

Art as craft in the writings of AS Byatt: a study of Byatt's use of devices of metafiction (intertext and autotext) to examine how women transgress the conventions of male-ordered society in their efforts to exercise their creativity and converse with the world.

by

Susan Rogers GRDSUS003

Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2002

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Signed by candidate

Date: 14 February 2002

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

contents

abstract	i - ii
introduction	1 - 15
<i>A modern way: Byatt's carefully crafted benediction on the future of women at work and in relationship with men</i>	
chapter one	16 - 60
<i>At the White Heat: a study of the ways in which the life and creativity of Emily Dickinson inform the character of Christabel LaMotte in AS Byatt's novel <i>Possession</i></i>	
chapter two	61 - 105
<i>Only connect: how fictitious Frederica's identity is fashioned from fiction in AS Byatt's novel <i>Babel Tower</i></i>	
conclusion	106 - 110
<i>Ariachne's Broken Woof: the artist's private images of her craft</i>	
bibliography	111 - 112

abstract

This examination of how AS Byatt has used the central female characters of *Possession* (LaMotte) and *Babel Tower* (Frederica Potter) to explore the stifling effects of the institutions and conventions of male-ordered society on creative women, is undertaken in two parts. The first chapter considers the intertextual creation of *Possession*'s LaMotte from the biography and canon of the American Victorian poet Emily Dickinson. Both the fictive and the real-life poets, possessed by a creative talent, frustrated by its lukewarm reception and disempowered by their inferior status, withdrew from society. The second chapter considers the commentary offered by autotext (extracts from the fantasy tales *Babbletower* and *Flight North*) on the emotional and intellectual development of *Babel Tower*'s Frederica, who seeks to live by what she learns from reading and analysing literature. (Autotextual writing comments on LaMotte's story too, for the fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin' resonates within its framing text, *Possession*.) Elements of fairy tale in Frederica's story self-consciously highlight the novel's status as fiction, reminding readers that they, like Frederica, are a construction of what they read and experience.

Nineteenth-century LaMotte withdraws from society with the financial co-operation and emotional support of a female companion, defying social pressure exerted on her to marry and produce children rather than poetry. This withdrawal grants her dignity and independence. However, a brief liaison with a married poet triggers a second withdrawal, for patriarchal conditioning has taught her to regard her actions as transgression and she colludes with this judgement. This second withdrawal is destructive for it leaves her embittered and condemned to obscurity. Twentieth-century Frederica is enraged by the limitations against which she chafes as wife and mother. She abandons her husband and his home and establishes her emotional and financial independence. Frederica successfully defies convention because in her century restrictions have been eased on women's movements, actions and occupations.

Byatt represents in both *LaMotte* and *Frederica* her view of her own art as craft diligently practised and essential to the emotional well-being of the artist. In her characters' lives and experience she explores her own fear that her gender might thwart her ambition, no matter how great her talent. An examination of Byatt's essays and interviews on the subject of her craft reveals her private imagery of the construction of a novel. She compares her art to the precise and exquisite craft of tapestry-weaving or of a spider spinning: it is pleasing and intricate.

Images of spinning and sewing/weaving are evident in the work of both fictitious *LaMotte* and real-life Dickinson. In twentieth-century *Frederica*'s life these images are given a new spin: with maturity and experience, *Frederica* perceives how her reading has led her to seek connection which she abhors. She subsequently learns to record her experiences, whether in memory or in writing, in self-contained layers so that they are ordered and preserved but not interwoven; this gives her a sense of freedom. She adopts a personal metaphor to describe this process: laminations. Thus these two novels are pervaded by Byatt's personal vision: art as craft.

introduction

A modern way: Byatt's carefully crafted benediction on the future of women at work and in relationship with men

One of the myriad threads in the two AS Byatt novels under discussion, *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *Babel Tower* (1996), is an exploration of the stifling limitations imposed on creative women by the institutions (most notably marriage and the family) and conventions of society. In the nineteenth century the life of a woman is diminished because she is allowed to exercise her skills and talents only for domestic ends within the home. She is denied freedom of movement, a public arena and the formal recognition of her achievements. Even in the twentieth century, despite the improved position of women made possible by cultural changes and advancements, she is conscious that these advantages might be denied her; they are not her automatic right.

In order to define the terms of this argument, it is first necessary briefly to consider the nature of metafiction and two of its devices: intertextual and autotextual writing. If fiction can be described as invented narrative describing imaginary people and events, then the prefix 'meta' indicates an additional sphere of activity. The devices of metafiction reveal that the fiction is conscious of its own construction: games can be played and messages conveyed if the reader can be drawn into a shared consciousness of fiction's form, its manner of production and its relationship with the reader's world.

Intertextual writing is the deliberate lifting and weaving of aspects of existing writing (fiction, poetry, biography) from the shared world of the author and the reader into the text. It is a creative act of the author which depends for acknowledgement on the past reading and present perception of the reader. Autotextual writing is writing (letters, journals, poems, fairy tales) generated by the narrative. Autotextual writing may be intertextual by nature, for example the fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin' written by the character Christabel LaMotte. Both the story and its intertextual echoes of the age-old tale of Sleeping Beauty resonate within the framing text of *Possession* and comment on

the life of LaMotte. Both *Possession* and *Babel Tower* are great webs of intertextual and autotextual writing, some of which is identified and explored in this thesis.

This study of Byatt's use of intertext and autotext to examine the struggle of creative women to give expression to their skills and talent in the male-ordered societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is undertaken in two parts. The first chapter of this thesis (*At the White Heat*) considers aspects of character and experience which Byatt might have drawn from the biography and canon of the American nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson in her creation of Christabel LaMotte, the Victorian poet of whose life and work we read in *Possession*. LaMotte's attempt to withdraw from society in order to share her creative life with a female companion closely parallels the real-life withdrawal into utter seclusion of the unmarried Dickinson. Many aspects of Dickinson's life and work can be detected in the fictitious LaMotte: the passionate engagement with an extraordinary creative talent which demands expression, the desire not only to speak but also to be heard, the reluctance of patriarchal society to recognise such ability because it is exercised by a woman, and secret letters generated by a love which would be condemned by society if its existence were detected.

The second chapter (*Only connect*) explores the ways in which the reader is invited to view Frederica Potter, the character through whose consciousness the action of *Babel Tower* is most often mediated. Educated and capable, Frederica is enraged by the passive role of wife and mother and defies society's conventions by abandoning her husband and his household in pursuit of personal fulfilment. Frederica makes sense of her existence and establishes her place in society by applying what she reads about life in novels to the everyday business of living. Both *Babbletower: A Story for the Children of our Time*, an apparently independent tale which threads its way through the text of *Babel Tower*, and elements of fairy tale embedded in the framing text, comment on Frederica's intellectual and spiritual development.

Evident in *Possession* and *Babel Tower* is the writer's interrogation of the nature of her own art, which she views as a craft. In discussion with Ignês Sodré, Byatt says:

I do connect my own desire to make works of art with this problem of the use of energy, particularly in women. I don't feel wholly myself unless I am *working on something*. ... the work, is the place where the self meets the outside world. ... You can't be a good artist if you don't have a craft. It can't just be inspiration. It has to be something technical that you can really do. (SCWW 113)

What connects the twentieth-century novelist Antonia Byatt with her fictional protagonists Christabel LaMotte and Frederica Potter is just this insistence on craftsmanship. It is LaMotte's view (recorded in the journal of her cousin Sabine) that

'[a] writer only becomes a true writer by practising his craft, by experimenting constantly with language, as a great artist may experiment with clay or oils until the medium becomes second nature, to be moulded however the artist may desire.' (P 335)

The writing itself is 'craftwork which can be bettered, or remade, or scrapped as an apprentice piece'. (P 340.) Dickinson expresses this in poem 320¹: the writer must practise ('We play at Paste') until a standard of excellence is reached ('Till qualified, for Pearl'). In *Babel Tower*, Byatt's view of her art as a craft is evident in the attitude displayed by Jude Mason, the author of *Babbletower*. Given the name Julian Guy Monkton-Pardew by his parents, he renamed himself as a tribute to Jude Fawley the stonemason in Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*:

A ... He was an honest craftsman, and he saw the poetry in stones. I believe art is craft first. I meant always to be an artist. 'Mason' seemed a good place to start.

Q Your name is indeed precisely crafted. (BT 571-2)

Jude Mason's contentious work *Babbletower*, a fantastical tale of escape from oppression and the establishment of a new and experimental way of life, runs side by side with the account of Frederica's escape from the oppression of marriage and her re-establishment of her independence and her career. *Babbletower* follows the progress of a group of French aristocrats and their attendants as they flee post-revolutionary

¹ All Dickinson poems are given with the number and in the form chosen by TH Johnson for his 1960 volume *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*. In 1950 ownership of Dickinson's literary estate was transferred to Harvard University. Johnson prepared the variorum text which was published in 1955. The 1960 edition selects one form of each poem and numbers the poem according to the Harvard (variorum) edition. When a date is given, it is that conjectured for the earliest known manuscript.

fervour and endeavour to create a harmonious society where everyone is equal and equally satisfied. The consequences for the eighteenth-century community are brutal and destructive. Within the action of the twentieth-century fiction, Jude Mason's *Babbletower* is published and pilloried. It is an independent entity within the text of the novel but it reacts with the framing text and comments on the life of Frederica who, by contrast to the small group of aristocrats, battles through what is brutal and destructive and emerges intact and far more knowledgeable about her self and her needs.

Juxtaposition of narratives like Frederica's and Jude's is part of Byatt's craftsmanship. The embedding of fairy-tale elements within both narratives is another. Using a complete tale (the fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin') contained within the framing text to comment on the experience and state of mind of her characters is a technique with which Byatt experiments in *Possession*. The short story 'The Glass Coffin' published as an independent tale in the collection *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994) assumes an additional significance within the text of *Possession* where it is represented as a tale written by LaMotte. The Ash poem in which a medium defends her practice by referring to it as 'artfulness, or simply Art,/A Tale, a Story, that may hide a Truth/As wonder-tales² do, even in the Best Book' (P 409) suggests that Byatt intends that a wonder tale should not only tell a story but should also conceal some deeper understanding, interpretation or truth. So a complete tale within a larger work of fiction should reveal a truth relevant to the framing narrative.

'The Glass Coffin' is a variation of Sleeping Beauty and aspects of both the Sleeping Beauty narrative and the tale itself may be regarded as offering comment on the course of LaMotte's life. A resourceful tailor is rewarded with one choice from three gifts and selects a finely wrought glass key which he uses to free a sleeping princess from a lengthy enchantment. Richard Todd (*ASB* 44) suggests that the tale, decoded, may offer insight into the emotions of its author, Christabel LaMotte, and function as a wish-fulfilment fantasy. Ash may be read as the enchanter who intrudes upon

²Ash here uses the term 'wonder tale' which in twentieth-century fairy-tale theory the Russian structuralist Vladimir Propp has made popular (from the German *wundermärchen*); it operates as a blanket term to cover both fairy tales and folk tales.

LaMotte's life. Both LaMotte and the princess have found contentment sharing their lives with a companion who is not a husband. The brother of the princess, whom the enchanter renders mute by his magical metamorphosis into Otto, a large mournful grey dog, may represent LaMotte's companion Blanche, who is silenced first by her exclusion from the LaMotte/Ash relationship and then by her suicide. By destroying the enchanter and restoring the prince to human form, LaMotte might be rewriting her life and putting it to rights, so that 'The Glass Coffin' positioned within *Possession* resonates with significance which it does not have when it stands alone.

Fairy tale is the ideal vehicle for the relief of LaMotte's suffering for its structure perfectly suits her needs - a magical transformation is effected by the successful completion of a quest which brings about one or more of the traditional happy and satisfying fairy-tale endings: vindication, reconciliation and partnership. Marina Warner says of fairy tales:

The more one knows fairy tales the less fantastical they appear; they can be vehicles of the grimmest realism, expressing hope against all the odds with gritted teeth. Like 'pardon tales', written to the king to win a reprieve from sentence of death, fairy tales sue for mercy. (*FBB* 225)

LaMotte is suffering on many counts: her decision to cease communication with Ash, for such a brief period her lover; her separation from the child to whom she gave birth in shame and secrecy; the fact that she is never to be acknowledged as a mother; and the loss of the life of productive contentment which she shared with her companion, Blanche Glover, who has committed suicide. The proposition that 'The Glass Coffin' is a creative response to the anguish, a grim fantastical attempt to regain the life of harmonious companionship and industrious productivity, is a satisfying theory. The reduction of the black artist to a small handful of 'grey dust and glass powder' (*P* 67), which seems so much like ash, is particularly appropriate.

The motives which Byatt would have intended the reader to infer from LaMotte's writing of the tale would then have been exactly those identified by Marina Warner in her history of fairy tales and those who tell them. Warner suggests that

[t]he pedagogical function of the wonder story deepens the sympathy between the social category women occupy and fairy tale. Fairy tales ... point out the evildoers and garland the virtuous, they stand up to adversity with dreams of vengeance, power and vindication. (*FBB* 21)

Just as the tale might provide LaMotte with a satisfying sense of vengeance wreaked on Ash, so it might signal her desire to be reconciled with Blanche and thus the tale might operate as Warner suggests fairy tales do. They function as 'a site of reconciliation and reversal for ostracized and condemned figures' (*FBB* 410).

The exegesis suggested by Todd can be extended. The blonde-haired princess of the tale shares her life with her twin brother and eschews marriage. LaMotte has long blonde hair and is called 'princess' by Blanche, her devoted companion with whom she has retired from society. Ash is the dark enchanter whose invasion of LaMotte's seclusion renders her creatively impotent. She 'sleeps' until her importance is recognised by feminist scholars of the twentieth century, most notably her own great-great-grand-daughter, Maud Bailey. The little tailor, hero of the story, might well prefigure Maud. The tailor ensured that the princess was 'released from sleep and silence' (*P* 66) and ended his days working for pleasure with the finest silk cloth and brilliant threads for '[a] craftsman is nothing without the exercise of his craft' (*P* 67). Maud resists relationships which might stifle her productivity. She identifies with the needs of her progenitor, Christabel LaMotte: '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.' (*P* 506.)

The role of the fairy-tale elements (for example Frederica as *princesse lointaine*, Nigel Reiver as Bluebeard, Bill Potter as ogre) within Byatt's account of Frederica's developing philosophy is equally intriguing. In order to find out why they lurk in the realist text, the second chapter (*Only connect*) considers what Jessica Tiffin (*GB:NE* 1) describes as 'Byatt's intellectual focus ... which leads her continuously to explore and deconstruct the nature and workings of her own narratives and the problematical relationship between narrative and reality'. It seems that as Frederica, Byatt's fictitious creation, struggles to establish her identity through her own reading and interpretation,

the conventions of fairy tale are incorporated into her story for various reasons. It is Bettelheim's contention that fairy tales are the only form of literature within children's comprehension from which they may learn 'about the inner problems of human beings, and the right solutions to their predicaments' (UE 5). Fairy tales

direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity - but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. (UE 24)

Jack Zipes identifies the adult desire for fairy-tale happiness: 'As children, we all hear fairy tales and read our lives into them. But we also want to see and realise our lives as virtual fairy tales even as we grow older. We never abandon fairy tales.'³ Another possible reason for Byatt's employment of elements of fairy tale in *Frederica's* story is to remind us that people who think and read build their own understanding of themselves with the same tools used by fictitious *Frederica*: reading, education, interpretation and experience. Italo Calvino suggests⁴:

Reading and experience of life are not two universes, but one. Every experience of life, in order to be interpreted, calls on certain readings and is fused with them. The fact that books are always born from other books is a truth, and only apparently in contradiction with that other truth: that books are born from practical life and from relationships with human beings. (IMEL 210)

Linda Hutcheon points out (NN:MP 41) that the reader 'has *always* been the one to activate the latent universe of the novel':

[M]etafiction merely makes this fact conscious and functional by revealing the conventions that 'traditional realism' sought to conceal, or even deny. The writer has always had to try

³ Quoted from the first page of Zipes' introduction to *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*. In an interview videotaped in 1985, Byatt acknowledges the existence of this mindset but argues that we do abandon fairy tale as we learn that life is in fact without pattern and shape:

It starts as a small child with a large number of fairy stories ... [you] start up expecting life to have a pattern and a shape and to get better and to have a certain goal and an aim and you meet philosophies which reinforce this ... and the older you get the more you see that the world is simply not like this ...

⁴ Calvino notes this in the 1967 preface to his first novel; it is quoted by Martin Travers in *An Introduction to Modern European Literature*.

rhetorically to unite shared language and his⁵ private imaginative experience. The reader then approached that same language, bringing to it all his own experience of life, of literature, and of language, in order to accumulate enough fictive referents to bring the autonomous fictional universe into being. (NN:MP 41)

Readers too are constructs like narrative and bring their experience to bear on the texts they read. And so it is fitting that Byatt employs elements of a style of story-telling which is entirely conscious of its own artificially constructed nature. Hutcheon suggests that the act of reading is a metaphor for the reader's own daily existence:

What has *always* been a truism of fiction, though rarely made conscious, is brought to the fore in modern texts: the making of fictive worlds and the constructive, creative functioning of language itself are now self-consciously shared by author and reader. The latter is no longer asked merely to recognise that fictional objects are 'like life'; he is asked to participate in the creation of worlds and of meaning, through language. He cannot avoid this call to action for he is caught in the paradoxical position of being forced by the text to acknowledge the fictionality of the world he too is creating, yet his very participation involves him intellectually, creatively, and perhaps even affectively in a human act that is very real, that is, in fact, a kind of metaphor of his daily efforts to 'make sense' of experience. (NN:MP 30)

Byatt was a voracious reader from an early age and claims that her impulse to write came 'from years of reading myths and fairy tales under the bedclothes, from the delights and freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed' (FS:DNE para 1). Her reading caused her to fear that her gender might impede the practice of her craft (the fate of *Possession*'s LaMotte and real-life Victorian poet Emily Dickinson on whom LaMotte appears to be modelled). In many of her novels Byatt explores how commitment to a man and confinement to the home limits the potential of women. In both the novels discussed here, the dilemma of the twentieth-century woman who regards marriage and home-making as a cul-de-sac is solved in each instance by the agreement of the couple to a loose alliance rather than a marriage. There is no contractual commitment, no promise of a shared home, and no alteration is required in the woman's independent lifestyle.

As *Possession* draws to a close, Maud and Roland agree to live and work and love each other on separate continents. The conclusion of *Babel Tower* provides Frederica Potter

⁵ Hutcheon proposes a male writer and a male reader. Byatt notes a similar peculiarity in Dickinson's 'beautiful literary spiders' (Om 151-2): 'Oddly, though she was a woman, and she praised her spiders as artists, they were all, improbably, male in her terms.'

with a new life. Stifled by marriage and stay-at-home motherhood, she has been granted release and independence by Byatt. She finds congenial work and is able to establish a home for her son without drawing on the wealth of her husband. Frederica's relationship with her lover, John Ottokar, is apparently to be structured to suit her requirements and in no way to bind her. As *Babel Tower* draws to a close in the year 1967 the reader last sees Frederica travelling home in the dark on a train, 'amongst the soot and cigarette smoke' (BT 616): the conflagration is over and she is moving on. However, her relationship has survived, for John Ottokar is in the same compartment. The tentative nature of their mutual commitment is emphasised by the fact that it is not sealed face to face; instead each gazes upon the other's multiple reflections in the dark train window:

She says to the glass, 'I've learned to do without you.'
 'I never doubted that. The question is, can you be doing *with* me?'
 'I might.'
 'That's good.'
 They touch hands and smile at each other's shadow in the glass. (BT 616)

The alert reader is given evidence that they are still a couple the following year (a time beyond the limits of the text of *Babel Tower*) in the prologue to *The Virgin in the Garden*⁶ in which the couple is spotted together at the National Portrait Gallery by Alexander Wedderburn, who has agreed to meet Frederica there. Wedderburn, leaning over the balcony as he waits for Frederica to arrive, sees her (VG 11) 'engaged in a feinting, weaving dance, round a quilted triangular stool, with an unknown man', whom the reader of *Babel Tower* easily identifies as John Ottokar by the thick blonde hair and trademark black PVC raincoat:

This man was large, and, foreshortened from above, consisted of a wide expanse of glossy black PVC raincoat, cringing out round a bulky body, and a heavy mass of straight blond hair, with a sheen like cool butter.

This man reached across the stool and caught her wrist: she reached up, spoke in his ear, kissed him under it, and twisted away. He reached after her as she moved off, and ran the flat of one large hand down her spine, over her tail, cupping it, resting there. It was a gesture of

⁶ This is further evidence of Byatt's careful craftsmanship. John Ottokar appeared in the prologue to *The Virgin in the Garden* but for almost two decades the reader was not in a position to identify him; the publication of *Babel Tower* eighteen years after *The Virgin in the Garden* gave him a face and a name. This argues meticulous and exhaustive planning of the tetralogy. The fourth and final novel has a title: *A Whistling Woman*. There is as yet no indication when it might be published.

complete, and public, intimacy. He then shouldered his way out through the crowd, not looking back. Frederica laughed, and came on up. (VG 11)

Even in the early twenty-first century, the concept of such an unstructured relationship is alien and unnerving. It has the characteristics of affairs (intermittent meetings of people who live separately) which are often short-term and destructive relationships. The threat of confinement is eliminated, but there is less opportunity for the development of a routine of mutual care and shared responsibility.

Maud's union with Roland is somewhat surprising. Maud is self-possessed, self-sufficient and has an established academic reputation; by contrast, Roland seems defeated. He is bound into an unsatisfactory relationship and nicknamed 'mole' which he loathes; he is hampered by a lack of funds; despite a measure of academic success he has not secured a teaching post and he carries the burden of having disappointed his mother. Fergus Wolff refers to him as 'sweet useless Roland' (P 235). He is an anti-hero. Then, suddenly, Byatt confers all things upon him: academic acclaim and a wide variety of possible posts, a promising flow of poetry and (possession of) the girl who is unavailable to the likes of the assertive and successful Wolff. It is a comic end and fitting for a romance. Maud's role in the consummation of their love is passive (P 507: 'Roland finally ... entered and took possession of all her white coolness'); by making Roland the possessor Byatt has awarded him, at last, the hero's part - he acts instead of being acted upon. It might also be another deliberate echo of the LaMotte/Ash relationship for we are told that during all their nights together LaMotte made no specific move to pleasure Ash (P 283). In this LaMotte conforms to the stereotypical notion of a sexually passive Victorian woman.

The novel's concluding paragraph (apart, of course, from the postscript) suggests, by appeal to the senses of sight and smell, that while the union of a man and a woman must necessarily involve destruction of autonomy, there is a way forward, 'a modern way', for this particular partnership:

In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a

tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful. (P 507)

However, there is apparently in the end a conventional marriage for Roland and Maud. From the fragment of narration with which Richard Todd teasingly concludes his work on Byatt (ASB 77), we learn from her designation by the narrator as Dr Maud Bailey-Michell that Maud does in fact marry Roland Michell. Todd's closing paragraphs abandon analysis and enter the realm of fiction without notice to the reader. The critic plays the same game in which the author indulges in her fiction. Just as Byatt ceaselessly and seamlessly weaves the language of a variety of discourses (such as the law courts, feminist criticism, television journalism) into her fiction, so Todd the critic, without signalling his intention, slips from literary criticism into narrative in order to continue Maud Bailey's story beyond the limits of its text, *Possession*.

We also learn from this unexpected extra-textual extension of Maud's story that this fiercely independent feminist academic, who has dedicated herself to the study and preservation of the work of her own great-great-great-grandmother, has given birth to a daughter, Rowan. Her daughter will doubtless assert her rights and lay claim to her independence just as her mother and progenitor have done. The reader attuned to Byatt's game-playing will appreciate the significance of Rowan Bailey-Michell's name. Rowan is a name which can be adopted by either a boy or a girl. Bailey is the married name of LaMotte's daughter Maia, born of her illicit liaison with the married Ash. The Rowan-tree is a name for the mountain ash and a rowan is a berry of the mountain ash. So, years after the publication of her novel, Byatt is still sending messages and playing games, no doubt to the mutual satisfaction of author and reader, through a medium generated by her own writing: the work of interviewers, critics and theorists who discuss and analyse her fiction.

Having discussed the twentieth-century unions in both *Possession* and *Babel Tower*, I turn now to the nineteenth-century relationship between Ash and LaMotte. In fact, the tender and tentative new beginning between Frederica and John Ottokar on the Underground calls to mind LaMotte and Ash, one century earlier, travelling north on a

train, having determined to become lovers. Convention binds them even as they flout it: each has brought a ring to create the appearance of a marriage. Ash felt determined that '[h]e would teach her that she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings' (P 279). However, in consequence of her brief liaison with Ash, LaMotte is to be stripped of everything, including her creative life and the freedom she had known before encountering Ash. He is to rob her of the solitude which, she said,

keeps us [women] very safe - within its confines we are free in a way you, who have freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine. I do not advise imagining it - but do me the justice of believing - not imputing mendacious protestation - my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. I hesitate to go out. If you opened the little gate, I would not hop away - but oh how I sing in my gold cage - (P 137)

One hundred years later, Frederica does 'have freedom to range the world' and *Babel Tower* is a record of how she claims it and exercises it; she desires emotional and financial independence and the dignity, mental stimulation and sense of self-worth derived from having work of her own. It is because her personal battle takes place one hundred years later than LaMotte's, after 'the early twentieth-century's radical revelation of female sexuality and appetite' (FBB 268) and when society's restrictions on women's actions, movements and occupations have been considerably eased, that she is better able to struggle and succeed. She does, in the terms of LaMotte's metaphor, hop away from the cage (returning neither to her marriage nor the stifling atmosphere of Bran House) and she does sing: reviewing books, teaching, renewing and initiating stimulating relationships and using her own writing as a healing therapy.

Essentially, both LaMotte and Frederica adopt the same strategy: they refuse to be bound by the constraints imposed on women for it is only by breaking society's rules that each has a chance of attaining the freedom she desires. LaMotte defies the expectations of society by rejecting the only options apparently available to a genteel Victorian lady: marriage or earning an income as a governess or companion. Instead she sets up an independent establishment with a fellow artist and earns an income by the practice of her art. Frederica escapes from a barren life of leisured ease in the

counties, preferring to support herself and her son by applying her energies to a variety of part-time posts.

LaMotte fails and Frederica succeeds, for the consequence of LaMotte's affair is the destruction of the independent life which she previously enjoyed. LaMotte's failure and Frederica's success are a function of the gradual sexual and financial liberation achieved by women in the decades which intervene between the stories of LaMotte and Frederica Potter. LaMotte lives, tolerated within her sister's household, like one who has been ostracised and condemned. It can be inferred that LaMotte is complicit in this annihilation. This is clearly the view of Ash, who resents being made to feel responsible:

I feel I stand accused, also, by your actions, of having loved you at all, as though my love was an act of brutal forcing, as though I were a heartless ravisher out of some trumpery Romance, from whom you had to flee, despoiled and ruined. Yet if you examine your memories truthfully - if you can be truthful - you must know that it was not *so* - think over what we did together and ask, where was the cruelty, where the coercion, where, Christabel, the lack of love and respect for you, alike as woman and as intellectual being? (P 456)

LaMotte was financially independent before her relationship with Ash and should have been so afterwards. We must assume that, after the birth of her child, she chose to hide for the rest of her life. Her work was no longer a source of fulfilment and this too was an act of her own will, for she informs her cousin Sabine that the 'habit of morbid Self-examination ... unfits a woman for producing good work' (P 41). Deprived of her independence and her work, it seems that she waited to die, for she writes of being like the sorceress in the Ash poem: 'quieted perforce and longing for her Quietus' (P 42). It is tempting to hear the poet's own voice in the LaMotte poem spoken by the Sibyl. The Sibyl's interrogator asks 'Who are you?' and 'Who were you?' and then:

What do you see?
I saw the firmament
Steady the sky
I saw the cerement
Close Caesar's eye.

What do you hope?
Desire is a dowsed fire
True love a lie
To a dusty shelf we aspire
I crave to die.

(P 54)

The Sibyl's claim to have witnessed Caesar's death ('I saw the cerement/Close Caesar's eye') might be LaMotte's coded reference to the death of her own potential for greatness. She did after all identify herself with Caesar when she peevishly enquired of Ash:

I wonder - if I had kept to my closed castle, behind my motte-and-bailey defences - should I have been a great poet - as you are? I wonder - was my spirit *rebuked* by yours - as Caesar's was by Antony - or was I enlarged by your generosity as you *intended*? (P 502)

Roland compares LaMotte's Sibyl to Ash's Sorceress, claiming that in the poem Ash is 'writing about the people, including herself, who thought she *ought* to be punished because of her beauty and wickedness. She colluded with their judgment. He doesn't.' The extract from the Ash poem to which Roland refers ('The Incarcerated Sorceress') is placed at the start of the chapter in which Maud and Roland enter Christabel's tower and find the Ash/LaMotte correspondence. The strategic positioning of the extract at the head of the chapter in which the existence of a relationship between Ash and LaMotte is confirmed, seems to suggest to the reader that in this poem, as in others, Ash is addressing LaMotte, communicating his thoughts to her in the aftermath of their affair. He could be exhorting her not to punish herself with withdrawal; not to collude in her own condemnation. I think that the reader is invited to conclude that LaMotte punishes herself because of an internalised sense of guilt born of her transgression of the social mores of her day and, in consequence, she seeks desolation and death. That a failed relationship might blight a woman's life and stunt her creativity is foreshadowed in LaMotte's letter to Ash after their first meeting alone, when she writes:

I am sad, sir, today - low and sad - sad that we went walking, yet sad too, that we are not walking still. And that is all I can write, for the Muse has forsaken me - as she may mockingly forsake all Women, who dally with Her - and then - Love -. (P 197)

She appears to be suggesting that when a woman loves a man with passion, her creativity is consequently impaired. That this is a cultural construct internalised by nineteenth-century women rather than the psychological reaction of the individual, is suggested by Ellen Ash's musings in her journal which reflect the same passive role

adopted by a woman once in relationship with a man. It is her role to inspire or facilitate, never to create:

My recent reading has caused me for some reason to remember myself as I was when a young girl . . . I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither . . .

I hit on something I believe when I wrote that I meant to be a Poet and a Poem. It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to all reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act. No one wishes a man to be a Poem. (P 122)

It is interesting that Val, Roland's girlfriend, also colludes in her own slow effacement:

Later, Roland noticed, as he himself had his successes, Val said less and less, and when she argued, offered him increasingly his own ideas, sometimes the reverse side of the knitting, but essentially his. (P 12)

However, in line with her policy of happy endings for the twentieth-century section of her novel, Byatt rescues Val from misery and penury with a smart young lawyer in a shiny motor car - a legitimate fairy-tale solution since the novel's subtitle proclaims it a romance. Byatt executes a similar sleight of hand for Frederica's parents, Bill and Winifred Potter, in *Babel Tower*, as will be discussed below. In the novels which precede *Babel Tower*, (*The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*) the reader is disconcerted by Bill Potter's explosive discontent and distressed by Winifred's silent and rigid endurance; in *Babel Tower* there is change and renewal. Their fraught relationship is resolved into a tranquil and nurturing partnership, complete with a new family, in the form of their two grandchildren who come to live with them.

Having contemplated the 'modern way' which Byatt opens for her twentieth-century couples as *Possession* and *Babel Tower* draw to a close, I move back to the nineteenth century to consider what the creation of Christabel LaMotte owes to the reclusive life and highly charged poetry of Emily Dickinson.

chapter one

At the White Heat: a study of the ways in which the life and creativity of Emily Dickinson inform the character of Christabel LaMotte in AS Byatt's novel *Possession*

Given that Byatt's novel *Possession* invites the reader to follow a fictitious literary detective game spanning two centuries of thought, theory and literature, it's wholly appropriate for the student of intertextuality to track down the truth in the lives of Victorian literary figures which might have furnished the fiction of Christabel LaMotte. *Possession* is, of course, prefaced by an extract from Browning's poem *Mr Sludge, 'the Medium'*, which warns the reader to approach biographical 'truth' with scepticism:

... '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?' (P preface)

The two twentieth-century academics who investigate the LaMotte/Ash relationship each name a reclusive Victorian woman poet in the early stages of their quest, and these are surely pointers to the reader on the trail of LaMotte's origins. Roland Michell muses over the identity of the 'reclusive lady who knew about, who wrote, or proposed to write, poetry' (P 7) whom Ash had met at Crabb Robinson's breakfast.

Roland considers the pious Christina Rossetti as a possibility which, immersed as he is in the philosophy and attitudes of the agnostic Ash, he almost immediately rejects. Maud Bailey mentions Emily Dickinson's 'voluntary confinement' (P 54) in her description to Roland of a paper she had written on Victorian women's imagination of space. Roland reads of LaMotte's retreat 'further and further into voluntary silence' in a biographical essay (P 37). Both Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning have been added to the list by real-life academic André Brink who describes, as 'part of the novel's fake search for fake origins', the possibility that:

LaMotte, in her turn, is informed not only by Christina Rossetti or Elizabeth Barrett Browning (or even, occasionally, by Emily Dickinson), but *also* by the male Robert Browning - which suggests that Browning is not a Freudian father figure at all, but features more as a spiritistic 'medium' *through* which the reader is allowed to reach even further back, into Browning's poetic 'world' where female figures and forces play a significant role. (*N:LN* 301-2)

I believe that in her novel Byatt has carefully synthesised elements of the biography and works of both Rossetti and Dickinson in order to dramatise the experiences of creative nineteenth-century women under patriarchy and the cultural restrictions and distortions under which they consequently suffer. In an account given of the writing of *Possession*, Byatt describes how she set about writing the poetry:

My mind has been full since childhood of the rhythms of Tennyson and Browning, Rossetti and Keats. I read and reread Emily Dickinson, whose harsher and more sceptical voice I found more exciting than Christina Rossetti's meek resignation. I wanted a fierce female voice. And I found I was possessed - it was actually quite frightening - the nineteenth-century poems that were not nineteenth-century poems *wrote themselves*, hardly blotted, fitting into the metaphorical structure of my novel, but not mine, as my prose is mine. (*CWP* para 8)

With reference to biography, critical analysis and the 1 775 published poems of Emily Dickinson, I here consider what the creation of the character and literary works of Christabel LaMotte might owe to the life story, poetry and private letters of Emily Dickinson.

In an interview with Byatt broadcast by the BBC World Service on 7 July 2000, interviewer Harriet Gilbert asked what it is that Byatt finds so interesting about biography, given that it is the theme of her most recent novel (*The Biographer's Tale*, first published in 2000) and that *Possession* tells the story of 'two present-day would-be biographers'. Byatt replied:

[Y]ou might think that you know a lot more about somebody in a biography than you will ever know about somebody in a fiction but of course the opposite is true. And I think what fascinates me about biography is the way human beings always escape their biographers. ... [A] biographer can spend years and years and years looking for the evidence of what somebody felt about something, what they thought, where they went, what they did. And there will always be huge gaps. ... [A]nd so what the biographer is always describing is the kind of shell from which you can deduce - the person who was inside remains secret and mysterious. I think for a long time I've been interested in the way in which this provides a kind of formal structure with which the author can play games. But the truth is, of course, I know everything there is to know about the people I have invented. (*BBC interview*)

Intrigued by the 'unknowability' of another person's life, Byatt considers biography ('recreating the life of someone who is dead') to be impossible. 'I think, I suppose, the origin of my interest in it [biography] is my own sense, as a scholar as well as a novelist, that I spent a lot of my time retracing the steps of the dead without finding them.' (BBC interview.) Maud expresses exactly this sentiment to Sir George and Lady Bailey:

You know, if you read the collected letters of any writer - if you read her biography - you will always get a sense that there's something missing, something biographers don't have access to, the real thing, the crucial thing, the thing that really mattered to the poet herself. There are always letters that were destroyed. *The* letters, usually. These may be those letters, in Christabel's life. (P 89)

Byatt has never considered writing biography:

I think some of the reason I haven't is a primitive fear of possession. I do not wish to spend most of my life on somebody else's life - not one other person's life. The word came to me long before the plot of the novel *Possession* and it was to do with being taken over or taking somebody over ... It's partly also that I do feel much closer to my real heroes - Browning, George Eliot - when I'm reading what they wrote than when I'm reading, say, their letters or interviews with them. (BBC interview)

Whether the parallels and comparisons between LaMotte and Dickinson which are drawn in the discussion which follows were intended by Byatt or not is immaterial, for they can be drawn. I believe that Byatt would agree with this contention, for in a series of discussions held with Ignês Sodré she says:

It's as though every story has endless, multifarious forms ... and the literary critic can also read into a novel things that the writer might not know they had put in, although they can be as wonderfully obvious as Freud's attempt to come to grips with his own guilt. I think particularly in *Villette*, and possibly also in *Beloved*, there are things which the novelist knew, and knew she had to write, and couldn't have said in any discursive form to anybody. Yet there they are presented in a narrative for us to see and know and read and feel and understand.⁷ (SCWW 238)

Also in this series of conversations, Byatt makes reference to the fact that she and Sodré are speculating about characters as though they are real people. In the concluding chapter she notes:

⁷ The reference is to Freud's irrational guilt feelings in relation to the death of his friend Fleischl. *Villette* is the novel by Charlotte Brontë and *Beloved* the novel by Toni Morrison.

We have allowed ourselves to talk about the characters in the novels as though they were real people, which is an almost primitive mode of discourse which literary criticism has eschewed for a long time. We know now so well that they are *not* real. We are constantly told that they are hypotheses, narrative functions. We have lost the capacity to talk about them as their creators must have wanted us to, and as indeed we do in normal, unprofessional conversation. I feel what you and I have had is a sort of conversation which is sophisticated at one level and very deliberately primitive and naïve at another, which has brought the worlds of the books, at least for us, back together, briefly. (SCWW 253)

In the following discussion of the ways in which the character of LaMotte is informed by Emily Dickinson, reference is constantly made to LaMotte as though she had in fact lived during the nineteenth century and written poetry. Instead of irking the reader with tedious reminders of her fictitious nature, I point instead to the greatness of Byatt as an author which enables her readers to speculate about her characters just as she has about Austen's (on page 12 she says: 'I think it's one of Jane Austen's greatneses that you don't feel you are doing anything wrong if you speculate about her people') and to Byatt's own obvious enjoyment in discussing the characters of other novelists as though they had been living people.

Both LaMotte and Dickinson have fathers of stature whom they revere and mothers whose influence appears to be negligible. Emily Dickinson discounted her mother in the following curt terms: 'My Mother does not care for thought'; instead, she preferred 'the stale inflation of minor News'. (LED 82 and 83.) 'I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled'; and 'I always ran home to Awe⁸ when a child, if anything befell me. He was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none.' (LED 74.)

There is a significant echo of Dickinson's sentiments in the observations of LaMotte recorded by her young cousin Sabine de Kercoz (P 348) in her 'Journal Intime' begun in October 1859 at LaMotte's suggestion. Here she records LaMotte's intimation that while her desire to write came from her father, 'the language in which I write - my *mother-tongue* exactly - is not his language, but my mother's. And my mother is not a

⁸ Gilbert and Gubar read this reference to Awe as 'the strong Mother of the poet's imagination, so strong indeed as to require a masculine pronoun'. (589) Could it not also be possible that 'Awe' indicates Austin Dickinson, much adored older brother from whom the poet was very seldom apart?

spiritual woman, and her language is that of household minutiae and female fashion.' After recording this, Sabine observes,

At the time, I did not think so much about what she had said about language, as about the fact that her mother was alive, for she said she '*is* not a spiritual woman'. She was in great trouble, so much was clear, and had turned not to her mother, but to us - to my father, that is, for I do not think I counted for anything in her decision. (P 348)

Both LaMotte and Dickinson are steeped in knowledge of the Bible and the doctrine of the Christian faith. LaMotte, by word and action, proclaimed herself a believer; Dickinson did not. LaMotte is described in the biographical essay read by Roland as having 'a troubled but steadfast Christian faith' (P 37) and by Maud Bailey as 'a diligent churchgoer' (P 71). In a letter to Ash LaMotte speaks of her struggle, for 'we know Things - that make a Simple Faith - hard to hold, hard to grasp, hard to wrestle' and she refers to the 'true tale of the Son' who is 'our hope, in his Rising from the Dead, of a future life for all of us, without which the failing and manifest injustice of our earthly span would be an intolerable mockery' (P 166).

Dickinson's knowledge of the Bible and her embattled relationship with God are evidence of a close acquaintance with the Christian faith which she could not adopt as her own. Throughout her life she struggled to 'regulate' her faith which, she said, 'doubts as fervently as it believes' (LED 724). During her final term at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1848, she describes the battle she wages with herself in the face of the earnest exhortations of her fellow pupils and of the teachers - who created several opportunities for the pupils to make a (public and emotional) commitment to Christianity:

I have neglected the *one thing needful* when all were obtaining it ... I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world. (LED 361)

She speaks as one divided against herself. Her fierce struggle is testimony to a strong and independent spirit. It appears that, for her, formal acceptance of the Christian faith would have been a form of surrender to convention. She reserves for herself the right

to allow her mind to engage with the world unfettered by the restrictions of Christian doctrine. Yet, still uncommitted, she is able to write to her cousins after her mother's death in 1882: 'I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker – that the One who gave us this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused.' (*LED* 640.)

There is further congruence in the biographical details of the real and the fictitious poet. Each was the maiden aunt of a group of nephews and one niece and each ended up living with her younger sister whom she predeceased. After Blanche Glover's death in June 1860, LaMotte moved to the home of her sister Sophie, until her own death in 1890 at the age of 65. Dickinson lived alone in the family home with her sister Lavinia, after the marriage of their brother and deaths of their parents. She died in 1886 at the age of 56. Both poets were involved in clandestine correspondence. Blanche Glover notes the Ash/LaMotte correspondence in her diary:

Letters Letters, letters, letters. Not for me. I am no blind mouldiwarp, my Lady, nor no well-trained lady's maid to turn my head and not see what is stated not to concern me. You need not hurry them away to lie in your sewing basket or run upstairs to fold them under your handkerchiefs. (*P* 46)

The Dickinson poem 636 (*c* 1862) (here the first two verses) describes a similar experience:

The Way I read a Letter's – this –
 'Tis first – I lock the Door –
 And push it with my fingers –next –
 For transport it be sure –

And then I go the furthest off
 To counteract a knock –
 Then draw my little Letter forth
 And slowly pick the lock –

The comparison extends to the failure of the relationship. Dated *c* 1862, poem 366 proclaims:

... I put away his life –
 An Ornament too grand
 For Forehead low as mine, to wear

and poem 443 (c 1862) gives an account of dutiful compliance with daily routine in spite of the crippling consequences of loss, described in these lines:

And yet – Existence – some way back –
Stopped – struck – my ticking – through –

Also a mutual experience is the treasuring of a collection of letters. Here, for example, is a verse from poem 293 (c 1861):

I got so I could stir the Box –
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath –
As staples – driven through –

Both LaMotte and Dickinson had rather less complicated emotional attachments to speechless creatures: dolls and dogs. The existence of LaMotte's dolls is first revealed to us in the light of Sir George Bailey's storm-lantern: 'a sudden row of staring tiny white faces, one, two, three, propped against a pillow' (P 81). Maud Bailey informs us that LaMotte wrote a series of poems about the dolls, and she quotes from memory the poem beginning 'Dolly keeps a Secret'; immediately thereafter she finds the LaMotte/Ash correspondence in the tiny bed upon which the dolls recline.

Dickinson must surely have played with dolls as a little girl (although she delights, in poetry and correspondence, in referring to her childhood as the time 'when I was a boy') and in poem 508 (c 1862) she refers to the dolls of childhood. In this poem, by means of the Christian sacrament of baptism, the speaker appears to be proclaiming triumphantly her own sense of her maturity as a poet, despite the failure of her friends and the world to acknowledge her as such:

I'm ceded – I've stopped being Theirs –
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading – too –

yes
... very
significant
Dolls
are an
important
image
to
the
poet.

In the six-line poem 481 (c 1862) 'a Doll' is used as an image of perfection and one wonders whether this was the reason it was chosen as a pet name for her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, whom she loved:

The Himmaleh was known to stoop
 Unto the Daisy low –
 Transported with Compassion
 That such a Doll should grow
 Where Tent by Tent – Her Universe
 Hung out its Flags of Snow –

Each poet shares her solitude with a large and hairy dog. In a letter dated 26 April 1862, Dickinson tells an acquaintance of her companions: 'Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself' (*LED* 542). This is Carlo, a gift from her father. On first meeting LaMotte's Dog Tray, Ash is struck by his size:

There was I, looking diligently about me for a King Charles Spaniel, or a milky sharp small hound - and there were *you*, quite overwhelmed and half-hidden by a huge gaunt grey creature out of some Irish fairytale or Northern saga of wolf-hunting. (*P* 190)

Dickinson favoured white clothing which later in life became a fixed custom (possibly after her father's death); LaMotte wore various shades of green. Neither took cognisance of the fashions of the day. Dickinson gradually withdrew from society from the time of her early thirties as did LaMotte.

In conversation with Ignès Sodr , Byatt makes several frank and emotional comments about her own life and feelings which have an interesting bearing on various points raised in this examination of the ways in which the real-life Dickinson informs the fictitious LaMotte. Byatt clearly shares with Dickinson a sense of being 'possessed by a power' (*SCWW* 39) which demands expression. This sense of possession, of being driven, must also be contained in the title *Possession* in addition to the idea of biographical, financial, literary or sexual possession. Byatt equates art with energy so that to 'do art properly' means to 'produce your energies properly' (*SCWW* 93). Byatt says to Sodr :

I don't feel wholly myself unless I am *working on something*. I have a private set of images ... about being stopped off, or not being allowed to act or not being able to move. And the *something*, the work, is the place where the self meets the outside world. I think again, *Daniel Deronda* moved me much more than most novels about artists because it did include the work. (SCWW 112-3)

Dickinson and LaMotte express this experience of being possessed by a creative urge which must be exercised in insect imagery which is analysed below. Byatt tells Sodré that '[o]ne of the deep and intense pleasures of writing novels is the possibility of dividing yourself up and pushing aspects of yourself out to see where they would go if they were the most important aspect' (SCWB 24). This would suggest that in LaMotte/Dickinson she is exploring not only the situation of an exceptionally creative woman trying to 'produce [her] energies properly' within Victorian patriarchy which routinely dismissed the efforts of the female pen, but also her own position in the late-twentieth century.

The *Melusine* epic is noteworthy in this context for LaMotte is clearly exploring aspects of her personal experience in her portrayal of Melusine in just the same way as Byatt is using LaMotte to investigate aspects of her own character. In a letter to Ash, LaMotte writes 'how can I be supposing you want my life-history in place of my Melusine-epic? Yet they are so *interwined* - ' (P 174). Even had LaMotte not made the connection, the reader would have regarded LaMotte as a nineteenth-century variant of the ancient fairy Melusine, for LaMotte shares her potential for both creativity and destruction.

The fairy Melusine chooses to keep the existence of her muscular fish-like tail a secret from her husband and when he spies on her and discovers the truth terrible destruction results. The monstrous muscular tail might represent LaMotte's talent, seeming to her to be a deformity because it has been trivialised by the patriarchal academy to which she appealed for recognition. Once she has made herself vulnerable to Ash, social destruction follows and, apparently in consequence, even the limited acknowledgement she had previously achieved comes to an end. She is deprived of two crucial creative outlets: as a poet she loses her audience; as a woman she is denied her child. She consequently sees herself as having become a monster, like Melusine. In her final letter

to Ash she tells him: 'I *have been Melusina* these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not' (P 501).

Unaware of the grim comparisons she will later draw between herself and the fairy, she goes on in the earlier letter to point out that the fairy Melusine has two aspects (both of which she shares): ' - an unnatural Monster - and a most proud and loving and *handy* woman. Now there is an odd word - but no other seems to suffice - all she touched was well done - ' (P 174). LaMotte views herself as one who embodies the monstrous aspect of Melusina even before she begins to experience what it is to be a mother separated forever from her child. Sabine de Kercoz notes in her journal that LaMotte pointed out to her that women are 'largely thought to be unable to write well, unlikely to try, and something like changelings or monsters when indeed they do succeed, and achieve something' (P 350).

LaMotte, like Melusina, is also 'a most proud and loving and *handy* woman'. In a letter to Ash, she describes her meeting with Blanche Glover at a lecture by Ruskin on 'the dignity of handicraft and individual *work*' (P 187); in the 'Bethany cottage' which she subsequently established with Blanche Glover they sought to make themselves

a life in which drudgery was Artful ... we were to renounce the outside World ... in exchange for - dare I say Art - a daily duty of crafting - from exquisite curtains to Mystical Paintings, from biscuits with sugar roses to the Epic of Melusina. (P 187)

Not only does LaMotte practise art in her home, but (in the judgement of Ash in one of his letters) she also has the skill to represent such activities in words:

Both in your wonder-tales and in your fine lyrics - you have a most precise eye and ear for the matter of fact and the detailed - for household linen for instance, for the fine manipulations of delicate sewing - for actions like Milking - which make a mere man see the world of little domestic acts as a paradisaical revelation - (P 176)

Ash writes to LaMotte of their desire to speak of 'the art, or craft, we both profess' (P 185) and in her journal Sabine de Kercoz records LaMotte's account of herself: 'I write

poetry ... I am diligent and I hope a craftsman' (P 344). This accords with Byatt's descriptions of her own hard-working application to her craft; something at which she is skilled; something which requires her to 'produce her energies'. Dickinson uses imagery to express exactly the same attitude in poem 320 (c 1862):

We play at Paste –
Till qualified, for Pearl –
Then, drop the Paste –
And deem ourself a fool –

The Shapes – though – were similar –
And our new Hands
Learned *Gem*-Tactics –
Practicing *Sands* –

Byatt is a consummate craftsman and her characters too are craftsmen and crafty. Ash, for example, is perfectly conscious of the dissonance between the appearance and the reality of his position. This consciousness is revealed in his poetry. Ash, eminent and established poet, head of a respectable household, husband of a devoted but childless wife, appears to embody Victorian respectability and patriarchy. However, his poetry reveals that he is the champion of neither. He appreciates LaMotte's greatness as a poet; in his poetry (the eight lines below are an extract from *Mummy Possess* which is presented in a chapter of its own, Chapter Twenty-One), he is able to acknowledge (in the voice of a female medium) that women's art is denied a public forum and is relegated to the home:

Our small deceptions are a form of Art
Which has its simple and its high degree
As women know, who lavish on wax dolls
The skills and the desires that large-souled men
Save up for marble Cherubs, or who sew
On lowly cushions thickets of bright flowers
Which done in oils were marvelled at on walls
Of ducal halls or city galleries.

(P 408)

Ash looks at LaMotte on the evening she is to become his lover and in his mind casts her as a hawk. Failing to consider that the hawk is a vicious bird of prey capable of inflicting destruction, he felt determined that 'He would teach her that she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings' (P 279).

However this poet, sufficiently 'large-souled' to transcend the view of women adopted by his contemporaries, is denied his conjugal rights by the wife he reveres and denied (apparently) even the knowledge of the existence of his child by the poet who was briefly his lover. Ash, apparently the epitome of patriarchy, is thus deprived or denied by women in precisely those areas (sex and child-bearing) which have traditionally made them objects (sex) or which have played a part in limiting their opportunities or stunting their careers (child-bearing). It is tempting to read the extracts from *The Garden of Proserpina* (1861) as an acknowledgement of this truth by Ash which he expected at least one of his readers (LaMotte) to understand. This extract is given to us as the epigraph to Chapter One:

These things are there. The garden and the tree
 The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold
 The woman in the shadow of the boughs
 The running water and the grassy space.
 They are and were there. At the old world's rim,
 In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit
 Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there
 The dragon Ladon crisped his jewelled crest
 Scraped a gold claw and sharpened a silver tooth
 And dozed and waited through eternity
 Until the tricky hero Herakles
 Came to his dispossession and the theft. (P 1)

'These things' which 'are there' are the archetypal elements of accounts of transgression explored in literature and psychology. Ash can therefore trust to LaMotte's accurate interpretation of his poem for both are poets and, as Ash suggests in his unsent letter (P 456), 'psychologists of no mean order'. There is transgression, for they are the parents of an illegitimate child⁹ which their society would have condemned. The images presented in the first three lines of the extract (the garden and the tree in the first line, the serpent and the fruit in the second and the woman lurking in the shadow in the third) recall Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden. 'They are and were there' suggests that just as sin entered the world, so it continues in the world. Next he offers us images of transgression from Greek mythology: the dragon Ladon

⁹ Ash is haunted by the child's existence for he cries out to LaMotte, in this same letter (P 456), for knowledge, for release from the torment of ignorance: 'What became of my child? Did he live? How can I ask, not knowing? How can I not ask, not knowing?'

protected the golden fruit in the garden of the Hesperides which Hercules was directed to steal during the course of his eleventh labour.

There is an even stronger indication that this poem is addressed by Ash to LaMotte. The longer extract from this poem which forms the epigraph to Chapter Twenty-Six (*P* 463), begins 'Since riddles are the order of our day/Come here, my love, and I will tell thee one' which suggests that he is addressing LaMotte, for in the correspondence which preceded their liaison, Ash refers to LaMotte's '*heated riddling*' (*P* 195). The chronology supports this interpretation for the poem was published in 1861 and the Ash/LaMotte relationship began and ended in 1859. Of the world which he explores in this poem, he says (*P* 465): 'We see it and we make it, oh my dear./People the place with creatures of our mind,/With lamias and dryads, melusines/And firedrakes ...' He appears to be addressing a fellow poet and he knows he inspired LaMotte to pursue the topic of the Fairy Melusine.

Ash appears to be casting himself as the dragon Ladon whose treasure (his conjugal rights and right of access to his child) has been stolen (the first by his wife, the second by his lover). The eminent poet, apparently socially and professionally secure, suffers dispossession and theft at the hands of wife and lover. Ash, who so clearly perceives how creative women are hampered by the failure of society to grant them adequate opportunities for expression, seems here to be elevating LaMotte/Ellen Ash to the status of a male hero (tricksy ... Herakles in line 11 of the extract above), where society might see each merely as '[t]he woman in the shadow' (line 3). LaMotte attempts to trick him into believing that his child is dead; his wife's trickery is more subtle. Her unfulfilled creative urges take the form of a subversive reaction which she deliberately and purposefully hands on to posterity to unravel. First consider her journal. A series of entries which record the reactions of a helpless woman unable to take action in the face of her housemaid's pregnancy, can be read as the implication of her husband in the conception of the illegitimate child. On June 12 she contemplates the practice of beating servants and reflects:

I do not believe my dearest Randolph would ever consider applying his hand - or anything else - to any young person in our employment. (P 226)

In an entry in July we are informed that Bertha slipped away in the night and 'Perhaps Bertha is gone to the man who [passage crossed out illegibly]' (P 231). We know that she anticipates the plundering of private documents once she and her husband have died, a practice which she frequently deplores; yet despite burning much, she leaves her journal, thus choosing that it enter the records. Likewise, her burial of letters in the grave of her husband is a creative act. During a discussion of *Villette*, the subject of the preservation by Lucy of Graham Bretton's letters arises, which reminds Byatt of Ellen Ash's actions in *Possession*:

I was very amused when I reread this passage which I had forgotten, to realise I had used it in *Possession* when the character went out and bought a glass bottle with a stopper and then bought oiled silk, and I knew I had some immensely sensuous memory of wrapping things in oiled silk, and I didn't know where it came from - ... What it's describing of course is the pleasure of the writer in making that image, the pleasure Charlotte Brontë must have had. ... To invent this complicated rite and make so sure that they were buried and not dead because they couldn't be rotted, is an artistic or creative act. (SCWW 64-5)

As a further example of Byatt's careful crafting, I note that Leonora Stern receives the same subversive treatment from Byatt as Ash has done. Leonora Stern, in the twentieth century, has the imposing presence and authoritative command of Ash in the nineteenth. She functions as an emblem of the triumphant feminist critic and academic asserting women's rights and exercising them upon literature in a manner previously the exclusive province of men, but Byatt undermines her by contrasting her feminist interpretations with the insight the reader has by virtue of his or her privileged position.

not sure
I agree

In the BBC interview Byatt, describing the fragmentary nature of the novel, pointed out:

In *Possession* ... I wrote bits which were orthodox feminist literary criticism which were not untrue - they were just one language of the many in which you can describe ... 'They weren't untrue' is important. I wasn't simply mocking. (BBC interview)

She may not mock, but by means of this pastiche she does subvert and criticise. 'I do it,' she says in the interview, 'because I have come to the conclusion that pastiche or parody is, in a way, the best form of literary criticism - the best form of reading.'

Fredric Jameson's definition of pastiche¹⁰, which he regards as one of the most significant practices in postmodernism, supports Byatt's view that mockery does not motivate its use:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what (*sic*) is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor. (*M/P* 167)

Byatt would doubtless regard Leonora Stern as being among those scholars who, as she notes during the BBC interview, 'don't start neutral' but apply their own 'kind of grid' which 'they put over the writer's preoccupations and then they try to twist it'. In her work *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte Stern* analyses the surfaces of the earth and hidden holes or openings through which water bubbles or enters, which women artists have chosen to celebrate. (*P* 243-4.) She adds to this her own appreciation of the waves of the sea,

their regular breaking bearing a profound relation to the successive shivering delights of the female orgasm. ... I can only marvel at the instinctive delicacy and sensitivity of those female companions of Charlotte Brontë who turned aside when she first came face to face with the power of the sea at Filey, and waited peacefully until, her body trembling, her face flushed, her eyes wet, she was able to rejoin her companions and walk on with them. (*P* 244)

Byatt invites the reader to question this interpretation when she takes the same set of non-linguistic signs observed by Leonora Stern (waves breaking on the seashore) and sets it within a frame which undermines Leonora's feminist reading of nature. Patricia Waugh identifies just such a metafictional technique in her examination of literary self-consciousness:

The metacommentary provided by self-conscious fiction carries the more or less explicit message: 'this is make-believe' or 'this is play'. The most important feature shared by fiction and play is the construction of an alternate reality by manipulating the relation between a set of signs (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) as 'message' and the context or frame of that message. ... [T]he same behaviour can be 'framed' by a shift in context which then requires very different interpretative procedures. (*M:TP* 35)

¹⁰ Quoted from Jameson's essay 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' published in the collection of essays edited by Peter Brooker.

And so LaMotte is positioned by Byatt before the sea at the bay at Fouesnant. Her cousin Sabine observes:

I thought she might run with me along the beach, or climb rocks ... But she simply stood at the edge of the water, with her boots sinking into the wet sand, and her hands tucked into her sleeves for warmth, and listened to the breakers and the gulls crying, quite still, quite still. Her eyes were closed when I came up with her, and with every breaker her brows creased in a little frown. I had the fanciful idea that they were beating on her skull like blows, and that she was *enduring* the sound, for reasons of her own. (P 347)

Leonora Stern, whose specialist interest is LaMotte the lesbian-feminist poet, would doubtless believe LaMotte's emotional response as she stood on the seashore to be similar to that which she deduced from Brontë's trembling frame, flushed face and wet eyes: the breaking waves recreating the pleasure of auto-eroticism or the shared caresses of women. The reader, however, is aware that LaMotte is not contemplating the sensual delights of either auto-eroticism or a lesbian relationship but is instead recalling with pain the brief interlude at the seaside with a man whom she loved and by whom she conceived the child she is carrying: quite a different form of creativity and one which must exclude homosexual love.

These 'readings' of the sea are made all the more fascinating by the Dickinson poem 520 (c 1862). Leonora Stern would, without a doubt, regard the sea as representing an oppressive male seducer from whom the (lesbian) poet instinctively flees:

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement¹¹
Came out to look at me –

...

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Bodice – too –

¹¹ Marina Warner has chosen this line of poetry as the title of a collection of stories about women. (*The Mermaids in the Basement* Chatto & Windus 1993.) According to the blurb on the dustjacket, Warner 'crosses the boundaries of time and space to listen to the calling of different heroines and anti-heroines'.

And made as He would eat me up –
 As wholly as a Dew
 Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
 And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
 I felt His Silver Heel
 Upon my Ankle – Then my Shoes
 Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
 No One He seemed to know –
 And bowing – with a Mighty look –
 At me – The Sea withdrew –

Dickinson and LaMotte share the desire not only to speak but also to be heard. On 16 April 1862, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a freethinker and civil rights activist who championed women's right to education and who admired the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, received a letter from Emily Dickinson, then aged 31. She asked 'Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive? ... Should you think it breathed, and had you the leisure to tell me, I should feel quick gratitude.' (LED 541.) LaMotte's tentative approach to an authority figure for recognition of her work exactly mirrors Dickinson's real-life experience. The men to whom they turned failed to recognise their talent and each poet was politely rebuffed. In a letter to Ash, LaMotte writes:

I will tell you a Tale - no I will not neither, it does not bear thinking on - and yet I will, as an instance of *trust* - towards You.

I sent some of my smaller poems - a little sheaf - selected with trembling - to a great Poet - who shall be nameless, I cannot write his name - asking - Are These Poems? Have I - a Voice? He replied with courteous promptness - that they were pretty things - not quite *regular* - and not always well-regulated by a proper sense of decorum - but he would encourage me, moderately - they would do well enough to give me an interest in life until I had - I quote him exactly - 'sweeter and weightier responsibilities'. (P 180)

On 7 June Dickinson wrote a letter which accepted with wit and humour a reaction much the same as LaMotte received from the 'Great Poet': 'I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish", that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin. ... You think my gait "spasmodic." I am in danger, sir. You think me "uncontrolled". I have no tribunal.' (LED 553.) She claims to be content never to publish: 'My Barefoot-

Rank is better - .' This male resistance to a woman's genius which denied Dickinson an audience in her lifetime and which Byatt suggests is a handicap which stunts the creative life of her character LaMotte, was a fear which the author herself experienced. In a discussion of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* she says of Deronda's mother¹², the Alcharisi:

[O]f all the characters in fiction she was the one who I felt I was, as opposed to feeling I ought to be or wanted to be, or might have been. In that sense there must be some great power in her as a woman artist; she says that terrible sentence about 'you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you'. ... And when I read that, I thought that's it. This is a truth. Although I've had a good education and I've had chances and I might do it, nevertheless, there is this sense of what to be a woman is, that is imposed upon you, that doesn't include being a great artist. (SCWW 100-101)

She describes her encounter as a child with an image of womanhood which horrified her in Austen's *Mansfield Park*:

Jane Austen was almost the first author in whom I met the convention that a woman couldn't speak if a man didn't ask her to marry him. They were the first women's novels I read in which the story was about waiting to see whether the man would speak, and silence was an essential part of being a woman no matter how violently you felt. ... I remember as a little girl thinking, is this my fate, is this the nature of being female? This kind of silence, this kind of waiting? It was a terrible shock to me. (SCWW 8)

Having uncovered in literature a convention which sentenced women to silence and having feared it in her own life, it is interesting to note that Byatt examined stories told by women who shared her art and at first thought that women authors reflected in their fiction this tendency in patriarchal society to silence women:

I used to think that most great novels by women were about what to do with energy that might be stopped off. And that's certainly true, for instance, of *Emma*, it's true of *Persuasion*, it's true of every novel by George Eliot, there is a woman in it possessed by a power which is thwarted. (SCWW 39)

Her own career might have contributed to the fact that this was something she 'used to think'.

¹² Deronda's mother cries: '[Y]ou can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out ... this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt.' (DD 474.)

The importance to a poet of being heard is another aspect of a writer's experience which Byatt explores in the life of LaMotte and which has a real-life parallel in the life of Dickinson. Public recognition came posthumously for Dickinson and, as is apparent in the dedication of Maud Bailey and Leonora Stern, Christabel LaMotte is enthusiastically acclaimed only in the latter half of the twentieth century and chiefly by women academics. A longing for acknowledgement, for appreciation of her worth, seems to be an integral part of each poet's experience of her craft. In her final letter to Ash (P 501) LaMotte writes '(I think she *will not die*, my Melusina, some deserving reader will save her?)' It is interesting that the true ability of each was acknowledged in her own time by another woman. A twentieth-century commentator says of *The Fairy Melusina* (P 36 and 37) that it is 'a grandiose and obscure epic poem ... deservedly forgotten'. However, Ellen Ash records an entirely different reaction:

Today I laid down *Melusina* having come trembling to the end of this marvellous work. What shall I say of it? It is truly original, although the general public may have trouble in recognising its genius, because it makes no concessions to vulgar frailties of imagination, and because its virtues are so far removed in some ways at least from those expected of the weaker sex. Here is no swooning sentiment, no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like *patting* of the reader's sensibility, but lively imagination, but force and vigour. (P 120)

Mabel Loomis Todd recorded in her journal that Dickinson 'writes the strangest poems, & very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius'. (LED 217.) Helen Hunt Jackson, unable to overcome Dickinson's resistance to publication (a result of the failure of earlier attempts) wrote to her, acknowledging her talent, as follows:

I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it - and I read them very often - You are a great poet - and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy. (LED 580)

Dickinson eventually abandoned her hopes of acknowledgment and renounced publication. Poem 709 (c 1863) proclaims her view:

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
 From Our Garret go
 White – Unto the White Creator –
 Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
 Then – to Him Who bear
 Its Corporeal illustration – Sell
 The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
 Of the Heavenly Grace –
 But reduce no Human Spirit
 To Disgrace of Price –

Poetry might seem like snow because it flows naturally and effortlessly, because it is delicately wrought and because its presence cannot be ignored. LaMotte might also be referring to her work as snow, herself secreted within the work in self-imposed isolation, in her untitled poem:

All day snow fell
 Snow fell all night
 My silent lintel
 Silted white
 Inside a Creature –
 Feathered – Bright –
 With snowy Feature
 Eyes of Light
 Propounds – Delight.

(P 128)

Both Dickinson and LaMotte wrote and received numbers of letters; both enclosed poems in their letters to others. Neither kept a journal. LaMotte rejects the practice as unsatisfactory and Dickinson's creative energy was already being channelled into her vast correspondence and the huge collection of poems which took her family by surprise when they were discovered on her death. Dickinson's carefully crafted letters should be regarded as part of her canon. The existence of draft copies of letters suggest that in them she was exercising an art rather than merely communicating information; the imagery she employs in her letters is as vivid and dramatic as that in her poetry. Her known correspondents number ninety-three and only a small fraction of the correspondence has not been lost or destroyed. Contemporary scholars can only speculate as to the magnitude and excellence of the literary production of her lifetime. Letter writing is more creative than the keeping of a journal because letters, as do

poems, presume an audience, even if it is only an audience of one. Roland notes that letters differ from other more self-conscious works¹³ of art in that they

are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. ... Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going ... Letters ... exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for a reader. (P 130-131)

It is evident that both Dickinson and LaMotte desire an audience (in the form of publication). One therefore presumes that there is an element of 'performance' in the production of art: here letters and poems. Journal writing is a private exercise. The domestic companion of each poet did keep a journal for a short period of time. Maud Bailey quotes LaMotte's written advice to a niece on the subject of keeping a journal:

'If you can order your Thoughts and shape them into Art, good: if you can live in the obligations and affections of Daily Life, good. But do not get into the habit of morbid Self-examination. Nothing so unfits a woman for producing good work, or for living usefully. The Lord will take care of the second of these – opportunities will be found. The first is a matter of Will.' (P 41)

LaMotte here condemns the keeping of a journal as an unsatisfactory halfway house between Art and daily life: an option for a creative woman which is second best. The journal entries of Ellen Ash and Blanche Glover reflect the frustration of nineteenth-century women who are striving to be successfully creative both publicly and domestically and achieving success only in the latter.

Dickinson's sister Lavinia kept a detailed daily record during the course of the year 1851 and LaMotte's companion Blanche Glover kept 'A Journal of Our Home-Life ... Commenced on the day of our setting up house. May 1st May Day 1858' (P 43), in

¹³ Byatt undercuts this notion of Roland's that letters are the spontaneous and unstructured means of communication between one writer and one reader, when Roland finds and we read two incomplete draft letters written by Ash to LaMotte (P 5-6) in which the sections which did not satisfy the writer have been crossed out. We are also able, together with Maud and Roland, to read and compare the letter which was finally sent and received (P 86-87). Byatt has thus revealed the infinite artifice and contrivance of a genre which purports to be authentic and personal.

which the entries were inexplicably and abruptly terminated, not even at the year's end.¹⁴

Although the reader is offered relatively little of what is supposed to be the canon of LaMotte's work, some fascinating parallels can be drawn between the work of the fictitious and of the real poet. Consider, for example, each poet's presentation of the repression and denial peculiar to nineteenth-century gentlewomen, using the imagery of a darkened room (to which Victorian ladies so often had to retire) to represent these forces. LaMotte's crisp poem contrasts the active life of a man with the withdrawn life of a woman; the latter is clearly resented:

Men may be martyred
Any where
In desert, cathedral
Or Public Square.
In no Rush of Action
This is *our* doom
To Drag a Long Life out
In a Dark Room. (P 112)

Ellen Ash, whose thoughts and experience are mediated to the reader through her journal-writing, expresses this same frustration employing almost identical imagery:

I was motionless all day, in one position. I had a haven of painlessness and torpor and every other twist and turn was agony. How many days do we spend lying still, waiting for them to end, so that we may sleep. I lay suspended almost as Snow White lay maybe, in the glass casket, alive but out of the weather, breathing but motionless. Outside, in the weather, men suffer heat and cold and fluctuating air. (P 232)

¹⁴Maud Bailey makes reference (P 41) to a diary kept by Blanche Glover for three years: 'I persuaded my father to let us lodge the papers in the Archive when I came here. There isn't a lot of material, but it's important. Manuscripts of the Tales, lots of undated lyrics on random little slips of paper, and of course all the revisions of *Mehusina*, which she rewrote at least eight times, always changing it. And a commonplace book, and a few letters from friends, and this one diary of Blanche Glover's, just for three years.' I presume this to be one of the inconsistencies found by critics in *Possession*. Alternatively, the mistake might be Maud's, in which case the reader might presume that Byatt is reminding the reader of the inevitability of historiographical inconsistencies between primary sources and their employment by scholars and critics. However, Maud is so organised and precise, that the latter possibility seems improbable.

Both women have expressed resentment at the limits imposed by society on their movements and on their activities in terms of the space in which they are trapped. Ellen Ash has also drawn on fairy-tale imagery of incarceration to describe her headache just as LaMotte has explored the enforced passivity of women in her record of Rapunzel in her 'glassy Tower' (*P* 35) and the beautiful princess kept alive within the 'shining glass coffin' (*P* 62) by a powerful enchantment. This subconscious resort to fairy-tale to express their dilemma can be explained by Rosemary Jackson's argument that fantastic literature expresses 'a longing for that ... which has not been allowed to exist ... as opposed to what already exists and is permitted' (*F:LS* 91).

There is other evidence of Ellen Ash's awareness of her own repressed potential: 'I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem and now am neither' (*P* 122) she notes. She is also aware that as a woman she is automatically assumed to be less able and less skilled than a man. Her indignation is expressed in mild tones in a journal entry which records a game of chess played with the vicar, Mr Baulk, who 'was pleased to tell me that I played very well for a lady - I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely'. (*P* 227.) However, the strength of her resentment becomes apparent in the dream which follows the game of chess:

I slept badly and as a result had a strange fragmented dream in which I was playing chess with Herbert Baulk, who had decreed that *my Queen* could move only one square, as his King did. ... I could see the moves She should have made, like errors in a complicated pattern of knitting or lace - but she must only lumpishly shuffle back and forth, one square at a time. ... It is odd, when I think of it, that in chess the female may make the large runs and cross freely in all ways - in life it is much otherwise. (*P* 228)

It is possible that the debilitating headaches suffered by Ellen Ash and Christabel LaMotte and a huge number of real-life Victorian gentlewomen might be a physical expression of unspoken resentment at a life of enforced passivity. Ellen Ash records in her journal the 'long days of prostration in darkened rooms' (*P* 115) and 'the unspeakable years of migraine headache and nervous prostration' (*P* 122).

This same sense of alienation and the use of a 'dark room' to represent a woman's stunted potential expressed by Byatt's nineteenth-century characters LaMotte and Ellen Ash, figure in Dickinson's poem 405 (c 1862), which appears to describe a failure to form a relationship for which she yearned:

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness —
I'm so accustomed to my Fate —
Perhaps the Other — Peace —

Would interrupt the Dark —
And crowd the little Room —
Too scant — by Cubits — to contain
The Sacrament — of Him —

I am not used to Hope —
It might intrude upon —
Its sweet parade — blaspheme the place —
Ordained to Suffering —

It might be easier
To fail — with Land in Sight —
Than gain — My Blue Peninsula —
To perish — of Delight —

Another image (in stark contrast to the 'dark room') shared by the fictitious LaMotte and the real-life Dickinson is that of 'White Heat', used by each to describe an extreme of emotion and the intense experience of creativity. Writing to Ash while feeling ill ('I have spent today in a darkened Room'), LaMotte protests that it is therefore not a 'worthy answer' to his previous letter. Her letter '[i]s not written at White Heat - as others have been - ' (*P* 170). The image surely conveys the thrust of creativity fuelled by their mutual fascination and by the mutual appreciation by each of the other's mind, ideas and mode of expression.

This extreme of emotion is captured in poem 365 (c 1862) where Dickinson describes the heat engendered by the frenzy of the creation of a work of art which will thereafter have a life of its own - independent of the 'forge' where it was worked into existence. Note the comparison of composition to the handicraft of the blacksmith:

Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*
 Then crouch within the door –
 Red – is the Fire's common tint –
 But when the vivid Ore
 Has vanquished Flame's conditions,
 It quivers from the Forge
 Without a color, but the light
 Of unanointed Blaze.
 Least Village has its Blacksmith
 Whose Anvil's even ring
 Stands symbol for the finer Forge
 That soundless tugs – within –
 Refining these impatient Ores
 With Hammer, and with Blaze
 Until the Designated Light
 Repudiate the Forge –

Liberty is a concept cherished by each. LaMotte points out in a letter to Ash that society has taught women to believe that to be alone is fearful and the companionship of marriage should be sought at all cost: '[S]olitude ... is a thing we women are taught to dread - oh the terrible tower, oh the thickets around it - no companionable Nest - but a donjon' (P 137). (A donjon is either the great tower or the innermost keep of a castle.) Convention requires that a woman marry but LaMotte claims that 'they have lied to us you know, in this, as in so much else'; instead she has discovered that withdrawal is essential if she wishes to preserve the independence she craves. In one of the letters in which LaMotte attempts to break off her correspondence with Ash, she explains:

It is pointed out to me, quite rightly - that 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 - to evade his bad opinions - and consequent niggling restrictions on my freedom of movement. (P 184)

Ironically, it is when her 'freedom' is threatened from within the barricades she had constructed to protect it (when she discovers that Blanche Glover has been intercepting and destroying letters and poetry sent by Ash) that she consents to the further contact with Ash which will ultimately destroy her life with Blanche. In a letter to Ash giving an account of Blanche Glover's behaviour, she asks 'And shall I give up - so? I who have fought for my Autonomy against Family and Society? No, I will not.' (P 189.)

The Dickinson poem 728 (c 1863) expresses a similar fear of the loss of liberty. Expressing fear that love of another which will disturb her equilibrium, the speaker styles herself a 'Girl at school' -

Still at the Egg-life -
 Chafing the Shell -
 When you troubled the Ellipse -
 And the Bird fell -

Manacles be dim - they say -
 To the new Free -
 Liberty - Commoner -
 Never could - to me -

...

Can the Lark resume the Shell -
 Easier - for the Sky -
 Wouldn't Bonds hurt more
 Than Yesterday?

Wouldn't Dungeons sorer grate
 On the Man - free -
 Just long enough to taste -
 Then - doomed new -

God of the Manacle
 As of the Free -
 Take not my Liberty
 Away from Me -

Each woman, the real and the fictive, has adopted the passive stance required of a genteel Victorian woman but has subverted it. Withdrawal from society and a refusal to enter into a conventional relationship and marriage with a man has enabled each woman to evade the limitations of the role of wife and mother which precluded a woman from work and independence.

LaMotte shares with Dickinson the image of an egg as a metaphor for female self-sufficiency. In a letter, LaMotte attempts to defend her freedom when a man breathing of love threatens her way of life. In an attempt to fend him off, she employs exactly the same image of an egg and its shattering. (Dickinson wrote: 'Still at the Egg-life -/ Chafing the Shell - /When you troubled the Ellipse -/And the Bird fell -... Can the Lark resume the Shell -?'; lines 1 - 4 and 9 in the extract above.) LaMotte offers Ash

an 'old' and 'easy' riddle 'in white and Gold with life in the middle of it' (P 137). An egg is her answer, but 'What is the riddle?' she asks. Her answer: 'I am my own riddle.' She then begs him not to 'seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude' and ends on a threatening note:

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

In her final letter to Ash, LaMotte recalls this riddle:

Do you remember how I wrote to you of the riddle of the egg? As an *eidolon* of my solitude and *self-possession* which you threatened whether you would or no? And destroyed, my dear, meaning me nothing but good, I do believe and know. (P 502)

Insects fascinate both poets and are a source of much vivid imagery. In one of her letters to Ash, LaMotte describes her need to write and employs the analogy of the spider:

You understood my very phrase - the *Life of Language*. You understand - in my life Three - and Three alone have glimpsed - that the need to set down words - what I *see*, so - but words too, words mostly - words have been all my life, all my life - this need is like the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she *must spin out* - the silk is her life, her home, her safety - her food and drink too - and if it is attacked or pulled down, why, what can she do but make more, spin afresh, design anew - you will say she is patient - so she is - she may also be Savage - it is her Nature - she *Must* - or die of Surfeit - do you understand me? (P 180)

Dickinson's poem 605 (c 1862) is a magnificently delicate description of a spider spinning out a 'Burden of Silk':

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
In unperceived Hands -
And dancing softly to Himself
His yarn of Pearl - unwinds -

Poem 1275 (c 1873) describes the spider as a 'Neglected Son of Genius' for his artwork of 'surpassing Merit' has never been acknowledged. Byatt has described the gradual accretion of ideas for the writing of *Possession* as a ghostly web of 'quotations

and parodies through which the poems and writings of the dead should loom at the reader, to be surmised and guessed at' (*CWP* para 1).

This spiderweb analogy describes the intertextual nature of *Possession*. Byatt has further developed the image of the spinning spider in *The Biographer's Tale*, using it to reflect on the nature of reading rather than writing. The narrator, Phineas G Nanson, reading biography in the course of researching a biography, muses (*TBT* 167): 'In the end, all I can do, is read the biographer's paragraph on his subject's dead body and make an *imaginative stab* at the penumbra of his words.' Nanson reflects that his own reading of the biographer's words can 'confer life, but not necessarily more truth' on what the biographer has '*quite adequately expressed*' (*TBT* 168). He consequently concludes: 'But no string has an end. Like spider-silk unreeling.'

A Dickinson insect poem (612 c 1862) featuring a gnat seems to express in poetry the same frenzy described by LaMotte, as though creativity is an inner compulsion which cannot be denied. The speaker shares with the gnat 'the Art/ ... To Gad my little Being out'. Despite being thwarted, the possessed person (unlike the gnat, she seems to say) has no option but to begin again: exactly the notion conveyed by LaMotte's spider analogy:

It would have starved a Gnat –
To live so small as I –
And yet I was a living Child –
With Food's necessity

Upon me – like a Claw –
I could no more remove
Than I could coax a Leech away –
Or make a Dragon – move –

Nor like the Gnat – had I –
The privilege to fly
And seek a Dinner for myself –
How mightier He – than I –

Nor like Himself – the Art
Upon the Window Pane
To gad my little Being out –
And not begin – again –

The stolid windowpane does not yield to the gnat's frantic beating. In the same way the work which the poet produces finds no intelligent and understanding reception. This suggests that a significant body of percipient and appreciative readers is essential to the poet's sense of her self, her achievement, her vocation. She longs to be recognised, to be acknowledged.

Sewing is another shared and significant source of imagery. LaMotte and Dickinson both sew regularly and expertly: it was a practical skill required of nineteenth-century women. Consequently, each exercises the art as a household task and incorporates it in her literary work: sewing is used to represent female creativity and to subvert conventional notions of that creativity as merely a practical skill or a pleasant domestic pastime.

Embroidery, weaving and sewing are activities which have been exclusive to women for centuries. They are activities which are functional or merely decorative. They are activities which are apparently passive. However, women inevitably use this legitimate outlet for their creativity to express their sense of being diminished or imposed upon by their submissive social roles. There is, for example, a literal subtext embroidered by an anonymous eleventh-century woman on the Bayeux tapestry, celebrating the battles and victories of men. Below a scene worked in wool to celebrate deeds of male prowess, is a small cameo: a wild-haired woman energetically flees from a man with a grotesquely enlarged penis. Men partake in battle which is subsequently celebrated in art. Women suffer humiliation and indignity in the course of battle which is only covertly acknowledged.

Evidence of Dickinson sewing is provided in her first letter to Dr and Mrs Holland, tentatively dated September 1853 (*LED* 598): 'Vinnie and I talked of you as we sewed, this afternoon.' LaMotte sewed expertly. Her cousin Sabine records an exchange with LaMotte which illustrates her excellence as a needlewoman and her penchant for riddles and for disguising uncomfortable truths in tales. She speaks on the subject of the Little

Mermaid's fishtail, cleft to please her Prince. She subsequently walked in pain, became dumb and was rejected by him. Sabine notes:

I see that it could well be thought that she was telling me, in her own riddling way, of the pains of womanhood. All I can say, is that at the time it did not feel so. No, her voice flashed, with all the assurance of her needle when she sews, fabricating a pretty pattern. (*P* 374)

Byatt, in conversation with Sodr , notes how sewing is seen to operate on a figurative level in literature:

One of the things I enjoy in feminist criticism is the amount of work that's been done on how important works of embroidery and needlework are in women's images of making things. (*SCWW* 72)

and

Sewing is one of the persisting metaphors for female creativity. (*SCWW* 140)

Such an example would be Dickinson's poem 617 (*c* 1862) in which the speaker seems resolved to resume the exercise of her creative capacity which has temporarily been crippled. Here are two verses from the poem:

Leave my Needle in the furrow –
Where I put it down –
I can make the zigzag stitches
Straight – when I am strong –

Till then – dreaming I am sewing
Fetch the seam I missed –
Closer – so I – at my sleeping –
Still surmise I stitch –

However, LaMotte (as one has come to expect of Byatt) uses this metonymic practice (needlework representing women's art) to subvert conventional notions of female creativity. The process of sewing (here as 'weaving') is used according to the accepted conventions of literature by Blanche Glover in her description of everyday life in her journal entry describing the life she shares with LaMotte:

Our days weave together the simple pleasures of daily life, which we should never take for granted, and the higher pleasures of Art and Thought which we may now taste as we please, with none to forbid or criticise. (*P* 45)

As one might expect, when the writer is a man the weaving metaphor is used to describe literary endeavours rather than the everyday activities of living. Ash uses the same metaphor of weaving to describe the activity of the brain:

I find I am at ease with other imagined minds - bringing to life, *restoring* in some sense to vitality, the whole vanished men of other times ... the incessant weaving labour of the marvellous brain inside the skull - making its patterns, its most particular sense of what it sees and learns and believes. (P 158)

The nineteenth-century view that women might manufacture beautiful artefacts which have practical purpose but not works of art, is expressed in Blanche Glover's words quoted by Maud Bailey to Roland Michell:

She came here - to this church - before she made up her mind to jump. She knew the Vicar. 'He suffers me as he suffers many maiden ladies with imagined pain. His church is full of women, who may not speak there, who may embroider little stools but must not presume to offer sacred paintings -' (P 217)

Then this notion that women exercise their ability in order to create serviceable goods is undermined by a heroine in one of LaMotte's *Tales for Innocents*. Roland Michell is flipping through the book reading opening paragraphs of stories and this one offers the reader a most unlikely heroine, who is clearly to be celebrated as LaMotte's story develops:

There was once a poor shoemaker who had three fine strong sons and two pretty daughters and a third, who could do nothing well, who shivered plates and tangled her spinning, who curdled milk, could not get butter to come, nor set a fire so that smoke did not pour into the room, a useless, hopeless, dreaming daughter, to whom her mother would often say that she should try to fend for herself in the wild wood, and then she would know the value of listening to advice, and of doing things properly. And this filled the perverse daughter with a great desire to go even a little way into the wild wood, where there were no plates and no stitching, but might well be a need of such things as she knew she had it in herself to perform. (P 51)

This same subversion of convention is achieved by the narrator in a description of Maud Bailey, for Maud has been forced to bind up her hair by the oppressive influence of her female colleagues, not by restrictive patriarchy. Hissed at a conference, for the audience imagined she had dyed her hair in order to please men ('It's the wrong colour,

you see, no one believes it's natural' (*P* 271)¹⁵), Maud has tied it beneath a headscarf ever since. Hair, akin to fur, is associated with the animal nature and thereby with sensuality. This is presumably why in earlier ages women who had been appropriated by men were required to hide their hair with a headcloth or a wimple (or in later ages to control it in a chignon or bun) and only the maiden wore her hair loose.

Another example of patriarchal control exercised upon the hair is the Hebrew custom described in the Old Testament, of bringing a woman thought to have been unfaithful before the priest to be put under oath so that she might tell the truth. Her humiliation is ensured most particularly by the part of the ritual according to which the priest 'shall loosen her hair' (Numbers 5:18) which, according to their custom, she must ordinarily bind up. In a small and significant ceremony, Maud Bailey acquiesces to timid twentieth-century Roland Michell's inarticulate request ('You should let it out ... because, because ...' (*P* 271)) that she free her hair.

Maud has felt obliged to constrict her hair to appease her feminist colleagues, rather than men operating within any patriarchal system. It is a man who asks her to set her hair free: a man alert to feminist attitudes and interpretations of literature. Roland does not view Maud Bailey as a trophy blonde; he longs to see her hair liberated just as he is

¹⁵ Fergus Wolff teases Maud with this poem, dedicated by Yeats to Anne Gregory. His aggression is suggested by the indication that he quotes it 'at her' (*P* 57): 'Never shall a young man/Thrown into despair/By those great honey-coloured/Ramparts at your ear/Love you for yourself alone/And not your yellow hair.' Wolff presumably shares the acerbic tone which Warner attributes the voice in the poem (*FBB* 366). Yellow, she suggests, is associated with devilment, blonde with goodness and purity. Wolff, despite his taunting tone, is every bit as captivated by Maud's hair as is the speaker in the Yeats poem. The poem continues:

'But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carròt,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.'

'I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.'

willing to accept Maud as a liberated twentieth-century woman who jealously guards the advances she has gained.

Roland now invites Maud to set herself free from female oppression, which involves pulling apart the 'art' of her hairstyle which has been constructed, plaited, woven as women of previous generations have done, their artistic endeavours restricted to the sphere of the domestic and the personal. The italics in the following extract are mine:

He waited. Maud untied the head-square. The segments of the plaits were ... glossy with *constricted life*. Roland was moved - not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the *rigorous constriction* all that mass had undergone, *to be so structured into repeating patterns*. ...

'Life is so short,' said Roland. 'It has a right to breathe.'

And indeed his feeling was for the hair, *a kind of captive creature*. ...

She began slowly to undo, with *unweaving* fingers, the long, thick braids. Roland watched, intently. There was a final moment when six thick strands, twice three, lay still and formed over her shoulders. And then she put down her head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it. ...

Roland felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping him.

He said, 'That feels better.' (P 272)

One of the privileges of studying the writing of an author who is currently at work, is the constant generation by that author of new material. In 2000 a piece of narrative was published in which Byatt explores both of the images of the artist at work discussed above: women weaving and spider spinning. Invited by editor Philip Terry to contribute to an anthology inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Byatt has explored and mused upon Ovid's account of Arachne, the mortal woman who entered into a contest of weaving skills with the goddess Athene. Within Byatt's narrative, her own piece of writing/weaving/spinning, she specifically connects the spider poetry of both the real-life Emily Dickinson and the fictitious Christabel LaMotte. In his introduction, Terry describes Byatt's contribution:

It should come as no surprise ... that a supremely visual contemporary writer, AS Byatt, should ... take her inspiration, in part, from a painting, Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas* (*The Spinners*), which represents the story of Arachne, told in *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. This is one of a number of Ovidian tales concerning the misfortunes of artists, where Arachne,

through an ill-timed boast, becomes involved in a tapestry-making contest with the goddess Athene. Byatt's mixed-genre narrative, weaving together elements of autobiography, essay, art history and sheer story-telling, makes its own tapestry of interconnected tales. These include the story of Velázquez's painting and of Ovid's Arachne, and other tales involving spiders (both real and literary), forming a kaleidoscopic narrative that is both improvisatory and densely patterned, meticulous and decentred; it no more resembles the tired shape of the traditional story than a spider's web does a piece of 'transfer' embroidery. (*Om* 3)

There are some visually striking aspects of style shared by both LaMotte and Dickinson in the writing of letters and - with dramatic effect - in the poems. There is the extremely long dash incorporated into the poetry as a rhythmic device and in order to create emphasis. In addition to this whimsical practice, both appear to indulge in an eccentric and apparently haphazard use of capital letters; this is also a device to create emphasis. Ash wrote to LaMotte (*P* 200) of his appreciation of the 'stopping and hurrying syntax of your quick thought' which exactly describes Dickinson's style described by Thomas Wentworth Higginson as 'spasmodic' and 'uncontrolled'. All Dickinson's poems and LaMotte's shorter poems are untitled, at a time when titles were fashionable. Five Dickinson poems (of the seven published in her lifetime) appeared anonymously in the *Springfield Republican*, but not before they had been temporarily mangled by male editors who attempted to make her rhythm more regular, clipped her vocabulary and awarded the works inappropriate titles. This treatment must have contributed to the waning of Dickinson's early passion for acknowledgement and publication.

Both poets resort to riddling when their sense of self is threatened. After her first private meeting with Ash and their 'single famished kiss' (*P* 193), LaMotte riddles at some length. She sits at her fireside (her home's hearth and her passion) with burning cheeks. Her sense of reality is of things which 'flicker and shift', are 'all spangle and sparks' (*P* 194). This is accounted for by her emotional state, the firelight and a developing headache. She anticipates her own destruction: 'I shall go up.' All that will remain is 'a smell of burning - a blown smoke'. Ash responds with a pun: he had expected 'a cool denial', not 'a most heated riddling' (*P* 195).

Dickinson's riddling is rather more cryptic as we cannot be sure precisely which issue she is addressing and generally only her side of the correspondence exists. In a letter of 1850 to her friend Jane Humphrey, she describes how she would like in the evenings to whisper many curious things so that she could read in Jane's face what she thinks about 'what I have done, and am doing' (LED 394). She was writing poetry, which fact she did not choose to disclose to others; she was resisting the Christian revival sweeping through her community; she was possibly in love.

I have dared to do strange things – bold things, and have asked no advice from any – I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong ... I could make you tremble for me, and be very much afraid, and wonder how things would end – (LED 394)

This must surely have electrified Jane Humphrey; it has certainly perplexed Dickinson scholars. Dickinson's preference for obscuring truth, whether for dramatic effect or self-protection, is proclaimed in poem 1129 (c 1868):

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise

As lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind –

This admonition brings to mind LaMotte's decision to obscure the truth sought by Ash when he surprised her by his presence at Mrs Lees's seance. LaMotte was attending the seance in an attempt to find relief from the burden of guilt she bore for her role in Blanche Glover's suicide; she instead allows Ash to believe she is seeking contact with the child conceived during their brief liaison, which would suggest that the baby had died. In her final letter to the dying Ash, which he is never to read, she confesses to him that this was her intention.

When I said to you - you have made a murderess of me - I spoke of *poor Blanche*, whose terrible end torments me daily. But I saw you thought I spoke as Gretchen might to Faust. And I thought - with a cold little malice born of my then *extreme sickness* of body and mind - let him think so, then, if he knows me so little, let him wear himself away, *thinking so*. (P 500)

Both poets share a rather arch epistolary style and the crisp humour of unusual phrases. In one letter to her nephew Ned (*LED* 84) Dickinson ridicules her mother's conventional admonition that he be a good boy with the cry 'Obtuse ambition of Grandmamas!' and in another, sent with a tiny pie, she writes: 'You know that pie you stole? Well, this is that pie's brother. Mother told me when I was a boy, that I must turn over a new leaf. I call that the foliage admonition. Shall I commend it to you? EMILY.' This smart rendition ('the foliage admonition') of a tired cliché ('turning over a new leaf') echoes for me LaMotte's reference to 'vegetable aliment' when writing to Ash (*P* 159) on the subject of cucumber sandwiches: 'If all persons to whom I *refused* mere vegetable aliment were so to regale me with intellectual nourishment I should remain obdurate in the matter of sandwiches till all eternity.'

Both poets incorporate their own eccentric versions of literary quotations seamlessly into their letters without acknowledging the source, which is most often Shakespeare or the Bible. In one of LaMotte's letters to Ash there are echoes of the Lady berating her husband in *Macbeth* ('Infirm of purpose!') and the 'still small voice' in which the Lord God spoke to the Old Testament prophet (1 Kings 19:12) and the voice (St John in the New Testament) crying in the wilderness:

How shall I answer you? I have been *abrupt* and *ungracious* - from fear of Infirmity of Purpose, and because I am a voice - a voice that would be still and small - crying plaintively out of a *Whirlwind* - which I may not in Honesty describe to you. (*P* 186)

In her letter to Ash in which she requests the return of 'all my letters without fail' (*P* 88), LaMotte, declaring 'All is indeed at an end', steals a line from Michael Drayton's sonnet *The Parting*, (substituting a 'yes' for Drayton's 'yea') and declares: 'And I am glad, yes, glad with all my heart.' Given that the final rhyming couplet of Drayton's sonnet undermines all his bravura and indicates a willingness to reconcile, her inclusion of a line from this sonnet in her utterly final break with Ash is a particularly refined cruelty.

Although the reader cannot be entirely confident of authorial intention where intertextuality is employed, it becomes clear that this barb would have found its mark

when Ash quotes the rhyming couplet which completes the sonnet in a letter addressed but never sent to LaMotte and found by Ellen Ash after his death.¹⁶

Prohibited from reading for a period by a doctor treating her eyes, Dickinson wrote that on being allowed to read again her 'blood bounded' and 'Shakespear (*sic*) was the first. ... Give me ever to drink of this wine.' (*LED* 669.) She described how she 'devoured the luscious passages. I thought I should tear the leaves out as I turned them.' Of the Bible, she said it 'dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference -'. (*LED* 700.)

At the age of 14 Dickinson wrote to her friend Abiah Root (*LED* 694): 'Excuse my quoting from the Scripture, dear Abiah, for it was so handy in this case I couldn't get along very well without it.' To Joseph Lyman she wrote of a time tentatively viewed as the mid-1850's (*LED* 695): 'Some years after we saw each other last I fell to reading the Old & New Testament. I had known it as an arid book but looking I saw how infinitely wise & merry it is.' Sewall reviews her life-long allusions to the Bible and comments (*LED* 700): 'She experimented with its language, its characters, its stories, its tremendous affirmations with a recklessness and humour quite unbecoming her time and station.' In 1881 she wrote to Mrs Holland (*LED* 698): 'Jacob versus Esau, was a trifle in Litigation, compared to the Skirmish in my Mind.' In 1884 she wrote to friends whom she had refused to see (*LED* 699): 'In all the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, "I was afraid and hid Myself." ' She frequently identified herself with Christ, naming herself Queen or Empress of Calvary and claiming to be 'acquainted with Grief'.

Although vast numbers of Emily Dickinson's letters were burned on her death by her sister Lavinia who understood this to be to what Emily required of her, many survive and have been used as a source for Dickinson scholars to patch together some idea of this reclusive woman's life. A number of these letters were published in 1924 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, daughter of Emily's brother Austin. Her volume is entitled *The Life*

¹⁶ 'Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,

From death to life, thou might'st him yet recover.' (*P* 456)

Ash has already noted the inevitable expiration of their love and has the grace to point out that he is not advocating its revival but using the sonnet 'only for the pleasure of the aptness of quoting'.

and *Letters of Emily Dickinson* and the letters are introduced by an unctious and rhapsodic commentary which attests to 'the loveliness of her immortal atmosphere' (39) and which describes her forays out of her seclusion during Commencement Week as a time when she 'measured her wit and poured her wine amid much excitement and applause from those fortunate enough to get near her' (42). Bianchi has clearly recast her memories of her eccentric aunt in the light of her posthumous fame.

However, despite this rather rosy recall of her aunt's life and presence (especially as her immediate family was unaware of the scope and quality of the poet's work during her lifetime), Bianchi does have facility with language. Two allusions in particular are striking: the Biblical image of Mary and Martha and the image of the Lady of Shalott, drawn from Tennyson's rendering of the Arthurian legend. On page 14 of her volume, Bianchi declares that Emily and her younger sister Lavinia 'were so vividly Martha and Mary ... : Lavinia with her wearing rectitude in household affairs, Emily with her sublime disregard of all detail; one living in the seen, the other in the unseen and scarcely to be imagined.' Christabel LaMotte and Blanche Glover choose exactly this parable to describe their own co-existence in Bethany Cottage, which is a counter-patriarchal retreat. However, both women are artists: neither is wholly a Mary nor a Martha. In a letter to Ash LaMotte describes

our *Bethany* cottage - ... to us Females, it was a place wherein we neither *served* nor *were served* - poor Martha was cumbered with much serving - and was sharp with her sister Mary who sat at His Feet and heard His Word and chose the one thing needful. ... We formed a Project - my dear Companion and myself - to make ourselves a Bethany where the work of *all kinds* was carried on in the Spirit of Love and His Laws. (P 186)

Here they create a life in which 'drudgery was Artful' and in which they have 'no Master' and LaMotte has escaped 'cramped Daughterly Devotion to a worldly mother' and Glover 'the genteel Slavery of governessing' (P 187). LaMotte's own sense of her position is that she has 'fought for [her] Autonomy against Family and Society' (P 189). Dickinson's seclusion, I am certain, is just such a refusal to sacrifice her art to the requirements which nineteenth-century society made of a gentlewoman. She expresses this principle in poem 435 (c 1862):

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
 To a discerning Eye –
 Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
 'Tis the Majority
 In this, as All, prevail –
 Assent – and you are sane –
 Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
 And handled with a Chain –

In the same letter to Ash in which she describes life in the Bethany Cottage, LaMotte employs an allusion from Tennyson's version of Arthurian legend:

Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott - with a Narrower Wisdom - who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards - but who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web - to ply an industrious shuttle - to make - something - to close the shutters and the Peephole too - . (P 187)

This is exactly how Bianchi describes the writing of Emily Dickinson. Her family was ignorant of the scope of Dickinson's work. They shared her life unaware that

[a]ll the while she was writing and selecting and tying up her poems in slender packages with a single thread, another Lady of Shalott at her subtler tapestries that were to amaze her readers when her little boat had drifted down to Camelot forever. (LLED 86)

Neither poet married and there is evidence in the life of each of a deep and enduring love for a woman of her own age and sensibilities, which certain feminist critics have used to postulate a lesbian lifestyle. Evidence of homoerotic love has been identified in their poetry as a result.

The role of Blanche Glover in LaMotte's life is open to speculation. I believe it was a physical relationship of love. When Ash first threatens the tranquillity of the Bethany Cottage, Blanche writes in her diary (P 47): 'Where is our frankness of intercourse? Where the small, unspeakable things we used to share in quiet harmony?' Ash, with his enquiring mind, speculates about a lesbian relationship after his first sexual contact with LaMotte:

In the morning, washing, he found traces of blood on his thighs. He had thought, the ultimate things, she did *not* know, and here was ancient proof. He stood, sponge in hand, and puzzled over her. Such delicate skills, such informed desire, and yet a virgin. There were possibilities,

of which the most obvious was to him slightly repugnant, and then, when he thought about it with determination, interesting, too. He could never ask. To show speculation, or even curiosity, would be to lose her. Then and there. (P 284-5)

Blanche's evident jealousy and her suicide also suggest the reaction of a lover who has been betrayed rather than a companion who believes her security is threatened. The anguish and perturbation of LaMotte which we glimpse in the account of the seance (described by Ash) and in some of her poetry written in the years after the death of Blanche also suggest that the relationship was one of mutual passion and commitment.

Further proof is provided by the untitled poem with which Chapter Twenty opens. Ash surprised LaMotte with his presence at the seance which she attended in a desperate bid to find Blanche: such a reunion of living person and ghost is what the speaker in the poem imagines. In the poem the ghost is a woman, for she might wear a 'gown' or 'plumey hat'. That the ghost is a lover is suggested by the tender gesture of affection displayed by the speaker during her life ('A trick of a wrist/Loved then ... /Caught at and kist') and by the description of her 'marbling nakedness' which is to be met by the speaker 'naked and bold'. The constant references to the colour white (the 'Window's white cross', the 'white marbling nakedness' and the 'white mouths') also point to Blanche, for 'blanche' is French for 'white':

I press my palms on
Window's white cross
Is that Your dark Form
Beyond the glass?

How do they come who haunt us
In gown or plumey hat
Or white marbling nakedness
Frozen - is it - That?

Their remembrances haunt us
A trick of a wrist
Loved then - automatic -
Caught at and kist

Gone now to what melting
Of flesh and bone
Infinite Graces
Bundled - in One

Do not walk lonely
 Out in the cold
 I will come to you
 Naked and bold

And your sharp fingers
 Featly might pick
 Flesh from my moist bones
 Touch at the quick -

My warm your cold's food -
 Your chill breath my air
 When our white mouths meet
 It mingles - there -

(P 383)

Susan Gilbert Dickinson, friend and then sister-in-law, seems to have been deeply and romantically loved by Emily Dickinson. The lifetime's length of poems and letters addressed to Susan attest to a passionate and enduring love. Poem 1401 (c 1877) proclaims:

To own a Susan of my own
 Is of itself a Bliss -
 Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
 Continue me in this!

Poem 1529, tentatively dated 1881, is regarded as a summation of a lifetime's relationship with Susan:

'Tis Seasons since the Dimpled War
 In which we each were Conqueror
 And each of us were slain
 And Centuries 'twill be and more
 Another Massacre before
 So modest and so vain—
 Without a Formula we fought
 Each was to each the Pink Redoubt—

The choice of the word 'pink' might be thought to reflect a relationship between two women. The colour, however, has far more interesting connotations for Dickinson. From poem 1527 (c 1881), a contemplation of a dead friend or acquaintance, we perceive that the poet associates flesh with pink:

Oh give it Motion - deck it sweet
 With Artery and Vein -
 Upon its fastened Lips lay words -
 Affiance it again
 To that Pink stranger we call Dust -
 Acquainted more with that
 Than with this horizontal one
 That will not lift its Hat -

In an eerie dovetail between real life and fiction, LaMotte writes in a letter to Mortimer Cropper's ancestress (P 389) of her search for Blanche Glover by means of contact with the spiritual world, using just this Dickinsonian imagery of dust and, most surprisingly, also of wheat. (See the analysis of Dickinson's reference to an 'Ear' of wheat in poem 791 on page 60.) She writes using riddles the reader is in a position to unravel, although Mrs Cropper is not. She longs for the physical presence of Blanche Glover. Her 'Desire', 'the Substance' of which she longs for, is expressed as 'A crumb, Mrs Cropper, of living dust, in my hand. A crumb. So far denied ...'. She longs for the 'unspeakable Grace' of 'Clasping' flesh which, she speculates, might be 'Orient and immortal wheat' for 'Dust falls from us daily as we walk, dust of us, lives a little in the air and is Trodden - we sweep away - Parts of Ourselves - and shall all these - jots and omicra - *cohaere*? O we die daily - and there - is it all reckoned and gathered, husks restored to gloss and bloom?' Here are three important Dickinson images used to describe the physical body of LaMotte's close friend: dust (flesh); a crumb (flesh; talent; poetry?) and wheat (poetry/fame/productivity/growth/flesh?).

Sewall discounts the popular notion of a failed love affair having driven Dickinson into seclusion, preferring her sister Lavinia's view that her withdrawal was 'only a happen': a gradual development arising out of 'domestic cares and the needs of her own temperament' (LED 448). It therefore seems that Dickinson would share LaMotte's view, expressed in a letter to Ash (P 137), that solitude, for women, is a form of protection which 'keeps us very safe - within its confines we are free in a way you, who have freedom to range the word, do not need to imagine'. The lives of both LaMotte and Dickinson therefore seem to demonstrate the same startling paradox: self-imposed restrictions secure personal freedom.

Late twentieth-century feminist criticism of Dickinson regards Dickinson's love for Susan Gilbert Dickinson as her most important relationship and in consequence identifies a strain of homoeroticism in her poetry. Blackadder expresses scorn for just such speculative feminist scholarship:

They [feminists] haven't any time for Randolph Ash. All they want is to read Ellen's endless journal ... They think Randolph Ash suppressed Ellen's writing and fed off her imagination. They'd have a hard time proving that, I think, if they were interested in proof, which I'm not sure they are. They *know* what there is to find before they've seen it. (P 31)

We read that a critical examination of LaMotte's poetry in 1947 focuses on her 'domestic mysticism' but by the late 1970s the feminists had seized upon her work and homosexuality becomes an issue. 'White Gloves: Blanche Glover: occluded Lesbian sexuality in LaMotte' catches Roland's eye (P 37) in a collection of feminist essays on LaMotte. Leonora Stern, inviting Maud Bailey to present a paper at the Australian meeting of the Sapphic society, writes:

[Y]ou might wish to be more rigorous in your exploration of LaMotte's lesbian sexuality as the empowering force behind her work (I accept that her inhibitions made her characteristically devious and secretive - but you do not give her sufficient credit for the strength with which she does nevertheless obliquely *speak out*.) (P 139)

By the latter half of the twentieth century, the work of an unmarried poet is inevitably scrutinised for (possibly subconscious) homosexual and/or homoerotic feelings. Byatt reflects this in, for example, Leonora Stern's reading of LaMotte. This is, of course, more an index of the cultural and social preoccupations of the latter half of the twentieth century, than a closer approach to biographical truth. We are again alerted to this link between cultural preoccupations and the way people are viewed in the background provided on the academic Beatrice Nest. She held an assistant lectureship at Prince Albert College where the way she was viewed changed with the decades:

Those girls in the 1950s and 1960s had thought of her as motherly. Later generations had assumed she was lesbian, even, ideologically, that she was a repressed and unregenerate lesbian. (P 116)

An example of twentieth-century feminist claims for homoeroticism in Dickinson's poetry is Bennett's pointing to the extensive use of imagery involving small round objects, which she views as genital imagery, the sexual significance of which might not have been apparent to Dickinson for, she argues (*EDWP* 154), 'sexual symbolism, particularly genital symbolism, derives from the deepest levels of the psyche and frequently lies outside conscious control.'

The small round objects (bees, dewes, crumbs, pearls, berries, peas, pebbles, pellets, beads and nuts), by their very repetition, never mind their use in context, would, according to Bennett, represent to Dickinson her subjective awareness of her own female sexuality. There is the small size of these objects (by comparison to the external male member) and the tremendous force contained within them despite their size. Bennett uses poem 791 (c 1863), with its Dickinson-trademark of indeterminate imagery, to illustrate her point:

God gave a Loaf to every Bird—
 But just a Crumb—to Me—
 I dare not eat it—tho' I starve—
 My poignant luxury —

To own it—touch it—
 Prove the feat—that made the Pellet mine—
 Too happy—for my Sparrow's chance—
 For Ampler Coveting—

It might be Famine—all around—
 I could not miss an Ear—
 Such Plenty smiles upon my Board—
 My Garner shows so fair—

I wonder how the Rich—may feel—
 An Indiaman—An Earl—
 I deem that I—with but a Crumb—
 Am Sovereign of them all—

The crumb might refer to her circumscribed life and the paradoxical liberty which it conferred on her, communion with God, or her considerable but unacknowledged powers as a poet. But the imagery which suggests possession ('the feat—that made the Pellet mine -') and the satisfaction of appetite ('Plenty smiles upon my Board') points to a sexual interpretation. Further, this possession and satisfaction gives her a sense of

exultation and power. The 'Ear', presumably an ear of wheat, might then be interpreted as a penis, which she does not require for satisfaction. 'I dare not eat it' might point to love for a woman which cannot be publicly confessed, which might also be an explanation for the warring with her female lover (see poem 1529 quoted on page 56) which is 'Without a Formula' as it is a relationship beyond the bounds of society's acceptance so that there is no example to follow or teaching to receive.

Susan Gilbert Dickinson and poetry were two of the greatest passions in the life of Emily Dickinson. It seems fitting to conclude this comparison of Dickinson and LaMotte with two pieces of Dickinson's writing which use the concept of possession to describe that enduring love and the spiritual riches of her talent. In one of the hundreds of notes which Dickinson addressed to Susan Gilbert Dickinson during her lifetime, she expresses the magnitude of her love in two pithy sentences. She measures her gain in terms of loss: 'To miss you, Sue, is power. The stimulus of Loss makes most Possession mean.' (LED 202.)

The second reference to 'possession' is in poem 855 (c 1864). It is an appropriate conclusion to a discussion of the art of two poets, one real and one fantastical. Exercising, acknowledging, practising such art is declared by Dickinson in this poem to be a *possession* of infinite worth. It is an inheritance, a source of wealth, which cannot be exhausted in a lifetime; a mine which will never cease production:

To own the Art within the Soul
 The Soul to entertain
 With Silence as a Company
 And Festival maintain

Is an unfurnished Circumstance
 Possession is to One
 As an Estate perpetual
 Or a reduceless Mine.

chapter two

Only connect: how fictitious Frederica's identity is fashioned from fiction in AS Byatt's novel *Babel Tower*

AS Byatt has to date completed three novels of her projected tetralogy¹⁷ chronicling the lives of the Potter family whose members (with the exception of Marcus, the only son and a mathematical genius) interpret their lives in the light of the literature which they read and analyse. There are elements of fairy tale, fragments of poetry and extracts from and references to novels within *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985) and *Babel Tower* (1996) which complement their self-conscious realism. Byatt refers to this series of novels in an essay in which she describes her exploration of the relationship between fiction and truth:

My early attempts at fiction were, formally, very concerned with its dangers. ... I saw novelists as consumers. ... And if fiction does not eat up life, reality, truth, it rearranges it so that it is forever unrecognisable except in terms of the fixed form, the set arrangement. (*PM: SW 22*)

Byatt goes on to explain that when, in the 1960s, she set out to write what she described as 'a series of ... self-consciously realist novels about my own time and my own culture', it was because she had learnt from her reading of Proust that a text was able to be supremely mimetic

and at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world. Proust could narrate what was his own life, *beside* his life, more truthfully and more exactly than any autobiographer, biographer or historian, because what he wrote contained his own precise study of the nature of language, of perception, of memory, of what limits and constitutes our vision of things. (*PM:SW 22*)

Byatt continues this line of thought in conversation with writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch in the ICA video production of 'Writers in Conversation'. Michael Levenson

¹⁷ Byatt began to plan all four novels in the series in the 1960s. 'One of the themes which runs through all of them is the shifting relation between language and reality - language and social life, language and ideas. One of my original ideas for the series was that the first and the last should be realist novels ... and that the two central ones should be subtly, not ostentatiously, "experimental" - should take apart the fabric of language and feeling and thought.' (*LBT para 2*)

has described Murdoch as Byatt's 'literary mother'¹⁸: '[t]he two of them alone are enough to count as a distinct contemporary lineage.' It is therefore interesting to compare Byatt's views expressed in discussion with Murdoch in 1985 with the views outlined by Murdoch some two decades earlier. Murdoch described the power of language in an essay entitled 'The Idea of Perfection'¹⁹:

Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril. It is totally misleading to speak, for instance, of 'two cultures', one literary-humane and the other scientific, as if these were of equal status. There is only one culture, of which science, so interesting and so dangerous, is now an important part. But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in *words*. (SG 34)

In 1985 Byatt, in conversation with Murdoch, also argues for the power of language:

We live at a time where there are a great many theories about, as it were, the untrustworthiness of language, the inadequacy of language, and not many theories about the enormous power of it, the enormous accuracy of it, the enormous descriptive energy it has so that you *can* describe a flower or a hospital room and none of your readers will see the same flower in their minds but none of them - if they can read at all - will not see more accurately. We seem to be slightly beleaguered by theories that try to persuade us that this is not the case - that language is not *in* the world. (ICA video)

A discussion follows as to how such theories of language might pose a danger to literature and Byatt illustrates her views with images:

Literature is going to be made into a small thing like a kind of paper flower or a boat which is nothing to do with how you have to conduct your life. The metaphor I always think of it in, is of it as a carpet unrolling in front of you and either you tread on it and it holds or you tread on it and it falls into a kind of void - and I think it holds. I think people can communicate in language. People can get closer to the truth with words. People can say to other people: 'this is how it is' - and be understood. (ICA video)

Byatt clearly shares Murdoch's concern with the moral function of literature. In an essay entitled 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts', Murdoch shares Byatt's

¹⁸ Levenson's essay 'The Religion of Fiction' is included in the 1994 Vintage reprint of Byatt's study of the early novels of Iris Murdoch entitled *Degrees of Freedom*. This reference can be found on page 338.

¹⁹ 'The Idea of Perfection' appeared in the *Yale Review* in 1964. This extract can be found on page 34 of the Ark edition of a collection of Murdoch essays first published in 1970, entitled *The Sovereignty of Good*.

confidence that literature has a bearing on how the reader lives. However, she makes an even more dramatic claim for its power, arguing that 'the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue' (SG 85). Great art, she says,

affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul. It is able to do this partly by virtue of something which it shares with nature: a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness. ... The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe. Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognise, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. (SG 85-6)

In this chapter, *Only connect*, I examine two particular ways in which Byatt deploys literature in *Babel Tower*: first there is the fantasy tale *Babbletower* and fragments of the tale *Flight North*. These tales, embedded in the narrative telling Frederica's story, are read and appreciated by Frederica. She, however, fails to perceive the analogies between her situation and the heroes of these tales (Culvert in *Babbletower* and Arteggall in *Flight North*) which are fiction for her, just as she is fiction for us.

In *Babbletower*, for example, Culvert, the eighteenth-century protagonist, seeks to escape the restrictions of society and convention in order to live in a way more pleasing to himself. Frederica undertakes this same quest in the twentieth century but, because she is trained to analyse and because she is willing to draw on the wisdom of literature (as Arteggall will do in *Flight North*) she will succeed where Culvert fails.

Culvert admits to no sources of inspiration other than his own views and opinions. He is tireless in his efforts to teach his community to think and live as he determines. He works hard committing his ideas to writing and then conveying them to his companions during lengthy public addresses. The medium by which Frederica seeks to make sense of her existence and establish her place in society is literature. At first she sets out to learn by reading and analysing works of fiction (most notably those of Lawrence and Forster) and later she gains insight by writing and teaching.

Next I consider Byatt's use of the elements of fairy tale and fantasy²⁰ to explore the form and construction of her own narrative. Jessica Tiffin points out that

[w]hile undeniably a feminist writer, what Byatt is primarily interested in, above all else, is the nature of storytelling itself. ... This interest in narrative is demonstrated in all her works, but perhaps most strongly through the use of fairy tale. The novel is a powerful tradition of narrative, but fairy tale is older, simpler, more basic, in many ways more potent. Byatt's own controlled and intellectual writing style has a strong affinity for the sparseness of fairy-tale narrative... Fairy tale offers a convention of narrative which is stripped down to an essence of representation ... and which thus exposes ... the artifice and constructedness of narrative. ... By using the conventions of fairy tale, Byatt taps into a storytelling tradition which has always problematised its own relationship with reality - which, indeed, has never pretended to reflect reality. From the traditional opening, 'Once upon a time,' fairy tale continually signals its own constructedness, its own nature as artefact. (GB:NE 1-2)

Both *Babbletower: A Story for the Children of our Time*, an apparently complete tale which threads its way through the text of *Babel Tower*, and elements of fairy tale embedded in the framing text, comment on the intellectual and spiritual development of Frederica. Therefore, before embarking on a consideration of these specific aspects of the novel, it is necessary to survey Frederica's emotional and intellectual development as it evolves through *Babel Tower* and the two novels which precede it.

Babel Tower enables the reader to observe the double process of the self-conscious development of a character (Frederica) 'perceiving and inventing'²¹ herself through her reading, writing and teaching of fiction just as the narration which unfolds her is 'perceiving and inventing' reality. *Babel Tower* is written in the present tense and the action of the novel is most often perceived through Frederica's consciousness. She is a careful and critical reader of fiction and she attempts to apply what she learns to lived reality. She perceives that her random experiences and observations cannot be connected and manipulated as a novelist orders and shapes a story; instead she must devise a strategy for the ordering and storing of what she learns in order to record

²⁰ In an article published on the internet, Byatt declares 'unreal narrative' to be an essential component of a great novel: 'Fairy stories are related to dreams, which are maybe most people's first experience of unreal narrative, and to myths. Realism is related to explanations and orderings - the tale of the man in the bar who tells you the story of his life, the historian who explains the decisions of generals and the decline of economies. Great novels, I believe, always draw on both ways of telling, both ways of seeing.' (FS:DNE para 1)

²¹ Byatt describes how a text can be realist and at the same time conscious that it is 'perceiving and inventing' its world in an essay published in the collection entitled *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* on page 22.

things truly and selflessly. The technique which Frederica develops, and the term upon which she settles to name it, satisfy her: laminations.

Frederica's development of this private image begins on a day on which she 'snarled at everyone, postured and boasted' (*VG* 201); she is a schoolgirl with two major preoccupations: preparation for A-level English examinations and a determination to gain sexual experience. Her mother suggests a good long walk and, 'released like a spring', she sets out on an expedition. After a series of minor adventures, she sets about linking the thoughts and events of the day: these include her mental images of her soft white sister Stephanie sexually stimulated by fat black-haired Daniel; a bus trip to the moorland; the sexual advances of Ed, a travelling salesman, and finally her discovery of her father's colleague Alexander and his lover on the backseat of his motor car.

I presume that what Frederica is doing is 'reading' the events of the day and analysing them: processing life, filtering it through her own understanding and experience, which is how she has learned to read fiction. Trained to analyse literature, she views these unrelated events as if they belonged together, as events compiled by an author, read and interpreted by a reader. However, she rejects this ordering of what she has observed, preferring to isolate each event in her thinking:

If you kept them separate, in many ways you saw them more truly. ...

One could let all these facts and things lie alongside each other like laminations, not like growing cells. This laminated knowledge produced a powerful sense of freedom, truthfulness and even selflessness, since the earlier organic and sexual linking by analogy was undoubtedly selfish. It was she ... who had linked these creatures to each other out of her own necessity.

...

She sensed that the idea of lamination could provide both a model of conduct and an aesthetic that might suit herself and prove fruitful. It would, she decided, as in the event it did, take years to work out the implications. (*VG* 209-10)

Frederica is developing a technique of deliberate and controlled fragmentation which will enable her to construct her experience of life as 'an art-form of fragments, juxtaposed not interwoven' (BT 359). She is learning to examine life as Murdoch advocates the examination of art: understanding it to be a form 'which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness'²². The exercise develops from a satisfying mental image into a written discipline, the progress of which is outlined below.

It is interesting to note that the driving force of creativity which cannot be suppressed in the nineteenth-century characters who formed the subject of my first chapter, had its outlet in poems and wonder tales (LaMotte in *Possession: A Romance*) and poems and letters (Emily Dickinson, American poet). Frederica does not want to write or publish fiction, but she does want to work with literature. Her work gives her great satisfaction and delight and slowly extends from lecturing and reading for a publisher to reviewing books for a newspaper and producing a TV column in a women's magazine. We learn from the prologue²³ to *Still Life* (3) that by 1980 (a time some thirteen years beyond the text of *Babel Tower*) she has become a public personality, for she signs the Visitors' Book at an art exhibition 'Frederica Potter, Radio 3 Critics' Forum'. None of these options would have been a possibility for nineteenth-century LaMotte or Dickinson.

Frederica has an urgent desire to talk and write about literature, but not to produce it herself. Assessing a first novel (*A Thing Apart* by Margot Cherry) for publisher Rupert Parrott, she writes:

²² This quotation is taken from Iris Murdoch's essay 'The Idea of Perfection'. See fn 19 *supra*.

²³ The planning of the tetralogy is evidence of Byatt's fine craftsmanship: '*Babel Tower* is a novel about the 1960s, which was planned, more or less, in the 1960s, and not written until the 1990s. ... It is the third in a series of four novels, which I started thinking out in the 1960s.' (I BT para 1). The prologues of the first and second novels provide us with evidence of Frederica's personal happiness and success beyond the action of *Babel Tower*. In the prologue to the second novel, *Still Life*, Alexander Wedderburn is waiting for Frederica to meet him at a Van Gogh exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts: 'She had suggested that they look at Van Gogh together, setting up another form of repetition, deliberate, contrived and aesthetic.' (SL 1) The 'repetition' which Wedderburn contemplates is an experience of creativity and artwork shared with Frederica decades earlier. The reader, however, is aware that the prologue itself is a repetition by the author of the prologue of the *The Virgin in the Garden*, the first novel, in which Wedderburn waits for Frederica at an exhibition, and observes her progression up a great flight of stairs to meet him. This too is a 'repetition, deliberate, contrived and aesthetic', proof of Byatt's artistry.

This is the sort of novel every young woman at university reading English imagines she can write - though most ['most of us' Frederica writes honestly, and then crosses it out in the interest of impartiality and objectivity] - most don't have the stamina or determination actually to write all these hundreds of pages. (BT 153)

When Frederica is required to deal with intimidating lawyers' letters and to record her own sense of the disintegration of her marriage in writing, she needs a controlled means by which she can give vent to her grief, confusion and anger. She chooses writing as her therapy and purchases an exercise book. First she writes: 'Much of the problem appears to be one of vocabulary' (BT 380). A week later, she adds: 'There is no vocabulary to provide the next sentence.' A month later, she suggests: 'Try simplicity. Try describing a day.' She begins, 'I woke up too slowly. My tongue was furry' and as she continues she has to exhort herself: 'Keep going':

We had the usual fight about who takes Leo's shoes because we are late. The usual fight. Describe it. Come on. I can't. This style fills me with a dreadful nausea. People write whole books like this. It looks so clever and it's a cop-out. I wanted to try and think about what had gone wrong and *what I am for* and it is nothing to do with furry mouths or one-verb sentences or noticing things you notice all the time *gracefully*, but as though they hadn't been noticed before, as though they were shocking or surprising. At this rate I could write hundreds of thousands of words and get further and further away from thinking anything out. (BT 381)

Frederica condemns this beginning as abortive. Asking herself of John Oitokar, in writing, 'Do I love him?' she had been filled with distaste for the rows of sentences beginning with the first person singular and had torn up her writing in disgust. This led to a contemplation of 'I' which she found only faintly nauseating and distinctly interesting:

I hate 'I' because when I write, 'I love him,' or 'I am afraid of being confined by him,' the 'I' is a character I am inventing who/which in some sense drains life from me and into artifice and aneloidness. The 'I' of 'I love him' written down is nauseating. The *real* 'I' is the first I of 'I hate I' - the *warrior* - though only until I write that, once I have noticed that, that I who hates 'I' is a real I, it becomes in its turn an artificial I, and the one who notices that that 'I' was artificial too becomes 'real' (what is real) and so *ad infinitum*, like great fleas with lesser fleas upon their backs to bite 'em. Is the lesson, don't I write? It is certainly. don't write 'I'. (BT 382)

Frederica now extends her private metaphor of laminations to include her collection of writing. First the term referred to the way she mentally ordered and stored her impressions and experiences; now the term includes both her own writing, by which she

is learning to give form to her experience, and the writing of others. She collects extracts from novels, poems and newspapers. One day she begins an account of a young woman 'having her long hair, which she has always had, short' (BT 388). 'Two young men are working together at the nape of her neck.' She has slipped into a third-person narration of her life which satisfies her:

This is a distinct improvement on 'I went to the bathroom'. It has no 'I' although it is a true story, and a story about Frederica. It gives her a quite disproportionate aesthetic pleasure, both because the words do not immediately nauseate her, and because she has somehow got it right, has pinned something down. (As the young men had pinned her down, she thinks, wondering if this is part of the pleasure.) The incident had rankled in her memory but is now pleasing and shapely. (BT 388)

Dyatt, in conversation with Ignes Sodré, noted that 'One of the deep and intense pleasures of writing novels is this possibility of dividing yourself up and pushing aspects of yourself out to see where they would go if they were the most important aspect' (SCWW 24). Frederica certainly embodies aspects of the author, for her strong drive to 'be someone' and have work, echoes the experience of her creator, who explained to Sodré:

I don't feel wholly myself unless I am *working on something*. I have a private set of images ... about being stopped off, or not being allowed to act or not being able to move. And the something, the work, is the place where the self meets the outside world. (SCWW 112-3)

In *The Virgin in the Garden* (421) Frederica shares her creator's anxiety about the condition of being a woman which seems to be an 'awful either/or': 'Either love, passion, sex and those things, or the life of the mind, ambition, solitude, the others'. She has fears about exercising her ability, but no doubt about its existence. As a schoolgirl, she had meditated on her potential:

Privately, Frederica thought it a terrible strain to live with the knowledge that you were possessed of the force and scope of Frederica Potter, especially before you'd decided exactly where to apply this force. (VC 48)

Once she has achieved A-level results 'so extraordinarily excellent that it was momentarily hard to credit them' (VC 376) she cried out in triumph:

"... I can do anything, I can do anything better than anyone, I can do ..." (VC 376)

Byatt, at Frederica's age, lived with Frederica's fear that she would encounter male resistance to her genius. In discussion with Sodr  (SCWW 100-101) she describes the anxiety she once felt: 'Although I've had a good education and I've had chances and I might do it, nevertheless, there is this sense of what to be a woman is, that is imposed upon you, that doesn't include being a great artist.'

One of the ways in which Frederica exerts herself is in her single-minded pursuit of sexual knowledge without the accompaniment of emotion. When she does finally secure an opportunity to yield up her virginity (it is a perfunctory and mechanical performance practised upon her by a friend and fellow actor, Edmund Wilkie) she measures her experience against what she has read. She had felt 'vague flickers and ripples of turmoil' (VG 420) and thought 'with a moment of nausea, of Lawrence's descriptions of Constance Chatterley's florid spreading circles of satisfaction'. When Wilkie has done, he notes: 'You didn't come.' Although Frederica apologises, 'She did not quite know,' we are told, 'despite earlier thoughts about Lady Chatterley, what he meant'. It is with Nigel Reiver, whom she marries, that Frederica learns desire. It is a lesson she resents because

[t]hat destroyed something in me: a separateness that was a strength. But I did want to *know*. To know, yes, but not to be *fused* with someone else. The idea is, and was, a little sickening. I am a separate being. (BT 311)

In *Still Life* (207-8) the subconscious influence of Frederica's reading is revealed when, as a Cambridge undergraduate, she fancies herself in love with a lecturer, Raphael Faber. Byatt analyses the sociological, psychological and aesthetic reasons for how and why she fell in love. Finally she turns to the mythic, which has been fashioned largely by Frederica's reading:

As a girl she had put herself to sleep at night by telling herself an endless tale, living a myth. In this myth she walked endlessly alone in a wild wood, accompanied by animals - lions, panthers, leopards, wild horses, gazelles. The animals were her people. In the myth she was the one who turned bush fires and found water, solved disputes, bandaged wounds, ran at the head of the gracefully bounding pack through dappled clearings. She wore always a floating pink garment and white veiling with roses, the original of which she discovered, shocked, at the age of thirty-five, on a hand-painted plate which was one of Winifred's few heirlooms and

depicted a buxom blonde nymph suspended on a crag with her hand resting on an exiguous bush, and behind her blue sky and flowing clouds. ... Later, maybe when she was eight or nine, the male figure appeared in the forest, with Raphael Faber's fine, dark good looks and an incompatible set of character traits, derived from Mr Rochester, the sad and sinful Lancelot du Lac, Athos the mournful Musketeer and other fictive innocent rakes. The Knight was beautiful but fallible and often in need of rescue. When rescued (as Lancelot was rescued by the Lily Maid of Astolat, as Artegall was rescued by Britomart) he would become strong again, a little cruel, intent only on his own purposes. The Lady would grieve: the Knight would be ambushed, by Morgan Le Fay, by Irish peasantry, by wizards, and would again helplessly need rescue. The composite Knight of Frederica's early myths, even more than the Renaissance-Georgian rake of her adolescence, had Raphael Faber's face. How had it been called up or constructed? Was it the male version of her early solipsist self, the same and yet different? I think not: I think it was put together out of floating cultural clichés. It was dark and lean because these qualities went with a delightful wickedness, they had Satanic and Byronic overtones. It was also 'sensitive'. Its opposite was square blond good health, honour, steadfastness which formed no part of Frederica's female dramas. (SL 207-8)

The beast has been used for centuries to represent the Other and his appetite. In the fairy-tale formula the beast represents the male lover (mysterious, threatening, unknown) and Beauty is the questor who must discover his true nature which will be annihilated (if bad) or accepted (if good). However, Frederica's use of the imagery of beasts has embraced a development made in literature written by women for women in the middle years of the twentieth century: the beast is acknowledged as existing within Beauty. In the late 1930s and early 1940s the surrealist author and artist Leonora Carrington, in her tales and self-portraits, represented her subject or herself with or as a beast. 'Generally speaking,' says Warner (*FBB* 384), 'her beast represents the inner dynamic of desire, creativity, self-expression inside her heroines' spirits, which is so often crushed by conventional forces.'

One of Carrington's tales ('As they rode along the edge ...') corresponds to Frederica's private myth: the heroine, Virginia Fur, lives in the forest through which she travels on a wheel at the head of a procession of a hundred cats. In her private fiction, Frederica is always central and always powerful, whether it is animals or the Knight whose safety requires her intervention. The waywardness and deviation of her hero is essential to his attraction. However, when she marries such a man and becomes the mother of his child, the reality is that she can exercise control over neither him nor her own life. Now it is she who is in need of rescue, instead of being the strong saviour.

It is after university and marriage and when she becomes a teacher that Frederica, from a position of maturity and experience, begins to examine the life of literature, rather than employing it as a medium to understand her own life. As she lectures her adult extra-mural class, Frederica is aware that their approach to the novels differs from that of her own and her fellow students at university, for she and they searched in fiction for assistance in the business of living:

The adult students are unlike the professional students. They desire knowledge and they come from what they think of as the real world, of work, above all, but also of things lived through, marriage, birth, death, success, failure, which are all phantasms to young students trying to find their shapes in the pages of books. The adults are inclined to measure the books against life and find them wanting. (BT 222)

It is interesting to note that as Frederica works alternately on the preparation of her lectures and on notes which she is making for her divorce lawyer, she appears to have learnt to extricate herself from her reading. She is now able to analyse and question what she reads instead of accepting it uncritically and applying it directly to her own life. She applies these same analytical skills to the subjective notes which she is making on the reasons for the breakdown of her marriage.

She decides that she may well have chosen to lecture on love and marriage in Forster (*Howards End*) and Lawrence (*Women in Love*) 'because she is snarled in the death of marriage and the end of love'. Working on her lecture, she writes:

Margaret Schlegel's credo is 'only connect' but she has to admit failure. Rupert Birkin spends most of *Women in Love* vilifying 'connection' and expressing intemperate suspicion of and antagonism to the word 'love'. But he ends in a mystical vision of oneness and connectedness, beyond language. (BT 306)

She recognises that she married Nigel Reiver 'because I was beglamoured by Margaret Schlegel, because I was a reader, dear Reader' (BT 308) so that her marriage was 'partly a product of the power of these books' (BT 310). It is intriguing that it is only when Frederica develops her practice of cutting up text, rearranging it and reading the resulting nonsense, that she makes a closer approach to the truth of the 'complicated connections between literature and life' (BT 310). She makes cut-ups of a letter from

Nigel's solicitor and from Forster's 'adjuration to connect' and Lawrence's 'ode to Oneness' (BT 383). These please her and lead her to the realisation that she is unjustly accusing Forster and Lawrence of leading her to marry Nigel out of a desire for Union of Opposites, connection, whereas in fact she married him in order to keep things separate:

I think I thought that because he was rich, I wouldn't have to be a housewife like my mother. I thought all the other parts of myself could go on being what they were, and marrying Nigel would deal with negotiating sex, and with not being a housewife. ... But the desire to Only Connect, the romantic bit, that was there *too*, we are a mixture of impulses. (BT 384)

Having examined Frederica's emotional and intellectual development which evolves as a result of her own reading, writing and interpreting, I turn now to elements of fairy tale and fantasy within the text of *Babel Tower* and what the reader is invited to infer from them about Frederica's development.

Babel Tower abounds in fairy tales and fantasy. There is Frederica's reading of Tolkien to Leo; Richmond Bly's poorly written fantastical tale reviewed by Frederica in which she notes echoes of *The Hobbit* and *The Wizard of Oz*, and there is *Flight North*, Agatha Mond's beautifully crafted and engrossing tale of the adventures of the prince and his page. Many of these stories involve suspense and escape which echo Frederica's own fairy tale turned on its head: married to the prince of the moated grange and having produced an heir, she has to escape by night with the help of her friends after which she embarks on an adventure with survival as her goal. Predominant amongst all these extracts from fairy tale and fantasy are the lengthy extracts from *Babbletower* interleaved into Frederica's story.

We are offered various views on the exact genre to which *Babbletower* might belong. Author Jude Mason perceives the intertextual nature of his work in its earliest draft versions, identifying elements of fairy tale, allegory and adventure story:

I was always writing the same story. The story about the *group of friends who run away to a better place* and make a better life, a more beautiful life, a freer life, where they can do what they want. It's the story of Cinderella and the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* and the story of *Coral Island*, I suppose. Getting out of the dungeon and the cinders and going to the ball or to heaven and sleeping in feather beds and eating off gold plates. (BT 565)

The nature of *Babbalanza* is succinctly described by Victoria McFarlane:

If every text echoes, alludes to, and is ultimately constituted by other previous texts, it must follow that there is no such thing as literary "originality". Yet the ineluctable fact of intertextuality - although it might well preclude *ab ovo* originality - certainly does not altogether preclude the new or the novel; it simply challenges the author to make the texts of his or her literary predecessors seem "new and first unseen". Intertextuality enjoys just this newness or freshness in its repeated, but infinitely varied, conceptions of seminal tales. It is, in short, the new writing superimposed upon the traces of the old on the surface of its palimpsest. (LL:191 1)

An Jude gained experience, something more sinister entered the world of his creation:

Only as I got older and more suspicious I saw that the place you make might turn out to be much like the place you ran away from. (BT 564)

Babbalanza is, therefore, 'a grim grown-up book about childish fantasy. And about grown-up fantasy. It is also a grown-up fantasy itself' (BT 566). When Jude Mason and his publishers are put on trial for the publication of obscene material, their counsel chooses to designate *Babbalanza* as fairy tale:

If we are to ban all books that might encourage monsters to be monstrous we should start with the Brothers Grimm and the giant who cries fee-fo-fo-foo, I smell the blood of an Englishman. Because some people in some places have ground up bones and made bread we mustn't forbid fairy tales. And the eminently sensible Mrs Pratt has told us that that is what *Babbalanza* is - a fairy tale. (BT 590)

Babbalanza is given the more satisfactory label of 'Fable' and Jude a 'Fabulator' in a review by Anthony Burgess²⁴ which is reported in the narration:

In the battle between St Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, who believed that fallen man was naturally evil, and Pelagius, the hopeful Hibernian heretic who believed that man could by free will and reasonable exercise of virtue achieve salvation, who, asked Burgess, is not instinctively on the side of Pelagius? And who, who ponders long and deeply, does not come to fear, to accept, that the grim Bishop was nevertheless in the light of it, that there is some quasi-mechanical system of destructiveness, betrayal, cruelty, in which we are entrapped, however we struggle?

Jude Mason, says Burgess, is that new kind of 1960s artist, the Fabulator. His Fable enacts the battle between Augustine and Pelagius but in a society more like the post-Revolutionary France, where the sardonic Marquis de Sade promulgated his theories of freedom and terror, a

²⁴ Richard Todd (ASB 77) has noted of Byron that '[n]o contemporary English novelist so palpably blurs the distinction between *real* "real people" and "images" ' which "casts fascinating light on the complex relationship between fact and fiction". Burgess is, of course, a prolific author of the twentieth century whose artistic output includes criticism, scripts, translations, lyrics and three symphonies.

runegade Augustinian, where the 'sweetly dotty' Charles Fourier constructed a Utopian vision of Harmony ... Jude Mason's people, says Burgess, are trapped in their Projector's Fourierist Utopian project which is a mechanical conveyor-belt to Sadeian subways and dungeons. (BT 42.1-2)

At the obscenity trial, evidence is given by Professor Marie-France Smith who believes that Jude has 'a very wide acquaintance with French thought, with French controversy, at the time of the Revolution and later, about how far human beings should be free and how far it was necessary for them to be restrained' (BT 543). She explains the metaphor which gives *Babbletower* (and *Babel Tower*) its title and identifies Jude's intertextual borrowings:

La Tour Bruyarde translates as the noisy, or shouting, or howling tower - the word 'bruyant' suggests the noise made by hound dogs. It is an image of the Tower of Babel which was constructed to displace God from Heaven, and was punished for its presumption by having a spirit of discord sent amongst its members, so that their languages were confused, they could no longer understand each other. It is a communal enterprise, set against the Authority of God. The *Babbletower* community is Fourier's Nouveau Monde Amoureux. It is also Sade's Château de Silling, where the libérrines cut the bridge that connects them to the outer world, so as to perform their terrible deeds. (BT 544)

I believe that Hyatt is using *Babbletower* within *Babel Tower* to comment on Frederica's development just as she has used 'The Glass Coffin' to provide indirect commentary on Christabel LaMotte's experience in *Possession*. Within *Babbletower* it is not the long-haired and seductive Lady Roseace who is red-haired Frederica's fantastical counterpart (even though the Lady Roseace is, like Frederica, resourceful and ruthless), as the reader might expect on a superficial reading of the tale. Richard Todd considers this possibility:

The experienced reader will also register that, because the extracts from *Babbletower* are embedded in *Babel Tower*, connections might be expected, and indeed cannot be avoided. Thus La Tour Bruyarde becomes a fantastic version of Bran House, each in its own way unprejudiced; the psychogomp Culvert becomes a fantastic version of the dominant Nigel Reiver; and Lady Roseace's firing of the *Babbletower* Utopia and attempting to escape figures Frederica's ill-fated attempts to rid herself of Nigel. But, of course, the parallels are not exact: it is more as though *Babbletower*, its world, and the issues it raises provide a prattling commentary on the worlds inhabited by and the issues facing the other characters in the braided construct that makes up *Babel Tower*. (ASB 71-2)

I believe that it is not the Lady Roseace but rather the self-assertive and domineering Culvert whose escape from oppression and whose subsequent experiments in social

engineering *even* Frederica's struggle to extricate herself from her marriage and establish an independent and separate life. Culvert expresses his intention (BT 12 'we shall enter into the possession of our own lives and our own ways of living') which is exactly the course upon which Frederica has determined.

Culvert (in *Babbletower*) and Frederica (in *Babel Tower*) both effect a secret and hasty escape from certain death. Culvert, an aristocrat, flees from a violent physical death 'at night, in haste and secrecy' (BT 10). Frederica has married for sensuous happiness and finds herself trapped in a marriage which threatens her with the annihilation of her identity. To escape this spiritual and intellectual death, she must also steal away at night and in secret. It is not only death (whether physical or intellectual) which Culvert and Frederica seek to evade but also the restraints imposed by society which prevent them from living as they wish. They do not set themselves against the authority of God, but against the authority of society which has established the order of religion, patriarchy, marriage and family.

There is one very obvious manner in which the stories of Frederica and Culvert are not congruent. Colonel Grim notes that Culvert's '*name is evergreen, but his taste runs to flame and blood*' (BT 263). Frederica, as noted below, is constantly associated with fire but she has no taste for blood. She seeks to escape the violence and bloodletting of her marriage. This divergence in taste and nature might be accounted for by the sex of each. Culvert is excited by violence and cruelty and, like other men, will spill blood as an expression of aggression.

Frederica sheds blood too, but it is the involuntary shedding of her own blood by her body which is designed to conceive and nurture life. Edmund Wilke's letter (BT 83: "do you remember ... a quite *bloody* hotel in Scarborough ...") reminds her of her 'unforgettable deforation' (BT 93) after which she bled profusely. As a mother she is devoted to her child, even though she views him as 'a person who appears sometimes to be *using* her life and drinking her life-blood' (BT 475). During a sexual encounter

between Frederica and John Ottokar, free from the fear of pregnancy (for Frederica is using a contraceptive), each is marked by her blood:

When they pull away in the morning light, she touches his skin and finds it is bloody; she touches her own, and her fingertip is scarlet. 'Look at us,' she says. They are like painted savages, streaked and smeared with warm and drying blood, spread thin like ruddy paint, in whorls and runnels, palm-prints and traced loin-cloths, which reflect each other, body and body. It is her own blood, the blood of the seeping, 'break-through' bleeding produced by the Pill in odd goutts and sprinklings, nothing to do with the old rhythms of fertility. (BT 433)

When Culvert playacts the process of giving birth he perverts and degrades the role he plays. He intends to adopt the role of the Woman clothed with the Sun (one of the personae attributed to the Virgin Mary) and, during the course of a Rite practised by his community, to give birth to the new year. However on the night of the celebration, he appears in the scarlet nails and golden locks of the Whore of Babylon and gives birth only once he has been whipped until he bleeds.

The child to whom Frederica has given birth, a son, appears to share the male taste for perversion and violence:

Leo develops a passion for the story of Tommy Brock and Mr Tod. Frederica tries to read him other things, *Thomas the Tank Engine*, more Hobbits, but night after night he insists on coming back to this rather unsavoury tale. He can recite large parts of it, and particularly enjoys the *dénouement*, when the fox believes he has killed the badger with a trap. (BT 104)

'I love Tommy Brock and Mr Tod,' Leo cries:

'We will have them tomorrow too. I love it when they do horrible things to each other. They are horrible people and they do horrible things and everything is *horrible* ... ' (BT 105)

Apart from her son's appetite for horror, it is remarkable how much violence and bloodshed intrudes upon Frederica's life: always practised by, or a source of fascination to, the men who surround her. Her husband 'takes hold of the red hair in the nape of her neck, and gives it a sharp professional twist. The pain is excruciating. Frederica hears various bones in her neck crack and shift.' He then strikes her (BT 89) 'in the small of the back, again causing major pain with minimal effort'. Nigel later crushes her father's head between a door and a wall (BT 157) and punches her brother-in-law

Daniel in the face (BT 198). Jude Mason is beaten up in a pub; he tells Daniel how the locals

took me by the hair and by the seat of my trousers and inflicted much local damage on my person with their boots, sweet Daniel, their boots and a bicycle chain and a broken pint glass ... (BT 196)

Jude Mason is sexually stimulated by violence and expresses the desire to be 'bashed to smithereens and shards and molecules and pulp and broth' (BT 196) by Daniel, who refuses to be provoked into a response to the inappropriate invitation. Undeterred, Jude invites Daniel to imagine him licking his wounds 'tongue-tip touching blood.' When Frederica later expresses a desire to lick her wounds (BT 218) she speaks entirely figuratively.

The argument that Culvert's story is intended to echo aspects of Frederica's story is strengthened by the striking similarities in the environment and experiences of each, even though Frederica escapes to the sophistication of a twentieth-century city while Culvert retires to a family estate in the wilderness and their stories are set more than 170 years apart. There is, for example, Frederica's extra-mural teaching in an old Catholic elementary school with its basement canteen: Our Lady of Sorrows. She will discover much about herself as she learns to teach. Culvert fails to recognise and avail himself of an opportunity to learn about himself when he encounters, in the basement of one of his towers, his old nurse, the midwife at his birth, spinning in the Lady Chapel amidst paintings of the suffering of the mother of Christ.

An echo of the physical environment of the one story in the other occurs when Frederica needs to locate Jude Mason so that he can sign a form in order to enter an appeal against the banning of his tale *Babbletower*. She establishes that he lives at the top of a tower where no one else wishes to live as a child fell from the tower and died (BT 606). Culvert's La Tour Bruyarde comprises several towers, and the Lady Mavis fell to her death from one of them, with her child Felicitas.

Towers unites Culvert and Frederica's stories in an entirely functional manner too. In an interview in which she describes the writing of *Babel Tower*, Byatt explains how she intends 'language towers' to pervade her novel and how Jude Mason's story (and therefore Culvert's story) and Frederica's marriage are to be tried in court and thereby diminished by language:

I want the Post Office Tower - this novel is haunted by language towers, and the Post Office Tower is a sort of communications tower, isn't it? Then I have stuck a thing called the language tower into the imaginary new University of North Yorkshire, and the students attack this tower. And I've got the trial of an obscure book and a divorce case, and both, as it were, produce a kind of degradation of language, in the sense that the language of the court degrades the language both of the book and of the marriage. (*JF Internet interview*)

Another example of experiences common to both characters is the 'happening' attended by Frederica in the mid-1960s (*BT* 611) which shares many of the elements (swirling costume, for example, and quantities of blood and the music of gongs, zithers and flutes) of Culvert's Rite for the New Year which he develops from the ancient Turn of the Year festivities presided over by the Lord of Misrule. In this Rite Culvert is to play the role of the Woman clothed with the Sun who gives birth to the New Year and wears robes spun from scarlet and white wool (*BT* 263). In the anguished symbolical dream which Frederica has during her divorce hearing she is arrayed in a scarlet and white paper dress which begins to disintegrate (which might suggest how vulnerable motherhood has made her) and she next finds herself indecently exposed, for she is inadequately clothed in red and white ribbons dangling from a band about her waist. (*BT* 521.) In the dream the shredded clothing must suggest how vulnerable she feels as she faces the possibility of separation from her son. The scarlet and white dress was, however, worn and shredded in a manner just as public and dramatic as that staged by Culvert who is whipped into an ecstasy of pain in his scarlet and white robes. In a scene from the verse drama *Astraea* in which Frederica played the princess Elizabeth her clothes were torn by Thomas Seymour in a rough game laced with sexual desire (*KG* 287).

When Culvert institutes the 'topsy-turvy' of all folk' (*BT* 261) in the Rite for the New Year he diabolically chooses for himself the role of the Woman clothed with the Sun,

which is one of the apocalyptic aspects of the Virgin Mary, depictions of whose pain Culvert had noted without flinching in the chapel where he encountered Griva. In his role, he wears not only the white and scarlet robes for which Griva spun the thread, but he covers his own black and gleaming tresses with a wig of long blonde curls (*BT* 266). Blonde hair is associated with wholesome sunshine, light and wheat and so with vitality, goodness, value and fertility - while Culvert is in fact moving towards destruction and death. As Frederica moves from ignorance to experience along the path of suffering through the break-up of her marriage, she cuts her hair as an outward sign of the new independence she has gained, the old sensual but senseless life she has shaken off. In the place of the long flaming locks or the elegant chignon into which she swept her hair when she modelled the designer dress given to her for Christmas, there is 'a shining bronze cap, or helmet, with pointed tongues licking her cheekbones' (*BT* 367). Frederica is the warrior prince performing the labours, solving the puzzles, to achieve the desired goal: the happy ending.

The connection between *Babel Tower* and *Babbletower* is indicated on the first page of the novel; it offers the reader the first of four possible ways in which the story-telling 'might begin' (*BT* 1, 2, 4 and 10). These four beginnings are a postmodern ludic device which invite the reader to celebrate with the author both the power of the imagination which creates fictional worlds and the power of the imagination which engages with those worlds presented in words. It conveys the writer's self-conscious awareness of the process of constructing fiction, an artefact, with language and it encourages the reader to examine the possible fictionality of his or her own reality outside the literary text.

This first page (which stands outside the twenty-one chapters of the novel) carries typographical codes for both *Babel Tower* and *Babbletower* and is the only connective passage. The print size indicates that it is Frederica's story, while a drawing of a shell (which stands where a chapter number otherwise might) suggests that it is Culvert's. Throughout the rest of the novel the sign of the shell and the smaller print size serve to introduce and conclude extracts from *Babbletower*. This proposed beginning presented

on the first page could belong to the eighteenth-century or the twentieth-century story, for it describes a thrush breaking open snail shells in order to reach the soft interior:

It might begin:

The thrush has his anvil or altar on one fallen stone in a heap, gold and grey, roughly squared and shaped, hot in the sun and mossy in the shade. The massive rubble is in a clearing on a high hill. Below is the canopy of the forest. There is a spring, of course, and a little river flowing from it. (BT 1)

The 'massive rubble' reflects the utter ruination and desolation (the closing paragraphs of *Babel Tower* indicate that the Krebs roasted and ate Culvert and his community) of Culvert's La Tour Bruyarde, a vast complex of buildings with a variety of turrets and towers, built on a hill above a forest and near a water source. The presence of a thrush at this site, if indeed that is the setting we are intended to visualise, is perfectly possible, for the Lady Roseace, in her private wanderings, observed the activities of a thrush and appropriated it to herself, saying 'my thrush is making a great song and dance in my hazel coppice' (BT 130). Further on in this tale, the Lady Mavis throws herself from a tower and hits a sharp rock 'like a snail dropped by a thrush' (BT 275) before she bursts apart.

In Frederica's story, Lysgaard-Peacock explains his work with snails to John Ottokar:

'We came here because there is a thrush's anvil here where we collect the broken shells - as you see - and count the numbers, and their changes in pattern.'

There is indeed a large stone in the roadside verge surrounded by smashed fragments of shell, some open and showing the spiral column, gleaming in the centre, some like crushed eggs.

'But the thrushes are diminishing,' says Jacqueline. 'Several of the anvils are abandoned: the thrushes have been killed by the pesticides in the food chain, we think ... the thrushes we study here are still here and still singing and still breaking snails on the anvil - but in many places they are gone...'

Frederica shivers: there is something uncanny in this conversation about man-made death falling silently through air and water and matter ... Frederica turns over the shells collected by Luk Lysgaard-Peacock. She looks at the lovely coils and spirals, the helical houses of the vanished creeping creatures, horned, slimy, glistening, seven-thousand-toothed. (BT 356-7)

The careful reader will note how snails are used to link Frederica's development of a constructive life philosophy with Culvert's development of a destructive one. The small slow-moving snail with its soft body is extremely vulnerable; yet its intricately constructed shell is designed to protect its life. Culvert, teaching by means of lengthy speeches and leading by example, shapes the life of his small community. His intention is to eradicate the influence of 'those *unnatural* institutions - marriage, the family, the patriarchy' (BT 64) for these, he claims, have harmed their natural impulses and inclinations. However, Culvert's 'natural impulses and inclinations' include a lust for death, which he will meet among the stones where the thrushes crush the snail shells in order to eat the soft bodies.

Frederica is in flight from these institutions too, but where Culvert's exploration of freedom leads to sexual licence, torture and murder, Frederica's leads to a healthy sense of her own self-worth and the successful establishment of her independence. She orders her emotional and creative life and finds shelter and security for which Byatt provides a picture in the structured protection of the snail shell. Frederica establishes this order by refining her concept of laminations discussed in detail above. It is the model which she uses to arrange and store her experiences and her reading; its physical outworking is a collection of writings in a notebook, her own and others'. Frederica further establishes order and stability in her life by procuring various stimulating jobs which absorb her energy and provide an income for the support of herself and her son.

By contrast to Frederica's concept of laminations, this strict separation she applies to the skeins of words which she collects, whether they are a record of her own experiences or drawn from her reading of others' writing, Culvert hijacks language for his own ends. In an address delivered to the community in the Theatre of Tongues, Culvert's sixth point for 'discussion', on which he delivers a lengthy monologue, deals with the reworking of language:

How language might in the end need to be reforged and re-invented, for there were no words in the language for many of the pleasurable exercises and human relations he proposed, and such words as there were were perjorative and harsh, carrying with them associations from the old prohibitions and pruriences of priests, patriarchs and pedagogues. Language, cried Culvert, throwing open the damp cavern of his mouth, with its hot quivering tongue and gleaming

teeth, language is a bodily product, a product of our earliest intimacies and desires, from the babble of the infant at the breast to the impassioned discourse of the visionary who tries to speak what is yet unformulated and unshaped. We will remake language in our own images, cried Culvert, with our own kissings and sippings we will make new names for what we will do and be, for the relations between ourselves and the world. (BT 64)

Culvert ignores the warning of the Lady Roseace that it might seem to the community that he believes himself 'to be the master and architect, and not only one of a free and equal society, as they had agreed' (BT 62). He will persist in his endeavour to remake the language and life of the community in the images which he determines and it will prove to be the way to death; by contrast, Frederica's strategy of separation, lamination, will give her a new and successful method for ordering life.

Snails are physically present in Culvert and Frederica's stories where they also function as emblems. Culvert, seeking to entertain himself on a wet grim day, descends a long winding stair and enters a Lady Chapel decorated with three paintings depicting the anguish of Mary whom Culvert appears to see as three separate women, Mothers of Pain. In this chapel, he encounters a ludicrous combination of fairy-tale archetypes and elements and recognises not one: there is a withered half-blind crone (wise woman, fate, fairy godmother, witch, sibyl) who was midwife at his birth, nurse in his childhood, and there is a spinning wheel, a distaff and an apple.

Culvert is not deflected from his purpose by his encounter with Griva, the hag whom he finds in the bowels of his tower. He does not seem unduly interested in her, only in ideas or information she might supply by which he could further his purposes. Psychic survival, it seems, is linked to our ability (learned by reading) to decode archetypes. Culvert might have recognised in Griva (she is spinning a thread from white and scarlet wool) one of the three Fates. Warner paraphrases the *Etymologies* of the seventh-century Isidore of Seville:

The fiction is that there are three Fates, who spin a woollen thread on a distaff, on a spindle and with their fingers, on account of the threefold nature of time: the past, which is already spun and wound onto the spindle; the present, which is drawn between the spinner's fingers; and the future, which lies in the wool twined on the distaff, and which must still be drawn out by the fingers of the spinner onto the spindle, as the present is drawn to the past. (FBB 15)

Culvert is about to prick his finger on the old woman's distaff, the thread wound on which represents the future. Culvert could seize the opportunity to cross-question the Fate and learn of the future but his attention is absorbed in his own concerns. The old woman weaves thread for the garment he will wear when he depicts the Woman clothed with the Sun in a carnival he will organise after her retelling of such festivals in the past. He is about to form this plan which she already knows. When she reveals prophetic knowledge of his future, he might have recognised her as a sibyl. The Sibyl of Cumae, driven underground by the advent of Christianity, continued in hiding her forbidden practices: 'making up stories, passing on information, giving a picture of what the future might hold for her hearers' (*FBB* 3).

At the very least, Culvert ought to have recognised in the old woman the potential for telling stories embedded in which there might be warning or advice. Old women, wise and experienced, were at the centre of the domestic network of information (gathered at the shop, the stall, the street, the sickbed) and information is power. Their unofficial network could alter attitudes, effect alliances and promote interests. Culvert fails to recognise this potential in the hag he encounters. This is all the more peculiar in one who appears to understand the power of story-telling, listening and questioning; in his speech to the community Culvert had proposed

that we regularly meet for story-telling. There may be those among you who suppose story-telling to be primitive and childish, but I say that story-telling is the primal *human* converse, since we are the only animals who look before and after, referring to past events and wisdom, and envisaging the future in the light of these things. I propose that we tell each other, one by one, the true stories of our lives, and this with several ends in view, viz the greater understanding and friendship this will bring about for each of the other, and equally the greater understanding these narratives will give of the true patterns of passions and desires that rule each of our lives. ... And as the narrators become more skilled and trusting, and as the listeners become more subtle in questioning and probing, so shall the stories become more and more truthful ... (*BT* 65)

Griva (nurse and therefore a surrogate mother, as was Snow White's stepmother) eats the apple Culvert offers her which is the action of 'Snow White' in reverse, for it is Culvert who has the wicked stepmother's urge to destroy what he cannot dominate. Griva predicts that he will prick his finger ('Sleeping Beauty') on her distaff with which he is fiddling, which he presently does. Culvert is asleep, like Sleeping Beauty, for his

self-importance and lack of self-awareness prevent him from understanding his role as chief protagonist in the fairy-tale narrative, responsible for the outcome of the story.

Byatt had already, at the time of writing *Babel Tower*, conducted the experiment ('The Story of the Eldest Princess', published in 1994 in the collection of stories *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*) of representing an aspect of her own life and experience as a fairy story. She writes of herself as the eldest princess who understood the personal dangers implicit in her own story: 'She thought, I am in a pattern I know, and I suspect I have no power to break it, and I am going to meet a test and fail it, and spend seven years as a stone.' (*DNE* 48.)

In Byatt's fairy tale the princess carries three injured creatures to the house of an old woman with magical powers. After some discussion, the princess decides to regard the company of the old woman and her array of talking animals as an alternative and entirely acceptable destination and she consequently abandons her Quest. She asks the old woman 'Was that you, ahead of me on the road, in such a hurry?' and is told:

There is always an old woman ahead of you on a journey, and there is always an old woman behind you too, and they are not always the same, and may be fearful or kindly, dangerous or delightful, as the road shifts, and you speed along it. Certainly I was ahead of you, and behind you too, but not only I, and not only as I am now. (*DNE* 71)

The old woman in 'The Story of the Eldest Princess' must surely represent both the sources of wisdom on which a character might draw and the potential for a character to practise and develop personal reserves of wisdom. It is a lesson which the eldest princess understands, for she declares 'I am happy to be here with you as you are now' (*DNE* 72) but it is a lesson which Culvert fails to understand. He encounters the old woman and leaves her with the inspiration he was seeking (an idea for binding the community grown disaffected during the cold and inactivity of winter) but without having initiated any enquiry or adopted any line of thought which might lead him to examine himself and his responsibility within his story. As the old woman in 'The Story of the Eldest Princess' explains, stories which are not histories and which have not happened are 'possible stories, for many things may and do happen, stories change

themselves' (*DNE* 68). Culvert moves with determination towards destruction and remains closed to any opportunity for growth or change.

In the Byatt story 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye', the protagonist, Gillian Perholt, tells the story of Patient Griselda (the tale told by the Clerk in *The Canterbury Tales*) at a conference of narratologists in Ankara. She makes a remark about the marquis Walter in that tale, which exactly reflects the horror implicit in Culvert's role in *Babbletower*:

But the peculiar horror of Patient Griselda ... lies in the narration of the story and Walter's relation to it. The story is terrible because Walter has assumed too many positions in the narration; he is hero, villain, destiny, God and narrator - (*DNE* 120)

Culvert's failure to consider critically his role within his own story translates into a failure to perceive that he is in fact the Lord of Misrule whose role he symbolically adopts by initiating the festivities for which the women of his community wear gourds and codpieces and the men dress as women in skirts with apple-stuffed breasts. The supremacy of the Lord of Misrule is traditionally short-lived; he is toppled from his position at the close of the festival and punished, tortured, possibly killed. In the same way, convention overthrown inevitably reasserts itself. At the close of *Babbletower*, which is the close of *Babel Tower* too, the reader learns that Culvert was roasted and eaten by the Krebs along with the other members of his community. However the percipient reader has guessed long before that Culvert, like the Lord of Misrule, will be - wants to be - toppled, destroyed, killed by the process he has begun. He muses to himself that human beings take pleasure in the observance of the infliction of pain

for we are pleased to imagine, to anticipate, the start of our own blood in fresh wounds, the heat of the sheet of it running along thigh and breastbone, the sting, the smart, the lively writhing of the nerve-ends, this we desire, if truth were told. (*BT* 258)

He observes that the torturers are always satisfied:

As the artist took pleasure, Culvert told himself, pulling his fur robe tighter with a thrill of horrified pleasure in response, pleasure in the infinity of ways of representing the red lips of a wound or the tender bruised mound of a whip-welt. Is this, the analyst of human nature asked himself, the worship of Death or the worship of Beauty and Pleasure? And he answered

himself, to his own satisfaction, the one is the other, and a kind of dark delight invaded his whole frame with a shivering heat, freezing and burning. (BT 258)

In the Lady Chapel upon which Culvert has chanced, snail shells filled with oil are used to light the pictures of pain. Snails are significant because they move freely between the worlds of life and death, suggests the old crone. Snails withdraw into the darkness of their shells and inhabit dim, dank places. The shells of dead snails, by contrast, filled with oil and carrying a wick, provide light. The Feast of Misrule depicts the conquering of the darkness of annihilation by the birth of new life. Culvert will cause this process to be represented by a small naked girl child who steps, covered in blood, from between his legs, bearing a candle. Culvert fails to perceive that his conduct is generating darkness which, according to the conventions of fairy tale and fantasy, the very genre in which he has his being, will have to be overthrown by forces of light. The Tower will be lit by 'brave little snail-lights' (BT 266) and snails will be roasted as part of the traditional festivities.

Snails function as an emblem for the metaphor, discussed above, which Frederica evolves in order to understand and order her own development. To this concept, first conceived in *The Virgin in the Garden* and exercised and developed, to her great satisfaction, in *Babel Tower*, she gives the name 'laminations'. The snail shells are a satisfying picture for her of this intellectual and emotional ordering which seems to her 'the key to power and safety':

Laminations. Keeping things separate. Not linked by metaphor or sex or desire, but separate objects of knowledge, systems of work, or discovery. In her pocket her fingers touch Luk Lysgaard-Peacock's snail shells, two greenish and one striped. Are the stripes laminations, or organic growths? ... She has the first vague premonition of an art-form of fragments, juxtaposed not interwoven, not 'organically' spiralling up like a tree or a shell, but constructed brick by brick, layer by layer, like the Post Office Tower. ... Laminations. Separation. I was thinking about the Virgin Queen, and the power of her solitude and her separation, the fact that her power and her intelligence were dependent upon her solitude and separation. (BT 359)

It is interesting that just as snail shells function as an emblem for both Culvert and Frederica, so too each draws inspiration from a female icon. Frederica feels the need for the solitude and separation in which she believes the Virgin Queen found power, while Culvert looked at depictions of the pain of the Virgin Mary on the occasion when

he is introduced to the concept of the Feast of Misrule which for him will be new birth for the community through his own enjoyment of the infliction of intense pain. The natural evolution of his enjoyment of pain inflicted will culminate in the torture and murder of another, a procedure which he will expect his community to endorse.

Babel Tower recounts Frederica's journey towards self-discovery and her struggle for independence in the face of her failed marriage. Jude Mason's *Babbletower* has provided an inverse analogy for Frederica's story: Culvert and Frederica turn their backs on society and convention and seek a way of living more congenial to each. Culvert's social engineering leads to the death he desired whereas Frederica's restructuring of her life, carried out with compassion for the suffering of her husband and son and an awareness of her own culpability, gives her an opportunity to begin again.

Just as aspects of her quest are reflected in *Babbletower*, so that quest is recast in Agatha Mond's fantasy tale, *Flight North*, which Agatha is in the act of writing as *Babel Tower* unfolds. It tells the tale of Artegall, a prince who grows up in a tower because his country is at war. The tower suggests the isolation experienced by bookish children. The prince reads prodigiously, but has no practical experience. One day the enemy fleet lands and the prince is rescued by a cook's maid, a palace guard and his own page, Mark. Together they journey north to escape capture and the prince's companions expect him to be of no use in the adventures which ensue; instead the knowledge which he has gained from reading proves a constant aid. Agatha explains to Frederica:

I wrote it for bookish children. Like myself, like you. For children despised because they read. To say, you can *learn to live* from books. Not didactically. But the obvious thing would have been to make Mark the ordinary boy triumphant. Whereas I think princes and princesses are what we all are in our minds - to be a prince *is* to be ordinary in a fairy tale- (BT 316)

Both Artegall and Frederica have learned about life by reading and as we read their stories, they are negotiating dangerous terrain having escaped from confinement;

Artegall's journey and the danger he faces are physical while Frederica's journey and dangers are emotional.

At first the links between Frederica's experience and Agatha's story are tenuous. For example, one of Artegall's companions, the cook's maid, is called Dol Throstle. The little bald agent who shadows Frederica, in order to report on her movements to her estranged husband, is Theobald Drossel. His presence passes undetected but he is still a companion of sorts.

However, the connections grow stronger and more obvious. One evening Agatha's reading leads the characters into a deep thicket where they are enclosed in darkness when slushy snow cuts off the light of moon and stars. She has written no more, so the children fall into conversation about the dark; the fictitious setting operates for Frederica as imagery of her own fearful insecurity in the face of her uncertain future:

'I'm not afraid of the dark,' says Leo, resting his red head on Frederica's knee.

Frederica is afraid. She is afraid of the thicket she is in, of what might happen, of losing Leo, of hurting Leo. (BT 326)

In the third (which is the last) extract from this tale, two characters have joined the prince's party. I believe each of these characters - Fraxinius and Dracosilex - represents an aspect of Frederica at this stage in her personal quest for sexual satisfaction and creative fulfilment. The prince and his party have reached the Last Village and an impassable wall of icy rock bars their way. They have adopted Dracosilex, a 'toad-like minor dragon' (BT 395), which can alter its form from stone to reptile. It has latent powers, such as the ability to set fires in wet wood. Fraxinius is 'skeletal thin and gangling' and lies slumped in a corner growing ever paler and drier.

The villagers are laying wood for the Bale Fire which is lit an hour before midnight on the Longest Night. If the Bale Fire burns very bright, it is a sign that there will be a Spring. This year there is sleet and icy rain and it seems improbable that the fire will burn; the villagers are inclined to blame Artegall and his companions for this ill luck and

begin to threaten to do them harm. Dracosilex co-operates and lights the Bale Fire with 'a sinuous noose of what seemed to be liquid flame' (BT 398) and soon the fire is roaring and blazing. Towards dawn, after a night of revelry, the young men begin to leap the flames and perversely decide that Fraxinius, fragile and dry, must be made to jump too. Fraxinius leaps high but falls into the heart of the fire. Fraxinius is set ablaze but as the fire draws energy from him he begins to grow. His muddy hair changes to green tendrils, his arms put out shoots, his legs become trunks. Liquid and green, he strides from the fire towards the impassable rock face which he cracks open, creating a way forward for the prince and his party.

Dracosilex has secured his companions' safety by his ability to generate fire and Fraxinius has been regenerated by burning. Frederica is consistently associated with flame and *Babel Tower* is a record of her regeneration. We see her face 'ablaze' (VG 71) and she is remembered by a friend as 'flaming and ferocious' (BT 18) and by her father's colleague as 'incandescent' (BT 143). Angered by her husband, she 'sees in her mind's eye a woman stepping barefoot across a bed of cinders, trying to find a path between little smouldering hot places, ready to break out in flames' (BT 36); as she grows angrier the 'little smouldering places are flaming here and there, like gas jets. Frederica takes fire' (BT 38).

In Frederica's unconventional and harmonious relationship with John Ottokar Byatt employs, for lust, the age-old imagery of fire. After Agatha's reading of how Dracosilex caused wet wood to blaze, Frederica and Ottokar spend the evening in each other's company. Their desire is unsatisfied because Leo is present, but still 'His skin warms hers and sets it alight' (BT 402) and when he strokes her spine 'the flame lies low, flickers sullenly' (BT 403). Frederica is entirely unsure how this relationship will develop but if her marriage presented her with an impassable rock face which denied her the work and independence for which she had longed, the possibility of a long-term relationship with John Ottokar offers her a crack through which to slip as she moves forward in her search for a lifestyle which satisfies her.

Fraxinius is a picture of Frederica's regeneration after the acknowledged failure of her marriage. She is conscious of being thin, like Fraxinius:

She thinks, I am a woman, and thinks what a silly pretentious thought *that* is. She thinks, I thought that, because the kind of woman I am is not quite sure she *is* a woman, she likes to be reassured about that. I am a thin woman, a sharp woman, a wordy woman, not the sort of animal men think of at all, when they think of a woman. (BT 119)

As her anxiety increases with the approach of her divorce hearing, she diminishes physically:

As the divorce hearing approaches, Frederica grows thinner and sharper. She is obsessed by the fear of losing Leo, a person who makes her life difficult at every turn, who appears sometimes to be *eating* her life and drinking her life-blood, a person who fits into no pattern of social behaviour or ordering of thought that she would ever have chosen for herself freely - and yet, the one creature to whose movements of body and emotions all her own nerves, all her own antennae, are fine-tuned ... (BT 475)

Standing inside the court building on the morning her divorce hearing begins, Frederica thinks: '*I am too thin to be convincing*' (BT 485). At the conclusion of proceedings, the judge finds for Nigel and grants him a Decree Nisi. Custody proceedings to determine with whom Leo shall live are scheduled for the new year. That night Frederica has a dream which draws together the personal mythology of her childhood (discussed above) and the imagery of Agatha Mond's tale which is a shadowy version of her own experience.

In the dream she peers through a dark keyhole like a long telescopic tunnel. Through it she can see the garden of Long Royston in which she played the part of the young Princess Elizabeth in the verse drama *Astraea*. She is barred from the garden, which might represent the innocence of her childhood during which she postured as a princess with a degree of arrogant pride, by 'a high gate, with barbed wire wreathing its top' (BT 520). The failure of her marriage is suggested by the forest of boughs which border the garden with 'beautiful ashy black leaves, and golden fruit covered with soot, so that the gold shines dimly, fitfully, through the black dust'. When she senses the presence of John Ottokar behind her on the train at the close of *Babel Tower*, there is a suggestion that she can build a future with him on the dust and ashes of her marriage,

for 'she smells, amongst the *soot* and *cigarette smoke*, faintly, the blond hair, the presence' (BT 616, my italics).

The majestic cats which followed in Frederica's train during her childhood daydreams of the nature of her own life now pad about the dream garden 'with gold eyes, with green eyes, with blood on their white fangs' (BT 521). Her intellect and talent are no longer beasts of powerful potential under her control; they have led to upheaval and destruction in her life and the lives of her husband, his child and his household. In her dream she knows she must let them out of the garden but that, let loose, they will devour her. She feels powerless for she sees that she is 'thin, she is two-dimensional, a paper woman, a cardboard woman'. Inside the garden is a small creature like Dracosilex, but it is a lion not a dragon and must surely represent Leo who is now the directing force of her life. The small stone lion is ensconced in a shrine and 'emits a kind of pulsing light, a hot, bright glow' (BT 521). At the close of the dream everything falls (BT 522): 'showers of red and white paper roses, showers of cards, the heavy stone figures. Everything falls, and she is under, and the stone lion is under her.' This suggests that even though Frederica is vulnerable and her world is falling apart, her foremost desire is to keep and to protect her son.

When, in 1992, Byatt was commissioned by two English editors to contribute to a collection of adult fairy stories entitled *Caught in a Story*, she wrote 'The Story of the Eldest Princess', discussed above. Here she discusses that writing process; the Tailor to whom she refers is the character in 'The Glass Coffin', the fairy tale told in *Possession*:

I am an eldest daughter, and as a small child suffered from a profound sense of injustice that in stories of three brothers or sisters it was always the youngest who succeeded - as though to be the eldest carried with it a Fate of failure and being surpassed. So I wrote a fairy story of a woman who deliberately left the Path of the narrative she was caught in, and took to the Forest, where she rescued the animal helpers who guided her to her salvation - which is storytelling as a way of life. Like the Tailor she is suspicious of love and its happy endings, though the old woman tells her that this suspicion is only one way of holding on to freedom. (FS:DNE para 7)

The eldest princess displays the same awareness of the patterns of the story within which she feels trapped as the little tailor does in 'The Glass Coffin'. In that story, the princess, newly released from her confinement within glass, suggests that she and the little tailor should flee, if he will have her:

'Of course I will have you,' said the little tailor, 'for you are my promised marvel, released with my vanished glass key, and I love you dearly already. Though why you should have me, simply because I opened the glass case, is less clear to me altogether, and when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and land and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter, and remain, if you will, alone and unwed. For me, it is enough to have seen the extraordinary gold web of your hair, and to have touched that whitest and most delicate cheek with my lips.' And you may ask yourselves, my dear and most innocent readers, whether he spoke there with more gentleness or cunning, since the lady set such store on giving herself of her own free will ... (P 66)

From the little tailor's deferential sensitivity to the interests of the princess it is clear that Byatt (through this story told, in the novel *Possession*, by LaMotte) is seeking, through fairy tale, to right wrongs and to change attitudes. This process, initiated by women writers, is identified and described by Marina Warner:

Women writers ... offer rare and rich testimony to a sophisticated chronicle of wrongs and ways to evade or right them, when they recall stories ... and retell them in a spirit of protest, or polite or not so polite revolt. These tales are wrapped in fantasy and unreality which no doubt helped them entertain their audiences ... but they also serve the stories' greater purpose, to reveal possibilities, to map out a different way and a new perception of love, marriage, women's skill, thus advocating a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny. The fairy tale looks at the ogre like Bluebeard or the Beast of 'Beauty and the Beast' in order to disenchant him; while romancing greatly, it is a medium deeply concerned with undoing prejudice. Women of different social positions have collaborated in storytelling to achieve true recognition for their subjects: the process is still going on. (FBB 24)

In *Babel Tower* the process continues. Frederica, the central character, is bound by narrative but refuses to be bound by convention. The fairy-tale elements in her story suggest that while the narration is mimetic, it is at the same time conscious of its own form as a construct, perceiving and inventing the world. These elements ally *Babel Tower* with the motives of fairy tale outlined by Warner in the quotation above: Frederica's story maps out a different way, other possibilities; it advocates a means of escaping imposed limits and prescribed destiny. The elements of fairy tale in Frederica's story include her role as princess, her husband Nigel Reiver as the dark

prince, her father Bill Potter as the ogre, the ballgown (a beautiful designer dress) and a (wedding) ring which (in her estimation) renders her invisible.

In the opening pages of *Babel Tower*, the reader first catches sight of Frederica through the eyes of her university friend Hugh Pink, who is wandering through Laidley Woods composing poetry and, rather more significantly, pondering images from mythology of women who transgress. Then he sees Frederica and her son: 'a woman and a child, standing quietly' (BT 3). Before she is identified by Pink, her attire is described. She wears the comfortable clothes of the landed gentry at leisure in the countryside, but an association with royalty is made, for she 'has a green headsquare knotted under her chin, in the style of the Queen and her royal sister' (BT 3). We are invited to view her as the princess in the fairy tale, but the fairy tale which we are to follow takes us beyond the moment of marriage and the agreeable conclusion that the couple live happily ever after.

Frederica Potter as princess has already been established in the first novel which introduces her: *The Virgin in the Garden*. In this novel she plays, to critical acclaim, the role of the young Princess Elizabeth in a (mediocre) verse drama celebrating the life and period of Elizabeth I in 1953, the time of the coronation of Elizabeth II. In the verse drama much is made of the iconography of Elizabeth I as Diana, Virgo-Astraea, the Virgin Mary. Frederica is, at this stage, determined to lose her virginity and to gain sexual experience and pursues many possible means of achieving this end. Frederica is neither a beauty nor an actress but secured the part because she was type-cast. In *Babel Tower* the narrator notes of Frederica:

She has the sexual self-confidence, over-confidence perhaps, of her curious historical position, brief and anomalous, a Cambridge woman when there were eleven men for every woman. They were princesses, those women, though ordinary enough, in fact. (BT 444)

The image is adopted by Laurence Ounce, Counsel for Frederica's husband, as he makes his final speech in court (given by the narrator, in the extract quoted below, in reported speech) during the divorce proceedings of Nigel and Frederica Reiver. Speaking from Nigel's point of view, Ounce refers to Frederica as a princess, using the

term to indicate the disproportionate number of men to women at Cambridge during Frederica's undergraduate years:

He felt, perhaps, that he had carried away the princess for the ball under the eyes of the suitors. He believed, perhaps, the story of the fairy tale - 'the most surprising people do believe it, my Lord, and act upon it, and learn to adjust their naïve expectations with good and bad humour as the case may be'. He believed that they would marry and live happy ever after, that the princess would become the lady of the manor and live as her predecessors had lived. But she did not want to, had no intention of being happy ever after. Adjustment was certainly required on both sides - when was it ever not? (BT 516)

It is when Ounce begins to describe the 'adjustment' required of Frederica that he reveals his patriarchal perception of the necessary disjunction between the roles of career woman and of wife and mother:

But Mrs Reiver would not adjust - she needed her court of young men, her 'career', her books, her 'independence', just as though her marriage vows had never been made, and even though she has a small son who might be thought to be enough occupation for the next few years of the happy ever after. (BT 516)

When Hugh Pink encounters Frederica in Laidley Wood, her four year old son is clinging to her leg: Leo, the lion, another hero of myth and of stories for children. We are invited to see him as the young prince and heir to the kingdom ('We love him, he's ours, it will be his house, I have a right to see my son' (BT 242) cries Nigel Reiver) and in a brief comic interlude as a gallant young knight:

[Frederica] is wearing a long black cloak-like coat over a knitted grey tunic, over green tights and high black boots. She is carrying a dull gold breastplate and bossed shield, and looks a little like Britannia on the pennies, or the ghost of Britomart. Her companion is wearing corduroy trousers, a blue hooded jacket with silver fur, and a large gold helmet, whose plastic visor descends, imprisoning his head, every few steps, and has to be pushed up again. He is alternately brandishing and trailing a large gold plastic sword, with a jewelled hilt, which is too large for him and impedes his progress further. If Frederica offers to carry the sword, he stands still, stubborn with fury, and strikes his head so that the visor falls yet again. ... She says,

'We could stick the visor up temporarily with plasticine; then you could see.'

'I might want it down, if an *enemy* approached.'

'We could stick it up in the street, so you could walk faster.'

'A street is where an *enemy* might be, I should think.' He brandishes the sword, and stands, yet again, stock still. (BT 292-3)

In the opening pages of *Babel Tower*, Frederica approaches Hugh Pink, crossing the stile and entering the wood; but before there is any further exchange, Hugh Pink perceives a change: 'She is dressed for hunting. But she no longer looks like a huntress' (BT 4). Her marriage appears to have disempowered her. Hugh Pink recalls the accounts within his social circle of Frederica's marriage to 'a stranger, a dark horse'. They have chosen to cast her marriage in fairy-tale mould:

[S]he had suddenly vanished, or so they told each other, with variants, with embellishments. It was put about that this man kept her more or less locked up, more or less incommunicado, in a moated grange, would you believe, in the country, in outer darkness. (BT 3)

When the reader meets Nigel, these fairy-tale associations are made by the narrator too: 'He is a dark man in a dark suit, a soft armour, with the blue shadow of a dark beard on his solid cheek' (BT 34). Clearly we are to read him as a modern Bluebeard. Of his beard we are told that it 'is heavy and he shaves twice daily - the mussel-blue shadow from jaw to cheekbone, along the long face, is one of his attractions' (BT 96). Warner describes Bluebeard as the 'bogey who fascinates: his very name stirs associations with sex, virility, male readiness and desire' (FBB 241). Nigel, like Bluebeard, comes and goes without notice on business he will not specify and Frederica will find his keys and use one to gain access to a locked case which contains Nigel's private collection of violent and degrading pornography (which is associated with the colour blue, as in 'blue movies'). Frederica's life will be threatened when her husband, a man with military training who knows how to kill, throws an axe at her in the dark, just as Bluebeard threatens his wife, in various depictions or retellings of the tale, with a variety of ferocious blades. Frederica will be rescued by a posse of male friends in a landrover, just as Bluebeard's wife is rescued by her brothers on horseback.

Hugh Pink's instinctive identification of Frederica's disempowerment within her marriage (she is dressed for hunting but no longer looks like a huntress) is borne out by the way she speaks of her husband and her life. She says of her husband to Pink (the italics are mine): '*His name's Reiver, the family have a house, an old house, Bran House, just over those fields, those are their fields, over that stile*' (BT 15). Richard

Todd notes that the reader is directed by the narrator to regard Frederica as a 'wonder-tale *princesse lointaine* in Bran House':

She becomes a prisoner in it: when her friends write to her, their letters are intercepted; when they visit her, they are rebuffed with impeccable English county manners laced with a quasi-sinister venom; when they attempt to telephone her, the surrogate stepmother Pippy Mammott dissemblingly puts them off. The household closes ranks, even when evidence of physical violence, such as a smashed-up bloodstained bedroom, becomes manifest. (ASB 68)

Leo, precocious although only four, appears to have observed his mother's unhappiness as is revealed in the following exchange when Leo fails to answer Hugh's question about conkers:

'He's like his father,' says Frederica. 'He doesn't talk much.'
 'You don't,' says the boy. 'You don't talk much.'
 'When your mother and I were friends, before,' says Hugh Pink, 'when we were younger, she never stopped talking.' (BT 16)

Other elements of fairy tale in Frederica's story include the magnificent dress which is the ball gown of fairy tale and a ring which confers invisibility. However, their conventional role in the story is inverted since Frederica's story is grim reality, not fairy-tale happiness. When Frederica puts the dress on she is, like every princess of fairy tale, 'wholly beautiful'; however, this is beauty which holds 'just for the moment' (BT 239). The dress does not enable her to win the heart of the prince. Instead, it is a propitiatory Christmas gift from the prince (her estranged husband) who has not yet accepted that his wife will never return to his home. Frederica wants nothing from Nigel, but Leo demands that the gift be opened:

The shiny paper rustles. There is a large, solid cardboard box. There is silver-and-pink tissue. There is a dress. It is dark charcoal grey with a high neck and long tight cuffs, woven with red silk braid and embroidery, very rich, very plain. It is a long tunic that goes over a short, slightly flaring skirt. It looks like, it is, Courrèges. Frederica, like most women with red hair, does not wear red, but there is one red, a clear dark vermilion, that brings out the fire in her hair and the gold in her dusting of freckles. This is that red. No one knows what to say. Winifred is wearing a heavy green polo neck and a tweed skirt; Jaqueline is wearing a dark brown double knit jumper over fawn cord trousers: Frederica herself is in jeans and a checked flannel skirt. Leo says,

'Put it on.'

...

Frederica comes back wearing the dress. In its honour she has put on black tights and carefully dressed her hair in a chignon. She is beautiful. Frederica is never beautiful, though often alive with attractive energy, but just for the moment, in the Courrèges dress, she is wholly beautiful, it is the word. (BT 239)

However, as this is a fairy tale in reverse, the prince who gave the gift of the ball gown leaves, slamming the door. His wife, in the beautiful dress, has been saved from his aggression only by the screams of their young son. The 'ball' at which the dress is admired is a Boxing Day drinks party. On being complimented on the dress, Frederica is bluntly honest:

'I made a disastrous marriage, it has all gone wrong, I am in despair, the dress was a propitiatory present which I shouldn't have put on, because I won't be propitiated.' (BT 248)

It is shortly after this statement that Frederica begins to work off her wedding ring, hiding her hand in her pocket. The symbolic act, performed in secret in the presence of the chorus of university wives bemoaning the boredom and exhaustion which are the inevitable consequences of motherhood, is a significant step in Frederica's battle to emerge from the connection of marriage in order to forge an independent life and identity. As she manages at last to push the ring off, she 'thinks of Frodo Baggins, the Hobbit, pushing off his ring of invisibility' (BT 254). The Hobbit was able to use the invisibility conferred by his ring as a tactical advantage. Frederica's experience has been quite the opposite; she has been hampered by the marriage which the ring represents. It has been a constraint and a limitation. In her conversation with Hugh Pink, he had said admiringly: 'You've done a lot of living, Frederica. Real things have happened to you' (BT 16). 'I used to be so sure about living,' is her response. 'I wanted.' 'The sentence,' we are informed by the authorial voice, 'has no object and no end, apparently.' In a rage she will later proclaim '*I have to have something to do*' (BT 37). She does not need to earn money, she requires the mental stimulation and dignity of work and: 'Her need is so terrible, she is almost in tears.' Nigel wants Frederica to be a wife and a mother and, when he rejects her suggestion that she travel with him to London, she passionately declares: 'I am someone, I *was* someone. I am someone, someone nobody ever sees any more - ' (BT 38). Shedding her marriage (and here,

symbolically, her ring) she feels she can set about regaining her identity; no longer invisible, she can once again be someone.

'I am someone, I *was* someone. I am someone, someone nobody ever sees anymore - ' cries Frederica (BT 38). This 'someone' whom Frederica believes herself to have been has been created, and will be further evolved, by her flamboyant personality, strong character, sharp mind and voracious reading. As discussed in detail above, her self-development is recorded in the two novels which precede *Babel Tower: The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*. If Frederica's story as it unfolds in *Babel Tower* is, as I have suggested, the telling of the fairy tale after the happily-ever-after ending, then it should be possible to identify fairy-tale elements in those novels which lead up to her marriage to the dark stranger and her disappearance into the countryside. It is also likely that the Potter family members will interpret their own lives in terms of their reading and tend to identify themselves with fictitious characters, as I have argued that Frederica has done.

In *The Virgin in the Garden* Byatt has cast each of Frederica's parents in the role of a well-known fairy-tale character. Winifred Potter is a twentieth-century version of the gentle and gracious queen, mother of the princess. Bill Potter, despite his small stature and comical appearance, is undoubtedly an ogre.

The wife of an irascible schoolmaster, Winifred is committed to keeping peace in her home. She is described (my italics) as having a '*heavy crown of greying blonde plaited hair*' (VG 29). Winifred as queen is also suggested by the link created in *The Virgin in the Garden* between her and Hermione, wife of the king in Shakespeare's fairy-tale play *A Winter's Tale*. Hermione loses her children and two decades of normal life, for she poses as a statue for twenty years to escape the king's unrighteous anger.

Domestic life drives Bill Potter into a state of rage. In the face of her exhaustion and disillusionment, Winifred decides to be quiet. 'Quiet spread over more and more areas where hope had been' (VG 87). She lives in this quiet and repressed manner for almost the same twenty years that Hermione passes as a statue, living out the term of the king's

displeasure. As Hermione lost her children, so Winifred loses her children who are alienated from their parents by their father's wrath. The third child, Marcus, is unplanned and a son. Bill destroys the boy with his expectations of genius, in the face of which the mother 'could only keep quiet. Convert energy to inertia. Undo, unmake' (VG 89).

Winifred is ultimately, in the course of the novel *Babel Tower*, to be restored to life, just as Hermione is. She is given charge of her two grandchildren after her daughter's accidental death and is settled, after Bill's retirement, in an elegant eighteenth-century stone house on the Moors. Here Winifred is able to live with 'beautiful things' (BT 49): 'With subtle colours, and changing lights, and old wood, and yellow and white roses.' Her marriage is restored to her, for she and her husband travel to country auctions to furnish their house '- it became a shared passion, they talked to each other as in some ways they had never done.' Bill has changed:

Most surprisingly, Bill does not roar in this house, he does not crowd, he is neither bored nor sulky, he is ... *busy*. ... He is writing a book. ... He is away quite enough for Winifred's peace of mind, and when he comes home, he talks to her about where he has been, what has been said. (BT 50)

Since the Potters read their lives in literature, it is not surprising that as Bill prepares his lecture on *Mansfield Park* for his extra-mural class

[h]e is thinking about Sir Thomas Bertram, who paid insufficient attention to his daughters' moral upbringing, but is able to make a satisfactory substitute family from his wife's sister's son and daughters, the Prices. He thinks with love of his grandchildren who live with him. (BT 156)

In *Still Life* we see the Potter grandchildren (Will and Mary) making 'a satisfactory substitute family' for their grandparents. We see this through the eyes of Marcus:

He came home because it both pained him and pleased him to see Bill and Winifred playing with the children, as they had failed to play with him. Will sat on Bill's knee, curled as Marcus had never curled, in the crook of that wiry arm, his little head erect and watchful under Bill's sharp chin. (SL 354)

Bill is seeking to nurture in his grandson his own passion for literature. Searching for poetry to recite to Will, he finds something to comfort himself in the loss of his daughter Stephanie. As he engages with literature in the business of living, so he engages with literature to cope with death:

Bill recited, mostly to Winifred, a poem of Hardy's he had found, looking up things to recite to Will. 'He was an inferior novelist but a real poet,' said Bill, 'despite a shocking tendency to use second-hand language and tired phrases.'

'I am the family face
Flesh perishes, I live on
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance - that is I;
The eternal thing in man
That heeds no call to die.'

He made quite a little occasion out of the reading, drew them together, held their eyes. 'Cold comfort,' he said. 'But something?'

Winifred was moved by this. Marcus was not. (SL 354-5)

However, before this time of regeneration, Bill Potter, 'a small, thin man, with the lengthy face, hands and feet of someone designed to be taller' (VG 31), is the ogre. The ogre of folklore and fairy tale is a man-eating monster, usually represented as a hideous giant; the term is therefore also used to name a man who might be likened to such a monster. Bill Potter's temper is towering even if his stature is not, and his influence on his children's lives warps and debilitates. Frederica spells out Bill's children's feelings succinctly in *The Virgin in the Garden* when he rages at his daughter Stephanie's decision to marry. What does she think her life will be, he demands, married to a curate:

Chat and hassocks and Brownies and Mothers and Fayres. You're totally unfitted for that sort of non-existence. Like a race-horse in a milk-float. You'll go crazy in a week ... [his work] isn't *your* work, you fool, it doesn't require your gifts, and it does require things you haven't got. ... You'll become a cow. A cow and a slave and a tweedy tea-pourer. You can't. (VG 198)

Frederica responds for them all: 'You are at fault,' she cries. 'You are at fault because you do what you are doing now. You make it impossible for us to do what you want us to do because you make it seem totally repulsive by the way you go on.' (VG 198.)

Just as Frederica has been associated with fire, so is her father:

His thinning hair had once, presumably, been the same horse-chestnut as Frederica's and was now fading, with silver flakes like ash on a dying fire. Several long strands floated over a bald crown. His nose was sharp and his eyes a very pale blue: in childhood both Potter girls had given the angry Pied Piper their father's face, the eyes glittering 'like a candle flame where salt is sprinkled'. There was usually an atmosphere of smothered conflagration about Bill - not visible flame, but the uneasy smouldering in the heart of a straw stack, the cracking at the base of a bonfire which might suddenly flare, flare and fall in. (VG 31)

The Potter girls (Frederica and her older sister Stephanie) transferred the reality of their father's face into their reading of childhood fiction; approaching womanhood, the procedure is reversed, and they try to fathom reality with the help of fiction. In the three novels to date we observe Frederica as schoolgirl, university student, lover and wife, trying to learn about the nature of life from the close study of literature. It is her father who has urged her to turn to literature for answers, although he has occasionally played the role of censor:

'I do not burn books.'
 'You do. You burned all my *Girls' Crystals* and all those Georgette Heyers I borrowed from that almost-friend I once had, and those weren't even *mine*.'
 'Ah, yes,' said Bill, with sharp retrospective delight. 'So I did. Those weren't books.'
 'They were harmless. I liked them.'
 'They were prurient fantasy. And vulgar. And untruthful, if that word means anything.'
 'I think you could trust me to recognise fantasy when I meet it. A little fantasy never hurt anyone. And it gave me something to talk to other girls about.' (VG 34-5)

Bill Potter distinguishes between fantasy, which he rejects, and 'real books' which he promotes because they offer 'real experience' (VG 34). Frederica appears to accept this belief of her father's but, when literature does not always accord with her own experience, she will find a way to adapt literature to fit her own perceptions of life, as has been discussed above.

There is an intriguing parallel action of book-burning in Frederica's life. Her father burned the 'prurient fantasy' of her childhood which angered her because she understood perfectly well that it was a temporary distraction. Far more distressing is the burning of her books by John Ottokar's identical twin brother (Paul) who wants to appropriate everything which John enjoys. When Frederica resists him he punishes her by piling up her books in towers ('her books, and not only her books, but part of herself' (BT 456)) and burning them in the square in which she lives. He calls this 'skoob' and regards it as an art form, although it is really a public protest against a relationship which threatens his own sense of security. He has instinctively understood that Frederica's books are a part of herself and that in burning them he destroys a part of her.

Frederica is enraged, because her work is being destroyed: all her notes written into the flyleaves of the books which are now burning. As she moves to retrieve her books and extinguish the flames, Paul Ottokar embraces a pile of burning books and burns himself badly in consequence. Again fire is associated with Frederica's emotional life which, like fire, can comfort and warm or maim and destroy. In her relationship with her lover's twin brother, fire reflects (as it did when Frederica fought with Nigel, 'smouldering' and 'flaming' (BT 38) before taking fire) the potential for injury and pain in emotional involvement with another. John Ottokar has sought separation from his brother and his actions echo Frederica's refusal to fuse her sense of identity with others, even those whom she loves:

'I told him *we had to separate*. I said I was going to get an ordinary job and live an ordinary life, on my own, like any other single person, any individual, I was going to make my own life. He couldn't bear it. He - he *pleaded*. ... I left the house to get in the cab to the station, the next morning, and he came out, he was going to get in, he took hold of me. I stood in the street and shouted. I - I hit him, once, he sat down on the pavement. I went.' (BT 353)

Apart from her desire to highlight the artificially constructed nature of her narrative, there are other reasons for Byatt's use of elements of fairy tale in her self-consciously

realist novels of her own time and culture. In conversation with Sodré, she points out that fantasy

transports the reader into the world of fairy tale where everything has a meaning, out of the world of real life where things can be shapeless and formless and an act might go one way or another. All acts acquire meaning and importance and sense of destiny if you get into a fairy tale. (SCWW 180)

The essence of fairy tale, in Byatt's words, is that: 'The fairy story says life is full of hazards and horrors and terrors and then you will be married and you will live happily ever after' (SCWW 191). The fairy tale offers satisfactory closure. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson argues that fantastic literature expresses 'an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not yet exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary, as opposed to what already exists and is permitted' (91) and 'aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient' (180).

What are these horrors, terrors, hazards, for Frederica? What is oppressing her, what does she long for? Byatt gives Chapter Four of Part 1 of *The Virgin in the Garden* (46) the title of a Lawrence novel, *Women in Love*, for their father has pressed Lawrence upon his daughters as an examples of 'real books' offering 'real experience' (VG 34). In this chapter entitled 'Women in Love', Frederica and Stephanie contemplate their shared passion for their father's colleague, Alexander Wedderburn.

He stood for the things they had not got, desired, and feared they would not have: art, as opposed to criticism of it, male mobility as opposed to female provincial rootedness, savoir-faire, the possibility of metropolitan glamour to come. (VG 47)

The idea that marriage and motherhood are hazards and an oppressive form of closure is presented to us in the life of Frederica and of her mother and is re-inforced by a chorus of schoolmasters' wives in *The Virgin in the Garden* and university teachers' wives in *Babel Tower*. Jenny Parry, wife of the German master, speaks for the wives of the schoolmasters in Blesford Ride. She cries out:

‘[L]et me tell you, Frederica, for what it’s worth, don’t. Don’t give it up, don’t stop, don’t turn into a cow and a mopper-upper, don’t suppose that the death of the mind can be avoided by a little rushed reading between two lots of nappies and dishes, because it can’t. Adultery you may find time for, but life, no, and don’t let them ... don’t let them tell you any different.’
(VG 384)

At a drinks party on Boxing Day in *Babel Tower*, Frederica encounters the wives of the teaching staff of the University of North Yorkshire. Their lament echoes that of Jenny Parry: another Greek chorus providing commentary from the edges of the action:

The women are discussing ... how bad it is to be bad-tempered with children, and a common feeling that children are like fat jugs into which their life is being poured, like rushing electrical vehicles for which they, the women, provide energy which is not entirely regenerated, like young healthy carnivores ... who consume the maternal flesh with the Weetabix and Alphabet Pasta in a smiling and automatic way. They say they blamed their mothers for being depressed and that they are now depressed. Brenda Pincher asks, can they not *work*, and they begin a long choral account of the ways in which they have tried this - a bit of typing, one did get, one evening class, Mrs Rennie taught, but the babysitter never came; Lady Calder-Fluss surprisingly confesses that she wanted to go back to scientific research, to do a Ph.D., but her husband thought it better not. (BT 252)

In conversation with Byatt, Ignês Sodré asks her to comment on the proposal that ‘endings are for the novelist the most difficult thing to do’. Byatt responds:

I think this is partly because endings are felt to be more artificial than the flow of the narrative. There is no *reason* why any story should come to an end, unless it is a tragedy and the end is death, or a fairy-tale comedy, where the end is marriage. The ending ... is negotiated with the narrative expectations of the reader, who has certain needs, purely *as a reader* - a need for happiness and satisfaction, and an equally strong need for *closure* - a need to feel that the end of the story has been arrived at and is known. This is an aesthetic need, to do with wholeness, which runs counter to many modern aesthetic theories which insist on denying the reader both emotional and aesthetic satisfaction. Several of our novels seem to solve this with a double ending - one happy and closed, one open and uncertain. (SCWW 254-5)

Babel Tower offers just such a combination of endings. Winifred and Bill’s ending is happy and closed, after decades of unsatisfactory married life. Frederica has developed a new model for survival. She no longer strives to connect the prose and the passion within herself; instead she understands that she is happiest holding all the elements of her life in tension. Consequently, her ending is ‘open and uncertain’. She has escaped her marriage which had become a trap (BT 307), which was a connection which failed. Byatt endorses Iris Murdoch’s assessment of marriage: ‘Iris Murdoch talks so

intelligently about the brute sense of connection between married couples, which she says survives any real sense that the people love each other and want to be together.' (SCWW 191.) Sodré responds by quoting the words of a character from the Murdoch novel *An Unofficial Rose*: 'As Randall says, "We are so horribly connected."' '

Babel Tower takes leave of Frederica travelling home in a train, an emblem of life's journey. She sees, in the darkened glass of the window, the multiple reflections of her lover's face. Given Frederica's constant association with fire and with the destruction wrought by fire, it is significant that she smells the soot and cigarette smoke: the aftermath of burning. This subtle suggestion that Frederica has survived the conflagration intact, is reinforced by the fact that, in these grimy surroundings, she smells and hears John Ottokar. For a brief moment their communication transcends language, with which Frederica has wrestled with such determination to make sense of her life.

Ottokar does not doubt that Frederica is emotionally independent, has learned to do without him, but asks rather 'can you be doing *with me*?' (BT 616.) Their smiles have been tentative, their impulses towards each other barely discernible. Now they touch hands, still not looking directly at each other, but rather 'they smile at each other's shadow in the glass'.

And so *Babel Tower* draws to a close with the same conclusion reached in *Possession* in the relationship of Maud Bailey and Roland Michell: a twentieth-century couple, in love but afraid of the destruction of autonomy which they have observed to be a consequence of marriage, agree that there is a way forward, 'a modern way' (P 507). The physical union of Roland and Maud is described as having an 'aftermath' redolent of 'crushed wood' and 'splashed sap'. Perversely, this imagery of destruction sounds like a benediction on relationships between thinking, reading men and women of the twenty-first century for, we are told, although '[i]t was the smell of death and destruction', this smell was 'fresh and lively and hopeful'.

conclusion

Ariachne's Broken Woof: The artist's private images of her craft

Byatt's craftsmanship is evident not only in the two novels discussed here - the end product of the writing process - but also in the paratexts²⁵ in which she gives an account of that process. In interviews and essays she describes the development of an intensely personal metaphor or geometric structure which represents the narrative which she has currently under construction.²⁶

Byatt's inspiration for *Possession* was the thought: 'There could be a novel called *Possession* about the relations between living and dead minds' (CWP para 1). She thereafter pictured the gradual accretion of ideas for the writing of *Possession* as a ghostly web:

The ur-Gestalt of *Possession* was a grey cloudy web, ghostly and spidery, to do with the ghostliness and connectedness of the original idea. ... I imagined my text as a web of scholarly quotations and parodies through which the poems and writings of the dead should loom at the reader, to be surmised and guessed at. (CWP para 2)

In an article published on the internet, she describes the germination of her idea for *Babel Tower* and her discovery of the 'ruling metaphor':

My plot came to me when I was thinking about the way in which the writing of a divorce petition was the exact opposite of trying to write an exact novel - it was distorted, one-sided, an account of a marriage and a human relationship designed to be adversarial and to fit into the straitjacket of the legal language created by the courts to define men and women and what they could and couldn't do and be. ...

At first my projected novel was called *Evidence* - when I found the title, *Babel Tower*, I also found my central metaphor, and my novel took off and took shape. (IBT paras 4 and 5)

²⁵ The term is used and defined by Edward Said: 'One of the critical distinctions of modern literature is the importance given by the writer to his own paratexts - writings that explore his working problems in making a text.' (B: IM 251)

²⁶ 'In my work experience I know what the form of a novel is when I find what I think of as the "ruling" metaphor' and 'I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns'; these observations were made in an essay published in a collection entitled *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* and these references can be found on pages 9-10 and 14.

'[T]he spider's geometry,' Byatt explains (*Om* 154) 'is the shape of the circle, the face of the infinite.' This accords perfectly with Henry James' account²⁷ of the delicate craft of the artist:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle in which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. (*SE* 176)

Byatt's private imagery is revealed in her reworking of the story of the metamorphosis of Arachne, a piece of narrative which she was invited to contribute to a collection entitled *Ovid metamorphosed*. The first story of the sixth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells the story of spirited Arachne. An ordinary woman, famous for her skill at spinning and weaving, she resents any suggestion that she has divine inspiration and, in fact, issues a challenge to the goddess Athene. The goddess, disguised as an old woman, suggests that she retract her words and seek forgiveness. Arachne, like Culvert in *Babbletower* and with equally destructive consequences, fails to acknowledge the old woman as a source of wisdom and strength. Barely able to resist striking the old woman, Arachne cries out 'You are worn out with old age, and your mind is feeble too. If you have any daughters or daughters-in-law, let them listen to what you have to say. I can look after myself.' (*MO* 135.)

The competition commences, and Arachne's entry is flawless. Now it is the goddess who cannot restrain herself. She tears up Arachne's tapestry ('the broken woof' of Shakespeare's play and LaMotte's poem) and hits the woman repeatedly on the forehead with a shuttle. Arachne, mortified, tries to hang herself, and the goddess turns her into a spider: another creature which hangs suspended. 'Her slender fingers were fastened to her sides, to serve as legs, and all the rest of her was belly; from that belly, she yet spins her thread, and as a spider is busy with her web as of old.' (*MO* 138.)

²⁷ This is quoted in a lecture by Frank Kermode published under the title *The Sense of an Ending* (176).

In her reworking, Byatt traced the development of the story's interpretation in the work of Velázquez who 'was in a line, a thread of emulation, of reworking, from Ovid to Titian to Rubens' (*Om* 143). Velázquez had, in his library, Pérez de Moya's *Philosophia Secreta* in which it is suggested that the metamorphosis of Arachne into a spider

is given to us to show that no matter how skilled anyone may be in any art, there may come, later, another who will outdo him, adding new things, as happens in all branches of knowledge, for as Aristotle says, Time is a great co-worker, and through time, the arts are changed and enhanced. (*Om* 142-3)

This process of change and enhancement is evident in Byatt's personal life and in the comparison of the stories of nineteenth-century LaMotte in *Possession* and twentieth-century Frederica in *Babel Tower*. In 'Arachne', Byatt describes a headmistress who exhorted clever girls to a life of 'mild usefulness' (sewing rather than academic work) and her great-aunt Thirza who created with thread a magnificence that Byatt would in time create with words:

[T]he movement, the intricate knotting and joining and change in tension and direction of a thread, became the image I had in my own mind of the things I wrote; you might have an expanse of rosy and flaming lights, you might have a tree of crimson and golden apples, but always you had the thread that persisted, connected, continued.

Into my story ['Racine and the Tablecloth'] ... I wove an image of my great-aunt Thirza ... She was a mythical figure, my great-aunt Thirza. 'She had blonde hair so long she could sit on it,' my aunt would always say. ... I have several of the cushions still. The silks are still bright. In my story my great-aunt Thirza stood for my ordinary origins, and her own bright work, for women making things in snatched time. But she was not allied with my levelling, lady-like headmistress, who haunts my dreams still, the nay-sayer, the antagonist, the fairy godmother who turned gold threads back into dull straw. (*Om* 138-9)

Evident is Byatt's connection of herself with Arachne, a woman of 'ordinary origins' and fabulous skill. Byatt's sense of connection with her creative great-aunt with long blonde hair calls to mind the long blonde hair of both Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey, the latter having inherited the passion for literature and independence exhibited by the former.

'Ariachne's broken woof'²⁸, a phrase from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*²⁹ and the title of a LaMotte poem, represents a crisis in a woman's life which cripples the exercise of her creative ability. As discussed in *At the White Heat*, LaMotte transgresses the social and religious mores of her society and chooses to punish herself with isolation. Her self-imposed constrictions appear to extend to her creativity for her career is impaired and it is only in the next century that the crusading female academy restores her reputation. One hundred years later, Frederica's creativity is stifled by a perfectly proper marriage in which the demands of the roles of wife and mother appear to deny her the right to make use of her excellent A-levels and her Cambridge degree. In order to re-enter the world where she can teach and review and use her own writing as therapy, she must leave her husband and his home and battle in the law courts for independence and for custody of her child. Due to the changes wrought by the passing of time her conduct leads to independence and recognition (whereas LaMotte's defiant actions led to self-immolation). However, her exercise of artistry is not writing (LaMotte's only option), but analysing and teaching the writing of others, which is also a creative work.

Byatt concludes her twentieth-century rewriting of Arachne's ancient story with a comment on the difference between what we see and what we guess at. We see the consequences within our world of the actions of the gods to which we are not party. We see a spider silk which can be woven into a tapestry or worked into biosteel to create 'invulnerable chain-mail'. What she says of the gods and of spider silk is true too of her own craft, the creative composition of narrative:

What we see is a clue only to the force, and the beauty, and the order and the complexity, of what we don't see. (*Om* 157)

²⁸ 'Woof' is defined in *The Oxford Concise Dictionary* (1995) as 'formed as a web' and must therefore indicate Arachne's competition tapestry, shredded by the goddess.

²⁹ Troilus expresses disbelief that Cressida, 'a thing inseparate', should split (for she makes an avowal of love to both Troilus and Diomedes) without a physical breach even so small that a (spider) thread might enter: 'the spacious breadth of this division/Admits no orifex for a point as subtle/As Ariachne's broken woof to enter' (Act V Scene II lines 148-150).

1500

25000

42

bibliography

- Bennett P *EDWP* Emily Dickinson Woman Poet (1990 University of Iowa Press, Iowa City)
- Bettelheim B *UE* The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1975; reprint Thames and Hudson London 1976)
- Bianchi MD *LLED* The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson (1924 Jonathan Cape Ltd London)
- Breen J In Her Own Write: Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction (1990 Macmillan London)
- Brink A *N:LN* The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino (1998 UCT Press Cape Town)
- Brooker P (ed) *M/P* Modernism/Postmodernism (1992 Longman London)
- Byatt AS *BT* Babel Tower (1996; reprint Vintage London 1997)
- Byatt AS *CWP* Choices on the Writing of *Possession*
<http://www.asbyatt.com/Posses.htm>; accessed 24/11/01
- Byatt AS Degrees of Freedom: the early novels of Iris Murdoch (1965; reprint Vintage London 1994)
- Byatt AS *FS:DNE* Fairy Stories: 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye'
<http://www.asbyatt.com/fairy.htm>; accessed 24/11/01
- Byatt AS *IBT* Introduction to *Babel Tower*
<http://www.asbyatt.com/Babel.htm>; accessed 24/11/01
- Byatt AS *PM:SW* Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings (1991; reprint Vintage London 1993)
- Byatt AS *P* Possession: A Romance (1990; reprint Vintage London 1991)
- Byatt AS *SL* Still Life (1985; reprint Penguin Books 1986)
- Byatt AS *TBT* The Biographer's Tale (2000 Chatto & Windus Ltd London)
- Byatt AS *DNE* The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories (1994 Chatto & Windus Ltd London)
- Byatt AS *VG* The Virgin in the Garden (1978; reprint Penguin Books 1981)
- Byatt AS and Murdoch I *ICA video* Writers in Conversation (1985 ICA Video Production)
- Byatt AS *SCWW* Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers (1995 Vintage London)
- Franklin R *IF internet interview* Inauthentic Fabrics: interview with AS Byatt published on the internet; dated 23 April 2001
- Gelpi A The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet (1975; reprint Cambridge University Press 1991)
- Gilbert H *BBC interview* BBC World Service interview with AS Byatt Broadcast on 7 July 2000

- Gilbert S and Gubar S The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979 Yale University Press New Haven Conn)
- Hutcheon L *NN:MP* Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (1980 Methuen New York and London)
- Innes M *MO* The *Metamorphoses* of Ovid: translated and introduced by M Innes (1955; reprint Penguin Books 1979)
- Jackson R *F:LS* Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (1981 Methuen London and New York)
- Johnson TH (ed) The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (1960 Little, Brown & Co Boston, Toronto)
- Kermode F The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (1967 Oxford University Press)
- Loeffelholz M Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory (1991 University of Illinois Press)
- McFarlane V *LL:PP* Line by Line: the Palimpsest of *Possession* (2001 unpublished undergraduate seminar essay)
- Murdoch I *SG* The Sovereignty of Good (1970; reprint Ark Edition London 1986)
- Pollack VR Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender (1984 Cornell University Press)
- Said EW Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975 Basic Books Inc Publishers New York)
- Sewall RB *LED* The Life of Emily Dickinson (1974; first published in Great Britain Faber and Faber Ltd London 1976)
- Stoneley P 'I - Pay - in Satin Cash - ': Commerce, Gender, and Display in Emily Dickinson's Poetry *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* Volume 72 No 3 September 2000
- Taggard G *LMED* The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson (1930 Alfred A Knopf New York)
- Terry P (ed) *Om* Ovid metamorphosed (2000; reprint Vintage London 2001)
- Tiffin J *GB:NE* Genies in Bottles: Narrative Entrapment in AS Byatt's Fairy Tales (1998 unpublished paper)
- Todd R *ASB* Writers and their Work: AS Byatt (1997 Northcote House Plymouth)
- Travers M *IMEL* An Introduction to Modern European Literature (1998 Macmillan London)
- Warner M *FBB* From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers (1995 Vintage London)
- Waugh P *M:TP* Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (1984 Methuen London)
- Zipes J Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry (1997 Routledge New York)