

ALLUSION IN A.S. BYATT'S FICTION

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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Allusion in A.S. Byatt's Fiction

by

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## Abstract

This study delineates A.S. Byatt's use of allusion over the course of her literary career. From the tentative attempts in *The Shadow of the Sun* to the elaborate patterns of allusions in *Possession*, Byatt has continually experimented with the device with surprising effects. A.S. Byatt employs allusion in the early stages of her career sparingly, but gradually incorporates more complex references as her technical skill matures. Although Byatt's mid-career novel, *Possession*, is best-known for its many allusions to nineteenth-century literary figures and for Byatt's insertion of poems, journals and prose, she has experimented with all of these elements in each of her earlier novels.

Chapter One traces the development of Byatt's allusory effects in epigraphs to signal the conventions she will be using. In *The Shadow of the Sun*, an excerpt from a Renaissance poem hints at the Petrarchan love sonnet conventions Byatt will apply to her novel about a girl's first serious love affair. The epigraphs from *Still Life* successfully allude to the conventions of narrative realism and still life painting, as Byatt experiments with verbally representing Van Gogh's paintings. The cross-pollination of the arts reaches its climax in *Possession*, a novel in which Byatt blends the conventions of the romance novel and the realist novel. Chapter Two shows how readers may misapply the allusion to a much wider network of precursor texts than Byatt's original allusion is intended to evoke. When readers do not grasp the import of Byatt's choice of an allusion embedded in an epigraph from Coleridge, they might apply the allusion to an alternate precursor text, or they might



resist the alluding epigraph because it is too difficult to understand or because it is perceived as unimportant while the main body of the tale awaits. Focussing on the complexity of the biblical and classical serpent allusions in *The Game*, Chapter Two offers explanations for misapplied and misunderstood allusions. Chapter Three focusses on the historical allusions in Byatt's mid-career works: *Possession*, *Angels and Insects*, and *Babel Tower*. Each of these works is compared to a contemporary novel to demonstrate that Byatt is not unique among writers of historical fiction. Chapter Four focusses on the function of *ekphrasis* – the verbal representation of a visual work of art – in Byatt's short stories, particularly those following the publication of *Possession*.

This work is essential for several reasons: most of the critical, scholarly work on Byatt's fiction focusses on *Possession* and very little academic work has been done on the novels preceding it; similarly, very little work has been done on the novels and short story collections that follow *Possession*, although interest is growing. While a small amount of critical work examines recurring themes and images in Byatt's novels, very few critics analyse the allusions. It is the objective of this study to contribute to the commentary on Byatt's experimentation with the form of the novel, particularly as it has been reflected in her allusions to literary conventions; to classical and biblical precursor texts; to historical figures and events; to philosophical ideas; and to visual works of art.

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## Introduction

The use of allusions and intertexts in British fiction is not new. In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen parodies the gothic conventions of works such as *The Castle of Otranto*, and *The Monk*. Similarly, the incorporation of artists – writers, painters, sculptors – in fiction is also not new; they have been appearing in British novels at least since the eighteenth century. Among twentieth-century British writers, A.S. Byatt is well-known for the “literary-ness” of her fiction because she usually refers to a great many literary antecedents in her books. She is not alone in this practice. Salman Rushdie frequently organizes his fiction around a particular myth or cultural event. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Rushdie alludes to 1960s pop music and in *Fury* he alludes to the legend of the Greek goddesses of revenge for the framework of its plot. Other contemporary writers have included historical figures in their fiction to great effect, notably Penelope Fitzgerald in her novel about Friedrich Hardenberg (a.k.a. Novalis). In *ABBA ABBA*, Anthony Burgess presents John Keats’s last illness while staying in Rome. Of particular interest is the developing friendship between Keats and Giovanni Gulielmi Belli, whose own sonnet sequence of 1200 poems was inspired by a conversation between the two men just before Keats died. On a similar note, Peter Ackroyd presents a journal Oscar Wilde is said to have kept during his last months in Paris in the eponymous novel *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*: it is fiction masquerading as history. *Matisse’s War* by Peter Everett and *Exquisite Corpse* by Robert Irwin detail the lives and times of artists just before, and during, World War Two. *Matisse’s War* chronicles the

dilemmas faced by many of Matisse's circle of friends, a variety of writers, painters, and sculptors. On the other hand, *Exquisite Corpse* follows the experiences of Caspar, a second-rate Surrealist painter who experiments with hypnagogic visions, sexual liaisons, and opium. Possibly the most recent British writer to achieve notoriety for the sheer number of allusions in her fiction is J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series. In her books, Rowling alludes to classical mythology, Celtic folklore, and all kinds of arcana about alchemy, necromancy and wizardry. Even Byatt's sister, Margaret Drabble, has centred a tale around an allusion to the Pleiades. *The Seven Sisters* is about a group of seven women, who have organized a trip to Italy to visit the historic cities associated with Dante and his famous poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Clearly, male and female writers use allusion in similar ways. Though individual writers may be drawn toward particular patterns, there does not appear to be either a feminist or a traditionalist method of using allusion in fiction. Therefore, it is more instructive to study how individual writers deploy the device. Of necessity, some terms will recur throughout this study: echo, allusion, intertext.

The study of allusion has a long and complicated history best delineated in Joseph Pucci's book, *The Full-Knowing Reader*. Definitions of allusion in literary handbooks and dictionaries of poetics are not very helpful because they tend to "borrow" the definitions of earlier handbook writers, thus perpetuating some unexamined assumptions about allusion, such as the notion that allusion is a *tacit* reference to a precursor text. Both Ziva Ben-Porat and Carmela Perri assert that for an allusion to be recognised by readers, it must be both overt and explicit (Ben-Porat 110; Perri 290). However, for the purposes of this

study, the comprehensive entry in Preminger's *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is illuminating. The definition covers many of the current debates about whether or not an allusion is covert; whether its sources must always be literary; and whether allusion can be distinguished from other types of referential texts. Allusion, then, is "a poet's deliberate incorporation of identifiable elements from other sources, preceding or contemporaneous, textual or extratextual" (Preminger 39). Preminger further distinguishes allusion from repetition and forms of parody and imitation by pointing out that, in the former, allusion "[recalls] portions of the original" (39) while, in the latter, allusion is not necessarily systematic. He also distinguishes allusion from intertextuality, asserting that "intertextuality is involuntary: in some sense, by using any given real [language], one draws on the intertexts from which one has learned the words, and neither the poet nor the reader is aware of the connections" (39). For a study of A.S. Byatt's fiction, "allusion" is the most appropriate term since her use of it conforms closely to Preminger's description of the device. Not all allusions are textual: "although poetic allusion is necessarily manifested in words, what it draws on in another work need not be verbal" (39). This dictum may suggest at least two possibilities: a writer may cause a character's actions to allude to a precursor text; or the precursor text may actually be a visual work of art such as a painting, sculpture, or photograph. Byatt incorporates both types of non-verbal allusions into her fiction. In *The Game*, Simon Moffitt's exploration of the Amazon basin is a reference to Adam alone in paradise. In her mid-career novel, *Still Life*, Byatt alludes to the life and paintings of Vincent Van Gogh; similarly, in *The Matisse Stories*, she chooses some of



Matisse's sketches for frontispieces for each of the stories. Each story contains allusions to paintings by Matisse which thematically embellish the story. For example, in "Medusa's Ankles", the prominent placement of a print of "le nu rose" in the reception area of a beauty salon predicts the voluptuous spa treatments clients receive. The owner has used the same pink tones of the painting to decorate the salon, but when he exchanges the print and paints the walls a different colour, the pleasurable ambience associated with "le nu rose" is lost.

A second characteristic of allusion, according to Preminger, is that "the words of the alluding passage may establish a conceptual rather than a verbal connection with the passage or work alluded to" (39). Byatt uses epigraphs to allude to specific literary conventions that will contribute to the form of the novel,<sup>1</sup> a technique she has repeated in all of the novels throughout her career, but which Byatt has eschewed in the collections of her short stories.<sup>2</sup> This pattern of alluding to literary conventions begins with the epigraph of Byatt's first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, which echoes the conventions of the Petrarchan

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<sup>1</sup> A conventions in literature is defined as "a device, principle, procedure or form which is generally accepted and through which there is an agreement between the writer and his readers (or audience) which allows him various freedoms and restrictions" (Cuddon 192). The form of a literary work is "its shape and structure and . . . the manner in which it is made (thus its style . . .) – as opposed to its substance or what it is about. Form and substance are inseparable, but they may be analysed and assessed separately. A secondary meaning of form is the *kind* of work – the genre to which it belongs" (Cuddon 351).

<sup>2</sup> Even though critics may discern patterns which link the stories in each of the collections, using an allusion to establish a conceptual framework for them could restrict the amount of play between each of the stories. For example, in *Sugar and Other Stories*, the title story emphasises the fluid boundaries between truth and embellishment in family history, and the narrator also acknowledges that storytelling is a craft that relies upon this fluid boundary for its narrative effects. Each of the accompanying stories is, to some degree, about individuals interpreting the truth of their perceptions even when another character understands the same circumstances differently. The title of the collections puts enough of a conceptual framework around the stories that the addition of an epigraph (or two, as is Byatt's habit) would bind the stories together too tightly.

love sonnet. In Byatt's second novel, *The Game*, the epigraphs allude to the imaginative games of children as well as to Coleridge's use of the serpent as an emblem for the imagination. In *Still Life* and *Possession: A Romance* both the epigraphs and the titles of these novels refer to the literary conventions that will be used: the realist novel in the former and the romance novel in the latter.

Finally, a writer's use of allusion signals some degree of "either intentionality or whatever other name a voluntary, deliberate effort goes under" (Preminger 39). Critics have debated about when an allusion occurs. Some scholars think an allusion occurs when it is written into the alluding text. Others suggest that an allusion occurs when it is recognized by a reader. Consequently, there have been definitions of allusion that privilege either the writer's or the reader's role, but until recently, there have not been definitions of allusion emphasizing the assumed relationship between the alluding text and the precursor text. However, Allan Pasco's definition of allusion does address this aspect:

Allusion is the metaphorical relationship created when an alluding text evokes and uses another, independent text. Neither the reference nor the referent, it consists in [sic] the image produced by the metaphoric combination that occurs in the reader's mind. (12)

Pasco uses the terms "alluding text" and "independent text" to distinguish the two literary works involved in an allusion. The alluding text contains a recognizable allusion and is independent from its precursor. This study will privilege the term "precursor text" to refer to the source of an allusion. Most scholars use the term "evoke" to describe the recognition

of an allusion, so that pattern will be followed here as well. Allan Pasco also remarks upon the failure of readers to recognise allusions:

In times where [sic] tradition is valued, it [allusion] tends to enhance the tradition, but in periods when authors and public alike disdain the past, allusion continues to be able to enhance whatever is being communicated. The only limitation comes from ignorance. When readers have not read, when their background is limited to pap, when readers and writers share no common tradition, then allusions may have been seeded in a text, but they will produce neither plant nor fruit. Of course, the potential remains. As long as the text exists, some day a reader may come with the proper, fertile background and permit a new efflorescence. When this happens, the seed sinks new roots and the reader's mind gives birth to a living text. (183)

It is always the hope of writers that readers will share their love of books. A prolific writer and a voracious reader, A.S. Byatt has expressed the same sentiment as does Pasco. In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1993, Byatt was asked how she would respond to critics' complaints that her novels are too literary and too academic. She replied: "[M]y books are thick with the presence of other books, but I feel that out there in the world there must be other people who read as passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and the world" (Byatt in Wachtel 77-78).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A good illustration of Byatt's sentiments occurs in "Art Work" from *The Matisse Stories*. In this story, the passage describing Mrs Brown's Muppet-like sculptures is full of allusions to children's literature, the 1001 *Arabian Nights*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", *Charlotte's Web*, "Little Miss Muffet" and the legend of St George and the dragon. The effect of the plentiful allusions to



Sometimes, instead of "allusion", scholars use synonyms such as reference, quotation, graft, intertextuality, influence and source to avoid what they consider to be problematic connotations of the term, and to contribute a term which emphasises particular attributes of allusion in the context of a particular study. But this practise is actually a red-herring for most allusion studies since all of these substitute terms also have their own connotations and resonances. In fact, intertextuality poses the greatest blockage to understanding allusion simply because it also has a chequered history even though, as a literary term, it is relatively new. Coined in 1969 by Julia Kristeva, the idea of intertextuality has sparked a great deal of debate, particularly among the linguistic theorists of the *Tel Quel* group in France. It will become clear that intertextuality is not the most accurate term to use when describing the intersection of texts in A.S. Byatt's fiction. A portion of this confusion between terms may be attributed to the work of Gérard Genette, who has used intertextuality as a component of his five-part system of transtextuality: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality. Genette's use of Kristeva's term is especially confusing because he describes intertextuality as "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts . . . [and in] its most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of *quoting*" (1-2 emphasis in original) . This definition no doubt contributes to the general confusion between intertextuality and allusion. A brief examination of "Medusa's Ankles"

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well-known children's literary classics satirizes domestic work with the tools of domesticity. Each allusion in this exotic scenario is clear and direct, a distinguishing characteristic of allusion which sets it apart from other forms of referential devices.

will illustrate this conundrum. The title of Byatt's story recalls the Medusa of classical mythology and Byatt's use of the reference functions as a code for the kinds of things readers should expect: a woman who wants to be made beautiful, whose temper has disastrous results for everyone around her. The setting of the story is a beauty parlour, and the protagonist, a woman who indeed wants to be made beautiful. Her displeasure with the stylist's handiwork erupts in a tantrum that demolishes the shop. Although Medusa has not visited the shop, she has metaphorically appeared in the person of the unfortunate customer. The ringlets in her hair mirror representations of Medusa's head of snakes. A second allusion – although a rather oblique one – to Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" argues that men are turned to stone, (i.e., sexually aroused, metaphorically), transfixed not by her ugliness, but by her beauty. Medusa is indeed a dangerous goddess. The last scene in "Medusa's Ankles" alludes to Cixous's essay when the woman's husband compliments his wife on her coiffure, and suggests she style it this way more often. The relevant question, now, is whether Byatt's reference to the Medusa legend may be described as an allusion or an intertext.

The common practice of many literary scholars today is to accept intertextuality as a synonym for allusion. In fact, many scholars would assert that the Medusa legend is an intertext for Byatt's story because both texts intersect even though the presence of the precursor text is mostly felt through its conspicuous absence. This assessment is the result of a widespread misreading of a short passage in Julia Kristeva's essay, "Word, Dialogue, Novel". She says, "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one

other word (text) can be read" (66). And later, on textual transformation, Kristeva writes:

[Any] text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (66, emphasis in original)

Both of these quotations inspire many literary critics to use the term, *intertextuality*, as an elaborate synonym for allusion because they understand the referential aspect of Kristeva's theory: however, they also fail to see that Kristeva is not talking about recognizable passages evoked in one book which originate in another. On the contrary, Kristeva is talking about the intersection of poetic language with ordinary language. Consider students in an English literature class who all read, write, and speak English. They use it daily as they go about their usual activities. When they read a poem, the language of the poem – English – becomes poetic language and signifies (makes meaning) on a level different from ordinary language. Therefore, poetic language transforms ordinary language and causes the words of ordinary language to signify doubly. As Preminger points out, there is an involuntary quality to this type of referential text such that recognition and identification<sup>4</sup> of it is not required either of the writer or of the reader. However, Kristeva does mention, in "Word, Dialogue, Novel", that this intersection of word (text) with other words (text) could be limitless. This observation might also explain

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<sup>4</sup> To be able to recognise and identify references in texts, one must first be able to see the presence of another text in the present work (recognition) and simultaneously one must be able to associate the reference with a precursor text (identification). Preminger is distinguishing between intertexts which do not have these requirements and allusions which do.

the erroneous notion that allusions can also be limitless. Mary Orr points out in her informative overview of Kristeva's poetics that "[while] endless permutations [of Kristevan intertextuality] exist hypothetically, particularization must be at work to overrule certain readings as arbitrary, subjective or nonsensical" (39). Therefore, while conversational norms or mannerisms operate to filter out non-signifying texts, the incorporation of allusion into literary texts does not perform in the same way. Allusions are either recognized or they are not. It is generally agreed that to be able to recognize a variety of allusions, readers must be experienced in a wide assortment of texts. In order to avoid the type of confusion instigated by the conflation of two different terms, originally theorized by Kristeva and Genette, this study will privilege the use of allusion to refer to the type of occurrence readers find in fictions when one text refers to another, independent text for the purpose of embellishing the meaning of the alluding text. The term, intertextuality, will be reserved for linguistic and semiotic concerns.<sup>5</sup>

Byatt's use of the Medusa legend in "Medusa's Ankles" is not precisely an intertext in the way Genette would use the term; nor is the legend strictly an example of hypertextuality since it is not mapped onto Byatt's tale. However, a review of Genette's contribution to the intertextuality debate does go a long way toward explaining why allusion is not the same referential device as intertext, and why scholars studying contemporary fiction use the two terms interchangeably. It is necessary to recognise that

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<sup>5</sup> The danger of using intertextuality as a term for a wide variety of textual references is that Kristeva's conceptualization of it as a descriptor of linguistic patterns becomes diminished. As Graham Allen points out, "[reduced] now to issues of quotation, plagiarism, and allusion, intertextuality thus defined is no longer concerned with the semiotic processes of cultural and textual signification" (101).

intertextuality may be a useful device to explore speech act processes, but it is not the intention of this study to delve in this manner into the referentiality of A.S. Byatt's work. Instead, the focus is on her deployment of allusions in so far as they link her fictions with those of the literary past. Her use of allusion combined with titles, epigraphs and literary conventions offers a range of referential possibilities for a writer whose knowledge of English literature is as extensive as is A.S. Byatt's. These combinations provide a framework for close readings of Byatt's fictional canon.

A.S. Byatt is, perhaps, best-known for *Possession*, a novel in which the weight of English literary tradition is keenly felt in the experiences of the two twentieth-century scholars, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, while they discover the truth of the relationship between the nineteenth-century poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The novel itself is lush, dense with allusions to historical figures and events, and replete with the literary output of the characters. Since the novel offers so much to the critical eye, scholarly interest has focussed primarily on *Possession* at the expense of her other novels and the short story collections published later. This study is not primarily about *Possession*, but instead seeks to position it within the corpus of A.S. Byatt's fiction. It will become clear that Byatt does not put anything into *Possession* that she has not already attempted in her earlier work and which she does not continue to do in the works that follow it. Focussing on the biblical and classical allusions present in much of her fiction, this study will demonstrate that Byatt's experiments with fiction in her early novels culminate in *Possession*, and though she continues to use many of the same kinds of allusions in her later



works, the effect is not as forceful. It is also apparent that by the time *Babel Tower* is published in 1996, A.S. Byatt's interests have changed. Her short story collections consist of more fabulist than realist works, and they possess an oriental tone akin to the *Tales of the 1001 Nights* though her most recent collection, *Little Black Book of Stories*, bears a filiation with the Norse and Icelandic legends of her childhood. However, despite changes in the length and the subject matter of Byatt's tales, her method of alluding to other texts remains constant.

Throughout her career, A.S. Byatt has used allusion in remarkably consistent ways. In all of her novels, Byatt's choice of the title for the work and its accompanying epigraphs direct the reader's interpretation of the work and denote the literary conventions she will incorporate into the work. In her mid-career novels, Byatt's allusions to historical events assist her exploration of the tensions between nineteenth-century scientific developments and religious fervour. Byatt also uses allusions as topical references to the life or work of other writers in the past such as Alfred Tennyson and Christina Rossetti. Similarly, Byatt employs allusion to describe two sister arts, since she is particularly interested in painting and sculpture.

In the early stages of her career, A. S. Byatt is relatively timid and sparing in her use of allusion, but she incorporates it more confidently in each new novel. Chapter One demonstrates the development of A.S. Byatt's choice of epigraphs as allusions beginning with *The Shadow of the Sun* and progressing to *Still Life*, and later, *Possession*. In the first novel, Byatt evokes/invokes the Petrarchan love poem conventions with her epigraph

from Raleigh's "Farewell False Love".<sup>6</sup> Byatt's inclusion of both allusion and epigraph to signal to readers how the story should be interpreted is clever, but based on the reviews of the only two critics who assessed the novel, the allusion to the conventions of the Petrarchan love sonnet remained unactivated, and consequently, the novel was not understood as Byatt would have wished. Compared to the epigraphs of the first novel, those in *Still Life* are more direct, and consequently are more successful in directing readers toward particular interpretations. They emphasise the beauty to be found in ordinary things, the brevity of human life and the cyclical progression of life. In addition, these epigraphs signal Byatt's intention to produce a novel within specific conventions. The title refers to a mode of painting that strives to represent domestic life realistically. Readers, then, must expect a realistic portrayal of the domestic life of the Potter family. Similarly, the epigraph pages of *Possession* declare the literary conventions to which the plot will adhere and establish the expectations readers may have of the work as a whole. Examining these novels sequentially with a concentrated focus on the elements of title and epigraph will reveal the steady development of A.S. Byatt's writing style and prove that the critical success of *Possession* was not simply a lucky draw, but a deliberate and measured program of experimentation.

In Chapter One, the use of "echo" follows John Hollander's definition of "language answering language" (21), especially in relation to the *sounds* of particular phrases. In *The Figure of Echo*, Hollander studies the phenomenon of poets repeating phrases from earlier

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<sup>6</sup> The title of the novel is a quotation from the same poem.

poems in their literary tradition. The repetition need not be exact; rather, the verbal pattern slightly modifies the original ensuring that the echo is recognized, but also enriched. However, Hollander assumes that only poetry echoes poetry. He does not reckon the possibility that fiction might echo in well-known patterns other literary works. For example, in the first chapter of *The Shadow of the Sun*, Henry Severell emulates Christ's crucifixion by hanging from the kitchen doorsill with his arms outstretched. The echo is particularly apt because Henry is busy working on a new book and some visitors have just arrived who will expect him to be a good host even though they will distract Henry from his work. Consequently, Henry feels persecuted initially by his wife, Caroline, who expects Henry to be sociable, and secondarily by Oliver, who persistently questions Henry about his books. In startlingly Christ-like behaviour, Henry wanders the English countryside for four days, echoing Christ's experience in the desert. The effect of the echoes in Byatt's novel is to link Henry with Jesus Christ on a visual level. Although there is no verbal pattern repeated in *The Shadow of the Sun*, the visual echo of a crucifixion has a similar effect. The echo is identified and meaning is generated for the novel.

Chapter Two focusses on Byatt's second novel, *The Game*, in which her allusive patterns are demonstrably more complex. As in *The Shadow of the Sun*, the title and epigraphs direct readers toward specific interpretations. Focussing on the serpent allusions in *The Game*, this study shows how readers may be misled by allusions and, consequently, misinterpret the novel. A few theorists suggest that an allusion could refer to a potentially

limitless spectrum of precursor texts,<sup>7</sup> but the assertion here is that it is unrealistic to expect allusions to evoke such a vast range of precursor texts: rather, as is typical of her fiction, Byatt evokes specific precursor texts, while excluding all other possibilities. However, it is conceivable that a reader who is unable to recognise the precise precursor text will attempt to substitute another, potentially more familiar, precursor text in an effort to supply the meaning of the alluding text.

As one reads some of the effusive descriptive passages in A.S. Byatt's short stories, it is delightful to follow the string of the allusion to its inevitable end. For example, Mrs Brown's exhibition in "Art Work" encourages one to think of all the fair maidens in children's literature who have ever been threatened by a spider or a dragon. One might even go so far as to recall Tolkien's great dragon, Smaug, who belched thick clouds of black smoke which poisoned the air of Middle Earth. However, following this thread of allusion from *Charlotte's Web* to "Little Miss Muffet" through Mother Goose to Smaug is exactly what readers should not do. In "False Exits: The Literary Allusion in Modern Fiction," Laszlo K. Géfin argues that the eternal problem of the relationship between allusion and interpretation is that "the more one tries to track down the ever widening intertextual field of allusions, the more the distance seems to grow between adopted and adoptive texts,

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<sup>7</sup> On the conservative end of the spectrum, Carmela Perri asserts: "The alluding marker has at least a double referent: it signifies un-allusively, within the possible world of the literary text . . . and allusively, to one or more texts outside its contexts" (295). Similarly, Janet Larson, writing about biblical allusion in Dickens, suggests that "[his] big novels are such phenomena par excellence or *ad nauseam* according to one's taste, that to read even a modestly complex allusion is to venture into a network of interpretive possibilities" (14 emphasis in original). A more radical proposal comes from Laszlo Géfin, who worries that the network of allusions could become too broad, thereby creating interpretive difficulties for readers.

showing an irreconcilable conflict and difference" (439). Essentially, Géfin worries that readers might potentially find themselves caught in an unwieldy network of texts. The implication is that the reader's correlation between an alluding text and the evoked text is illusory; numerous false exits to other unconsciously evoked texts may well lead the questing reader astray. Géfin need not worry about allusions in Byatt's works because she is precise in her placement of them, and almost invariably directs her readers toward a specific prior text even though some of her reviewers might not recognise it. This aspect of allusion is explored in some detail in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three explores the ways in which historical people and events function as allusions in A.S. Byatt's novels. The chapter is divided into three case studies in order to broaden the perspective and to situate Byatt in relation to some contemporary writers of historical fiction. The first case study centres on a discussion of the problems associated with historical fiction and fictionalized history in Byatt's *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*. Byatt's novel plays with the various levels of romance operating in the text: first, the obvious love relationships and entanglements present one interpretation of "romance"; secondly, "romance" connotes a literary genre; and finally, the detective work Maud and Roland perform is also romanticised. In contrast, Ackroyd's novel toys with notions of lying and plagiarism, drawing attention to the ways that writers like Harriet Scrope feel justified in "borrowing" ideas from obscure writers to further their own careers. But Ackroyd goes further, suggesting in the course of Charles Wychwood's researches on Thomas Chatterton that even though most people treat history with a degree of



seriousness, historical records may be open to multiple interpretations. Both novels allude to writers of the past and to documented historical events.

The second case study in Chapter Three compares Byatt's *Angels and Insects* with *The Tiger in the Well* by Philip Pullman. Both novels portray in detail aspects of the Victorian period, though Byatt's focus is on hidden relationships in middle-class households while Pullman's interest is in the underbelly of Victorian society. *Angels and Insects* alludes to Tennyson's ideas in *In Memoriam* about reconciling religious faith with advances in modern geological science and natural history. Byatt's novellas echo Tennyson's crisis of faith by showing different ways of coping with religious doubt. In "Morpho Eugenia", Reverend Alabaster deals with his doubts by writing about the patterns in the natural world which appear to assert the existence of a Divine Creator. "The Conjugal Angel", in contrast, professes a belief in the afterlife, but shows that despite the persistence of the séance group, the Vestal Lights, only one of their members is able to make contact with the spirit world, and with very limited success. *The Tiger in the Well* alludes to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales in ways that modify and update the precursor texts to reflect the values of today's teenaged reader.

The third case study of Chapter Three presents a close reading of *Babel Tower*, focussing almost exclusively on the prosecution of Jude Mason's novel, *Babbletower*, for obscene libel.<sup>8</sup> *Babel Tower* is included in this chapter as a historical fiction because it deals

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, one does "prosecute a novel". The term is used both in Byatt's novel and in the documentation of the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial which deemed the novel to be its own legal entity, and thus, could potentially exert a harmful influence upon certain members of society. As a point of law, both in the historical case and in Byatt's fictional example, the novels were prosecuted separately from their

with a period of time in the past even though the events described are contemporaneous with the writer's life. The novel also exhibits several clusters of allusions. On one level, the events of *Babel Tower* allude to the cultural and social upheaval experienced in Britain during the 1960s. The description of Frederica's divorce hearing, and later her child custody hearing, epitomises the changes in social and family values of the period. On a second level of allusion, the transcript of the *Babbletower* obscene libel trial alludes to actual historical events which Byatt's fictional characters deem to have an influence on both the writing of *Babbletower* and the outcome of its trial: the trial of D.H. Lawrence's novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; the Profumo scandal; the Moors Murders case; the abolition of capital punishment for first degree murder convicts; and the controversy over the publication of Anthony Burgess's novel, *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>9</sup> On a third, deeper level of allusion, the barrister who prosecutes *Babbletower*, Sir Augustine Weighall, stands for the ideas Plato asserts in *The Republic* about why fictional works should be banned. Though Weighall does not cite Plato in any of his speeches to the court, the connotation of his words certainly does allude to Plato's ideas. This case study explains why old ideas like Plato's banning the poets from his ideal city remain current in today's society.

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publishers and their authors for the crime of obscene libel.

<sup>9</sup> The famous *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial occurred in 1960 (see note 92 below). The Profumo scandal erupted in 1962 when John Profumo, secretary of state for war, began an affair with Christine Keeler, who was rumoured to be sleeping with the Russian Naval Attaché, the effect of which was to bring down the Macmillan government ending 13 years of Conservative governance. The Moors Murders trial was especially spectacular because of the brutality of the murders. Ian Brady and Myra Hindley were convicted in 1966 just a few months after the repeal of capital punishment. Anthony Burgess's novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, published in 1962, elicited much discussion but rather small sales. With the release of the film version of the book in 1971, both Stanley Kubrick (the film's director) and Anthony Burgess were caught up in the controversy. In America, the film has since become a cult classic, but as a consequence of questions raised in the British parliament, the film was never distributed in England.

Even though Byatt continues to write novels, *Babel Tower* is the last novel which continues the writing style of *Possession*, and though Byatt completes the Frederica Potter Quartet in 2003 with *A Whistling Woman*, there is a noticeable shift in her writing toward shorter works and a concomitant move toward portraying more actively a variety of artists and artisans in her stories. Though one might not normally consider the verbal description of a visual representation – or ekphrasis – a form of allusion, most theorists of allusion allow for the inclusion of cultural artefacts in their taxonomies of allusion. On this basis, Chapter Four presents some close readings of stories taken from three of her collections to illustrate Byatt's allusive use of this mode of description. "Sugar", a story which actually pre-dates *Possession*, dramatises some of Byatt's preoccupations with crafting a literary work and the boundaries between truth and falsehood a writer might choose to transgress in order to make the tale more interesting for the audience. In "Art Work", from *The Matisse Stories*, Byatt juxtaposes artists' notions of the differences between "art" and "craft". Two stories from the *Elementals* collection illustrate the necessity of connecting to the larger cultural traditions in which artists work: in "A Lamia in the Cévennes", a painter is so taken with the iridescent colours of the lamia's skin that he fails to recognize the cultural connotations she signifies; alternatively, in "Cold", all of Prince Sasan's courtship gifts for Princess Fiammarosa are brimming with symbolic nuances. Both stories reveal A.S. Byatt's penchant for ornate description and multiple allusions to literary and artistic works of the past.

This pattern of referencing cultural artefacts in the British and European traditions

derives from Byatt's long-standing love of the past which is most eloquently expressed in *Possession*, but has also been a mainstay of her writing style. The ensuing pages begin the journey through literary time which A.S. Byatt's novels prolifically annotate.

## Chapter One

### Ground Zero of Byatt's Writing Style

*Possession: A Romance* marks the apex of Byatt's career: released in March 1990, by October the novel had won the coveted Booker Prize. The print media critics all found something to admire, even when some of them thought the novel too literary, too erudite, or too pedantic.<sup>10</sup> Elaine Feinstein described *Possession* as "a poet's novel" (38); Richard Jenkins called Byatt's ventriloquism "a *tour de force*" (213); Jay Parini pronounced the novel "gorgeously written" (11); and Fanny Howe, the reviewer for *Commonweal*, effusively suggested that the novel "transports the reader – for many sublime hours – to the realms of gold" (69).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, some reviewers, like Richard Jenkins and Peter Prescott, have praised Byatt's novel in their opening paragraphs and later reviled the book in the same review.<sup>12</sup> Despite reviewers' positive endorsement of the novel, they most often comment on Byatt's use of language and plot structure. For example, Danny Karlin favoured the multifarious use of possession "as a term of material, erotic and demonic significance" (17);

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Jenkins opines: "it is a mistake to have Roland reflecting that his situation has become implausibly romantic, because one can only agree. Worse still are one or two passages of would-be post-modern self-reflexiveness, which merely take us back to the university novel at its most arch and banal" (213). Danny Karlin complains that it is too convenient to invent the Victorian poets rather than use historical figures because the "Norse and Celtic myths, and other artistic topics in which [LaMotte] and Ash are interested, dovetail together too neatly, a feature of Byatt's compulsion to make everything resonate with everything else" (18). "Breathtaking", is Judith Thurman's word for Byatt's pedantic tendencies: "She expropriates every possible response, including exasperation at her own 'polysemous perversity'" (155).

<sup>11</sup> Ms Howe's remark is an unfortunate pun on the title of Margaret Drabble's novel, *The Realms of Gold*, a comparison A.S. Byatt would not have relished.

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins points out slips in chronology – *Silas Marner* is mentioned before it was written – and inaccurate phrasing, while Prescott complains that the invented poems are "exhausting" (61).



Jay Parini found Byatt's invention of her Victorian characters' writings "dazzling" (11); and Ann Hulbert claimed that if one is suitably self-conscious about story and character, one can "offer old-fashioned mystery, comedy, and romance tricked out in newfangled, self-reflexive style" (47).

The effusiveness of the popular press reviewers is mirrored in the scholarly criticism on *Possession*, though the tone is more sedate. For example, Chris Walsh describes the novel as "an exhilarating, sophisticated postmodernist novel" (185); Kathleen Coyne Kelly calls the novel a "virtuoso study" (283) of the life of the mind; and Louise Yelin says the novel entices the culturally literate reader "with its depiction of scholarship as a detective game . . . , and it flatters us by offering us the pleasures of recognizing the intertextual allusions and revisionary rewritings out of which it is made" (38). Even though *Possession* was favourably received, we will see that Byatt employs her usual techniques. In the novels preceding *Possession*, A.S. Byatt maintains her habit of giving each book a title and a set of epigraphs to signal her literary intentions. Much of the detail and technical complexity in *Possession* evolves from Byatt's earlier novels: the use of an iconic title, epigraphs to focus reader interpretation, the inclusion of historical figures and artists as well as allusions to the literary tradition. At the beginning of *Possession*, two epigraphs warn that what follows may appear to be improbable,<sup>13</sup> or even a pack of lies.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, turning to chapter one, the reader should expect a certain amount of

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<sup>13</sup> Hawthorne's definition of the Romance genre. See Appendix A.

<sup>14</sup> Browning's "Mr Sludge, the Medium". See Appendix A.

fabulating and dissembling: however, a reader might not expect Byatt's precise knowledge of nineteenth century literary figures; or the ease with which she emulates the poets of the period; or her ability to develop a plot across two centuries. Clearly, *Possession's* success affirms Byatt's talent as a writer of fiction, a talent refined through the writing of four previous novels. Yet one might ask how Byatt developed her technique. Julian Gitzen has observed that the "hybrid form" (83) of *Possession* has been "anticipated in each of her previous novels" (83). But the hybrid form of which Gitzen writes – realism combined with a self-conscious awareness of artistic endeavour – is not all that is anticipated in Byatt's earlier novels.

In *The Shadow of the Sun*, A.S. Byatt's writing style lacks the complexity of *Possession*, but her first novel introduces four elements that will be perfected over the course of her career: a title functioning as a central metaphor; epigraphs directing reader interpretation; allusions to classical and biblical sources; and non-literary allusions to artists and painting. Each of these elements may evoke allusions and intertexts independently of one another, but as Byatt's writing matures, she allows for greater allusive interplay between the levels of text. Byatt usually links her titles to epigraphs to direct the reader's attention toward classical and biblical allusions, and to paintings and artists, that appear in her books. Both *The Shadow of the Sun* and *Possession* employ allusion in title and epigraph, but in the earlier novel both art and the artist are underplayed. In contrast, the role of the artist in Byatt's fourth novel, *Still Life*, dominates the novel. However, all three novels are preoccupied with what Harold Bloom would call "the anxiety of influence" (56), the need to supplant

one's literary forebears. In *The Shadow of the Sun*, Anna Severell would like both to be in love and to write something worthy of her father's admiration. Similarly, in *Still Life*, Alexander Wedderburn wrestles with the language of a play about Van Gogh: he wishes to portray Van Gogh's tempestuous lifestyle and the vibrant colours of the Arles paintings. In *Possession*, though, Byatt attempts what the earlier novels do not: she lets the creative output of her characters tell the story instead of an authorial voice. Despite the breadth of the literary allusions and the complex parallel plot structure, the tale is much more compelling, drawing the reader into the complicated lives of the nineteenth century lovers while simultaneously sending the reader on a quest with the twentieth century scholars. Though subsequent chapters will interrogate A.S. Byatt's biblical, classical, and artistic allusions, this chapter will trace the development of Byatt's use of title and epigraph to demonstrate her awareness of generic traditions.

The epigraph is a type of quotation, which presents well-known, recognizable passages from earlier literature and evokes associations in the mind of the reader. Epigraphs in Byatt's books mainly direct the reader toward a particular interpretation, as if the interpretive hint she provides in the epigraph were part of a coded language she and the reader have in common. The notion of writer and reader sharing a common cultural experience is integral to the deployment of referential devices like epigraphs, quotations, echoes, and allusions<sup>15</sup> because they impose multiple layers of textual significance which

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<sup>15</sup> Herman Meyer asserts that whether an author is "oriented toward tradition or against tradition, the writer is concerned with the management of a cultural inheritance that he himself [sic] absorbs, preserves, and passes along. . . . Precisely in the case of quotation it is of decisive significance whether there exists a literary and cultural background which the author shares with his public and to

some readers may recognize and others may not. What is especially interesting about Byatt's coded message in the epigraph to *The Shadow of the Sun* is that a reader may only partially understand the coded message. It is clear that the quotation from Raleigh<sup>16</sup> is about feeling deranged and doing illogical things like chasing the shadow of the sun. What might not be clear for the average late-twentieth-century reader is that Raleigh's poem was intended to fit into the Petrarchan conventions of courtly love. A reader who looks up the poem will discover that the poem is, in fact, about the pitfalls of being in love, but unaware of Petrarchan conventions may fallaciously interpret the poem as a romantic outpouring of grief for a hard-hearted beloved.

In epigraph form, the quotation from Raleigh tells the reader that Byatt is doing two things: first, she emulates Renaissance writers, who were expected to imitate writers of the past without the necessity of being original; and second, she applies the Petrarchan love poetry conventions to frame the events of her novel. The Petrarchan conventions are rather formulaic, but are set down as follows: the poet addresses his poems to the beloved Laura, who does not respond; consequently, the lover questions the purity of his love: he wonders whether his love is actually lust, and therefore, a sin; and he fears the beloved's silence

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which he can appeal with full confidence that it will be understood" (17-18). Others agree with this assertion: David Leon Higdon says that "allusion, by its very nature, assumes a literary tradition shared by author and audience" (27). Christopher Ricks, in "Tennyson Inheriting the Earth", proposes two levels of allusions in *In Memoriam*: "some of its strongest and deepest poetical reminiscences . . . are of words which only a tiny circle within the large circle of its original readers could ever have recognised and participated in" (68). Even the scholars whose primary interest is in the linguistic performance of allusion assume a writer-reader dialectic.

<sup>16</sup> Of the two dominant spellings of this surname - Raleigh and Raleigh - Byatt privileges the former. Readily available anthologies of the poet's work and of English Renaissance poetry also privilege the former spelling.

suggests there is a rival. As a result of this excessive passion, the lover appears to be psychologically unstable and his feelings obsessive.

Raleigh follows these same conventions in his own poem, "Farewell False Love". This approach is not unusual, for Renaissance writers typically "turned to the great writers of the past and to their critics to see how a thing should be done and shaped [their] own work accordingly" (Evans 26), so Byatt is taking part in a time-honoured tradition of English writers. In the sixteenth century, poets were not expected to be original, but they were expected to imitate their literary ancestors under the premise that there are no new stories, simply new ways to tell old material. Raleigh describes love as false because it takes one away from reason and leads to many troubles. One's actions should be rational, so any illogical behaviour, like falling in love, removes a person from reasoned activity. In the poem, love is personified as false, as a deceitful, "envious boye" (line 3) who causes all of the negative symptoms of being "in love". Version 10A, (Byatt's actual epigraph), demonstrates the irrationality of love: the "fortress foiled" (line 13) is the mind left undefended by reason, resulting in such unreasonable behaviour as running after "the shadow of the sun, / A goal of grief for which the wisest run" (ll. 17-18). As Raleigh imitates Petrarch, Byatt imitates Raleigh, using the conventions though not the same form.<sup>17</sup> Byatt shows how unsatisfactory unrequited love can be and offers an alternative in the shape of a reasoned choice of partner for Anna Severell. Anna's behaviour conforms to the

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<sup>17</sup> For an informative discussion of Petrarch's love poems, see Robert M. Durling, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*. Also, in *English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century*, Maurice Evans describes how sixteenth century poets approached writing as a rhetorical exercise.



Petrarchan conventions: she is erratic when she loves someone who does not return her affection, but becomes emotionally stable once she chooses the right partner. But what might readers conclude if they do not grasp Byatt's reference to Raleigh? Reviews from the *New York Times Book Review* and *Times Literary Supplement* (both published in 1964) show that critics did not grasp Byatt's effort to imitate her literary ancestors. Indeed the *NYTBR* reviewer portrays Anna as a confused young woman who has no sense of purpose until she becomes pregnant, and afterwards complains that "[between] Anna and her problems there always intrudes an ornamental rhetoric, substituting exposition for the revelation that should come out of a clash of characters" (33). The *TLS* reviewer, on the other hand, sees Anna as in revolt against everything her father represents, and asserts that the only reason Anna and Oliver seem to be in love is because they both "envy the vision he [Henry] sees and they will never see" (21). Clearly, Byatt's epigraph has failed to be helpful for the critics' interpretations.

At the beginning of the novel, Anna Severell is about to write A-level examinations, but she is more anxious to attract the admiration of a young man than she is worried about programs of study at university. Her story is fraught with passion and unrequited love, an aspect of the story initially signalled by the epigraph. Although Anna would like to be "in love", she cannot express her feelings except through meaningful sighs and passionate entries in her diary. Is Anna Severell's experience of love "false"? Each of her three lovers – Michael Farne, Peter Hughes-Winterton, and Oliver Canning – causes Anna to behave oddly: Michael Farne represents an unrequited love, but Anna's relationships with Peter

Hughes-Winterton and Oliver Canning impede her desire to become a writer.

In Anna's emotional life, Michael Farne is similar to Petrarch's Laura though he does not match the role exactly. Michael works at the stable where Anna rides. He is both the object of Anna's desire and her Muse. She writes his name and draws his picture repeatedly in exercise books she keeps hidden in the hut at the end of the garden.

She found, curiously, that although bad at drawing, she could produce a recognizable likeness of him, and filled page after page of her notebooks with the same square, blond, slightly smiling face, or the same solid body, set lightly on its feet in every conceivable and inconceivable posture. He became a way of seeing, a way of possessing by incantation the things seen which had so distressed her. (21)

This repetition of Michael's name and drawing of his picture makes a non-verbal statement of Anna's feelings. She does not know what to do or what to say in Michael's presence, yet without any relationship in progress, Anna comes to believe that she loves Michael. It is clear that Michael is interested in Anna because he calls for tea a few times and takes her to the cinema, holding her hand throughout the film, but because Anna does not offer any *verbal* encouragement, Michael does not ask for a second date. Instead, throughout the film, Anna "shivered, and suffered, and waited with awful longing for the moment when she could relive all this for herself, alone in bed at night" (20). Thus, the false love represented by Michael can never be articulated or realized because it belongs to the realm of adolescent female sexual fantasy. In her fantasies, Anna imagines a Heathcliff-type

lover, a Byronic hero. For Anna, it is an "essential part of her picture that Michael should have been carefree, self-assured, even slightly cruel; he was easiest to admire like that" (74). In her fantasy the object of desire is put on a pedestal and admired; but only his proximity is desired: a *real* relationship with the beloved would spoil the fantasy.

In contrast, Peter Hughes-Winterton offers a real, adult relationship that grows out of their friendship. But this relationship is a false love too because it is predicated on Peter's offer of marriage when Anna tells him she is pregnant with Oliver's child. Following the Petrarchan conventions, Peter does not fit the framework of either the lover or the beloved. He does not passionately love Anna, nor does Anna exhibit any strong feeling for him other than gratitude. Instead, Peter represents a logical choice for Anna facing an unwanted, unplanned pregnancy. His offer of marriage is the noble action of a young man trying to do the right thing for a young woman he likes, perhaps even respects, but whom he does not love. Therefore, the proposed marriage is a logical step for Anna, but an illogical one for Peter.

When Peter brings Anna to the Hughes-Winterton estate to meet his mother, it becomes patently clear that the marriage will not take place. Lady Hughes-Winterton does not immediately approve of Anna, and she becomes convinced that Anna will have difficulty fitting in with their way of life because they are not acquainted with the same families. Having introduced his intended to his mother, Peter goes out to do things young men of his age and class do, and Anna is left at home with her future mother-in-law and her own feelings of inadequacy:

[She] saw that Peter's mother was coming to suspect her of a basic dishonesty – which indeed, with the pregnancy, there was, although luckily she was no longer very sick – and, although this was not what was meant, to suspect her of a scheming, a plot, something to hide, which made the whole thing impossible and fraudulent. (286)

Anna clearly does not feel comfortable about her proposed marriage: though she would like to use the marriage to hide her illegitimate pregnancy, she begins to see that Peter is not the right husband. Though the expected child is not his, Peter appears to be “playing house” with Anna in an attempt to do something noble to help a friend. He will be expected to marry one day, too, but he need not be quite this chivalrous in his choice of a wife. The relationship fails because of the class differences between Anna and Peter, and the expectations of his parents. Anna suddenly realizes that she “had not allowed for herself, or her own modes of knowledge; here she would be half-human; a child in a nursery” (295). Although Anna initially thought that marriage would free her from being under her father's shadow, she understands that by marrying Peter, she will be circumscribed by Lady Hughes-Winterton's expectations. Anna begins to understand that to escape false love, she must act for herself, so she chooses to return to Oliver even though marriage with Peter would mean financial stability and a comfortable life. Anna concedes to herself that her flight from Peter to Oliver could be interpreted as another example of her running away, but once she sees Oliver again, Anna realizes that, for the moment, being with Oliver is right, a conclusion that makes Anna feel “surprisingly content” (298).

Through Oliver, Byatt does what Raleigh and Petrarch could not: she finds an appropriate mate for Anna. Byatt envisions the lover, who has been obsessing over an unacknowledged love, maturing as an individual and transferring affection to a more stable relationship.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the two younger boys, Oliver represents a logical, reasoned choice for Anna. Even though he is already married to Margaret, Oliver demonstrates genuine concern for Anna long before they become lovers. A practical person, not easily led by his emotions, Oliver is a tough character to appreciate since most of his actions, from the other characters' perspectives, are both forceful and abrasive. He incessantly evaluates people and situations. When Anna is expelled from school, Oliver makes it his business to investigate why Anna ran away from her school. He also makes it his duty to set Anna on a course of study to write her A-level exams and to apply for admission to universities. Although Anna repeatedly asks Oliver to leave her alone and lets him know that her family's problems are "nothing to do with [him]" (39), it is readily apparent to Oliver that Anna's running away from school and her indecision about what to do next stem from Henry and Caroline's negligent parenting. In his humble opinion, Oliver thinks Anna has "been left alone too much" (39). He is irked by Anna's inactivity, but is hopeful that a Cambridge education will help Anna discover her talents for herself.

The most dissatisfying aspect of *The Shadow of the Sun* is the end of the novel. Anna Severell does not become a writer, but becoming involved with Oliver does seem to attract

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<sup>18</sup> "Even when no moralizing tone is heard, the true English love lyric shows none of the southern [i.e., Italian] tendency to idealize or apotheosize the girl who is wooed. Courtship is simple, sincere, a pledge of quiet partnership through life" (Lever 10). Oliver Canning thus fits into an English tradition of faithful, reliable lovers.



her father's attention. She re-unites with Oliver, content to have her baby and live with him. The underlying, but unstated, assumption at the end of the novel is that Oliver will divorce Margaret. When Anna says that she could not have gone far without Oliver, he is relieved, but Anna's timidity is surprising. She has consistently been portrayed resisting the wishes of the other characters. Her relationship with her mother is openly hostile in a passive-aggressive way. She repeatedly tells both Henry and Oliver that she is not like either one of them and that they should leave her alone. Running away from school, and later, leaving the Hughes-Winterton home, suggest an impetuosity that is at odds with her passiveness in Oliver's presence. When Oliver arrives at the hotel in York, Anna is on the point of going to London to have an abortion. As he grabs her arm demanding where she is going, the authorial voice reports: "Anna turned slowly to him, waking up out of a dream, seeing that what one did was indeed done, one was what one did" (297). Anna's flight to London is a reverie from which she awakes to face the consequences of her own actions. Combined with Anna's earlier feeling of being in cold storage and waiting for some kind of life-changing event, the pregnancy may, indeed, be that long-hoped for event. Therefore, Anna's contentment springs not from the reunion with Oliver, but from the satisfaction of knowing that her "event" has finally arrived.

The title and epigraph of *The Shadow of the Sun* were clearly meant to allude to Raleigh's poem, and also to the literary conventions subsumed by it, but they fail to lead readers toward the correct interpretation because a general readership cannot be expected to recognize sources intended for specialist readers. Consequently, the epigraph of the

novel elicits only a partial effect: being in love can have disastrous effects. Indeed, this conclusion is borne out by the responses of the reviewers. The *New York Times Book Review* critic describes Oliver as "a lively ferret of a literary critic, who plucks Anna from the depths of adolescent melancholia, tutors her for Cambridge and gets her pregnant" (32). In the *TLS* review, Oliver's behaviour toward Anna is portrayed as "provocative bullying" by a "second-rate, despicable fellow" (21). Plainly, neither reviewer understood the interpretive clue provided by the epigraph, but in her fourth novel a different situation arises.

At the beginning of *Still Life*, Byatt includes four epigraphs, of which only the first is translated, accompanied by the dedication to Jenny Flowerdew, suggesting that they are more important than the others. The remaining epigraphs appear on the next page: two from Proust and one originally from Cuvier which Michel Foucault quotes in *Les mots et les choses*. The content of each epigraph is suggestive, too, and avid Byatt readers might recognize from their clues that she is hoping readers will think about the novel in particular ways. For example, the passage from Bede comments on the brevity of human life, while the excerpts from Proust make observations on the use of language to denote clear images of ordinary things and on the discovery of beauty in unexpected places. The quotation from Cuvier via Foucault is obscure, but it reiterates his idea that death is a natural, "necessary consequence of life" (Cuvier 5), a vision of life as a cyclical progression

from animate matter to inanimate matter.<sup>19</sup> With these epigraphs, Byatt asks her readers to contemplate the ordinariness of life, death, and beauty.

Like the epigraph in *The Shadow of the Sun*, the epigraphs in *Still Life* signal Byatt's intention to juxtapose a variety of interpretations of "still life", so that a genre of painting is contrasted with a realist mode of writing, and the beauty of ordinary things is found in Van Gogh's representations of them. Thus, Alexander Wedderburn's struggle to create a verse drama about Vincent Van Gogh's life is emblematic of the inadequacies of language to "translate" into prose what is expressed visually in paint.<sup>20</sup>

A still life painting, according to Norman Bryson, is differentiated from other kinds of painting like portraiture and history painting "by existing in opposition to these as the genre where the human figure is deliberately avoided" (60). Whereas history painting idealizes the human form and portraiture depicts individuals, more or less, as they are, "still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event" (Bryson 61). What is left are the artefacts of human life: a chair with a pipe<sup>21</sup> or a Bible with a candle and a novel on a table,<sup>22</sup> both Van

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<sup>19</sup> Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), French naturalist, developed a theory to account for extinction, called the Doctrine of Catastrophes. According to Cuvier, natural disasters such as floods destroyed former worlds and ancient life forms. His studies of the Paris basin revealed that the different layers of rock were filled with fossils, which led him to conclude that each geological period had ended in a dramatic catastrophe causing the extinction of species (see Cadbury 70-74).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander is not concerned with ekphrasis, a referential device explored in Chapter Four, but with the exigencies of verbally representing Van Gogh's life whose experiences were expressed in vivid paintings, since he does not wish to be reductive.

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Van Gogh. *Vincent's Chair with His Pipe*. 1888-89. The Courtauld Collection, Tate Gallery, London. *The Works of Vincent Van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*. By J.-B. de la Faille. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970. 222.

<sup>22</sup> Vincent Van Gogh. *Still Life with Open Bible, extinguished candle and Zola's 'Joie de Vivre'*. 1885. Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam. *The Works of Vincent Van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*. By J.-B. de la Faille. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970. 82.

Gogh's compositions. Thus, still life painting presents a domestic realism without portraying the household activity in which the still life items are used, whereas realism in literature unquestionably includes the human form and may focus on the minutiae of daily life. Though painters of still life pictures might have to decide how accurately to represent a bowl of fruit through the use of colour, shading, and the arrangement of the fruit in the bowl, writers using the realist mode must consider whether or not the narrator is a passive recorder of events, simply mirroring the reality of experience in the literary work and to what degree the material of the tale is selected, ordered and interpreted by the narrator. In addition, works contemporaneous with *Still Life* exhibit a self-reflexive awareness of the narrator's manipulation of the tale, so that the realist mode is, as Andrzej Gąsiorek points out, not "a set of formal techniques . . . [but] a constellation of discursive practices, making it more pertinent to talk of an impulse to represent the social world than of a particular narrative mode" (13-14).<sup>23</sup> Thus, realism in Byatt's work (and by implication her literary type of still life) consists of a mimetic approach to representation, her identification with realist writers of the past and an interest in interrogating the structures of established genres. Byatt has asserted her own literary genealogy through George Eliot because of her "large numbers of characters, wide cultural relevance, [and] complex language" (Dusinberre 187),<sup>24</sup> but she has also claimed kinship with writers like Ford Madox Ford,

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<sup>23</sup> A definitive list of such self-reflexive works would not be possible here, but a few examples of this trend should suffice. Works that have been compared with Byatt's novels are John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*; and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

<sup>24</sup> In *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, Andrzej Gąsiorek describes George Eliot as a conservative realist, one who must interpret and synthesize the world in order to present it artistically (10). He positions Eliot as reacting against the sentimentalism of her predecessors while practising a

Ezra Pound, and Willa Cather, whose work she considers “plainer, starker, and more descriptive: a word for each object” (Dusinberre 183). With the epigraphs in *Still Life*, Byatt signals her intention to manipulate the conventions of realism in writing and also the conventions of still life in painting.

Though the sister arts of literature and painting have traditionally been thought to be separate but equal, *Still Life* shows that they may, in fact, have much to do with each other. Byatt is not the first writer to suggest this hypothesis. In *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James proposes that novels and paintings “may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other” (423). Similarly, art historian Richard Shiff says that a work of art “may express a theme that can be conveyed in other media, a theme known not only through a particular work but in its translations” (112). Thus, both art forms – still life painting and realist fiction – emphasize the importance of “[portraying] things as they really are, in the sense of presenting objectively and concretely the observable details of actual life” (Kaminsky 217). Alongside this premise is a preoccupation with documenting facts, a belief that the literary work ought to “mirror the world, and through this impersonal mirroring show ‘truth’” (Lee 11).<sup>25</sup> The topic of truth in realism is complex and not the focus of this study, but it should be recognized that Byatt’s experiment with *Still*

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realism similar to Balzac, de Maupassant, and James (see 11-13).

<sup>25</sup> Leonard Diepeveen cautions against using terms common to different artistic endeavours because they are not shared in precisely the same way in other art forms, so the terminology loses its precision and helpfulness (207). Diepeveen compares the use of ‘rhythm’ to describe Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Picasso’s collage *Still Life with Chair Caning*. In literature, ‘rhythm’ refers to “the temporal progression of sound patterns” (208) whereas in visual art, ‘rhythm’ signifies the artist’s use of “three-dimensionality and visual spacing” (208). Clearly, though the term may have its resonances for inter-arts comparisons, the use of the term for each art form is different, thus weakening the comparison.



*Life* consists of a desire to represent people, things, and events simply and accurately without recourse to metaphor. In the companion essay "Still Life/Nature Morte," Byatt insists that the "idea of the second novel of the series – *Still Life* – was that it should, by contrast, be very bare, very down-to-earth, attempt to give the 'thing itself' without the infinitely extensible cross-referencing of *The Virgin*" (*Passions* 5).<sup>26</sup> In this essay, Byatt outlines what contributed to the formation of her novel, how her reading of Ricoeur, Foucault and Wittgenstein influenced her attitudes toward precision in language, that a noun could "describe simply and clearly, ... categorize and distinguish" (SL 301). Essentially, Byatt hypothesizes an empiricism in realism which she later learned is unreachable. In a sense, *Still Life* is an account of the failure of her experiment to use language with precision. Though Byatt acknowledges the failure of the experiment both in the novel and in its companion essay, she is not surprised that such a large network of significations exist between nouns and adjectives.

To illustrate this idea, Byatt portrays Marcus Potter as the one individual who is most reluctant to interact with the other characters. He encounters the world with a visionary sensibility, though he is unwilling to describe his experiences to anyone. Whereas Alexander Wedderburn uses words to describe his experience of reality, Marcus, like Anna and Henry Severell, sees the natural world in geometric patterns.<sup>27</sup> Looking up

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<sup>26</sup> *The Virgin in the Garden* juxtaposes the red and white Tudor roses with quartering and butchering, and also with a lost paradise; subsequently, also a lost innocence for some of the characters. The notion that ideas, language and things are "naturally and indissolubly linked" (Byatt *Passions* 3-4) is the ruling metaphor of the novel.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus has usually associated the spreading effect with his asthma and the side-effect of the medication, which causes a rush of adrenalin and a sense of heightened awareness. Until now, Marcus

the centre trunk of an elm tree, Marcus notices that the crown, which initially appears amorphous, has an order to the formation of branches: "The leaves grew out of the twigs in alternate ranks, at  $180^\circ$  from each other, and the twigs too could be mapped . . . as growing out of the branches on a regular spiral at the same angle" (240). It is an epiphanic moment, because Marcus has not, until now, felt himself to be part of a system. Though Marcus visualizes the tree geometrically, he also sees the tree as "moving force and energy, stable yet changing, consuming and not consumed" (241). As he observes the tree, Marcus begins to understand it is also part of a sub-system:

Water rose uninterrupted from dark roots to dancing green. . . . The water rose, not through suction, nor from pressure, but because it was an uninterrupted cohesive column, drawn up from base to crown. For a moment he saw the geometric fountain of rising water, a twisting and branching rope, the inner figure – no, *an* inner figure, there must be many – of its life and shape. (241)

As Marcus visualizes the tree as a metaphorical fountain, he also finds beauty in it as an ecosystem, for the tree itself and as another signifier. Perhaps this is the meaning behind the third epigraph: that discovering the geometric pattern in a tree is not unlike finding beauty in unexpected places. Marcus sees the tree literally, without a conscious understanding that his visualization of the tree as a fountain is actually metaphorical. Instead, grounded as he is in the empirical data of his senses, Marcus experiences the tree,

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had always associated these sensations with "the onset of madness" (197).

its fountain shape, and its structure as a nexus of inner and outer geometry (240).

Strictly speaking, Marcus's description of the tree, first as a complex geometrical pattern, and later as a fountain demonstrates Byatt's contention that language is prone to the creation of metaphors: they are virtually inescapable. Metaphorical language, according to Leonard Diepeveen, is required to bridge the gap between things which initially appear not to have common ground.

Introducing resonances and the play of signifiers, metaphors force us to recognize new categories, irresolvable incongruities, and the interaction between previously discrete systems. Metaphor shows us how incomplete 'regular' language is, how much of our communication is based upon irresolvable tensions. (209)

In this way, Diepeveen echoes Byatt's sentiments about her mimetic approach to the writing of *Still Life*.<sup>28</sup> Using the postmodern characteristics of self-reflexiveness, intertextuality and ironic examination of representation coupled "with a mimetic approach to representing her characters and their experiences" (Rippl 527), Byatt explores the limits of the realist mode in which the story is narrated at the same time that characters attempt to describe ordinary things with precision. She fails largely because language itself is full of the same metaphors and cultural associations Byatt means to eschew. Like Alexander, Byatt "had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse to

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<sup>28</sup> Gąsiorek observes: "[accounts] of realism differ, but most emphasize the gap between human cognition of the world and the world's autonomous existence" (187).

reference to other people's thoughts, without . . . recourse to simile or metaphor" (108). She thought the novel could be written plainly "eschewing myths and cultural resonances ... [and] forgo[ing] metaphor" (*Passions* 3).<sup>29</sup> She found this type of non-figurative writing could not be done.

[One] cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. We all remake the world as we see it, as we look at it. (108)

Indeed, *Still Life* demonstrates that different ways of seeing the world all have equal validity even when characters lack the ability to describe reality. Marcus, for instance, has some very complex dreams, but when asked by his psychiatrist to describe them, he simplifies them. Similarly, Frederica attempts to write about the Provençal landscape, which she notes is not unlike how Van Gogh painted it: "the light was gold, ... olives were black and warm, the olive trees were powdery-grey, ... lavender was a purple haze" (59). Through this exercise, she discovers that her way of looking at a landscape is influenced by her Yorkshire roots, and by her reading of Wordsworth's poetry (59). However, there are two scenes in *Still Life* in which characters fail to be as precise with language as they would like: first, Alexander contemplates the silvery haze over the purple skin of a bowl of plums; and later, Marcus lists the names of grasses, discovering that the Latin names are actually metaphors for individual traits of each type of grass.

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<sup>29</sup> This is not Byatt's first attempt to jettison cultural contexts. In *The Game*, Simon Moffitt insists, during a television interview, that he studies snakes "to learn, to measure" (161), and because he "wanted something neutral to do. Something . . . where curiosity was simply curiosity" (162).

Alexander's contemplation of a plum from the kitchen fruit bowl alludes to a still life painting by Van Gogh.<sup>30</sup> This scene in the novel demonstrates how different ways of seeing necessitate different ways of description. Alexander notices that the combination of purple and yellow appears to intensify both colours, deepening the purple and making the yellow brighter (164).<sup>31</sup> The next segment of the novel is beautifully modernist in the way that the narrative voice slides from Alexander's consciousness to the omniscient narrator's consciousness to an authorial voice that muses on the inevitability of linking words for things with their artistic representation: the shift from consciousness to consciousness is virtually seamless. As Alexander stirs yogurt into his muesli, the narrative consciousness shifts from Alexander to the omniscient narrator, who examines the metaphorical associations between human flesh and fruit flesh. The omniscient narrator claims that the "unadorned immediacy" (164) of a plum, a pear, an apple is not clear enough. One must be more particular about the characteristics of the fruit: one must "exclude and evoke" (164). Therefore, the narrator concludes that to avoid the "looseness and vagueness" commonly associated with too many adjectives one must use them as "an instrument for precision" (164). Next, the narrator claims that one could talk about the firm flesh of the fruit, "[but] you cannot exclude from the busy automatically-connecting mind

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<sup>30</sup> Vincent Van Gogh. *Still Life: Lemons*. 1886. H. E. Hirschland, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey. *The Works of Vincent Van Gogh: His Paintings and Drawings*. By J.-B. de la Faille. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 1970. 108. The painting shows a bowl containing five lemons with four others assembled on the cutting board, one partially peeled and cut open to reveal the flesh.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Wedderburn has difficulty describing the purple of a plum, which for him is not unlike the "dark centre of some new and vigorously burgeoning human bruise" (164), an unsatisfactory description since the plum is "neither bruised, nor a bruise nor human" (164).



possible metaphors, human flesh for fruit flesh, flower-bloom, skin bloom, bloom of ripe youth for this powdery haze, human clefts, declivities, cleavages for that plain noun" (164). In this passage Byatt interrogates the generic limits of realist modes of writing as well as the still life mode of painting. As the passage from the novel shows, Alexander and the narrator discover that to some degree all language is loaded with inescapable metaphorical meaning. The flesh of the fruit is likened to human flesh, while declivities and cleavages recall the body's erogenous zones. Alexander recognizes that certain kinds of image-making possible in language are not possible in paint. He asks himself: "do we have enough words, synonyms, near synonyms for purple" (164)? A painter would mix the precise colour of purple he required without feeling a need to name the shade of purple he uses. At times, Alexander is troubled by the idea that Van Gogh could "get nearer to the life of plums than he ever could [because] metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language" (165).<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Alexander's erotic comparisons between the flesh of fruit and humans, Marcus names, draws, and describes the sexual forms and behaviours of plants for his A-level Botany examination. His area of concentration is grasses, a study which shows that the seemingly simple task of naming a plant is also bound up with metaphor: for example, *alopecurus* (foxtail), *gastidium* (nit-grass), *phalaris* (canary grass), and *panicum* (panic-grass). Byatt especially enjoyed these names because they reveal human observations

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<sup>32</sup> To an extent, Alexander's assumptions are correct, but the art historian, Carl Hausman, adds that when words are used metaphorically, the writer intends to juxtapose their usual significances. He asserts that "such play is not trivial, because it loosens the usual semantic rules for joining words and because the outcome is a new significance" (136).

about nature.

These names are all small metaphors – human perceptions, the nit, the little swelling, seeing the likeness in the difference of foxtail or haretail and grass. They are also double metaphors, out of etymological confusion. I like panick particularly. I see the grass both quaking with fear and providing wheat-ears for bread. . . . These names – differentiations, a taxonomy, Adamic names, muddled metaphors, shining yellow like fields of light, Gestalts combining fox and vegetable like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit – these names to me stand for the relation of words to things, inventive, imprecise, denotative, practical imaged. (*Passions* 13)

Though it may seem that Byatt has reneged on her experiment by failing to devise a means of describing things simply and accurately, she, in fact, has made some significant observations: that some sciences use linguistic metaphors to describe phenomena in nature; that language does have a blurring effect in which adjectives meant to describe a noun with greater precision potentially increase the capacity for inaccuracy; and that writing without metaphors is virtually impossible. Indeed, according to Carl Hausman, a writer's penchant for using metaphors derives from a need to describe the unfamiliar with the familiar, or to contrast the expected usage with the incongruous (145). For Marcus, writing his A-levels, the two-part names of plants distinguish one species from another and signify subtle differences among grasses with certainty: though all types may

be grasses, their individual characteristics will separate each type into species groups.<sup>33</sup>

Marcus is not concerned with the figures of speech offered by each name, though they are a preoccupation of the narrator who observes that the metaphors embedded in the etymology of each name reveal "the overwhelming human need to make connections and comparisons (foxtail, cat's-tail, hare's-tail) even if they are also the stuff of poetry (Panic, Trembling, Shining)" (302). Rather, for Marcus, the metaphors representing the grasses are a means of ordering the natural world to show resemblances between species and not to play linguistic games with figures of speech.

Fundamentally, in *Still Life*, Byatt challenges the idea that language is adequate to communicate an experience or a concept. Because of his psychological fragility, Marcus appears to be solipsistic and needs to be taught by his peers how best to use his powers of observation. Until he begins preparing for his examinations, Marcus fears his visionary talents because he associates the sensation of heightened awareness with feeling riotous. His friends, Jacqueline and Ruth, teach Marcus how to look for small details in natural phenomena. Gradually, he learns to rid himself of panic and to understand that his geometric visualization of the world is his brain's way of ordering reality. In contrast, Alexander's musings about plums and adjectives reveal that he thinks language is much

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<sup>33</sup> A species is a group of closely related organisms that are able to breed and produce offspring. Related species are grouped into a genus (genera, pl); genera are grouped into families, families into orders, orders into classes, classes into divisions and divisions into kingdoms. The two-name system that fascinates Marcus was established by Carolus Linnaeus and refined by modern scientists. The first word signifies the genus. The second word describes the organism, its geographic location, or the person who discovered it. For example, Kentucky bluegrass, a common grass used to seed lawns in North America, is *Poa. pratensis*. It belongs to the family *Poaceae* which includes species like wheat, spelt, and fescue: the adjective refers to meadow plants (see "Classification", *Encarta* 2002).

more slippery than he, at first, had supposed. While the novel certainly has been preoccupied with language, especially with using it precisely to describe an external reality, the dominant trope of the novel is concerned with ways of seeing. Indeed, the epigraphs present ways of perceiving ordinary things, but the prologue foregrounds ways to describe one's perceptions. Frederica and Alexander have agreed to meet to look at the Van Gogh exhibition. Alexander contemplates the pictures and recalls how Van Gogh's work inspired his own play, *The Yellow Chair*. He recalls how troublesome it was to find "an appropriate language for the painter's obsession with the illuminated material world" (2). The narrator describes the paintings and surveys the other spectators at the gallery: two old women, unable to comprehend the French names of the artists and paintings, completely misinterpret the sound guide and catalogue; a gaggle of schoolgirls wander around the gallery "filling in xeroxed, hand-written, one-word-answerable questionnaires" (4); the more knowledgeable Frederica and Alexander attract a group of people "as though they were offering a guided tour" (6); and Daniel is admonished by Frederica for leaving the museum without *seeing* the pictures.

Byatt satirizes the spectators for their uncritical viewing of Van Gogh's paintings, negatively judging those who consume cultural artefacts for the pleasure of name-dropping or reducing the significance of a work of art to a one-word quiz answer. Alexander and Frederica are knowledgeable and educated spectators, but they cater to a secondary audience who like to be told what to think about art. Daniel is a philistine, a spectator who sees without understanding the work of art and feels no need for art in his

life, but comes to the museum anyway out of a sense of duty to his sister-in-law. With tongue in cheek, Byatt surreptitiously asks her readers which kind of audience they will be. While viewing the Van Gogh collection, Alexander reminisces about his attempt to write a play in "a plain exact verse with no figurative language" (2): it had failed largely because "[metaphor] lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but resembled the sun" (2). Though Byatt portrays him experimenting with the verse drama form, Alexander uses words carefully, and describes himself as a "fidgety, costive kind [of writer] whose works are long in the planning, and meticulous in the execution" (66).

At the beginning of the project, Alexander wanted to write in a plain non-figurative language "in which a yellow chair was the thing itself" (2). As the writing process continued, he struggled with form: should he make the play "stark and classical by keeping the unities" or make it "episodic and epic" (83)? Later, he struggled with meaning, with "the disposition of colour-adjectives in his play" (166). Choosing his form has large implications for the characterization of the protagonist. To keep the unities, Alexander must focus on only one event in Van Gogh's life. The proposed event is the dispute between Gauguin and Van Gogh that results in the delivery of Vincent's ear to the Arles whore. Clearly, this event is not satisfactory because it is neither representative of the man nor of his work and results in a reductive representation of the artist. The episodic epic form suits Alexander's own aesthetic leanings for large, weighty subjects; still, he must choose episodes carefully to portray the conflict in Van Gogh's career and to maintain audience interest. Perhaps a more biographical approach in *The Yellow Chair* would have



made the representation of Van Gogh's life and work more realistic.

Alexander discovers that the primary images of his play – the chair, the sower, the reaper, and the sunflowers – become emblematic, having too many literal and figurative referents for the play to connect with common themes and images. He later concludes that his experiment with language in *The Yellow Chair* was doomed to fail because the two main recurring images in Van Gogh's paintings, the chair and the sunflower, were too loaded with metaphor, "cultural motif, immanent religion, a faith and a church" (2).

This pattern of linking ordinary objects to cultural motifs recurs throughout the novel beginning with Van Gogh's yellow chair. One of twelve purchased for the Yellow House in which a colony of artists were intended to nurture each other, the chair begins a pattern of discipleship. Similarly, at the pre-natal clinic, Stephanie Potter Orton stands in line behind twelve women, all of whom are waiting for the attentions of "a royal-blue Sister with a crimped white turret on her head" (11), and whose attire recalls the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary. Frederica Potter discovers at Cambridge that there are eleven men for every woman at the university, and it is not long before she has her own collection of male admirers and hangers-on. Some of the cultural motifs in the novel are less universal and more local. For example, while working in Provence, Frederica visits a church where the miraculous lives of St Mary Jacobus, St Mary Salome, St Mary Magdalene and their servant, Sarah, are annually celebrated with a ritual bathing of the saints' statues in the ocean, followed by their spiritual rebirth. This motif is also linked to the patterns of birth, growth, and renewal in the novel. One means of facilitating renewal

is through naming. The impetus to name children derives from a desire to maintain cultural ties and create a family legacy. As the narrator points out: "The pattern of the genes is biological, is chemical, is human history" (251), but human history is also transmitted by patterns in naming children. Elinor Poole gives birth to a son, but is unsure whether his father is her husband, Simon Poole, or her tenant, Alexander Wedderburn. She makes a tenuous connection to both men by naming her child Simon Vincent, creating a line of patrilineal descent while at the same time making an oblique reference to Alexander through the subject of the play he was writing at the time of the child's birth. Stephanie and Daniel Orton name their daughter Mary Valentine because, as Daniel insists, "She just looks as though her name is Mary" (251) and because she arrives on February 14, 1956.

In *Still Life* the world is remade as Byatt sees it and communicated through the thoughts and perceptions of her cast of characters. Frederica writes what she sees and hears; Marcus has an empirical way of thinking about reality; Alexander searches for "*le mot juste*"; and Daniel is a very literal man, accepting things as they come to him. Through her narrator, and also in the companion essay, Byatt bemoans the failure of her experiment, but she may be protesting too much. Compared to her debut novel, *Still Life* presents realistic, believable characters. The epigraphs that point to the ordinary aspects of human experience are fulfilled over the course of the plot, and the suggestive interpretations of the title are also played out in the novel. The complexity of the plot and sub-plots as well as the interweaving cultural motifs demonstrate that A.S. Byatt has come into her own as a

novelist. With *Still Life* she has demonstrated that the experimental novel and the realist novel need not be kept rigorously separate, but that a writer can experiment with language and with other structures in the novel while writing in the realist mode.

With *Possession*, Byatt continues to transgress the boundaries between the experimental and the realist novel<sup>34</sup>, blending the conventions of several different genres of the novel – the romance-quest motif, the detective thriller, and the supernatural tale – with both poetry and prose writing. She tells the tale and provides all the supporting documentation, too. With *Possession*, Byatt clearly builds upon her experimental successes of the past: challenging the limits of literary conventions and reasserting the parameters of the realist novel. Whereas *The Shadow of the Sun* exhibited more anxiety toward her literary ancestors, *Possession* exudes a confidence unlike any of Byatt's earlier novels. The book begins with the discovery of an illicit romance, but as Roland Michell<sup>35</sup> and Maud Bailey pursue the clues offered by the Victorian poets' letters and poems, the genre of the novel shifts from 'high Romance' to 'vulgar romance'. Indeed, the Hawthorne epigraph tells readers to expect this kind of latitude. Following Byatt's established pattern of hinting in the epigraphs at the aims of each book, the epigraphs for *Possession* initially identify the generic conventions of Romance and then they are deployed *carte blanche* to transgress the

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<sup>34</sup> Byatt's literary predecessors found themselves either defending or opposing modernism, so that those who felt modernism too subjective or lacking reference to an external world were defending the realist novel against the decadence of the experimental novel (See Gąsiorrek 2-3). In her own generation, the boundaries between the realist novel and the experimental are considerably more blurred as writers use aspects of both narrative modes to suit their own aims.

<sup>35</sup> Both American and British reviewers spell Roland's surname with and without a "t". Here, I use the spelling privileged by both the Chatto & Windus first edition and the Vintage paperback edition.

rules.<sup>36</sup>

The place to begin sorting out Byatt's challenges to the conventions of high Romance is with the title and the epigraphs. In an interview with Mireia Aragay, A.S. Byatt explains how the subtitle of the novel came to be:

I will be completely truthful with you. I put the subtitle in at the last moment because I was already beginning to panick [sic] about my editor at Chatto & Windus, who I knew would not like what he would see as the frivolousness of this novel and the improbability of the plot and he wouldn't see what I was doing with the genre. I thought if I put in "a romance" he would see it as not meant to be a realist novel and at least we should start off on the right foot. So I put in the Hawthorne quotation. (161)

Byatt appears disingenuous about adding the subtitle. The impulsive decision connotes an uncharacteristic frivolity. As we have discovered already, Byatt always calculates the effects of each element in her novels, including sub-titles. *Possession* is a stylistic break from the realist tradition in which Byatt has been working, but blaming her editor for closed-mindedness strikes a false note. Later, Byatt reveals the actual inspiration for the subtitle:

I was excusing my historical novel along Hawthorne lines, but I think probably owing to [a] conversation with David Lodge<sup>37</sup> I also saw that

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<sup>36</sup> In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, imitative allusions are distinguished from other types of allusion because they foreground the formal aspects of the work and the generic tradition in which the work is situated (39-40).

<sup>37</sup> Lodge has used the same subtitle for *Small World* which was published while Byatt was working on *Possession*.

Christabel's "Melusina" poem is medieval romance, and the novel is also a love story in the vulgar Barbara Cartland sense. . . . It's also a quest. So I found that I could play with about twelve more genres than I thought I was going to be able to when I started the book. Anyway, the subtitle, although I can give a good critical account of it, was an afterthought. (161)

Essentially, Byatt is using the Hawthorne epigraph as her poetic license to incorporate elements into *Possession* which one would not expect from a writer who usually works in the realist mode. Hawthorne's definition of Romance stipulates a connection between an earlier time and the present with the proviso that the writer may swerve from the truth in order to present the events of the story imaginatively. Hawthorne's definition of romance distinguishes between "Novel" and "Romance" through the writer's commitment to truthful representation. He is not suggesting that romances are untruthful, only that they bend the truth, swerving from it, to represent the improbable events of an imaginative tale.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the imaginative mode takes precedence over the realist mode.

Byatt's tale does connect the present with the past: two twentieth-century academics research two Victorian poets. But once Byatt has indicated her intention to use the form of the Romance, she also links her tale with the tradition of the romances exemplified by writers like Hawthorne, with a lesser connection to medieval romances, and incorporates

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<sup>38</sup> These notions are consistent with contemporary theories of Romance. Diane Elam, for example, asserts that Romance, as an aesthetic term, exceeds the conventional categories of the genre – though this may be part of its appeal – and consequently "we are never quite sure what romance may mean or how it may mean" (7). In contrast, Robert Scholes submits a more precise definition of Romance: "a formal pattern of events designed to move toward climax and resolution, balanced by a counter-pattern of events designed to delay this very climax and resolution" (26).



elements of them into her novel: an adventure story about characters who "live in a courtly world somewhat remote from the everyday" (Cuddon 803) whose actions may be heroic or spectacular, chivalrous or gallant, written in an extravagant tone. The university campus certainly qualifies as a world apart from the everyday for the purposes of Romance conventions. Roland Michell becomes a romantic hero only because he "was seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse" (10) to steal an uncatalogued letter from the London Library. What follows as a result of this action is an adventure tale that pits Roland's wits (and his extensive knowledge of R.H. Ash's poems) against the collective experience of his academic elders in a chase across England and Normandy. It is also this action that triggers the beginning of the quest narrative in *Possession*. Pilar Cuder Domínguez describes the quest narrative as a cyclical series of events: the hero must leave his original setting and journey toward a new place; he will face dangers and obstacles which are overcome with the assistance of helpers; and he may be chased by, and escape from, one who wishes to prevent the hero's successful completion of the journey (79-80). The impetus for leaving his place of origin is usually triggered by a misfortune, while the end of the quest implies the hero's reintegration with the people of his home.<sup>39</sup>

Roland Michell's adventure fits this same pattern. He must leave the Ash Factory

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<sup>39</sup> Cuder Domínguez's conception of the form of the quest narrative is derived from Joseph Campbell's and Vladimir Propp's descriptions of the hero's adventures in folklore and mythological tales. Campbell, for example, likens each stage of the hero's adventure to stages of the rites of passage: separation, initiation, and return (30). Propp's assessment is similar, though he divides the plot lines of folk tales into thirty-one separate functions. The hero must leave his home to search for something either he or a member of his family desires; he will face a villain and they will compete with each other; the hero will prevail and obstacles to his task will be removed. When the task is resolved, the hero will be recognized and the villain will be exposed and punished. As a result of his accomplishments, the hero will be rewarded with marriage and property (Propp cited in Tatar 386-387).

because he has impulsively stolen a letter from the library, a “breach of the scholarly code” (Cuder Domínguez 80). The shocking content of the letter precipitates the theft, but it also piques Roland’s curiosity so that he must follow the clues to discover the identity of the unnamed woman. In order to identify the woman, Michell must call upon the expertise of scholars in the field. The first task is to identify the breakfast party at Crabb Robinson’s where Ash and the woman initially meet. Instinctively, Roland knows he must keep his discovery a secret from Blackadder and the other members of the Ash Factory. How to do it while gleaning the information he needs is key for the quest motif of the novel.

According to Propp’s thirty-one functions of the folktale, the beginning of the hero’s journey is signalled by his need to gather information. Roland must ask those he does not trust to provide him with the necessary information to proceed with his research. First, he hints to his partner, Val, about a “solid discovery” (23), whose response is unenthusiastic and acrimonious. Next, Roland asks Blackadder about “a writer called LaMotte” (35), who responds with a thumbnail sketch of Isidore LaMotte, Christabel’s father. Though the question is casual, asking it is fraught with anxiety because, as principal investigator, Blackadder may wish to claim Roland’s discovery as part of his own project. A more direct competitor, Fergus Wolff, gives Roland the most information about Christabel LaMotte and directs him to Maud Bailey, the local expert on her poetry. For Roland, the challenge is to establish his own niche of expertise relative to his colleagues in the same literary field. His desire is to be “a better job prospect” (23); so meeting Maud Bailey, discovering the love letters at Seal Court, and unearthing evidence to prove Ash and LaMotte had an affair are

all part of the romance tradition of challenging the hero and rewarding him for successfully completing his task.

As often happens in romantic tales, the development of the quest motif requires that the hero meet people willing to help him in his task. Roland has three helpers: Maud Bailey, whose expertise on Christabel LaMotte balances his own on R.H. Ash; Beatrice Nest, the guardian of Ellen Ash's journal; and Ariane Le Minier, the discoverer of Sabine de Kercoz's journal. Because of the parallel plot structure, *Possession* needs two academics questing for information on the two poets. Byatt gives Roland a female helper: Maud Bailey, a feminist scholar, who is immediately suspicious of his motives. They do not easily befriend each other, though the crucial moment for their relationship occurs when Roland quotes a passage from Ash's *Ask to Embla* in which a line is identical with another line from LaMotte's *The Fairy Melusina*. The frisson Maud feels hearing the echo establishes trust between them as they work to decipher the clues contained in LaMotte's and Ash's poems of the 1858-1860 period.

Beatrice Nest establishes the connection between Ash and LaMotte by discovering a reference in Ellen Ash's journal to a letter from "a mysterious and urgent lady" (250) requesting a personal interview on a "matter of life and death" (250). Fortunately, both for the posterity of the novel and for the conventions of the quest, Ellen Ash has kept the annoying letters from this strange woman, and Beatrice Nest has them in a shoe box in her office. The letter-writer is Blanche Glover, Christabel LaMotte's lover. This information is crucial because it validates the hypotheses Roland and Maud are developing about the love

affair between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The role Beatrice Nest plays in bringing the information forward is also important. In Roland and Maud's quest, Beatrice is a benign helper, "a protective figure" (Campbell 69). Her function is not only to be protective of Ellen Ash's interests, but also to provide Maud with useful information that will prove the affair took place and explain anomalies in the dating of some of Ash's poems from 1859 and 1860. Beatrice is also exacting her own revenge against an institution that assumed women academics could not, or perhaps should not, work on the poems of great men like R.H. Ash. Relegated to the academic equivalent of 'women's work', she has been assembling an annotated edition of Ellen Ash's journal for twenty-five years without producing any publishable material. Though many of the old chauvinist values are still in place, Beatrice feels a sisterhood with Maud that results in her complicity when she agrees not to mention their discovery to Blackadder or Cropper.

Professor Ariane Le Minier makes two contributions to Maud's and Roland's research: first, in a letter to Leonora Stern she reveals Christabel's 1859 visit to cousin Sabine; and later, hand-delivers a photocopy of Sabine's journal to Maud and Roland. The closure of the French archive for summer holidays could have been an obstacle for the quest participants, but a search of its holdings for additional material might have slowed down Maud and Roland just at a time when Blackadder, Leonora Stern, and Cropper are all joining the chase. None of the scholars want to be left out of such a major discovery; indeed, each wishes to be first at the expense of the others' effort. At the end of the novel,

in her role as a protective figure, Beatrice Nest hosts a gathering of minds<sup>40</sup> to discuss how to foil Cropper's plan to disinter Randolph and Ellen Ash to recover a box alleged to have been buried with them. The conventions of romance – both high romance and its vulgar variant – dictate that the hero must be successful: the obstacles confronted during the quest will be surmounted; the hero will unmask the villain; and, finally, he will win the love of his lady.<sup>41</sup> To achieve these ends, the hero will need more assistance. Euan MacIntyre, a lawyer, and thus the symbolic representative of civil order, witnesses Cropper's desecration of the Ash grave, and using his walkie-talkie, assembles everyone to assist in the recovery of the papers in the box. As Cuder Domínguez points out, the gothic mode "discloses the secret of the hero(ine)'s mysterious origin, and brings a solution to issues of rightful inheritance and social status" (86). Among other mementoes in the box, Christabel's last letter to Ash reveals that Maud is their direct descendant. Byatt uses letters again to resolve Roland's plot line: he is informed by Blackadder that three different offers of employment await him in London.

The disclosure scene in *Possession* is influenced by mystery writers like Agatha Christie. Indeed, the scene at the inn where all of the characters have been gathered to examine the contents of the metal box strongly resembles the disclosure scenes of the Hercule Poirot mysteries: the characters are all assembled to hear how each was complicit in the crime; to pass judgment on the guilty; and to resolve the mystery. Even the ne'er-do-

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<sup>40</sup> The gathering consists of Roland Michell, Maud Bailey, James Blackadder, Leonora Stern, Euan MacIntyre (Lord Ash's lawyer), Val, and Beatrice Nest.

<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen defines the quest form as "a journey at the end of which the marvelous will become reality for the seeker" (117).



wells of this novel are permitted to hear Christabel LaMotte's last love letter to Ash and to see the locks of hair entwined in the back of his watch.

To write "by the rules", to imitate her predecessors, Byatt must eschew the realist mode and allow for a happy ending. Though the characters and the geographic locations of events in the novel may all be recognizable, Byatt's romancing Hawthorne-style will preempt her realist leanings. Commenting from a folklore perspective, Victoria Sanchez points out the intersections between the fairy tale characteristics and the realist mode in *Possession*: "one-dimensionality of time and space, separation of the spirit and ordinary worlds by geographic distance, and the depthlessness of characters" (49). She comments on both the fairy tales incorporated into the novel as well as the form of the novel itself. Sanchez argues that the whole novel is essentially a fairytale with many subtle layers contributing to its complexity, though in some passages the reality of everyday living intrudes upon the characters' fairytale existence. For example, Christabel's "honeymoon" in Yorkshire with Randolph is idyllic because they can savour their time together since they will not be able to have a public relationship. Ash is already married, and LaMotte is involved with Blanche Glover.<sup>42</sup> However, Christabel's pregnancy puts an end to the exchange of love letters and terminates their relationship when she secretly flees to her relatives in France. The reality of the expected child alters the fairytale honeymoon. As Sanchez points out, "to speak of the matter, to acknowledge [the pregnancy] in any way,

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<sup>42</sup> After 1857 in Britain, it was possible though complicated to have a divorce decreed by the ecclesiastical court. It would not have been impossible for Christabel LaMotte and R. H. Ash to marry, but the legal wrangling and public airing of private matters could conceivably have irreparably damaged their reputations as writers and embarrassed their families.

would bring it back into the 'real' world, with painful consequence" (45). In addition, the parallel plot lines exhibit "a continuity of imagery, description, and action which spans the fairy tale world, the nineteenth-century world, and the twentieth-century world" (41). Roland's relationship to Maud changes as the quest for information about Ash and LaMotte proceeds. Though he initiates the quest, once the scholarly quest grows, Maud becomes the dominant partner. Roland uses her to negotiate the sensitive, and (for him) treacherous, world of Women's Studies; he allows Maud to use her contacts and her money in France instead of getting his own grant money; and once the Seal Court Bailey family decide to have the letters evaluated, it is clear that George Bailey prefers to correspond with Maud, a distant relative, rather than with Roland, a stranger. And though the scholarly quest separates Maud and Roland from their usual daily routines, effectively putting them in a fairy tale world to discover the lost papers, reality intrudes upon them when they feel sexually attracted to each other.

Byatt's use of Romance and its cousins (the folk tale, the quest motif, and detective fiction) emphasizes the familial relationships between literary forms which readers may take for granted. It also demonstrates her familiarity with inherited traditions and her ability to allude confidently to a wide spectrum of genres and subjects. In her earlier works, Byatt imitates the literary conventions of the past. In *The Shadow of the Sun*, though a prose work, Byatt imitates the conventions of Renaissance love poetry, and in *Still Life*, she juxtaposes the conventions of realism and still life painting. These novels demonstrate the evolution of A.S. Byatt's writing technique: with each new novel, she enthusiastically

tackles the relationship between form, generic conventions, and the imperative to 'make it new'. Critics agree that *Possession* might be Byatt's best fiction, the yardstick by which all of her subsequent books will be measured, but playing with generic conventions is not the only technique Byatt brought to new heights in *Possession*. Byatt is frequently preoccupied with the imagination, its symbolic representation, and its effects when misdirected. The next chapter will explore Byatt's use of serpent imagery, particularly as it applies to Coleridge's conception of the imagination in the emblem of the serpent. As we have seen, Byatt uses traditional generic conventions in new ways. This pattern replicates itself in her juxtaposition of Coleridge's serpent emblem with the biblical serpent, and again with allusions to the figure of the serpent in classical mythology, a disconcerting and disorienting effect for the reader.

## Chapter Two

### Reading & Misreading Serpent Allusions in *The Game*

Like *Possession*, A.S. Byatt's second novel, *The Game*, is an imaginative work of the "first water". It is about writers and those who study them, a subject to which Byatt returns. This novel is partly about the rivalry between two sisters, and also about the destructive use of their imaginations. As in *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt repeats the technique of directing interpretation of the novel with two epigraphs:<sup>43</sup> one from Charlotte Brontë's poem "Retrospection", and the other attributed to S.T. Coleridge about the serpent serving as an emblem for the imagination. The Brontë epigraph emphasizes fond memories of childhood games, while the Coleridge epigraph emphasizes the fluidity of wisdom and the imagination.<sup>44</sup> Chapter One demonstrated Byatt's use of generic conventions as allusions: the Petrarchan conventions unsuccessfully employed in *The Shadow of the Sun* were contrasted with the successful use of Romance conventions in *Possession*. Chapter Two will apply the theories of Laszlo Géfin and Janet Larson to Byatt's

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<sup>43</sup> See Appendix A for the text of the epigraphs.

<sup>44</sup> It is also the foundation of an academic joke because the passage does not belong to Coleridge: William Hazlitt wrote it in imitation of him, describing a typical conversation they would have had about the deplorable state of modern French drama. The serpent, an emblem of the imagination, was a preoccupation for Coleridge: he *might* have said such a thing to Hazlitt in conversation, but the point is that he *did not write* this particular passage. John Beer uses Hazlitt's passage as one of the epigraphs for his *Coleridge the Visionary*, in which he describes it as a typical example of Coleridge's conversation. It is ironic that both Beer and Byatt have attributed the passage to Coleridge since its usage is apt for both books. Though Hazlitt's imitation of Coleridge smacks of good-natured high jinks, Julia Corbett's novel imitating her sister's life is so satirical as to be malicious. Ironically, the title of Julia's novel, *A Sense of Glory*, echoes one of the chapter headings in Beer's book. Thanks to Ms. Janet Goosney, Information Services, QE2 Library Memorial University, for tracking down this source.

use of the serpent emblem as an allusion to creative endeavour. While the serpent emblem works to showcase the characters' imaginative output in Coleridge's use of the term, it also evokes allusions to classical and biblical texts which are supported by the themes of *The Game* and part of the larger cultural tradition in which the emblem of the serpent has meaning. There is no guarantee that readers will consciously grasp the referent, especially when a particular symbol in the text evokes other competing precursor texts. The result, for the reader, will be an interpretation that favours the more familiar referent when the structures of the text support it.

Laszlo Géfin and Janet Larson account for a reader's misidentification of allusions in different ways. Géfin argues against allusions, claiming they get in the way of the plot and distract readers with unnecessary links to too many precursor texts. Comparatively, Larson takes a more moderate approach to allusions by demonstrating that some writers allow for more interpretive play in their work by incorporating multivalent allusions. Though the Coleridge epigraph is apt for the subject of Byatt's novel, a reader's misapplication of it illustrates Laszlo Géfin's concept of false exits, a condition that occurs when the cognitive pathway from the allusion to the precursor text is indirect. He proposes that allusions tempt readers to search further afield for the precursor text than necessary, and the potentially large quantity of precursor texts could prove unwieldy for readers and difficult to assimilate with the meaning of the alluding text. In addition, the writer's application of the allusion could be inexact; readers' literary knowledge might not grasp the import of the Coleridge reference because the text leads them to other precursor



texts that fit the serpent emblem equally well; and readers might resist an alluding epigraph because it is too difficult to understand or because it is perceived as unimportant while the main body of the tale awaits. In contrast, Janet Larson suggests that there are two kinds of allusions which form the subtext of the narrative: first, the evoked text mirrors, or provides a commentary on, the plot; and alternatively, the evoked text may be a "pervasively influential parallel text" (17) by providing the means of interpreting particular episodes. For example, the undercurrent of garden imagery in *The Game* recalls the biblical story of Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden, an allusion not usually associated with the imagination, which creates a rival subtext that should be interpreted relative to the network of allusions in the novel.

Much of the available criticism on *The Game* emphasizes the dichotomies which the novel both suggests overtly and attempts to resist: sibling rivalry, the conflict (real or imagined) between the artist and the critic, and the tension between reality and imagination.<sup>45</sup> Some interpretations see the Corbett sisters as an allegory of artist and critic, and assume that good critics are not visionaries, but instead, they should emulate Oliver

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Todd's chapter on *The Game* in his book *A.S. Byatt* is mostly descriptive, but he warns readers not to treat the book as a thinly disguised complaint about the two Drabble sisters, a reading Byatt would resist, and which has made her cringe in interviews which question her relationship to her writer-sibling Margaret Drabble. Speaking with Jennifer Foote, in 1991 about winning the Booker Prize and the Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Award, Byatt says that the best thing about winning these awards is that "they've freed her from the shadow of her younger sister's greater reputation". Julian Gitzzen glosses over Byatt's early works in favour of the more obvious patterns of self-reflexive artistic behaviour in Byatt's mid-career novels. Beate Neumeier discusses in some detail Byatt's representation of the visionary artist in all of the novels up to *Possession*. Her section on *The Game* proposes that the ongoing feud between Cassandra and Julia is a manifestation of the perennial conflict between artist and critic though the dichotomy between artist and critic is complicated because "the critic, Cassandra, is . . . endowed with visionary faculties, whereas the writer, Julia . . . [possesses] a reductive clichéd view of reality" (14).

Canning in *The Shadow of the Sun*, a plodding, uninspired pedant.<sup>46</sup> In *The Game*, Julia and Cassandra Corbett are both writers: the former a novelist; and the latter a scholar. The women have had a life-long passion for writing which began with crafting stories for the characters in a childhood game they played together: a pack of cards divided into four armies, some Arthurian-styled clay figures, a map, and some ledgers chronicling their adventures. Conflict arises between the sisters when Julia betrays Cassandra: first, Julia wins a children's literary contest by revising a story Cassandra originally wrote (70); and later, she attempts to steal Cassandra's friend, Simon Moffitt, by hinting that there is more to the relationship than there really is (91). Cassandra might have eventually recovered from the first betrayal, but she is so offended by Julia's flirtatious behaviour toward Simon that she cuts them both out of her life. Consequently, contact between the sisters is limited so that both sisters over-analyse the actions and motivations of each other. In an effort to reconcile, Julia visits Cassandra, offering the gift of a glass serpent: "It's terribly realistic in a funny way... considering how artificial it is" (112). On the one hand, the glass serpent symbolizes the slippery<sup>47</sup> relationship between the two sisters, but on the other hand, it is weighted with the meanings of many precursor texts.

The glass serpent is the embodiment of a complex nexus of allusions. It refers to the

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<sup>46</sup> Unlike her characters, Byatt enjoys exercising both her creative and her critical talents. In an interview with Juliet Dusinberre, published in 1983, A.S. Byatt states: "I need to write a theoretical book at the same time as I write a novel. The gap between creative writers and critics has closed markedly in the last ten or twenty years, partly through the influence of structuralism. There are now academic theorists, novelists who are academics, and critics like Harold Bloom who think criticism is a form of creative writing. I don't. I think critical writing is a way of finding out how to write well. I had to throw off the burden of Leavis who thought that to write any book of criticism, however second rate, was better than to write a second-rate novel. I always put novel writing higher" (193).

<sup>47</sup> Both sisters comment on their slippery relationship, but, in fact, a snake's skin is dry.

ancient classical symbol for the imagination and prophecy. For some readers, the glass serpent recalls the form in which Satan tempted Eve as well as represents the theme of betrayal. Since it was Julia's gift to Cassandra, the glass serpent represents her recognition of their differences, but for Cassandra the gift suggests a mythical interpretation. In her journal she tells Simon that the serpent "is traditionally . . . a symbol for our horror at finding ourselves necessarily embodied" (24). She discusses the poets who have made significant uses of the symbol: Milton's portrayal of Satan's transformation in *Paradise Lost* as well as Keats' "Lamia" and Coleridge's "Psyche" in which the serpent represents the transformation of "spiritual love to bodily lust" (24). Later, when Cassandra's mental health becomes unstable, the glass serpent acquires a more tenuous interpretation: an object made of glass, it has both "weight, as well as transparency" (137). Indeed, she imagines a pane of glass lies between the world of solid reality and the "pure vision" (141) of the world of dreams, which must not be broken because of her fear that the two worlds will destroy each other. For this reason, Cassandra feels "disturbed by glass objects . . . because they contain, being transparent, the suggestion that they are not simply solid" (137). Consequently, how to interpret the allusions associated with the glass snake poses a difficult problem for readers wishing to establish the correct precursor text.<sup>48</sup> In *The Game*, the sibling rivalry dominates the plot so that the theme of betrayal becomes the dominant structure in the novel,<sup>49</sup> and the serpent imagery becomes associated with biblical

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<sup>48</sup> Géfin's journal article emphasizes the need to ascertain the correct precursor text for each allusion to situate the meaning of the allusion within the larger context of the alluding work.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as Jane Campbell points out, the narrative structure of *The Game* alternates between Julia and Cassandra like two players taking turns (see Campbell 2004, 45).

themes rather than with Coleridge's conceptualization of the poetic imagination. The serpent imagery in the novel also recalls classical references which interrupt the association with imagination, and which ultimately misdirect the reader's interpretation toward madness and prophecy, elements supported by Cassandra's visionary paintings and her belief that she has conjured Simon in the greenhouse (191). Larson would describe the serpent allusions in *The Game* as stable allusions whose purpose is to "give readers hermeneutic and psychological assurance" (20), but Géfin would disagree. If readers take their interpretive cue from Byatt's use of the Coleridge epigraph, then they should understand that the biblical and mythological serpent allusions are false exits.

Laszlo K. Géfin describes a false exit as the widening gap between the texts of two writers when the allusion refers not only to the precursor text, but also to every text between the text of the present and the text of the past making a similar allusion. Consequently, the eternal problem of the relationship between allusion and interpretation is that "the more one tries to track down the ever widening intertextual field of allusions, the more the distance seems to grow between adopted and adoptive texts, showing an irreconcilable conflict and difference" (439). Initially, Géfin finds the vast interconnectedness of texts to be exciting, but as the gap between the alluding text and the precursor text widens, he also finds the deferral of meaning distressing because a reader could potentially find herself caught in an unwieldy network of texts: the alluding text (A) evokes one text (E1), which in turn recalls texts E2, E3, E4 and so on with the added possibility that each of the evoked texts may trigger other related texts until the total

number of potential evoked texts (n) is exhausted at E<sup>n</sup>. There is a specious quality to this part of Géfin's essay: first, though there may be a great many precursor texts which fit with Byatt's serpent allusions, only one will properly fit the meaning of her novel because she has given readers the key to the meaning of her serpent allusions with the epigraph from Coleridge; and second, the false exit only occurs when readers have read widely enough to notice the additional resonances with other precursor works. Allusions simply do not work unless readers recognize them. They remain part of the subtext until a reader identifies the alluding passage with an earlier text.

Nevertheless, a related concern is that a reader might delight in associating an allusion with as many precursor texts as possible, thus deferring the meaning of the allusion indefinitely. Géfin proposes that Derrida's concept of *différance* may be a useful theoretical approach to illustrate or explain how "allusions disperse and disseminate the meanings of both adopted and adoptive texts" (440), but he also notes that in its extremity *différance* "means that an allusion can be used to function in any way, in any text, after it has been excised from its context" (440). Reluctantly, Géfin admits that *différance* ultimately will not work. As he says:

Allusions seem to be open invitations to readers to 'dig up' the totality of the allusion, all the more to enrich the reality of the adoptive text. But if the makers of allusions suspected the implications of opening up the side-doors and corridors of what to them is a straight passageway between adopted and adoptive texts, they would probably have refrained from making the allusion



in the first place. (441)

The implication here is that the imagined straight line between the alluding text and the precursor text is entirely illusory, and in actuality, there exist numerous side doors, or false exits, to other unconsciously evoked texts, which will, in turn, lead the questing reader in entirely new directions than the originating allusion might have suggested. Géfin does not, however, account for a reader's ability to judge the fit of a precursor text with the alluding passage. Though a reader may derive pleasure from "digging up" related precursor texts, he or she should also be able to judge which precursor text best fits the allusion.

### The unwieldy precursors: the serpent allusions

Beginning with the epigraph from Coleridge, serpent references in *The Game* allude to the imagination; to Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott"; to the biblical story of Satan's betrayal of Adam and Eve; and to such classical legends as Python, Medusa, and Lamia.<sup>50</sup> The sibling rivalry between Cassandra and Julia Corbett also evokes resonances with such precursor texts as the betrayal of Esau by Jacob as well as Cain's murder of Abel.<sup>51</sup> Simon's study of snakes and his travels in the Amazon deliberately link Simon to

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<sup>50</sup> There are many references to snakes and serpents in classical mythology, but the most familiar are Medusa, Cassandra of Troy, and Lamia. According to Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Minerva's temple because she was so beautiful. Her most beautiful feature was her hair, so as a punishment for attracting inappropriate male behaviour, Minerva changed Medusa's hair into snakes. After her transformation, Medusa could turn any man to stone simply by gazing upon him (IV, 776-789). Cassandra of Troy, King Priam's daughter, was gifted with the power of prophecy, a talent usually reserved for Python's high priestess; but Apollo, whose advances Cassandra had refused, caused her predictions to be disbelieved even though she was invariably correct (Bulfinch 893). According to Coulter and Turner, Lamia fell madly in love with Zeus, and out of jealousy, Hera turned Lamia into a snake with the head and breasts of a woman (286). In addition, Hera killed all but one of Lamia's children, which caused Lamia to become insane. Whenever she saw a child in its mother's arms she would seize the infant and devour it.

<sup>51</sup> Jacob, the younger brother, convinced Esau to sell his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew and some bread. See Gen. 25:29-34. Cain murders Abel (Gen 4:8) because he is jealous that Abel's

a modern-day Eden. Couple these items with the sisters' description of Simon as an emotional meddler and the experienced reader will conclude that Simon is a devilish character in this story. In addition, there are parallels between Simon's behaviour toward Cassandra and Lancelot's behaviour toward the Lady of Shalott<sup>52</sup>. Taken together, these allusions refer to sexual anxieties exacerbated by Simon, since he is compared to Lancelot in the Tennyson allusion, to the serpent (as the agent of Adam and Eve's sexual knowledge) in the Garden of Eden, and although Simon's behaviour is never as violent as the gods in classical mythology, his behaviour toward, and treatment of, the Corbett sisters is unabashedly contemptuous.

If Simon is a latter-day Lancelot, then readers might expect the reference to fit Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" since Cassandra's academic lifestyle is comparable to the entowered Lady. Both women express their dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives; they love a man who will not return their affection;<sup>53</sup> they have immersed themselves in an imaginary world; and they fear that escape from this world will presage death. Finally, both women live a cloistered existence, although Cassandra's circumstances are self-imposed. Cassandra's cloistered life is integral to her place in academia. She also

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offering of lamb fat to God was found more acceptable than his own offering of grains.

<sup>52</sup> Tennyson based his poem on Elaine le Blank of Astolat (or Shalott) in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. She falls in love with Lancelot du Lac, but he does not reciprocate. Instead, Lancelot offers her a dowry to marry another knight, but Elaine refuses the offer and dies for love of him. Her body is placed in a dory which winds its way downstream to Camelot, so that King Arthur may know of Lancelot's hard-heartedness. Similarly, Cassandra loves Simon; her love is left unrequited though he offers her sexual solace.

<sup>53</sup> Lancelot, the knight the Lady sees in her mirror, is not permitted to love another since he wears Queen Guenevere's token. In contrast, Simon Moffitt is so psychologically damaged from witnessing his father's suicide that he cannot return affection.

deliberately isolates herself from colleagues by refusing to engage in their social activities, except on her own terms, and by perpetuating her own idiosyncracies through her odd way of dressing and her frequently bizarre behaviour.

The trouble with interpreting the allusion to the Lady of Shalott is that it best applies to Cassandra and Simon, but leaves out Julia's role in their lives. Though Géfin would think the Tennyson poem a false exit and part of the unwieldy mass of literary connections evoked by patterns in *The Game*, Larson would describe Tennyson's poem as a useful non-narrative allusion for interpreting Cassandra: a way of understanding her adult life and the sacrifices she has made. Academia provides opportunities for Cassandra to pursue her research interests as well as to lead a fairly cloistered lifestyle. In terms of the Tennyson allusion, Cassandra is the Lady of Shalott, but while the Lady weaves tapestries day after day, Cassandra writes and paints. Byatt ironically compares Cassandra to the Lady of Shalott, whose creative processes flourish inside her tower, but who cannot tolerate the outside world. The Lady of Shalott creates tapestries from the reflections in her mirror (a physical representation of the reflected world); but Cassandra writes and paints an imaginary world that has no physical manifestation.

Cassandra's writing records daily events, impressions, and reactions to people, but her painting is much more visceral, growing out of "the terror". For example, she writes in her journal about Julia's "superficial awareness of other people's feelings" (75) when the family gathers for Mr Corbett's funeral. Later, she acknowledges a fear of glass objects, particularly the glass serpent, because it appears not to be solid. When she paints,

Cassandra is prolific, but almost every written project is left unfinished, suggesting that words fail her in ways images do not. Indeed, in a journal entry toward the end of her life, Cassandra contends that she is a “specialist in useless knowledge” (141), linking herself with other literary Cassandras like Jane Austen’s sister, and doing for readers precisely what Géfin warns against – extending the allusion as far as it will go:

Cassandra. Not Cassandra Austen, sisterly supporter of the expressive Jane. Cassandra who was Apollo’s priestess, and – since she refused intercourse with the Lord of the Muses, and was thus no artist – incapable of communication. Unrelated to the world of objects around her. (Apollo, besides being Lord of the Muses, was God of Light and thus doubly rejected for some impossible chastity.) Cassandra, like myself, like myself, [*sic*] a specialist in useless knowledge. (141)

In her journal and her dreams, Cassandra believes she communicates with Simon and that he knows her innermost thoughts; on a symbolic level, Simon, an Apollo-figure, probably does, but only because they have both been exposed to the same cultural and literary works, and both think about the same subjects. Originally, the journal had been a repository for new imaginative work, but now “the journal was becoming an increasingly necessary means of distinguishing between what was real and what was imagined” (24).

An essential part of her conversation with Simon includes criticisms and addendums on each episode of his television program. The conversational tone of this part of the journal suggests (unrealistically) that Simon has had an opportunity to review these notes

and respond to them. Cassandra's comment that Simon "used some of [her] quotations last week" (24) suggests that this written conversation is real for her, even though Simon takes no part in it. Several weeks later, Cassandra writes in her journal:

Occasionally – I do not speculate how – what I have dreamed, and written down, he has afterwards said. I have dreamed other things he has not said. He spoke, tonight, about a moulting snake; I had heard it before, I knew it.  
(139-140)

The way Cassandra writes about her relationship with Simon suggests that she feels a mystical connection with him that appears to be confirmed by his use of her quotations on his television program. Actually, there is a much simpler explanation for this phenomenon: the moulting snake episode is recorded in a much earlier journal entry, dated Easter 1944, long before Simon became a television personality. Cassandra describes how Simon keeps his collection of snakes in a cave. She reports the detail with which Simon records his observations of the snakes: "There are no thoughts, only notes on how they excrete, how and when they cast their skins, how they swallow, how long they go without food, what they will and won't eat" (73-74). These youthful experiences portray Cassandra and Simon attempting to interact socially. His compilation of facts about the snakes, and his reluctance to name them show Simon as a perceptive individual, though lacking in imagination. In contrast, Cassandra enjoys putting her perceptions into a cultural context by linking what she has read with what she experiences. She writes that they are "[not] evil-looking . . . just little heaps like coils of rope or something one might



have dropped" (73).

Though the journal is one creative outlet, painting soon supersedes Cassandra's writing. Her best creative work is visual, partly because of a tendency toward histrionics and madness, and partly because Cassandra's academic training, with its focus on detail, has influenced her preference to paint close-ups of flowers and foliage, evoking a controlled jungle. After painting numerous studies of flowers and foliage, she begins to paint a man, dressed in a trench coat, standing in a densely forested landscape. Cassandra recognizes this figure as Simon, and when he eventually turns up in Oxford in the same hothouse where she has chosen to paint, Cassandra is unsure whether "she had called him up" (191). The phrase "to call up" suggests both contacting a person by telephone and by telepathy. Both are possibilities given Cassandra's precarious mental condition.

The Oxford greenhouse setting echoes the earlier childhood setting in the cave: in isolating herself from people Cassandra may be trying to maintain her childhood innocence. Simon's accidental dip in the goldfish pool, a microcosmic Amazon, echoes his cameraman's fatal swim in the pool of piranhas. Most of the plants in the university greenhouse are tropical as are the fish in the pool, but the greenhouse environment is unnatural: its heat, light, and humidity are controlled and monitored. Given the energy Cassandra expends to control her own space, it is not surprising to learn that the greenhouse is a favourite haunt. Her painting directs energy away from Julia. When Simon visits her after the publication of Julia's novel, Cassandra declares that she has finished painting. Its purpose was to work out the differences between reality and imagination, a

therapeutic process, so while the paintings are considered complete, Cassandra is unable to complete any of her writing projects. At the time of her death, an epic novel and a critical edition of *Morte d'Arthur* are left unfinished.

In the spirit of digging up precursor texts, Simon, Cassandra and Julia may be connected with serpent allusions which serve to illustrate symbolically the circumstances of their lives. Two such associations are Pythia (the Delphic Oracle)<sup>54</sup> and the Ouroboros (the world-encompassing serpent)<sup>55</sup>. Like Python, Simon Moffitt, in the role of television personality, appears to possess the secrets of the earth. A scientist, he argues, can engage empirically with his subject and ignore its cultural associations, but Simon does not actually present the material on his television program in this way. In the first program, Simon discusses the linguistic origins of the Amazon's name, offers some general information on the seasonal conditions, and quotes Huxley, Burmeister, and Coleridge in the course of discussing forest life. Indeed, Cassandra remarks upon his use of some of her quotations (24), so he is clearly not above putting his material into a cultural context, but Simon asserts that the purpose of the program is "to make snakes seem familiar" (13), and his plan is "to see these [the snakes] as a form of life, simply" (13).

Simon persists in eschewing cultural coding of snakes during his discussion with

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<sup>54</sup> Pythia, the perpetual name of the high priestess at the Oracle of Delphi, represented the god Python (Hera's son), who was thought to live in the earth and who knew its secrets, and hence was thought to be a source of wisdom (Walker 832-833). Jealous that Zeus had slept with Leto, Hera attempted to kill her while pregnant with the twins, Apollo and Artemis. Later, Apollo killed Python in revenge and took over his oracle (Bulfinch 19 and 297).

<sup>55</sup> The Ouroboros is the "Hermetic World Serpent, sometimes the Sea-serpent Oceanus encircling the earth; sometimes the underground Python coiled in the earth's womb" (Walker 754), which symbolizes mankind's desire to know the earth's secrets.

the panelists on *The Lively Arts* program. Instead, they want to discuss myths and legends that feature serpents. Simon attempts unsuccessfully to convince them that one watches a snake eating because "you might just be curious about how it does it" (161). The panelists vehemently disagree, pointing out that there is no escape from the cultural forces that variously depict snakes as emblems of carnal desire (Eros and Psyche), prophecy (Python, Cassandra of Troy), and evil (Satan). Simon rebuts that in the jungle, far from civilization, survival is the only goal; myths that have grown up around snakes and serpents are virtually meaningless when the next snake bite could be fatal. As the panelists view Simon's documentaries, they comment on aspects of the films which Simon had not previously considered: Percy observes that a mystique surrounds the making of art (159); Ben counters with the platitude that "sociology and telly documentary are destroying the naturalistic novel" (160); while Gordon asserts that "'we've got to stop talking about how Simon conveys 'meaning' and talk about *what* he means'" (161). Throughout the ordeal of taping the program, Simon defends his approach to the study of snakes on the grounds of ordinary curiosity: "'I - I wanted simply to - learn, to measure'" (161). Whereas Simon wants to gather facts about snakes and present them neutrally to his audience - "Scientific knowledge . . . the thing in itself" (161) - Percy would like to explore the cultural baggage the average viewer would recognize: "death and rebirth, evil and healing, water and light, . . . and sex" (161). In an episode about the anaconda, Simon propounds his own *modus operandi*:

'And the scientist with a camera,' he said urgently, 'can, as it were,

rediscover innocence. The innocent eye, not the ignorant, but trained, detached, seeing everything for itself, for what it is, with no apprehensions and very fluid preconceptions. Once one has one's own feelings in hand – once one's fears are real fears and one's needs are real needs – everything else can be seen with that pure curiosity which is one of the highest human qualities, and I would call it innocence. An achieved, an informed innocence.' (21-22)

Clearly, Simon believes his own rhetoric. Using the camera lens, Simon believes that scientific endeavour can approach a level of purity not previously possible. His sentiments are similar to early twentieth-century attitudes about the camera as a naked eye: stripped of cultural associations, the camera sees its subject purely, objectively. Antony's gruesome death, filmed in detail in the Amazon jungle, has become fascinating to Simon for the same reasons one might want to watch a snake eat its prey. He is interested in the struggle to live exemplified by the predatory creatures of the jungle, but Simon is unable to escape the psychological implications of his friend's violent death, since he clearly associates it with his father's suicide and his own narrow escapes from death. Though the camera creates a physical distance and an artificial narrative distance, it does not re-create innocence in the biblical sense. Though Simon has witnessed Antony become food for the piranha, he does not fancy being the intellectual food of the panellists on *The Lively Arts*. After taping his guest appearance on the show, Simon informs Julia that he is reluctant to participate in any more programs because "[they] make one feel savaged. Food for thought" (165).

In order to control his fears while in the jungle, Simon proposes to jettison all cultural myths attached to jungle wildlife. But how does he readjust to cultural conditions upon leaving the jungle, especially when he is re-entering a society that subscribes to the myths he hopes to leave behind? Simon's confession to Cassandra suggests the impossibility of living this kind of bifurcated existence: he had thought he could "take it" – violent events like piranhas eating Antony alive – because he had lived through, and survived, his father's suicide, but he experiences "an expanding nightmare" (193), until he correlates living in England with living in the Amazonian jungle: "'Lately I really don't know whether I'm here or there'" (193). Like Cassandra's terror, Simon's confusion shows that setting aside fears associated with snake mythology is only a coping mechanism for dealing with the traumatic events in his life. Reuniting with a mentally ill Cassandra makes Simon all the more aware of his own neuroses. Cassandra prefers to suppress her fears, but Simon talks about his experiences, though rather disjointedly. To his great regret, Simon learns belatedly that western, Christian cultures have a much too tame view of the Garden of Eden. Witnessing a man being devoured by a piranha shows Simon that Eden is, in fact, a dangerous place.

In contrast, both Corbett sisters experience a hunger for their work which manifests itself when they use their imaginations: Julia wants to write a more profound novel, while Cassandra steepes herself in the details of medieval symbolism. Cassandra is so involved with her intellectual work to the detriment of her health, that she fears the intrusion of the world of reality upon the world of imagination. In contrast, Julia hungers for greater



imaginative powers and self-gratification. She calls it hankering, and admits to Cassandra she does it "[a] lot of the time" (101). Whereas Cassandra has dreams which reveal a fear of the physical appetites, Julia is portrayed with an excess of appetite. At the beginning of the novel, she is introduced taking leave of Ivan Rostrevor after a successful dinner-party (7). Julia desires a spot on the panel of Ivan's program, *The Lively Arts*: "[she] liked the idea of being promoted from being a woman writer to being – in some sense – an expert on the art of the novel" (10). Her confession about befriending Simon occurs while she and Cassandra make toast (91), as if hurting Cassandra will somehow be more palatable over a shared snack. Toward the end of the novel, her final confrontation with Thor begins just as Julia is about to serve dinner, triggered, to some extent, by the regurgitated mess on Thor's trousers (181). Other more memorable events take place during meals, and eventually are parodied in Julia's new novel, *A Sense of Glory*: the evening meal in the Dining Hall, where Cassandra accidentally dangles her crucifix in the spaghetti, and Julia becomes "obsessed by an image of the bloody loops of paste over the rigid, jewelled arms of the cross" (108); and later, Cassandra's dinner-party becomes fodder for Julia's novel as she unimaginatively reduces each guest to a type.

While Julia's creativity is driven by representing the physical realities of women's lives, her own insecurities are piqued by a desire to be recognized by Cassandra. Byatt represents Cassandra as a solitary individual, one satisfied to pursue her studies and limit her contact with other people. In contrast, Julia needs to feel connected to others, and in an effort to ensure others acknowledge her, she tries to discover their innermost thoughts.

Julia uses this approach with Cassandra, too, certain that if she can gather enough facts about Cassandra, she will win Cassandra's approval. It is the motivation behind befriending Simon, a particular friend of the past, and co-opting Father Rowell, Cassandra's current particular friend.

Julia has never understood how intensely private Cassandra is, so Julia's nosiness is hardly innocent. Researching her sister's life is how Julia hopes to create believable characters for her novel. In the past, her daughter, Deborah, has complained that Julia writes books about how "Father and I - how we diminish her, stop her living" (67), but Julia wants to write a novel "with a few symbols and a Message" (106), though one critic has described her as "the best of that increasing number of women writers who explore in loving detail the lives of those trapped in comfort by washing-machines and small children" (47). Therefore, Julia's efforts to impress Cassandra undoubtedly will fail. Julia snoops in Cassandra's bedroom, noting the copy of *Nature World* featuring an article on Simon Moffitt and a palm cross with a letter from Father Rowell comforting Cassandra about "the terror" (110). In the same way that Simon has been the panellists' food for thought, Julia devours the details of Cassandra's life to be "written up" (60) in *A Sense of Glory*.

Unhappy about her own writing, Julia thinks she does not use her imagination enough, while Cassandra uses hers too much: "Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, one trying to 'give the charm of novelty to things of every day', whilst the other . . . likes 'persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic'" (122). She concludes that most of her novels

have been written "on a level of complaining about facts" (122) instead of moving beyond a journalistic approach. Pondering her discoveries about Cassandra's lifestyle, Julia feels drawn to a topic about the imbalance between imagination and reality, and recognizes that exploring such a theme would mean confronting her own reservations about the game.

It would be a real novel, with a real idea behind it, not a complaint. It would be a way of coming to grips with Cassandra, but also of detaching us. It would be a way of seeing her as a separate individual. Knowledge, after all, was love. A lighting up of the other. (123)

These are all therapeutic reasons for writing a novel. However, rationalizing what will be good for Julia, may harm Cassandra, a point Julia ignores. She justifies writing *A Sense of Glory* as a gesture of love and hopes Cassandra will accept the offering of this book in the same spirit. Julia is overly optimistic since Cassandra, in fact, interprets the novel as a huge betrayal of her hospitality. Julia invited herself to Oxford. Cassandra made her feel welcome, and like Deborah's earlier complaint, Julia has "written up" (60) her sister's life, digested it and regurgitated it for public consumption. Though it is meant to confront Julia's demons - Cassandra, the game, and Simon - *A Sense of Glory* is a therapeutic novel, good for the novelist to write and put in a drawer until everyone in it is dead. Additionally, Julia fails to imagine adequately the lives of the thinly disguised characters in her novel. As Campbell points out, "Each time Julia raids Cassandra's imaginative life, the resulting product is a distortion" (47). She has re-worked one of Cassandra's stories from the game, and in her own novel attempts to represent Cassandra's relationship with

Simon, though she "makes the imagined lover a priest rather than a naturalist" (Campbell 47), thus conflating Simon and Father Rowell.

In *A Sense of Glory*, Julia has created a stylized version of the relationship between Cassandra and Simon. Indeed, the reviewers praise Julia for her attention to the kind of "surface detail that implies a moral judgement" (219), but though Julia has acquired knowledge about her sister, any wisdom or insight she may have gained is ambivalent. In an unusually imaginative moment, Julia frightens herself with the "concentrated distress" (234) of Cassandra's rooms at Oxford, suggesting that she has some degree of appreciation for Cassandra's over-imaginative mind. On the other hand, Julia is enjoying the fact that people are buying her book because they think the novel explains how she drove her sister to suicide. Darkly gleeful that the book is a best-seller, Julia appears not to have appreciated Cassandra's wish for privacy. However, Julia claims that she is "not refined enough not to survive" (237), implying that her vulgarity is what keeps her from feeling too guilty over Cassandra's death, and also from taking too personally the public's criticism of her novel. Just as it began with Julia, *The Game* ends with Julia, but now she is figuratively shutting the door on Cassandra. She has decided that though *A Sense of Glory* was meant to come to grips with Cassandra (123), she will not actually resolve their issues: "She was going to excise Cassandra from her life" (237). The provisional nature of Julia's newly-acquired wisdom consists of three components: first, Julia realizes that she has allowed her own imagination to interpret Cassandra's irrational behaviour as directed toward herself; secondly, she makes several promises to herself to be a better parent, and

a more confident writer; and finally, Julia acknowledges that changing her behaviour is like slimming because "one must not expect too much at once, nor give up or repine too much over occasional back-sliding" (238).

Clearly, there are many potential source texts for the serpent allusions in *The Game*. According to Géfin's theory, there should be only one correct precursor text despite many alternate sources for an allusion. But what would be the result if a reader could not see the relationship between the Coleridge epigraph and Byatt's novel?

### **Substituting the precursor text for another**

Discovering the meaning of the Coleridge epigraph is difficult, and it is conceivable that any reader unused to the cadences of nineteenth-century essayists might ignore the epigraph altogether, but it does not suggest that such a reader would not notice other patterns in the novel. The biblical allusions in *The Game* are linked with the garden and serpent imagery and many readers of this novel will notice the parallels between Cassandra, Simon, and Julia, and Adam, Eve, and the serpent. The theme of betrayal also strengthens the biblical references, especially to the serpent allusions. The story in Genesis focusses on Adam, Eve, and Satan, but God's presence is felt, too. In Byatt's novel, there is a similar pattern, though some characters have a double function. Both sisters are linked with a man-of-god character and with a meddling character. The characters representing God are Father Rowell, Cassandra's priest at Oxford, and Julia's husband, Thor Eskelund<sup>56</sup>, a Quaker activist and missionary. Both sisters are linked to the same

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<sup>56</sup> Thor is named for the Scandinavian thunder and lightning god (Walker 995) and aptly named. Julia admires Thor for his inability to "think ill of you [sic], or get impatient, or understand meanness



trouble-maker character: Simon Moffitt.<sup>57</sup> The ambiguity of some characters is best represented by Simon Moffitt. For example, on his television show, Simon explains the religious practices related to snakes of some of the tribes in the Amazon while linking his own experiences with the biblical creation story. Comparing the Amazon to the Garden of Eden, Simon asserts that because it has been less documented by naturalists and geographers, the Amazon is a place where one must "find [one's] own bearings – map out for ourselves, not good and evil, but what life and death are really like, since we are not immortal" (21). Cassandra's students are fascinated with Simon, and one girl describes him as "desperately attractive in a helpless sort of way" (23), which suggests that Simon's celebrity has created for him the persona of a secular evangelist. Later, Julia suggests that Simon appeals to the modern, secular audience because "he's a sort of popular symbol of what's got crowded out of our urban lives" (51). Similarly, Cassandra interprets Simon's program as a response to a societal need "to see ourselves connected to, in terms of, the primitive animals, blood and food, the eternal rhythms, inevitable destruction" (88). Therefore, while Simon popularizes snakes and associated serpent legends, he functions

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intuitively" (99), but Thor's temper flares like the stroke of the thunder-god's hammer when he grows impatient with Julia writing about "imagined slights and fantastic illnesses" (183). Simon is a biblical name. There are nine different references in the Gospels, but Simon Moffitt is identified with Simon Magus, a Samaritan sorcerer and follower of the apostle Philip. When he saw Peter and John bestow the Spirit by laying on hands, he wanted to buy this power for himself, but was rebuked for his wickedness (see Acts 8:14-24).

<sup>57</sup> To paraphrase the story in Genesis, the serpent, described as the most crafty animal God had made, asks Eve whether God has commanded her not to eat from any tree in the garden. She replies that she and Adam have been forbidden from eating from the tree in the middle of the garden, but that they may eat from any other tree. The serpent tells Eve that the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden will not cause her to die, but instead, it will cause her to become "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Consequently, Eve eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and she subsequently convinces Adam to eat the fruit also. The rest, as people say, is history.

within *The Game* as a trouble-maker for the Corbett sisters, but as a benevolent figure for his viewing audience. Even Thor notices the threat Simon represents and advises Cassandra to "let it lie" (89).

The potential doubleness of characters also extends to Father Rowell and Thor, who primarily function within the narrative as "good" men, though they both behave in ways that undermine their goodness. Father Rowell, unaware of the Corbett sisters' antagonistic history, reveals Cassandra's illness to Julia, hoping that she will "draw [Cassandra] back a little, as it were, into daily life" (121). His reasonable request, albeit a meddlesome one, has the opposite effect when Julia uses Cassandra's fascination with Simon as the basis for her new novel (136). Similarly, Thor Eskelund ministers selflessly to the sick and the poor, but his dispassionate way of telling their stories shows that Thor feels a responsibility toward others that Julia does not share. Julia's mother understands why Thor feels compelled to help others: "He feels guilty" (59), she says. However, Thor has his limits too, and in a final confrontation with Julia over the suicide of a client, he behaves more like his Scandinavian namesake, the thunder god, than an Adam-figure: Thor smashes a lamp, overturns the coffee table, throws a cocktail glass at the window, and attempts to put his foot through Julia's dressing table mirror but satisfies himself with pushing her cosmetics onto the floor. His departure from the house is precipitated by the realization that Julia and the dead female client are alike because they both whine too much about imagined slights: "I want to break your neck, too, that's a fact, and I'm going, before I do" (186). Thor's tantrum shows that the understated emotions have always been bubbling

underneath his normally cool demeanour. Favours a pragmatic, stoic approach to his work, Thor has always suppressed his emotions, but he blames Julia and his suicidal client for his own suffering, a ploy similar to Adam's when caught eating the forbidden fruit. When God confronts Adam, he complains: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12).

Simon's behaviour with Julia is similar to the serpent's seduction of Eve in the Garden of Eden because they both rely upon semantics. In the biblical story, the serpent suggests that eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil will not cause death, but will, in fact, open Eve's eyes so that she "will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). Eve is tempted because she believes the serpent, and in a way the serpent is correct: Eve learns about good and evil when she eats the forbidden fruit. But God's command not to touch or eat the fruit because death will ensue is mistakenly interpreted by the serpent, and also by Eve, as an immediate consequence, when in fact, death will occur eventually. Julia has always believed her friendship with Simon to be benign, but in fact, Cassandra's knowledge of the relationship will eventually contribute to her suicide.

The serpent and garden imagery associated with Simon is considerably more threatening, especially as they appear in Cassandra's nightmares. One of them is about a tea-party which features Simon as an antagonist. The garden is represented by the carpet, "grass-green, expansive, bedizened with pink and silver roses and trellis-work" (91), with black and white furniture on which Cassandra's family sit. Simon enters the room, kisses the women present and turns to kiss Cassandra, who hides behind the couch. The stylized

garden in the carpet mirrors the stylized behaviour of the tea-party, "a normality of behaviour she had feared and avoided" (92). The nightmare occurs after she attends a tea-party with Simon and Julia. Cassandra has just discovered their betrayal and feels the loss of Simon's friendship. Cassandra's unwillingness to kiss Simon in the dream suggests a subconscious inability to come to terms with normal adult intimacy, both social and sexual. Cassandra admits that the tea-party is a normal way for adults to interact, but her behaviour in the dream is not normal.

The other recurring nightmare is considerably more Darwinian. Cassandra says it usually begins in "some foreign landscape, in brilliant sunlight, in an impossible clarity" (103). The nightmare presents a panoramic view of the flora and fauna of the landscape. When Simon enters the dreamscape, they go exploring. Later, the pace of the dream quickens and Cassandra notices how rapidly creatures multiply, flourish, and die, but it is the ugliness of the creatures' deaths that frightens Cassandra, turning a relatively placid dream into a nightmare. While Simon is present in the dream, Cassandra feels safe, but when his "warm presence" (104) vanishes while her attention is elsewhere, Cassandra feels frightened by the aggressiveness of nature. Simon has previously observed to Julia that "you never feel [Cassandra]'s all there" (82) and that "she just doesn't quite exist" (82). He thinks that her preoccupation with abstract ideas causes Cassandra not to live enough in the world and that it has an effect on her sense of reality. Indeed, Cassandra's fear of the burgeoning natural world in her nightmare suggests a corresponding fear of her own place in it. Like the earlier nightmare in which she rejects normal adult intimacy, Cassandra's

fear of the biological imperatives of nature hints at her own fear of sexual contact. Indeed, many years later, when she and Simon reunite, the moment arrives when intercourse might be possible, but she thinks love-making is one thing she is "too old to learn with any dignity" (201).

Cassandra's nightmares are echoed in the gruesome death of Simon's cameraman, Antony Miller, who was eaten by piranhas. The image of savage hunger is juxtaposed with tea-drinking and sandwich eating in Cassandra's first nightmare, and also with the cat crunching its teeth as it tears apart the carcass of a rabbit. Simon's reaction to his friend's death is darkly comic: the piranhas ate his friend "[guts] and cock and all ... every little bit except the hair and teeth" (192). In her journals and paintings, Cassandra created an imaginary paradise where she could explore "the terrors" that haunt her. Initially imagined as a safe means of re-examining old wounds, Cassandra's journals and paintings gradually acquire an increasingly menacing tone. Suffering from many irrational fears, frequent nightmares, and day-time hallucinations, Cassandra's imaginary "paradise" is a decidedly unsafe place. Because Cassandra imagines threats from all quarters, she uses the greenhouse as a safe, enclosed and beautiful space.

Cassandra has traditionally favoured enclosed spaces throughout her life. Benstone, the Corbett family home, has a walled garden, and is the location of the first confrontation between the sisters after Cassandra learns that Julia has befriended Simon. In the walled garden, Cassandra is busy cutting lilacs for "Easter vases on altar and Meeting-house table" (94), and rather than face Julia, she thrusts "her head into the bush so that her vision [is]



criss-crossed with twigs and close white flowers" (95). The walled garden evokes the prelapsarian Edenic setting and the reference to Easter suggests the annual celebration of Christ's Passion. The white flowers suggest innocence, while the criss-crossed twigs of the bush signify that everyone has little crosses to bear in life, even Cassandra, and that it is easy to build imaginary barriers against others. Her reaction to Julia's approach suggests that she thinks Julia is one of her "crosses".

The game itself has also been part of this pattern: whereas Julia attempts to take the writing skills she acquired in childhood into adult life, Cassandra becomes drawn into the intellectual world of the game. She reflects that she "chose a field of study where the great images are those of unsatisfied desire, formalized, made into a mode of apprehension" (97). In their youth, Simon noticed that Cassandra was already cutting herself off from people and becoming absorbed into the world of medieval romance, but Julia lives out her plots, and goes as far as "writing up" arguments for *The New Yorker*. Much later, Julia and Cassandra discuss the aspects of life from which they feel shut out. Julia admits to hankering for something more from life, and Cassandra agrees that she also feels "'Shut out of Eden with the flaming sword across the gate'" (101). The allusion is to the eviction of Adam and Eve from Paradise (Gen 3:24). When they depart, the east gate of Eden is shut against them and a cherub with a flaming sword is set to guard the gate. The implication is that the game was a kind of Paradise the two sisters created in their childhood and that their childhood imaginings cannot be re-created by their adult imaginations. Julia yearns for, but fails to achieve, this unblemished state of mind in her own writing. The enclosed

space image occurs for the last time when Cassandra tapes shut her windows to prevent the gas escaping when she commits suicide. At the inquest, it is revealed that Cassandra took steps to ensure her privacy in her last moments: she fitted new bolts to both the outer and inner doors; gaps in the doors and windows were "sealed with cellulose draught-excluder" (232); she took some Seconal and drank some brandy before turning on the gas. She did not wish to continue life as it had been scripted for her by Julia, but in leaving life, Cassandra clearly did not wish to endanger anyone else. Nevertheless, Julia feels annoyed by Cassandra's actions because she thinks that Cassandra's suicide is a means of continuing the game:

'She always made the rules. She planned the story, and I fitted in, I carried it out. She made me what I am. She made perfectly normal behaviour into crimes – like borrowing books, like telling people things, like talking to you. She locked me out until I was crazy to get in. And then she saw to it I was guilty of real crimes, that what I'd done I couldn't change or undo. She made me – take things – and then left me in possession. She wanted it this way.'

(233)

Though Cassandra is dead, and her rooms at the college cleaned out, Julia persists in talking about her sister as if she is still alive and master-minding the next episode of the game. Julia is certain that the childhood crime of borrowing a book from Cassandra – stealing the book, in Cassandra's terms – has led to the present situation in which Julia feels guilty for her sister's death. Indeed, Simon warns against such musings and cautions Julia

against falling into the trap of being manipulated by Cassandra's imaginings: "Because you think she wanted to make a murderess of you you won't admit that you are - partly - a murderess" (236). However, Julia has already considered this point and dismissed it as she tells Simon she will survive despite what people might think of her. In this way, Simon's theory that the real struggle in the Amazonian Eden is not between good and evil, but between life and death, applies to the Corbett sisters. Cassandra, whose life work deals with abstract ideas like good and evil, becomes an emblem for death because she is unable to live fully in the world. Julia, on the other hand, survives her sister precisely because she does not allow herself to become too enmeshed in the imaginative.

Cassandra is not angelic, but her death, precipitated by Julia's novel, is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's desire to kill the angel in the house, a symbolic slaying of the person who stymies the artist's creativity and growth. Julia's novel, *A Sense of Glory*, has a similar function, conjuring Cassandra's academic life; her fears and longings; and her reunion with Simon, while graciously leaving the events open-ended. Cassandra chose to make her usual stony silence permanent by committing suicide. Indeed, she informs Simon, "I shall be silent" (228). She need not have taken such a drastic measure. Like the childhood game she played with Julia, Cassandra envisions herself an unhappy heroine from a nineteenth-century novel, and imagines similar endings for herself: marriage, madness, or death. Cassandra dismisses marriage as undignified; has tried madness and found it unsatisfactory, so her last option is death. It does not occur to her to reject Julia's narrative

destiny and create her own plot.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the boxes containing Cassandra's private papers, readers are left with three objects – the glass serpent and the clay figure of Queen Morgan sitting beneath the oval mirror. The serpent, the clay Queen Morgan, and the mirror present an interesting juxtaposition because, as objects, they evoke the ambiguity of interpretation. The glass serpent represents the duality of things. As Sabine Foisnier succinctly put it, the glass serpent is “fragile and hard, transparent and three-dimensional, realistic and artificial at the same time, and . . . a symbol of the game, suggestive of the past, the germ of the conflict between the two sisters, a token of reconciliation or a harbinger of Simon's return” (201). Primarily, the snake is a metaphor, a point Cassandra would appreciate from her literary studies. It represents Simon, the student of snakes, and his place in the conflict between the sisters. Similarly, the clay Queen Morgan figure combines the earthly existence of a woman with her imaginative skills as a seer and a witch, qualities with which Cassandra must have identified since the figure was usually kept on top of the television. The third object – the mirror – offers the same kind of duality as the glass serpent and clay figure, a subject Cassandra has briefly discussed in her journal: she thought of them as “an assurance of solidity” and as “partial truths” (138). Since all three objects reflect different kinds of partial truths, it is perhaps fitting that Julia finds them together after Cassandra's

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<sup>58</sup> Byatt explores stepping outside the predicted narrative in a short story titled “The Story of the Eldest Princess”. The Eldest Princess goes on a quest knowing that both she and her middle sister are supposed to be unsuccessful because the youngest sibling always succeeds in these stories. The Elder Princess meets a wise woman who advises her to step out of the narrative imagined for her and find her own story, a piece of advice the princess decides to follow.

death since they integrate the primary patterns of allusion with which Byatt has been working in *The Game*. The glass serpent evokes references to the snake as an emblem for the imagination as well as the biblical sources. The clay figure may represent Cassandra herself, but it also stands for the research she accomplished on the *Morte d'Arthur*. The mirror recalls the legend of the Lady of Shalott and suggests Cassandra's identification with the tragic Lady primarily through her cloistered lifestyle, but also in the matter of choosing to die when one's love is unrequited.

### **Missing the allusion**

No doubt it might be possible for a reader to absorb *The Game* without recognizing many of the allusions. In the secular, television-oriented society of today, it would be unreasonable to expect uneducated readers to recognise the allusions to classical mythology or to Tennyson's poem and the Arthurian legends. The sibling rivalry theme might seem familiar even though its source could not be identified simply because the theme is a common premise of many television dramas. For instance, Fox-TV's sitcom *The Simpsons* relies upon the sibling rivalry theme for many of its episodes: Lisa and Bart vie to be the anchor of a children's News Hour, but resolve their differences as co-anchors; Lisa and Bart, playing on opposing peewee hockey teams, try to out-perform each other as they compete for their parents' affections; and in the first Hallowe'en Special, Lisa and Bart compete telling ghost-stories, a contest Lisa wins with a rendition of Poe's "The Raven". The point is that while the literary source of an allusion may go unrecognised, contemporary audiences will recognise it from a pop culture context even when the



historical source is unclear.

For theorist Laszlo Géfin, the existence of allusions cannot be explained by their performance for the simple reason that some allusions do not “perform” because some readers do not recognize them. There is nothing complicated about the failure of an allusion to perform. Some readers are inexperienced because they lack exposure to certain kinds of traditions. For example, in today’s increasingly secular society, readers raised in a nominally Christian tradition do not easily recognize biblical allusions because they have not been to church to hear the stories. Classical mythology suffers from a similar lack. Latin and Greek are no longer part of the secondary school curriculum, so exposure to the literary traditions of antiquity are relegated to university Classics departments. One might wonder why writers continue to use allusions when the works from which they come are devalued by contemporary society. Géfin considers inadequate the pat response that allusions allow writers to participate in their cultural tradition.

‘Participationist’ critics of allusion would like to have it both ways: on the one hand, the work participates in the riches of Western cultural traditions and ideas, while on the other it remains autonomous and self-contained. They fail to consider that one of the first things allusions do is to destroy the New Critical notion of the ‘self-contained world’ of any literary work. (437)

Géfin vehemently disagrees with the notion that allusions are only important for readers who recognize them and that when allusions are unrecognized, they can be ignored

without affecting the plot line.<sup>59</sup> Géfin asserts that this approach to allusion reduces the device to “ornaments inserted for the delectation of connoisseurs” (436-37).

Allan Pasco is not quite as dismissive of the uneducated reader as Laszlo Géfin. Instead, he believes that at different times in cultural history tradition has been either valued or treated with disdain. For Pasco, the only limitation on an allusion is a reader’s ignorance, for “when readers and writers share no common tradition, then allusions may have been seeded in a text, but they will produce neither plant nor fruit” (183). In such conditions, one can wait and hope that a reader with the necessary background will rediscover the text.

In an essay written for Antonia Fraser’s book, *The Pleasure of Reading*, Byatt recalls some of her early reading experiences and traces her memories to the moment when, as a child, she understood the importance of books. She remembers being aware of the vast “inner world” (128) of books and their tremendous interconnectedness. Byatt writes,

The tales and myths and legends did, I am now more sure than ever I was, exactly what Coleridge said they did. They made it clear there was another world, beside the world of having to be a child in a house, an inner world and a vast outer world with large implications – good and evil, angels and demons, fate and love and terror and beauty – and the comfort of the inevitable ending, not only the happy ending against odds, but the tragic one too. (127-128)

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<sup>59</sup> See Michael Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction*, p. 11.

The "inner world" of which Byatt writes in this essay is also the world of allusion. Avid readers may make meaning from a literary work in ways other, less-experienced readers will not. Having a clear sense of the literary canon in addition to the work in hand is a necessity, especially when reading the work of a writer who hopes her readership enjoys the same books she does. Part of the pleasure of reading comes from being absorbed into the world of the book as well as feeling connected to a network of readers and writers who have all enjoyed the same texts. Veteran readers learn the pleasure of recognizing allusions, identifying their "home" text, and discovering the significance of it in the context of the present text. A.S. Byatt's second novel *The Game* is the type of novel that attempts to establish a readership network through its layers of allusions to Biblical texts (especially Genesis), to classical mythology, and to Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott". That one might read *The Game* and miss the clever inter-locking patterns of the serpent allusions is a loss of pleasure that is hard to imagine, yet there must be some readers who do not grasp the meaning of the allusions. Northrop Frye suggests, "If we don't know the Bible and the central stories of Greek and Roman literature, we can still read books and see plays, but our knowledge of literature can't grow" (27-28). Therefore, while Géfin would not like to see allusions reduced to textual ornament, and Pasco would like to see readers making meaning out of the allusions they do notice, the real pleasure of recognising allusions can be attributed to the joy of reading. To do as Frye suggests – to increase our knowledge of literature – means that one must be willing to follow the network of texts.

The glass snake in *The Game* is the first in a long series of snake and serpent allusions

in Byatt's work. It will reappear in a myriad of forms drawn from folklore, mythology, and literary sources: as a lamia in the short story "A Lamia in the Cevennes"; a melusine (a type of mermaid with water serpent characteristics) in a poem of the same name in *Possession*; as a dragon in Byatt's story, "Dragon's Breath" reminiscent of sand worms in the *Dune* novels; and as an allusion to Medusa's serpent hair in the story "Medusa's Ankles". In almost every snake/serpent allusion, Byatt conjures its source material, but her fiction also leaves enough room to allow some interpretive "play". This chapter has demonstrated the pitfalls of following the network of an allusion too far, as well as the danger of misreading the allusion and substituting another precursor text. The next chapter will explore Byatt's use of history and historical events as allusions in her historical novels *Possession*, *Angels & Insects*, and *Babel Tower*. As we will see, Byatt continues to explore the networks of texts through her interest in history. Some of her books are clearly historical because of their representation of nineteenth-century topics, but others are less obviously so. *Babel Tower*, the third volume in the Frederica Quartet, shows readers the liveliness of 1960s Britain, a period that is living history for some people, yet the book refers to political scandals, murder trials, and other salacious events of the time which have since become topics for history books.

## Chapter Three

### The Presence of the Past in Byatt's Historiographic (Meta-) Fiction

The body of critical literature on *Possession* can be divided into three main categories: studies of folklore motifs; studies of generic conventions; and studies of historical fiction of both postmodernist and traditional types.<sup>60</sup> A.S. Byatt still uses the same techniques she developed in her earlier novels, but *Possession* represents, for Byatt's career, both the height of her achievement and a fork in the road. On the one hand, the short story collections that have appeared since *Possession* reveal an abiding love of folklore traditions from around the world.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the novels which follow *Possession* build upon her interest in historical topics. Though scholars have written on a wide variety of subjects concerning *Possession*, only a few<sup>62</sup> have linked the novel with others of its type, and no one has discussed it relative to Byatt's other historical works such as *Angels and Insects*, and the Frederica Quartet. Whereas Chapter One demonstrated A.S. Byatt's

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<sup>60</sup> It is interesting to note that though scholars are fascinated by A.S. Byatt's manipulation of history and narrative, no one discusses the historical events and personages in *Possession* as a form of allusion.

<sup>61</sup> Since the publication of *Possession*, four short story collections have appeared. *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* is reminiscent of the 1001 Arabian Nights; *Elementals* examines passions, often borrowing elements of the French wonder tales; *The Matisse Stories* use the artist's paintings as focal points for the three tales, combining art, tale, and allusion to Greek mythology; and *The Little Black Book of Stories* returns to Byatt's childhood favourites, the Norse legends of trolls and stone women.

<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the intersections between historiography and postmodernism, see Sabine Hotho-Jackson's "Literary History in Literature: An Aspect of the Contemporary Novel" *Moderna Språk* 86.2(1992): 113-119 and "'The Rescue of Some Stranded Ghost' - The Rewriting of Literary History in Contemporary British and German Novels" in Stark, Suzanne. *The Novel in Anglo-German Context: Cultural Cross-Currents and Affinities*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 385-398. Del Ivan Janik argues that the novels of A.S. Byatt, Peter Ackroyd, and others transcend the postmodern category because they "[affirm] the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence" (162).



incorporation of epigraphs to signal her intention to use generic conventions of the past, and Chapter Two elucidated that there is no guarantee a reader will connect allusions in the novel with the interpretive direction indicated in the epigraph, Chapter Three maintains that Byatt continues to apply techniques developed in the early novels while integrating historical topics into her work.

The previous chapters illustrate Byatt's allusions to the formal and generic aspects of literary texts. As well, allusion may be *topical*, i.e., refer to recent events, or may take a *personal* form and refer to publicly known details of a writer's life. In *Possession*, Byatt employs both topical and personal allusions: the nineteenth-century plot is set in Victorian England and in the course of the story refers to recognisable writers such as Tennyson, Cuvier, and Carlyle; in addition, the characterizations of R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte are based upon the lives of Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. All that is required of an allusion is that it consist of: "(1) prior achievements or events as sources of value; (2) readers sharing knowledge with the [writer]; (3) incorporation of sufficiently familiar yet distinctive elements; and (4) fusion of the incorporated and incorporating elements" (Miner 39). Byatt continues the pattern of alluding to historical people and events in *Angels and Insects* as well as in the final volumes of the Frederica Quartet: *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*. All of the novels begin with a series of epigraphs and they all continue Byatt's practice of mingling narrative perspective through the use of parallel plot structures, personal diaries, poems or stories by individual characters, and the minimized intrusion of the authorial voice. The distinguishing point

is with Byatt's treatment of history. In *Possession*, Byatt presents history filtered through the consciousness of a group of contemporary characters; in "Morpho Eugenia", she alludes to the Creationism-Darwinism debate through a direct portrayal of the intellectual milieu of the period; and in *Babel Tower*, she alludes to significant events of the recent past by incorporating the sensational trials of the time. However, A.S. Byatt is not the only practitioner of experimental historical fiction.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, scholarly work on *Possession* frequently compares it to Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Browsing the fiction departments of today's book stores, one readily discovers plenty of historical fiction for both adults and children, but the experimental aspects of historical fiction vary widely. The aim of this chapter is to explore Byatt's several approaches to incorporating history in her work while broadening the perspective to include works by her contemporaries. The present chapter will be divided into three parts, the first part will pair *Possession* with Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, a novel about poetry, ventriloquism, and forgery. To some extent, both novels are about the attempts by twentieth-century characters to recover the past, and by recovering it to discover the truth about their respective mysteries. Next, *Angels and Insects* will be paired with Philip Pullman's novel *The Tiger in the Well*, a "Victorian thriller" aimed at a young adult audience. Both novels evoke Victorian times and social conventions just after the mid-century; they deal with the transcendental conflict between Good and Evil; and allude to

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<sup>63</sup> I am reluctant to borrow Linda Hutcheon's apt term "historiographic metafiction" because Byatt's historical fictions do not always incorporate either a self-awareness of historical constructs or a critical assessment of the method of writing a narrative about a historical period.

ideas current in Victorian England: evolution in "Morpho Eugenia" and the New Woman in *The Tiger in the Well*. The closing section of the chapter assesses the obscene libel trial in *Babel Tower* as a moment of contemporary history integrated into Byatt's work of fiction at the same time that her fictional author, Jude Mason, writes his allegorical novel, *Babbletower*, to comment on the frivolity of the art scene of the 1960's. Indeed, Byatt's contemporary, Anthony Burgess, appears in *Babel Tower* as one of the reviewers of Jude Mason's book, which he predicts "is in great danger of being prosecuted for obscenity" (423). Burgess's own book faced a similar danger, though it was never prosecuted.<sup>64</sup> The trial of *Babbletower* deals with the desire of government to limit artistic endeavour and to control access to publications which may corrupt the weaker members of society. The prosecuting attorney alludes to other historical trials which bear upon *R v Babbletower*, notably the Profumo Scandal, the Moors Murders trial and the prosecution of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on obscenity charges. Both *Babel Tower* and its embedded novel reflect the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s when censorship of word and deed were both thought to be repugnant. It is the aim of Chapter Three to situate A.S. Byatt's allusions to historical events within the larger arena of contemporary historical (meta-) fiction.

#### Case 1: *Possession and Chatterton*, or The Search for Truth

A relatively new concept for writers of fiction (but not for historiographers) is the idea that a scholar could be so absorbed in the study of an historical person that

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<sup>64</sup> Though *A Clockwork Orange* was discussed enthusiastically when the novel was published, it was not until the film adaptation was released in the U.S. that "the film, and the book, were accused of being an incitement to violence" (Morrison xix). Questions were raised in the British Parliament, and consequently, Stanley Kubrick, director, withdrew the film from distribution in the U.K.

assumptions readers have about the past have been filtered through the work of this same scholar. In his series of lectures delivered at Cambridge in 1961, E.H. Carr explains that some aspects of life in the past are well documented because "people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view ... thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving" (13). The preservation of particular types of facts constitutes the material that people of the present use to talk about what life was like in the past. Thus, the portrayal of devout medieval people, for example, "is indestructible, because nearly all the known facts . . . were preselected for us by people who believed it, and wanted others to believe it, and a mass of other facts, in which we might possibly have found evidence to the contrary, has been lost beyond recall" (Carr 14). Hayden White would concur, adding that little attention has been given to "historical narratives as what they most manifestly are - verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (42).

In a 1991 interview with CBC's Eleanor Wachtel, A.S. Byatt explains the sequence of events that originally inspired *Possession*, a novel which conflates nineteenth-century facts with invented nineteenth-century style fictions:

I looked at [Kathleen Coburn] one day, walking around [the British Library], making notes on Coleridge's notebooks, and I thought, she can't have thought a thought for the last thirty years that isn't in some sense *his* thought, and then I thought, everything I know about his thought has been

put together for me by her. (78-79)

Byatt's sentiment about how Kathleen Coburn has shaped her own thinking about Coleridge recognizes that Coburn has pre-selected and pre-determined the significant facts about the poet and turned them into history. Though a work of fiction, Byatt's characterizations of Randolph Henry Ash, Ellen Ash, and Christabel LaMotte are derived from her knowledge of eminent Victorian poets such as Browning and Tennyson, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Her characters are not Browning, Tennyson, and Rossetti, but they certainly allude to those historical figures. Ash's poems "Swammerdam", "The Incarcerated Sorceress" and "Mummy Possest" are reminiscent of Browning's dramatic monologues in *Men and Women*. Ash's dabbling in Greek and Norse mythology, particularly his epic poems *Ragnarök* and *Ask to Embla*, evoke similar long poems in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and *Morte d'Arthur*. Similarly, aspects of Christabel LaMotte's poetry echo the work of the two poets who inspired her character: Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti.<sup>65</sup> Her shorter poems, especially the scraps Ariane Le Minier sends to Maud Bailey, are composed in a style similar to that of Dickinson, while the longer poems – *The City of Is* and *The Fairy Melusine* – evoke the lush language of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". In fact, Blanche Glover, Christabel's particular friend, describes their living arrangements as a "[weaving] together the simple pleasures of daily life, . . . and the

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<sup>65</sup> In one interview in 1992, A.S. Byatt claims Christabel is a composite of "Christina Rossetti, and particularly Emily Dickinson and also Charlotte Brontë" (Aragay 156). The following year, in an interview with CBC's Eleanor Wachtel, Byatt downplays the importance of Christina Rossetti in the creation of Christabel LaMotte contending that she wanted "something tougher and harder and clearer and cleaner and stranger than that pre-Raphaelite thing" (Wachtel 80).



higher pleasures of Art and Thought which we may now taste as we please, with none to forbid or criticise" (51). Similarly, Christabel writes to Ash that their home "was a place wherein we neither *served* nor *were served*" (204 emphasis in original), and as a result of this philosophical position, they decided "to live the Life of the Mind" (205), renouncing the outside world "and the usual female Hopes ... in exchange for . . . Art" (205). In her letter, Christabel invokes Ruskin's notion of the "dignity of handicraft and individual work" (205) which simultaneously evokes the lifestyle choices of the Princess, an endearment Blanche uses for Christabel, in Tennyson's eponymous poem.

In her early works, Byatt does not emphasize history to the same extent she does in *Possession*. Each of the four early novels has an historical context, though they lack references to specific historical or political events.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the omniscient narrator of *The Virgin in the Garden* asserts: "In 1952 history took a grip on the world of Alexander Wedderburn's imagination" (17), and the historical context of *Still Life* is signalled in the chapter headings with actual dates. But in *Possession*, readers are presented with two dates on the first page of the novel: first, 1861, the date of the quotation from Ash's poem "The Garden of Proserpina", and second, 1986, the occasion when Roland Michell examines an old book at "ten in the morning, one day in September 1986" (3). In this way Byatt

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<sup>66</sup> For example, Henry Severell has grown a beard "to cover scars left by the war" (*Shadow* 9), a reference to World War II. In *The Game*, Thor has been asked by the Society of Friends to go to the Congo to "run a relief centre near Elizabethville" (57), so the story must occur before 1966 when the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) changed the European names of cities to African ones. Without these small clues, it would be difficult to pinpoint the historical context of these novels ("Democratic Republic of the Congo. History: The Mobutu Years." *Encarta Encyclopedia Standard Edition*. CD-ROM. Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 2002.)

introduces the parallel plot structure of the novel at the same time that she indicates that the nineteenth-century plot will be mediated through the twentieth-century plot using the agency of the twentieth-century scholars and their ability to interpret the poems, letters, and diaries of the nineteenth-century poets.

A similar technique is used in Peter Ackroyd's 1989 novel, *Chatterton*, which opens first with a brief encyclopedia-style biography of the young Thomas Chatterton, followed by four vignettes of four writers worrying about death and their place within literary history. The poem Chatterton recites suggests it might be possible to escape death: "the wanderer will appear - / His eye will search for me round every spot, / And will, - and will not find me" (2). By the end of the novel, it is clear that Chatterton has outlived his earthly existence through the legacy of his poems, but only because succeeding generations of poets have continued to tell his story. In the second vignette, a young George Meredith muses on whether his poetry or Henry Wallis's painting will immortalise him, and in the third vignette Harriet Scrope, a novelist, misquotes both Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence", while claiming that she has "given [her] life to English literature" (3). She makes the assertion with such authority that readers might be reluctant to question whether Harriet is accurately quoting the material. In the last vignette, Charles Wychwood experiences such an intense headache that he believes he sees the ghost of Thomas Chatterton. His belief in the appearance of the ghost suggests that Charles is critically ill, though he knows not the nature of his illness, nor that it is fatal. Each of the vignettes undermines the authority of the biographical sketch on the first page.

The poem Chatterton recites establishes the expectation that he has, to some degree, lived beyond his death, but each of the other vignettes adds a layer of interpretation to Thomas Chatterton's life history by using the story as a topical allusion and by manipulating the narrative: Meredith is both a poet and the representation of a poet; Harriet Scrope plagiarizes the novels of a forgotten nineteenth-century novelist in the same way Chatterton forged the Rowley poems; and like Chatterton, Charles Wychwood dies without achieving recognition for his poems. He desires a wider audience than his devoted friends and family, and he craves a positive review of his published work in the local newspaper. As Brian Finney points out, "Ackroyd is evidently concerned to show from the start of his book that we all appropriate the past for our own purposes and in our own ways" (250).

The notion of appropriating the past is also true of the characters' actions in *Possession*. Professor Cropper wishes to collect Ash memorabilia because, for him, objects provide a mystical connection between himself and the past. In contrast, James Blackadder and Beatrice Nest collect and collate information about R.H. Ash and his wife, Ellen, with the intention of publishing definitive, annotated editions of their writing. Both projects become mired in the process of data collection primarily because the principal investigators wish to possess all the known facts about their subjects without sharing information with their colleagues. Both researchers feel proprietorial toward all aspects of their projects, though Blackadder's feelings are nationalistic, while Beatrice Nest's wishes are to protect Ellen Ash's interests. Consequently, the search for an explanation of Ash's and LaMotte's

"lost year" of 1859-60 proves to be an object lesson in co-operating with one's colleagues. As the quest motif develops, the number of assistants increases to provide Roland with the help he needs to complete his task: Blackadder provides the titles of Christabel LaMotte's books; Fergus Wolff contributes a biographical sketch and the name of an English expert, Dr Maud Bailey, with whom he had an affair; and Maud's expertise in women's writing of the Victorian period balances Roland's knowledge of R.H. Ash's work, so that once they discover the hidden love letters at Seal Court, they are able to reconstruct the courtship of Ash and LaMotte. Later, as Roland and Maud re-trace the Yorkshire journey of the nineteenth-century poets, they read the poems of Ash and LaMotte as if they form a dialogue, noting similar phrases in Christabel's *Melusina* and Randolph Henry's *Ask to Embla*. Indeed, Maud Bailey observes that the style of *Melusina* "is very like some of Ash's poems" (288).

Of all the scholars in *Possession*, only Mortimer Cropper remains outside Roland's group of scholars until the disruption of his attempted grave-robbery. For them, he is *persona non grata* because he is unscrupulous in his methods and his conspicuous use of the Stant Collection cheque-book readily persuades collectors to part with their memorabilia. Indeed, when Roland initially suggests that he may have discovered something important, Blackadder quips: "You'd better keep this absolutely hush-hush, ... or it'll all be winging its way across the Atlantic, whilst the London Library replaces its carpets and installs a coffee machine" (35). Later, in a moment of intellectual excitement, Roland and Maud acknowledge that by following the clues in the poems, they may be able to discover the

truth about the relationship between R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte. If they feel uncertain about their ability to follow the clues, it is because they are both junior scholars: they lack confidence, not the necessary skills. When Maud suggests telling Cropper, Blackadder, and Leonora Stern to "marshal our resources" (258), she quickly realizes that she wants "to feel taken over by this" (258) and to be the scholar who finds out what happened between Ash and LaMotte. By collating the poetic echoes in the poems with known facts about the travels of both poets, Maud and Roland reconstruct the events of 1859-60. In this way, History and Romance intersect: on the one hand, Roland represents the questing hero of Romance narratives and Maud, with her fair complexion and light blonde hair, evokes the white ladies who may either help or hinder the progress of the questing knight; on the other hand, their academic work emphasizes the possibility of recovering the past since by following clues in documents produced by LaMotte, Ash, and others, Roland and Maud are able to explain some obvious lacunae.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, with the help of senior researchers, Maud and Roland are able to prevent Cropper from stealing the metal box from Ash's coffin which allegedly will resolve their quest. Ironically, Cropper refuses to part with the box, and it is he who opens both the box and Christabel's letter that was buried unopened with Ash.<sup>68</sup>

Where the Romance narrative pauses, History resumes the tale through Maud's

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<sup>67</sup> Readers are warned of this possibility in the epigraph from Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*.

<sup>68</sup> The recovery of the metal box Ellen Ash placed in her husband's grave alludes to the manuscript of love poems Dante Gabriel Rossetti placed in the coffin of Elizabeth Siddal in 1862, which he later caused to have exhumed in 1869 so that he could publish them (Drabble 879).



biological connection to both poets. At the beginning of the novel, when Roland's quest is fresh and the defining goal of the quest still mysterious, *Possession* claims all the elements of a Romance. The focus of the novel is on determining the identity of the mysterious woman to whom the letter, found in Ash's copy of Vico, is addressed. As Roland gathers facts about her and identifies her as Christabel LaMotte, the focus of the plot shifts toward documenting what happened to her illegitimate child. Keeping in mind the opposition of Romance and Novel<sup>69</sup> highlighted in the epigraph from Hawthorne, one wonders whether the search for Christabel LaMotte's illegitimate child fits into the Romance paradigm. In the epigraph, the differences between a Romance and a Novel are highlighted: a novel "is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience"; whereas a Romance "may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart". Both forms deal with history, but only the Novel attempts to present the Truth. Diane Elam says it best:

An affective relationship to history, such as the one postmodern romance evokes, . . . exceeds realism's nostalgic project of recovering the past through purportedly accurate representations of it; postmodern romance reveals the constructedness of realism and resists a nostalgic "coming to terms with the past" - a nostalgia that would conveniently also be a dismissal of the past through the very 'accuracy' of the representation. (15)

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<sup>69</sup> I am maintaining Hawthorne's use of Romance and Novel, primarily because Byatt used these terms this way, and secondarily because I wish to distinguish Christabel's plot which is a high Romance with particular conventions from the pulp fiction popularly called romance which does not usually conform to the conventions of Romance.

Taking A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as a postmodern romance, one can see how Roland and Maud flirt with reconnecting to a by-gone time when they follow the footsteps of Ash and LaMotte's holiday in Yorkshire. But the link between Romance, History, and Truth begins much earlier in the novel when Roland shows the first letter to Maud, who agrees that Roland's letter fits with complaints Blanche Glover describes in her journal: "The dates fit. You could make up a whole story. On no real evidence" (56). Maud's observation reflects the Romance spirit of the narrative. She imagines a bodice-ripper type of story devised out of some suggestive details in Blanche's diary. Some time later, after compiling notes on Blanche Glover's and Ellen Ash's diaries, Roland and Maud meet to discuss their findings. Both scholars conclude that Blanche showed Ellen something, a spiteful gesture which may have been motivated by Christabel's trip to Yorkshire with Ash. However, this "something" cannot be considered proof since neither Ellen nor Blanche describes what Blanche delicately refers to as "my Evidence" (254). Similarly verifiable facts accumulate as Roland and Maud examine the sites Ash was known to have visited in 1859. At Filey Brigg, Roland finds a sea anemone, which causes Maud to recite Ash's comparison of it to a glove, adding that "Gloves in LaMotte are always to do with secrecy and decorum" (275). In Whitby, at a jewellery shop specialising in jet, they discover brooches that strongly resemble the one Ash bought for Ellen and the shopkeeper notices the mermaid-shaped jet brooch Maud uses to fasten her head-scarf. Maud claims she wears the brooch as "a joke" (283) because of her academic interest in mermaids, but Roland rebuts: "Perhaps it was a joke of *his*" (283 emphasis in original), though he concedes that Christabel might have

bought the brooch herself anywhere such items were sold (284). The next day, while exploring Nelly Ayre Foss, Roland and Maud discuss Christabel's use of Yorkshire words in *Melusina*. Words like "gills and riggs and ling" (287) convince Roland that the landscape in *Melusina* is actually Yorkshire and not Brittany as the topic would suggest. Later, at Thomason Foss, Roland witnesses a peculiar dappling of light reflected on the inner walls of the cave and Maud recalls the description of this effect from the opening lines of *Melusina*. Though these experiences all cause Maud and Roland to feel intuitively that Christabel and Ash visited these sites together, they also know that recognising the landscape in the poems is not the same as finding two signatures in a hotel register. Therefore, the quest for information about the "lost year" in Ash's career still fits the Romance paradigm. The past has been explored, revisited even, but the shift toward the mode of realism has not yet occurred.

Maud and Roland's curiosity about Christabel's child provokes the shift from Romance narrative to Realist novel. The epigraph from Hawthorne expresses a concern for fidelity to the details of ordinary experiences, a rigour not normally expected of Romance. However, the search for the 'lost' child<sup>70</sup> is a search for family history, and thus also a search for an elusive truth. In this sense, the plot shifts from a Romance to a Novel (in Hawthorne's terms) because the demand for 'real' data about the identity of Christabel's child is really an expectation that History can be recovered. In addition, while

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<sup>70</sup> A common motif, lost children appear in folktales as well as historical romances like Scott's *Lorna Doone*, in which the heroine reaches maturity before discovering that she is actually the lost daughter of a noble family. Ash's lost child may claim a kind of literary nobility through her parents though she is not of the nobility.

Maud and Roland are fortunate in their ability to recover the letter that spells it all out,<sup>71</sup> so to speak, there are other pieces of the past that cannot be recovered such as Ash's momentary meeting with his daughter, though a hint of their meeting is provided by Ash himself with the lock of platinum blonde hair kept secretly (and safely) in the back of his watch. Finally, there is one other 'lost' child: that of Ellen Ash's maid servant. Ivana Djordjević points out that "the motifs of uncertain paternity, concealed birth, and illegitimacy are scattered throughout the novel's embedded narratives" (55-56), notably in Ellen Ash's account of her housemaid, Bertha, whose child "is most probably [fathered by] none other than Ash" (56 n27), but she does not explain how she reaches this conclusion. A careful examination of the text will reveal some persuasive clues. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1859, Ellen Ash writes in her journal: "Bertha has been somewhat sluggish of late" (242), and she wonders whether the girl is unhappy or unwell. A week later, Ellen notes that Bertha is now "more sullen and more lethargic than she was a week ago" (244). A few days later, Ellen's sister, Patience, "with her customary acuteness observed immediately that something ailed Bertha, and made a shrewd guess as to what it might be" (245). When Ellen confronts Bertha about her condition, Bertha claims that the responsible man cannot take care of her "either by marrying, or in any other way" (246), so the inference is that the "responsible man" is already married and that he is Bertha's employer.

Djordjević does not comment on one other event in the Ash marriage that might

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<sup>71</sup> The appearance of the letter that explains everything the twentieth-century scholars want to know is an element of the Romance mode. As the end of the novel approaches, the quest is resolved, and to ensure the plot ends happily for everyone, the Romance mode is re-asserted.

convert Ash's paternity of Bertha's child from merely probable to highly likely: their honeymoon. Ellen remembers it graphically rather than verbally. She recalls a "thin white animal, herself, trembling" (498), Ash as generous and kind toward her, and her body's response when Ash attempts to possess her:

Tendons like steel, teeth in pain, clenched, clenched. . . . The approach, the locked gateway, the panic, the whimpering flight. (498)

She also remembers that in exchange for her sexual solitude Ellen has been "his slave" (498). But has Ash practiced abstinence as exclusively as Ellen believes? The pregnant housemaid suggests the premise that he has not been as faithful as Ellen would like to think, and the affair with Christabel LaMotte strengthens that supposition. If it were possible to discover what happened to Bertha and her child, as well as to convince Bertha to reveal the paternity of her child, then Roland and Maud might be surprised to discover that Christabel's daughter, Maia, has a half-sibling and all the family connections which that relationship might imply. Even so, Ellen Ash's penchant for writing about her domestic life using innuendo, euphemism and deliberate obfuscation shows a woman's attempt to exclude herself from History. As Sabine Hotho-Jackson points out, Ellen Ash's diary "remains an intriguing example of an eyewitness falsifying her own history for the sake of protecting herself from history" (389). Indeed, without the intervention of the authorial voice, readers would not have access to Ellen's memories of her honeymoon and her unconsummated marriage at all.

Despite vigorous attempts to tie up all the loose ends of Maud's family history,



Maud and Roland are unable to recover all aspects of the past. For example, the platinum blonde lock of hair twisted around Ash's grey one is not Christabel's hair as everyone supposes: it is Ellen's hair. As he lies dying, she plaits the bracelet (491). Without the assistance of the authorial voice in *Possession*, it would be impossible to know that Ash did, in fact, meet his daughter and receive from her a lock of hair which she plaited for him "to keep it tidily" (554), and which he "wound in a fine coil, and put into the back of his watch" (555), the same lock of hair Leonora Stern assumes must belong to Christabel: "'And their hair . . . Christabel's hair, it must be, the blonde'" (547). Though Blackadder observes that it must have been strange for Maud "to have been exploring all along the myth – no the truth – of [her] own origins" (547), the story is unfinished. We are not supposed to know whether Ash actually met his daughter though the clue exists in the lock of hair inside his watch. Even Blackadder's comment is equivocal: has the quest been in pursuit of myth or truth, romance or history? The quest begins with Roland sitting in the British Library thumbing through Ash's copy of Vico's *Scienza Nuova*, a huge interpretive hint from Byatt. As Djordjević points out, Vico thought that history could be knowable because it is made by men (53). This idea is echoed by Christabel, who writes "all history is hard facts – and something else – passion and colour lent by men" (542). Clearly, Byatt believes, with Vico, that the hard facts aspect of history is recoverable, but that the "something else" – the passion – is better left unexamined.

Though much of the relationship between the nineteenth-century poets, Ash and LaMotte, has been excavated by the twentieth-century scholars, there are gaps in the tale

because some events pertaining to the scholars have not yet played out. For instance, the budding relationship between Maud and Roland is left unresolved, though their conversation mirrors the fears and trepidations Christabel communicated in her letters to R.H. Ash. Early in their correspondence, Christabel pleads with Ash to discontinue the relationship saying, "if I am jealous of my freedom to live as I do - and manage my own affairs - and work my work - I must be *more than usually careful* to remain sufficiently respectable in the eyes of the world and his wife" (202 emphasis in original). Maud echoes this same sentiment:

'I feel as she did. I keep my defences up because I must go on *doing my work*.

I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy. I don't want to think of that going.' (549 emphasis in original)

Though Maud argues stridently for her solitude, she also wants Roland to "be here to love me" (550). Maud wants both the realist plot, one in which the heroine chooses her career, and the romance plot, in which she is swept off her feet by the hero of the tale.

In the Romance tradition, the quest hero must claim his lady-love, but in the Realist tradition, closure is not always a given. When Byatt causes History and Romance to overlap in *Possession*, the romance mode asserts the imperative for closure, and through the authorial voice Byatt provides the closure one might not expect from a realist novel: the unrecorded meeting of R.H. Ash and his illegitimate daughter, Maia. By doing so, Byatt questions why Ash should not meet his daughter. By showing us this event, Byatt reminds readers that in a Romance, all endings are possible even when they "leave no discernible

trace" (552).<sup>72</sup>

The effect of the Epilogue in *Possession* is to reinforce the Romance mode for all of the plot lines in the novel. Roland and Maud's search for the identity of Christabel's child proves to be a digression from Romance into History, and thus into realism. Once the family connection between Christabel and Maud is established – she is Maud's great-great-grandmother – the Romance mode can, once again, dominate the narrative framework. Hayden White calls this process emplotment, or "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot-structures" (46). Building upon Frye's ideas in *Anatomy of Criticism*, White proposes that "we understand why a particular story has 'turned out' as it has when we have identified the archetypal myth, or pre-generic plot-structure, of which the story is an exemplification" (46). In other words, *Possession* is predominantly a Romance, so any diversions into other modes may be overshadowed by the romance plot-structure. White observes that historical events are value-neutral until a historian "configure[s] them according to the imperatives of one plot-structure or mythos rather than another" (47): romance, tragedy, comedy, irony and satire. Therefore, as White suggests, histories become stories when a historian fits the facts of an event into a narrative framework. Of all the nineteenth-century characters in *Possession*, only Ash needs to meet

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<sup>72</sup> Sabine Hotho-Jackson would add that "History is a construct because seemingly authentic voices of the past merely present a perspective on reality, not reality itself. History is a double-construct because if the historian can only work with "Entwürfe" [drafts] and "Projektionen" [projections], he or she cannot go beyond interpretations of interpretations of reality, with his or her own subjectivity as much part of the interpretation as that of the Gewahrsmann [source]" ("The Rescue of Some Stranded Ghost" 390). Following Vico's notion of recurring history, Djordjević observes: "It is hard not to see the story of Roland and Maud as a *ricorso* of that of Ash and Christabel, in which case we could read in *Possession* a love story with a delayed happy ending" (66).

his daughter because in meeting her, he sets his own mind at ease<sup>73</sup> and achieves closure. In this way, the history of Maia Bailey is also a good narrative.<sup>74</sup>

The history of the inspiration of *Possession* is also a good tale, one which Byatt enjoys telling. In the CBC interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Byatt maps out her reasoning for inventing Ash and LaMotte rather than portraying an actual Victorian couple. She was initially tempted to use Robert Browning because of the ventriloquism of his poetry, and because of his romantic courtship of Elizabeth Barrett, but she concluded "this would be inhibiting to my writing and . . . I would be in for lots of libel actions from Browning scholars, so I gave that one up" (79). The character of Christabel LaMotte has a similar evolution. Originally inspired by Christina Rossetti, Byatt found she was "quite unable to reproduce" (80) Rossetti's piety, so she drew upon the stylistic aspects of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters, and to account for Christabel's "sexual frankness which almost no English women, except George Eliot, had in those days" (80), Byatt made her character part French. Even though readers may discern the allusions to Browning, Rossetti, and Dickinson, they are not intrusive. Actually, the characterization of Ash and LaMotte is so

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<sup>73</sup> Ash has the ominous words "'There is no child'" (428) from Hella Lees' séance in his mind, as well as "'Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint'" [I am the spirit, the always negated.] (428). Meeting Maia resolves the fear that his child might be dead, but the petulant tone of the ghostly voice echoes the tone of Blanche Glover's suicide note: "I feel strong in the trust that my Maker . . . will make better use hereafter of my capacities - great and *here unwanted and unused* - for love and for creative Work. It has indeed been borne in upon me that *here* I am a superfluous creature" (335 my emphasis). Blanche's feelings of being neglected and forgotten contribute to the possibility that she is the ghost who appears at Hella Lees' table-rapping session, but is mistakenly identified by Ash as the child he has not yet met.

<sup>74</sup> Dana Shiller comments on the difficulty of knowing the past from its textual traces: "Byatt's novel is full of mysteries that resist the very notion of solution, while it illuminates (and pokes fun at) the insatiable curiosity of her scholar-detectives, who come to learn that collecting the artefacts of dead poets and scrutinizing their marginalia does not in itself produce knowledge and that attention must be paid to what has been left out of the standard biographies" (545).

carefully crafted, and the poems so stylistically similar to many Victorian poems, that it is difficult to believe they are all the products of Byatt's imagination.

This level of verisimilitude can also be found in Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* when Charles Wychwood discovers a painting in a curiosity shop which he believes to be a portrait of a middle-aged Chatterton. Since Chatterton is known to have committed suicide at the age of 17, the portrait is an obvious forgery. Or is it? The painting is very convincing: it features a middle-aged man with four volumes (all of them Chatterton's books); it is signed by George Stead and dated 1802. Even Charles's friend, Philip, insists the portrait is of Thomas Chatterton: "Look at the high forehead and the eyes" (21). Like Roland's fortuitous find in *Possession*, Charles believes that he has also found a valuable painting, one whose provenance might make him rich. Whereas Maud Bailey cautions Roland against making up a story on very little evidence, Charles and Philip appear to feed upon each other's suppositions. Philip bases his assertion that the older man in the painting has the same high forehead and shape of the eyes as the young Thomas Chatterton on a print Philip owns. Charles responds by quoting at length the thumbnail sketch of Chatterton's life from a reference book. In this conversation, Philip is visually-oriented: that is, he relies upon visual material, like the painting and his print, to assess what appear to him to be historical data. In contrast, Charles is textually-oriented: he relies upon information found in reference books to provide historical data. It is Charles who notices the painter's signature on the canvas - "Pinxit George Stead" (22) - but it is Philip who notices the details of the painting and discovers that the books are actually



Chatterton's books. Charles calculates the dates (text) between when Chatterton is supposed to have committed suicide, 1770, and the date of the painting, 1802, arriving at the conclusion that Chatterton "faked his own death" (23). Consequently, Charles begins to write a treatise based upon the supposition that Thomas Chatterton faked his own death to avoid exposure as the forger of the Rowley poems and to continue writing using the names of many well-known Romantic poets such as Gray, Blake, and Wordsworth. This latter point is founded upon another flimsy "fact". While researching the provenance of the painting, Charles has the good fortune to meet its previous owner who passes along a bag full of hand-written manuscripts which appear to be very old. At the same time, Philip meets an old man inside the church of St Mary Redcliffe who proclaims that Chatterton's body was never found (55), thereby establishing the "fact" that Chatterton survived his suicide on no evidence at all. Because of the lucky confluence of painting, manuscripts, and tales from an old man, Charles and Philip are willing to accept the authenticity of the information. They do not, for one instant, suspect that any of these artefacts might be forgeries. But Charles immediately recognizes Blake's work when Philip randomly selects a paper from the bag and reads aloud,

Arise now from the Past, as from the Dust that environs thee. When Los  
heard this he rose weeping, uttering the original groan as Enitharmon fell  
towards dark Confusion. (60)

Even though the passage is readily identified, both Charles and Philip are bemused by the signature at the bottom of the page: "T.C." (60). Charles enjoys what he has found,

imagining the "admiration of the world" (60) for this discovery and consequently becoming "very famous" (61). However, before much more than a preface can be put on paper, Charles is struck down by a fatal stroke, a condition he has, until now, kept secret from his family. Like Chatterton, Charles Wychwood dies before his poetry is recognised by the public.

Both *Possession* and *Chatterton* begin with the fortuitous discovery of new historical data. Byatt privileges her scholar-detectives by grounding their quest for verifiable facts in documents whose authenticity cannot be questioned. Each time a discovery is made, it is tied to one of the poems. For example, while visiting Christabel's room at Seal Court, Maud recites Christabel's "Dolly" poem, who "ever sleepless/ Watches above / The shreds and relics / Of our lost love" (92), and discovers the love letters beneath Dolly's blankets. The pattern of linking poems with concrete facts about the Ash-LaMotte relationship fits with the Romance mode of story-telling. It may not be very realistic for the poems to line up so neatly with historical facts, but this degree of latitude is permissible in the Romance form. However, the activities of Charles Wychwood and Philip Slack in *Chatterton* demonstrate the unreliability of historical sources (Hotho-Jackson 389), especially when one is concerned with the authenticity of the artefact. Indeed, the novel, as a whole, deals with various levels of authenticity with different kinds of texts undermining the authenticity of others. Chatterton uses his imagination to create the medieval monk, Thomas Rowley, and his poems celebrating the history of Bristol. Ironically, Chatterton's imitation of medieval documents found in the muniments room of St Mary Redcliffe

church is consistent with the notion that young poets should imitate their literary antecedents. In fact, Chatterton's Rowley poems are so authentically medieval that his readership believes the monk actually existed, even the characters in Ackroyd's novel. On a secondary level, when Harriet Scrope experiences a severe case of writer's block, she adapts the plots of obscure nineteenth-century novelist, Harrison Bentley, because she believes "that plots themselves were of little consequence" (102), that style is the most important element of writing. However, the difference between Harriet's novels and Chatterton's poems is that Harriet lives at a time when readers value originality in fiction and would not expect writers to imitate their literary precursors.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps more pointedly, Henry Wallis's famous painting of Chatterton's suicide is both an historical allusion to the event and a text in Ackroyd's novel which undercuts the historical facts of Chatterton's life. Very little is known about the circumstances of Chatterton's death, but Wallis's "portrait of a dead Chatterton . . . was to supplant in the public imagination the only portrait of the poet to have survived from his lifetime" (Finney 250). Ackroyd reconstructs the conversations between painter and poet that must have developed during the sittings George Meredith attended while Wallis painted him as the dead Chatterton. As an historical artefact, Wallis's painting alludes to the historical fact of Chatterton's

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<sup>75</sup> It is, therefore, all the more puzzling that Ackroyd's characters and the novel's critics alike speak of the historical Chatterton as a plagiarist when all he did was emulate the style of some medieval documents and adopt a pseudonym from which he dissociated himself. Greg Clingham notes that renewed interest in Chatterton's work rests on "its status as forgery" (36); and in a similar vein, Brian Finney observes that "[all] that survive from the Romantics' elevation of the alienated gifted artist reliant on his innate imagination are the texts, and these are themselves forgeries" (250); but Dana Shiller objects, pointing out that "Rowley is Chatterton, and Chatterton's gift is not for forgery but ventriloquism, the ability to refract his own voice through a variety of personae" (555). Ackroyd's Charles Wychwood agrees: "How else could Chatterton's forgeries become real poetry" (151)?

death. The painting simultaneously undercuts the veracity of the event by presenting the death realistically – Chatterton draped across the bed, the open window, the torn papers on the floor – so that what was thought to be a suicide appears equally to be an accidental death. In Ackroyd's novel, the first sitting for Wallis's painting takes place *in situ*, as it were, in the room where Chatterton is believed to have died. On this occasion, Wallis sketches Meredith in black chalk, informing his model that he "can add the details in the studio" (139), that only "the general effect" (139) is needed now. Meredith observes "the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery" (139), a comment on the illusion created by the details of the scene. Later, at the second sitting in the studio, Meredith discovers that the garret room has been reproduced in detail so that Wallis can begin painting in earnest. He assumes that Wallis has persuaded Pig to part with her furniture, but Wallis assures him it is all newly purchased. Ackroyd's description of Meredith's second sitting emphasizes the sleight-of-hand elements brought to bear on the painting. Meredith sees similar furniture arrayed much like it was in the garret room and fails to observe that it is not the same stuff: he sees what Wallis wishes him to see. In the end, the beauty of the work of art has more to do with Wallis's skilful placement of furniture and figure than it does with verisimilitude, but the painting does allow the viewer to feel as if one were present at the moment of Chatterton's death.

As the sitting draws to a close, and as Wallis completes the painting, Meredith comments on the fine line between things that exist in the imagination and those which are real: says Meredith, "Our dear dead poet created the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet

he has more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed" (157). Therefore, Rowley will be more real for readers by the same token that Wallis's painting will be more real for viewers.

'Chatterton did not create an individual simply. He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And this is why he is feared.' Meredith came up to Wallis, and for the first time looked at the canvas. 'And that is why,' he added quietly, 'this will always be remembered as the true death of Chatterton.' (157)

Put another way, Kathleen Coburn and Thomas Chatterton have much in common: they both brought to life the past in ways that left an indelible impression upon their audiences. What is more commendable is that they have both been the source of inspiration for subsequent generations of writers. For Chatterton, what may have begun as schoolboy hijinks transformed into a livelihood, but under Ackroyd's pen became re-invented as a good-humoured exegesis about the commonness of borrowing the work of another artist. Byatt, on the other hand, shows readers that history, in fact, possesses them not the other way around. Try as we might to recover the past, there will always be people like Ellen Ash, who will attempt to subvert the course of history, and events like Ash meeting his daughter that will elude capture by even the most perceptive reading between the lines.



### Case 2: *Angels and Insects* and *The Tiger in the Well*:

As the previous case study demonstrated, A.S. Byatt creates and maintains a complex set of allusions to an historical period, including references to public figures of the day. In *Angels and Insects*, Byatt again relies upon her readers' shared knowledge of some of the intellectual movements of the Victorian period. In fiction, as in historiography, the writer must be selective. As Lytton Strachey remarks in the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, "ignorance is the first requisite of the historian – ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art" (5). In her historical fiction, Byatt continues to simplify, clarify, select and omit, but as Linda Hutcheon observes, "to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually" (88). However, it may be that Byatt's notion of thinking critically and contextually about the past is quite different. Whereas Hutcheon expects postmodern writers to "[reinstall] historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, ... [problematize] the entire notion of historical knowledge" (89), Byatt achieves the former while ducking the latter: her narratives are unimpeachably stable. *Angels and Insects* continues Byatt's fascination with nineteenth-century intellectualism: 'Morpho Eugenia' examines the intersections between religion and natural selection, while 'The Conjugal Angel' explores the "other side" of human experience through séances in the salons of fashionable society, theosophy, and poetry, especially Arthur Hallam's and Alfred Tennyson's poems. Both works draw upon the topics Tennyson raises in his elegy for Arthur Hallam: what happens to the soul after death, whether or not the living can continue to sense the presence of the

departed, and how to reconcile matters of faith in the face of contradictory geological evidence. Byatt has observed on other occasions that she likes to write both critical and fictional works at the same time because both forms help her to think about her writing. The former assists her experiments in fiction, while creating a fictional work helps her solidify her ideas about literature.<sup>76</sup> In this sense, *Angels and Insects* may be understood as a critical work examining different theories about the afterlife and focussing on some issues raised in earlier works, but also continuing a discussion begun by Tennyson in 1850.<sup>77</sup> Like Byatt, Philip Pullman sets his Sally Lockhart series in the Victorian period, immersing his teen readers<sup>78</sup> in Victorian culture with each new novel. Each of the books takes on an unsavoury topic, echoing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books: the first novel, *The Ruby in the Smoke*, deals with the opium trade; *The Shadow in the North* follows the affairs of an industrialist involved in illegitimate arms deals; *The Tiger in the Well* is about divorce, a woman's right to her property, and child custody; and *The Tin Princess* is about political assassination.<sup>79</sup> The Sally Lockhart books present an interesting contrast

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<sup>76</sup> See Dusinberre 193.

<sup>77</sup> Though Byatt uses in both novellas postmodern techniques like multiple narrators and embedded narratives, they are not precisely postmodern works simply because Byatt does not attempt to analyse the act of writing, nor does she "challenge narrative singularity and unity" (Hutcheon 90). Though Byatt incorporates historical periods and personages, she does so as a form of allusion. For Byatt, history is a means to an end: the telling of the story and alluding to familiar texts, people or events.

<sup>78</sup> Though the Sally Lockhart series is aimed at a teenage audience, Pullman's novels, including the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, also attract older readers too. I thank Dorothy Mills, Collections and Acquisitions Librarian, of the QE2 Library for bringing these books to my attention.

<sup>79</sup> Pullman's *The Ruby in the Smoke* recalls several aspects of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Man with the Twisted Lip*: both are tales of two brothers, one a theologian and the other a sailor addicted to opium; *The Tin Princess* echoes *A Scandal in Bohemia*, both are tales of European monarchs who had affairs with unsuitable women; *The Shadow in the North* shares similar plot elements of *The Illustrious Client*: both are centred on wealthy industrialists whose cruelty is only exceeded by their greed; finally, *The Tiger in the Well* borrows from several Holmes stories, for example, contriving to cause a person to leave his or her domicile so that it may be used for nefarious purposes, as in *The Red-Headed League*.

with A.S. Byatt's historical novels because they portray aspects of Victorian life which Byatt leaves unexamined. 'Morpho Eugenia' focusses on a family of the landed gentry class, while 'The Conjugal Angel' portrays two working-class women, without the support of husbands, trying to make a decent living for themselves among middle class people. Pullman's books frequently portray dispossessed people: they are left alone in the world either because, like Sally, their parents are dead, or because of their involvement in the criminal aspects of society. Whereas Pullman's portrayal of late Victorian society is visceral and Byatt's conceptualization is more genteel, both novelists draw upon the intellectual and cultural milieu of the 1870s.

If Byatt's *Angels and Insects* takes part in the legacy of *In Memoriam*, it is not her only work to do so. William Adamson in 'Morpho Eugenia' and the mediums, Sophy Sheekhy and Liliás Papagay, in 'The Conjugal Angel' are the literary descendants of Simon Moffitt of *The Game*. R.H. Ash, too, forms a bridge between the two books because he is an amateur naturalist and he uses the services of a medium to discover what happened to the child he sired with Christabel LaMotte. Borne either of desperation or of an open-minded willingness to try unorthodox methods to find out the truth about his child, Ash's unexpected meeting with Christabel at the same séance, and his subsequent behaviour, destroy any opportunity he might have had to learn the truth about his child. His poem, "Mummy Possest", is a satirical examination of a medium's fraudulent use of her spiritualist powers.<sup>80</sup> Like R.H. Ash, Reverend Alabaster in 'Morpho Eugenia' is an

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<sup>80</sup> Indeed, 'Mummy Possest' recalls many of Browning's frauds like "Mr Sludge, the Medium".

educated man and an amateur naturalist. He is also a clergyman struggling to reconcile his own religious beliefs with recent discoveries in science, and his profound loss is the inexplicable absence of scientific proof for the existence of a Creator.<sup>81</sup> Reverend Alabaster feels attracted to the new science "by the sheer beauty, the intricacy of the arguments of Mr Darwin" (33), but he is also repelled by Darwin's arguments because he cannot believe that there is no Divine First Cause behind the inexorability of Nature: "It opens the path to a dark pit of horrors" (34). His musings on the subject echo Tennyson's similar doubts: "Are God and Nature then at strife, / That Nature lends such evil dreams?" (LV 5-6).

A.S. Byatt's fictional works, and Tennyson's elegy, make clear that extraordinary grief can result from the loss of close friends and relatives, and precipitate unusual ways of dealing with the loss. For Simon Moffitt, the suicide of his father has a profound effect on him, not only on his ability to foster relationships, but also on his beliefs about life and death. Simon's misadventures in the Amazon cause him to style the region as a modern Garden of Eden, one in which the primary concern is "not good and evil, but what life and death are really like, since we are not immortal" (21). In addition, the bizarre death of his cameraman demonstrates Simon's conclusion that death is senseless and a force against which we must continually battle. For R.H. Ash, the loss of his child is different: he has never been told whether or not his child lives, so while there is no body to grieve, there also is no child in his life. Attending a séance in an attempt to make contact with the child's

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<sup>81</sup> Byatt variously names this force Designer, God, Divine First Cause, and Creator, perhaps to demonstrate forcefully Reverend Alabaster's confusion about the correct, contemporary term to apply.

spirit seems like a reasonable, if unorthodox, thing to do when other means of discovering the truth have already been exhausted. However, Ash is a skeptic despite his use of ventriloquism in poetry and makes himself unpopular at the event because he is determined to expose chicanery in the mistaken belief he has been "practised upon" (430). Mrs Hella Lees feels affronted by Ash's disruption of the séance, but offers a modicum of sympathy: "Mr Ash's whole manner was that of a *seeker* betrayed by his own positivism into the frustration of any communication he might have received" (430 emphasis in original). Mrs Lees perceives Ash's sensitivity to the spirit world, in which he, ever an empiricist, cannot bring himself to believe.

In 'Morpho Eugenia', Byatt re-visits familiar terrain. Like Simon Moffitt in *The Game*, Reverend Alabaster attempts to find meaning for his life by reconciling his religious beliefs with scientific evidence which seems to contradict them. In the beginning of the novella, Alabaster is very firm in his beliefs. He believes there is a God and a Divine Plan modelled upon family relationships that explains and organizes all aspects of nature. Even his sermons reflect this benign paternalism:

Their note was kindly, their subject matter love, family love, as was appropriate to the occasion, the love of God the Father, who watched the fall of every sparrow with infinite care, who had divided His infinity into Father and Son, the more to make His love comprehensible to human creatures, whose understanding of the nature of love began with the natural ties between the members of the family group, the warmth of the mother, the



protection of the father, the closeness of brothers and sisters, and was designed to move outwards in emulation of the divine Parent and embrace the whole creation, from families to households, from households to nations, from nations to all men, and indeed, all living beings, wondrously made.

(23)

Alabaster's firm belief in the familial organisation of nature extends to his scientific research. He is keen to see William Adamson's specimens from the Amazon and eager to use their example as evidence for the presence of God. Just after William has exhibited his specimens, Reverend Alabaster remarks upon the butterfly's beauty: "'It is hard', he said to William, 'not to agree with the Duke of Argyll that the extraordinary beauty of these creatures is in itself the evidence of the work of a Creator, a Creator who also made our human sensibility to beauty, to design, to delicate variation and brilliant colour'" (19).<sup>82</sup>

Reverend Alabaster still believes in the biblical creation, but he feels caught between outmoded beliefs and the new scientific materialism. Consequently, his ideas are plagued with doubt. It is, perhaps, as a consequence of feeling trapped between two belief systems

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<sup>82</sup> I have not been able to identify Argyll or the work Reverend Alabaster cites, but William specifically mentions Henry Walter Bates (1825-92) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) as sources of inspiration for his own work: both were naturalists, and made their first expedition in 1848, to a place called Pará in the Amazon. Between 1851 and 1859, they explored the Amazon more deeply and the resulting research introduced over 8,000 species not previously known to scholars (Drabble 73). When Wallace returned to Britain after the first voyage, he published a book called *Travels on the Amazon and the Rio Negro* (1853). After the second voyage, Wallace and Bates published *The Naturalist on the Amazon* in 1863. Much later, Bates and Wallace made another voyage which is described in *The Malay Archipelago* published in May 1869. In 1858, during an attack of fever while in the Moluccas, the idea of natural selection as a solution to the problem of evolution flashed upon Alfred Wallace. Upon recovery, he wrote a letter to Charles Darwin, and the outcome was the delivery of a very famous paper at the Linnean Society in London on the theory of evolution (Drabble 1049).

that Reverend Alabaster wants to write a book using the Scientific Method to prove the existence of a Creator: "A book which shall demonstrate – with some kind of intellectual respectability – that it is not impossible that the world is the work of a Creator, a Designer" (33). Alabaster is not asserting the existence of a Creator: he is saying "It is *not impossible* that there is a Creator", signifying doubt. He has presented his intended thesis statement for the book in negative terms, so it will not be surprising that Alabaster, in frustration, tears up his work. The more he tries to prove that there is a Creator, the more Reverend Alabaster begins to doubt the existence of a Creator, and consequently, he finds himself questioning Church dogma.

In the on-going debate between Reverend Alabaster and William Adamson, each man represents an oppositional system: William represents modern science and changing attitudes while Reverend Alabaster represents tradition and the old social order. Though Reverend Alabaster is attracted to the new science, represented by men like Darwin and Lyell<sup>83</sup>, because their discoveries are glamorous and exciting, the inherent atheism of science conflicts mightily with his faith. While debating the topic of his book with William, Reverend Alabaster's doubts surface as he realizes he is stuck in a constricting belief system he is unwilling to dismiss:

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Darwin (1809-1882), naturalist and author of *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* (1859), "argued for a natural, not divine, origin of species" (Drabble 257). He used Lyell's (1797-1875) notion of slow geological change as an analogy for how species adapt over long periods of time eventually becoming new species. Unlike others, Darwin did not see any moral or religious imperative in species adaptation, only chance and necessity. In a later work, *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin proposed that humans had evolved from higher primates, an idea Reverend Alabaster finds especially repugnant. William Paley (1743-1805), a theologian, author of *Natural Theology* (1802) in which he describes the proof of the existence of God in the design apparent in natural phenomena (Drabble 741).

It was all very well *then* for Paley to argue that a man who found a watch, or even two interlocking cogs of a watch, lying on a bare heath, would have presumed a Maker of such an instrument. There was then no other explanation of the intricacy of the grasp of the hand, or the web of the spider, or the vision of the eye than a Designer who made everything for its particular purpose. But now we have a powerful, almost entirely satisfactory explanation - in the *gradual* action of Natural Selection, of slow change, over unimaginable millennia. And any argument that would truly seek to find an intelligent Creator in His works must take account of the beauty and force of these explanations, must not sneer at them, nor try to refute them for the sake of defending Him who cannot be defended by weak and *partial* reasonings. (33 emphasis in original)

Although Alabaster admits his own weak and partial reasonings, he is also aware of the formidable arguments he will be confronting with his own book. Being human, he is not able to comprehend fully the nature of the Divine, but he also has difficulty accumulating hard evidence to support his thesis that cannot be easily disputed by Darwin's theory because they both use the same evidence to support their individual claims. It is no wonder Alabaster gives up his project.

In a simplistic way, Reverend Alabaster and William Adamson stand for the concept of natural selection. On the one hand, Reverend Alabaster still believes in the theology of his Church even though he finds the new science very attractive. He remembers with awe

the stories of the Old and New Testament – the Original Sin and the Divine Birth – and believes them “without question” (59), but society is changing and he feels that he must do so too, yet he cannot do as Simon Moffitt has done, give up angels and devils battling “in the Heavens for virtue and vice” (59) in exchange for a new social order that explains human development in terms of being “eaten and absorbed into other flesh and blood” (59). Undoubtedly, Reverend Alabaster feels betrayed by science. The image of the madonna monkey – “with puzzled eyes and a hanging brow and great ugly teeth, clutching its hairy offspring to its wrinkled breast” (60) – does not satisfy his notion of godhead, and he is offended by the hypothesis that humans may have descended from apes. As a result, Reverend Alabaster can neither grow in his faith nor fully embrace science. He also argues against his own colleagues when he castigates William Whewell for suggesting that “the lengths of the days and nights were adapted to the duration of the sleep of Man” (57). Instead, Alabaster takes a naturalist’s approach to explain the phenomenon: “The whole Creation lived and moved in a rhythm of response to the heat and light of the Sun and to its withdrawal” (57). On the other hand, William Adamson does not believe in the physical incarnation of God. Instead, he suggests that religion “is as much part of the history of the development of mankind as the knowledge of cooking food, or the tabu against incest” (34), and because of this continuous human development, William trusts his reason to assess his observations so that his beliefs are “constantly modified by [his] instincts” (34). For William, religion is a necessary part of man’s cultural evolution, and a part that must be disposed of when society begins to replace it with

something else. But Alabaster cannot conceive of his religion as a work-in-progress. To do so would mean understanding God as a “fumbling craftsman who changed his mind in mid-work” (58).

Instead, Reverend Alabaster goes looking for God in unlikely places. He thinks that Darwin allows for the possibility of a Creator in the development of the tissues of the eye. His supposition is a fallacy. Alabaster cites Darwin’s phrase “*we must suppose that there is a power always intently watching each slight accidental alteration in the transparent layers [of the eye]*” (36 emphasis in original). Later in the same passage, Darwin proposes that the slow development of the eye (as an optical instrument) is superior to a glass optical instrument in the same way “the works of the Creator are to those of man” (36). Alabaster supposes the reference to the watching power is Darwin’s name for God. Actually, Darwin refers to the process of Natural Selection, and it is, perhaps, unfortunate that Darwin has personified the process because men like Alabaster cling to the hope that at the bottom of all this science, there is a god, a loving creator, who watches every aspect of his creation. In addition, their personal fears that there might be no god, and consequently no eternal reward, either of heaven or hell, provide the impetus for men like Reverend Alabaster to use Darwin’s theory to rationalise the existence of a Creator. Though he sounds dismissive, William’s response that “it is easier for us to imagine the patient attention of an infinite watcher than to comprehend blind chance” (36), certainly reflects the spirit of the Victorian age, especially as it has been symbolized by *In Memoriam*. Both men have wrestled with their beliefs in ways that are mirrored by the Poet Laureate – Alfred



Tennyson – and also by Darwin.

Later, Reverend Alabaster shows William a draft of a passage which will become part of his book. It consists of “a new rehearsal of old arguments, some of which Harald [Alabaster] had already, in conversation, rejected as untenable” (83), but models the organization of the work on Tennyson’s poem, beginning with an assertion that all creation is a mystery and that the knowledge humankind possesses “is of things we see; / And yet we trust it comes from thee” (Prologue 22-23) and modulating toward a belief in an invisible guide which Alabaster knows not how to name: “Blind Chance, or loving Providence” (86). Alabaster’s work later depends upon “truth of feeling” (88) just as Tennyson, toward the end of his poem, describes “A warmth within the breast [which] would melt / The freezing reason’s colder part” (Section 124: 13-14), so that a firm faith in God’s presence is all that is required to conquer religious doubt. Whereas the persona of *In Memoriam* works through his grief over the death of his friend,<sup>84</sup> and simultaneously confronts his own assumptions about the immortality of the soul, Alabaster’s own ideas on this topic are not so clear. He begins with a quotation from the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm,<sup>85</sup> which he thinks establishes a link between God, the Creator, and the “continuous fashioning” of

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<sup>84</sup> According to Robert Ross, editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson had been reading Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* at the time of Arthur Hallam’s death. In particular, Section 56 “marks the depth of the speaker’s despair” (Ross 35, n.1) because a planet that is older than the concept of God presents the possibility that creation did not happen as it is described in Genesis. Darwin’s concept of natural selection would have a similar impact on a devout person’s faith. For example, if one believes God to be perfect in every way, then His creations should also be perfect and consequently, there should not be any need to adapt, revise, or erase any species. Alternatively, if one believes God is like a stock breeder, constantly watching over his creatures, then the concept of natural selections shows that He is a careless farmer: some species become extinct because their habitat lacks the resources to support them; and those who survive ecological challenges adapt their bodies to the new conditions.

<sup>85</sup> See Appendix C for the full text of Psalm 139.

evolution. He then attempts to collapse Darwin's proposition by suggesting that "natural selection" is actually a secular name for God. Darwin personifies natural selection as if it were a Watcher tending a massive garden, constantly assessing the developing characteristics of each species and Reverend Alabaster accepts the analogy as a metaphor for God's husbandry: "Mr Darwin's new understanding of the means by which these providential changes are brought about is not in itself a *new providence* contributing both to human advance and development, and to our capacity to wonder at, to know, to further and repair those forces which God has set in motion" (84 emphasis in original). Alabaster suggests that the means of the providential changes for which Mr Darwin argues is not a new idea at all, but an old one. With God as the constant watcher over all Creation, these providential changes could be understood as His continuous creating and re-fashioning. But with the underlying meaning of chance in "providential", we cannot help but wonder whether the changes to which Alabaster refers are not simply lucky mutations. If this is the case, then God is a poor craftsman, or there is no God, but simply blind chance and luck ruling over the adaptability of species. Alabaster's argument then shifts to a discussion about social insects and how individuals' behaviour toward members of their own species seems to emulate the altruism and self-sacrifice found in human societies. Alabaster demonstrates how the process by which Queens are chosen can be understood in two ways: first, that many more Queens are produced than are actually needed in order to account for the many mishaps which can happen to a new Queen; thus, Nature is both cruel and wasteful; and second, "a special providence" chooses the new Queen best fitted

to provide the hive with new generations. In the first option, Nature stands back and allows a new Queen to emerge through savage struggle. In the latter option, God or Providence or the Divine Force chooses the new Queen and allows the other potential Queens to fall victim to the perils found in nature.

Alabaster's passage on the selection of ant queens echoes Tennyson's musing on the wastefulness of nature in Sections 54-56 of *In Memoriam*. Section 54 expresses the hope that "not one life shall be destroy'd / Or cast as rubbish to the void" (6-7), which is afterward mocked in Section 55 when the poet suggests that God and Nature must be at loggerheads because "So careful of the type [species] she [Nature] seems, / So careless of the single life" (7-8). Section 56 asks why should a man, Nature's "last work, who seem'd so fair" (9), be blown about the desert dust, / Or seal'd within the iron hills" (19-20), when this man has sung praises, prayed, and trusted in God's love. Alabaster's point, then, is why create the idea of God if humankind did not understand how crucially such a Being is needed? His response is another question. He suggests that it was a "true leading that enabled Mr Tennyson to become again as a little child, and feel the Fatherhood of the Lord of Hosts" (89), so asking for, and receiving, a sign that God exists must come from the heart. For Alabaster, one must believe for there to be a God. God just IS and no evidence is required other than simple, pious belief.<sup>86</sup>

William is not convinced by what he has just read simply because he rejected his

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<sup>86</sup> This sentiment also echoes the message God wishes Moses to communicate to the Israelites in Egypt: "'I am who I am.' He said further, 'thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" (Gen 3: 14-15).

childhood vision of God while living in the Amazon. He tries to make Alabaster feel better about his wavering faith by offering the following observation: "We need loving kindness in *reality*; and often we do not find it – so we invent a divine Parent for the infant crying in the night, and convince ourselves all is well. In reality, many cries remain unheard in perpetuity" (89 emphasis in original). William bases his beliefs on empirical evidence, following Darwin's example. In one of their early conversations, he tells Alabaster: "I believe I have indeed been led by my studies – by my observations – to believe that we are all the products of the inexorable laws of the behaviour of matter, of transformations and developments, and that is all" (34). He also acknowledges that these beliefs do not come to him easily because he does not think that "such a belief comes naturally to mankind" (34). Recognizing that society as a whole expresses the need to be loved in the concept of the mythical, or Divine, Parent to fill whatever is lacking in our individual lives, William asserts that the theory of evolution seems unpalatable because people insist upon unconditional love from a Divine Parent.

'The Conjugal Angel' offers a different answer to Alabaster's (and Tennyson's) question about the immortality of the soul. Initially, it is an ethereal response to the more mundane questions posed in 'Morpho Eugenia', but the story also asserts the belief in the continuation of the soul after death; that the living may be able to contact the dead; and that the dead may choose to communicate comforting messages to those who grieve their loss. Emily Jesse, Alfred Tennyson's sister who was betrothed to Arthur Hallam at the time of his sudden death, is an active member of the spiritualist group attempting to

communicate with dead loved ones, but she has never received a message from her beloved. The medium, Sophy Sheekhy, knows "large runs of *In Memoriam* by heart" (175), and often quotes passages from it in her messages from the spirit world, as does her partner, Mrs Liliás Papagay, in the automatic writing messages she "receives" from the spirits they contact, but the messages always seem to be meaningful for the other participants in the spiritualist circle. Despite the group's many ineffectual attempts to contact Arthur Hallam, it is he who finally breaks through to Sophy Sheekhy, but only in the privacy of her room.<sup>87</sup> Even so, the group is not without its successes: Sophy Sheekhy channels the rapping from Mrs Hearnshaw's dead babies, who all predict the coming of "a new brother or sister" (198); she sees a feathered creature between "the sofa and the window" (201); and she communicates a message which may actually be from Arthur Hallam, but which Mr Hawke interprets as the spirits' reproachfulness for the group's "lack of zeal" (204). At the next meeting, Sophy is too drained from her encounter with Hallam's spirit to be an effective medium, but Mrs Papagay has some strange results with the automatic handwriting.

All of the messages consist of allusions to well known contemporaneous texts and emphasize the need for comfort in the face of abandonment: the first refers to the beatitudes in Matthew 5:4, extending the hope that bereavement may be assuaged; the declamatory statement "he will not come" alludes to "Mariana", a poem about a woman

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<sup>87</sup> The spirit of Arthur Hallam craves warmth and poetry, and a glimpse of Alfred Tennyson, so Sophy permits the spirit to use her body to these ends. He does not, as one might expect, ask about Emily.



waiting for her lover who feels abandoned by him; the third passage is from a poem Tennyson dedicated to Richard Trench, a member of the Cambridge Apostles, about being abandoned by love; next, the passage from *Measure for Measure* picks up on the howling motif suggested by the previous citation; and the last message returns to the grief motif and the imminent arrival of the Bridegroom, an allusion to the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Mrs Jesse is convinced the messages are for her, but when the spirit confirms they will be joined together in the hereafter, Mrs Jesse decides she has mourned the loss of Arthur Hallam long enough. In this scene of the novella, A.S. Byatt speculates on Emily Jesse's motivation for becoming involved with the New Jerusalem Church: "She had wanted so much to speak to lost Arthur, to be reassured that she was forgiven for not having been able to be what Arthur's sister, Julia Hallam, called a 'dedicated Nun'" (218 emphasis in original). Byatt imagines a life for Emily Jesse (née Tennyson) that has extended beyond the parameters of a footnote to her own brother's life and which includes a husband, a circle of friends, and the pursuit of her own interests. Presented struggling with her own grief over the premature death of her fiancé, Emily Jesse wants forgiveness and understanding from her extended family, especially Arthur, when she is usually treated with incredulity.

The closure Byatt achieves for Emily Jesse is especially inventive and ironic: Sophy Sheekhy receives one last message for Emily that "they shall be joined, and made one Angel" (283) in the hereafter which Emily feels is a shockingly monumental assumption that she would want to spend eternity with Arthur Hallam having been dogged by his

memory throughout her life. In a significant act of her own, Emily Jesse puts Hallam's spirit fully to rest by choosing life with her husband, and by choosing "to share our good times, presuming we have them, in the next" (283). Of all the participants, it is Mrs Papagay who is most pleased by this exchange, for when Emily Jesse was threatened with "the loss of the husband she had taken for granted that she really saw him, saw him in terms of his loss, . . . and was driven to imagine existence without him" (284). In the course of this imagining, Emily Jesse removes herself from her brother's story and reinvents her own.<sup>88</sup> In fact, in Byatt's fiction, the potential for alternate stories always exists. As has already been noted, the 'missing' children in *Possession* represent stories Byatt chooses not to tell. Similarly, in 'The Conjugal Angel', her authorial voice suggests alternate endings for the Jesse and Papagay families: "Storms and ice-floes might have taken Captain Jesse, grief or childbearing might have destroyed his wife, Mrs Papagay might have lapsed into penury and she herself have died as an overworked servant" (287). The conditional verb tense evokes different outcomes at the same time it predicts a different actual ending. Because Emily Jesse has been a footnote in someone else's history, the usual way to understand her experience is through Arthur Hallam's death. Had Emily Tennyson done what society expected of her by hiding behind her grief and maintaining a superficial widowhood, there would have been no need to make contact with Arthur's spirit in search of forgiveness. The historical Emily Tennyson must have wanted more from life when she

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<sup>88</sup> Reinventing one's own story is a common motif in Byatt's fiction. In *Babel Tower*, Frederica Potter cuts up legal documents and mixes them up with other writings to reinvent herself, with humorous and ironic results.

accepted Richard Jesse's proposal of marriage, even if she felt she owed something to the Hallam family. Byatt's novella successfully uses the historical references to imagine what life must have been like for Emily Jesse, during an era that expected superior moral rectitude among women of the landed gentry, but which did not give them much of an arena in which to exercise it.

Imagining the alternative lifestyle is only implied in 'The Conjugal Angel', but Philip Pullman does his research for the Sally Lockhart series of Victorian-style thrillers. The first novel in the series explains how Sally finds herself alone in Victorian London and apparently friendless until she meets Frederic Garland, a photographer, in the course of investigating her father's mysterious death and the disappearance of his fortune. It is 1872, so the historical period reflected in Pullman's novels begins where Byatt's novellas end, and toward the end of the nineteenth-century plotline in *Possession*. Sally thinks of herself as an ordinary girl, but she has not had an ordinary life: her mother was killed by a sepoy during the Indian Mutiny, and her father, upon leaving the army, became a shipping agent and co-owner of Lockhart and Selby; rather than sending Sally away to school, Mr Lockhart taught her in the evenings such useful subjects as military strategy, bookkeeping, the principles of the stock market, and Hindustani.<sup>89</sup> With these skills, Sally is able to provide for herself much like Liliás Papagay and Sophy Sheekhy in Byatt's novel, but not without some crucial assistance from Frederic Garland to get started.

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<sup>89</sup> Later, when on her own, Sally approaches problems like a military strategist; she can provide for herself using her bookkeeping skills, and with her knowledge of the stock market, she is able to establish herself in business as a financial consultant.

The odd mix of people who live with Frederic Garland at 45 Burton Street are strangely reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes's Baker Street Irregulars. Indeed, aspects of each of the Sally Lockhart novels strongly resembles some of the Arthur Conan Doyle tales, so while Pullman alludes to Doyle's works, he also modifies them to reflect twentieth-century gender sensibilities. For example, in "The Illustrious Client", Holmes and Watson rely upon the talents of Shinwell Johnson, a reformed criminal, for information gathering "in the darker recesses of the underworld" (18). Though Holmes investigates a man reputed to have murdered his wife, the capture of the criminal is achieved at an arm's length. Holmes and Watson remain morally pure while using men like Shinwell Johnson who are on the moral fringe of society to deal directly with the morally impure. There are no such niceties in Pullman's novels. As a financial consultant, Sally has become accustomed to investigating the companies in which she contemplates investing, so she knows how to gather information from parish registers, directories, and by interviewing people. Consequently, her business has been a success "against the expectations of everyone who thought that women couldn't do that sort of thing, or shouldn't if they wanted to remain feminine, or wouldn't if there wasn't something wrong with them" (4). Though these remarks seem to be Sally's thoughts, they are actually the voice of the omniscient narrator, a crucial distinction since the remarks seem to encapsulate many of the views held by the people of the Victorian age and reflected in fictional representations of women of the period.

The remarks also echo E.H. Carr's assertion that "the facts of history . . . are always

refracted through the mind of the recorder" (22) so that what was once an interpretation of human behaviour becomes, with the passage of time, historical fact. Whereas in the Sherlock Holmes tales women usually are acted upon rather than asserting their own agency, in *The Tiger in the Well*, Sally defends her right to be an independent woman of means even though men behave chauvinistically toward her. For example, Sally neglects to tell her lawyer, Mr Temple, that she has had a child out of wedlock because she "didn't want to lose his good opinion" (11), but now that he is dead, a younger partner has taken over the practice who feels that Sally has concealed the birth of her child, and consequently, is inclined to take the custody petition at face value. That Sally never was married to the petitioner is not the point. The novel is an elaborate allusion to Doyle's "The Red-Headed League", a tale in which a man is hired on the basis of his red hair to copy volume B of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. One day he arrives at the offices of the Red-headed League to discover them vacant, and when he returns home, the man learns that his house-boy has run away. The two events appear to be unrelated until Sherlock Holmes proves that the house-boy was in league with two other men who dug a tunnel from the basement of his home into the premises of a bank next door intending to rob it. The purpose of the employment at the Red-headed League was to ensure the man's absence from his home so that the villains could have access to his basement to work on their tunnel. When the tunnel was completed, there was no further need for the Red-headed League. Pullman uses a similar ploy in *The Tiger in the Well*: the petition for divorce and custody of Harriet is intended to keep Sally distracted so that she cannot pay attention to the villain's real



target, her business. The villain is Ah Ling, the commission agent from Singapore whom Sally's father used in former times and who was shot by Sally in *The Ruby in the Smoke*, who believed him dead. Using Arthur Parrish as a screen, Ah Ling plans to take advantage of property and divorce laws to dispose of Sally's house and liquidate her investments. What is interesting about Pullman's novel is that while the premise of the plot employs the same device Doyle used in "The Red-Headed League", no actual crime has been perpetrated against Sally. Once the petition has been filed with the court, Sally discovers that her home and her business both legally belong to Mr Parrish. In a meeting with his own solicitors, Mr Parrish sums up the situation succinctly: "What it boils down to is that as soon as the court's found for me, not only the child, bless her heart, but the money and property my wife controls come to me" (90).

At the opening of *The Tiger in the Well*, Sally, with her daughter, Harriet, has her own home in Twickenham. She lives discreetly since she never actually married Fred Garland before Harriet was conceived, and Fred was subsequently killed in a house fire at the end of *The Shadow of the North*. The legitimacy of the child will prove to be the point upon which the legal aspects of this novel turn. In *Possession*, Maia Bailey is absorbed into her extended family so that her legitimacy is not questioned. Similarly, Eugenia Alabaster Adamson's children breed so true to type that their legitimacy is not questioned either – not until William witnesses Eugenia and her brother, Edgar, *in flagrante delicto*. In *The Tiger in the Well*, Sally is put in the socially awkward position of having to explain the legitimacy of her child at the same time she must defend herself against a petition for divorce from a

man she knows she never married who is also petitioning for custody of Harriet on the grounds of fitness "because she was currently associating with persons of doubtful morality, sharing a household with two unmarried men" (9).

The paternity issues presented in the historical novels of A.S. Byatt and Philip Pullman draw upon the plots of earlier writers like Arthur Conan Doyle, but elements of Byatt's works also allude to the ideas of writers like Tennyson and Darwin, who offered, as it were, more articulate expressions of the *zeitgeist* of their time. Byatt's reference to Vico in the early pages of *Possession* alludes to the notion that history is both cyclical and progressive. Darwin's contribution to this idea is that "nature, like history, turned out to be progressive after all" (Carr 113). Books like *Angels and Insects* remind readers that human beings struggle to improve upon the efforts of previous generations, and in this effort, this type of novel presents an optimistic view of human progress. Similarly, books like *The Tiger in the Well* demonstrate that not all humans progress at the same rate, and indeed, some may be said to be regressing.

*Angels and Insects* ought to be published not only with a reader's guide to the niceties of Victorian class structure, but also with a list of readings in the theories of geological time and evolution, in addition to a selection of speculative works on the topic of the reconciliation of scientific theories with biblical events and the immortality of the soul. The references to classical legends in the two novellas comprising *Angels and Insects* can easily be clarified by any good dictionary of Greek and Roman mythology, and the allusions to nursery folktales are common enough as to be instantly recognized. But the one textual

reference underlying both novellas in *Angels and Insects* is Alfred Tennyson's elegy for Arthur Hallam, *In Memoriam*. Taken together, the two novellas explore the hereafter and continue an intellectual conversation begun more than one hundred years earlier.

### Case 3: Ban the Flute: Censorship in *Babel Tower*

Byatt introduces *Babbletower* as the "book that was to cause so much trouble" (12), echoing Lincoln's words to Harriet Beecher Stowe<sup>90</sup> when they met during the American Civil War. This sentiment is reiterated several times throughout the novel. Rupert Parrott, though interested in publishing the novel, is worried about the risk it presents, especially since the trial of Penguin Books and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*<sup>91</sup> is relatively recent history:

'It's a dreadful risk. It could get any publisher into trouble. Even in these marginally more enlightened days. It's not a nice book.' (304)

Jude replies that he "wrote what [he] had to write" (306) and that the circumstances of *Babbletower* are "all around us" (306). Despite shifts in social attitudes and value systems of the late 1960's, reviewers simultaneously predict trouble and call for the ban of

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<sup>90</sup> Lincoln is alleged to have described Harriet Beecher Stowe as "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war". In fact, though Stowe and Lincoln did meet in 1862, there is no direct account of the meeting and no evidence that Lincoln had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Thomas F. Gossett demonstrates that the story may have been put about by critics hostile to Stowe, people who would have thought it amusing to blame a woman for causing a civil war on the abolitionist issue (315).

<sup>91</sup> Penguin Books, the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the United Kingdom, were tried in 1960 for contravening the Obscene Publications Act. The trial was significant because it introduced the concept of the literary merit of a work, and the relevance of said literary merit to the greater public good. Therefore, a publication judged not to have literary merit would be convicted of the charge of obscene libel and ordered to be destroyed. The trial of *R. v Lady Chatterley's Lover* has become a benchmark case by which subsequent obscene libel trials have been measured. See H. Montgomery Hyde's overview of the trial (14-43).

*Babbletower*. The *Daily Telegraph* critic writes: "In a more robust society, this book would not have been published, for the publisher would have had convictions" (416). The *Guardian* critic exhorts readers to accept their own loathsomeness and praises Jude Mason for taking "a fearless step forward on all our behalfs" (sic 416). Anthony Burgess, who had created some controversy in 1962 with *A Clockwork Orange*, describes Jude Mason's novel as a battle over evil between the Augustinian assertion that fallen man is naturally evil and the Pelagian hypothesis that by free will and virtue salvation can be achieved. He, then, suggests that Jude's characters "are trapped in their Projector's Fourierist utopian project, which is a mechanical conveyor-belt to Sadeian subways and dungeons" (423). With a strong tone of glee and mischief, Burgess suggests that *Babbletower* "is in great danger of being prosecuted for obscenity" (423). He concludes his review by describing the legal concepts behind the premise that a book can deprave and corrupt readers, leaving the question open whether Jude Mason's intent is to be didactic or merely pornographic. The answer to this question determines the fate of Mason's novel. Jude's response to all of these reviews is unequivocal: he is disgusted to be treated "as a symptom of other people's swinish malaise" (417) and insists "my book is mine, and a work of art, I do believe and maintain, contrary to their insulting insinuations" (417).

Throughout the obscene libel trial of *Babbletower*, Byatt does not appear to take a stand on the issue of the moral integrity of a literary work. In fact, the novel, its author and its publisher all lose their case, but win the appeal hearing later. There are some obvious reasons for this: a) *Babbletower* is a best seller that achieves much notoriety through critical

reviews causing it to remain in the public eye much longer than other books do, and so its more violent passages receive more attention than they probably deserve; b) Anthony Burgess's comment that the book could be prosecuted comes to the attention of a government bureaucrat who does indeed pursue the matter (without first reading the novel); c) the prosecution of the novel (as if it were a person) keeps it in the press as details of the courtroom proceedings are published regularly. Consequently, some members of society have more to say on the topic of pornographic art than they would if the novel had gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, to charge a book and its publishers with obscene libel in the twentieth century suggests that our society is not as permissive as the youth of the 1960's would like to think. Instead, such a charge suggests that some literary works of art should be banned because their contents might deprave and corrupt the people who read them.

The parliamentarians who made the obscene libel law in the nineteenth century were worried about the effects of salacious literature on the minds of young people, particularly as it might affect their morality.<sup>92</sup> At the Penguin Books trial concerning *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in 1960, Mr Mervyn Griffith-Jones, Crown Prosecutor, invited the jurors to consider whether they would approve of their sons and daughters reading Lawrence's novel; or would they leave it lying around the house; or even wish their wives and servants to read such a book (Hyde 17). This concern is not new. Plato proposed that in his ideal city, only hymns to the gods and odes celebrating historical events and great men would

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<sup>92</sup> Based on the Vagrancy Act of 1824, the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 was commonly known as Lord Campbell's Act, so named for the "Lord Chief Justice of England, who was mainly responsible for its passage through parliament" (Hyde 2).



be performed. Fictional works would be banned for two reasons: a) they represent only imperfect copies of perfect originals, and therefore cannot be said to represent the Truth (Grube 247); and b) fictional works represent people expressing emotions they would be ashamed to display publicly in real life (Grube 250), and such an emotional display is damaging because "music and the theatre should encourage stoical calmness, not boisterous uncontrolled emotion" (Murdoch 5). *Babbletower* is the kind of literary work Plato would exclude from his city and Jude Mason is the type of artist Plato would prevent entering his just society.

Mason's book depicts men and women exploring the limits of pleasure (sexual gratification, gastronomic delights, imaginative storytelling), but when the Projector's ideas become psychologically manipulative, the community's behaviour also becomes increasingly violent and perverted. The individuals of the community at La Tour Bruyarde believe in the necessity of rejecting "monarchies, the Christian religion, places of education ... all made in imitation of that Family" (204), the Christian family of God, madonna, and Son. It is their fervent desire that "all men would be equal... [that there] would be no marriage, no family" (204), that envy, favouritism, and shame would also be abolished. These ideas are not so easily put into practice. The Projector of the community, Culvert, behaves like a benevolent dictator, suggesting a variety of voyeuristic activities – such as confessing one's sins of the past and enacting sexual fantasies – in which everyone is invited to participate, though choosing not to participate is perceived by the group as clinging to the ideals favoured "in the old state, before the Revolution" (207).

Jude's representation of the Feast of Misrule shows people taking part in a ritual, originally designed to celebrate the birth of the New Year, that has been transformed into a sado-masochistic orgy so that Culvert may take advantage of the weaknesses of those for whom he feels a strong antipathy. Lady Mavis, his primary target, is asked to play the role of Pope to Culvert's Scapegoat and Whore. She is given a "stack of white willow wands and urged [...] to ruddy [his posterior] truly and not in jest, for real and not faked blood was required to flow in their new world" (267). Culvert has determined that the "new year" shall be beaten out of the body of the "old year". The ritual chastisement has the desired effect only for Culvert and Lady Mavis: "for she would hate in principle to see any man whipped for any reason, and yet she would desire, in part, to whip himself for his treatment of her, and yet, too, she would hate that in herself" (268). For everyone else, the Feast of Misrule is a massive failure because the event lacks symbolic meaning. Instead, it sets a new standard of violent sexual behaviour in the community which afterwards is mimicked in the hazing behaviour teenaged boys exhibit towards younger children, and which ultimately results in the supposed death of Florian, Lady Mavis's son.<sup>93</sup> This scene is pivotal both for Jude's book and for his trial. For the book, this scene marks a transition in the community from one of pastoral pleasantry to one of dictatorial brutality. For the trial, this scene challenges readers' toleration of shocking material.

These scenes, particularly those depicting the decay of the community at the end of

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<sup>93</sup> Though everyone searches diligently for Florian, his body is never found. Some of the inhabitants believe that he has escaped La Tour Bruyarde, but others believe that his tormentors have successfully hidden his corpse.

*Babbletower*, challenge the accepted boundaries of good taste. In *Babel Tower*, the characters assess the transgression, and attempt to defend Jude's novel on the grounds its publication serves a greater societal good. The problem with a book like *Babbletower* lies with determining what that "greater good" might be, but in a trial situation this type of defence allows "the evidence of expert witnesses to justify a publication *prima facie* obscene 'as being for the public good on the ground that it is in the interests of science, literature, art or learning'" (Hyde 11). For example, the jurors at the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were instructed to "allow, as far as you can, the right of writers and publishers to express their talents, and approach the book from the widest and most liberal point of mind" (Hyde 16). The judge's instructions to the jury allude to David Hume's distinction between taste and opinion. To approve or disapprove of a book is a matter of opinion, but to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with an awareness of the beauty of the prose, a willingness to compare the literary attributes of the novel with others of its kind, and an ability to distinguish a literary work from a pulp fiction all demonstrate the degree of an individual's taste. In "Of the Standard of Taste", Hume argues that "reducing expression to truth and exactness" (214) would produce an "insipid and disagreeable work" (215), but that an experienced, sensitive reader will compare one work with another, approaching all works with an open mind "free from all prejudice" (218). Though the judge in the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial and the fictional judge in *Babel Tower* both instruct their juries to exercise taste rather than exert opinion, it is interesting to note that the fictional jury decides Jude Mason's novel is obscene and without literary merit (595), despite the extensive testimony from other

writers.

Mid-way through Anthony Burgess's review, the Authorial Voice interrupts his thoughts on the likelihood of *Babbletower* being prosecuted to describe the distinction between literature and pornography:

True pornography ... is *kinetic*, it moves to action, it titillates, it irritates and excites flesh and spirit to seek relief. It does not follow that because a writer's concern is deeply moral, deeply concerned with right and wrong, that what he writes will necessarily lack this *kinetic* quality. (423 emphasis in original)

It is upon this point that Sir Augustine Weighall, the Crown Prosecutor, perseverates. He asks all witnesses – those for the defence as well as those for the prosecution – whether they felt aroused by the sexy scenes in the novel. He is particularly forceful in his questioning of Jude Mason since his sexual liaison with Dr Grisman Gould, a teacher at Swineburn boarding school, establishes the possibility that Gould “hurt [Jude’s] body and depraved [his] mind with a mixture of literature and cruelty – and that [Jude] is intent on passing on that hurt to the world, to [his] readers, to the possible victims of those of [his] readers who resemble [his] own betrayer” (579).

The notion of transmitting degrading behaviours from one generation to another originates in Plato. Concerned for the morality of the people living in his just society, Plato claimed that an artist's soul is infected by evil when he or she plays or enjoys a bad role, and consequently, contributes to increasing the sum of badness in the world. Further, the

work of artists tempts the better part of the soul to be less vigilant than usual thereby causing the lowest part of the soul to "feed and enliven base emotions which ought to be left to wither" (Murdoch 6). Though he does not specifically use Plato's ideas, Sir Augustine Weighall certainly stands for them: he intimates that books like *Babbletower* contribute to the depravity of society's youth. In his opening remarks, Sir Weighall cites the Moors Murders<sup>94</sup> case as an example of young people corrupted by the books they have read (530). The allusion, coupled with the allusion to the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* on an obscenity charge, evokes well-known contemporary events in recent memory, causing the jurors to intuit a causal effect between what an individual reads and what he does. Sir Weighall intends to argue that because Ian Brady had the works of the Marquis de Sade and Adolf Hitler on his bookshelf, and because Jude Mason also has a similar private collection, both men have become infected by the books they have read and have "passed on" their depravity to others: Brady enjoined Myra Hindley to take part in his killing spree, and Mason infects the minds of his readership with his shocking book. Weighall claims that books which show characters taking pleasure in the torture and murder of other

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<sup>94</sup> Ian Brady and Myra Hindley met at a chemical supply company where they both held clerical positions. Ian Brady was interested in Adolf Hitler and the Marquis de Sade as well as the general topics of witchcraft, sadism, and genocide to which he introduced Myra. Initially, they practised sexual perversions, or Ian would photograph Myra posing nude, until they decided to experiment with methods of killing people. Their method was to use pretty, blonde, friendly Myra to lure children into their van where Ian killed them. They buried their victims on the moors outside Manchester and took pictures of Myra standing over the grave-site. The end of their escapades came when they attempted to orchestrate the murder of Edward Evans for the benefit of another boy, David Smith. Smith witnessed Brady bludgeoning Evans with the blunt side of a hatchet and called the police. Brady and Hindley were convicted of the murders of Lesley Downey and Edward Evans in 1966. Brady was also convicted of the murder of John Kilbride and Pauline Reade. The pair avoided the hangman's noose because capital punishment had been repealed in England just a few months before their trial. See Haines, 28-32.



characters are dangerous because they inspire potential murderers to actualize a fantasy. Jude rejects this position. He consistently asserts that he wrote what he felt compelled to write and that he will be responsible for what he wrote, but not for how other people use his words.

The defense counsel's response is to manipulate Canon Holly into describing the episodes of hunting children and the death of Roseace as morally shocking, but not sexually titillating, but by doing so the defense counsel takes the weaker, defensive position thereby losing control of the debate for literary merit. Instead, the defense lawyers find themselves using witnesses to re-interpret the claims the prosecutors make. Canon Holly's responses are so equivocal that Hefferson-Brough must put Parrott on the stand: he describes the book as "strong meat" (559) and asserts that while Jude's book portrays a utopian society degenerating into a dystopian society, there are some episodes in the novel which are remarkably realistic, such as the hazing of little boys in dormitories by older children. He asserts that this type of behaviour continues today in the nation's public schools and comments that the scenes of sadistic treatment of little children in the dormitories made him recognise that the book had to be published: "I recognised the dormitories and the torture from my own school days" (560). When questioned whether murder had ever been committed in the course of these clandestine activities, Parrott replies that there have been many close calls and he speaks to the conspiracy of silence and climate of acceptance found in the large boarding schools, suggesting that students and teachers have both been complicit in the boys' violent behaviour.

Rupert Parrott's testimony mirrors the plot of Jude Mason's book. It offers another realistic perspective on a story that has been presented in allegorical terms. Hefferson-Brough's questioning of Parrott leads into the topic of the public good: he wishes to demonstrate that public opinion accepts the lurid reporting of the Profumo<sup>95</sup> scandal and the Moors Murders trials, even though members of the public may find such reports disturbing in ways that a literary work is not. He acknowledges that "we admit generally *now* that certain things go on that we once used – as a public community – to pretend didn't exist" (560). Parrott is suggesting that the permissiveness of the 1960s has changed society so that events that formerly were kept hidden are now openly discussed.

There is a gap between what many or most people now know about human nature and what we are allowed to say. Those of us who suffered at school – as I did, and as I can see Jude Mason did – suffered also from the little boys' normal conspiracy of silence. I think the public conspiracy of silence is as bad as the frightened conspiracy of little boys in dorms. We are grown-up men now. We live in a grown-up time. We have a right to responsible grown-up descriptions of the actions of which we are capable. (560-1)

Jude's testimony corroborates Rupert Parrott's description of Swineburn School. He tells the court about the "great deal of refined cruelty" (563) exercised in that school "routinely

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<sup>95</sup> In 1962, John Profumo, secretary of state for war, met and became enamoured with Christine Keeler. When rumours of his involvement with her escalated, he was confronted in the House of Commons about his relationship with Keeler. In March of 1963, he told the House of Commons that there was no impropriety, which turned out later to be a lie because, in fact, Keeler was also sleeping with the Russian Naval Attaché. This news brought down the Macmillan government and forced an election a year later, which the Tories lost, ending 13 years of Conservative governance. See Brown (<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/>)

by the masters" (564); he tells of whippings for all sorts of reasons, even for no good reason. Jude's testimony calls into question the moral function of art. He quibbles over the counsellor's question about the "serious moral point" of *Babbletower*. He suggests, instead, that art is supposed to do many things, but making a serious moral point might not necessarily be its objective: "It moves, it appals, it makes you chuckle, it delights, it despairs . . . [but] my book is not a stupid book, it is a good book, and is meant to enlighten and to move, not to harm and disgust" (568).

Jude insists the novel is a *tale*, a term no one pursues. It might have saved the lawyers some trouble if they had since the form of the tale exhibits a wide variety of characteristics, bordering on the folk tale, the *conte*, and the fable, which may have been useful for determining the literary merit of *Babbletower*.<sup>96</sup> Instead, none of the lawyers – particularly the lawyer representing the publishers – enquires about the relationship between the form of a novel and its content. Alexander Wedderburn's testimony focusses on matters of characterization, especially the types used in allegory. His remarks are used to establish that the qualities allegorical types represent reflect many qualities "as in life" (535), asserting the interpretation that *Babbletower*, though allegorical in nature, represents the truth of some kinds of human relationships. In the same way, Anthony Burgess's testimony is used by defence counsel to draw attention to the didacticism of the novel, and under cross-examination Sir Weighall gets him to admit that "Jude Mason is not trying to

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<sup>96</sup> The folk tale usually describes the adventures of a hero and may contain some supernatural elements such as ghosts, demons and spirits, giants and the like (Cuddon 346); the *conte* tends to be "a little fantastic (not realistic), droll and witty" (Cuddon 190); and the fable usually illustrates a moral (Cuddon 322). All of these forms have been used by writers to address morality issues.

*work up* ignorant readers into a state of irresponsible excitement" (542). Though Weighall does not pursue this point, it is one of the main reasons why Plato thought poets ought to be banned from the just society. He thought that what one saw represented on the stage would appeal to the baser part of the soul and cause individuals to behave boorishly at home. Burgess emphatically says that Jude Mason's intent is not to encourage this type of behaviour, that his novel is against it. The defence counsel calls other expert witnesses to support the literary merit of *Babbletower*: Douglas Corbie describes the novel as a serious work because "it treats of evil" (542); Professor Marie-France Smith establishes its connection to "the *mainstream* tradition of European intellectual history and philosophical debate" (543, my emphasis); theatrical director, Fausto Gemelli, speaks to the Aristotelian viewpoint of cathartic experience, "sooner murder an infant in its cradle than arouse unacted desires" (547); and Elvet Gander, psychoanalyst, declares that "we muck about with the language of our bodily selves at our peril, and Jude Mason has shown us the consequences, the leather tongues and steel tools we make when we are forbidden to use tongues and tools" (548). Though all of these people vigorously defend the literary merit of *Babbletower* and Jude's right to continue writing similar books, no one pursues his use of "tale" in the sub-title of his novel.

The novel is composed while Jude works as a nude model for art school students. He is well situated to meet the rising stars of the British art world, and as Jude observes the multifarious artists, he translates their ideas about a hedonistic society into the plot of his novel. But Jude's aim is unclear: is *Babbletower* merely an account of what people are

capable of doing in the absence of societal infrastructures, or is the novel a premonition, a warning of impending doom to a solipsistic, decadent society? It becomes clear in the course of the trial that most people – Jude’s lawyer included – think the novel is an account of the degeneration of a utopian society, but the subtitle of the novel – *A Tale for the Children of Our Time* – emphatically positions *Babbletower* as a cautionary tale, a premonition of how social order might disintegrate if people maintain a solipsistic world view. Jude thinks he is addressing an audience, but who is it? In his interpersonal relations with students at the art school, with Frederica, and with Daniel on the crisis line, Jude Mason is typically obscure and cryptic. It would reflect his ironic sense of humour to stylize the hipsters of 1960s London as children, innocents who are too busy focussing on their experiments with sex and drugs to visualize the potential harm they could be doing to themselves, but it is not precisely what Jude means by “children”. Though Jude never defines his use of “children”, it is clear that he thinks of himself as intellectually superior to the journalists who review his work and the literary critics who discuss it. In particular, Jude is dismayed by the results of his interview with Marianna Toogood, the *Evening Standard* critic. She compares Jude’s novel to the “*crises de foie*” (422)<sup>97</sup> in Phyllis Pratt’s novel *Daily Bread*. Jude describes the spelling error as “pure pig-ignorance” (422), claims she cannot recognize irony and focusses only on his eccentric appearance. His comments echo his later testimony that his book is “meant to enlighten and to move” (568)

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<sup>97</sup> As Jude puts it: “*Crise de foi, sans e, crisis of Faith; crise de foie, with an e, liver attack, as in foie gras, fat liver*” (422).



and anyone who "cannot see that can't read properly" (568). Therefore, anyone who cannot master the social commentary in *Babbletower* is an intellectual child. However, the bureaucrats and journalists against the novel have concluded that "Children" refers to society's youth, that the book is a kind of fairy tale meant for the young, and consequently, they judge on the basis of the novel's violent content its potential to corrupt the young. Phyllis Pratt also makes this judgement, suggesting that *Babbletower* is not a tale for children because they "don't like explicit sex" (581). However, when Sir Weighall attempts to distinguish Pratt's more realist novels from Mason's fabulist one, in order to show that Mason's novel is more violent than *Daily Bread*, Mrs Pratt corrects his view:

The heroine of my first book stabbed her husband in a real *welter of gore* when he pushed her too far. That was a fantasy, Sir Augustine, which would perhaps have become a fact, if it hadn't got out on paper and cheered up a multitude of other vicars' wives and other women indulging similar fantasies. What Mr Mason said about fantasies and dreams was very wise.

They save us, they save us from action. (581-582)

Though some of Phyllis Pratt's comments seem to support the prosecution's case, she does support Jude's right to construct fantasies so that we all might be saved from action. Unfortunately, the prosecution's expert witnesses do not agree with her. All five witnesses affirm the harm books can do: Hermia Cross, MP, says that living in a permissive society "leads to Brady and Hindley hurting children" (582); Superintendent Wren testifies "that those vulnerable to suggestion, do act on it" (583), citing his experiences on the police force;

Bishop Humphrey Swan thinks *Babbletower* is blasphemous (584); and Professor Effraim Ziz describes the book as pornography because it “reduces human beings to bodily functions” (587). Throughout the trial, Jude describes his writing career as always writing the same story about a group of friends escaping one situation to try to create a better one in a new place. He insists that his story is not unlike *Cinderella*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, or *The Coral Island*, except that as he “got older and more suspicious [he] saw that the place you make might turn out to be much like the place you ran away from” (567).

It seems that the real question is whether “real life” is obscene, or only Jude Mason’s fictional representation of “real” life? But it is not a question anyone attempts to answer. In the end, the issue comes down to language. It is permissible to insist on a conspiracy of silence when discussing ordinary people’s lives, but it is not permissible to speak about life’s violent acts in print. Jude Mason loses his case, more because of public opinion than because the book’s suppression serves justice. He wins his appeal on a technicality: the judge’s instructions to the jury were too partial to the Prosecution. Whereas the trial itself had been front-page news, the decision of the appeal hearing is a two-line article appearing in the back pages of the newspaper, suggesting complicity with the conspiracy of silence. In “Literature as Equipment for Living”, Kenneth Burke defends literature by making the claim that it is by reading that we learn how to live, how to behave towards others, and how to cope in particular kinds of situations. Proverbs, he says, “are strategies for dealing with situations” (514 emphasis in original), an example that may be extended to novels. He points out that “a work like *Madame Bovary* ... singles out a pattern of experience that is

sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis*, for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude toward it" (515). It could be argued that Jude Mason's novel exhibits proverbial qualities: those that foretell the downfall of a society lacking appropriate social constraints.

Can a literary work be judged as obscene if its creator claims the book represents the lives of "real" people? In *Babel Tower*, Byatt suggests that justice must appear to have been served. When a book elicits as much controversy as *Babbletower*, resulting in negative public opinion, then the book, its author and publishers must appear to lose the battle in court. Ordinary life does consist of obscene elements: the supper-time news hour confirms that depraved and corrupt people live among us,<sup>98</sup> but if writing is supposed to represent the truth of human experience, then including depraved and corrupt human behaviour should not be judged obscene.

This chapter demonstrates that historical allusions comprise a wide range of references to the past. On the one hand, historical allusions may recall specific periods such as the Victorian Era, or well-known personalities such as Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam, as well as familiar literary works or the myths and legends of antiquity. On the other hand, historical allusions like those in *Babel Tower* may refer to people and events in much more recent memory. It might also be more difficult to ascertain the influences of a murder trial on the obscenity trial of a book, but A.S. Byatt deftly draws the two together

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<sup>98</sup> While this chapter was being edited, police in London, England were investigating a series of bombs that exploded in the subway system killing 56 people and injuring many others. Violence in the name of politics and religion continues to be obscene, even on the televised supper-time news hour.

as she portrays individuals concerned with the morality of a changing society. The first chapter explored A.S. Byatt's use of allusions to literary conventions and connected these, in the second chapter, to her consistent use of epigraphs to guide reader interpretation of specific clusters of allusions. This chapter situates A.S. Byatt's later novels within her cultural context, linking her use of historical allusions to the practices of other popular writers of the same period. The next chapter looks forward to examining A.S. Byatt's preoccupation with artists and the creation of the work of art as they appear in her short story collections. The serpent imagery reappears as do images of water, glass, and ice. In addition, A.S. Byatt's love of the myths and legends of Greece as well as the Norse sagas provides the literary precursors for further literary experiment.

## Chapter Four

### A Sketch Is A Painting Is A Story:

#### Ekphrasis in A.S. Byatt's Short Story Collections

The previous chapters have examined A.S. Byatt's use of allusion: the traditional use of allusion to literary conventions employed by her literary ancestors; her unusual combination of epigraph and biblical allusion to direct readers toward a non-traditional interpretation of serpent references; and the incorporation of historical data to recall significant cultural events. Throughout her fiction, A.S. Byatt demonstrates a fascination with creative individuals and their work. Beginning with Henry Severell and his odd writing method in *The Shadow of the Sun*, all kinds of creative people appear in A.S. Byatt's fiction: writers, painters, sculptors, glassblowers, musicians as well as other less typical artists.<sup>99</sup> What is interesting about Byatt's short story collections is her examination of why creative people choose their particular craft. The writers, poets, and essayists who populate Byatt's short stories choose writing as their art form because it is a means of recording their impressions of the world around them. Byatt's painters, in general, are fascinated with the juxtaposition of light and colour, though such an occluded view of reality frequently creates tensions between perfecting a work of art and having meaningful relationships with others. Sculptors, on the other hand, are multifaceted characters in

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<sup>99</sup> Some of Byatt's less traditional artistes are Debbie Dennison, a graphic artist and engraver, and Sheba Brown, who creates knitted sculptures, both from "Art Work" in *The Matisse Stories*; Dolores, in "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha" from *Elementals*, is a superb cook.



Byatt's tales: they visualize a project much as painters do, but they create their work in three dimensions and often have other talents as well. For example, Prince Sasan, in "Cold", is primarily a glassblower and ruler of his kingdom, but he is also an accomplished flautist, is able to draw well, and is the engineer of the cooling system in an underground palace, of which he is also the architect.

Though Byatt is preoccupied with the careers of her creative characters, she also describes in some detail how they create their art works. This type of description is called *ekphrasis*, or "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 3), a device traditionally applied to poetry in which poets incorporate a visual work of art into the verse form. Mack Smith, one of the first theorists to consider the use of ekphrasis in fiction, suggests that novels conforming to realist conventions may incorporate "means and theories of creating art . . . to contrast methods of worldmaking and the possible worlds that result" (20). Consequently, in contrast to the use of ekphrasis in poetry, a fictional work allows for greater "complexity of ekphrastic systems" (Smith 36). Neither Heffernan nor Smith considers that the verbal description of the visual work of art may also function as a form of allusion, especially when the work being described is a recognizable cultural artefact. In "The Poetics of Literary Allusion", Ziva Ben-Porat suggests that allusions between different art forms may be possible but "are more problematic for they involve a 'translation' of the work alluded to (or aspects thereof) into the 'language' of the alluding work" (108 n5); however, once this translation is achieved, she sees "no essential difference" between text-to-text allusions and text-to-painting allusions. Byatt's short

stories reveal some interesting ekphrastic patterns. First, the tales in *Sugar and Other Stories* are more closely aligned with the traditions of realism, and "Sugar", in particular, is concerned with the tensions between the accurate representation of family history (i.e., truth/fact) and the embellishment of family legends (i.e., lies/fiction). Second, in *The Matisse Stories*, Byatt links each tale visually with a Matisse drawing and textually with one of his paintings so that both works function as allusions to the themes of the narrative. On the title page of "Art Work", Byatt has paired her story with Matisse's drawing "L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir", and the story opens with a reference to Matisse's painting "Le Silence habité des maisons". Both visual works, as we will see, are used ironically. In *Elementals*, Byatt portrays two very different artists inspired by a woman: "A Lamia in the Cévennes" presents an artist so enamoured with the reflections of light on the lamia's skin as she cavorts in his pool that he fails to notice the cultural connotations she also represents, resulting in a lack of meaning in his own paintings; however, in "Cold", Prince Sasan's glass *objets d'art* provide the context for his courtship of the ice maiden Princess Fiammarosa, and afterwards his skills with glass, ice, and water – all elements, possessing different physical characteristics, which nevertheless look remarkably similar – save the princess's life and sustain his marriage. In addition, the collections of stories which post-date the publication of *Possession* have another characteristic in common: like the novel, they embrace some aspects of the romance tradition in their more fabulous details.

*Sugar and Other Stories* is the only short story collection that pre-dates the

publication of *Possession*. The collection exhibits some of the same patterns readers have become accustomed to having in a Byatt book: the title provides the central interpretive metaphor;<sup>100</sup> the stories maintain connections to literary ancestors through Byatt's use of allusion; but there is no guiding epigraph, a tradition Byatt maintains with all of her shorter works. All of the tales – even the ghost stories – consist of realistic plots and situations. (In contrast, the short story collections that post-date *Possession* – *The Matisse Stories*, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, *Elementals*, and *Little Black Book of Stories* – all embrace fairy tale traditions while demonstrating a fascination with artistic creation.) In “Sugar”, Byatt muses covertly on the subjects of lying, biography, and the art of storytelling: but because the story, though fictionalized, is primarily about her parents and their methods of preserving family history, it is also a very personal story. In the stories in the other collections, Byatt distances herself from the narration of the tale so that her examination of creativity is presented through the character. Consequently, this distance in the narration allows Byatt some latitude with the fabulist elements of the tale.

“Sugar” was written while her father was dying of cancer, and Byatt afterwards realized that she had used the story “to think about the nature of truth and writing” (*Passions* 14). In both the story and in “real” life, Byatt's father was a circuit court judge, portrayed as concerned about leaving behind an accurate description of his family and the reasons why he left the family candy business to become a lawyer, and later, a judge. The

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, each story must be savoured like the hard candy Byatt describes her grandfather making in “Sugar”. Some of them, such as “The Dried Witch” and “Loss of Face”, have a bitter “after taste” while others, such as “Rose-Coloured Teacups”, seem a bit saccharine.

desire to set the record straight does not come from any omission on his part, but rather, from an accusation that his wife, the family storyteller, is a "terrible liar" (215), a fact corroborated by the narrator of the story: "She lied floridly and beautifully, in her rare moments of relaxation, to make a story better" (215). The conflicting needs to set the record straight and to lie about it to improve the story is an interesting way to think about representation. As Jane Campbell has pointed out, "the line between realism and post-modernist metafiction becomes blurred" (105) in *Sugar and Other Stories*. Campbell argues that the central metaphor for the collection is confecting and that the ordering and progression of stories contributes to the confecting process that is Byatt's "metaphor for storytelling" (106). Consequently, for Campbell, each of the stories is deliberately linked to those preceding it. In this way, the influence and transformation expected from the intertextual relationship is much closer than usual.

Each of the stories the narrator's mother tells is confected out of a kernel of truth and transformed into a story, becoming part of the family mythology. The first family myth has to do with the narrator's paternal grandfather, a "Victorian despot, purblind to the feelings of his wife and children, wholly devoted to his business which was the manufacture and sale of boiled sweets" (220). The man feels for his children only insofar as they may become part of the family business in the future. The second family myth has to do with how each of the six children, in their own ways, escape the candy business: the eldest child is a cripple and confined to a wheelchair; Arthur is a pilot; Gladys has married a coalminer, quickly divorced him, and much later, dies mad; Sylvia goes on a world cruise

and marries a remittance man in South Africa; Lucy and a "woman friend" book passage to Australia, where she later becomes a violinist and breeds dogs; and Freddie, the narrator's father, after working as a travelling salesman for the candy factory, becomes a lawyer. Each sibling becomes part of the narrator's family mythology through the filter of her mother's storytelling. Arthur represents adventure, while Gladys is linked in the narrator's mind with Jane Eyre; Sylvia and Lucy are puzzling moral exempla of unrestricted female sexuality; and Freddie stands for the Prodigal Son.

The manner in which Freddie's wife tells the story of the day he told his father he had saved enough money to go to Cambridge resonates strongly with the story of the Prodigal Son. She described the manufacturer's reaction as "filled with pride and delight" (224), such that he "[fell] upon your father's neck" (224). This latter reaction is one the narrator finds uncharacteristic for the old man, partly because it affirms revolt, a quality he would not have tolerated, and partly because it is so obviously a narrative strategy, a means of resolving satisfactorily an ending which could not have, in truth, ended so happily. The mythologizing of family events suggests two possibilities: first, that some stories like the Prodigal Son have an atavistic quality such that people unconsciously model their lives on the story itself; second, the family audience, to some degree, expects a satisfying outcome to a family legend, and since some stories cannot stand up to repetitive telling, the storyteller may choose to embellish, erase, or significantly alter those weaker aspects of the story.

The story ends with the narrator's acknowledgement of how much stories are



confections; that she has inherited the storytelling capacity from her mother, but used the talent better; and that there is little difference between what she does for her living and her grandfather's candy manufacturing.

I have inherited much from her. I do make a profession out of fiction. I select and confect. What is all this, all this story so far, but a careful selection of things that can be told, things that can be arranged in the light of day? Alongside this fabrication are the long black shadows of the things left unsaid, because I don't want to say them, or dare not, or do not remember, or misunderstood or forgot or never knew. (241)

The frank admission of leaving out aspects of the story demonstrates how a story may appear to be realistic, and yet be constructed from carefully selected episodes. The passage also points out that storytelling is a public act, and the narrator admits that she prefers to include events that can easily be brought into "the light of day" (241). For the narrator, fiction should not be unseemly: it is better to risk forgetting or misunderstanding an event than to bring "the long black shadows of the things left unsaid" (241) into the light of day.

The narrator's closing remarks in "Sugar" suggest some conventions on which she grounds her career, but "Art Work", from *The Matisse Stories*, raises the question of whether artistic conventions should be challenged though the portrayal of the antagonism between Robin Dennison and his housekeeper, Mrs Brown. Robin Dennison has collected some objects he uses to represent the primary and complementary colours of the spectrum. In the Dennison household, these objects are generally known as Robin's fetishes. A toy

soldier represents red, blue, and black; a candlestick, cobalt blue; a sauceboat, yellow; a china sculpture of violets represents purple, but there is no orange thing. Mrs Brown, Robin's housekeeper, says the fetishes collect dust and during her tidying of the studio, she often moves the fetishes – primarily to clean them, but secondarily to order them according to her own aesthetic sense. This outrages Robin, since in terms of his formally trained mind, primary colours go with primary colours and complementary colours with complementary colours. Occasionally, he will allow certain odd colour combinations, but only for a specific visual effect, a technique that reflects his formal training. Robin's wife, Debbie, suggests he explain his colour theory to Mrs Brown, hoping that she will understand the principle behind Robin's ordering of the fetishes and possibly leave them alone. Debbie, with similar art training, understands that Robin sees colours as a discourse that reflects the "truth" or "reality" of an object. Mrs Brown listens patiently to Robin and nods her head, but in the end she expounds her own colour theory:

They always told us, didn't they, the teachers and grans, orange and pink, they make you blink, blue and green should not be seen, mauve and red cannot be wed, but I say, they're all there, the colours, God made 'em all, and mixes 'em all in His creatures, what exists goes together somehow or other.

(60)

Her use of colour challenges the notion that Robin's colour theory is neutral and natural, drawing attention to the constructedness of his work. The beauty of Mrs Brown's colour theory is that she loves colour and is not afraid to use it. She sews her own clothes from

remnants and discarded clothing retrieved from the waste bins of her employers. The result is that every hand-made garment exhibits a daring mixture of colour (solids and patterns) as well as textures. She believes that God's creatures show us how to use colour, but her fabric sculptures are not as close to nature as Robin's work is. Putting together colours that transgress the laws of complementary colour, Mrs Brown's work is the epitome of constructedness in the way she uses scraps of fabric to create a whole work of art, using and abusing the conventions of colour, and by implication, the conventions of design.

A second point of contention between Robin and Mrs Brown has to do with a pottery bowl. Robin assumes that "anyone with their wits about them" (46) can distinguish a work of art from a functional piece. His complaint stems from a collection of odds and ends that Mrs Brown left in a pottery bowl while tidying the studio. He complains to Debbie: "If you can't get it into her head that she mustn't muck about with my work-things she'll have to go" (45). Ironically, the bowl is a decorative piece, not one of the fetishes, so it does not really qualify as a "work-thing". Indeed, Robin feels caught between an impotent rage at not being able to control his own work space, knowing that his space must be cleaned from time to time, and that it is necessary for Mrs Brown to come in to the studio to do it. Mrs Brown's *faux pas* demonstrates that the work of art is not always obvious and that the difference between functional art and "high" art can be quite blurred. For Robin, the bowl ought to be appreciated for its beauty and its exquisite colours. He says:

This bowl [. . .] is a work of art. Look at that glaze. Look at those huge satisfactory blue and orange fruits in it, look at the green leaves and the bits of yellow... Now I ask you, would anyone suppose this bowl was a kind of *dustbin* for things they were too lazy to put away or carry off? (46)

It is significant that the bowl is pottery rather than, say, porcelain, or some other material because potters traditionally have been caught in the artistic no-man's land between "high" and "low" art; its hand-painted glaze associates it with "craft" rather than "art"; and it stands for functional art rather than decorative art, even though art can be, even ought to be, functional. Given that Mrs Brown's art work tends toward the "craft" end of the artistic spectrum, she would agree with those who think art ought to be functional rather than merely decorative.

Without the Dennisons knowledge, Mrs Brown gets a solo exhibition of her soft sculptures. When Debbie's magazine sends her and a photographer to do a story on a new feminist installation at the Callisto Gallery, Debbie is amazed to read the sign "Sheba Brown Work in Various Materials 1975-1990" (81) and see a photograph of her own housekeeper. The whole gallery has been transformed into a "soft, even squashy, brilliantly coloured Aladdin's Cave" (77), full of visual allusions to folktales and literature. Byatt's description of the installation is plush, too. Her details of the fabrics Sheba Brown has used to make "huge tapestries, partly knitted, partly made like rag rugs" (77) pile on the adjectives to evoke in words the visual impact of Mrs Brown's work. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is evoked in the "mad embroidered faces, green

with blue eyes, black with red eyes, pink with silver eyes" (77) of the wall-coverings. Similarly, every spider tale from antiquity to the present is evoked by the crocheted cobwebs, the dusky spiders and "swarms of sequined blue flies", both "brilliantly pretty" and "elegant and sinister" (77). Sheba Brown manipulates her viewer into following the trail of the allusion from Arachne to *Charlotte's Web* and Little Miss Muffet when, in fact, the domestic context of the Lady and the dragon/Hoover probably refers to the Fates. Chests of drawers made from orange crates covered with William Morris and Laura Ashley wallpaper "reveal half-open treasure chests with mazy compartments containing crazy collections of things" (78). Here is the booty in Aladdin's Cave, but unlike the cave of the *1001 Arabian Nights*, the collections in Mrs Brown's treasure chests are purely domestic: mismatched bone buttons, glass stoppers, single cufflinks, medicine bottles full of iridescent beads, pearlised poppet beads and sunflower seeds, dolls' teaspoons, tea leaves and rose petals. There is a large shapeless, multi-breasted female figure resembling, as the narrator tells us, a "squat Diana of Ephesus without face or hands" (79). Near the Diana figure, there is another female figure, limp and ineffectual, made of knitted, scalloped fronds.

The centrepiece of the exhibit is a kind of "dragon and chained lady" (79): a St George and Princess Saba, or Perseus and Andromeda, the narrator offers both options but does not specify to which allusion the dragon and lady refer. Visually, the sculpture brings to mind the tradition of "damsel-in-distress" stories throughout art and literary history. The dragon has



hundreds of black shining wiry tentacular legs, which expose their scarlet linings and metal filaments. It is knitted yet solid, it raises a square jaw with a woollen beard and some teeth dripping with matted hair and broken hairpins, multicoloured fluffy foam and cotton spittle. . . . It is a Hoover and a dragon, inert and suffocating. (79-80)

The presentation of the lady demonstrates her relationship to the dragon/Hoover and the back-breaking work the vacuum cleaner represents. The Lady also evokes both a rape victim and Diana of Ephesus, her "broken and concertinaed" (80) body evoking the victim, and her multiple "battered shoulder-pad" (80) breasts denoting the bounty of the Goddess, sacrificially draped across a large, flat stone. In addition to the threat of the dragon/Hoover, the Lady's chains suggest both physical and mental torture in her lingerie: "twisted brassieres", "demented pyjama cords", and "sinister strained tights" (80), clothing typically valued for its sexual allure and seductive possibilities. The Lady's face is embroidered on a petit-point canvas, denoting the prettiness of the figure, but as her face is half-done, it also suggests the invisibility she suffers in her work and the violence to which she is exposed in her home. All of the faces of the female figures are either partially or wholly erased. The St George figure is represented by a knight on a horse, "a toy soldier with a broken sword and a battered helmet, who have both obviously been through the wheel of the washing-machine, more than once" (80-1). Nevertheless, Mrs Brown's art work suggests that men and women are both victims of violence, and that violence is all-encompassing. The littleness of the male figure suggests that he is powerless to "rescue"

the lady because the "dragon" of violence is connected to history, ideology, and technology. The collections in the treasure chests testify to the material culture of the home, but keeping it clean, organized, and tidy is unrecognized and undervalued work. The ferocity of the dragon/Hoover at the centre of the exhibit represents the female figures' oppression.

If Robin's canvasses are, as he says, about the terror of colour, Mrs Brown's squashy sculptures are also about the violence of colour. The bright colours woven into tapestries, spiders, female figures, and the dragon have an overwhelming, violent quality. The vacuum cleaner as a dragon further suggests that woman's place is in the home, that her story is one of keeping house, being invisible, and occasionally being rescued by her fairy tale prince. The sinister spiders in their webs resonate with the spinning of tales, a pattern Byatt has used elsewhere with a similar effect. While the spiders do recall the mythological and nursery rhyme sources, their faces and postures are crafted with a threatening expression associating them with the dragon/Hoover. Together, the spiders and the dragon/Hoover portray the overwhelming and endless tasks of housework. Whereas Robin's paintings failed to communicate the idea of violence because of his commitment to tradition, Mrs Brown's sculptures succeed because she is willing to defy the boundaries of formalist art. The difference between the two artists lies in the richness of Sheba's message. Not only is her work about the insignificance of women's lives, but it is also about the violence in women's lives which romance stories and fairy tales disguise.

The irony of Sheba Brown's exhibit eludes the formally trained minds of Debbie and

Robin Dennison. Debbie does not understand the sub-text of the relationship between Mrs Brown and Robin. Her concern is to maintain the *status quo* so that Mrs Brown will not quit her job, but it is her dependence on Mrs Brown that prevents Debbie from resuming her career as a wood engraver. Robin simply does not understand what Mrs Brown is trying to do for him. The Dennisons perceive Mrs Brown as just the cleaning lady, failing to observe the clues that Mrs Brown is an artist in her own right. Even her clothing subtly reveals her artistry: every garment displays her expertise with a needle. But the Dennisons do not perceive Sheba Brown's artistry because they associate "art" with the form "painting" or "wood-engraving", so that needlework of any kind – sewing, embroidery, or tapestry – is, strictly speaking, "folk art". They discount and dismiss Mrs Brown, the artist, because they cannot see past their own assumptions about the work of art and artists.

The effect of Mrs Brown's exhibition is to motivate Debbie to return to her wood-engraving, and to inspire Robin's painting: there is "a new kind of painting on the easel, geometric, brightly coloured, highly organised, a kind of woven pattern of flames and limbs with a recurring motif of a dark, glaring face with red eyes and a protruding red tongue" (89). Robin has changed from one mode of painting to another, even though his technique is still tightly organized, and he has traded small objects on an empty background for geometric patterns in bright colours instead of neutrals. At least Robin has made a new start. Hopefully, it will not require a similar defection by the new housekeeper, Mrs Stimpson, to prompt Robin's next artistic growth spurt.

The figure of Robin Dennison does reappear in another context: as the painter Bernard Lycett-Kean in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" in *Elementals*. A bachelor-artist escaping "Thatcher's Britain" (81), Bernard seeks solitude where he can experiment with the extremes of weather and the effects of heat and light. The paintings which result from these visual experiments are sold for enough money to enable Bernard to hire Jardinerie Emeraude to build a pool "lined with a glittering tile mosaic, and with a mosaic dolphin cavorting amicably in its depths, a dark blue dolphin with a pale blue eye" (83). Even though the workers from Jardinerie Emeraude diplomatically suggest that the blue tiles lining the pool are "a little *moche*" (83), Bernard selects them anyway because his mind is "full of blue dots" (83) and it is a colour "he needed to know and fight" (83). In this tale, Byatt's ekphrasis consists of recounting Bernard's experiments with the many shades of blue he discerns while swimming in the pool:

The best days were under racing cloud, when the aquamarine [of the water] took on a cool grey tone, which was then chased back, or rolled away, by the flickering gold-in-blue of yellow light in liquid. . . . But the surface [of the pool] could be a reflective plane, with the trees hanging in it, with two white diagonals where the aluminum steps entered. The shadows of the sides were a deeper blue but not a deep blue, a blue not reflective and yet lying flatly *under* reflections. (84-85 emphasis in original)

This passage shows Bernard working with his subject, examining the shifts in colour tone and texture with changes in the light at different times of the day, and in various weather

conditions, but it does not describe any actual painting. Bernard Lycett-Kean and Robin Dennison have much in common: both men prefer to work in isolation; their artistic styles are similar; and they produce large paintings representing a very myopic view of reality. However, both men have made a career out of producing this type of minimalist painting though Cassandra Corbett, in *The Game*, could not. The subjects of Cassandra's paintings are "soaked grass wound round tree roots . . . , patterns of broken twigs and mud and leaves . . . [and] a series of studies of flowers and creepers, always from very close" (142). Byatt's ekphrasis tells readers more about Cassandra's interests and the kinds of subjects she prefers to paint, but very little is revealed in this passage about the paintings themselves. Cassandra uses this occluded method of looking at nature because she is interested in the signification of patterns in addition to her psychotic desire to distinguish reality from hallucination. Robin and Bernard do not have this difficulty, but they do approach their work in a similar fashion. In particular, Bernard obsesses about colour so much that he attempts the same painting several times using many different techniques:

He tried oil paint and acrylic, watercolour and gouache, large designs and small plain planes and complicated juxtaposed planes. He tried trapping light on thick impasto and tried also glazing his surfaces flat and glossy, like seventeenth-century Dutch or Spanish paintings of silk. One of these almost pleased him, done at night, with the lights under the water and the dark round the stone, on an oval bit of board. But then he thought it was sentimental. He tried veils of watery blues on white in watercolour, he tried



Matisse-like patches of blue and petunia – pool blue, sky blue, petunia – he tried Bonnard's mixtures of pastel and gouache. (87-88)

The authorial voice reports that Bernard is happy with all of this activity, but despite the vast amount of experimentation, Bernard does not produce a single painting he considers satisfactory. Again, Byatt's use of ekphrasis in this part of the story serves to enumerate the many techniques available to a skilled painter, and the descriptive passage is similar to the passage describing Sheba Brown's elaborate cave, but the effect of this descriptive passage is to manipulate the reader into thinking Bernard is a prolific artist. It also echoes Alexander Wedderburn's preoccupation with *le mot juste* while he works at composing his play about Vincent Van Gogh in *Still Life*. He envies the painter's use of colour without having to contemplate linguistic implications. Musing over a bowl of plums on the breakfast table, Alexander is "troubled by the sense that it was possible for – say – Vincent Van Gogh to get nearer to the life of the plums than he ever could [because both] metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language" (165).

Bernard's meticulous attention to gradations of colour and the effects of light on them prevents him from recognising an omen in the "sulphurous stench" (88) of his pool, and afterwards when the treated water is replaced with mountain spring water, he is unable to interpret the cultural significance of the lamia inhabiting the pool. On the one hand, the reference to sulphur connotes the stench of hell and has associations with the devil. Since Bernard has been so preoccupied with the pristine state of his pool, when the water becomes smelly, he wants his pool returned to its original condition. It does not

occur to him that the stench might be a signal to change the focus of his work. On the other hand, the result of cleaning the sulphurous water out of the pool and replacing it with water from the mountain spring (i.e., not treated water from the city reservoir) is that the pool brings Bernard closer to nature: it now has "a grassy depth . . . a lovely colour, a natural colour, a colour that harmonised with the hills and it was not the problem [he] was preoccupied with" (93-94). Indeed, during his first swim in the cleansed pool, Bernard imagines the swirling movements of a snake in the depths of the water, but discovers instead a frog.

When Bernard finally sees the snake in the bottom of his swimming pool, he does not immediately recognise it as a mythopoeic figure, but instead he sees the colours of the snake's skin as a solution to his problem of representing accurately the blue of the water: "Between the night sky and the breathing, dissolving eyes and moons [on the snake's skin] in the depths, the colour of the water was solved, dissolved, it became a medium to contain a darkness spangled with living colours" (96-97). Bernard's desire to paint the snake and the snake's desire to become human and gain a soul develop into a Faustian-styled pact, which Bernard wishes to prolong "until he had solved the colours" (100). Understandably, the lamia is not so patient: having waiting a thousand years already, she wants Bernard to kiss her so that she can return to her female human form, be married, and gain an immortal soul.<sup>101</sup> Bernard quips that "Nobody nowadays believes in immortal souls" (100),

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<sup>101</sup> According to Walker, Lamia was "the Greek name for the Libyan serpent-goddess" (527), who also appears in classical mythology as Medusa, Neith (the Egyptian triple goddess who gave birth to Ra), and Athene. She was represented as a Kali-like destroyer figure, but also "revered as a supreme Goddess, called Daughter of Heaven and Great Lady" (527). Byatt adds the thousand-year life, the desire

hoping against the odds that today's conventions will satisfy the enchanted lamia.

Not all of A.S. Byatt's artists are so emotionally distant. In "Cold", Prince Sasan's gifts of glass objects demonstrate that he is neither intimidated by metaphor nor afraid to express his feelings to a woman. Though Melanie, in "A Lamia in the Cévennes", represents the epitome of contemporary male fantasy – the beautiful, sexy, *silent* woman with a fortune of her own – Prince Sasan expects a more traditional relationship with his wife: he not only appreciates Fiammarosa's physical beauty but also enjoys talking with her, which results in a more satisfying relationship.

At the courtship stage, when the prince's first envoy arrives at Fiammarosa's home, she is informed that the prince "had been much moved by the Princess's portrait" (141). The envoy proceeds to unpack and assemble "a glass palace, within the ice, so to speak, as hallucinatory turrets and chambers, fantastic carvings and pillars, reveal themselves in the ice and snow of mountain peaks" (141). Byatt goes on to describe, in all its details, an elaborate confection of glass blown to create the illusion of a castle "large enough for the centre to be hidden from the eye, though all the wide landings, the narrow passages, the doors and gangways, directed the eye to where the thickness of the transparent glass itself resisted penetration" (142). The prose style of this passage is strikingly similar to the description of Aladdin's Cave in "Art Work" and of Bernard's painting in "A Lamia in the Cévennes". The details of what each artist is doing are meticulous though the actual science of Prince Sasan's blown glass might border on the fabulist. But then, the stories in

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to marry, and the wish for a soul to the legendary elements of the lamia myth.

*Elementals* all contain within them exotic or occult elements of the romance tradition. When the exquisite glass palace is fully revealed, the envoy informs Fiammarosa that it represents the prince's heart, "a poetic image of his empty life, which awaits the delicate warmth of the Princess Fiammarosa in every chamber" (143). As if the opulence of the glass palace were not enough, a few days later a second envoy from Prince Sasan arrives bearing the gift of a glass beehive "constructed of layers of hexagonal cells, full of white glass grubs, and amber-coloured glass honey" (144). This is a daring gift, to be sure, since the beehive traditionally symbolises both industriousness and fertility. The second envoy says that the beehive represents "the heart of his master touched by the warm thought of the Princess, so was love seeded, and sweetness garnered, in the garden of his heart" (144). It is no wonder that Princess Fiammarosa falls in love with Prince Sasan: his talent speaks for him in ways his own voice probably could not.

It is fortuitous for the Prince that these gifts arrive in the order they do – of course, it is Byatt's contrivance that they should – because the first gift communicates the prince's attraction to the princess and the second gift promises sexual fulfillment. Finally, because "Cold" is a fairy tale, and because the conventions of the fairy tale dictate patterns of three, readers will, by now, expect a third envoy from Prince Sasan, who arrives at the palace "bloodied and incoherent" (144) because his journey has been even more arduous than those preceding him. Consequently, the gift he brings is even more precious, more opulent: it is a glass tree of life representing the prince's summery home on one side – the branches full of "blossoms of every kind, apple and cherry, magnolia and catkins, [and]

radiating between all these, the fruits, oranges and lemons . . . with the bloom on them" (146) – contrasted with the princess's wintry home on the other side of the tree hung with "frost-forms and ice-forms" (146) which the prince has made to show that "the essential sap of trees lived through the frost, and so it was with the tree of life" (147). The metaphor of the tree of life communicates to Fiammarosa the prince's vision of their married life together, a perfect balance of heat and cold. In her heart, Fiammarosa understands this message because her whole life has been a search for what will invigorate her. Gradually, Fiammarosa learns that heat literally melts her, but that snow and ice give her life. Her tutor warns the princess that "glass is not ice" (148), but she does not comprehend him. Much later, when life becomes stifling in Prince Sasan's desert country, Fiammarosa learns how sand heated at a high temperature produces glass. Though glass comes from heat, it can be made to conduct cold, and in an inspiring demonstration of love and sacrifice, Prince Sasan builds an underground glass palace where Princess Fiammarosa can thrive. The palace where she will live echoes the smaller model she received as a courtship gift. Its construction also echoes the tree of life sculpture:

It was a palace built of glass in the heart of the mountain. They were in a forest of tall glass tubes with branching arms, arranged in colonnades, thickets, circular balustrades. . . . All the glass pillars were hollow, and were filled with columns of liquid . . . Other columns held floating glass bubbles, in water, rising and falling, each with a golden numbered weight hanging from its balloon. . . . The strange pipes rose upwards, some of them formed



like rose bushes, some like carved pillars, some fantastically twined with glass grapes on glass vines. And in this room there were real waterfalls, sheets of cold water dropping over great slabs of glass, like ice-floes, into glassy pools where it ran away into hidden channels . . . Fiammarosa took in one thing. The air was cold. (175-176)

Byatt's description of the palace is lengthy: there is a second passage following this one describing the system of vents and pulleys Prince Sasan has invented to regulate the temperature in the building. Like the passages describing his courtship gifts, Byatt's prose is detailed, almost 'purple' in its description of the beauty of Sasan's creations. However, her fascination with the similarities between ice, water, and glass harken back to Cassandra Corbett's journal entry in which she describes her fear of a glass serpent because it feels solid, but being transparent contains "the suggestion that [it] is not simply solid" (137). Byatt's extensive details in "Cold" establish the solid, permanent, and enduring qualities of both the *objects d'art* Prince Sasan creates for Fiammarosa as well as the symbolic endurance of his love for her: "He could neither bear to keep her in the hot sunny city, nor could he bear to lose her" (178).

Byatt's short story collections reveal a preoccupation with artists, their work, and their efforts to represent reality both truthfully and metaphorically. The images of water, glass, and ice recur frequently though Byatt does not use them as allusions with the same forcefulness as she has in earlier works. The result, though, is a shift from the dense allusiveness of *Possession* toward plots which recall legends from Arabian tales, Norse

sagas, and classical mythologies. Works like "Medusa's Ankles" from *The Matisse Stories* reveal an enduring love of ancient Greek mythology but offer an unexpected, modern interpretation of the old story. Other tales like the title story from *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* or "A Stone Woman" from *Little Black Book of Stories* show that A.S. Byatt's interests in folklore are expanding to include not only Norse favourites of her childhood but also Arabic tales reminiscent of the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights*. It appears, also, that in her recent offerings Byatt is reserving the fabulist style for her short story collections and returning to the traditions of realism in her full-length works.

## Conclusion

There is no question that A.S. Byatt is an accomplished writer. Her reading interests are reflected in her work and it is also clear that she expects her readers to be erudite. Byatt is cognizant of a variety of genres and the conventions which apply to them (from her use of the Petrarchan love sonnet in her first novel to the conventions of the Romance and the realist novels in *Possession*). Her works challenge readers, and their responses to her literary game-playing are expressed in the critical acclaim that her novels have received, particularly the accolades given to *Possession*.

When this study began four years ago, certain assumptions were in place: that "intertextuality" was simply a fancy word for allusion; that allusions were exclusively textual; and that Byatt was unique in her abundant use of them. In the interval, I have learned that many scholars assume that "intertext" and "allusion" are synonyms, and use the former with such frequency as to render it ineffectual as a theoretical concept and to make allusion seem an old-fashioned term. It is patently not the case: allusion survives as the preferred term to describe the literary graft of one text onto another; the word-play between literary works; and the incorporation of canonical works into newer ones. To use a Bloomian word, the *misprision* of Kristeva's term has sent the study of intertextuality veering away from linguistic debates, and toward discussions about recognising allusions, grasping their significance, and accurately judging their effect. The persistent practice of using intertext and allusion synonymously indicates a level of intellectual snobbery and

exclusionary jargonism one would consider unprofessional in today's university environment normally concerned with political correctness and ameliorating differences.

An attentive reading of A.S. Byatt's fictions confirms that her allusions are not confined to literary texts. Throughout her career, Byatt has alluded to works of art and sculpture;<sup>102</sup> to scientific treatises;<sup>103</sup> and to popular culture.<sup>104</sup> Byatt began her writing career by doing what every developing writer in the Renaissance was required to do: imitate her literary ancestors. Chapter One traces the development of Byatt's imitation of writers of the past by alluding in the epigraphs of her novels to the forms they used. In *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt alludes to the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry, which she applies to her novel about a young woman who hopes to become a writer but whose career goals are deflected, somewhat irrationally, by her amorous involvement with an older man. Her application of Petrarchan love poetry conventions to prose fiction is a significant

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<sup>102</sup> A.S. Byatt's references to artists of the past begin in *The Shadow of the Sun* with references to the paintings of Samuel Palmer which reinforce the mystical imagery associated with Henry Severell. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, the dominant image patterns of red and white roses are evoked by a double allusion to Darnley's portrait of Elizabeth I and to Campion's poem in which he describes red and white roses "quartered in her [Elizabeth's] face". More recently, in the *Elementals* collection, Byatt evokes Velasquez's painting of Christ in the house of Mary and Martha in her eponymous story. Many of Byatt's stories are replete with craftspeople and artisans, notably the amateur painter, Joshua Ridell of "Precipice Encurl'd", Mrs Brown, a knitter, of "Art Work", Prince Sasan, an accomplished glassblower, of "Cold", and Thorsteinn Hallmundursson, a carver of funeral statuary, of "Stone Woman".

<sup>103</sup> In *Angels and Insects*, Byatt alludes to Paley's theory of a Divine Intelligence, Charles Darwin's natural selection hypothesis, and the voyages in the Amazon of Henry Bates and Alfred Wallace. William Adamson and Matty Crompton write together a general interest scientific book on the ant populations they find at the Alabaster estate. In the *Frederica Quartet*, Byatt refers to Wittgenstein's colour theory, the development of ethnomethodology, and classification systems. Similarly, a late-career novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, examines in detail Linnaeus's classification system.

<sup>104</sup> *Babel Tower* focusses on the popular culture of Britain in the 1960s: in particular, the spontaneous theatrical "happenings", skook burning ("books" spelled backwards and formed into towers to protest the hegemony of establishment culture), and the changing social norms mirrored by Frederica's divorce hearing and the testimony heard at the obscene libel trial of Jude Mason's novel, *Babbletower*.

accomplishment for a *début* novel even though the only two critics to review the novel did not recognize the allusion. However, the allusions in the epigraphs of *Still Life* (Byatt's fourth novel) are much more direct. Both the title and the epigraphs of this novel refer to the beauty of ordinary things, suggesting to readers they should expect a realist novel since the conventions of still life painting typically portray the details of the lifestyles of ordinary people. Later, in *Possession*, the allusions in the epigraphs draw upon the distinctions between romance and realism, truth and lies. The effectiveness of these allusions contributes to the cohesiveness of the novel, which no doubt, played a role in the judges' decision to award *Possession* the Booker Prize for 1990.

Since some of the scholars working on the theory of allusion examine the possibility that the alluding text could evoke a limitless number of precursor texts, the focus of Chapter Two is on Byatt's precision when alluding to another writer or another work. By examining the serpent patterns in *The Game*, I demonstrate how attention to the epigraph prevents readers from identifying the wrong source for the serpent allusions. In the epigraph, Byatt clearly links the serpent pattern of her novel with Coleridge's use of it as an emblem for the imagination. Some attention is also given to the reasons why readers might misunderstand the reference to Coleridge or ignore it altogether with the result that other patterns in the novel such as the strong theme of betrayal might subsume the allusion to the imagination in favour of a more edenic interpretation. Like most cultured writers, Byatt frequently alludes to biblical stories. The challenge for her readers is to ascertain the difference between a biblical allusion and a reference to an icon used in another system of



signification such as Coleridge's use of the serpent image as an emblem for the imagination. The main reason Byatt's alluding to Coleridge is misleading is that the plot of *The Game* is centred around the antagonistic relationship of the Corbett sisters and Julia's frequent betrayal of Cassandra. Consequently, the effect of the confusing serpent allusions is to lead readers away from the actual meaning of the allusion toward a biblical interpretation. Chapter Two demonstrates how a reader could fail to apply the correct precursor text to the meaning of the allusion. This distinction is significant for studies of the theoretical aspects of allusion since discussion about matching an allusion to its meaning within the alluding text has typically focussed upon the reader's ability to recognise the allusion, but neglects the two issues of a reader's failure either to apply the allusion to the correct precursor text or to recognise the allusion in the first place.

Moving away from the initial assumption that Byatt's allusions are mostly textual, the purpose of Chapter Three is to demonstrate that she frequently incorporates historical people, events, and ideas into her novels. A great deal of scholarship has classified the types of allusions found in poetry and proposed taxonomies to distinguish literary allusions from references to historical events, cultural artefacts, or philosophical ideas.<sup>105</sup> The limitations of typology studies have been to ignore the potential of fiction to allude widely and creatively, drawing upon all aspects of English culture. Chapter Three also explores A.S. Byatt's incorporation of allusions to historical people, events, and ideas which

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<sup>105</sup> At the same time, modern literary handbooks and dictionaries of poetic terms and theories stress the fact that allusions are not exclusively literary. The inclusion of non-literary allusions demonstrates a writer's awareness of cultural influences other than those which are strictly print-oriented.

connect her works to a larger community of writers, both her literary ancestors and her contemporaries. The first case study of the chapter examines the relationship between history and fiction, and the particular truth they both represent. By depending on her own knowledge of eminent Victorian poets (as well as the work of scholars like Kathleen Coburn), Byatt selects the most relevant facts about the nineteenth-century poets and transforms them into historical fiction. A comparison of *Possession* with Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* shows that both novels appropriate the past in different ways. In *Possession*, two of the twentieth-century scholars, James Blackadder and Beatrice Nest, are compiling definitive editions of R.H. Ash's poetry and Ellen Ash's diary. Their motives are nationalistic in contrast to those of Mortimer Cropper, whose appropriation is more literal since he attaches a mystical quality to possessing Ash memorabilia. In *Chatterton*, the characters' motives are less pure. Charles Wychwood and Harriet Scrope are both looking for immortality through their writing. Though Charles has never published his poems, he hopes to be remembered for some research he has done on Thomas Chatterton which suggests that he survived the poisoning and lived to pen some of the greatest poems of the late eighteenth century which we know to be attributed to writers like Blake, Grey, and Byron. That the evidence is part of an elaborate hoax is only revealed after Charles's death. In contrast, Harriet's appropriation of history is more literal: she plagiarises the novels of an obscure writer to ensure her own fame. The desire to recover a legendary past is a strong component of both novels, and both writers of *Possession* and *Chatterton* have skillfully blended fact and fiction, blurring the demarcation between history and narrative,

truth and lies.

The second case study of Chapter Three focusses on Byatt's allusions to an historical period and contrasts them to the historical novels of Philip Pullman. Byatt's interest is in the religious, philosophical, and scientific movements of the mid-nineteenth century, whereas Pullman's detective novels focus on the underbelly of Victorian society. In this segment I demonstrate that the two novellas, "Morpho Eugenia" and "The Conjugal Angel", mirror the concerns Alfred Tennyson raises in his long poem *In Memoriam*: what happens to the soul after death; how one rationalises faith in God with scientific developments that show the earth is much older than the Bible would have us believe; and why one must not succumb to doubt. Pullman's novels, in contrast, are less intellectual but clearly evoke the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. Though Pullman's novels borrow heavily from the plots of Doyle's tales, Pullman updates aspects of his plots: Sally Lockhart is a strong-minded young woman, who was home-schooled by her father in subjects one traditionally associates with the education of Victorian boys; she has more in common with today's teenager than she does with young women in her era of similar class and prospects; and Sally frequently flouts Victorian social conventions though she will negotiate these constraints when the situation demands it.<sup>106</sup>

The third case study of Chapter Three offers a close reading of the trial scene in *Babel Tower* to show that the attitudes toward works of art and those who create them originate

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<sup>106</sup> Sally has had a child out of wedlock, a fact she neglects to tell her lawyer because she fears his opinion of her will be, somehow, diminished.

in Plato's insistence that poets be excluded from his ideal city. This case study verifies that Byatt is capable of reaching far into the past for an allusion and its effect on readers's interpretation of the alluding text.

Chapter Four expands the parameters of allusion to include the visual arts and the concept of *ekphrasis*, a verbal description of a visual work of art. The twofold objective of this chapter is to maintain that A.S. Byatt continues to allude to both literary and visual artworks of the past, and that readers may expect in her short story collections the consistent application of allusions to literary texts, historical figures, and visual works of art that she has always incorporated in her novels. The study of selected short stories in Chapter Four presents the range of Byatt's portrayal of artists. One is constantly left with the impression that each of these stories could have been a novel, but that the intricacy of the design of the plot, the allusions, and the images makes one feel grateful that it is not because each story is a perfect microcosm. Byatt's love of detail suggests that she must be a realist novelist. Her penchant for the right adjective in the right place, her abiding admiration for fellow craftspeople, and her consistent portrayal of human relationships even when the setting is at her most fabulist are hallmarks of the realist novelist.

Allusion, as a rhetorical device and a poetic concept, is more than embellishment: it is a means of preserving literary works of art through word play; it recycles the legends of antiquity; and it keeps readers attuned to their literary and cultural history. The contribution of this research to the study of allusion is to emphasise that it may appear in a variety of forms, but it always works in the same way by referring to an independent

precursor text. By focussing on the work of A.S. Byatt, this research attempts, first, to restore allusion as a theoretical term because the use of "intertext" is confusing and its trendy usage obscures its subtleties as a semiotic concept, and second, to demonstrate the variety of purposes to which allusion can be directed. Because *Possession* was so successful, there is a marked tendency among critics to treat it in isolation from Byatt's early novels, so a third objective of this project has been to show that all of the techniques and poetic devices Byatt uses in *Possession* were part of her experiments in her earlier novels, which are all so dense with literary allusions that it is natural to want to explore these recurrent patterns in some detail.



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## Appendix A

Epigraphs from the novels described in Chapter One.

*The Shadow of the Sun*

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.

- Sir Walter Raleigh

### *Still Life*

Talis, inquiens, mihi videtur, rex, vita hominum praesens in terris, ad conparationem eius, quod nobis incertum est, temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali . . . adveniens unus passerum domum citissime pervolaverit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit . . . Mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur.

‘Such,’ he said, ‘O King, seems to me the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which to us is uncertain, as if when on a winter’s night you sit feasting with your ealdormen and thegns – a single sparrow should fly swiftly into the hall, and coming in at one door, fly out through another. Soon, from winter going back into winter, it is lost to your eyes.’

– Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*

Les mots nous présentent des choses une petite image claire et usuelle come celles qu’on suspend aux murs des écoles pour donner aux enfants l’exemple de ce qu’est un établi, un oiseau, une fourmilière, choses conçues comme pareilles à toutes celles de même sorte.

– Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*.



[Words present us with small clear images of ordinary things like those we hang on school walls to show children an established example of a bird, an ant-hill, things known to be identical to others of the same type.]

J'essayais de trouver la beauté là où je ne m'étais jamais figuré qu'elle fût, dans les choses les plus usuelle, dans la vie profonde des «natures mortes».

- Marcel Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*.

[I tried to find beauty wherever I would not expect it to be, in the most ordinary things, in the deep life of "still life".]

Les substances mortes sont portées vers les corps vivants, disait Cuvier, pour y tenir une place, et y exercer une action déterminée par la nature des combinaisons où elles sont entrées, et pour s'en échapper un jour afin de rentrer sous les lois de la nature morte.

- G. Cuvier, quoted by Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, p. 289.

[Dead substances are borne towards living bodies in order to take up a place and exert an action within them determined by the nature of the combination into which they have entered, and in order to escape from them again one day so as to fall once more under the laws of inanimate nature. (Cuvier 28 in Foucault 277)]

*Possession: A Romance*

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probably and ordinary course of man's experience. The former – while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. . . . The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us.

– Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*.

And if at whiles the bubble, blown too thin,  
 Seem nigh on bursting, – if you nearly see  
 The real world through the false, – what *do* you see?  
 Is the old so ruined? You find you're in a flock  
 O' the youthful, earnest, passionate – genius, beauty,  
 Rank and wealth also, if you care for these:  
 And all depose their natural rights, hail you,  
 (That's me, sir) as their mate and yoke-fellow,  
 Participate in Sludgehood – nay, grow mine,  
 I veritably possess them – . . .

And all this might be, may be, and with good help  
 Of a little lying shall be: so Sludge lies!  
 Why, he's at worst your poet who sings how Greeks  
 That never were, in Troy which never was,  
 Did this or the other impossible great thing! . . .

But why do I mount to poets? Take plain prose –  
 Dealers in common sense, set these at work,  
 What can they do without their helpful lies?  
 Each states the law and fact and face o' the thing

Just as he'd have them, finds what he thinks fit,  
Is blind to what missuits him, just records  
What makes his case out, quite ignores the rest.  
It's a History of the World, the Lizard Age,  
The Early Indians, the Old Country War,  
Jerome Napoleon, whatsoever you please.  
All as the author wants it. Such a scribe  
You pay and praise for putting life in stones,  
Fire into fog, making the past your world.  
There's plenty of 'How did you contrive to grasp  
The thread which led you through this labyrinth?  
How build such solid fabric out of air?  
How on so slight foundation found this tale,  
Biography, narrative?' Or, in other words,  
'How many lies did it require to make  
The portly truth you here present us with?'

- Robert Browning, from "Mr Sludge, 'the Medium'"

Epigraphs described in Chapter Two.

We wove a web in childhood

A web of sunny air;

We dug a spring in infancy

Of water pure and fair;

We sowed in youth a mustard-seed,

We cut an almond rod;

We are now grown up to riper age –

Are they withered in the sod?

Faded! The web is still of air,

But how its folds are spread,

And from its tints of crimson clear

How deep a glow is shed . . .

The mustard-seed in distant land

Bends down a mighty tree,

The dry unbudding almond-wand

Has touched eternity.



- from "Retrospection", by Charlotte Brontë

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

- S.T. Coleridge

## Appendix B

"Farewell False Love" peryll and mishappe,

Farewell false Love, thou Oracle of Lyes,

A mortall Foe, an Enymy to reste,

An envious Boy, from whence all cares aryse,

A Bastard borne, a Beast with rage posseste.

A way of Error, a Temple full of Treason,

In all effectes, contrary unto reason.

A poisoned Serpent, coverde all with flowres,

Mother of Sighes, a murtherer of repose.

A Sea of Sorrows, when ar drawn such showres,

As moisture lends to every grief that growes.

A Poole of guile, a Neste of Deepe Decaapte

A guilded hooke, that holdes a poisoned Bayte.

A fortresse foild, which Reason Did Defende,

A Syrens song, a Fever of the mynde

A maze wherein Affection findes no ende,

A raunginge Clowd, that roves before the wynde

A Substance like the shadow of the Sunne

A Goale of Grief, for which the wisest runne.  
A quenchlesse Fyre, a Nurse of trembling feare,  
A pathe that leades to peryll and mishappe,  
A trew retrayt of Sorrow and Dispayre,  
An ydle Boy, that sleepes in pleasures lappe.  
A deep mistrust of that whiche certayne seemes,  
And hope of that, which Reason doubtfull deemes.  
Since then thy traynes, my yonger yeres betray,  
And for my Faithe, Ingratitud I finde,  
And sithe Repentaunce, doth thy wrongs bewray  
Whose course I se, repugnant unto kinde,  
False Love, desire, and Bewty frayle, Adew,  
Dead is the rote, from whence such fancies grew.

from *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh: A Historical Edition*. Ed. Michael Rudick. Tempe,  
AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the Renaissance English  
Text Society, 1999. Version 10B. 12-13.

## Appendix C

*Psalms 139*

1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You discern my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night,"

12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them – they are more they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.

19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me –

20 those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!

21 Do I not hate those who what you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.







