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Art and Destruction: shared philosophies which shape the work of Iris Murdoch and AS Byatt

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

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Abstract

Susan Rogers 25 August 2005

***Art and Destruction:* shared philosophies which shape the work of Iris Murdoch and AS Byatt**

The genesis of this thesis was the observation that water played a role in many Murdoch novels as did accounts of the wanton destruction of valuable possessions. Study of the works of AS Byatt revealed a similar interest in the human impulse to destroy – and in the Byatt tetralogy published over a period of more than two decades fire is often the means of destruction. My academic training to date has taught me to attempt to account for such observations. I concluded that Murdoch's obsession with the imagery and activity of water and Byatt's with that of fire reflect their awareness that, despite the wide acceptance of the death of the idea of God, humans as individuals and in community still need a religious life - ritual, ceremony, nurture, blessing and a moral order to control the human impulse to destruction. My first chapter therefore examines the ways in which each author has reshaped the ancient religious imagery of water and fire. A natural extension of this is an examination of their investigation of the ways in which humans exercise and experience power – and in the works of both authors destruction appears to be the tool of the disempowered. Destruction is also acknowledged by each author as the flipside of the creative process.

My introduction establishes the strength of the friendship and mutual admiration which existed between Murdoch and Byatt. Reading their texts I detect shared interests (partly accounted for because they draw from the same pool of resources: their culture, education and reading) and a trend: ideas in Murdoch's work which are developed by Byatt in startling ways. For example, Murdoch extols the moral power of art while Byatt employs artworks as a tool of construction – and even reproduces them on covers and title pages. A chapter on narrative theory (Dorrit Cohn's notion of psycho-narration and Rimmon-Kenan's idea of focalisation) again reveals Byatt developing existing ideas in a dramatic fashion. Because Byatt follows Murdoch in time, I argue that on occasion she rewrites Murdoch's fiction and even, because violation and destruction are a component of both life and of the process of artistic creation, rewrites Murdoch's life.

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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 thesis from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date 25 August 2005

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Key to abbreviations of titles of works of fiction

AS Byatt

AI	Angels & Insects
WW	A Whistling Woman
BT	Babel Tower
E	Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice
BB	Little Black Book of Stories
P	Possession: A Romance
SL	Still Life
MS	The Matisse Stories
VG	The Virgin in the Garden

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Iris Murdoch

FHD	A Fairly Honourable Defeat
ASH	A Severed Head
AWC	A Word Child
AM	An Accidental Man
UR	An Unofficial Rose
BD	Bruno's Dream

HC	Henry and Cato
JD	Jackson's Dilemma
NS	Nuns and Soldiers
ss	Something Special
B	The Bell
BP	The Black Prince
FE	The Flight from the Enchanter
NG	The Nice and the Good
PP	The Philosopher's Pupil
SS	The Sea, The Sea
S&S	The Three Arrows and The Servants and the Snow
TA	The Time of the Angels
U	The Unicorn
UN	Under the Net

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1 INTRODUCTION

The influence on AS Byatt of both the theoretical writing and the early fiction of Iris Murdoch has been acknowledged by Byatt and noted by scholars; the critical appreciation which each author has shown for the work of the other is well documented. In an essay entitled 'The Religion of Fiction', for example, Michael Levenson identifies Iris Murdoch as the 'literary mother' of AS Byatt for '[t]he two of them alone are enough to count as a distinct contemporary lineage' (Levenson 1993: 337-8); Byatt endorsed his view when she included Levenson's essay in the 1994 Vintage reprint of *Degrees of Freedom*, her study of the early works of Murdoch first published in 1965. In the foreword written for the 1994 reprint, Byatt explains:

> *Degrees of Freedom* was ... written ... out of a passionate curiosity about how Iris Murdoch's novels *worked*, what the ideas were behind them, how the ideas related to the forms she chose, how her world was put together. It was a writer's curiosity about techniques that started me on the work. When I had finished it I had developed a deep admiration for Murdoch's wisdom, her understanding of the way philosophical, political, aesthetic and narrative thought worked (or failed to work). It is not too much to say that I was morally changed, for the better, I think. And I had learned a great deal about both writing and thinking. (Byatt 1994: viii)

AN Wilson, in his memoir of Murdoch's life, describes Byatt as Murdoch's 'disciple and interpreter' and tells us that Byatt was among those personal friends whom Murdoch quaintly termed 'beloved beings'.[1]

Respect and appreciation have been expressed by each author for the other in public and in private. In bold print on the back cover of the 1981 Penguin edition of Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden* (*VG*) (the first novel of a tetralogy published over a period of more than two decades) is Murdoch's endorsement: 'This is a very good book. It is a large, complex, ambitious work, humming with energy and ideas.' Murdoch's name is again invoked to promote the second novel in the tetralogy, *Still Life* (*SL*). In bold print on the back cover of the 1986 Penguin edition her contribution reads: 'A major novel ... a marvellous and most unusual work.' An entry in Murdoch's diary on 23 May 1970 is incoherent but clearly complimentary: 'Toni has touches of greatness. Her tense tough intellectual fibre, fabric ... This is just homage to Toni.' Murdoch biographer Peter Conradi claims 'Byatt thought Iris the greatest living English novelist and the person whose mind had done most for her own' (Conradi 2001: 518) and he records Byatt's

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tribute paid on Murdoch's seventieth birthday: 'She's at the centre of our culture' (Conradi 2001: 570).

In an essay written in 1989[2] Byatt gives a brief account of her apprenticeship to fiction. Her desire to write fiction arose from '[her] childhood reading and storytelling, and [her] adult encounter with Proust' and thereafter her 'further decisive encounter' with Murdoch's 'extraordinary essay' ('Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch') in which Murdoch argues for 'the hard idea of truth' rather than 'the facile idea of sincerity' (Byatt 1991: 24). In this essay, published in 1961, Murdoch argues that views of human nature current at the time assume that people are 'solitary and totally free' and that the fundamental virtue is sincerity – a term which Byatt suggests might be translated as 'self-consistency' or 'truth to oneself' (Byatt 1991: 24). In opposition to this idea of sincerity, Murdoch sets 'the hard idea of truth': 'We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity.' Byatt comments: 'The phrase persuades with a metaphor – truth is like stone, sincerity is slippery like butter' (Byatt 1991: 24). In the 1985 ICA video *Writers in Conversation*, Byatt makes reference to this idea as one of the maxims by which she lives and in the 1989 essay published in *Passions of the Mind* she says that the idea 'electrified and electrifies' her (Byatt 1991: 24).

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In a conversation published in 1995, Byatt gives an account of a practical skill in the craft of writing which she has learned from Murdoch. Byatt and Ignês Sodré are discussing Murdoch's novel *An Unofficial Rose* (*UR*) and mention of the character Lindsay Rimmer reminds Byatt of a technique which she has noted in the work of Dickens and which has been successfully adopted by Murdoch: a peripheral character is given weight by means of one striking physical characteristic, to which the author makes repeated reference. So, for example, Murdoch endows her character Lindsay Rimmer with cascades of golden hair: she is described as a woman who was 'whatever her other short-comings, undeniably beautiful, with a pale complexion, very rounded head, long golden braids of hair, large brow and great expressive light brown eyes' (*UR* 72). Byatt explains:

> When [Lindsay Rimmer] is introduced Murdoch describes the coils of hair at least three times in three or four pages. ... This is a trick you can learn from Dickens as a writer: if you haven't got

> room to make a character, if you give him or her one totally memorable physical characteristic, the character becomes symbolic and stands for itself. I've tried this, partly because I learned it from Lindsay Rimmer, and it's always worked. Somebody will always come up and say to you, that is an absolutely wonderful character you created with that great big plait down her back. In fact the character consisted only of the plait down her back, she had no other character. But it was memorable. I think Iris Murdoch has tried that with Lindsay Rimmer. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 163-4)

I feel certain that the example cited by Byatt (the character with the plait) is Ruth, a minor character in three of the four novels which make up Byatt's tetralogy. In the novel *Babel Tower* (*BT*) she is described by her closest friend Jacqueline as someone who 'doesn't *talk*, she's a kind of non-person' (*BT* 366). Ruth is loved by Marcus Potter, seduced by the priest Gideon Farr and in the final novel she gives birth to a child and dies in one of the two raging fires with which the tetralogy ends. The birth of Ruth's child (unassisted, unregistered and illegitimate) and her gruesome death make a point about the dangers of a community driven by fanaticism and divorced from normal social interaction. Ruth makes an impression on Marcus Potter, who barely notices other people: 'He liked to think of her when she was not there, the spiral of her plait, the oval face, the eyelids dropped, the small closed full mouth' (*SL* 239). During the action of the final novel *A Whistling Woman* (*WW*) they encounter one another when Marcus visits the religious community of which Ruth is a member. She urges him to join; after their brief conversation '[s]he turned away, with a load of dishes, and her plait swung behind her with its own life' (*WW* 262). The large plait with a life of its own certainly makes this peripheral character memorable.

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In the Acknowledgements at the conclusion of the *Babel Tower* (1996), Byatt notes: 'Writers whose ideas changed me in the sixties and are still important to me are Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing[3] and George Steiner.[4] I have briefly borrowed a character[5] from one of Iris Murdoch's sixties novels' (*BT* 618). It is thus not surprising that the real Iris Murdoch is often summoned up in Byatt's fiction. When Frederica Potter, the central figure of Byatt's tetralogy, considers which career she might pursue as her final year at Cambridge draws to a close, she contemplates 'two hypothetical future Fredericas' (*SL* 283); one is a Frederica who might write 'something elegant and subtle on the use of metaphor in seventeenth-century religious narrative'[6] and the other possible Frederica might move to London and write 'quite different things, witty critical journalism, maybe even a new urban novel like those of Iris Murdoch' (*SL* 283). Of course it is 1956 as

Frederica muses on these possible futures; in 1956 Murdoch had only one novel to her name - her highly acclaimed first novel *Under the Net* (*UN*) was published in 1954. It would have been quite impossible for Frederica to consider writing novels 'like *those* of Iris Murdoch' (*SL* 283, my italics).

Faced with these two possible 'future Fredericas', Frederica takes steps 'to promote the careers of both' (*SL* 283) and writes both an application for the PhD and an entry for the *Vogue* Talent Competition. This entry comprises an autobiography and two shorter pieces, one of which is a list of 'Hurrahs' and 'Boos' for 1956. Iris Murdoch is included under the 'Hurrahs'. There is an account in *Babel Tower* of how Frederica develops techniques for reviewing novels in the very limited space of a column in a cultural magazine: 'You cannot summarise a plot in that space: you can only hint, at an atmosphere, at an analogy (Amis-territory, Murdochian moral intricacy, Sparkian wit and *bizarrerie* ...) ' (*BT* 305). In *A Whistling Woman* Frederica continues to support herself by freelance work: writing reviews, 'reading the slush heap' (*WW* 38) for a publisher, extra-mural teaching. The narrator informs us that this erratic source of money means to her 'trousers for Leo, a pair of tights, an Iris Murdoch novel, washing-up liquid, apples, roses, wine' (*WW* 38). The reader presumes this list to be an interesting combination of necessities (trousers, tights and washing-up liquid) and luxuries (an Iris Murdoch novel, apples, roses and wine).

The percipient reader might stumble on other subtler games played by Byatt which point to her relationship with Murdoch and her consciousness of the constructed nature of fiction. There is, for example, her description in *The Virgin in the Garden* of the demented Lucas Simmonds waiting about in the church under a painting of Hell Mouth 'in an attitude of rebarbative prayer' (*VG* 376). This must be intended as a private joke for Murdoch's appreciation, for in Murdoch's novel *The Bell* (*B*) there is a charming and innocent young boy (Toby Gashe) who clearly enjoys using the word 'rebarbative' – which is not an adjective commonly employed. When the omniscient narrator reflects the thoughts and attitudes of Toby Gashe, the word invariably slips into descriptions: '[E]veryone appeared to be extremely nice, except that that Dr Greenfield man was a trifle rebarbative. (This was a word which Toby had recently learnt at school and could not now conceive of doing without.)' (*B* 48) In other episodes mediated through Toby's

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consciousness the reader hears of a rebarbative dog (*B* 57), a rebarbative swimming towel (*B* 140), a rebarbative bog (*B* 144), a rebarbative adventure (*B* 162) and the rebarbative old bell (*B* 256). All these rebarbative items and events are encountered or experienced by Toby during his brief stay within a religious lay community; Toby will depart a more knowledgeable and experienced person but still the antithesis of Byatt's unbalanced and wretched character Lucas Simmonds who haunts his local church in an attitude of 'rebarbative prayer'.

Apart from this mutual admiration, Iris Murdoch and AS Byatt shared a close friendship. In a letter of 10 July 1995 to Peter Conradi, Byatt explained her feeling that 'though "dailiness" – the things most of us struggle with and sink under – was an imaginative exercise for Iris, the "big things, the best and the worst", she understood and looked steadily at' (Conradi 2001: 519). Conradi notes:

> Murdoch helped Byatt through a number of crises, coming to London in 1968 when Byatt had a health-scare, breaking other arrangements in the autumn of 1972 to be with her after her young son was hit and killed by a car, listening weeping to the things Byatt could say to no one else, and, when able, helping over the years in many ways. (Conradi 2001: 518-9)

Byatt often works the dramatic episodes of her own life into her fiction. She was, for instance, shocked[7] while trying to rescue a bird from beneath an unearthed refrigerator, which is how Stephanie Orton is electrocuted in *Still Life*. Another medical emergency is described in one of the short stories in *Little Black Book of Stories* (*BB*): the protagonist of the short story 'A Stone Woman' suffers the twisted intestine which Byatt experienced while on retreat in the French countryside in an effort to finish the novel *A Whistling Woman*. Byatt, like the unnamed protagonist, was told while recovering that without medical intervention she would have had, at the most, four hours to live. It is thus tempting to read the description of a daughter's quiet and intense grief on the death of a mother with which 'A Stone Woman' begins, as Byatt's experience of the death of Murdoch: 'People had thought she was a dutiful daughter. They did not imagine, she thought, two intelligent women who understood each other easily, and loved each other' (*BB* 130). This is especially tempting since it is so well known how fraught with tension and misery Byatt's relationship with her own mother had been. However, given Byatt's aversion to Levenson's choice of the phrase 'literary mother'[8] to describe her debt to

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Murdoch (although she endorsed the argument of the essay in which the phrase is used), this idea is pleasing but unlikely.

In the twentieth-century social world reflected in the fiction of both AS Byatt and Iris Murdoch (and in the nineteenth-century society into which Byatt makes fictional forays from time to time) almost all relationships are faulty, fractured and inadequate. At the close of Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance* (*P*), the pair of twentieth-century lovers is so disillusioned with the concepts of love and marriage that they determine to subvert both institutions, to be cunning and find 'a modern way' (*P* 507) to conduct a relationship so that self-possession and autonomy are preserved. In Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia* (published together with a second novella, *The Conjugial Angel*, under the joint title *Angels & Insects (AI)*) Victorian naturalist William Adamson overcomes the barriers of class and marries the wealthy and socially superior Eugenia Alabaster about whom he had repeatedly written in his journal 'I shall die if I cannot have her' (*AI* 13) – a line he recalls from a fairytale of childhood. However after three years of marriage 'he was not happy. He had perhaps never been exactly happy, though he had had what he desired, what he had written in his journal he had desired' (*AI* 72). Although William Adamson has achieved the union he longed for, he has lost his sense of vocation and is lonely, although not alone. In Byatt's short story 'Body Art', Dr Damian Becket 'lived alone, since his parting from his wife, with whom he did not communicate' and '[h]e considered himself hopelessly and helplessly married' (*BB* 69).

Murdoch only ever published one short story, 'Something Special' (*ss*). Yvonne Geary, who works in her mother's small shop in Dublin, is determined to hold out against the urgings of her family to marry her only suitor (Sam) whom she rejects as 'nothing special' (*ss* 2). Her uncle advises:

> 'If you wait till you marry for love … you'll wait ten years and then make a foolish match. You're not Greta Garbo and you're lucky there's a young fellow after you at all. Sensible people marry because they want to be in the married state and not because of feelings they have in their breasts.' (*ss* 7)

An evening spent out together is judged entirely unsatisfactory by Yvonne; it culminates in Sam's offer to show her 'something special' (*ss* 38) which turns out to be a tree fallen across a pathway in a closed public park. Yvonne declares 'it's nothing' (*ss* 45), bursts

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into tears and returns home; yet such is her despair of her chances of marriage that as she climbs into their shared bed she concedes to her mother that she will take him 'for nothing' (*ss* 48). The story concludes: 'The long night was ahead' (*ss* 51) which the reader accepts as a comment on the unhappy state of the marriage which will follow. Examples of the unsatisfactory nature of married relationship from Murdoch novels include the claim of Bradley Pearson, narrator of *The Black Prince* (*BP*), that marriage cannot work:

> The human soul is not framed for continued proximity, and the result of this enforced neighbourhood is often an appalling loneliness for which the rules of the game forbid assuagement. There is nothing like the bootless solitude of those who are caged together. (*BP* 64)

Randall Peronett in *An Unofficial Rose* feels his wife to be a dead weight, yet at the same time he feels terribly sorry for her: 'And I'm hideously – connected with her. It's odd how that *connection* survives any real relationship. And it seems to go out into everything. The roses. Even the bloody furniture!' (*UR* 122). In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (*FHD*) Leonard Brown, an embittered and ill elderly father (a parodic figure of God, as will be discussed below), concludes that people are incapable of contentment: 'It's all a myth .. Love, happiness. They can't do it, they *can't* do it. It all went wrong from the start' (*FHD* 54). James Arrowby, the Buddhist sage in *The Sea, The Sea* (*SS*), comments on the human condition when he tries to reason his cousin Charles Arrowby out of his obsession with Mary Hartley Smith: '[Y]our rescue idea is pure imagination, pure fiction ... You say she's unhappy, most people are. A long marriage is very unifying, even if it's not ideal, and those old structures must be respected' (*SS* 178).

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AN Wilson claims to have gained insight into the Bayley marriage in his reading of *The Sea, The Sea*. His highly coloured and personal account of the life of Murdoch is clearly influenced by his anger and resentment at what he perceives to be John Bayley's betrayal of his wife by his published accounts of her mental and physical degeneration as Alzheimer's disease took its course:

> Those who read her novels, with their many exposures of marital unhappiness, might often have wondered whether her smiling and patient insistence that she enjoyed unblemished domestic felicity was not sometimes in itself a form of martyrdom. 'Every persisting marriage is based on fear' – *The Sea, The Sea*. Whatever we decide about that, we might think that the repeated public 'revelations' by her husband in recent years, which began before her death and which have done so much to demean her dignity, were not something that any domestic partner deserves from another. (Wilson 2003: 101-2)

Probably as a result of this reaction, he emphasises Murdoch's disillusion with human behaviour, claiming that her novels

> are a coruscating analysis of the human capacity to turn love into power-games; the most uncompromising scrutiny of what takes place in the tyrant's cage which masquerades as a happy marriage. More than any other writer of her generation, she stared with wide-awake intensity into the muddied waters of our emotional lives, exposing our confusions, our need to deceive ourselves and other people. (Wilson 2003: 6)

Most curiously, for so fine a scholar, Wilson chooses to conflate Murdoch's biography with her fiction, reading her novel as a personal commentary when he proclaims that she portrayed her own marriage as existence in the 'tyrant's cage' in *The Sea, The Sea*:

> IM's imagination appeared to be wondering whether the blissfully happily married Bayleys of legend were in fact not prisoners of something rather hellish. She depicted herself as Hartley, an overweight, lower-class woman married to a peppery domestic tyrant in a neat little bungalow miles from anywhere. Not long afterwards, while IM was away ... her husband bought a tiny suburban house in Oxford overlooking a noisy children's crèche. (Wilson 2003: 97)

The Byatt tetralogy (*The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)) explores the difficulty of relationship and the unsatisfactory nature of marriage. The protagonist of the series, Frederica Potter, grows up in a home dominated by her fiery, restless and opinionated father; her mother takes refuge in silence. There is to be redemption for the parental marriage, but Frederica herself flees the moated grange of her Bluebeard husband and enters thereafter into a series of unconventional liaisons, marked by her refusal to fuse her sense of identity with others. There is a long period of domestic tranquility in a London home shared with another single mother; Frederica and Agatha Mond are able to share responsibilities and chores 'with a new kind of necessary efficiency' (*WW* 11). Approaching the end of a long relationship with John Ottokar, Frederica ponders the constructed nature of a couple's experience of being 'in love':

> And what kills it? Often enough ... a failure in oneself, or in the beloved, to conform to an ideal pattern put in the mind long before these particular two have met. ... It is a dance. It has a formal pattern that friendship doesn't. It is a made-up story. *Love*. Something else, fiercer and harsher and hotter (Life?) needs us to believe in Love for purposes of its own, which are not ours. And we collude. She remembered playing the young Elizabeth I in the garden, the virgin queen whose power was the recognition that separateness and solitude were safety. (*WW* 12)

Frederica has described love within a relationship between a man and a woman as 'a dance ... a formal pattern ... a made-up story' (*WW* 12); Murdoch's character James

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Arrowby refers to marriage as one of 'those old structures' which 'must be respected' (*SS* 178). Relationship and marriage are examples of ritual essential to people's peace of mind and sense of self. Human beings need something to believe in and a structure by which to order their living. A sense of order and control is created by the establishment of a daily routine – beyond this, they require ritual as a way to purge themselves of frustration, of guilt, of a sense of failure. There is comfort in ritual which keeps at bay the knowledge of the finite nature of the human condition and its ultimate isolation. Ritual is an integral part of relationship, and ritual is an integral part of religion. I would now like to consider how both Murdoch and Byatt examine the role of religion in twentieth-century life and how, in the process, they have reshaped those ancient metaphors of religion: water and fire.

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2 FIRE AND FLOOD

2.1 Introduction

Water in the fiction of Murdoch and fire in the fiction of Byatt assume the dual role of the deity of any established religion: nurture and destruction. Given the proposition that God is dead and that the religion of fiction is one of the options proposed to fill the vacated space, it is inevitable that the ancient metaphors of religion should be reshaped. Sin and death, love and redemption are the essence of religion; Murdoch and Byatt use water and fire to explore these elements of spiritual life and the ritual it engenders.

Redemption, according to Murdoch and Byatt, can be found in the word. Murdoch explores this idea in an essay entitled 'The Idea of Perfection'. Moral activity is characterised by an endless aspiration to perfection and the gaze of the individual is directed at the ideal; '[w]here virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*' (Murdoch 1964: 31). The use of words is both an instrument and evidence of such growth. Literature, according to Murdoch, is the crucial source of the word:

> 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. ... [T]he 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. (Murdoch 1964: 34)

Some ten years later she was still preaching the same message. In his 2002 foreword to a reprint of Murdoch's novel *A Word Child (AWC)*, Ray Monk notes that in a lecture delivered to the American Academy of Arts and Letters entitled 'Salvation by Words', Murdoch argued that of all the arts literature is 'the most practically important for our survival and salvation':

> Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence. We become spiritual animals when we become verbal animals. The *fundamental* distinctions can only be made in words. Words are spirit. (*AWC* vii)

Byatt shares Murdoch's faith in words. In the introduction to her collection of essays entitled *Passions of the Mind* she writes:

> The problems of the 'real' in fiction, and the adequacy of words to describe it, have preoccupied me for the last twenty years. If I have defended realism, or what I call 'self-conscious realism', it is not because I believe that it has any privileged relationship to truth, social or psychological, but because it leaves space for thinking minds as well as feeling bodies. (Byatt 1991: 3-4)

Engaged in discussion with Murdoch in the 1985 ICA video production of *Writers in Conversation*, Byatt uses imagery to illustrate her fear that theories of the impotence of language might pose a danger to literature:[9]

> 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*)

In 1989, in an essay written as an introduction to the French translation of the short story 'Sugar', Byatt argues that translation confirms her views of the power of words to communicate accurately:

> Translation gives one a new vision of the nature of exactness, accuracy, and of the fitting of words to things. When I first read Jean-Louis Chevalier's translation of *Sugar*, I felt, in a splendid paradox, both that *Le Sucre* was a new thing, a different piece of writing, and indeed vision, and that it was an exact translation, an exact *re-vision* both of my world and my words ... *Le Sucre* in French is not *Sugar* in English. The fact that words name things differently in two languages is part of our knowledge that we make up, we invent, what we experience and see, that naming delimits and arranges it differently. But the fact that Jean-Louis Chevalier can find such exact

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> equivalents for my English feelings, knowledge, history, shows that the ideas of truthfulness and accuracy also have their validity. (Byatt 1991: 25)

Byatt argues that literature reflects our experience of the world and Murdoch believes that literature acts upon our lives. In an essay entitled 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts', Murdoch expresses her belief that art shapes our lives; she argues that 'the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue' (Murdoch 1967: 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. (Murdoch 1967: 85-6)

Friend and biographer Peter J Conradi describes Iris Murdoch as 'passionately religious by nature and by blood-instinct, yet devoutly sceptical about most traditions in practice' (Conradi 2001: 6). Byatt (with specific reference to recent literary theory) claims: '[M]y temperament is agnostic, and I am a non-believer and non-belonger to schools of thought' (Byatt 1991: 2). Murdoch believed in the good and in the importance of living a spiritual life, but she did not believe in God:

> I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. This is to say that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense. (Murdoch 1967: 79)

Conradi notes that:

> In her letters after the madcap London days, she declares hers precipitately to be an 'essentially religious nature ... These germs in the blood must be confessed to.' How is such a nature to be defined? 'A certain sense of sin combined with a certain sense of beauty? Something like that ... ' (Conradi 2001: 223)

While Byatt also rejects what Murdoch describes as 'God in the traditional sense of that term' (Murdoch 1967: 79), there are spiritual powers which she does acknowledge. She

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feels that certain gods have become more real and powerful to her as she has grown older. As a small child she read the Greek myths:

> In those days, there was no question of belief. There were stories, and I used their accounts of gods and goddesses to diminish the importance of the Bible stories, which I was expected to believe, and recognised as the same sort of stories as the Greek, and the Norse myths, only less attractive, less powerful, less real. They were all stories. Larger and more exciting than life (even though we were in the throes of a world war and my father was in the air in the Mediterranean) but stories. (Byatt 2000 (a): 131)

'When I was at the end of my schooling,' she claims 'I was beginning to see that the gods were more real and dangerous than I had supposed as a small girl, reading my story-books' (Byatt 2000 (a): 137). This view of the power of the gods of mythology (or of the forces which they represent) is endorsed in the 1976 Murdoch novel *Henry and Cato* (*HC*). Henry Marshalson visits the National Gallery to view one of its recent acquisitions, Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*:

> Henry felt such intense pleasure as he looked at the picture, he felt so purely happy that he wanted to howl aloud with delight. ... It was certainly dangerous to tangle with goddesses. ... What poor thin semi-conscious beings mortal men were after all, so easily maddened, so readily destroyed by forces whose fearful strength remained forever beyond their powers of conception. Surely these forces were real, the human mind a mere shadow, a toy ... the piercing joy which he felt now, and which he knew to be so momentary, was surely as real as the gods. (*HC* 96)

Both Murdoch and Byatt eschew traditional notions of God and in their fiction both set out to demythologise the church. In Byatt's tetralogy Daniel Orton, her unbelieving curate, uses the established structure of the church to serve the community; he upholds the ritual of the church but does not worship. In the prologue to *Still Life* he contemplates the suicide of a parishioner who had endured terrible suffering: 'He had not prayed for Ann Maguire. He was not that kind of priest. He had metaphorically shaken a large fist, impotently, at some looming energy-field, and got on with his work, his work' (*SL* 9). In *A Whistling Woman*, Bill Potter, the ferocious atheist, and Daniel Orton, the son-in-law whose vocation and character he had initially roundly denounced, sit side by side in church at Christmas time at a midnight carol service. Mary Orton, daughter and grand-daughter, is singing. As Daniel listens to the sweet soaring voice he thinks about his daughter Mary and his father-in-law, Bill Potter, a cross old man:

> Why had he called her Mary? It was a plain name, and a weight. ... Bill coughed again, and Daniel thought that God had walked quietly out of this stone building, too, he was present in his absence only, and that was why the old man had felt able to cross the threshold, for the live force

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> that had once held the stones together, which had once urged 'Put off thy shoes, for this is holy ground', had flickered and ceased to burn. (*WW* 243)

Byatt notes of Murdoch's novel *The Time of the Angels* (*TA*) that it 'is concerned with the unrealised implications, psychological, moral, behavioural, of the concepts at work in the "demythologising" of the church' (Byatt 1994: 252). Carel Fisher, the central character, believes his is a 'vocation to be the priest of no God' (*TA* 170). The true state of affairs, he claims, '[n]obody wants to hear ... It is the most secret thing in the world. And though I may tell you, you will not retain it in your mind because it cannot be borne' (*TA* 171). This truth, according to Fisher, is that God does not exist and neither does Good:

> 'Philosophers ... are certain that Goodness is there in the centre of things radiating its pattern. They are certain that Good is one, single and unitary... Any interpretation of the world is childish ... All philosophy is the prattling of a child. The Jews understood this a little. Theirs is the only religion with any real grimness in it. The author of the book of Job understood it. Job asks for sense and justice. Jehovah replies that there is none. There is only power and the marvel of power, there is only chance and the terror of chance. And if there is only this there is no God, and the single good of the philosophers is an illusion and a farce.' (*TA* 172)

Good, according to Carel Fisher, exists only if individuals are 'good for nothing':

> 'One must be good for nothing, without sense or reward ... and that is why goodness is impossible for us human beings. It is not only impossible, it is not even imaginable, we cannot really name it, in our realm it is non-existent. The concept is empty. This has been said of the concept of God. It is even more true of the concept of Good. ... With or without the illusion of God, goodness is impossible to us.' (*TA* 174)

That these views expressed by Carel Fisher are indeed Murdoch's views, is confirmed in her essay 'On "God" and "Good" ' in which she says that we require

> an acceptance of the utter lack of finality in human life. The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' in the midst of a scene where every 'natural' thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself. (Murdoch 1969: 71)

Byatt has her unbelieving priest, Daniel Orton, cry out:

> 'I know that humanism isn't enough ... Making any sort of religion out of *being human* is a failure. The Religion of Humanity is a sugary sweet compared to the truth of things. It's just a dummy for babies ... My son says, I'm not a religious. He may be right. I do the things somebody has to do since religion died in the world. Not for "humanity's" sake, but because we are religious beings, and caring for each other is what is left of what we used to know or believe about how everything worked.' (*WW* 400)

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The slow extinguishing of the sense of God in the life of an individual is described in the Murdoch novel *Bruno's Dream* (*BD*). Bruno is very old and he is dying; he meditates on the events of his life including his relationship with God:

> When I was very young … I thought of God as a great blank thing, rather like the sky, in fact perhaps He *was* the sky, all friendliness and protectiveness and fondness for little children. … Later on in adolescence it all became confused with emotion. I thought that God was Love … I loved God, I was in love with God, and the world was full of the power of love. … Afterwards he became less, He got drier and pettier … Then he receded altogether, He became something that the women did, a sort of female activity … He was something rather lost and pathetic, a little crazed perhaps, and small … Yet he had his own places, His own holes and burrows, and it could be a sort of surprise to find him there. Later on again He was simply gone, He was nothing but an intellectual fiction, an old hypothesis, a piece of literature. (*BD* 94-6)

An even more poignant commentary on the declining influence Christianity and the church is present in Murdoch's very last novel (*Jackson's Dilemma* (*JD*)), in the shape of Spencer, the aged hunter, deserted and alone in his field (*JD* 39). He calls to mind any one of the mighty horses of the New Testament book of Revelation, one of which represents the church of Christ on earth (Rev 6:2; Rev 19:11). Spencer is cherished by each of the central characters in the story but receives no practical help from any one of them. A horse is a herd animal and should never be kept in isolation. The novel records disruption, misunderstanding, mistake and pain – all of which are resolved in a number of happy pairings; there is reconciliation and restitution. However Spencer is denied a happy ending. He is denied companionship, even of a pony bought for the young boy Bran. The child parts from the old hunter:

> He had been thus to the field more than once, but this visitation had something very special, painful, a burning sensation, as if there were flames licking them both, lifting up their faces to the heat of the risen sun. Bran found himself sobbing … and Bran said to Spencer, 'I am sorry, oh I am so sorry,' apologising for not being able to be, with and for the other, something perfect. He detached himself … and turned away and ran back across the field … Spencer followed him slowly as far as he could. He was very old and tired. Bending his elegant legs he lay down in the long grass. (*JD* 248)

This seems to be a picture of the reluctant farewell of the western world to an institution and belief system once cherished, now apparently defunct. There is compassion and affection for the horse, but he cannot be rehabilitated or redeemed. Death is coming for him.

AN Wilson notes that ideas, such as this one of the death of God, which were debated in Murdoch's lifetime 'have started to curl around the edges' (Wilson 2003: 132):

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> The Death of God debate in the American universities now has, for those who can remember it, the same kind of retro charm as beads or flowers in your hair. If the full-blooded versions of these fads now seem dead, how much more the English watercolour reproductions, Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* or John Robinson's *Honest to God*. But in IM's novels, they are alive. When Don Cupitt is only a footnote in the intellectual history of our times, the priest's loss of faith in *Henry and Cato* will still seem real, as real as love, to the readers of IM. (Wilson 2003: 132)

Don Cupitt, the atheist Anglican theologian to whom AN Wilson makes reference, wrote an essay entitled 'Iris and the Death of God' in the newspaper column *Face to Faith* in the *Guardian* of 23 March 2002. He comments on the 'saturation coverage' given to Murdoch, including a substantial biography, an Oscar-nominated feature film and a BBC2 documentary. However, the focus of each, he claims, is on 'young Iris bonking and old Iris bonkers' with little or no attention paid to the real Iris in between. Don Cupitt regards the chief concerns of Murdoch's life to be the investigation of the moral order and the search for the answer to the question: after the death of God, what happens to the religious life? The examination of water in the fiction of Murdoch (and fire in the fiction of Byatt) considers answers to this question; it reveals the ways in which elements of religion (such as redemption, self-control and moral order) are regarded by each author as essential components of human community.

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2.2 Murdoch's novels awash with water

Most interestingly, in the light of my consideration of water in her novels, Murdoch's biographer Peter Conradi suggests that '[s]wimming was the secret family religion' (Conradi 2001: 30). After the onset of Alzheimer's Disease (diagnosed in 1997) Conradi notes that Murdoch's diary entries 'reduce to a heart-rending simplicity' (Conradi 2001: 588); in her debilitated condition, swimming is still a source of joy:

> *1 July 1995, of a peaceful Thames swim.* Indescribable. Holiness.
>
> ...
>
> *Among her final entries, on 8 June 1996.* We swam in the Thames, in our usual secret place ... Ducks, geese, swans – a delightful man comes swimming in – we talked – no one else in the whole huge area. He swimmed by, swimmed off, conversation, beautiful. (Conradi 2001: 589)

Robbed by the disease of her health and the ability to work with words, Murdoch used water as an image when she noted of her own condition, as late as December 1997, that it was the time 'since I began sailing away into the darkness' (Conradi 2001: 589).

Certainly, her novels are awash with water (in canals, rivers, the sea, swimming pools, hot springs, bogs and marshes) and many of her principal characters are either fanatical swimmers or are entirely unable and have no desire to swim. This generally serves as a comment on the character in question, as does the use to which each puts water (recreation, revelation, refreshment, death). In her novels Murdoch examines people's pursuit of purity of heart, knowledge, redemption, resolution. It is therefore appropriate that water is integral to such examination since it is an ancient religious sign of purification and an equally ancient literary symbol of death.

The Thames is a dark strongly flowing presence in the 1969 Murdoch novel *Bruno's Dream*. The 'flooding Thames' (*BD* 1) is one of the last concerns of Bruno who is aware that even though he is dying, he cannot 'divest himself of a sense of property' (*BD* 3). This 'sense of property' centres on a valuable collection of rare stamps, reluctantly released to him by his dying father. Bruno did not realise its financial potential ('He might have had a world tour. Or bought great works of art and enjoyed them. Or had oysters and caviare every day' (*BD* 4)) and now those who surround him eye the collection greedily (*BD* 30, 47). His two 'handsome and talented children' (*BD* 13) are not among those present as he labours through the routine of his last days; his daughter jumped to her death off the Battersea bridge to save a child who could in fact swim (*BD* 23) and he is alienated from his son. In a dramatic depiction of the vanity of worldly possessions, the stamps are whirled away by the river at the climax of the novel when the Thames rises and floods Bruno's house (*BD* 250).

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The character on whom the conclusion of the novel will confer the greatest delight is Bruno's pragmatic son-in-law Danby, who loved Bruno's daughter, tends Bruno as he dies and seizes what opportunities life offers for happiness. Danby is manipulated into participating in a duel at dawn on the bed of the Thames at low tide. After shots are fired and bodies have fallen (unharmed) Danby runs along the shore and then splashes into the river: 'He plunged in deeper, wildly splashing, and then with a sudden sense of blissful release gave himself to the Thames' (*BD* 240). Aware that he is now safe he swims with the gently flowing tide: 'He felt a strange beatific lightness as if all his sins ... had been suddenly forgiven. ... [H]e saw that a perfect rainbow had come into being, hanging over London, bridging the Thames from north to south. Danby swam towards it. He swam

under Battersea bridge' (*BD* 240). This is to be a recurring theme: characters who display a willingness to face up to their moral inadequacy or emotional failure, who repent and change and grow, often swim with exuberant delight in Murdoch's novels.

Ponds, fountains and the Thames are a silent presence in Murdoch's 1975 novel *A Word Child*. Ray Monk, in his introduction to the 2002 Vintage edition of the novel, suggests that the story of Hilary Burde is a challenge to Murdoch's thesis of salvation by the word. However, this is to misunderstand the matter. It is not dogged devotion to words or self-improvement by the acquisition of language that offers salvation. We are required to use words to advance our own development and growth:

> [W]ords are not timeless … word-utterances are historical occasions … As Plato observes at the end of the *Phaedrus*, words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom. Words, moreover, have both spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts. We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot.) Uses of words by persons grouped round a common object is a central and vital human activity. (Murdoch 1964: 32)

Hilary Burde's use of words is immoral: 'Grammar books were my books of prayer. Looking up words in the dictionary was for me an image of goodness. The endless endless task of learning new words was for me an image of life' (*AWC* 22). 'I relied upon routine, had done so perhaps ever since I realised that grammatical rules were to be my salvation; and since I had despaired of salvation, even more so' (*AWC* 27). Both his name (Burde) and his physical appearance ('I liked … my copious fur, my blackness, my secret being as a black animal' (*AWC* 27)) align him with creatures, rather than with human beings and this is appropriate given his abuse of words. He thinks of himself in terms of animals: the references are overwhelming.[10]

Burde not only regards those close to him with the benign condescension one might reserve for animals, but in fact treats them as one would treat an animal. Each person is 'conditioned' (*AWC* 15) and his or her behaviour controlled by the slightest look or gesture. He notes of his sister and lover that '[t]hey could both read me as dogs read their master, probably noticing tiny traits of behaviour of which I was myself unconscious' (*AWC* 58). He cannot love his devoted girlfriend; despite his deep attachment to his sister he is domineering (he forbids her to own either a television set or a dog) and attends

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to his own best interests rather than hers. He makes constant smug references to his assurance of her virginity:

> I did not 'find her attractive'. I simply was her. I had to have her there, like God. And by 'there' I mean again not necessarily in my presence. I needed to see her regularly but not very often. She just had to be always available in a place fixed and controlled by me. I had to know, at any moment, where she was. I needed her sequestered innocence, as a man might want his better self to be stored away separately in a pure deity. Did I want her to remain a virgin? Yes. (*AWC* 60)

The crippling guilt which has blighted his prospects has condemned him to a stagnant position in the civil service, a terror of holidays and a tendency to travel aimlessly on the Underground. Given the chance to expiate his guilt (caused by the adultery and reckless behaviour which resulted in the death of the wife of Gunnar Jopling, a colleague) he instead repeats the sin. Gunnar finds his second wife Kitty in Burde's embrace on a jetty on the edge of the Thames and attacks him; attempting to part the fighting men, Kitty plunges off the jetty into some jelly-like mud. She manages to extricate herself from its slow suction but doesn't believe Burde's warning that the river will be a worse danger:

> I suddenly saw, dim yet somehow clear, Kitty floundering madly upon the very edge of the dark racing river. ... I saw her turn over, her whole body now encrusted with mud, as if she were about to sink at last into the hole which her own struggles had created. Then, and I heard her scream as she did it, with a last wild panic-stricken flurry she was beating the water; and then in a second she was gone. She had got herself into the river and the river had taken her away. (*AWC* 376)

Burde fails to learn and grow through words. Instead he stagnates, opting for a life as dark and routine as the Underground on which he mindlessly and aimlessly travels or the mud into which Kitty is sucked to her death. Hilary Burde is frequently associated with water. For example, he describes how he enjoys the experience of 'half-sleeping ... when [he] lay like a floating turtle, just breaking the surface of consciousness, aware and yet not self-aware, not yet tormented by being a particular person' (*AWC* 26). He is 'soaked to the skin' (*AWC* 155) during one emotional encounter and falls to his knees in the snow in another (*AWC* 314). His story is punctuated with the tears of his mistress (*AWC* 245) and his sister (*AWC* 307) or both of them simultaneously (*AWC* 388). But the water, as with words, is not life-giving. He uses bodies of water to create gravitas in his otherwise mundane life. So the Round Pound becomes a place of reconciliation with his girlfriend (*AWC* 177), the fountain of embracing bears (*AWC* 54 and 64) a place where Crystal is to be delighted; a clandestine meeting with Lady Kitty occurs at the Serpentine

and in the ecstacy of bliss which follows his declaration of love to Lady Kitty he longs for a death, a drowning (*AWC* 313).

To highlight Hilary Burde's state of stagnation, his sister Crystal is presented to us as a foil to the brother she loves. Unlettered, Crysal knows how to love; she falls in love with and remains loyal to each man introduced into her life by her brother. She relieves Gunnar Jopling's anguish at the loss of his wife by making love to him (yielding up that virginity which her brother, in ignorance, continues to prize) and she marries in defiance of her brother's will to the contrary. To this woman, cloistered, disempowered and physically unappealing, is given the power to act out of love. To her hapless suitor, who is gormless and unpromising, is given deep insight, although it is expressed in a garbled fashion. He has a position on the nature of goodness:

> 'I think one should try to stick to simplicity and truth. There may be no God, but there's decency and – and there's truth and trying to stay there, I mean to stay in it, in its sort of light, and trying to do a good thing and to hold onto what you know to be a good thing even if it seems stupid when you come to do it. ... [I]t can only be done by holding onto the good thing and believing in it and holding on. It can only be done sort of – simply - without any dignity or - drama – or – magic.' (*AWC* 290)

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It is probably not accidental that this man's name is Arthur, which recalls for the reader the legendary king whose knights defended virtue and championed justice. Arthur Fisch has a following – a group of drug addicts who haunt the office and whom he tries to assist. However the reader cannot concur with Hilary Burde's view of himself as a knight. He describes his repeated and ill-judged interventions in Gunnar Jopling's life as a 'quest' carried out for a 'Lady' (*AWC* 259) and imagines himself 'locked in frightful combat' (*AWC* 260). Arthur is discounted and despised by his fellow civil servants and treated in a high-handed and contemptuous manner by Hilary Burde. Yet it is he who has adopted a moral stance and who displays spiritual insight. Using the JM Barrie play *Peter Pan* as an illustration, he explains his views to Burde:

> '[T]he spiritual urge is mad unless it's embodied in some ordinary way of life. It's destructive, it's just a crazy sprite. ... Wendy is the human soul seeking the truth. She ends up with a compromise.'
> 'Living half in an unreal world?'
> 'Yes, like most of us do. It's a defeat but a fairly honourable one. That's the best we can hope for, I suppose.' (*AWC* 88)

This exchange between Arthur Fisch and Hilary Burde provides an explanation for the title of Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. In this novel it is the 'diminutive swimming pool which made a square of flashing shimmering blue in the middle of the courtyarded garden' (*FHD* 3) which provides an indication of the self-absorption which Murdoch examines or the joyful abandon to the act of living which she celebrates in certain characters. Rupert Foster, complacent and self-satisfied, is immersed in a work of philosophy – a 'meditation on the relation of love to truth and justice' (*FHD* 36); love, he believes to be 'the last and secret name of all the virtues' (*FHD* 81). Rupert is of the opinion that '[s]wimming refreshes the soul' (*FHD* 8) but is not seen in the water until his accidental death, mirror of a spiritual death, when Morgan finds '[a] fully clothed human body ... floating in the pool below the surface, arms and legs outspread and dangling. It was a man. It was Rupert' (*FHD* 380). Rupert's physical destruction is a consequence of the destruction of his sense of himself as a good man and the ridicule and destruction by his friends of his attempt to express his philosophy in words. (His friend Axel, with whom he studied philosophy at Oxford, anticipates that the work will prove 'a farrago of emotion' (*FHD* 26) and after the party held to celebrate its completion the manuscript is shredded by the Fosters' son Peter with the assistance of Julius King.)

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Morgan, the representative mortal absorbed in a quest to find herself (to her sister she pompously announces 'I just want you to exist quietly near me while I discover who I am and what the purpose of life is' (*FHD* 44)), also never swims. During a period of introspection when Morgan believes herself to be temporarily 'whole in madness' (*FHD* 163) she imagines her relationship with Julius King as a kind of joyful abandon to water: '[W]ith Julius one is in the hands of the gods, one has *fallen* into their hands. That is frightening but life-giving. To be deep in life: not to creep by or tremble on verges' (*FHD* 163). Morgan does not swim with this kind of abandon which suggests that her personal imagery is a delusion. After a mystical experience there follows a revelation that 'All is good, all is beautiful. ... What seems bad is just apparent. If one thing is good then all things are, if one thing is intact and precious and absolutely beautiful then everything is. ... One simply needs a starting point' (*FHD* 167); the starting point on which she and her nephew rapturously agree is a piece of Shakespearean poetry which also describes immersion in a new element: '*Full fathom five thy father lies,/Of his bones are coral made./Those are pearls that were his eyes,/Nothing of him that doth fade,/But*

doth suffer a sea change/Into something rich and strange' (*FHD* 167-8). This is followed by the rapturous adoption of a new creed ('innocent love' (*FHD* 170)); all of these ideas newly developed by Morgan are illusory, transient, subjective and ultimately destructive.

Julius King cannot swim and when he is toppled into the pool by Simon, whom he has taunted and terrified, he almost drowns. His antipathy to water ('I'm nervous of water, even in swimming pools' (*FHD* 259) he confides) supports the view that Julius King represents the devil (to whom the waters of baptism are abhorrent) battling with Christ (Tallis Browne) for the soul of humankind (represented by Morgan). Conradi, for example, suggests that '[t]he trio of Julius and Tallis fighting for the soul of Tallis's wife Morgan belongs to Christian *psychomachia* – Christ and Satan struggling for the soul of the Common Man' (Conradi 2001: 504). Morgan, the novel's representative mortal, has lived with both Tallis and Julius. To Hilda she confides that 'everything with Julius was so *high* ... It was a heroic world. It was like living in ancient Greece or something. The light was so clear and everything was larger than life' (*FHD* 46). 'With Julius,' she says to Rupert, 'everything was ritual' (*FHD* 79). Of Tallis (whose best efforts achieve nothing, which seems appropriate in a character intended to represent the idea of the death of God) she says: 'At first it all seemed very unworldly and spiritual and free. Later it was depressing. Later still it was frightening. It made me lose my sense of identity' (*FHD* 78). Tallis and Morgan constantly exchange a string of amber beads, reminiscent of a rosary. They were a gift of love from Tallis, broken by Morgan, mended by Tallis and finally slipped over Tallis's head by Morgan in jest; he wears them under his shirt. A symbol of relationship for Tallis, they are repeatedly treated as trivial by Morgan, who cries out about her relationship: 'I can't *see* Tallis any more. He's just something hung around my neck' (*FHD* 81). This account by Morgan of her inability to 'see' Tallis (who represents the idea of God) tallies with Murdoch's definition of an effective God as an 'object of attention':

> I shall suggest that God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention* ... The religious believer, especially if his God is conceived of as a person, is in the fortunate position of being able to focus his thought upon something which is a source of energy. Such a focusing, with such results, is natural to human beings. (Murdoch 1969: 55)

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However, I choose to read Julius King not as a figure of Satan, but as a picture of truth – possibly Murdoch's concept of 'the *hard* idea of truth', which Byatt, in an essay entitled 'The Omnipotence of Thought', defines as 'an awareness of the limitations of mind, of the dangers of fantasy' (Byatt 1991: 127). Julius King strips away the consolations of fantasy as he forces those with whom he forms a relationship to acknowledge unwelcome truths about themselves. When Morgan proclaims her intention to live with 'the truth' (*FHD* 124) that her relationship with Julius is the only important thing ever to have happened to her, even if it burns or kills her, Julius answers 'I detest the spectacle of self-deception of any kind' (*FHD* 127). He will soon prove his point when he easily diverts Morgan's attentions to her brother-in-law Rupert, with disastrous consequences. Julius will cruelly confront Axel's reluctance to acknowledge his homosexuality with the gift of an outsize pink teddy bear. He exposes the inadequacy of Rupert's philosophical work which he condemns and then physically tears into pieces.

The circle of friends in this novel illustrates one of Murdoch's major preoccupations: the operation of the religious urge within people who have abandoned the notion of God. Hilda and Rupert do not believe in God: 'God was still around when we were young,' says Hilda to Rupert. 'It's different now' (*FHD* 11). They have replaced God as an ordering principle in their lives with order itself. 'I do think a reasonable amount of efficiency is an aspect of morals,' says Hilda to her husband. 'There's a sort of ordered completeness of life and an intelligent use of one's talents which is the mark of a man' (*FHD* 13). This desire for order is not limited to the arrangement of their own lives. They also desire to order the lives of others. Hilda Foster, priestess of order, contemplates the life of her son and her sister:

> She thought then of Peter and moved her hand as if to make a sign of blessing in the air. Peter will be all right, she thought, and felt certain of it in that moment. My bond with him has never been broken. All shall be well. But there was something more than that, and almost lazily she recognized what it was that had suddenly so caught and pleased her. Morgan was coming home. Morgan was coming home for refuge and comfort and help. Hilda would pick up the pieces. (*FHD* 33)

Simon Foster possibly subscribes to the same philosophy, for he too finds pleasure in the thought of putting Morgan back together:

> Poor poor Morgan. Proud Morgan. I must try to help her, he thought. I shall go to her. I shall help her to pick up the pieces. And with the phrase 'pick up the pieces' a curious thrill of pleasure

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> shot through him. He would enjoy that somehow, helping Morgan to pick up the pieces. (*FHD* 30)

Rupert's appreciation of order is reflected in the arrangement of his papers on his desk in Whitehall:

> Rupert's papers were set out in neat piles. Papers in neat piles calm the mind. They were weighted down by water-smooth stones brought back by Rupert and his wife from rivers and seas all over Europe. (*FHD* 219)

Again Rupert's status as an observer who does not immerse himself joyfully in the business of living is reflected in his appreciation of stones which have been shaped by water from which he himself remains distant.

It would not occur to Tallis Browne to swim for he never consults his own pleasure; instead he exerts himself ceaselessly for the good of the world, achieving nothing. He lives in the midst of human misery: 'There were distant cars and the intermittent night cries of the neighbourhood. There was always to be heard some sound of human trouble, shouting people, quarrelling people, weeping people, drunks' (*FHD* 97). His compassion is displayed when he laboriously and rather ludicrously saves a fly from drowning in his sherry (*FHD* 159). The champion of right and truth, it is he who insists that Julius King confess his machinations to Hilda although a series of blunders on Hilda's part delays her reconciliation with Rupert and in the interval Rupert drowns.

Tallis is established as a Christ figure when we are told that he has never said to himself of his relationship with Morgan: '[I]t is finished' (*FHD* 97) (Christ's last words on the cross). He is devoted to his crotchety father Leonard who believes that he suffers the pains of arthritis, unaware that he has cancer and is dying. Leonard seems to speak as a parodic version of God the Father, deeply disillusioned with human nature; people seem to him to enjoy being humiliated by their deity – being booted in the face. In a ludicrous, humorous but significant instance of bathos, the reader learns that Leonard's toes (appendages on the foot with which – were he indeed God - he might boot human beings) are itching:

> 'What are they for after all but to kiss the foot that kicks them in the teeth? And when they've had the boils and the cattle have died and the children have died and they're scraping themselves with potsherds … and after all that and the damned irrelevant rubbish about the elephants and the

> whales and the morning stars and so on, there they are still whining and grovelling and enjoying being booted in the face – My toes are itching like hell. What do you think that's a symptom of?' (*FHD* 97)

He has concluded that human beings are capable of neither love nor happiness and claims that the human race failed in the beginning and will in the end engineer its own destruction:

> '[I]t's no good their talking about progress. If they get hold of one thing they lose another. It's automatic. They can't win. Now they are prating of happiness. But what is it? They don't even know. If they had it they'd keep their coal in it. And there's another thing. They crave for change, at any price ... and that's why they'll always have wars ... until this globe's got nothing on it but old bones and plastic bags and a seething mass of spiders.' (*FHD* 92)

It is Simon and Hilda (who love with an abandon of self, exhibit a practical self-knowledge and who live joyously) who are constantly in and out of the pool. To his partner Axel, Simon cries:

> 'I rejoice that you exist, that I have met you, that I can touch you, that we live in the same century. I will never cease to bless you for my good fortune.' Simon could not prevent himself from saying such things constantly. They burst out of him as a paean of thanksgiving at his phenomenal luck in having discovered Axel and at finding that where he loved he also was loved. (*FHD* 28)

His days of promiscuity are over and he is committed to this relationship:

> The old days had their charm, but only in memory. Simon felt, as he so often felt when he thought suddenly and intensely about Axel, a sort of lifting supporting tide of love. (*FHD* 174)

When he begins to fear for his relationship as a result of Julius's machinations, Hilda notes: 'He's quite gone off his swimming lately, I'm sorry to say' (*FHD* 259).

Fanatical swimming or the inability to swim marks several of the characters in Murdoch's 1978 Booker-prize-winning novel *The Sea, The Sea*.

Whatever the sea represents in *The Sea, The Sea* (Byatt suggests power and chance[11]) it is immediately apparent that it is something quite removed from the element in which the novel's self-obsessed narrator, Charles Arrowby, functions. Its huge passive form 'lies' before the narrator, 'leans quietly against the land'; 'the bright sunshine cannot penetrate the sea' and 'the gentle water taps the rocks' (*SS* 1). These descriptions suggest a body of water which holds itself aloof from the land, which keeps its being separate.

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The form of the narrative is unclear to the narrator. Until he finally acknowledges that he is writing his life as a novel (*SS* 153), Charles Arrowby names his chronicle variously a memoir, a diary (*SS* 1), a philosophical journal (*SS* 2), autobiography (*SS* 3). Whatever shape it assumes for the narrator, to the reader it seems to be none of these things. Instead it is an account of the arrogant and self-absorbed life of the human mind which feeds on illusion and wish-fulfillment. Insight and understanding flare briefly before drowning in the subconscious; it is self-delusion and fantasy with which the psyche principally entertains itself and steady recognition of truth seems impossible. The thoughts and actions of the novel's narrator illustrate this selfish and self-deluded nature of the psyche. In her essay 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts' Murdoch summarises modern psychology's assessment of the psyche:

> The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. ... The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. (Murdoch 1967: 78-9)

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Charles Arrowby's account of himself exactly illustrates this view of the nature of a human being. Central to his life, he believes, has been the loss of his childhood love, Mary Hartley Smith. He is on occasion able to face the truth and to acknowledge that his belief is misguided and that his lover is unwilling ('I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality' (*SS* 499)) only to lapse soon after into his dream text once more: 'But there is no doubt that Hartley ... did, as I thought at first, sometimes feel sorry that she had lost me' (*SS* 500). At the novel's conclusion he has gained a measure of insight but has made no progress. He muses:

> What an egoist I must seem in the preceding pages. But am I so exceptional? We must live by the light of our own self-satisfaction, through that secret vital busy inwardness which is even more remarkable than reason. Thus we must live unless we are saints, and are there any? (*SS* 482)

It is the reader's task to sift the narrator's explanations and justifications in order to identify the untruth of Charles Arrowby's perceptions and ultimately to acknowledge this as the human condition. The sea, in Charles Arrowby's story, seems to represent the realm of the mind with its potential for spiritual life. The second paragraph of the

Prehistory with which the novel opens, informs us that once the opening paragraph had been composed 'something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible' (*SS* 1) that the narrator cannot undertake its description. It was the emergence from a calm sea of a coiling monster with a crested snake's head (*SS* 19) which shocks the narrator and leaves him breathing 'carefully' and holding his heart. This monster witnessed by Charles Arrowby seems to me to represent the truth, possibly ugly, possibly terrifying, which lurks in the narrator's subconscious and which emerges on occasion but which is never examined, explored or put to rest. It will emerge again when Arrowby almost drowns and before losing consciousness becomes aware of the 'strange small head near to mine, terrible teeth, a black arched neck' (*SS* 467).

Byatt describes the sea in Murdoch's novels:

> It is beautiful, shifting, contains inhuman beasts friendly and alien … It kills, supports, entices, delights and terrifies, reminding one that those things exist, things that Wallace Stevens called 'inhuman , of the veritable ocean'. It is interesting that in both *The Unicorn* … and *The Sea, The Sea* death, or possible death by drowning give characters the nearest chance they have to vision of the universe freed from their selfish desires. (Byatt 1994: 283)

Experiencing the death of Clement Makin (the glamorous actress who was in fact central to his life) gave Charles Arrowby similar access to the truth, acknowledged and then abandoned: '[E]ach death … leads us to the self-same country, that country which we inhabit so rarely, where we see the worthlessness of what we have long pursued and will so soon return to pursuing' (*SS* 485). This idea (that moments of insight are quickly submerged in the daily wash of life) is encapsulated in the line of poetry which Murdoch twice weaves into her fiction from Paul Valéry's poem *Le Cimetière Marin*, a meditation on death and eternity: '*La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée*'. Spiritual contemplation may lead to insight and understanding but these soon slip away and the search for truth and meaning begins again. Waves (the sea beginning again) break at the margins of the sea; this seems an appropriate picture of Charles Arrowby's life of constant new beginnings and opportunities which will never advance his spiritual journey because he is his own handicap. For example the reader will realise what Charles Arrowby will only intermittently acknowledge, that Clement Makin was central to his life ('Clement was the reality of my life, its bread and its wine' (*SS* 484)) rather than Mary Hartley Smith. Biblical imagery conveys to the reader the failure of the idealised relationship with

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Hartley. There is for example the instance when Hartley 'half dead' cannot be revived even when he offers her a meal which recalls the sacraments: bread and wine (*SS* 277). The reader recalls the reference to Christ and the Bible as 'the word' when Arrowby notes: 'I had lived my life on her words, and now she could not even recall them' (*SS* 299). And so the 'religious' foundation of his life, his all-consuming love for Hartley, is a lie, which might account for the 'faint smell of fire and brimstone' of which he is aware (*SS* 85) as his memory of her is revived.

And so Charles Arrowby proclaims that the intention of his writing and his sojourn by the sea (in a property called Shruff End purchased for this purpose) is 'to repent of a life of egoism' (*SS* 1), 'to become … pure in heart' (*SS* 122), failing to understand that while he might be abjuring the glitz of a career in the theatre conducted in a glare of publicity, his state of blind self-absorption continues without missing a beat. He imagines that he is setting himself the task 'to learn to be good' (*SS* 2) and believes that his journal-keeping within sight of the sea will have substance unlike the writing undertaken during his career which was 'written in water' (*SS* 2). He believes that the 'dervish dance' (*SS* 23) is over and that he has entered a new phase: 'How huge it is, how empty, this great space for which I have been longing all my life' (*SS* 485).

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However, nothing has in fact changed. Charles Arrowby is still the high-priest of self-love. He constantly proclaims a creed which is trivial and pronounces upon the elements of his daily ritual which, when examined, are mundane and even ludicrous. The dicta which comprise the creed include the proclamation that '[i]n food and drink … simple joys are best, as any intelligent self-lover knows' and '[o]ne of the secrets of a happy life is continuous small treats' (*SS* 8). His daily rituals include swimming but are primarily the preparation and consumption of meals. This is described in exalted tones full of recommendations and admonitions, yet the menus are pedestrian and would revolt a gourmet. So frozen kipper fillets are declared to be 'arguably better than smoked salmon' (*SS* 25); 'frankfurters with scrambled eggs, grilled tomatoes and a slight touch of garlic' are followed with 'shop treacle tart' (*SS* 31); a coley is defrosted, braised and 'served with a little tomato ketchup' (*SS* 53). His pompous proclamations on the subject of food 'approximate' he believes (*SS* 87) 'to absolute truths'. The sea is meant to inspire in Arrowby a spiritual life but before its face he continues to perform his ingrained rituals

and all that the sea appears to succeed in revealing to him is a selfish fear – a fear of loneliness and death (*SS* 49).

Could the sea represent the realm of the mind which encounters the power of the spiritual life, to be entered with respect, courage, humility and an awareness of the potential for danger? Admiring the contents of the rock pools, Charles Arrowby notes '[w]hat a remarkable amount of beautiful and curious life they contain' (*SS* 7) and he embarks upon the 'excessive task' (*SS* 242) of gathering stones which are variously coloured and which have been smoothed by the sea; these he treasures and shares with those closest to him. His cousin James, who has spiritual insight, asks for a stone and it is found on his desk after his death (*SS* 481); Hartley is reluctant to receive the gift of a stone and abandons it twice, finally tossing it into the garden before she emigrates (*SS* 481). In addition to this, it is to be noted that Hartley cannot swim (*SS* 280) and in a state of distress she is associated with the sea, the spiritual element, in a destructive way:

> [H]er whole figure expressed ... a total dejected resigned misery which had passed beyond fear. She had an air of being dripping wet as if she had in truth been drowned and this was her ghost. I held the gate open. She passed me with her blind dripping drowned head. (*SS* 237)

That Hartley's husband Ben Fitch also has no spiritual life is suggested by his lack of affinity for water – for example he attends boat-building classes which teach not boat-building but woodwork (he will therefore never go to sea in a craft of his own making) and there is his inability to swim (*SS* 214).

Charles Arrowby's stone-collecting and pool-gazing seem to suggest the limited extent of his immersion in a spiritual life: it is merely pleasant meandering on the margins. His obsession with himself precludes him from any experience of revelation or insight. He is constantly disappointed in his search for signs of life in the sea: 'They say there are seals here, but I have seen none yet' (*SS* 2); on other occasions he refers to the 'remarkably empty tract of sea' (*SS* 12) and 'our strangely unfrequented sea' (*SS* 440). He undertakes his daily ritual of swimming without any particular respect for potential danger.

Arrowby is rewarded with a sign of life only after a he has shown himself willing to acknowledge truth. Surfacing from sleep and recalling the fact of James's death, he

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wonders: 'Who is one's first love? Who indeed' (*SS* 476). He has temporarily abandoned both his aggression towards his cousin and his blind insistence that Hartley is his first and only love. His willingness to contemplate truth seems to be celebrated by a brief display of activity in the otherwise empty sea: the appearance of four frolicking seals, 'lithe and glossy' with dripping whiskers and wet backs. It is a short-lived moment of personal insight. The difficulty of cutting through the 'dream life of the consciousness' (Murdoch 1976: 85) to truth has been repeatedly illustrated by the ridiculous difficulty he regularly encounters extracting himself from the sea. His access to the sea is repeatedly established and then broken. Steps hewn into the rock are rendered useless because the lower section of their iron bannister has been broken off and has washed away; the sea removes a knotted rope (*SS* 27) and a stout cotton curtain used for the same purpose (*SS* 67, 206).

Charles Arrowby fails to seize two opportunities for salvation. One is offered to him by his cousin James who will miraculously 'resurrect' him from a potential death by drowning. The magnitude of this spiritual achievement appears thereafter to enable James to shed his attachments and achieve death at the time of his own choosing. Charles, by contrast, will fail in every spiritual quest. He gains a 'son' in the form of Titus, Hartley's adopted son, but carelessly loses him to the sea and does not learn or grow from the experience as James has done. It is to James (and to Titus) that the words of the novel's title are given: 'The sea, the sea, yes, ' (*SS* 176) James muses. Once Titus has materialised at Shruff End, hoping to establish that Arrowby is his father, he is quickly elevated by Arrowby to Hartley's previous position: '[H]e was the centre of the world' (*SS* 251). Almost immediately Titus utters the words of the title: 'He said, suddenly stretching out his hands, "Oh, the sea, the sea" – '. When a swim is suggested he strips, leaps into the sea and exhibits 'marine joy', showing off, swimming like a dolphin and lifting up a 'wet exuberant laughing face' (*SS* 256).

James, in his capacity as spiritual guide, repeatedly speaks the truth to Charles. For example, after Charles has kidnapped Hartley, James questions his dedication to Hartley:

> 'I won't call it a fiction. Let us call it a dream. Of course we live in dreams and by dreams, and even in a disciplined spiritual life ... it is hard to distinguish dream from reality. In ordinary human affairs humble common sense comes to one's aid. For most people common sense *is* moral sense. But you seem to have deliberately excluded this modest source of light. Ask yourself, what

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> really happened between whom all those years ago? You've made it into a story, and stories are false.' (*SS* 335)

Charles cannot hear this and once he has released Hartley to her husband and home, determines to wait at Shruff End for Hartley to change her mind; should this not happen, he intends to kidnap her again: 'simply start the whole thing over from the beginning' (*SS* 354,357). (*'La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée.'*)

The novel concludes with Arrowby contemplating a new range of possible beginnings (there are invitations to direct, to travel, to father a child (*SS* 501)) none of which, the reader now knows, will be used by him as opportunities for spiritual development. He returns to his old rituals (which will never enlighten him) of the preparation of curious combinations of foods. He is no closer to personal insight or spiritual redemption. The reader is inevitably frustrated by Arrowby's resistance to those moments of insight which hold the potential for spiritual growth and understanding.

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By contrast, the altered perspective and insight achieved by Jake Donaghue, the protagonist of *Under the Net*, Murdoch's first published novel, is most refreshing. This novel is packed with action (for example a political riot erupts on a film set, Jake assists Hugo Belfounder to break out of hospital and Jake and Finn kidnap a most appealing celebrity dog), yet its climax is not any of these swift-paced and dramatic episodes, but rather a piece of information which acts as 'a wrench which dislocated past, present, and future' (*UN* 227). Jake absorbs the facts presented and there is an immediate and life-changing shift in perception which he then realises must alter his understanding of reality. The tumult of action which unfolds through the course of *Under the Net* serves as a foil to this moment of quiet insight which has radical consequences in the life of the character: he determines to write good fiction rather than translating inferior fiction; he finally understands who it is that he loves and bears the shame 'of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were' (*UN* 247).

These important developments are of course reflected in water imagery. Jake describes his change in perception and attitude: 'Like a fish which swims calmly in deep water, I felt all about me the secure supporting pressure of my own life. Ragged, inglorious, and apparently purposeless, but my own' (*UN* 250). The narrator of *The Nice and the Good*

(*NG*) similarly describes the conscious state using water as an image: 'Each human being swims within a sea of faint suggestive imagery. It is this web of pressures, currents and suggestions, something often so much less definite than pictures, which ties our fugitive present to our past and future, composing the globe of consciousness' (*NG* 332). In *Under the Net* there is a most vivid description of a late night swim in the Thames which I think reflects Jake's willingness to engage with life and to learn. Dave Gellman the philosopher is one of the party, and he refuses to swim. This seems appropriate in one who theorises about abstract principles as a profession; it also seems appropriate since he holds himself aloof from Jake's problems and refuses to engage him in debate. Jake says that Dave Gellman, being a philosopher, 'is professionally concerned with the central knot of being ... and not with the loose ends that most of us have to play with' (*UN* 24). Gellman crouches above the swimmers 'like a monument' and is denied the glory of the swim which Jake experiences: 'The sky opened out above me like an unfurled banner, cascading with stars and blanched by the moon. .... I swam well out into the river. ... The whole expanse of water was running with light. It was like swimming in quicksilver' (*UN* 106-107). They emerge from the river in a state of exhilaration: 'A tension had been released, a ritual performed' (*UN* 108).

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Thus from the very first novel published by Murdoch, water has a significant presence. In her second novel *The Bell* (1958), a masterful work which never flags or falters, the equation of water with self-knowledge, self-discipline and spiritual awareness is quite clear. One of the chief protagonists, Dora Greenfield, charming and feckless, is described as having an imagination 'starved throughout her meagre education, and unsatisfied still' (*B* 8). She is without religion:

> Dora's ignorance of religion, as of most things, was formidable. She had never in fact been able to distinguish religion from superstition, and had given up her own practice of it when she discovered that she could say the Lord's prayer quickly but not slowly. (*B* 14)

During a brief sojourn within a lay community at Imber Court, Dora twice experiences the 'ordeal by water' which the reader will learn to associate with Murdoch. The events which lead to the dissolution of this lay religious community will reveal her to be in fact morally astute and capable of change. However in the period before this change is effected, the point is repeatedly made that Dora cannot swim.

The Abbey across the lake from the religious community at Imber Court is regarded by the community with deepest respect. Audiences with the Abbess are coveted and the Abbey is described by a postulant within the community (Catherine Fawley) as a 'great storehouse of spiritual energy' (*B* 112). The leader of the group, when in consultation with the Abbess, has the sensation that 'the spiritual force of the place seemed to blow upon him like a gale' (*B* 234). This view of the Abbey as a source of authority and power is endorsed by the action of the novel when Sister Clare, whose spiritual guidance has so often been urged upon the recalcitrant Dora, rescues Catherine and Dora as they flounder in the muddy lake; Catherine, who has lost her wits, has flung herself into the lake in an attempt to drown herself and Dora, in a selfless act (for after all she cannot swim), has tried to save her. Sister Clare, referred to as 'an aquatic nun' (*B* 283) and 'the intrepid and amphibious nun' (*B* 303), is quite unembarrassed by the spectacle she presents partially stripped of her dripping habit; she remains calm throughout the drama. Her strength and tranquility seem to be at one with the image we have been given of the Abbey as a powerhouse of spiritual energy.

Before Dora is rescued from drowning by Sister Clare, she has another watery adventure shared with the young boy Toby Gashe. The courtly Toby's admiration is evident from his first meeting with Dora on the train to Imber (*B* 20); that evening it is he who finds and restores to her a pair of lost shoes ('Toby was the lucky one!' (*B* 39) cries James Tayper Pace). Shortly after Toby realises that he views Dora as 'the incarnation of femininity' (*B* 174) she begs him to '[m]ake a miracle' (*B* 198) and raise the long lost mediaeval bell from the bed of the lake in order to surprise the community. Toby uses his ingenuity and knowledge of mechanics to achieve this feat and, successful, claims a kiss (*B* 221). Toby the knight has succeeded in the quest for the fair lady by achieving the near-impossible. The raising of the bell from the lake recalls Excalibur rising mysteriously from the depths to which it must return – just as the new bell will plunge into the lake as a result of the sabotaging of its installation. This triggers Catherine Fawley's frantic suicidal dash into the water for her brother sabotaged the bell to protest her decision to enter upon the life of a nun. Dora, now the hero (*B* 222) rather than the maiden, will attempt to save her. As a result of this ordeal, Dora submits to the counsel of Sister Clare, for she now feels 'intensely the need and somehow now the capacity to live and work on her own and become, what she had never been, an independent grown-

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up person' (*B* 301). Not surprisingly, the outward sign of this inner spiritual reality is reflected in Dora's announcement that she intends to learn to swim:

> By the time that anyone got around to telling her not to, since no one had time to supervise her and she must not go out alone, she had practically taught herself. She turned out, when put to it, to be a natural swimmer, buoyant and fearless in the water. ... [B]efore the warm weather ended she had mastered the art quite adequately. (*B* 299)

Her new attitude, her new life and her new independence are proclaimed yet again at the novel's close as she unties the small rowing boat from the painter which connects it to the ferry and rows herself (another newly acquired aquatic skill) back to Imber Court. As we have seen, confidence in or on the water in a Murdoch novel is a sign of emotional and spiritual growth and self-confidence. Dora has the narrator's blessing on her future.

The Philosopher's Pupil (*PP*), set in a fictitious spa town ('Ennistone') in the south of England, is narrated by N, who describes himself as 'a shadow, Nemo ... a student of human nature, a moralist, a man' (*PP* 16). N is obsessed with the social structure of his town: the occupations and religious persuasion of its inhabitants and their forbears ('The McCaffreys ... were originally commercially-minded Quakers' (*PP* 29); the Stillowens 'were Methodists, formerly involved in trade ... but now professional people of various kinds' (*PP* 30); George McCaffrey married Stella Henriques 'daughter of an English diplomat of Sephardic Jewish extraction' (*PP* 31)) and the social consequences of these facts, such as the location and nature of their homes.

The inhabitants of Ennistone share 'a strong social conscience' and a commitment to 'worthwhile activities' (*PP* 16). Everybody swims, all year round (*PP* 24). From time to time there are disturbances, 'a restless sensationalism, something almost superstitious' (*PP* 26) such as the accusation of a visiting evangelist: 'You have dethroned Christ and worship water instead.' The delight of this community in their daily ritual immersion seems as though it should reflect the washing away and cleansing of sin, but it does not. Rather we are invited to consider the idiosyncratic means to salvation which various individuals have devised for themselves. George McCaffrey, for example, believes that his salvation will be achieved if he can secure the acknowledgement of the famous philosopher, John Robert Rozanov, who was once his teacher. Rozanov is revisiting Ennistone, his home town. George works hard to provoke a 'happening' (*PP* 427) which

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will create a bond between himself and the philosopher. Rozanov understands this and will not be drawn into any interaction.

George is envied by certain members of the community for his 'liberation from morals' (*PP* 29); he 'made violence his trademark. He made a point of his aggressiveness and bad temper to define his *esse*' (*PP* 74):

> There was some deep ... wound in George's soul into which every tiniest slight or setback poured its gall. Pride and vanity and venomous hurt feelings obscured his sun. He saw the world as a conspiracy against him, and himself as a victim of cosmic injustice. (*PP* 76)

George's personal dissatisfaction gives rise to aggressive and destructive behaviour. He smashes the collection of Roman glass displayed in the museum where he works (*PP* 7) and in the opening sequence of the novel, in a downpour of rain, he drives his car over the edge of the town's canal and then pushes it in, in an attempt to kill his wife Stella who is still inside (*PP* 6). He thereafter dives in to save her (*PP* 8) but she swims out of the sunken car and saves herself; she will not condemn him, thereby increasing her hold over him which he so resents. Towards the close of the novel, George will again attempt to kill someone who has power over him – this time the philosopher John Robert Rozanov, who is renting rooms at the Institute on the site of the hot springs. The reader is aware of the personal ritual which George establishes by means of repetition: where once he tipped the car containing his wife into the canal, he now tips the philosopher off his bed and into the bath where the waters of the hot springs surge. George thereafter 'drowns' one of Rozanov's notebooks (*PP* 553) – he seems to regard this as part of the ritual destruction of the man and his work. However, Rozanov has in fact swallowed sleeping tablets and was in the process of dying by his own volition; a pupil will recreate the notebook from lecture notes. George has in fact achieved nothing but does not know this; his action confers upon him a sluggish and passive peacefulness.

George and Stella have in fact lived in mutual torment since their son died in an accident for which Stella blames her own 'carelessness and stupidity' (*PP* 366). The community chose to believe George was responsible and Stella did nothing to alter this perception. This has bound them in a mutual experience of hell. Stella tells N that 'it's like being damned together, tied together and thrown into the flames' (*PP* 367). Once George has

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achieved salvation (although its basis is false) he submits to the control of his wife and thus delivers her from her personal hell.

Other characters' routes to salvation generally also involve water. Adam, George's nephew, has a small much beloved dog named Zed; boy and dog are inseparable and are viewed as Alpha and Omega (*PP* 38). On a family outing to the sea, an annual ritual, Adam loses Zed while swimming. The frantic family swim out in search of the dog while Adam remains on shore 'flailing his arms and screaming with terrible woe' (*PP* 354). George is swimming around the point, aware of the sea's 'curative influence' (*PP* 356), and he encounters the exhausted and bedraggled dog and saves him. Quite by chance he has been the instrument of Adam's salvation. Then there is Tom McCaffrey, George's half-brother, who is 'innocent and happy, happy because innocent, innocent because happy' (*PP* 319). His innocence is corrupted by Rozanov who attempts to engage Tom as a husband for his grand-daughter, Harriet, for whom the philosopher has an illicit sexual passion. Tom attempts to achieve this union and is deeply disturbed by the experience; he hopes that the annual ritual of the family outing to the sea will cleanse him:

> Tom had thought ... that the day at the sea would somehow 'cure' him. The old idea of the family holiday at the sea was replete with innocence and calm joy. He needed to see Hattie again in some sort of ordinary way so as to wash off, as it were, the painful unclean impression of the previous meeting. (*PP* 380)

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Tom's expectations fail; further efforts to right the situation leave him feeling as though he inhabits 'a dark nightmarish cavern out of which there opened an indistinguishably large number of exits into hell' (*PP* 472). He will finally be purged in a trial by water: he seizes an opportunity to explore the subterranean works which control the hot waters of the spring and is locked in the steaming dark plant. By his own ingenuity and with some luck he escapes and is given a new lease of life and confidence which enables him to claim Hattie, the philospher's grand-daughter, as his bride.

Having considered the prominent role of water in Murdoch's fiction and its philosophy, I now turn to fire and its significance for Byatt.

2.2 Byatt's tetralogy aflame with fire

Chapter Two of Byatt's novel *Possession* is prefaced by an extract from the writings *ca* 1840 of the (fictitious) poet Randolph Henry Ash. Although it is a lengthy paragraph, it is one sentence, which begins 'A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds ...'; it culminates in a fiery metaphor:

> A man is ... all this and something else too, a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come. (*P* 9)

That this comparison is not a particularly useful or profound comment on the nature of man, is suggested to us in the reported musings of the character Roland Michell:

> It mattered to Randolph Ash what a man was, though he could, without undue disturbance, have written that general pantechnicon of a sentence using other terms, phrases and rhythms and have come in the end to the same satisfactory evasive metaphor. Or so Roland thought, trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject. (*P* 9)

At the time that Randolph Ash drew this comparison of the life of a man to a flame, he was writing a twelve-book poem *Ragnarök*, 'trounced' by some of his readers as 'atheistic and diabolically despairing' (*P* 9). In the essay entitled 'The Religion of Fiction', in which Michael Levenson claims that Murdoch and Byatt 'count as a distinct contemporary lineage', he identifies in Byatt's writing the desire 'to be the natural historian of the post-Christian spiritual life':

> All through Byatt's writing life, she has reflected on the way we earthly beings dream of spirit. She is a Realist, a post-Christian, a sometime academic living in sceptical times. These may seem heavy drags on the religious turn, but for Byatt these are simply the latest natural conditions for our spirit-hunger. It's no use whining. Her point is not to confirm religious truth, but to enlarge the religious sense, which locates value not in the infinite but in the yearning for the infinite, not in God but the search for God. (Levenson 1993: 343)

Levenson notes Byatt's appreciation of the French historian Michelet's definition of history-writing as neither narrative nor analysis but as resurrection: '[T]his may have been my contribution to the future: that I have if not arrived at, then at least pinpointed, the aim of History, that I have given it a name no one has yet given it. ... I have called it "Resurrection", and this name will stick' (Levenson 1993: 41). Levenson believes that this has inspired in Byatt the belief that historical fiction raises the dead:

> To write … historical fiction is to resurrect the dead, it is to raise Lazarus: this thought is made for Byatt. It leads quickly to her own elevated vision for the contemporary novelist, who through strenuous imagining might herself raise the dead, and it encourages her in the proud thought that what religion was, literature can now be. (Levenson 1993: 343)

My exploration of Byatt's use of fire as a crucial element in her representation of English social and religious life in the 50's and 60's, is limited to the tetralogy. The four novels of the tetralogy are set in the same decades as the novels of Murdoch discussed above and also deal with the British *haute bourgeoisie.* Planned and begun in the 60s, these four novels (*The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)) explore the family and community life of Frederica Potter. Since Frederica is the central figure of the tetralogy, it is she who is consistently associated with flame, fire and burning, as will be discussed. Even Byatt's reviewers associate Frederica with fire: in the extract below from Robert MacFarlane's review of *A Whistling Woman* published in *The Observer* of 15 September 2002, reference is made to 'the *sparky*, spiky Frederica Potter' (my italics). MacFarlane describes the technique and intention of Byatt in her creation of the story over several decades:

> A more modestly inclined writer, confronted with such a massive historical terrain, might have settled upon a technique of high-altitude mapping: noting familiar landmarks and large-scale cultural contours. Byatt, by contrast, has tried to write history as seen from ground level, by creating a central character – the sparky, spiky Frederica Potter – and pushing her forwards through two decades of English life. More than this, by using her skills as a pasticheur and letting her prose take on the texture of whichever idea, person or writer she is describing at a given moment, Byatt has attempted to bring her readers to feel the past, rather than simply telling them about it. (Macfarlane 2002: internet)

Midway through the tetralogy there is a marked change in the attitude of the narrator towards Frederica. In the first two novels she is felt by characters and narrator alike to be obnoxious and she is a figure of derision. However in *Babel Tower* Frederica (through whose consciousness the action is most often mediated) invites only admiration and respect. Her battle is represented as that of women of the 60s oppressed by the role of wife and mother, yearning for work and dignity. We learn from the prologue to *Still Life* (*SL* 3) that by 1968 (a time beyond even 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'. In the course of the fourth and final novel she is to emerge as a successful television presenter and published author. The alteration in the attitude of the narrator is exactly in step with Frederica's empowerment. She is transformed by her own

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hard work, talent and determination from frustrated minor and disillusioned wife into independent single mother and successful career woman. Frederica's development is of course also assisted by her interaction with art, for example her study and teaching of the novels of Forster and Lawrence, whose ideas she applies to her own life. She also creates her own private metaphor - 'Laminations' – to describe an intellectual exercise embodied in a collection of writings – her own and others' – which she will eventually publish.

In a book review in *The Spectator* of 7 September 2002, Philip Hensher assesses the tetralogy:

> So what is the cycle about? What gives it the powerful unity now evident? At one level, it is the compelling story of one woman's life over 20 years, a life which takes on a secondary, emblematic interest, how women's minds and lives changed between the early 1950s and the 1970s. But I think, more centrally, what binds the books together is a decision to tell a two-fold history of England: the first, the social conditions, the possibilities of lives, questions of public events; the second, an account of the imaginative fantasies which seized the English mind as the decades passed. … *A Whistling Woman* introduces quite a new tone into the cycle; previous volumes were capable of extraordinary violence, but none leaves such an impression of violence unleashed as this does. In part it is to do with recurrent images of fire and blood. (Hensher 2002: internet)

In a review of *A Whistling Woman* published in *The Guardian* of 7 September 2002 and entitled 'Trials by fire', Alex Clark describes a reader's sense of a novel spinning out of control as its author '*fired* with genuine curiosity' (my italics) appears to cast off Frederica 'the quartet's great questing figure, its truth-seeker as much as its unstably stable centre' in order to pursue innumerable other interests which present the reader with 'a constant parade of dense and complex ideas' and descriptions of a world 'saturated with sensual and physical detail, as if to counter the charge of not being fully alive'. He speculates that fire might offer Byatt a solution: 'That may be why she's also attracted to fire, to the tempting liberation of burning the entire edifice down.' I argue against this notion – see page 204 in subsection 7.3 'Focus: who is seeing – and what?' On the subject of fire Alex Clark continues:

> The scorched arm of Frederica's dead sister lies at the centre of the quartet, followed by the book-burning of *Babel Tower*. Here too there are catastrophic flames, bonfires of the vanities that signal both the approach of the novel's conclusion and the imminent melt-down of its precarious patterns. For Joshua Ramsden, a sane lunatic, fire is purification; at the pitched battle between the university and its assailants, it is sheer destruction. Quite what it is for Byatt is one of the novel's most intriguing questions. (Clark 2002: internet)

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Another reviewer who feels the novel is overloaded is Robert MacFarlane, writing in *The Observer* on 15 September 2002. He describes *A Whistling Woman* as 'an over-ambitious jumble' which

> suffers from the same sins which beset its forerunners – the excessive use of symbols (spiders, spirals, fire, webs, mirrors), a narrative gnarliness, an overbearing sense of allegory – but it suffers from them even more acutely. ... She has never been afraid of a symbol, and the bewilderment which the book's ideas induce isn't helped by the tropes which proliferate throughout. (Macfarlane 2002: internet)

Clark has answered his own question about the possible significance of fire for Byatt:

> Byatt has ... explored sense and thought, and the problematic notion of how they can possibly be represented in fiction. And like the characters here whose ideas prefigure the search for a Theory of Everything, she has attempted to create a kind of fictional unity that few other writers could even imagine. Watching it break apart, one senses, is just as interesting for her as watching it struggle to cohere. For her readers, this is not always the case, but it's a close-run thing. (Clark 2002: internet)

Another possibility is that Byatt is deliberately disrupting the narrative process in order to question the nature and limits of literature. In *Still Life* Byatt makes the point that real life does not provide satisfactory endings when she winds the novel down with three unremarkable domestic scenes connected only by the circumstance that the characters in each scene gather at a table to eat and drink. (I return to these apparently unremarkable scenes in my conclusion.) This might be why Byatt creates a contrast by choosing to conclude the quartet with catastrophic and cataclysmic flames.

In *A Whistling Woman,* water and fire are given their ancient roles of purification and destruction in the child-like poem read by the anarchic poet Mickey Impey; this poem provides some clues to the pervasive presence in this novel of fire and blood. In the poem, scientists are described as 'metal men ... full of hate' who imprison children who thereafter burst their chain, burn the spectacles and coats of the scientists and send them naked into the rain. Having been taught the truth, the naked scientists kneel to pray '[r]ainwashed *to innocence, and youth*' (*WW* 43-4). This poem foreshadows the issues which the novel will explore: the violent reaction of the young, the oppressed, the insane – the disempowered - against the status quo. No matter how fiercely this reaction is expressed the consequence is the same: nothing changes.

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Two such situations develop and simmer during the course of *A Whistling Woman*. The students of the University of the North demonstrate against authority and reject their curriculum; they disrupt lectures, burn effigies of authority figures on gibbets, petrol-bomb and smash university property and burn artworks and buildings. The uprising has been carefully orchestrated by dissidents encamped on the fringes of the university's property. Once their work is done they slip away. The second example explored in the novel of a community in revolt against the status quo is the formation of a 'Therapeutic Community' (*WW* 223) established on a Yorkshire farm according to the principles of the Manichees. A sociologist observing the life and development of the group and smuggling out reports records: 'Two of the activities that weld groups into communities (cults) are well under way. One is hard work. The other is ceremonies' (*WW* 224). The ceremonies become destructive to human life; a pregnant cult member is denied medical attention and a mentally unstable member is allowed to waste away and die. The cult's community life is brought to an end when they light 'Need-fires ... to purify the place' (*WW* 403); the farm buildings are destroyed and members of the cult are burned to death.

In *Babel Tower* the mechanics of community life removed from the normal restrictions and conventions of society are examined in *Babbletower*, a fable which is relayed in episodes interspersed in the *Babel Tower* narrative. A large and diverse group of aristocrats and their servants arrive at a remote fortified location, having escaped a terror, possibly the French Revolution. They are led (and manipulated) by the aristocratic owner of the property, Culvert; they set about creating a community in which harmony prevails and every individual's desire is identified and satisfied. In consequence of each person being allowed absolute freedom to express his or her true desire, the community finds in themselves 'deep-rooted desires to hurt and to be hurt, ancient instincts of immolation and oblation' (*BT* 274). Several members of the community observe this development but it is a woman, Lady Mavis, who tries to bring people to their senses. The Lady Mavis, whose children are persecuted and fatally harmed by their fellow playmates, lays on a feast for the community. Feasting is an ancient sign of fellowship. However at this gathering, the Lady intends to sacrifice her life by jumping from the battlements before their eyes; in this dramatic fashion she hopes to bring people to their senses and prevent them from behaving in a way which is leading them to self-destruction:

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> 'I should like to think that I can take with me the yeast of blood-lust and malice that is at work, that I could concentrate its energy in my body and extinguish it with my life. Because I go voluntarily, *no one else is guilty* of my death, I kill myself, and restore a kind of preliminary innocence.' (*BT* 274)

The Lady Mavis is making herself a blood sacrifice as established in religious practice. She reminds them how in Babylon the god Baal was propitiated with 'a red human heart, tastefully roasted, a whole human infant, the first-born, trussed and tossed into the flames of his altar fire' (*BT* 272). The community strove to appease the god to ensure that he 'did not wilfully torture or persecute the people for the following year, but let their corn and vines grow rich and their children spring up plump and healthy' (*BT* 274). She reminds the gathered people that the Krebs, the tribe who live beyond the walls of the fortress and who menace the community, 'still build a Balefire and make their offerings ... a prisoner, a fool, a goat, a beloved son' (*BT* 274). The community has rejected God and all the institutions of society by which order is instituted and social life regulated. The Lady Mavis points out that they have 'no gods to judge or to comfort, to afflict [them] or to take away pain' (*BT* 274); drawing on her own resources, the Lady Mavis will sacrifice herself just as in other times and tribes sacrifices have been burnt on fires. However her sacrifice is in vain; she instead gives the community 'a taste for blood ... and for spectacle' (*BT* 276) and by the end of their tale and the end of the novel, all its members (bar three wily old men) have been roasted and eaten by the Krebs. The *Babbletower* fable illustrates how fire has been traditionally used as a medium to propitiate the gods and ensure fertility and security; the end of the tale reminds us that fire is a weapon for subduing and destroying.

A Whistling Woman begins with an examination of endings. *Flight North*, the fairy-tale adventure told by Agatha Mond which punctuates *Babel Tower*, is brought to a conclusion in the first eight or nine pages of the novel's opening chapter. *Flight North* (to which all further references in *A Whistling Woman* are only brief extracts read, overheard or quoted by the characters) operates within *Babel Tower* as a fairy-tale foil to Frederica's experiences and growth. I discuss it here because this fantasy tale which parallels Frederica's 'real-life' existence includes instances of fire and burning which comment on Frederica's life in which real flames flare together with figurative ones.

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Flight North is the tale of Artegall, a prince, who grew up confined by war to a tower, which suggests the isolation experienced by bookish children such as Frederica. The prince reads prodigiously, but has no practical experience. One day the enemy fleet lands and the prince escapes with a group of companions who expect he will be of no use in the adventures which ensue as they travel north to elude capture; instead the knowledge which he has gained from reading assists them time and again. Both Artegall and Frederica learned about life from their reading and their own life stories recount the negotiation by each of dangerous terrain after an escape from confinement; Artegall's journey and the dangers he faces are physical while Frederica's journey and dangers are emotional.

In the third and last extract from this tale within *Babel Tower*, two characters join the prince's party. These characters - Fraxinius and Dracosilex – each represent an aspect of Frederica at this stage in her personal quest for sexual satisfaction and creative fulfillment. When the *Flight North* party reach the Last Village, they are prevented from travelling further by an impassable icy rock wall. The inhabitants of the Last Village are preparing the Bale Fire, which is lit every year an hour before midnight on the Longest Night. A brightly burning fire guarantees a Spring. The fire is reluctant to burn and the villagers seem inclined to blame the small band of travellers; harm is threatened. Artegall submerges Dracosilex in a geyser and invites the revived salamander to light the Bale Fire which he does with 'a sinuous noose of what seemed like liquid flame' (*BT* 398). A roaring fire is set and the celebrations are euphoric.

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However, towards dawn, people begin leaping the fire and fragile fawn-coloured Fraxinius is goaded into participation. He leaps the fire and falls into its heart. He is set ablaze but instead of being destroyed he is remade with fresh green limbs of trunk and twig, 'a body pliable and liquid, emerald and mossy' (*BT* 400). Enveloped in a cloak of flames, he strides towards the impassable rock face and melts rock and ice, opening a 'dark and dangerous' crack through which his 'bright conflagration' passes. Fraxinius, gangly and stick-like, represents Frederica's vulnerability as she battles her husband in court, seeking a divorce and custody of her son: 'Frederica thinks: *I am too thin to be convincing*. It is an odd thought, not real, a product of unreal air, full of old pain, old terror, old triumphs and despair, old dust' (*BT* 485). However, *Babel Tower* is a record

of Frederica's triumph and rejuvenation. She will blaze a path forward, through the apparently impassable rock face of her husband's counter-petition and social disapproval of her choices. She forges a way ahead in her life just as Dracosilex and Fraxinius have opened a physical passageway for the characters in *Flight North*.

Fraxinius has vanished from the story with which *A Whistling Woman* opens, but Dracosilex is present: stony, heavy and inert. He is a 'toad-like minor dragon' (*BT* 395), which can alter its form from stone to reptile. In *Babel Tower* he secured his companions' safety by his ability to generate fire. When the party reach the Northern Kingdom it is filled with summer sunlight which their cold skins drink in. Reacting to the sunshine, Dracosilex 'gave a start of fierce life, spread his wings and tail, claws and nostrils, blinked his scaly eyes and stepped out of Mark's pack lightly to the ground where he began a sinuous leaping and prancing of which they would not have thought him capable' (*WW* 8). This suggests that in this final novel we are going to witness Frederica, after the misery and humiliation of her escape from an oppressive marriage, cavorting in the sunlight of her independence and increasing success, and finding satisfactory companionship and love – fulfilling all her stated aims.

In the tetralogy Frederica is consistently associated with flame and *Babel Tower* has been a record of her destruction and regeneration by fire, for she will emerge a fulfilled modern woman. She has inherited her colouring and energy from her father Bill, who is described in some detail in *The Virgin in the Garden*:

> 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. ... 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 crackling at the base of a bonfire which might suddenly flare, flare and fall in. (*VG* 31)

In the filmed discussion with Iris Murdoch in the *Writers in Conversation* series, Byatt claims that a text will always prefigure what the author knows is to come. Asked to elaborate on how this happens, she points to her use of the future tense with reference to characters who have a future (see end note 18 on page 218), and to the use of metaphor. In this description of Bill Potter, for example, in the early pages of the first novel of the

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tetralogy, Byatt has revealed by means of a metaphor something which lies in this character's future. Bill Potter will 'flare, flare and fall in' as each of his children in turn reacts against his explosive and abrasive personality leaving him deflated and humiliated.

Daniel divides the family into the 'blank pale Potters' and the 'bird-like, judging, flaming Potters' (*SL* 47). Bill and Frederica make up this latter category. However Frederica's mother Winifred, whom Daniel regards as a blank pale Potter, does flame on occasion, but in a self-controlled and silent fashion. During the period after all the children have left home (Marcus deeply traumatised and refusing to return) Winifred 'was besieged, or, it would be more accurate to say, infiltrated by the menopause' (*SL* 147). This transitional state is described in fiery imagery: 'There was the paradox that she felt everything thinning, diluted, enfeebled and yet heat could rise inside her as though she was boiling, an old witch in agony on her pyre' (*SL* 148). These physical symptoms let loose emotions which have long been suppressed: 'The heat was not only blood or boiling fat, it was rage.' Her outward appearance ('There she sat, a handsome, still, silver-gold woman, upright and judicious looking') belies the inner upheaval: Winifred 'saw herself in her mind's eye as a raging volcano of overflowing flesh and cracking bone, dead hair, dull eyes, numb fingers, monstrous' (*SL* 148).

Another experience of transition which is hidden and fiery occurs for Winifred when Frederica is home from Cambridge during a summer break with a 'raw and flaming face' (*SL* 263), suffering from German Measles. Winifred tends her daughter assiduously:

> Frederica did not discover, then or ever, that the silent female form, bearing dish and napkin, was in fact burning. Winifred loathed the sight of the young leggy body, sprawled in its damp nightdress, where once her child had been. She stood in the kitchen with the dry, bloodless fire rising in her and drove herself to wait on this least needy of her children only through pride. Her days for childcare were over, her body no longer fit to bear more. And here was this creature, the length of whose limbs was some kind of insult, acquiescing briefly in being waited on. I am like a dried-up stick, Winifred told herself. I should be left alone. (*SL* 264)

Regeneration and wholeness lie in the future for Winifred – in the period after Bill ceases to rage and flame. In the first novel in the tetralogy the reader encounters Bill as a man who 'took pleasure in flouting normal expectations, seemed driven to flare up, to "create"' (*SL* 43). He bitterly opposes Daniel's marriage to his daughter Stephanie ('he disapproved of Daniel, the Church of England, Christianity and Stephanie's burial of her

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talent amongst these things' (*SL* 22)) but he will learn to respect and admire Daniel, eventually deciding that Daniel is very like himself; Daniel is able to assure Winifred that reconciliation has occurred – 'The fire's gone out, in that chimney' (*SL* 58). Frederica is constantly associated with fire in the same way. 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 (*BT* 36) 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'; 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. For example, 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 Frederica's son Leo is present, but still '[h]is 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. 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). However, this relationship will also fail and when the reader catches a last glimpse of John Ottokar, he is lying burned and silent in hospital where he is visited by Frederica (*WW* 405).

In the readings from *Flight North* given in *A Whistling Woman*, fairy-tale or fantasy characters are figures of Frederica just as they have been in *Babel Tower*. The first and most obvious, and a neatly constructed bridge between the two novels, is her representation (within the extract from *Flight North* read by Agatha as the story opens) in the weird hybrid creatures, the Whistlers. These creatures have long slender necks,

feathered hoods and wings, pale red-gold beaks, long hair and human faces with arched eyebrows (*WW* 4). We recognise Frederica as a Whistler when she looks at television rushes and notes that the cameras 'made her sandy quality richer, gave her hair a dark red depth, her eyebrows ... a winged arch' (*WW* 46). The connection is made explicit in the first of the three quotations which preface the novel: *'A frequent saying of my maternal grandmother:* A Whistling Woman and a Crowing Hen/Is neither good for God nor Men.' The implication is that it is neither seemly nor acceptable for a woman to trespass on a man's territory. This is what the Whistlers of *Flight North* have done, and they have been duly punished. They were women of Veralden, denied the right of the men to be shape-shifters; instead they were condemned to a sedentary lifestyle, spinning, teaching and tending gardens. In search of '*the speed and the danger of the wind and the snow and the dark*' (*WW* 6) they made feather-coats for flying and undertook secret expeditions until they were betrayed and shamed. In a ritual as ancient as human life, the community punished what they feared by fire: '*an angry crowd burned our women's clothes outside the gates of Veralden, and almost burned us*'; asked if they desired to be women again they claimed that while they '*could never forgo the wind in the wings, and the free racing through the stormskies*', they longed to be welcome again within their community (*WW* 6). This is Frederica's battle, for independence and mental stimulation, which is chronicled in *Babel Tower*. Divorced wife and single parent, she is an oddity in her community and, together with Agatha, she has formed a new kind of family:

> They supported each other in practical ways ... the two women were able to help each other with childcare, with shopping, with book buying, with a new kind of necessary efficiency. And out of that sprang a kind of new and different domestic comfort. Leo and Saskia were friends, and quarrelled much less than they would have done if they were siblings. Agatha and Frederica were calmer together than if they had been sisters.... It all worked much better than they had expected or hoped it would. (*WW* 11)

Frederica, like the Whistlers, has also endured the burning of her possessions by those who would shape her. For example her father, who urged her to turn to literature for answers, did not trust her early independent judgment and tried to control her by fire:

> '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.'

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'They were prurient fantasy. And vulgar. And untruthful, if that word means anything.' (*VG* 34-35)

Later, in an intriguing parallel action of book-burning, her lover's twin brother (Paul Ottokar) tampers with her identity (he resents his twin's involvement and his own exclusion) by piling her books in towers ('her books, and not only her books, but part of herself' (*BT* 456)) and burning them in public. He first practises this 'art' on Bonfire Night which is a riotous celebration by Frederica and her neighbours. Frederica objects in principle to the burning of books and is told that that is the essence of the art form: 'No point burning things nobody cares about' (*BT* 406). He drinks a toast to the burning Guy: 'Here's to him. He had the right idea. Explode it all. From underneath. Then there's a chance of living a real life. Up in flames. Theophany.' This art form is called 'skoob' (books backwards). Paul Ottokar creates another artform of which fiery destruction is an element at the Dip Show, the exhibition held at the end of the year at the Samuel Palmer School where Frederica is a part-time teacher. Dressed in a tailcoat and white tie, Paul Ottokar plays the clarinet, accompanied by the rattling and tapping of 'a human being dressed like a large bird' who stands inside 'a kind of cage-like edifice made from multi-coloured playstraws' (*BT* 442). To conclude the presentation, Paul Ottokar sets fire to the cage which 'flares, blackens and dies' (*BT* 443). After the structure's collapse, the bird and the clarinet player take a bow.

However Paul Ottokar is unable to function normally within society and is made deeply unhappy by the attempts of his brother John to establish a life apart from his own. He therefore employs his 'artform' skoob as a tool for overturning a world which does not satisfy him; when he later burns Frederica's books the art form becomes a public protest against her relationship with his twin which threatens his sense of security. Frederica will spend the night in tears, 'sorting the burned books from the almost intact, the black paper from the scorched brown and yellow, the ashes from the written words' (*BT* 457). Paul Ottokar has instinctively understood that Frederica's books are a part of herself and that in burning them he destroys a part of her. In the final book of the tetralogy, Paul Ottokar's destructive art will be instrumental in burning much of historical value at Long Royston, the stately home donated to the University of North Yorkshire by Matthew Crowe, and in burning down a farmhouse and thereby burning to death some members of

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the religious cult who inhabit it. Paul and John Ottokar are badly burned in this fire, which is one of two huge conflagrations with which Byatt chooses to end her tetralogy.

The concept of book burning as art was presumably borrowed by Byatt from artist John Latham whose untitled multi-media work which includes burnt books (see Illustration One on page 49) is on display at the Tate Modern. I discovered this in notes made by a friend on reading *Babel Tower:*

> Imagine my surprise when Jude Mason describes a party where 'Jeff Nutall and John Latham were painted blue. They were dressed as books, which they destroyed. Everyone danced.' (*BT* 339) John Latham was a cousin of my mother's grandmother, an artist whose collage of burnt books can be found in the Tate Modern. Jeff Nuttall was a poet in the 60's, who would have met John Latham in 1966 when Better Books was looking at film work involving them both. John Latham was born in Rhodesia in 1921 and, as far as I know, is still alive. This ... shows how the realism of a book can touch people unexpectedly. My mother was so excited when we saw John Latham's work – and books about him – at the Tate. (Rees-Bevan 2002: 1)

Frederica is enraged by Paul Ottokar's practice of 'skoob' because her work is being destroyed: 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, it reflects (as it did when Frederica fought with her husband Nigel: 'smouldering' and 'flaming' (*BT* 38) before taking fire) the potential for injury and pain in emotional involvement with another. Finally, in the concluding chapters of *A Whistling Woman* in which Byatt makes concessions to all the conventions of popular literature with her happy endings and promise of a bright future, fire becomes a source of healing and cleansing – for example on the second-last page (of the whole tetralogy, since this is the last novel) when Frederica and her son drive across the moor in search of Luk and the gorse blooming in the heather is 'spread like a sea of fire' (*WW* 420). Fire has already been reinstated as a symbol of passion: Frederica experiences her relationship with Luk as perturbation of body and mind as fire begins to rearrange the patterns of her intellectual and emotional life (*WW* 411). There is a sense that Byatt has given in to the patterns of popular literature out of sheer exhaustion at the conclusion of the decades of work on her tetralogy.

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Illustration One John Latham (Pop Art): Untitled Relief Painting, 1963

'The concept of book burning as art was presumably borrowed by Byatt from artist John Latham whose untitled multi-media work which includes burnt books is on display at the Tate Modern.'

Frederica's fairytale ending begins in June 1969 when she and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock leave the burning buildings of the North Yorkshire University where the anti-university protestors have used fire to disrupt an innovative Body-Mind conference. Luk's lecture at the conference has been a great success; Frederica attended the lecture and her observation of him and her perception of his fiery nature immediately suggest to the alert reader that Luk is going to be significant in Frederica's life: 'Frederica watched Luk, amazed and delighted. He seemed like some sort of small golden fire-demon, with sparks coming out of the ends of his fingers (which he used a lot, as he paced the platform, very effectively)' (*WW* 359).

Lady Eva Wijnnobel, the mentally unbalanced wife of the Vice-Chancellor, participates in the riot which disrupts the Body-Mind Conference. Aware that Gerard Wijnnobel is very concerned for his wife's safety, Frederica enlists Luk's help when she sees Eva Wijnnobel running away down the drive of Long Royston. They see Lady Wijnnobel climbing into a white van and set off in pursuit. They follow the van to the outlying farmhouse (Dun Vale Hall) where an assortment of disturbed individuals, many of whom have suffered or perpetrated acts of extreme violence, have established a community. Here at the end of the year they will find the second of the two destructive conflagrations with which Byatt ends her tetralogy. However it is after this first fire at the university that they take refuge in Luk's cottage on the moors. This is to be the scene of Frederica and Luk's first intimacy. Luk offers Frederica a hot bath: 'You are covered with bits of burned stuff, and your face looks as though you've pushed it in a bonfire' (*WW* 379). In the months that follow, both think occasionally 'about their night together, in the shadow of the burning' (*WW* 383); they meet again when both are in Yorkshire and attend Alexander Wedderburn's production of *The Winter's Tale* staged to raise funds to repair damage sustained to university buildings by the fire. After 'the usual rejoicing and celebration' (*WW* 395) which follows this performance, it is established that Daniel's son Will has disappeared. Daniel and Luk rescue Will from the community at Dun Vale Hall.

Two nights later, Dun Vale Hall is set alight after purification rituals burn out of control. Three people die and the Hall is destroyed. The Ottokar twins are burned but survive and lie side by side in the Burns Unit 'their faces turned to each other, their bandages and skin-grafts uncannily symmetrical. Frederica visited them. They did not speak. Their

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lips were covered with dressings' (*WW* 405). The reconciliation of their differences has been effected by the fire and their unspoken mutual communication and their exclusion of the outside word by silence has been re-established.

Tired and stunned by events, Frederica and Luk again retire to his remote cottage on the moors. We are reminded of the earlier association of Frederica with the strange Whistlers of Agatha's fantasy tale *Flight North* as she sits huddled in Luk's quilted eiderdown, a 'cloak of feathers' (*WW* 406). After gentle love-making they discuss their separate futures; Luk encourages her to pursue a career in television rather than academia. He acknowledges that success is harder for a woman to achieve but he urges: 'You must just whistle harder. Louder.' The narrator tells us that 'if he had said, you are lovely, and if he had said, I want you exclusively to be *mine* ... Frederica would not have been so perturbed in body and mind. The laminations were slipping. Fire was arranging them in new patterns. She was full of life, and afraid' (*WW* 411).

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Again in accordance with conventional endings, Frederica is given a child, the age-old symbol of new life. However, her life experience and the development of her thinking and understanding have altered her attitude so that she is able to overcome her fear of commitment and responsibility despite the fact that '[t]his second pregnancy brought back banished memories of the first, the terror of being trapped by her own body, by two other people's bodies, of being *shut in*' (*WW* 415). In a review of Murdoch's novel *The Time of the Angels*, Byatt wrote:

> Iris Murdoch is one of the very few novelists we now have who explores in any detail that area of life in which men are changed by thought. She knows that men are affected as moral and emotional agents both by muddled concepts and by intellectual passion, and presents these facts convincingly. (Byatt 1994: 251)

In the account of Frederica and Leo's reaction to Frederica's pregnancy in the closing chapter of *A Whistling Woman* we have an example of a novel charting the change and development of the attitudes and thinking of its characters. On the advice of her ten-year-old son Leo, Frederica seeks out Luk, the father of her child; the reader of the entire tetralogy who is aware that Frederica has been associated with fire throughout the course

of all four novels, would note with satisfaction the fiery imagery employed to describe the countryside through which Frederica and Leo drive on their quest to find Luk:

> The gorse was out, and spread like a sea of fire, along the sides of the road, across the heather. It was bright, bright, sun-yellow, with flecks of scarlet and crimson. It was full of movements in the turmoil of the air, it bowed, and flickered, and lapped with vegetable flames at the sooty roots of the heather and ling. (*WW* 420)

Through the course of four novels, the reader has followed Frederica's struggle to achieve independence and intellectual satisfaction; this course has been charted in imagery and dreams and fairytales which have involved fire and destruction. The tetralogy draws to an end after the destruction and death caused by the conflagrations which ravaged the university and the community at Dun Vale Hall. In accordance with the convention of happy endings, this destruction has been reworked into something inspiring and beautiful as the moors are described as a fire of colour, movement and light. Luk and Frederica meet on the moor and agree that they will 'think of something' (*WW* 421) to do about their situation. Frederica's pregnancy signals healing for Luk who has endured the ignominy of loving for years a woman (Jacqueline Winwar) who could not love him. Next he suffered the loss of his first child when Jacqueline miscarried and further the misery of Jacqueline's subsequent relief at being released from both motherhood and the relationship. As Frederica stands together with Luk and the child of her first marriage looking 'over the moving moor, under the moving clouds, at the distant dark line of the sea beyond the edge of the earth' we know even before we are told that '[t]he world was all before them' (*WW* 421). This verbal echo is a deliberate reversal of the conclusion of Milton's *Paradise Lost* which ends with Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way. (Book XII lines 646-649)

Ulike Adam and Eve who have just been expelled from Paradise, Luk and Frederica have been rewarded with Byatt's version of Paradise: commitment and love without the loss of self-possession. However, to the confident claim that '[t]he world was all before them' the narrator does add the the cautionary rider 'it seemed' (*WW* 421).

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Having examined some of the ways in which Murdoch employs water and Byatt flame to reflect the moral stature and development of people in a post-Christian world, I next consider how the visual arts feature in their fiction and affect their thinking. Sue Sorenson, in an article published in the journal *Mosaic*, investigates the ways in which Byatt engages with artistic vision and religious symbol in the work of Van Gogh in the novel *Still Life*. Sorenson points out that in *Degrees of Freedom*, Byatt's study of the early works of Murdoch, Byatt

> draw[s] approving attention to Murdoch's assertion in *Against Dryness* that 'what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.' Opacity, ironically, is by definition a visual quality or, more accurately, a description of the impossibility of clear vision. Murdoch's 'respect for the contingent' and for 'the real impenetrable human person' are doctrines that Byatt ascribed to. (Sorenson 2004: 77)

Sorenson notes that moral qualities are here described in visual terms. Murdoch and Byatt share a view of the visual arts as a source of inspiration to good and of spiritual salvation and both revere the artistic processes involved, which complement their own. In an interview conducted in 1983 with John Haffenden, Murdoch was asked to comment on her view that 'art is a great *clue* to morals' (Haffenden 1985: 205). Her response was that novelists must tell the truth about 'the contingent nature of life and what human failings are like, and also what it's like for someone to be good' (Haffenden 1985: 205). She then extends this to painting, pointing out that a bad painter is one who 'hasn't really *looked*' and who therefore lies; 'Truth and justice are involved there, because the artist has to have a just judgement. I think it's not presumptuous; it is a humble occupation if it's pursued properly' (Haffendon 1985: 205). While answering a question on her interest in Bhuddism she reverts to the subject of the artist who paints and claims: 'Painting is an image of the spiritual life; the painter really sees, and the veil is taken away' (Haffenden 1985: 207).

Having considered Murdoch and Byatt's investigation of the operation of morality in a society which has discarded belief in God but continues to need the ritual and structure of religion, I now turn to an examination of their use of the visual arts as a tool to explore people's moral and emotional relation to the world.

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3 ART AND DESTRUCTION

3.1 Introduction

Having discussed how Murdoch and Byatt have documented the shift from God-centred morality to a moral order shaped by art, particularly fiction, I would now like to look more closely at the use made by each author of specific works of art within her fiction and how these artworks function as sources of revelation and as moral exemplars; thereafter I consider how Murdoch and Byatt explore the nature of destruction (the reverse face of the creative process which produces works of art) and the role it plays in people's emotional and spiritual lives. Both Murdoch and Byatt engage with specific works of art in their fiction; sometimes artwork is a tool employed to convey details and ideas to the reader without recourse to words. So, for example, the reader of Murdoch's novel *The Bell* confers the limpid grace and tranquil air of relaxation of Donatello's sculpture of the young David upon Toby Gashe once the comparison has been drawn:

> [E]xcept for his sun hat Toby was quite naked. His very pale and slim body was caressed by the sun and shadow ... He bent over his stick, intent upon the water ... The sight of him filled Dora with an immediate tremor of delight, and a memory came back to her from her Italian journey, the young David of Donatello, casual, powerful, superbly naked, and charmingly immature. (*B* 76-77)

With similar economy, Byatt conveys information about her characters by recourse to a famous work of art in the novella *The Conjugial Angel* (a companion piece to *Morpho Eugenia*; the novellas are jointly entitled *Angels & Insects*) which is an account of the life of Emily Tennyson, sister of the poet. Emily Tennyson was, after a brief courtship, engaged to her brother's friend Arthur Hallam. Hallam's unexpected death before they could marry, and the subsequent expectation that she should thereafter live a chaste life of mourning, were to blight Emily Tennyson's future. The strength of the friendship between Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam is conveyed by Byatt's subtle evocation of a famous painting. The two friends are described in a state of repose which calls to mind Michelangelo's depiction of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (see Illustration Two on page 55). Tennyson and Hallam loll side by side in wicker chairs in the sunshine, fingers almost touching.

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Illustration Two Michelangelo's depiction of God and Adam: Sistine Chapel

'[Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam] are described in a state of repose which calls to mind Michelangelo's depiction of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Tennyson and Hallam loll side by side in wicker chairs in the sunshine, fingers almost touching.'

That Hallam might be a representative Adam is suggested by the 'dirty-brown' of Hallam's hand (he has been weeding while they talked (*AI* 227)); it seems appropriate that Tennyson, with his creative powers, represents God, for Tennyson conferred on Hallam a form of eternal life in the poem (*In Memoriam*) written in response to Hallam's early and unexpected death. Shut out from their intimate conversing, Emily Tennyson observes them 'with the sensations of one excluded from Paradise' (*AI* 226-7): 'There were the two fingers of their trailing, relaxed arms, touching earth, pointing quietly at each other' (*AI* 228).

Artwork is also employed by both Murdoch and Byatt as a tool by which one might more nearly approach the abstract concepts of truth and beauty. Arguing against the Leavisite view that English Literature is at the centre of social morality, Byatt writes: '[A]ll sorts of other things are good and beautiful, paint, philosophy, mathematics, biology – there are many ways of coming at inevitably partial visions of truth' (Byatt 1991: 2). In *The Bell*, Dora Greenfield's religious experience in the National Gallery as she gazes at 'the great light spaces of the Italian pictures ... Botticelli ... Piero della Francesca ... Crivelli' (*B* 190) illustrates Murdoch's philosophy that great art 'invigorates our best faculties' and 'resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness' (Murdoch 1967: 85):

> [H]er footsteps took her to various shrines at which she had worshipped so often before ... Dora ... marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. ... Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. ... the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all. (*B* 190-191)

The myth of the Flaying of Marsyas by the god Apollo has been interpreted in the works of some of the greatest artists. The strength of the myth's significance for Murdoch is suggested by the inclusion of a small section of Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (see Illustration Three on page 57) as a backdrop to Tom Phillips' portrait of Murdoch commissioned by the trustees of the National Portrait Gallery in the mid-1980s. This relatively small portrait (36" x 28") was chosen by Byatt for the front cover of the 1995 Vintage reprint of Byatt's study of the early works of Murdoch entitled *Degrees of Freedom*, first published in 1965 (see Illustration Four on page 58).

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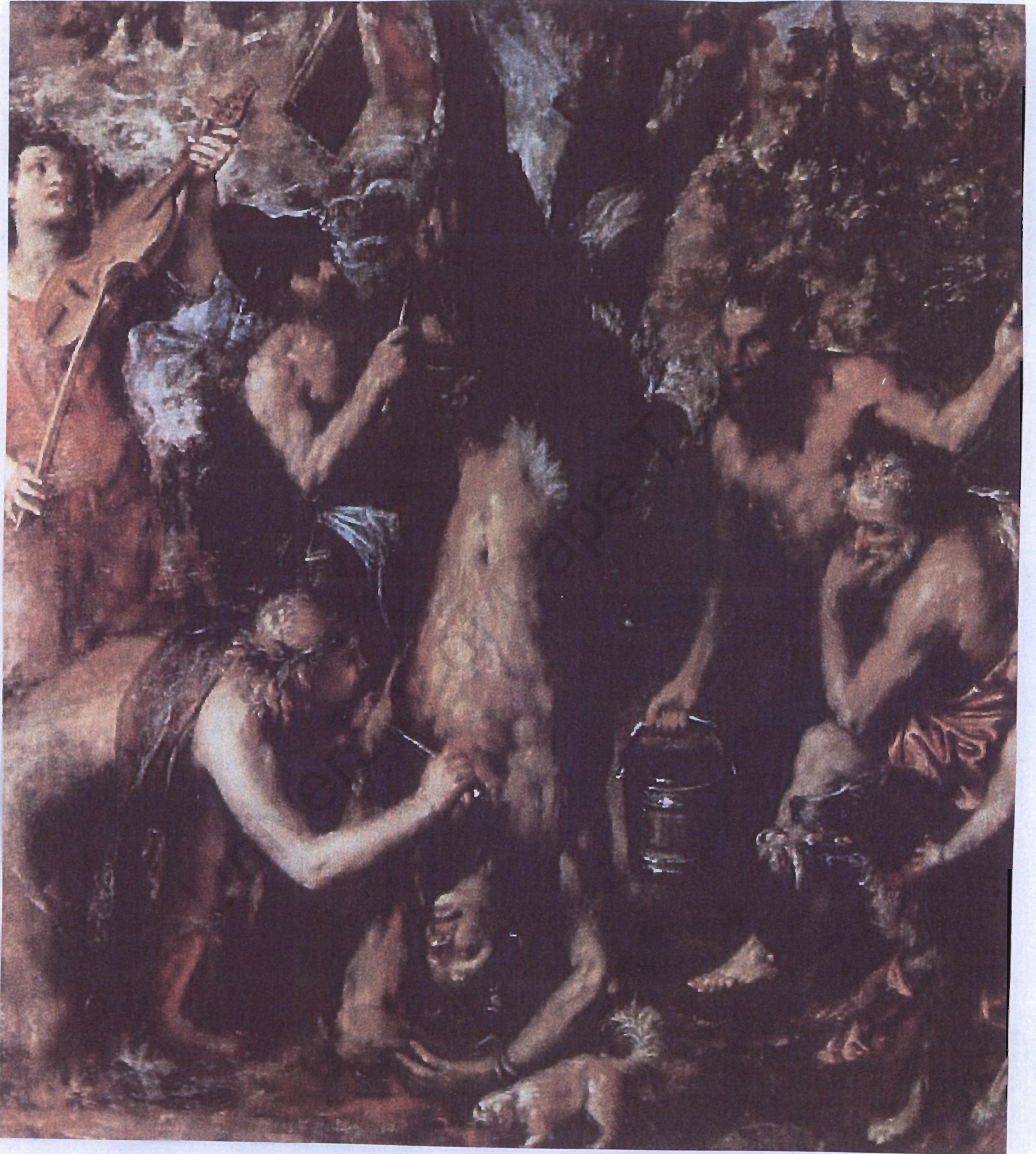
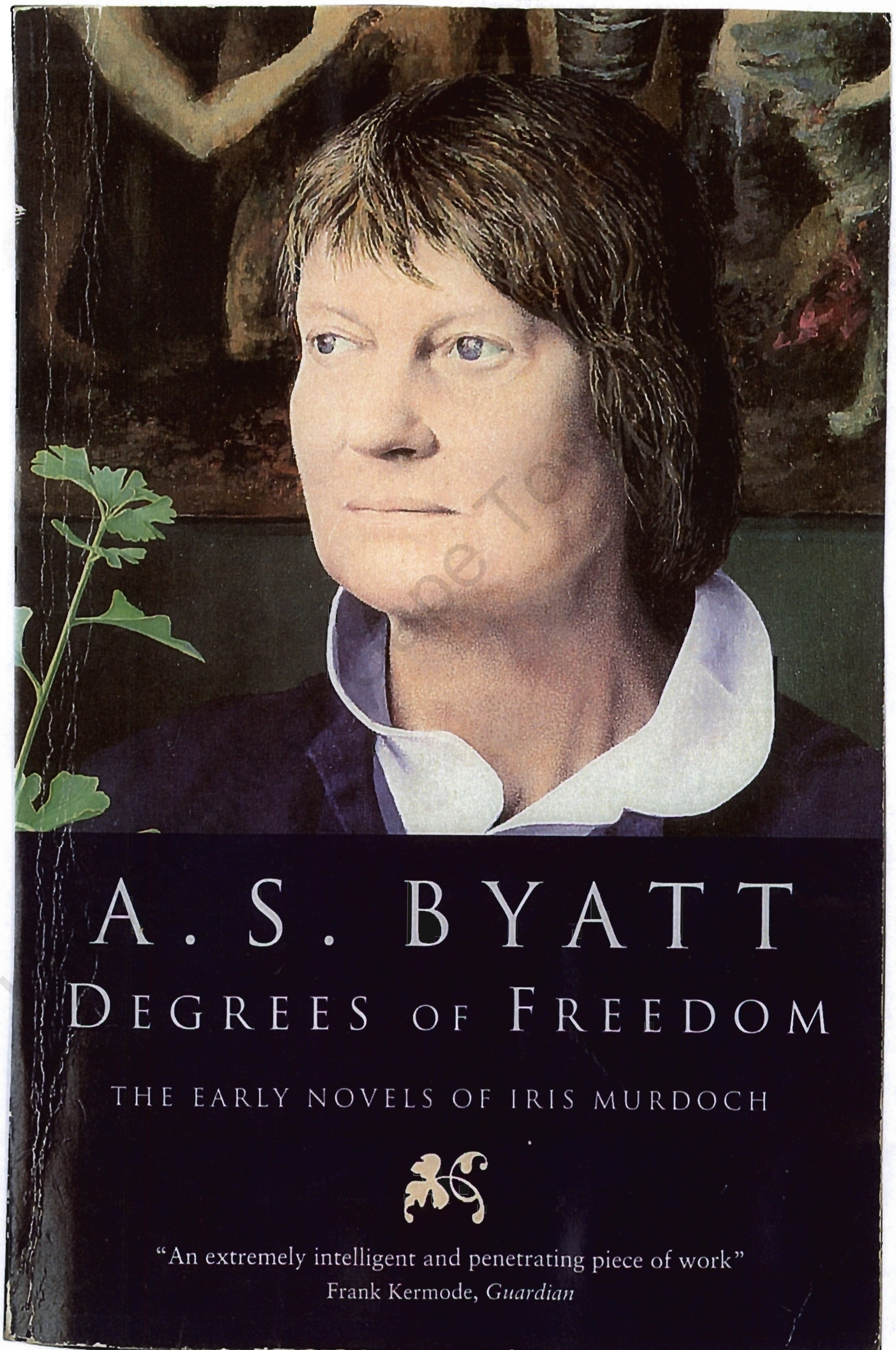
Illustration Three Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*



'[T]he strength of the myth's significance for Murdoch is suggested by the inclusion of a small section of Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* as a backdrop to Tom Phillips' portrait of Murdoch commissioned by the trustees of the National Portrait Gallery in the mid-1980s.'

Illustration Four The portrait of Murdoch which was Byatt's front-cover choice



'This relatively small portrait (36" x 28") was chosen by Byatt for the front cover of the 1995 Vintage reprint of Byatt's study of the early works of Murdoch entitled *Degrees of Freedom*, first published in 1965.'

The myth of the flaying of Marsyas, in verbal and visual form, fascinates both Murdoch and Byatt because it functions as an image of art. Byatt tells the story of Marsyas in an essay commissioned for a collection of rewritings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> It was Athene who invented the flute, which Marsyas the satyr found where she had discarded it. ... Marsyas challenged the Lord of the Muses, the sun god Apollo and his lyre. ...[H]e risked everything. It was agreed the victor would do whatever he pleased to the loser. The Muses were the judges. Apollo won, inevitably. He hung the faun from a tree, and flayed him alive. Raphael and Titian painted his agony, the beads of blood, the bursting flesh under the pelt. Michelangelo's St Bartholomew dangles his flayed skin from his fingertips; the folded, hanging face is Michelangelo's own. Flaying was seen as a way of releasing the spirit from the flesh, pure art from earth. Dante in Paradise prayed to Apollo to break into his breast, to breathe in him as he did when he tore the faun, Marsyas '*della vagina delle membre sue*', from the sheath of his skin. (Byatt 2000 (a): 134)

Stripping the skin from the body suggests the split between spirit and flesh; the image is thus appropriated to represent the process of artistic creation and could also represent the supernatural nature of religious experience. There is potential for destruction and pain in both activities. The god Apollo himself is an image of both art and destruction. We learn this when various characters in *The Virgin in the Garden* view a painting of the death of Hyacinth on the ceiling of Long Royston House – which is to be donated by Crowe together with the estate in which it stands for the creation of a new university, the University of North Yorkshire. In the painting Apollo kneels over Hyacinth's bleeding body. Matthew Crowe explains: 'Here we have Apollo as principle of order and disorder, art and destruction' (*VG* 141). Interestingly, Byatt will cause this particular painting to be destroyed by the anti-university protestors in the 'Battle' (*WW* 383) which precipitates one of the conflagrations with which her tetralogy comes to an end:

> It was Frederica Potter who noticed the flames in the windows of the old house, of Long Royston. Curtains were flaring, flames crawling up them, although there was no crowd encamped outside. ... The front door was open. There were very small fires in the hall – slowly burning neat heaps of books, which Frederica recognised. Skoob. An art-form.
>
> Someone had set fire to the bed-curtains in the Elizabethan bedrooms. The beds were burned, and the ceiling, with its painting of the Death of Hyacinth, had fallen in on the bed. People brought fire appliances, and succeeded in dousing the flames, though more damage was done to the ancient embroideries and carvings. (*WW* 370-371)

The painting of the flaying of Marsyas is first seen by Frederica after a meeting held in Crowe's stately home to discuss costume for Alexander's play. Tea is served in the dark panelled study in which the painting of Marsyas is directly lit:

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> Crowe explained, with glee, that it was Jacopo's subtlest and nastiest work, not, like Raphael's Marsyas, an image of the animal strung up to await the divine flaying that would produce high art, but like Ovid's Marsyas an image of pain on the point of disintegration, the body after flaying but still, for a brief moment, holding its terrible shape. The furry pelt was extended on the ground, the flesh and laced muscles were exposed, and gouts of blood were bursting out under the muscles, so that what had appeared at first glance to have the firmness of marble was running and slippery, bulging, about to burst into formlessness. Carved horn pipes lay cast aside: in the middle distance Apollo smiled his terrible empty smile and struck his lyre.
>
> Crowe put his arm around Frederica's shoulder.
>
> 'What do you make of that?'
>
> 'I don't like it.'
>
> 'It is very painful. It is lovely. It is the moment of the birth of the new consciousness. Marsyas cried out to Apollo: *quid me mihi detrahis*. Why do you tear me from myself. And Dante prayed to be so torn. Apollo should deal with him "si come quando Marsia traesti: Della vagina delle membre sue." As when thou didst tear Marsyas from the sheath of his members. A metamorphosis, yet again. The shining butterfly of the soul from the pupa of the body. Larva, pupa, imago. An image of art.' (*VG* 143)

Iris Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince* is an exploration of the nature of art (and destruction) by the various characters in the novel and by the novelist herself. The god Apollo is the impresario, the stage-manager, who co-ordinates the whole. He is editor of the work and it is to him that the central character, Bradley Pearson, offers an account of his life and his relationship with Arnold Baffin, the protégé whose output has grown substantial. Apollo styles himself P Loxias (one of several cultic titles for Apollo in Ancient Greek literature); in her postscript Rachel Baffin notes of 'P Loxias':

> The name conceals the identity of a notorious rapist and murderer, a well-known musical virtuoso, whose murder, by a peculiarly horrible method, of a successful fellow-musician made the headlines some considerable time ago. (*BP* 355)

Pearson never forgets that it is Apollo to whom he is addressing himself. For example, at the moment that his sister, who has attempted suicide, is carried from his house on a stretcher, Pearson begins a digression: 'Perhaps at this point in my story, my dear friend, I may be allowed to pause and speak to you directly. Of course the whole of what I write here, and perhaps somehow unconsciously my whole *oeuvre*, has been a communication addressed to you' (*BP* 54). The entire work is in fact dedicated to Apollo. At the end of Pearson's foreword he notes: 'With a full heart, to witness duty, not to show my wit, I dedicate the work which you inspired and made possible to you, my dearest friend, my comrade and my teacher, with a gratitude which only you can measure' (*BP* xviii). The

mutual relationship is clearly intense and Apollo's presence thus broods over the entire narrative. Each of the voices which is allowed to speak in a postscript acknowledges Apollo and he is the only one to have read everyone's account. His foreword and postscript allow him ultimate control by giving him the first word and the last. He figures in the title, of which Byatt notes:

> The Black Prince, who is an object of love and terror, is a composite god-demon in the novel; he is Apollo, the god of light and art, but also the cruel god who punished the faun, Marsyas, by flaying him for daring to compete with him as an artist. He is Shakespeare and Hamlet, he is Love and Death, and Art. (Byatt 1994: 271)

Bradley Pearson is in the act of creating art as he narrates his story; as he breathes life into his story he also examines the nature of the process which produces art. He prefaces his story with an account of his own growth in wisdom and charity, expressing the hope 'that the light of wisdom falling upon a fool can reveal, together with folly, the austere outline of truth' (*BP* xi):

> I have already by implication described this 'reportage' as a work of art. I do not of course by this mean a work of fantasy. All art deals with the absurd and aims at the simple. Good art speaks truth, indeed *is* truth, perhaps the only truth. (*BP* xi)

Dedication to good art might require the martyrdom of silence:

> I have, I hope and I believe, kept my gift pure. This means, among other things, that I have never been a successful writer. I have never tried to please at the expense of truth. I have known, for long periods, the torture of a life without self-expression. The most potent and sacred command which can be laid upon any artist is the command: wait. Art has its martyrs, no least those who have preserved their silence. There are, I hazard, saints of art who have simply waited mutely all their lives rather than profane the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful, that is to say, with anything less than what is true. (*BP* xii)

It is also his opinion that '[o]nly art explains, and that cannot itself be explained. We and art are made for each other, and where that bond fails human life fails. Only this analogy holds, only this mirror shows a just image' (*BP* xv). What Bradley Pearson does not consider but what his actions reflect is the measure of violence and destruction for which he is responsible. He is disgusted by his sister's ageing body and he despises her helplessness; he abandons her to despair which leads to her suicide. He casts off the affections of Rachel (wife of Arnold Baffin) once he has conceived a passion for her daughter which seems to be a selfish grasping for renewal as he yearns to link his 58 year

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old body with her 20 year old one (*BP* 269). He orders a complete set of the works of Arnold Baffin and then shreds them:

> I looked at the huge compact mountain of smugly printed words. I picked up one of the books and opened it at random. Rage possessed me. With a snarl of disgust I tried to tear the book down the middle, ripping the spine in two, but it was too tough, so I tore the pages out in handfuls. The next book was a paperback and I was able to tug it into two and then into four. I seized another one. Francis ... came down the stairs to help me, murmuring 'Hi!' to himself, 'Hi!' as he dragged the books to pieces and then pursued and tore again the white cascading sheaves of print. We worked resolutely through the contents of the box, standing sturdily with our feet apart like men working in a river, as the pile of dismembered debris rose about us. It took just under ten minutes to destroy the complete works of Arnold Baffin. (*BP* 313)

And, finally, we presume, he kills Arnold Baffin (he is tried and convicted but the possibility remains that the murderer was Baffin's betrayed wife) by smashing his head with a poker. Bradley Pearson is in fact playing Apollo to Arnold Baffin's flayed Marsyas. Apollo designates himself as Pearson's *alter ego* (*BP* ix). Pearson describes Baffin as his protégé (*BP* 8), and himself as Baffin's 'discoverer and patron' (*BP* 9), his 'tutelary deity' (*BP* 9). However he despises Baffin's writing. 'Inquisitive chatter and cataloguing of things one's spotted isn't art' (*BP* 26) he tells Baffin with indignation. His contempt for Baffin's proficiency is made sharper by his own literary impotence for, as he confesses upon retiring and dedicating all his time to writing, 'I found I had no thoughts at all' (*BP* xvii). These are his motives for murder – just as Apollo chose death as punishment for the challenge Marsyas offered to his mastery and skill. Even if he did not wield the poker himself, it could be argued that Bradley Pearson was nonetheless responsible for Baffin's death. His revelation to Rachel Baffin that Arnold Baffin had planned to leave her in order to live with another woman might have been intended as the goad which would drive her to an act of destruction. He would therefore be responsible even if he didn't commit the murder himself.

Instances of destruction such as Bradley Pearson's shredding of the complete works of Arnold Baffin are present in both novelists' work; violence and destruction appear to be an equal and opposite force to that of the creative process. Each is a natural state of human nature. Destruction is an element of every act of creation. This is acknowledged at the conclusion of the story of the twentieth-century lovers in Byatt's novel *Possession* when Roland Michell 'took possession' of Maud Bailey 'so that there seemed to be no

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boundaries' (*P* 507). Each has surrendered some measure of autonomy, of self-possession, but there is new potential in the destruction:

> In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of 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)

The drive to create is described by Christabel La Motte, the nineteenth-century poet whose story is told in *Possession*. In a letter to the poet Randolph Ash, she writes:

> *You understood my very phrase – the* Life of Language. *You understand that the need to set down words what I* see, *so – but words too, words mostly ... 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 –* (*P* 180)

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The urge to destroy is an equally ferocious drive but it is controlled by a sense of moral order instilled by the rituals and conventions established by community and society to safeguard their members from the human instinct to hurt and spoil. The notion that convention promotes virtue is explored in part 2 of the fourth chapter (page 115) entitled 'The power of convention and ritual'. The reaction of intelligent and educated people released from the constraints of society is explored by Byatt in *Babbletower*, an account within the novel *Babel Tower* of a group of aristocrats who flee society and set up their own community. This story and the consequences of the experiment are examined in section 5.2.3 ('Rereading other writing', page 157) of Chapter 5 ('Pattern and Shape'). The leader of the group, who has named himself Culvert, 'had not reached that stage in his development which was the deep contemplation of the natural human urge to hurt, to harm, to pierce, to open, to bruise, to stab, to strangle' (*BT* 207). The outworking of these desires within Culvert once they are released and judged acceptable is death – death which is desired.

Another form of cruelty meted out by the community is considered in *Babel Tower* by Daniel Orton when he keeps watch in St Simeon's Church in London on 28 October 1965; he 'wishes to give thanks for, to contemplate, the ending of an evil' (*BT* 372) for on this day the House of Commons has passed the Abolition of the Death Penalty Bill.

This process is condemned by Daniel as a 'grisly ceremony' and 'ghoulish cruelty … peculiarly horrible … because of its certainty, because of its public enactment, because it is unnatural' (*BT* 373):

> What horrifies him about the infliction of capital punishment is the horror it spreads into the whole society which enacts it, connives at it, decrees it. … The pleasure in pain that thrills in the press and in the sickened, the profoundly infected imagination of the people as they imagine what can't be imagined, whether with a murderous delight, or a bloody righteous wrath … A society that can make these mechanisms, Daniel believes, is a sick society, and if it cannot be called an inhuman society it is only because cruelty is human, cruelty is part of our nature as it is part of the nature of no other creature. (*BT* 373)

'Jael', a short story in the 1998 Byatt collection entitled *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (*E*), is an account of the destructive power of boredom and 'the natural human urge to hurt' (*BT* 207) experienced by ordinary decent people. Jael, whose story is documented in the Old Testament of the Bible, murdered an army commander (Sisera) to whom she had offered protection. Jael is praised by the Hebrew judge Deborah for '[s]he put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer and she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples' (*E* 202). The narrator points out that 'Jael was not Sisera's enemy; she enticed him in, and gratuitously betrayed him' (*E* 202).

However, as the narrator of 'Jael' reminisces about various experiences at school, she reveals her own bent for destruction. At school '[a]ll the excitement of life was in books' (*E* 207) and 'mostly … I remember this smeared, fuggy, limited light of boredom, where you couldn't see very much or very far, and the horizon was unimaginable' (*E* 208). She recalls two girls who each led a gang, Wendy and Rachel. Wendy was the most clever of her peers and the most popular. She was also good-looking and best at sports. Given to 'dreams of drama' (*E* 212) the narrator imagines how a dark rope strategically stretched might fell Wendy in the cross-country run. She does not act upon her idea, but Wendy falls in the exact spot, is harmed and thereafter fails to meet her potential. In addition to contemplating Jael's will to destructive treachery and her own, the narrator observes (in the present time of the story) her younger colleague Lara sabotaging her position in an advertising agency. Lara is spreading the story that a survey has revealed that the narrator's advertisements 'are infecting whole slots with boredom and apathy' (*E* 212). Even if the findings and the survey were invented by Lara, the narrator's position

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has been jeopardised. These acts of destruction are acts of power, perpetrated by the disempowered, perpetrated to alleviate boredom. Creativity is, by contrast, empowering and all-absorbing. The same message is preached in another story in this collection, 'Crocodile Tears'. Patricia Nimmo, a grieving English widow, escapes to France where she is saved on more than one occasion from an impulse to suicide by a chance acquaintance, the Norwegian Nils Isaksen. Her unlikely saviour urges her to change her attitude to life, for the indifference into which she has sunk will undoubtedly become cement (*E* 40). In its place he recommends curiosity: 'You may sit there, glass-eyed while things slip past ... Or you may look with curiosity, and live' (*E* 40). This is the crux of Byatt's message in this collection of short stories. A comment in bold print on the back cover of the collection quotes Michèle Roberts of the *Independent on Sunday*: 'Rich physical details, lush sensual descriptions of people and places ... Byatt's engaging message is that art, curiosity and stories save us.'

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3.2 Visual art as an organising principle

Murdoch's sensual appreciation of the visual arts is apparent in her fiction. Dora Greenfield, for example, in *The Bell*, visits the National Gallery and revels in

> the great light spaces of Italian pictures ... the angels of Botticelli, radiant as birds ... the glorious carnal presence of Susanna Fourment, the tragic presence of Margarethe Trip, the solemn world of Piero della Francesca with its early-morning colours, the enclosed and gilded world of Crivelli. (*B* 190)

Axel and Simon, the couple whose relationship survives despite the cynical manipulation of Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, meet and fall in love through their mutual appreciation of a fifth-century BC marble statue of a *kouros* or youth in the National Museum of Athens. Two of Murdoch's novels are plotted around a painted masterpiece which is a quiet focus of truth, calm and beauty in contrast to the characters' fevered machinations. *The Nice and the Good* examines the pain and destruction which can be caused by the power games generated by love. This is depicted in Bronzino's painting

Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time which is visited by Richard and Paula Biranne in the National Gallery. Venus and Cupid kiss:

> It is the long still moment of dreamy suspended passion before the spinning clutching descent. Against a background of smooth masks and desperate faces the curly-headed Folly advances to deluge with rose petals the drugged and amorous pair, while the old lecher Time himself reaches out a long and powerful arm above the scene to bring all sweet things to an end. (*NG* 141).

In *An Unofficial Rose* a small glowing Tintoretto becomes a pawn in the sexual games of father and son Hugh and Randall Peronett. The painting represents the idea of perfection which contrasts with the messy reality of the loves of father and son. Hugh once loved Emma Sands but chose to remain with his wife. On her death, Hugh aspires to renew his relationship with the now aged Emma, but is barred from intimacy, he believes, by the presence of Emma's young companion, Lindsay Rimmer. In a neat pattern typical of Murdoch's composition, Hugh's married son Randall re-enacts his father's story: he has made contact with Emma and met and fallen in love with Lindsay. Randall urges his father to sell the Tintoretto in order to fund the lifestyle which Lindsay has prescribed as an essential requirement if she is to leave the wealthy Emma Sands to share Randall's life. Hugh sells the Tintoretto to finance his son's infidelity, hoping to benefit himself: he imagines that Lindsay's departure will render Emma vulnerable and willing to commit herself to a relationship with him. In the event, Emma merely secures the services of another companion and continues to reject Hugh's advances.

Byatt shares Murdoch's sensual appreciation of the visual arts but rather than positioning an artwork as a static object within a story, she engages with the theory and the work of a specific artist – for example, the life, beliefs, painting and writing of Van Gogh become an element of the *Still Life* narrative. Byatt's artistic control extends to the production of her work, for example (as will be discussed below) when the covers of her novels are designed to be an integral part of the reader's experience. In the short story 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary' the Spanish artist Velázquez is a central character who preaches Byatt's message; the story's title page features a detail in black and white from the Velázquez painting which inspired the story (see Illustration Five on page 67).

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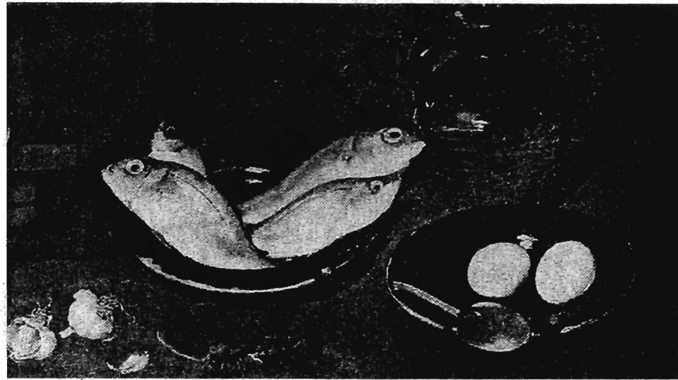
Illustration Five Title page of Byatt's short story 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary'

Christ in the House of
Martha and Mary



Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary (detail), Diego Velázquez, c. 1618

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'The Spanish artist Velázquez is a central character who preaches Byatt's message in the short story 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary'; the story's title page features a detail in black and white from the painting by Velázquez which inspired the story.'

In the Biblical account of this story Martha makes complaint against her sister Mary's failure to serve; Christ's response is the explanation that by choosing to listen and learn at the feet of the teacher, 'Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her' (*E* 224). Just as the Biblical account provided Velázquez with a subject, so the painting (see Illustration Six on page 69) in turn generates a story; in it Byatt outlines her personal philosophy. In the Byatt story the painter Velázquez eats and works quietly in the kitchen of a great house. Here he observes the servants and uses them as models. Dolores, the large and brawny young cook who is judged by a wise fellow servant as capable of becoming 'a true artist' (*E* 219), is deeply discontented with her lot. ('I want to live. I want time to think. Not to be pushed around' (*E* 220).) After an incident of public humiliation she is determined to leave until the painter echoes the opinion that she is a true artist:

> Dolores turned on him. He had no right to mock her, she said. He was a true artist, he could reveal light and beauty in eggs and fishes that no one had seen, and which they would then always see. She made pastries and dishes that went out of the kitchen beautiful and came back mangled and mashed – (*E* 223)

It is at this point that Velázquez tells the story of Martha and Mary and how Mary had, in the opinion of Christ, chosen 'the good part'. Dolores cannot agree that there is a choice: 'There will always be serving, and someone will always be doomed to serving, and will have no choice or chance about the *better part*' (*E* 224). Velázquez then argues that both he and Dolores, as artists, have access to 'the better part'. It begins in attention to loaves and fishes; what matters is that the work is good (*E* 225). In his argument outlining 'the religion of art', Velázquez deliberately invokes Biblical references, for 'loaves and fishes' recall Christ's miraculous provision for thousands of hungry followers in the New Testament and work which is 'good' recalls the creation story as recorded in the Old Testament: each stage of the process of creation was perceived by its creator to be 'good'. The painter explains to the cook:

> 'The cook, as much as the painter, looks into the essence of the creation, not, as I do, in light and on surfaces, but with all the other senses, with taste, and smell, and touch, which God also made in us for purposes. You may come at the *better part* by understanding emulsions… by studying freshness … by mixing wine and blood and sugar into sauces, as well as I may … You must learn *now* … that the divide is not between the servants and the served, between the leisured and the workers, but between those who are *interested* in the world and its multiplicity of forms and forces, and those who merely subsist, worrying or yawning.' (*E* 225 – 226)

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Illustration Six Painting by Velázquez: *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*

'Just as the Biblical account provided Velázquez with a subject, so the painting in turn generates a story; in it Byatt outlines her personal philosophy.'

A reproduction of the painting by Velázquez entitled *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* appears in Dale Brown's *The World of Velázquez*. In his commentary Brown suggests that 'the subject is simple: an old woman points to a scene showing Jesus teaching Martha and Mary. She seems to be telling the girl to heed Jesus, choose Him over all others and serve Him by working' (Brown 1969: 48). Byatt's interpretation of the scene is far more rich and intriguing and her 'preaching' is of quite a different order to the traditional approach suggested by Brown. However visual art, in Byatt's work, is not limited to being the subject matter of her writing or a medium to convey her personal philosophy; it is sometimes also a crucial element in the process of composition.

As a writer Byatt is conscious that reading is a twofold process: both the written word and the visualised image impress themselves upon the reader. She is aware that readers imagine 'unseen visible images' (*BT* 213) as they read and she uses visual images as a tool of construction as she writes a novel, in ways which are discussed below. Frederica Potter puts these ideas into words as she strives to interest the art students of the Samuel Palmer School of Art and Craft in the process by which Lawrence wrote, and they read, the novel *Women in Love*. She uses, and urges her listeners to 'see', concrete images to describe the intellectual process of reading and writing:

> She tries to seduce them into seeing that books are complicated formal structures. ... A novel, *Women in Love* for instance, she says, is made of a long thread of language, like knitting, thicker and thinner in patches. It is made in the head and has to be remade in the head by whoever reads it, who will always remake it differently. It is made of people ... [who] are made of language, but this is not all they are. A novel is also made of *ideas* that connect all the people like another layer of interwoven knitting - ... This novel is made of visual images – the lanterns, the moon, the white flowers – which you might think were like painted images, but they are not for they have to be *unseen visible images* to be powerful. ... She is trying to make the painters and sculptors see how a novel is a work of art and not a painting. (*BT* 212-213)

Visual images are used as the ordering and creative principles which shape Byatt's work. Clearly her consciousness is deeply immersed in the visual arts and she engages with specific artworks to order her thinking or trigger her writing. She describes herself as one of those 'who *think* with mental imagery' (Byatt 1991: 13); 'I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure; various colours and patterns' (Byatt 1991: 14). Byatt describes how she settles upon a ruling form, often an artwork, to give shape to the creative process which is a novel or a short story. 'In my experience I know what the

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form of a novel is when I find what I think of as the "ruling" metaphor' (Byatt 1991: 9-10). The ruling metaphor of *The Virgin in the Garden*

> was a metaphor of metamorphosis – of flesh into stone, or of flesh into grass – and a concomitant metaphor of language itself into flowers. Human passion frozen into works of art – there is a chapter on the marble men and maids of the Grecian Urn. Also on the statue of Hermione in *A Winter's Tale*. I played with the clichés: 'You can't get blood out of stone.' Or, 'All flesh is grass.' My second-rate verse dramatist's language is described as 'florid': in my mind, and subsequently in the text, this became linked to the very concrete image of the flowers spilling from the mouth of the nymph in Botticelli's *Primavera* – flowers which became the dress of Flora (language in the dress of thought) and are also part of the earth itself – which I thought of in Philip Sidney's phrase about enamelled flowers and 'Whatever else may make that too much loved earth more lovely'. Words are literally things. (Byatt 1991: 10)

The ruling metaphor of the second novel of the tetralogy, *Still Life*, was Van Gogh's yellow chair (Illustration Seven on page 72) 'which seems initially to be very much a mimetic rendering of the thing itself, for its own sake' (Byatt 1991: 14); Byatt says of the painting 'I took [it] at first as a work of art which was made for the pure pleasure of exact mimetic knowledge – the chairness of the chair, the colour, the form' (Byatt 1991: 25). It seems appropriate at this point to note Murdoch's delight in the objects which fill the world. Conradi records her remark to Harry Weinberger on the occasion of his presenting her with the gift of a Tibetan ritual dagger: 'How nice objects are – I'm glad we live in a thingy world' (Conradi 2001: 588).

Byatt's initial delight in Van Gogh's chair which appeared to insist on the quidditas of the phenomenological world seemed fitting as *Still Life*, written as her father was dying, was intended to be 'a bare precise novel, telling things (birth, marriage, death) exactly, recognisably, without metaphor or analogy' (Byatt 1991: 24); it was to be 'as plain as possible – a novel eschewing myths and cultural resonances – a novel, I even thought, which would try to forgo metaphor' (Byatt 1991: 9). The attempt to 'forgo metaphor' failed. However, the image of the yellow chair was revealed to be perfectly suited to *Still Life* in its final form, for Byatt discovered that Van Gogh's painting was not at all 'a mimetic rendering of the thing itself' (Byatt 1991: 14). Instead the painting had both cultural and personal connotations, for Van Gogh had bought twelve chairs 'for the disciples of the new religion of secular art' (Byatt 1991: 25): so 'Van Gogh's chair was yellow and blue (colours of day) in contradiction to Gauguin's, which was red and green (the "terrible human passions" of the night)' (Byatt 1991: 25). (See Van Gogh's painting of Gauguin's chair on page 73, Illustration Eight.)

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Illustration Seven Van Gogh's painting of a yellow chair

'The ruling metaphor of the second novel of the tetralogy, *Still Life*, was Van Gogh's yellow chair "which seems initially to be very much a mimetic rendering of the thing itself, for its own sake" (Byatt 1991: 14); Byatt says of the painting "I took [it] at first as a work of art which was made for the pure pleasure of exact mimetic knowledge – the chairness of the chair, the colour, the form" (Byatt 1991: 25).'

Illustration Eight Van Gogh's painting of Gauguin's chair

' "Van Gogh's chair was yellow and blue (colours of day) in contradiction to Gauguin's, which was red and green (the 'terrible human passions' of the night)" (Byatt 1991: 25). '

Byatt gives all these thought processes to her playwright, Alexander Wedderburn, who writes a play about Van Gogh which is first staged in 1957. It is entitled *The Yellow Chair*:

> At first he had thought that he could write a plain, exact verse with no figurative language, in which a yellow chair was the thing itself, a yellow chair, as a round gold apple was an apple or a sunflower a sunflower. ... But it couldn't be done. Language was against him, for a start. Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but resembled the sun, the source of light.
>
> Van Gogh's idea of things had also been against him. The yellow chair, besides being brushstrokes and pigment, besides being a yellow chair, was one of twelve bought for a company of artists who were to inhabit the Yellow House ... Not only metaphor: cultural motif, immanent religion, a faith and a church. One thing always linked to another thing. (*SL* 2)

Byatt engages with art right through the process of writing to the final production and publication. In this regard it is interesting to compare two publications of essay collections by Murdoch and Byatt. A 1985 Ark Paperbacks edition of a collection of Murdoch's essays entitled *The Sovereignty of Good* bears on its front cover a reproduction of the central portion of Raphael's *School of Athens*. (See Illustration Nine on page 75.) The two central figures engaged in debate are Plato and Aristotle. Socrates, Euclid and Pythagoras are among antiquity's great leaders of thought who have been identified in this work. That the artwork is an appropriate choice for the cover of a book of essays on moral philosophy produced by one of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century is quite obvious. The selection was no doubt made by Murdoch's publishers but with her approval.

There could be no question but that Byatt made her own selection of artwork (a Matisse painting entitled *Jupiter and Leda* – see Illustration Ten on page 76) for the cover of the 1993 Vintage edition of the collection of essays entitled *Passions of the Mind*. According to this myth, Leda was a beautiful young girl who steadfastly rejected the advances of the god Jupiter; he was finally successful when he took the form of a swan which she allowed to approach. Their close communion is depicted in the painting but given their very different forms - just as reality is separate from the word which describes it - what they share must necessarily be a passion of the mind. The publication in 1993 of *The Matisse Stories* (*MS*) (discussed on pages 81 – 99) reveals further startling developments in Byatt's engagement with the work of Matisse.

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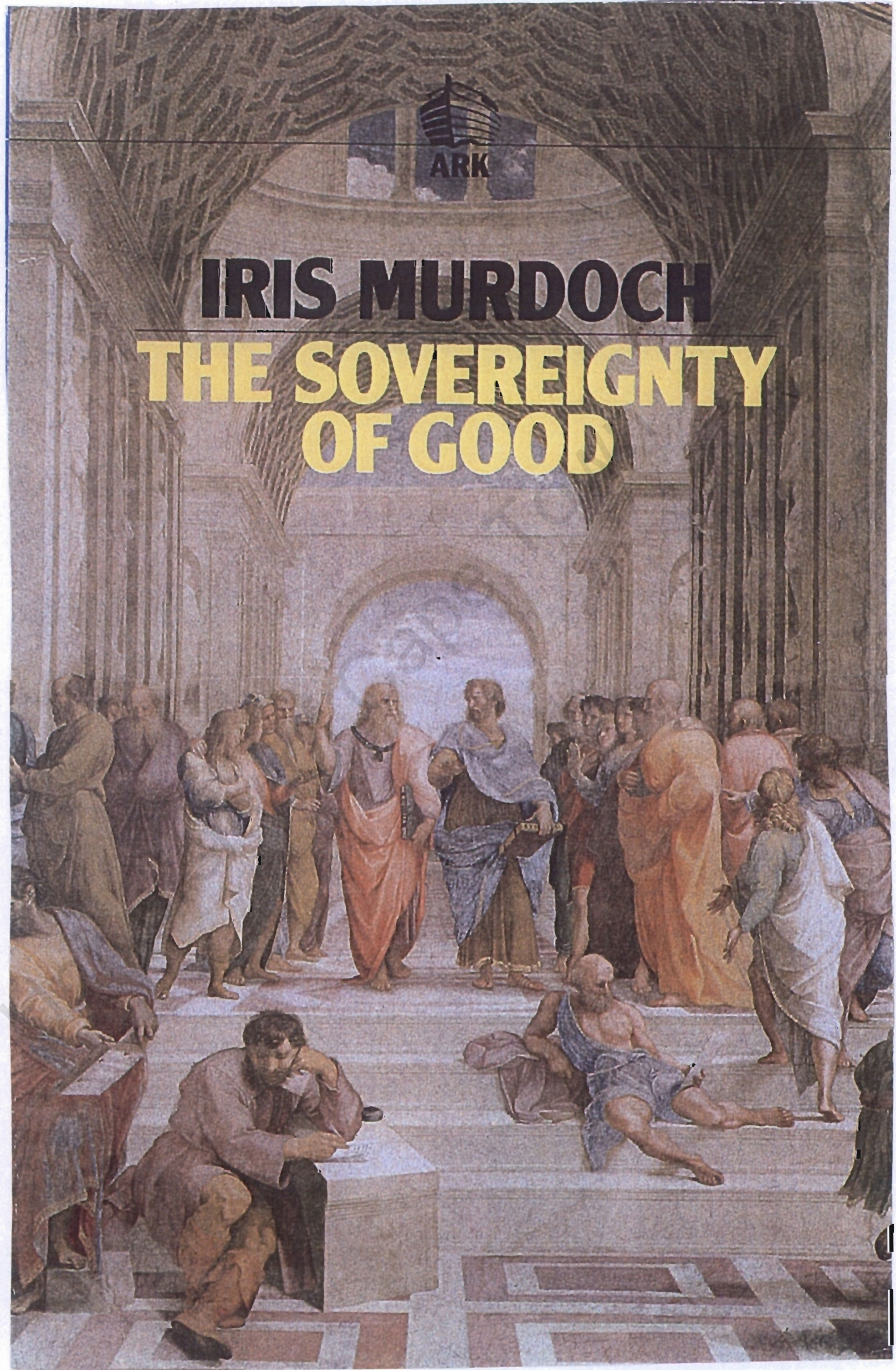
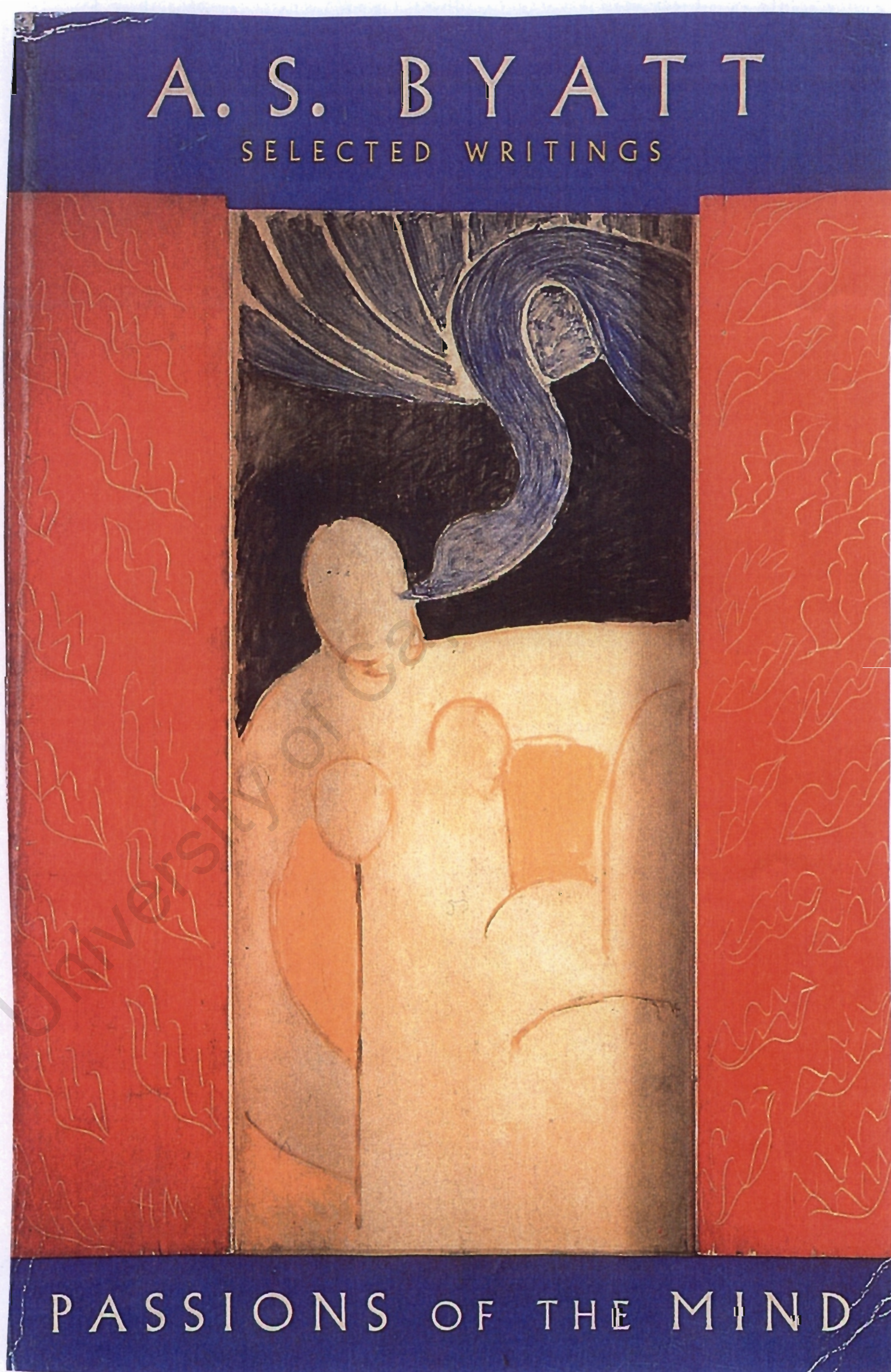
Illustration Nine Front cover of the 1985 Ark Paperbacks edition of a collection of essays on philosophy by Iris Murdoch



'A 1985 Ark Paperbacks edition of Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* bears on its front cover a reproduction of the central portion of Raphael's *School of Athens.*'

Illustration Ten Front cover of the 1993 Vintage edition of a collection of essays on literature by Byatt



'There could be no question but that Byatt made her own selection of artwork (a Matisse painting entitled *Jupiter and Leda*) for the cover of the 1993 Vintage edition of the collection of essays entitled *Passions of the Mind*.'

Artworks commissioned for the cover of Byatt novels are even more of a revelation of the author's perception of her stories. The softcover Penguin publications of both *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* have cover illustrations by Angela Barrett (an award-winning illustrator whose collectable works are regularly exhibited) which can only be interpreted once the novel has been read. Barrett says of her illustrations: 'My people aren't exactly realistic. It's something to do with the way I try to show a sense of heightened emotion' (Barrett: internet). Stephanie and Frederica feature in the foreground of each illustration. In the first novel (*The Virgin in the Garden* - see Illustration Eleven on page 76) golden Stephanie radiates the calm delight of a happily married woman pregnant with her first child. Frederica's tattered attire and fallen position indicate her current state of disempowerment. Behind them various characters interact in the formally laid out gardens of Long Royston where Alexander Wedderburn's play is staged. The play tells the story of Elizabeth I and its presentation is part of the celebrations of the coronation of Elizabeth II. The meticulously kept garden, laid out with geometrical precision, represents the English nation and the orderly rule of each of these monarchs. It might also represent Frederica's schoolgirl innocence. The fascination with the notion of a garden operating as a metaphor developed as Byatt worked on a doctoral dissertation on seventeenth-century religious allegory:

> Before I abandoned it, this project had narrowed itself to a discussion of temptations in gardens between *The Fairie Queene* and *Paradise Regained*, between the Bower of Blisse, the serpent's address to Eve, and Satan's temptation of the incarnate Christ, the Word in human form, in the wilderness. It is not too much to say that this unwritten work, with its neoplatonic myths, its interest in the incarnation, in fallen and unfallen (adequate and inadequate) language to describe reality, has haunted both my novels and my reading patterns ever since. (Byatt 1991: 3)

The cover of the second novel (*Still Life* - see Illustration 12 on page 79) again features both Frederica and Stephanie. They stand in the foreground of what appears to be an oblong box which is in fact the stage design for the 1957 production of Alexander Wedderburn's play about Van Gogh entitled *The Yellow Chair*:

> There were three acts and in all three of them the stage was seen as a closed receding box, the back-cloth, by various devices, made to seem small, bright and far away. There were three objects on the stage: Vincent's yellow chair, solid wood and rush, Gauguin's more opulent curving chair, green-seated, reddish-brown painted, highlit in violet, and an easel containing a large blank canvas on which, from time to time, were flashed magnified transparencies of various works, the huge black painted Bible of Vincent's father, the heap of yellow novels on a brilliant pink and white ground painted in Paris, the Breakfast Table. (*SL* 310)

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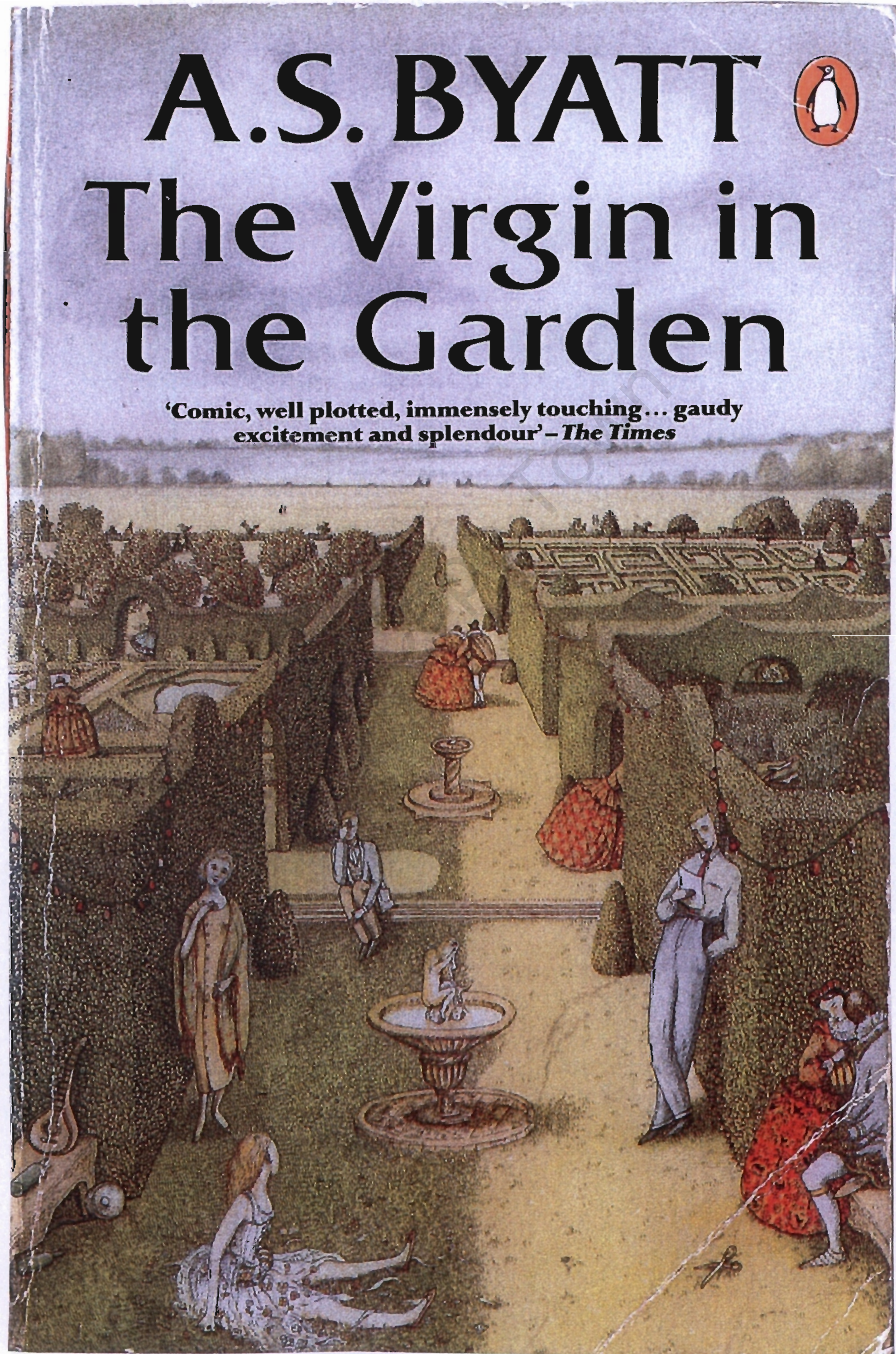
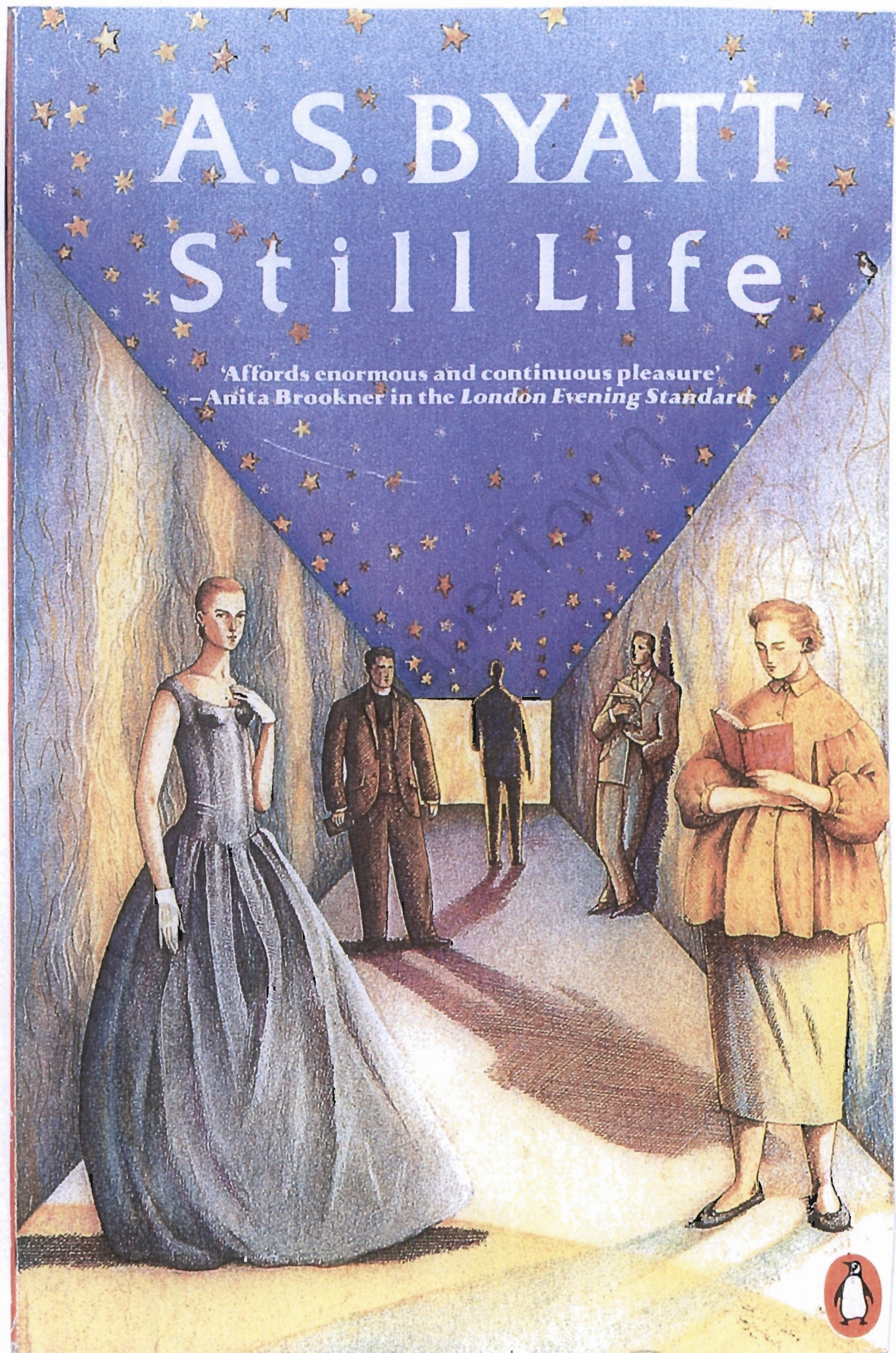
Illustration Eleven Front cover: 1981 Penguin edition of Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*



'In the first novel (*The Virgin in the Garden*) golden Stephanie radiates the calm delight of a happily married woman pregnant with her first child. Frederica's tattered attire and fallen position indicate her current state of disempowerment.'

Illustration Twelve Front cover: 1986 Penguin edition of Byatt's *Still Life*



'The cover of the second novel (*Still Life*) again features both Frederica and Stephanie. They stand in the foreground of what appears to be an oblong box which is in fact the stage design for the 1957 production of Alexander Wedderburn's play about Van Gogh entitled *The Yellow Chair*.'

The significance to Alexander's play of the Van Gogh still life for which Byatt has selected the title *The Breakfast Table* is not revealed, but its significance within *Still Life* becomes apparent in the novel's closing chapter – which is discussed in my conclusion (see page 210). The starry roof of the 'receding box' depicted on the front cover of the Penguin edition of *Still Life*, even though it is a rather conventional depiction of stars, might be intended to call to mind Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (recalled by young Frederica, for example, when first she visits the Midi where he lived and painted (*SL* 53)) since Van Gogh's art and thinking are so closely examined in this novel of life and death.[12] The use of perspective and the shadows (two of them intersecting) of the three men positioned in triangular formation behind the women suggest the important role which the visual arts, specifically the works and techniques of Van Gogh, are going to play in this novel. These three men are Daniel (identified by his bulk and his dogcollar), Alexander (holding a script) and fiery Bill Potter, who is walking away for he has turned his back on his daughter's marriage. Shared grief at Stephanie's accidental death will reconcile Bill Potter to Daniel Orton; this connection is suggested by the way in which Bill's shadow falls beneath Daniel's feet in the illustration. On first hearing of the proposed union, Bill had cried out:

> 'And what the hell do you think that [your life] will be, married to the 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 if you aren't, as I said, already. And he must be mad, or totally without imagination, to expect it of you. Not that he looks as though imagination's his strong point.' ...
>
> 'His work, his *work* is good, I respect his work.'
>
> 'It isn't *your* work you fool, it doesn't require your gifts, and it does require things you haven't got. The man can't have thought at all. ... My God, Stephanie, you aren't going to tell me you can honestly want to go and join an institution with St Paul's view on women, and views, no doubt, about breeding and the sanctity of recurrent parturition. You'll become a cow.' (*VG* 198)

Of course, Stephanie's children will become Bill's salvation and effect reconciliation with Daniel – although Daniel's son William will generate a new cycle of resentment at what he believes is his father's abandonment of himself and his sister after his mother's death. Stephanie is heavily pregnant in the drawing on the Penguin edition front cover – and in consequence wears a practical flowing smock and flat shoes for comfort and convenience. Her physical stance, blonde hair and yellow smock recall Daniel's view of her: 'He looked at his pale gold wife, her arms folded about her belly' (*SL* 20). Despite

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impending motherhood, she is still pursuing the intellectual pleasure of literature. During her pregnancy she works on appreciating the poetry of William Wordsworth (*SL* 12-15). In the delivery room she is refused access to her books so, striding up and down in an attempt to control the pain, she tries to recall Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* (*SL* 91). After the birth of her son she proposes to her husband a name they had not discussed: 'I thought of William. ... I – thought of it – for Wordsworth. All those hours – when they wouldn't let me have my book – I walked up and down ... - and in my mind I thought "William" because of Wordsworth' (*SL* 97). She has of course entirely forgotten that her father Bill is in fact William. The naming of her son delights her father: 'I take it kindly, you know – his name. I'm honoured. I'm moved. One's children – and their children – are all the immortality one has, of that I'm sure. And names mean more than you might suppose' (*SL* 99). This will be the beginning of the long process of reconciliation and healing which will be effected in the course of the tetralogy, and which is discussed in the conclusion of my thesis (see page 208).

In the front-cover illustration, Frederica wears her first successful dress which flatters and impresses. It is a dress of her own design made up to her exact specifications for the two May Balls she attends in 1956. The cloth is cotton in a shade of graphite; seeing it, 'Frederica had immediately known it was right' (*SL* 259). The waist is slightly dropped 'so that her long torso was straight and silvery like a pencil' and the boned basque enables her to 'push up her small breasts into neat decorous cones under the grey shimmer' (*SL* 259). She has learned how to make herself up to best advantage and how to enhance her hair with a 'false doughnut'. 'In the Newnham mirror before the Trinity Ball she looked at the lovely colour her ginger had become against the graphite and gave a sigh of satisfaction' (*SL* 259). Frederica is well on her way to empowerment.

A further development in the process of Byatt's engagement with the visual arts is her use of the works in different media (pencil, charcoal, paint) of one artist as a framework for a coherent group of stories in the collection entitled *The Matisse Stories*. Each story is built upon a Matisse painting and prefaced with a Matisse line drawing. The painting is integral to each story so that the reader engages with both the words and the visual image as the story unfolds. Each story deals with some aspect of destruction which is an inevitable part of human life. It must be pointed out that it is not the elements of violence

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and destruction which surface in each story which connect with the techniques and philosophy of Matisse. By nature an anxious man, Matisse used his art as a means to sublimate his nervous temperament. Art historian Wendy Beckett notes the claim of Matisse that his art was 'a good armchair' – for it was for him personally 'a respite, a reprieve, a comfort' (Beckett 1994: 337). However, it is the central importance and power of colour in the work of Matisse which appears to engage Byatt for her own emotional interaction with colour is one of the driving forces of her writing. In an article posted on the internet after the publication of *Possession* entitled 'Choices: on the writing of *Possession*', Byatt notes of that novel: 'And the Gestalt now? A green and gold and blue balloon, far away, untouchable. A writer can't think about novels that have gone away.' She then makes reference to her current work, which must be *Babel Tower*: 'The Gestalt of the one I am writing, about the 1960s, is a jagged harlequin pattern of coloured fragments and smoking bonfires. And there is something *weak* about the narrative line, or tension, connecting these, that I'm trying to deal with.' On 22 April 2004 Byatt conducted an 'online chat' with *The Washington Post* and claimed 'I like to write about painting because I think visually. I see my writing as blocks of colour before it forms itself. ... Painting to me is not a metaphor for writing, but something people do that can never be reduced to words'. There follows a very vivid account of the colours in which she envisaged the tetralogy:

> The quartet is easy to describe. *The Virgin in the Garden* was red, white and green, and the red was blood and the white was stone and the green was grass. *Still Life* started out very dark purple, and then I felt there ought to be yellow, it was the complementary colour to the purple, and because I felt there ought to be yellow, I thought of Van Gogh's chair, and in fact Van Gogh became an important symbolic figure in that book. ... *Babel Tower* is black and red, because of blood and destruction. And *A Whistling Woman* is quite difficult, because it tries to tie them all together. And in fact it combines the colours of all the others. At the end there are two scenes of fire, one is a real fire when the students burn down the university, and the second is a metaphorical fire when Frederica is looking over the moors and all the gorse is in bloom, and it looks as far as you can see the land is on fire, but it's only flowers. And the colours of *A Whistling Woman* are the *Babel Tower* colours, which are the real fire, and the *Still Life* yellow, which is the harmless fire. (Byatt 2004: internet)

The Matisse Stories inevitably almost overpower the reader with colour and also, like the tetralogy, examine the destruction latent within human individual and community life. There are three short stories in the collection. 'Medusa's Ankles' examines the destruction by time of the life of the body and the promise of the future (and the central character destroys the interior of a hair salon in reaction against this); 'Art Work'

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explores the violation of the personal when other people enter one's environment and seize and rework into artwork of their own both one's possessions and one's ideas; 'The Chinese Lobster' reveals how the hard lessons of experience (particularly the encounter with death) erode human empathy.

The 1994 Vintage edition of *The Matisse Stories* is colourfully produced: colour reproductions of the paintings central to each story appear on the blue front and back covers. All writing on the covers is yellow and the word 'Matisse' is recreated as the famous signature. (See Illustration Thirteen on page 84.) Within the covers, titles, reviewers' names and page numbers are all printed in blue. Extracts from reviews chosen to promote the book, employ metaphor on the theme of artwork: 'A masterpiece of its kind' (*Sunday Telegraph*); 'A miniature worthy of being set beside Matisse's own work' (Allan Massie, *Scotsman*); 'This is prose working precisely and elegantly, with quick deft brush-strokes' (Michèle Roberts, *Independent*) and 'Byatt's three-tale sequence ... hits the imagination's retina with all the vibrant splatter of an exploding paintbox ... scenes sizzle with chromatic intensity' (Peter Kemp, *Sunday Times*).

Belonging to the movement named Fauvism,[13] Henri Matisse is credited with creating rather than imitating light in his paintings; for him colour was an emotional rather than a descriptive force. It is thus appropriate that each Byatt story is a riotous celebration of colour and so of life. In 'Art Work', Mrs Brown the cleaning lady seems to express Byatt's own delight in creation when she explains: '[T]here's so much in the world, isn't there, and making things is a natural enough way of showing your excitement ... ' (*MS* 85). There is a great deal of noise in the background of each story; the last story also celebrates the delight of eating. However, beneath the sensuous parade of each story's progress, is charted the progress of something sinister and frightening. As noted above, this literary characteristic of Byatt's short stories is not a part of the visual ethos of the art of Matisse.

Byatt prefaces *The Matisse Stories* with the dedication: 'For Peter Who taught me to look at things slowly. With love.' It is significant that she accepts that she is already able to look, and had to learn only to look slowly. These stories have much to do with looking which is of course the only sense which grants access to painting and drawing.

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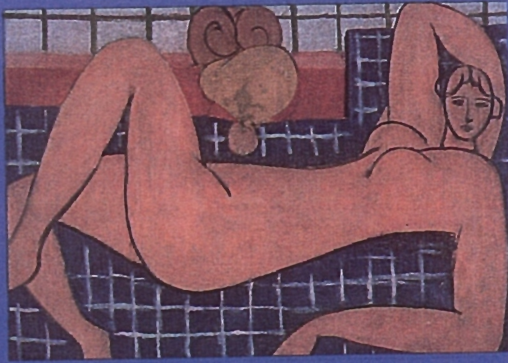
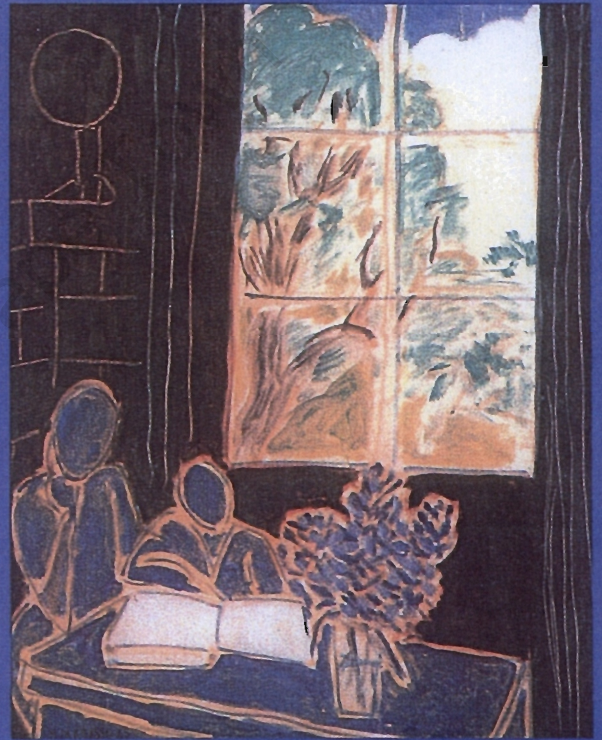
Illustration Thirteen Front and back covers: 1994 Vintage edition of Byatt's *The Matisse Stories*





'The 1994 Vintage edition of *The Matisse Stories* is colourfully produced: colour reproductions of the paintings central to each story appear on the blue front and back covers. All writing on the covers is yellow and the word "Matisse" is recreated as the famous signature.'

'Medusa's Ankles' tells of an ageing woman, Susannah, looking squarely at approaching old age and raging against it. The hairdresser she enlists in her battle to keep age at bay does not take the trouble to 'see' her; nor does her husband, who thinks a hideous 'set' makes her look twenty years younger. 'Art Work' deals with an artist wife who exclaims that her husband's artworks 'are miraculous, they are like those times when time seems to stop, and you just *look* at something, and *see* it, out of time, and you feel surprised that you can see it at all ... and the seeing goes on and on, and gets better and better' (*MS* 53); then marriage and responsibility end their communication, separate them and stunt their artistic growth. In 'The Chinese Lobster' Perry Diss, distinguished visiting professor, describes a meeting with Matisse himself, in rooms shrouded in darkness. Matisse, facing the possibility of blindness, was acquainting himself with the dark; he was not raging or resentful and pointed out that 'black is the colour of light' (*MS* 131). Diss describes his own moment of revelation: 'And then, one day I saw it. I saw how hard it is to see, and how full of power, once seen. Not *consolation ... life and power*' (*MS* 121). He and his colleague, Gerda Himmelblau, meet to discuss a disturbed Honours student who is reworking a selection of Matisse paintings; Diss exclaims repeatedly in despair that 'she can't *see*':

> 'It [her artwork] can have taken at the maximum *half an hour* – and there's no evidence anywhere in the silly girl's work that she's ever spent more than that actually *looking at* a Matisse – she has no accurate memory of one when we talk, *none*, she amalgamates them all in her mind into one monstrous female corpse bursting with male aggression – she can't *see*, can't you see?' (*MS* 113)

The stories function as a composite whole for each informs the others: the first charts the unleashing of rage experienced in the face of lost opportunities, unrealised potential and the creeping advance of old age and ultimately death. The second begins with stagnation and anger and tells of destruction and the regeneration it triggers. The final story introduces two people who have raged and suffered and thereafter been reconciled to death and suffering. Repeated readings are required in order to appreciate the sequence. Each story rests on a Matisse painting and each is prefaced with a Matisse line drawing which comments on the action. The first story has at its centre the Matisse painting *Le Nu Rose* (see Illustration Fourteen on page 86). A print of this painting attracts the attention of Susannah, the protagonist, in the first line of 'Medusa's Ankles'. It draws her into the hair salon where it is displayed.

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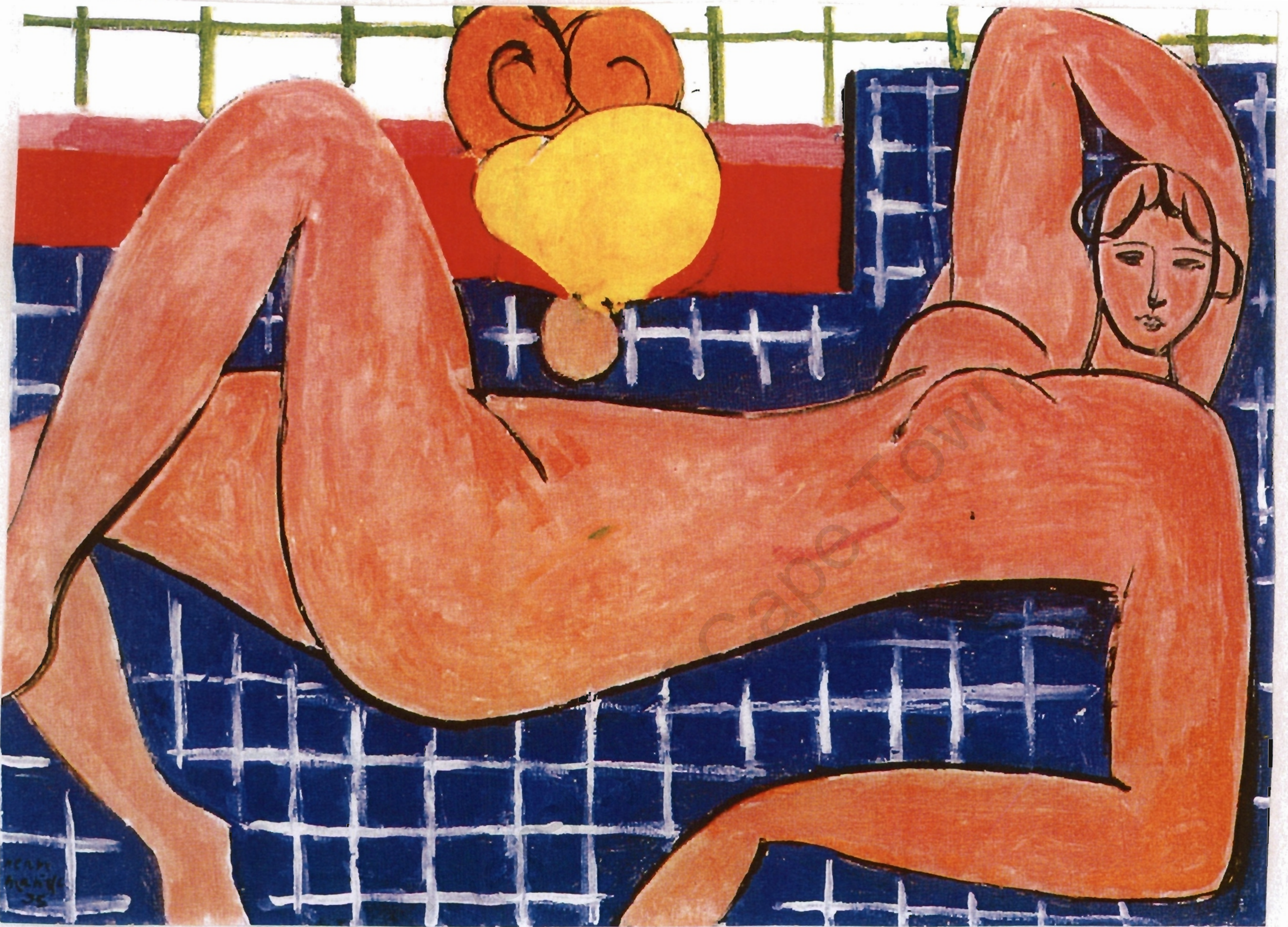
Illustration Fourteen Matisse painting *Le Nu Rose*



'Each story rests on a Matisse painting and each is prefaced with a Matisse line drawing which comments on the action. The first story has at its centre the Matisse painting *Le Nu Rose*.'

The setting of the story over a period of months within this hair salon accounts for Byatt's choice of a Matisse line drawing of a woman and her head of hair (entitled *La chevelure* – see Illustration Fifteen on page 88) on the story's title page. The proprietor of the salon, Lucian, chose the print for its colours which complement the scheme of his salon; he has no appreciation for the artwork itself. He will in fact remove the print from his salon quite early in the action of the story, but the voluptuous rosy flesh of the nude pervades the whole story even in her absence, as the reader gazes into the salon mirror with Susannah and inspects her sagging ageing face.

In the story's dénouement, Susannah will smash up the salon and the chaos which she creates functions as an image of her dissatisfaction with the course of her life. The award of a medal and public acknowledgement for her work has come too late (*MS* 19); her husband no longer sees her (*MS* 28) and she cannot ignore her own steady physical deterioration. The print of the voluptuous and rosy nude recalls for her the days when 'she had been attractive, with the attraction of liveliness and warm energy, of the flow of quick blood and brightness of eye' (*MS* 19). She specifically remembers a day of lovemaking with an Italian student in Perugia; she recalls 'her own little round rosy breasts, her own long legs stretched over the side of the single bed' (*MS* 22). Now all that remains is 'the life of the flesh, which began to die' (*MS* 19) and hair which 'was not much any more, its life was fading from it' (*MS* 16).

The proprietor of the salon cannot 'see' the beauty of the Matisse print and does not attempt to 'see' Susannah (he is far too absorbed in the current state of his extra-marital affair and the breakdown of his marriage). He is aware that his job involves 'making suburban old dears presentable' (*MS* 9) but appears to be unaware that Susannah has entrusted herself to him ('She came to trust him with her disintegration' (*MS* 7)). In a quirky twist Susannah's husband appears to 'see' her for the first time in ages once she returns home from her orgy of smashing and destruction. He is described as an 'alert' man (*MS* 28), yet he no longer notices his wife. He indicates approval of what he sees although what he sees is something which disgusts Susannah herself.

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Illustration Fifteen Matisse line drawing *La chevelure*

Medusa's Ankles

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La chevelure, 1931-32

'The setting of the story over a period of months within this hair salon accounts for Byatt's choice of a Matisse line drawing of a woman and her head of hair (entitled *La chevelure*) on the story's title page.'

Of course Lucian's own life is a parallel story of disintegration; he has abandoned his family for a girlfriend whose love he cannot entirely believe in and he is conducting a fruitless search for an 'inner life' (*MS* 8). He considers trying to find such a life in art, archaeology and religion. His haphazard attempts to build and order a life of the mind frighten Susannah. She observes and fears her physical disintegration but her inner life is intact – well-established and sound: 'She could recognise the flitting mind ... It frightened her. What she knew, what she cared about, what was coherent, was separate shards for him to flit over, remaining separate' (*MS* 9). Lucian cannot even tell his own story in a coherent or useful manner:

> Over the next few months, maybe a year, the story evolved, in bumps and jerks, not, it must be said, with any satisfactory narrative shape. He was a bad storyteller, Susannah realised slowly. None of the characters acquired any roundness. She formed no image of the nature of the beauty of the girlfriend ... She did not know if the wife was a shrew or a sufferer ... All these wraith-personae were inventions of Susannah's own. (*MS* 13)

Lucian chooses the 'perfectly beautiful girl' (*MS* 12) over the wife whom he blames for having 'let herself go altogether' (*MS* 21) and worse, '[s]he's let her ankles get fat, they swell over her shoes, it disgusts me, it's impossible for me' (*MS* 21). This galls Susannah: 'Because her own ankles rubbed her shoes, her sympathies had to be with this unknown and ill-presented woman' (*MS* 22). The attitude of Lucian towards his wife mirrors Susannah's attitude towards herself. The story's title suggests that as a result of the natural process of ageing she has come to regard herself as something akin to Medusa, the snake-haired gorgon, repulsive to look at.

The unfortunate assistant who dresses Susannah's hair creates '[s]ausages and snail-shells, grape-clusters and twining coils' (*MS* 23). These 'twining coils' call Medusa to mind and will become for Susannah, as she gazes into the mirror, a vision of her mother. At the story's beginning we are offered a picture of Susannah's vivid memory of her mother emerging from the hairdresser 'under a rigidly bouncy "set", like a mountain of wax fruit, that made her seem artificial and embarrassing' (*MS* 6). Clearly Susannah, as she struggles against middle age, fears becoming the image of her mother which embarrassed her. Her anger is a response to a deep-seated anxiety about ageing, which would introduce 'the crêpe, the sag, the opulent soft bags' (*MS* 19). The destructive outbreak which is engendered by this anger is triggered when she is left for a long spell to

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gaze at her 'poor face' towards which she feels 'a gentle protective rage' (*MS* 19). The destruction of the artfully decorated hair salon will not retard the processes of destruction which have engulfed the lives of either the insensitive and self-absorbed Lucian or sensitive and analytical Susannah.

The second story uses a Matisse painting as a springboard. The painting is described and explored by the narrating voice and then there is an abrupt transition to the noises in a house. The title of the Matisse painting (*Le Silence habité des maisons* – see Illustration Sixteen on page 91), gives the clue to its connection to the story of this particular household for although there is a great deal of quiet, rhythmical, repetitive noise (for example 'the splashy mechanical giggle' of the washing machine (*MS* 32) and the 'upbeat cheery squitter' of the television (*MS* 33)), it is the silences (the experiences of frustration and despair which are not named or discussed) which occupy the narrative. Robin Dennison reviles the cleaning lady and 'does not ask himself if his hatred of Mrs Brown is a deflected resentment of his helplessness in the capable hands of his wife, breadwinner and life-manager' (*MS* 58). He has also endured others' sense of his inadequacy: 'Everyone said, "He's *got* something," or more dubiously, "He's got *something*." Probably not enough, they qualified this, silently to themselves, but Robin heard them well enough, for all that' (*MS* 56). Debbie, wife and mother, would have liked to be a wood-engraver:

> Her fingers remembered the slow, careful work in the wood, with a quiet grief, that didn't diminish, but was manageable. She hated Robin because he never once mentioned the unmade wood-engravings. It is possible to feel love and hate quite quietly, side by side, if one is a self-contained person. Debbie continued to love Robin, whilst hating him because of the woodcuts, because of the extent of his absence of interest in how she managed the house ... and because of his resolute attempts to unsettle, humiliate, or drive away Mrs Brown, without whom all Debbie's balancing acts would clatter and fall in wounding disarray. (*MS* 54-5)

Mrs Brown is viewed by Robin and Debbie as merely a cleaning lady whose creative talent is expressed in a series of garish gifts made out of oddments and whose intrusions into Robin's work space are uncomprehending and insensitive. Thus Mrs Brown's unacknowledged creative talent is also initially an emptiness, a silence in the narrative. When this silence is finally given expression (Mrs Brown's work is exhibited in an art gallery where Robin had hoped to see his own work displayed) it is clear that a measure of destruction has already taken place. Materials for the works and their very subject have their origin in the Dennison home.

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Illustration Sixteen Matisse painting *Le Silence habité des maisons*

'The second story uses a Matisse painting as a springboard. The painting is described and explored by the narrating voice and then there is an abrupt transition to the noises in a house. The title of the Matisse painting (*Le Silence habité des maisons*), gives the clue to its connection to the story of this particular household.'

More destruction might follow, should Robin choose to view Mrs Brown's show as an opportunity stolen from him (*MS* 82); his consequent anger would sever relations. Right at the start of the story the narrating voice, invested with omniscient authority, informed the reader that without Mrs Brown 'it must immediately be said, Debbie's world would not hold together' (*MS* 39). The Matisse line drawing (*L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir* – see Illustration Seventeen on page 93) with which 'Art Work' has been prefaced, depicts a model lounging on a chair in front of a mirror which reflects both the model and the artist who is painting her. This is a pointer to what will ultimately be revealed to be the mutually beneficial relationship of Mrs Brown and her employees: each is to be both artist and model. Each is to be the muse of the other. Mrs Brown's 'feminist installation' (*MS* 76) at the Callisto gallery represents a brilliantly coloured and chaotic home. The centrepiece is 'a kind of dragon and chained lady' (*MS* 79). 'It is an odd dragon, recumbent amongst its own coils' (*MS* 79) and it surely represents Robin Dennison in his attic 'explaining his fetishes to Mrs Brown, and roaring as he will roar no more, about her forays into his workplace' (*MS* 82). The chained lady might well be Debbie tied up in her responsibilities.

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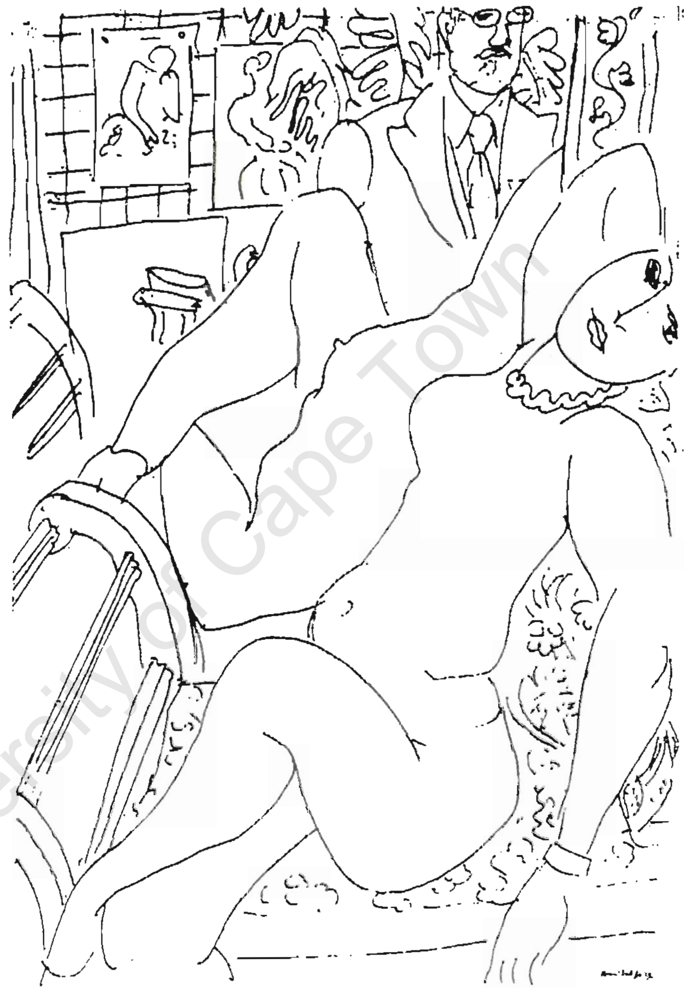
Mrs Brown's artwork will release both Debbie and Robin; Debbie will feel 'a kind of subdued envy which carries with it an invigorating sting' (*MS* 82). Her fear is realised: Mrs Brown leaves her employ. However her replacement, Mrs Stimpson, is equally efficient and the life of the household continues and there are artistic developments which show promise:

> Debbie goes back to making wood-engravings. *A Book of Bad Fairies* and *A Book of Good Fairies*, which have a certain success in the world of book illustration. Some of the more exotic fairies have the carved, haughty face of Sheba Brown, and the sweet, timeless face of Mrs Stimpson. (*MS* 89)

Robin also finds a new direction for his work: oriental mythology. Debbie is stunned and delighted to find a painting on his easel of Kali the Destroyer which, she is aware, shows promise. 'It is not right, thinks Debbie, that the black goddess should be a travesty of Sheba Brown … But at the same time she recognises a new kind of loosed, slightly savage energy in Robin's use of colour and movement. … It has indeed got something' (*MS* 89-90). Mrs Brown has unloosed a measure of destruction in Robin Dennison's life, but she has simultaneously released a new creative energy in him.

Illustration Seventeen Matisse line drawing *L' artiste et le modèle reflététes dans le miroir*

Art Work



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L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir, 1937

'The Matisse line drawing (*L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir*) with which 'Art Work' has been prefaced, depicts a model lounging on a chair in front of a mirror which reflects both the model and the artist who is painting her. '

The revelation of Mrs Brown's creativity has been regarded by Robin and Debbie as a destructive act; it has severed her relationship with the Dennison family. However, the 'destruction' has been a catalyst which has engendered new opportunities for creativity; the 'destruction' has had healthy consequences.

Like the two preceding stories, 'The Chinese Lobster' is overcharged with colour. For example, Dr Himmelblau enters the Chinese restaurant and rather uneasily acknowledges the little brass god within the door; before him glass pots of 'saturated scarlet' hold burning incense and he sits within a 'bright jade-green shrine' (*MS* 94). The reader's senses are also assailed by noise (muzak plays 'Twang, tinkle, plink, *plink*' (*MS* 97); in 'Medusa's Ankles' there is piped music in the salon: 'tinkling and tripping and dropping' (*MS* 5) and in 'Art Work' the silences in the house are overlaid with an endless variety of domestic sounds). In addition to sight and sound, 'The Chinese Lobster' celebrates the sense of taste, described in terms of touch, smells and sight: 'a little flame of hot chilli here, a ghostly fragrant sweetness of lychee there, the slaty tang of black beans, the elemental earthy crispness of beansprouts' (*MS* 108). Despite the practical sense and good cheer of Dr Himmelblau and despite the colour and clamour which pervade 'The Chinese Lobster', it is the first story to introduce and examine the blackness and silence of death.

The Matisse line drawing (*Nymphe et faune* – see Illustration Eighteen on page 95) on the story's title page depicts a faun intent upon sexual intercourse with a voluptuous (and unconcerned) nymph. However, it is the seduction of death which is under consideration in this story, rather than sexual seduction. Professor Perry Diss is supposed to have made inappropriate sexual advances to a disturbed student who makes a formal complaint and threatens suicide. There are already two failed suicide bids on her record. It will emerge that Dr Himmelblau flirted with suicide and 'old scars, well-made *efficient* scars' on the wrists of Perry Diss (*MS* 130) testify to his struggle with its seductive allure. The Matisse painting which informs the story is *La Porte noire* (see Illustration Nineteen on page 96):

> It has a young woman in an armchair quite at ease in a peignoir striped in lemon and cadmium and … over a white dress with touches of cardinal red – her hair is yellow, ochre and scarlet – and at the side is the window and the coloured light and behind – above – is the black door. Almost no one could paint the colour black as he could. (*MS* 131 – 2)

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Illustration Eighteen Matisse line drawing *Nymphe et faune*

The Chinese Lobster

Nymphe et faune, 1931-2

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'The Matisse line drawing (*Nymphe et faune*) on the story's title page depicts a faun intent upon sexual intercourse with a voluptuous (and unconcerned) nymph.'

Illustration Nineteen Matisse painting *La Porte noire*

'The Matisse painting which informs the story is *La Porte noire*.'

If the black door is a portal to death then the ease and unconcern of the woman, Matisse's subject, in its presence indicate the possibility of making peace with the fact that life will come to an end. This acceptance is indicated both by her relaxed posture and by the jaunty colours she sports. Dr Himmelblau and Professor Diss, the two older people who converse through the course of this story, have reached this same level of quiet acceptance, for each has faced death and dealt with it. The instinct for survival and the sensuous appreciation of life has triumphed instead.

That these two people are older and experienced is suggested by the muted but elegant colour combinations of the clothing adopted by each – in strong contrast to the lemon and cadmium, red, ochre and scarlet adorning the woman who sits for Matisse. Dr Himmelblau wears suits in 'damsons, soots, black tulips, dark mosses – with clean-cut cotton shirts' (*MS* 99); Professor Diss arrives in 'an olive-green cashmere coat with a black velvet collar' (*MS* 106) under which there is 'a corduroy suit, the colour of dark slate' (*MS* 109). The battle which Dr Himmelblau and Professor Diss have fought with death and destruction has been suppressed and contained within each as a place of no colour, an icy whiteness. They discuss the urge to suicide, each aware but not saying out loud that the experience is personal. Dr Himmelblau says that '[e]verything seems clear, and simple, and *single*; there is only one possible thing to be done – ' (*MS* 125), to which Perry Diss replies:

> 'That is true. You look around you and everything is bleached, and clear, as you say. You are in a white box. A white room, with no doors or windows. You are looking through clear water with no movement – perhaps it is more like being inside ice, inside the white room. There is only one thing possible. It is all perfectly clear and simple and plain. As you say.' (*MS* 125)

But the power and impact of this conversation lies in what is acknowledged, understood, but not spoken. Using the imagery of flowing water and darkness, the narrating voice informs us of the unseen undercurrent of this conversation; the description is true of all people involved in conversation and is thus extremely moving and powerful. The colours of the description are dark to suggest its hidden nature:

> Any two people may be talking to each other, at any moment, in a civilized way about something trivial, or something, even, complex and delicate. And inside each of the two there runs a kind of dark river of unconnected thought, of secret fear, or violence, or bliss, hoped-for or lost, which keeps pace with the flow of talk and is neither seen nor heard. And at times, one or both of the two will catch sight or sound of this movement, in himself, or herself, or, more rarely, in the other.

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> And it is like the quick slip of a waterfall into a pool, like a drop into darkness. The pace changes, the weight of the air, though the talk may run smoothly onwards without a ripple or quiver. (*MS* 126)

The mutual silent revelation between Dr Gerda Himmelblau and Perry Diss is described in terms of water flowing in darkness. The experience which they share and describe in the same imagery is also depicted in terms of water and colour: ice and whiteness. Dr Himmelblau contemplates the action of suicide:

> She believes the impulse is wrong, to be resisted. But at the time it is white, and clear, and simple. The colour goes from the world, so that the only stain on it is her own watching mind. Which it would be easy to wipe away. And then there would be no pain.
>
> She looks at Perry Diss who is looking at her. His eyes are half-closed, his expression is canny and watchful. He has used her secret image, the white room, accurately; they have shared it. (*MS* 129)

The reason for this meeting and discussion is the disturbed student Peggi Nollet who is working on an honours thesis entitled 'The female body and Matisse'; she is expressing her rage against what she perceives to be Matisse's disrespect for the female body by '*revising* or *reviewing* or *rearranging* Matisse' (*MS* 103). Perry Diss is to supervise the written component of this thesis. The practical section, entitled 'Erasures and Undistortions' involves the creation of mixed-media pieces; part of this work involves smearing prints of Matisse paintings with organic matter. *Le Nu rose*, the painting which is featured in 'Medusa's Ankles', is one of the prints which is subjected to this treatment. The two academics puzzle at Peggi Nollet's choice of Matisse and decide that she is raging against him '[b]ecause he paints silent bliss. *Luxe, calme et volupté.* How can Peggi Nollet bear luxe, calme et volupté?' (*MS* 121) His paintings depict pleasure and, according to Perry Diss: 'Pleasure is *life*, Dr Himmelblau, and most of us don't have it, or not much, or mess it up, and when we see it in those blues, those roses, those oranges, that vermilion, we should fall down and worship – for it is *the thing itself*' (*MS* 123-4).

The two academics resolve the problem of Peggi Nollet (to whom a sympathetic superviser will be allocated to avoid scandal and loss of funding), agreeing that '[i]t matters very much and not at all' (*MS* 133). Each of these people deeply appreciates the sensuous pleasure of life, as depicted by Matisse, probably all the more since each was almost seduced by death. The instinct for survival and for pleasure has been the

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strongest. And the price of this survival is a diminished ability to care for others and the adoption of a measure of callous self-protection. And so the two of them look at the Chinese lobster and the two crabs in the freshwater tank at the front of the restaurant. Both had examined it on entering. Both are aware that the creatures are not in their natural element and are dying 'hissing their difficult air' (*MS* 134).

> 'I find that *absolutely appalling*, you know,' says Perry Diss. 'And at the same time, I don't give a damn? D'you know?'
> 'I know,' says Gerda Himmelblau. She does know. Cruelly, imperfectly, voluptuously, clearly. (*MS* 134)

Through the medium of the artwork of Matisse, Byatt has explored the ways in which people face destruction or create destruction as part of the act of living. Susannah in 'Medusa's Ankles' faced the Medusa head of her physical deterioration and the failure of her life to quite measure up to all the promise which it held at the outset. In reaction against this she destroyed the 'arty' hairdressing salon where the signs of the ageing process could not be satisfactorily disguised. Dr Himmelblau and Professor Diss both attempted their own physical destruction and have survived to enjoy a limited measure of pleasure, controlling the horror of their experience by translating it into imagery of ice and whiteness. Their survival requires a measure of destruction of their ability to sympathise with the suffering of other people or creatures.

Out of the threat of destruction of the ritual of the Dennison household in 'Art Work', came healing growth and new life. 'It is exhilarating to watch Byatt claim so large a territory in these short stories. Her natural, buoyant art makes Matisse an appropriate touchstone for the collection' wrote Helen Dunmore of the *Observer* (quoted as a preface to the Vintage edition of the stories). We watch Byatt working with Matisse, exploring art and destruction, and in the process of reading, absorbing and analysing, our own ability to 'see' – in visual and literary contexts - is refined and perfected. Having ended this section with an examination of the way Byatt has used artworks as a means to examine various destructive processes, I would now like to consider some of the destructive acts which punctuate the action of Byatt's fiction and, even more frequently, Murdoch's fiction. These acts almost always incur no consequences.

This must be significant and worth investigating.

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3.3 Artful acts of destruction

The notion explored by both Murdoch and Byatt that acts of destruction (the opposite process to the artistic act of creation) can be perpetrated specifically to shift the balance of power in human relations, is neatly illustrated in an historically recorded event which is recreated by Byatt within the formal structure of the historical play presented in *The Virgin in the Garden*. Alexander Wedderburn wrote the play to celebrate England's two Elizabethan ages; Frederica Potter, whose personal manipulation of the power of ability and personality has been emphasised by Byatt's clever association of her with the sharp and fiery Elizabeth I, plays the role of the young princess.

It is a matter of historical record that Sir Thomas Seymour (after the death of Henry VIII in 1547 elevated to Baron Seymour of Sudeley Castle and Lord High Admiral for Life) courted first the thirteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth and thereafter, with success, the Dowager Queen, Katherine Parr. The young Princess Elizabeth went to live with the Admiral and her step-mother. Also a matter of historical record is an incident in which the Admiral cut to pieces the dress of the princess. This occurred in the course of one of their regular romps which were in fact an outwardly acceptable means for the Admiral to give expression to his sexual desire and for the princess in turn to accept his attentions. Alison Weir, biographer of the six wives of Henry, documents the incident in which Katherine herself was involved.

> [A]t Anne Boelyn's old manor of Hanworth in the spring, Katherine accompanied her husband to Elizabeth's room on two mornings, and joined in the tickling, amid peals of laughter. While still at Hanworth, the Admiral chased Elizabeth through the gardens; when he caught her, they wrestled together, then Seymour called for shears and cut her black gown into strips, while the Queen, in fits of laughter, held her still. Afterwards, Elizabeth fled indoors where Mrs Ashley asked in horror what had happened ... Elizabeth ... would only reply that 'it could not be helped'. (Weir 1991: 552)

The man, more powerful than the princess because he was older, stronger, richer and had more political influence, was able to exercise his mastery over the girl who one day, when queen, would in her turn exercise over others the power of life and death. This act

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of destruction recorded in history is metamorphosed into art by Byatt in the play written by Alexander Wedderburn:

> Elizabeth's first big scene, Alexander's first big scene, Frederica's first big scene, was the one where the Princess ran hither and thither in the orchard, pursued by that amorous and politic satyr, Thomas Seymour, and her stepmother, Katherine Parr, who together cut her garments, laughing hugely, into a hundred fragments. Alexander had, he hoped, used this scene delicately to intimate the contrarieties of his heroine's sexuality as he saw it: the ferocious flirtatiousness, the paralysing fear, the desire for power, the sense of solitude. (*VG* 282)

This appears as another form of art: Frederica in her shredded dress is depicted in Angela Barrett's illustration for the front cover of the 1981 Penguin softcover printing of *The Virgin in the Garden* (see Illustration Eleven on page 78). She is sitting flat on the ground, legs outstretched, temporarily laid low. Neither Frederica nor her forbear, the princess, was floored for long.

This destruction of clothes in a scene charged with sexual tension is similarly recreated in Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Julius King, who will involve Morgan in a game which will reveal her intellectual pomposity, cuts up her clothes. Morgan stripped in an effort to seduce Julius, and imagines that her ploy has worked:

> She watched him fascinated. When at last the scissors bit into the material she shuddered slightly. But she watched in silence until the entire dress had been cut through, first one way and then the other. ... Julius stooped and gathered together the ribbony silky pieces of white dress and black underclothes and threw them into a heap in the hall. (*FHD* 131)

He then leaves her naked in his apartment without access to clothes or a telephone. Her mood changes rapidly from one of exhilaration to panic; in an attempt to cover her nakedness she pulls down a curtain and accidentally smashes a T'ang horse which she will never be able to afford to replace. Julius will be unaffected by this revelation (*FHD* 151).

A rather more malicious incidence of destruction occurs at a party held to celebrate the completion of Rupert Foster's philosophical treatise. Before the evening is out, the manuscript is ripped to pieces by Rupert's son Peter, with the assistance of Julius King. It is a demonstration of the contempt they feel for Rupert's undertaking. Further destruction ensues for, humiliated and miserable, Rupert will accidentally drown in the

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swimming pool in which he once took such pride. In the novel *Babel Tower* there are many instances of burning practised as an art-form called skoob by a character (Paul Ottokar) who feels powerless. In the next novel, *A Whistling Woman*, skoob will not be constructed merely as a form of protest, but will be used to set fires which destroy historical artefacts and buildings and which take lives.

Fire and water, art and destruction are thus intricately connected in the works of Murdoch and Byatt. Water and fire in their novels are a cause of death and destruction. The smashing, burning and cutting which Murdoch and Byatt describe is often perpetrated by those who are attempting to exert power. On occasion these acts of burning, cutting and smashing are viewed by certain characters as works of art or are metamorphosed into works of art. Byatt's Paul Ottokar, for example, in both *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, practises the 'art form' of book burning called skoob, as discussed above. Examples of destruction taking on the form of art include the illustration of Frederica in the shredded dress of Princess Elizabeth on the cover of the Penguin edition of *The Virgin in the Garden* and the 'cut-ups' which she creates in *Babel Tower* out of letters received from her husband's solicitor. She cuts the letters up into fragments and rearranges them into 'a kind of consequential structure' (*BT* 378). What was once a lawyer's 'unambiguous statements with unquestionable conclusions' (*BT* 379) no longer makes sense; however it does 'approximate to a satisfactory representation of her confusion, of her distress, of her sense that the apparent irrefutable clarity of Nigel's solicitor's arguments is a nonsense in her world' (*BT* 379).

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These acts of destruction which are artful also serve as a metacommentary on the nature of fiction – if we accept Alex Clark's suggestion that Byatt is 'burning the entire edifice down' with the fires which destroy life and property at the conclusion of *A Whistling Woman*, because the ideas she has explored in her tetralogy have proliferated and become too weighty and vast for the framework of her fiction to bear.

A reader familiar with a number of Murdoch's works of fiction cannot but be struck by the frequent instances of the criminal destruction by one character of the precious and valuable possessions owned by another. Even more worthy of note is the fact that there are never any repercussions or consequences for those guilty of the destruction. An event

in a Byatt novel which seems to operate according to these same principles occurs during the course of the Battle on the campus of the University of North Yorkshire. The Vice-Chancellor confronts a group of militant students using the handles of their placards to smash the glass display cases of the university's museum exhibits. Nick Tewfell, a student leader who was trying to prevent the destruction, faces the Vice-Chancellor while the others run:

> He wished to hurt someone. He was not used to the feeling. He glared at the Vice-Chancellor, through one of the undamaged glass cases, which contained two pieces of Renaissance glass ... He ... raised his placard, and brought it down on the glass case, shattering it and the artefacts inside it. His opponent bent and picked up a handful of the finer fragments, closing his fingers on them. He held up his bleeding hand ... 'Go *away*.'
>
> Many years later, when Tewfell was a minister in Tony Blair's government, he would still wake at night and remember that moment ... the broken box, the splinters of glass, the dark-faced tall man with his bleeding fingers ... The odd thing was, that the Vice-Chancellor had never said anything to anyone about who had broken the glasses. (*WW* 372-3)

Byatt reflects upon the function of possessions within the structure of social life when, in *Still Life*, Stephanie Potter meditates upon the social importance of possessions during the course of another social ritual (Christmas Midnight Mass):

> She thought ... of *The Mill on the Floss*, that cruel social history of English religion, locating its true centre in the Lares and Penates, a dense structure of *things* which defined who you were and what your relation to others was, spotted damask, sprigged china, the graduated expense and display of bonnets kept to be worshipped rather than worn. (*SL* 42)

Stephanie's mother, Winifred, contemplates something similar, surrounded by wedding gifts in her small comfortless home, lonely within her marriage:

> She thought in an energetic, jarring way inside her stillness about her life, her home, her husband, her possessions.
>
> The possessions which particularly attracted her attention during these silent meals were small objects with very limited functions. She considered daily the butter dish ... the little butter-knife with its blunt blade, the teapot stand ... the cheese dish ...the egg cosies in red felt, the pickle fork, a miniature trident, the small silver things, egg cups, toast-rack, sugar tongs ... She had been pleased to acquire, to be given, most of these things, she remembered sourly. They made her life appear to correspond with some ordered, ideal form, some series of ceremonies to which the proper utensils lent authenticity and grace. (*SL* 146-7)

Murdoch often invests those of her characters who have self-knowledge and moral stature with fine possessions - as Byatt did the Vice-Chancellor, or at least his university, in the extract above. In her novel *An Accidental Man* (*AM*) Matthew Gibson Grey, a successful

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retired (and knighted) diplomat, who has embraced Buddhism, has an invaluable collection of Chinese porcelain and an expensive new car. His younger brother Austin (who empowers himself by enacting the role of the victim) causes an accident while driving the car in an irresponsible manner and when the chance presents itself he smashes the collection of china. His attempt to transfer power to himself is a partial success. James Arrowby, the Buddhist sage in *The Sea, The Sea*, has a vast and valuable collection of eastern writings and artefacts. His cousin Charles, who has always felt inferior to James, will break up and redistribute the collection when he inherits it after James's death.

In *The Philosopher's Pupil*, George McCaffrey, who is an angry and destructive self-styled victim in the same mould as Austin Gibson Grey, smashes the 'small but very precious collection of Roman glass' (*PP* 7) held by the museum in which he works. This is referred to as merely an 'incident' which, although it does eventually lead to his dismissal, does not cause an undue stir (*PP* 28). His attempt to destroy with a hammer his wife's precious collection of Japanese netsuke, 'treasured as tokens of her father's love' (*PP* 138), is thwarted when he cannot find them. His wife, despite his vicious treatment of her, exercises power over George. Her ability to anticipate and forestall his act of destruction is a measure of this power.

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Bradley Pearson, the morally bankrupt narrator of *The Black Prince*, surrounds himself with knicknacks in his overcrowded drawingroom decorated in the cluttered style of the Victorians. The collection is not valuable but this is in keeping with Murdoch's scheme, for Pearson is not a man whose insight or moral code the reader is invited to admire. A small Chinese bronze of a woman riding a water buffalo is to be a gift to Julian Baffin, to whom he is attracted. His miserable sister who threatens and attempts suicide claims it as her own and demands its return. Once it is back in her possession, she breaks it – so that it becomes yet another in a succession of things (such as her own security and marriage) which have been irretrievably lost by her. Will Boase, a minor character in the novel *Bruno's Dream*, has no fixed employment and is being kept at arm's length by Adelaide de Crecy, the woman he loves. When he perceives that Adelaide is unable to choose between himself and his twin brother, he smashes a collection of Meissen parakeets belonging to the elderly lady in whose home he has taken up residence (*BD* 43).

Adelaide herself will slam doors and smash a Wedgewood teacup (which does not belong to her) when she catches Will flirting with another woman (*BD* 123).

In these many instances of the destruction of valuable possessions, it is not the power of the owners to which attention is being drawn, but the powerlessness of the person engaged in the destructive act. The Murdoch novel *An Unofficial Rose* is intriguing because it is a child who uses possessions and their destruction to manipulate the people who inhabit her world. Miranda Peronett is the vigilant and malicious teenage daughter of a troubled marriage. Miranda has watched her parents and learned how to manipulate them. In order to divide and control she strikes where they are most vulnerable. She wishes to separate them from each other. She tells her father she would be 'relieved' if he left the family home, 'if it were all settled somehow' (*UR* 212). She assures him that her mother will also be relieved, 'will manage. She's awfully tough really. She hums all the time. I thought at first it was crying, but it was only humming' (*UR* 213) and she hands over a parcel containing his two soft toys, possessions which he has always used to designate his home, his presence (*UR* 215). She thus, by her will rather than his, puts in place an outward sign of his desertion of the family home. She knows that her mother will observe and interpret this sign. To secure her mother within the home (Ann Peronett is loved by her neighbour, the courtly soldier Felix) she pretends that her father might return, claiming that 'he seemed to think he might want to come back' (*UR* 293).

To strengthen her argument, Miranda invokes the authority of the church and advises her mother against running off with someone else because her father 'might come back crying for [her] and looking for [her] and [she] wouldn't be there' (*UR* 296). She fully intends at some future date to separate her father from his lover so that she is loved exclusively by each parent. Miranda has a collection of dolls which she tends carefully and moves and poses about the house. Miranda and her dolls are observed by her cousin Penn:

> She was sitting sideways on the stairs, her feet tucked under her, leaning her head against the bannisters, as if she had been waiting for him to come out, while two of her dolls with legs dangling sat on the stair below. The little cold group of strange beings regarded him. (*UR* 56)

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Miranda's doll collection and her treatment of the dolls is a picture of her capacity for cold calculation; of her watchfulness and of her determination to control the people in her orbit. Miranda has long and hopelessly loved Felix and she in turn is loved by her young Australian cousin Penn. She uses this love as a medium of manipulation and she secures from Penn the Nazi dagger which had passed into his possession; she thereafter humiliates him to ensure his abrupt departure from her home. Having manoeuvred people into the positions she desires, Miranda determines to 'pull everything down, for better or worse' (*UR* 309); she methodically destroys the collection of photographs and newspaper cuttings which was a testament to her hopeless love for Felix (*UR* 309). She has dismantled her social and personal world, and now her rows of dolls seem dead:

> The life with which she had endowed them was withdrawn. They were nothing now. ... They were rows of dead semblances, mocking her solitude. She held the doll dangling at arms' length; then she took hold of its head and body and pulled. The china head came off and she threw it on the floor and it broke. She took the next doll and hurled it by its legs against the wall. Gradually the room filled with sawdust and fragments of pink china. What she could not smash she slashed to pieces with the German dagger. Poussette was last. She looked into the inane familiar face, and tore Poussette's head and limbs off. Now they were all gone, the little princes. (*UR* 310)

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Her mother, while burning household rubbish, finds the documents which have been shredded by Miranda:

> With trembling hands she held them together, the jagged dismembered pieces of ghostly occasions, the vanished moments, the dear looks and smiles and caught familiar glances. The pieces of manuscript too were all in his writing. They seemed to be letters. Then, as she began clumsily to assemble them, she realised what letters they were. And with that she realised everything. (*UR* 337)

Ann recognises her daughter's hopeless love for Felix, but can do nothing. She is the adult, the parent, but her daughter has rendered her powerless. It is clear that as soon as people are joined in relationship, power springs into being. The massive destruction wrought by Miranda (both of her dolls and her collection of items related to Felix) is a physical act which parallels the emotional destruction which has taken place in her mother's life. Ann has been made impotent by her social and emotional conditioning. Abandoned by her husband, she feels unable in her turn to abandon the family home. Her chances of love and happiness with Felix are thus shattered. Destruction is clearly an effective tool by which power can be appropriated by those who feel vulnerable and powerless – like the child Miranda Peronett and the social failure Austin Gibson Grey.

In the chapter 'Fire and Flood' I explored the views of Murdoch and Byatt of the way in which the structures and procedures of religion still operate in the social and private lives of individuals despite the widespread loss of faith and the diminishing influence of the church. People appear to need the framework which ritual and ceremony create and the experience of forgiveness and salvation which religion provides. Next in this chapter entitled 'Art and Destruction' I have considered how Murdoch and Byatt preach salvation and the promotion of moral behaviour through the appreciation and practice of the creative process of art. The converse of art is destruction, the nature and purpose of which is explored in their fiction. It is a natural human urge which is kept under control by society's notion of accepted social behaviour – ritual and convention. Destruction is also a tool by which power is wielded by the individual, consciously or unconsciously. It seems appropriate next to consider how Murdoch and Byatt investigate power, its operation and manipulation by people and its effect upon them – and a natural extension of this is to consider also the power of the author within the text.

4 POWER AND ENCHANTMENT

4.1 Introduction

Biographers of Iris Murdoch have identified a number of men who exercised considerable power (sexual and intellectual) over Murdoch at different periods of her life, such as the philosopher Donald MacKinnon who was her tutor at Oxford (Conradi 2001: 123) and Elias Canetti who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981 (Conradi 2001: 346, 349). Her fascination for and personal involvement with such men appears to account for the powerful enchanter figures who often dominate her fiction. Byatt, in her turn, has created Frederica, the great questing figure central to her tetralogy. However, in addition to the representation of the power of a talented and charismatic individual, Murdoch and Byatt examine the nature of power itself rather than the people who wield it.

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Power resides within the very structure of our common social life. In Murdoch's novel *Bruno's Dream*, Adelaide De Crecy has a mental picture of herself which reveals her perception of her powerlessness within society:

> [T]here were married people who *knew* that they would be together for ever ... And there were people who did important work and had their names printed on official lists. And people with grand families and property. These people belonged to the structure of the world, to which Adelaide did not feel herself in any way attached. She felt like something very small which rattled around somewhere near the bottom and could quite easily fall out of a hole without anybody even noticing. (*BD* 124)

Murdoch demonstrates the narrative power of the author when she releases this character by the wave of the narrator's magic wand. Adelaide marries Will Boase 'in a mood of cornered desperation' (*BD* 262) and because she believes him to be her fate. However, the reader is informed, Adelaide did not dream of 'much later and sunnier days ... when her tall twins would be up at Oxford (non-identical, Benedick and Mercutio), when Will would be one of the most famous and popular actors in England, and a greatly transformed Adelaide would be Lady Boase' (*BD* 263). The names lifted from Shakespeare suggest that Murdoch is drawing on the fanciful and happy (and very far from 'real') endings of Shakespearean comedies. Into the mix, she adds some fairytale when the senile aunt with whom Will Boase has lived turns out to have been wealthy and well connected. 'Auntie' is first introduced as someone who is 'completely gaga' and who 'talks some sort of gibberish she thinks is Russian' (*BD* 21). 'She announced periodically that she was a Russian princess, was about to sell her jewellery for a fortune, and was engaged in writing her memoirs of the Czarist court' (*BD* 38). Auntie dies some time after the marriage of Will and Adelaide and her jewels are indeed worth a fortune and her memoirs, when translated, become a bestseller (*BD* 263).

Frederica Potter is conscious of the process by which social narratives (such as the vivid one Adelaide de Crecy developed) are structured and the power they have to change people's perceptions of themselves. When Frederica visits a solicitor to initiate divorce proceedings she is aware that she is constructing a legal narrative as she delivers 'a precise, dispassionate résumé of her marriage. She has thought out what to say and what not to say' (*BT* 277). Her legal narrative has power for it has changed people. Nigel, for example, has changed 'into the Husband, herself into the plaintiff' (*BT* 281). Emerging

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from the solicitor's office and aware of the new narrative she has constructed which is frightening because 'this narrative is like a fishnet, a trap. It redefines her and so changes her' (*BT* 282), Frederica overhears two women in huge knitted hats and fake fur coats complaining about their husbands.

> Their husbands are one indistinguishable He, and in the context of those husbands, these women are also one indivisible voice. This is the narrative of women talking, women watching children, talking. ... [S]he can recognise an archetypal, anonymous female narrative, and wonders suddenly how this talk affects the relations between the women and the men they return to. Does the speaking of mocking criticism turn Cyril and Fred and Louis and Sebastian into He He He He when they are seen again, does it strengthen opposition to Him or dissolve Him in laughter? (*BT* 281)

The effect of the divorce proceedings themselves, the cross-examination and the judge's pronouncement, affect Frederica's perception of herself:

> She feels she has been watching a film about a woman whom she rather despises, a silly woman who has been judged and found wanting. On top of this, she feels obscurely, the story of her life has been changed by the way it has been told today – both the true bits, and the velleities, and the flat lies, one part of a new fiction, a new story, in which she – who is she, does she exist? – is entangled as in a fine, voluminous net. (*BT* 519)

The judge has declared instances of Frederica's adultery to be 'amply witnessed and supported' (*BT* 518) and he declares the higher education of women to have 'encouraged skills and raised expectations which society as it is at present constituted is incapable of fulfilling or satisfying – skills and expectations perhaps incompatible with the fulfilled life of wife and mother' (*BT* 519). This hostile and critical assessment of her behaviour and situation causes Frederica to feel inadequate and disoriented:

> She thinks that the story that was told is the story of a woman unfit to have charge of a small boy, whom she does not love enough. She feels she has stepped into a world where the codes, the rules, are different: reading is wicked, is neglect, a movement of love or comfort to one man is simply defined as depriving another of his *rights*. She stands by herself and her knees knock. Words come into her head. 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' Who said that? (*BT* 520)

Dreaming is yet another narrative form which acts upon Frederica. Dreams are a form of story-telling in which the sleeper is simultaneously the central character, the author and the audience. Murdoch and Byatt both claim the fantasy territory of dreams for their realist fiction. In the dreams described by their narrators, 'the real' is spun into fantasy. Dreams related within their realist texts reflect the simultaneous operation of power in several spheres. The relation of the dream sequences reflects the narrative power of the

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omniscient authorial voice which has access even to the character's deepest subconscious mind. The detail of the dreams reveals the power of the unconscious for the dreams are a combination of the sleeper's prevalent hopes and fears and the symbolism and myth-making with which the sleeper has identified.

Murdoch's novel *The Flight from the Enchanter* (*FE*) relates the experiences of a number of refugees who have found sanctuary in Britain. The immigrant with the greatest measure of wordly and psychological power is Mischa Fox the wealthy newspaper magnate; such is his ability to manipulate and influence that he has enslaved a number of people and made them his creatures (*FE* 154). One of these 'creatures' is Nina the dressmaker. Ambitious, organised and a good business woman, she is aware that she could expand her business and set down 'the basis of a powerful enterprise' (*FE* 153). However she is robbed of power by Mischa Fox who controls her movements and will not allow her to act independently. One of the reasons she is powerless to act against him is her perception of herself as 'a soul without a nationality, a soul without a home' (*FE* 289). Her passport seems to her a death warrant:

> She turned the faded pages. The earlier ones carried the names of the frontiers of her childhood, frontiers which no longer existed in the world. ... She was without identity in a world where to be without identity is the first and most universal of crimes, the crime which, whatever else it may overlook, every State punishes. (*FE* 289)

Nina lives in a studio filled with racks of clothes which she is creating for her clients; she works by choice on an old-fashioned treadle sewing machine. When an account of Nina's dream is given it reflects all these elements of her existence. In the dream she is working an extremely long piece of cotton with a pattern she cannot discern through the 'rapacious mouth' and 'steel jaws' (*FE* 148) of the sewing machine. The increasing speed with which she operates the treadle with her feet becomes a race through a dark wood; the machine runs beside her and she periodically catches sight of its glistening eye.

The uneasiness and fear in which Nina passes her waking hours is reflected in her dream sense 'that something had gone wrong' (*FE* 148); the machine increases in speed and Nina senses that if she fails to guide the material through its steel jaws some terrible occurrence will take place (*FE* 149). The woods grow darker as she and the machine

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work with maniacally increasing speed. 'The darkness began now to be thick and full of impediments. Soft stuffs hanging down from trees touched Nina's face with silk and velvet touches, and clawed gently at her arms and shoulders' (*FE* 149). She turns to look at the sewing machine which she now regards as 'the beast beside her' and in turning she begins to fall; the cotton she has been sewing whirls itself around her limbs like a winding sheet and at last its pattern is revealed: a map of all the countries of the world. 'At the same moment the creature began to savage the material, tearing it with its jaws, and then it sprang on top of Nina. She could feel its heavy paws upon her chest' (*FE* 149).

All the elements of Nina's daily routine and her overwhelming concerns are portrayed in this dream. It reflects her sense that 'she could not oppose her will to that of Mischa in any direct combat, she could not propose even the mildest skirmish. Her only hope lay in flight' (*FE* 155). This suggests a reason for her desperate running and the presence of the beast with its snapping jaws which threatens her. The map of Australia which she keeps hidden in a bale of material accounts for the map of the world appearing as a pattern on the cotton she sews in her dream. Her sense of running through woods probably has its source in the layout of the studio in which she lives: whenever she walked through the room 'the materials brushed her tenderly with their characteristic touches, and she paused to plunge her face into each and inhale its familiar smell, like one in a garden who moves from flower to flower' (*FE* 156). Nina's flight will finally take place when, terrified by a summons from the Home Office after legislation rendering some immigrants' presence in England illegal, she packs a suitcase. However she believes failure and deportation to be inevitable and opts to cross the only remaining frontier, 'the frontier where no papers are asked for' (*FE* 290); she plunges to her death from the window of her room. In fact Nina was never in danger. Another character in conversation remarks that '[a]fter all, it's England. It's like the Duchess in *Alice*. No one really gets beheaded. Someone writes to *The Times* or their MP long before that happens' (*FE* 306). Nina's death is a senseless tragedy prefigured in her own dream in which a swathe of cotton depicting a map of the world becomes her winding sheet.

Nina's sense of identity was threatened both by the insecurity of her status as a refugee and her manipulation at the hands of Mischa Fox which left her powerless to determine

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the course of her own life. Frederica temporarily experiences these sensations as she battles with financial insecurity, hostile divorce proceedings, custody hearings and the narratives which these experiences produce in which she is cast as a person she does not like or recognise. This is why there are elements common to the dreams of both Nina and Frederica, such as powerful and threatening beasts, fearful running through menacing plant life, a plunging fall at the point of waking (which reflects the dreamer's sense of finally falling victim to the fear which pursues her) and even a similar reference to the crazy cry of 'Off with her head' (in Frederica's dream and in a comment made by an observer after Nina's suicide) from the topsy-turvey world of *Alice in Wonderland*.

In fact the adventures of Alice inform much of the dream which is described on the night of the day in which Nigel Reiver is granted a divorce from Frederica. She stands outside a high gate but is not tall enough to peer through its massive keyhole (*BT* 520). Beyond the gate is a garden with croquet hoops and rose trees. However this is not the garden of *Alice* but the grounds of Long Royston where Frederica played the young Elizabeth in Alexander Wedderburn's *Astraea*. The destructive nature of Frederica's divorce proceedings and the association of Frederica throughout the tetralogy with fires both literal and figurative might be reasons why the boughs which border this dream garden have 'beautiful ashy black leaves, and golden fruit covered with soot' (*BT* 521). Inside the garden upon the lawns pad great cats: 'Lions, tigers, black panthers, with gold eyes, with green eyes, with blood on their white fangs silent and pacing' (*BT* 521). These animals which the dreaming Frederica fears will devour her are an element of her own childhood myth-making when she fantasised about the power she one day imagined she would wield:

> 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 the 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. (*SL* 207)

The sense of powerlessness generated in Frederica by her stifling marriage and then the fearsome divorce proceedings is reflected in the danger which these animals now pose and in her own sense of being thin, 'two-dimensional, a paper woman' (*BT* 521) who can insert herself between the gates and float above the garden like a kite. The deepest source of her current fear is that she will lose custody of her young son Leo. He is present in her

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dream as a small stone lion. As she moves towards him her red and white paper dress disintegrates; this recalls the scene she acted in Alexander's play when the young princess's dress is shredded in fun by her ambitious and lecherous 'stepfather' Thomas Seymour. The dress-shredding was an exercise in power; however that power was to pass from Seymour who was tried for treason and lost his head. This image is succeeded by a scene prompted by the dreamer's reading of *Alice in Wonderland* for her fear and insecurity are next represented by large stone women who chase her howling 'Off with her head' (*BT* 521).

Frederica has struggled with identity on another front in her relationship with John Ottokar and his twin brother Paul. John is seeking to free himself from his intimate connection with his brother; however Paul wants whatever his brother appears to have and he stalks and intimidates Frederica. In a dream which depicts her sense of oppression created by this situation she is in bed with two hot stone men, one red and one white:

> They turn to her, they lay their heavy arms across her chest, crushing her. They mount half of her, a thigh one side, a thigh the other. They are heavy, they crush her, she cannot cry out. She wakes. She is afraid. She is rather pleased with the energy and simplicity of the dream-forms, as though they were a work of art she had deliberately constructed. (*BT* 434)

The crushing weight of stone and the stark contrast of red and white are thus repeated elements of Frederica's dreaming. Among other things the colours clearly represent the conflicting emotions of passion (her fierce bond with her son; the sexual success of her married relationship; the attraction between herself and John Ottokar) and self-preservation – her desire to preserve her power and sense of self by refusing to identify herself with another. The crushing power of the stone represents the opposition against which she must pit herself. In the moment before waking from the dream which occurs after her divorce becomes official, Frederica faces the possibility of failure in a dream fall: 'And everything falls, 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' (*BT* 521). However Frederica's story is one of the gradual empowerment of a clever and talented woman who triumphs in the fifties (her portrayal of the young virgin princess in *Astraea* is a triumph as are her A-level results and her Cambridge career) and in the sixties (in which she separates herself from her controlling husband, as a single mother establishes a home and financial security for her son and achieves prominence as a media

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personality) and the seventies (in which she conceives a second child and finds a partner who will encourage her to advance her career and who will not threaten her independence). This is quite the opposite of Nina's despairing plunge to an unnecessary death.

Murdoch and Byatt also examine the ways in which power is generated by human community. Murdoch, as noted in the opening paragraph of this chapter, frequently presents the reader with a compelling enchanter figure who exercises considerable influence over a social group of friends and relatives. He holds sway because the individuals who make up the court which surrounds him co-operate in treating the man (and it is always a man) with awe, admiration and respect. It seems that this influence is broken only by death. The suicide of Nina the dressmaker in *The Flight from the Enchanter* has just been discussed; she could imagine no other way of escaping the control of Mischa Fox and the British authorities. Carel Fischer, the godless priest in *The Time of the Angels*, believes that goodness is an impossible achievement for mankind. When the redeeming miracle he seeks (his black lover must love him even when she discovers that he is involved in an incestuous relationship with his daughter) is denied him, he commits suicide leaving his family in emotional disarray and homeless. In *The Philosopher's Pupil* John Robert Rozanov commits suicide but George McCaffrey (who tips the dying man into a bath of water) believes himself to have drowned the philosopher and he thereafter subsides into a passive and peaceful state. He now allows his wife to dominate him entirely for he has escaped the hold which his mind had allowed the philosopher to gain over him. The court which pursues Charles Arrowby to his coastal sanctuary in *The Sea, The Sea* breaks up after the accidental drowning of the young boy Titus and the near-death of Arrowby himself after he is pushed into the sea by Peregrine Arbelow who has not forgiven him for breaking up his marriage several years earlier. Arrowby is saved by the supernatural intervention of his Buddhist cousin James who, by his performance of this selfless deed, is thereafter apparently able to choose to die. In a similar way, the social circle which once so revered Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is broken up after the accidental drowning of Rupert Foster, humiliated in the eyes of family and friends by the practical joke perpetrated by King.

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Byatt, on the other hand, examines the shifts of power among rather more ordinary collections of people. She notes that within the associated group, power seems frequently to arise out of chance and circumstance with the result that it falls briefly to the lot of the individual and then passes once again beyond his or her grasp. Examples of the shifting balance of power in human relations include Daniel Orton's mother whose 'only intense pleasure in life had been flirtation' in 'the days of teasing and vacillation and power before marriage' (*VG* 52). Felicity Wells, an elderly spinster teacher, observes the passion felt by Daniel Orton for her friend Stephanie Potter. The two women work on pageant costumes and Daniel joins them for tea in the Vicarage room in which Miss Wells lodges. The reader is reminded that Daniel is fat and informed that he is burning (*VG* 112); when Stephanie stands close to him and offers him Jaffa cakes he rages: 'People like to offer – biscuits and things – as an exercise in power. The woman tempted me and I did eat' (*VG* 113). Aware of the sexual tension, Felicity Wells leaves the room and her re-entry is described as 'yet another example of stage-management and timing as the exercise of power' (*VG* 114). The ability to exercise power in these circumstances is fleeting but the opportunity to exercise it is seized by those for whom it occurs. However power does not reside solely in people. As custom and ritual have evolved over hundreds of years they have been invested by communities with power which is seldom questioned or investigated.

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4.2 The power of convention and ritual

Rules & Meanings is a collection of readings compiled by Professor Mary Douglas for teaching a course of anthropology. The readings 'draw out of the sociological theory of knowledge a certain thread. The theme goes back to Hegel and Marx; that reality is socially constructed' (Douglas 1973: 9). The readings have been divided into sections and the first is entitled 'Tacit Conventions'; Professor Douglas's introduction to this section exactly describes the quest of Murdoch and Byatt:

> How the moral order is known – how the inner experience of morality is related to the moral order without – this depends on hidden processes. Each person confronted with a system of ends and means (not necessarily a tidy and coherent system) seems to face the order of nature, objective and independent of human wishes. But the moral order and the knowledge which sustains it are created by social conventions. If their man-made origins were not hidden, they would be stripped of some of their authority. Therefore the conventions are not merely tacit, but extremely inaccessible to investigation. (Douglas 1973: 16)

Social convention and religious ritual are two of the processes by which human community is controlled. Murdoch employs metaphor to convey her characters' sense of being socially conditioned to act rightly. John Ducane complains to Mary Clothier in *The Nice and the Good* that he is required to make an important decision at a moment when he is feeling 'jumbled and immoral' (*NG* 270). Mary replies that he knows *how* to make the decision – because he has internalised 'the machinery of the decision'; she suggests he '[l]et the machinery work and keep it clear of the jumble' (*NG* 270). Ducane feels this to be the 'correct reply' and is calmed. Military imagery is employed to the same effect in *Nuns and Soldiers* (*NS*). Guy and Gertrude Openshaw are characterised by '[a] strong sense of duty, of the cast-iron necessity of decent behaviour' (*NS* 19). Guy Openshaw is of the opinion that 'vice is natural and virtue is not' (*NS* 347) and strives to quash the former and nurture the latter. Their close friend nicknamed 'the Count' is of the same mould and he has adopted Guy Openshaw's military imagery into his own conception of himself: 'The Count had always known that he was not a gentleman volunteer in the army of the moral law. If ever a soul was conscripted he was. He intensely feared disgrace, loss of honour, loss of integrity' (*NS* 42). This moral attitude dictates the Count's behaviour after the early death of Guy Openshaw. He loves Gertrude deeply but believes a declaration would be improper while she grieves.

No such idea of propriety and restraint operates in the life of Tim Reede. He has lived off and on for years with an equally wayward lover, Daisy Barrett. They live in penury for neither has a steady income and after discussing stealing as an option for survival 'agreed they were conditioned against it' (*NS* 72). Tim counts his cheerful temperament as 'his nearest approach to virtue' (*NS* 77); he also has an image of himself which has a military bent (like that of Guy Openshaw and the Count) but he is not disciplined and therefore he is instead 'a soldier of fortune, a raffish footloose fellow, a drinker, a wandering cadger' (*NS* 77). He and Daisy see themselves as 'soldiering on from one little festival to

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another' (*NS* 73, 84). Tim concludes that life holds no ordeal; instead 'one simply soldiered on becoming older and balder and less talented' (*NS* 126).

However, Tim has a quality which both Murdoch and Byatt celebrate in the characters of whose attitudes and behaviour they approve: he 'sees' the world around him clearly and appreciatively (*NS* 126). Tim also swims with vigour and delight (*NS* 151 and 156) which is a clear indication that, even though his mind is 'full of rubble' and 'mental debris' (*NS* 282) he will receive Murdoch's blessing. By a combination of lucky chance and spontaneity he wins the love of the grieving Gertrude Openshaw, only to lose her trust when Daisy's existence is revealed (*NS* 332). As the reader has learned to expect in Murdoch's novels, as discussed in the chapter 'Fire and Flood', Tim will be redeemed after an ordeal by water when he falls into the swiftly flowing waters of a canal which carry him into an underground tunnel. Miraculously, he emerges: 'The murderous waters of the canal and the blackness of the tunnel had beaten and baptised him back to life. Had he then returned to Gertrude purged and punished? ... He had come back because he was bruised and bleeding and half drowned' (*NS* 476). Restored to grace in his marriage with Gertrude, Tim indulges in prayerbook language as he determines: 'I will be faithful to her and serve her loyally and lovingly all the days of our lives. And I will never tell lies any more. Never. *Never*. Never? Well, hardly ever' (*NS* 479).

Another character of Murdoch's who is locked into the discipline of decency and proper behaviour is Ann Peronett, in the novel *An Unofficial Rose*. Even though she has been humiliated and deserted by her husband, she remains in the family home and cannot commit herself to another relationship. Byatt notes that as a reader she is 'terribly exasperated' by Ann Peronett:

> She's holding on to a series of precepts, Christian precepts about how to behave. 'You must not assert yourself', 'the assertion of your own desires, the taking of anything from anybody is always wrong, always wicked'. She is held by convention, which is not virtue, but which John Bayley says can stand in for virtue and can hold you to virtue because it's been constructed for that purpose. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 155)

Murdoch clearly believes that the twentieth-century understanding of good and evil is informed by the teaching of the great world religions. 'I want there to be religion on this planet,' she said in an interview with John Haffenden (Haffenden 1985: 207); religious

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thinking has seeped into convention where it lies hidden and still exerts power. The narrating voice of Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good* (which voice seems not quite omniscient, for on some matters it speculates) is able to describe the conception of good and evil held by John Ducane (a central character) of which Ducane himself is unaware:

> Ducane's particular sort of religious temperament, which needed the energy of virtue for everyday living, pictured the good as a single distant point of light. A similar and perhaps less accurate instinct led him to feel the evil in his life as also single, a continuous systematically related matrix. Almost a conspiracy. This was perhaps the remnant in his mind of his ancestors' vigorous and literal belief in the devil. (*NG* 182)

Byatt regards Murdoch's novel *An Unofficial Rose* as the novel of a moral philosopher 'who believes that you can and should discuss the meaning of good and evil':

> It is the novel of a moral philosopher, to put the argument briefly, who believes that our ideas of what is good and our ideas of what is evil in the society in which we live have always been provided by religion, and that we have now become a society which is no longer religious. Murdoch believes that we have not wholly understood that our ideas of what is good and what is evil have been formed by what our society has thought in the past, and has ceased to think. Our sense of Good depends upon the sanction of a God in whom we no longer believe. ... I think she believes that morality partly consists in intelligently seeing what is going on and attempting to understand it. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 174)

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Byatt points to this residual power of religion when she identifies the influence of the Bible in European literature:

> [T]he form of the European novel is related to the form of the biblical narrative. There are rules of conduct and laws of human feeling which have been assumed by the whole of the society in which we live to be derived from a good parent in heaven, even if one has no good parent on earth, or even if one loses one's good parent on earth. I think the form of the novel went on having a relation to the form of the Bible, long into the time when most of the people writing it had completely lost faith in the biblical narrative as history. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 42)

Writing about the composition of *Still Life*, Byatt explains that her project was 'both to demythologise my novel and to describe the demythologising of the Church in the novel' (Byatt 1991: 11). Daniel Orton, alone in his church, muses on its nature. He regards it as

> a house where no one lived, a building made to represent an idea of the nature of things, a place where certain phrases, certain prayers, certain confessions of faith, had been repeated and repeated over the centuries, a building where community had been more alive to its common life than to the individual need of men and women. It was heavy and stuffy and confined: it represented order and authority. (*SL* 139)

Despite widespread loss of faith, Murdoch's novels reflect the fact that belief in God (and the devil) still has power in the twentieth century. Central to Murdoch's novel *Henry and Cato* (*HC*) is the conversion (and thereafter the loss of faith) of Cato Forbes:

> Suddenly ... he experienced God. ... He entered quite quietly into a sort of white joy, as if he had not only emerged from the cave, but was looking at the Sun and finding that it was easy to look at, and that all was white and pure and not dazzling, not extreme, but gentle and complete ... And what was so strange too was that this new grasp of being came to him quite clearly identified as an experience of the Trinity. ... *How* the Trinity was One, and how this Oneness was the law of all being, the law of nature, the electrical universal expression of love, he now *saw* with the opened eyes of the soul, and *resting* as he had never rested before he let this indubitable vision gather him into its silent power. (*HC* 26-7)

Cato is ordained as a Roman Catholic priest and he settles into a life living and working with the poor in Paddington. However a period of spiritual dullness sets in. This cannot be shaken off and then 'Cato woke up one morning with the absolute conviction that he had been mistaken and that there was no God' (*HC* 34). The 'silent power' (*HC* 27) of his conversion experience is no more.

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Cato is no longer able to acknowledge the divine power of God and he abandons the priesthood. Beautiful Joe, the young delinquent whom Cato longed to save and with whom he was in love, is no longer enchanted by the 'power' he discerned in Cato the priest:

> 'I thought you'd still be a priest, and that would make it all right. You've no idea how bloody stupid you look in those clothes. All the – all the sort of – magic's gone – what made me care – Now you're just a queer in a cord coat. You're the sort of person I spit on.' (*HC* 191-192)

The power of the priesthood was for Beautiful Joe 'a sort of magic'. Beautiful Joe kidnaps both Cato and his sister Colette, whom he tries to rape. Cato kills Beautiful Joe in order to protect his sister and thereafter moves about in a self-imposed state of hell. In one of their animated discussions, theology is dismissed by Cato and his mentor Brendan Craddock as 'a magic spell, made up', 'the old "game" ' (*HC* 337). However, it is not only the power of religion (and god/s and death) which interests Murdoch and Byatt, but power in all its manifestations. Murdoch's novel *An Accidental Man* appears to proclaim by its title that it will investigate the role of chance and accident in human affairs. Instead the novel examines the powerful influence of social conditioning on the choices and decisions people make.

A superficial reading of the novel might support the notion that it is contingency, rather than convention, which the author intends to explore. Contingency intrudes upon the action in the example of Matthew Gibson Grey, who is haunted by the memory of an incident he witnessed on a diplomatic posting: 'an accidental passerby' (*AM* 122) impulsively joined a demonstration in Red Square and was almost immediately arrested and removed to a labour camp or 'hospital' – a 'pointless' waste of a life (*AM* 261). In a similar way, his nephew Garth Gibson Grey is troubled by his reaction (which he identifies as a lack of guilt) to a chance incident on a street in New York. In the early morning hours Garth witnesses two men stabbing a 'Negro' to death beneath a street light. The 'Negro' calls to Garth for help; Garth watches and then walks on (*AM* 108). Charlotte Ledgard's life is dramatically altered by contingent circumstance when she is disinherited by the mother for whom she has cared sacrificially for years. As Alison Ledgard lies dying she might be repenting of her cruelty, for she repeatedly speaks a word which her family interpret variously as 'trees' (*AM* 42) or 'priest' (*AM* 45) or 'lease' or 'peace' (*AM* 50). Finally the family realises she is speaking the name of the solicitor, 'Treece':

> 'I'll telephone him at once,' said Charlotte. ... 'Don't worry, Mother. I'll get Treece. He'll come at once. I'm sure he will. Don't you worry, dear.'
>
> The great staring eye closed and tears suddenly washed down Alison's cheek. (*AM* 52)

Having succeeded in conveying her will to her family, Alison Ledgard dies before her unkindness can be redeemed; she leaves her daughter in a position of humiliating dependence. Charlotte will attempt suicide and regain consciousness in a ward where she will encounter another character who has attempted to take refuge in suicide: Mitzi Ricardo. Mitzi's life as a successful and wealthy athlete is ruined when she destroys her ankle after attempting to leap over a net; her path 'led through a million entwining contingencies to that hideous tennis court moment' (*AM* 35). Mitzi and Charlotte will settle into an uneasy union without the promise of happiness: two lives ruined by contingency.

However it is not contingency alone which is the focus of this novel's investigation of human life and behaviour. *An Accidental Man* also explores those power structures

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which ensure that many of our apparently spontaneous decisions and actions are determined not by chance or by independent thought processes but as a result of both our instinct for self-preservation and by our social conditioning – which operates upon us in various forms such as custom, conformity, influence and guilt. It seems to me that the actions and attitudes of Austin Gibson Grey are motivated by the instinct for self-preservation, rather than by the occurrence of accidental events. I shall argue that Austin is the author of his own misfortunes and thus *not* the accidental man of the title. However, Austin is innately cunning and he markets himself as a victim, an 'accidental man':

> Mavis had been by now thoroughly initiated into Austin's view of himself as a victim. 'I am an accidental man,' Austin had once said to her. 'What do you mean, Austin? Aren't we all accidental? Isn't conception accidental?' 'With me it's gone on and on.' 'We are all like you.' Yet he has been unlucky she thought. (*AM* 412)

All the 'accidents' in Austin's life have their source in the power struggle between Austin and his older brother Matthew; this power struggle generates much of the action of the novel. Austin remembers his early childhood as having had 'the clarity of art' (*AM* 25). This was before an incident in which he climbed down a steep and stony embankment to swim in a river on a hot day, in order to taunt his fat older brother who did not have the agility to manage the descent. However, he found it difficult to climb out of the gully and brought down upon himself a 'rivulet of stone' (*AM* 25) which he is convinced Matthew deliberately occasioned. He has in consequence developed an hysterical condition: a stiff right hand which is useless. Since this moment he has regarded himself as a 'Looking-glass man' (*AM* 22) for he had 'fallen through the looking-glass and could never get back' (*AM* 25).

The consequences of the minor incident are life-long and destructive. Overseas in the diplomatic service, 'Matthew knew that if he had always carried Austin within him as a poisonous and unassailable alien body, the Matthew which Austin carried must be that much greater and more venomous' (*AM* 123). Austin interprets Matthew's every action as hostile and destructive to himself. He believes, for example, that Matthew 'stole' his wives (*AM* 339). Offered an opportunity to drive Matthew's car (a conciliatory gesture on Matthew's part) he responds aggressively by driving dangerously and in consequence

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he kills a young girl. The horror of this chance accident is matched, in a further instance of Murdoch's pattern-making, by the report of the accidental death of the young Henrietta Sayce (*AM* 400) whose presence in the novel is only ever encountered in the conversation of her family's friends. Blackmailed by the stepfather of the girl he killed, Austin panics and attacks the man – and this too he sets to Matthew's account ('Matthew had done for him again' (*AM* 189)).

The battle for power between Matthew and Austin is fought with greatest destructive effect in another arena marked by power struggles: relationships with the opposite sex. Austin elevates their petty rivalry by casting it into the mould of fairytale and daring deed:

> 'There were these two brothers and they lived on top of a high mountain and down at the bottom … there was a deep blue lake and at the bottom of the lake there lived a lady – … And this lady was the most beautiful and desirable thing in the whole world and one day the younger brother said to the elder brother, Brother, let us go down and get this lady, let us appropriate this lady, and the elder brother said, One lady between two is no good, I resign my part in the lady … Then when he [the younger brother] was climbing up the mountain with the lady the elder brother looked down and saw and he couldn't bear it and he took a great boulder and rolled it down the hill and killed the younger brother – ' (*AM* 68)

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The possibility that Matthew appropriated Austin's first wife is raised (*AM* 337). Austin's second wife, Dorina, is disturbed and estranged from Austin, who is fiercely possessive and tries to control access to her. When Dorina turns up on Matthew's doorstep (expecting to find Charlotte in the house), Matthew has gained the power to hurt Austin. He takes Dorina in his arms in order to prevent an attack of hysterics: 'He held her as he might have held a magic talisman or a sacred relic or the Grail itself' (*AM* 279). Matthew has a sizeable collection of valuable Chinese porcelain which is an outward and visible sign of his wealth and considerable social standing (both of which Austin lacks). Having Dorina temporarily under his control and influence '[h]e felt excited, surprised, alert and satisfied, as if he had just added another marvellously beautiful object to his collection' (*AM* 283). Dorina is aware that once Austin knows of her interlude with Matthew, emotional 'smash or chaos' will ensue (*AM* 350). This in fact happens quite literally; once Austin establishes that his second wife's disappearance was into Matthew's care, he smashes Matthew's priceless collection of Chinese porcelain:

> [Matthew] leaned down and picked up a handful of small fragments. Blue and white Ming this, *famille verte*, amber yellow Tang, pallid creamy Sung, celadon Sung, ash-grey Sung. ... The glass display cases were empty. Everything had been smashed, every single thing. (*AM* 334)

So momentous is the discussion between the two brothers about their mutually destructive relationship, that barely a word is exchanged about the destruction which lies at their feet. On his way out, Austin pauses to ask 'Was this stuff insured, by the way?' and on hearing that it was not responds: 'Too bad. Well, goodnight' (*AM* 340).

Austin's first wife Betty, a strong swimmer, drowned in a lock. Whether it was accident, suicide or murder is never resolved by the characters; her death seems related to the emotional turmoil which exists between Matthew and Austin. Dorina follows Betty to a watery death. Terrified by the consequences of her three-day stay with Matthew she hides out in a London hotel; one morning she sees a compassionate friend, Ludwig Leferrier, in the street and regards this a sign of salvation, except that he passes her by. In despair she returns to her hotel and steps into a hot bath; traffic vibrations tip a bar-heater into the bath. 'The surging water' (*AM* 352) closes over her head and she is dead.

Austin turns to Dorina's sister Mavis for comfort. Mavis is Matthew's lover: 'Had Austin, with unerring instinct, made the one move which would render his brother powerless?' (*AM* 419). Austin effectively cuts Mavis off from Matthew:

> Austin had simply stayed with Mavis too long and had contaminated her. ... With a strange precision Austin had taken his revenge for the pollution of Dorina. Of course Austin had not really done this 'on purpose'. It had all been, like so many other things in the story, accidental. But it was too beautiful not to have been also the product of instinct. (*AM* 420)

Matthew here identifies another force (quite separate from contingency) which motivates human action and sets events in motion: an instinctive reaction arising from a sense of thwarted ownership and a desire for revenge. These powerful libidinal drives are unexamined and thus unacknowledged. If Austin were able to confront the emotions and experiences which he represses he might understand his actions; instead he luxuriates in his misery and blames and lashes out at others. Since people repress rather than examine unacceptable emotions, the actions to which these sublimated feelings give rise are every bit as destructive as the blind and random events of contingency. The destruction of Matthew's precious porcelain collection and the destruction of his relationship with

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Mavis appear to restore Austin's peace of mind; at the party which concludes the novel, guests note that he has regained the use of his right hand, in which he now holds a wine glass. Through the destruction of the emotional well-being and the physical possessions of his brother he has (at least temporarily) found wholeness.

It is not immediately clear whether the attitude, conscience and decisions of Ludwig Leferrier illustrate the operation of contingency or of those power structures set in place by social conditioning. Ludwig has a right to British citizenship by an 'accident' of birth (*AM* 71). He has an English fianceé who shortly after their engagement unexpectedly inherits her grandmother's fortune so that Ludwig finds that he is 'quite accidentally going to marry a rich girl' (*AM* 115). He takes up a coveted position at Oxford University. These are all strong arguments to avoid being drafted into the army of the United States of America to fight a war of which he cannot approve. He is resolved to resist his parents' steady and desperate written pleas to co-operate with the United States' government in order not to forfeit his hard-won rights in that country.

Despite his unwavering and carefully reasoned defence of his position, Ludwig is haunted by his own history: 'He felt ashamed of being an Aryan German and yet also ashamed of having ceased to be one' (*AM* 13); travelling in Europe after the Second World War '[h]e remained outside it all [the whole passion of recent history] and yet burdened by it as if by something heavy for ever trailing behind him' (*AM* 14). He is a loving and dutiful son, conscious that his stance is causing his parents to suffer, for '[i]t had been the achievement of their lives to make him what they could never be, genuinely American' (*AM* 11). It is clear that he has learned from his parents to be a dutiful citizen:

> He did not feel guilty only because he was disappointing his parents. He felt guilty exactly as they did because he was disappointing the USA, because he was breaking the law, because he had decided not to return, because he feared death and would not be a soldier, because he was behaving as cowards and traitors behave. (*AM* 14)

Ludwig and his parents have been conditioned by social structures to co-operate and to obey authority. This behaviour accounts for Ludwig's desire to satisfy and please his parents. He is not unaware of this conditioning. 'Has your father ever influenced you?' he is asked. 'No,' he answers '- or only so far as he is myself' (*AM* 415). In the course of endlessly debating the matter with Garth Gibson Grey (whom he met at Harvard where

Garth was studying philosophy) he declares 'It matters whether I act rightly or not' (*AM* 109) to which Garth replies 'Not really ... You and I are conditioned anyway to do what's normally thought of as right. Any of the acts you are capable of contemplating will be "right" ' (*AM* 109).

At the point at which his parents capitulate and accept Ludwig's decision to settle in England and to forfeit the rewards and privileges of American wealth and democracy, a contingent moment intervenes and Ludwig abandons his stance. He deserts his wealthy fianceé, sacrifices the coveted job and returns to the United States where he must submit himself to imprisonment (*AM* 426). It is not social conditioning and parental influence which ultimately determine his actions and decisions. Instead it is the chance encounter (referred to above) on a London street (Murdoch's pattern-making again) with Austin Gibson Grey's disturbed wife Dorina.

> He half paused, then walked on. .... His own confusion and misery were so great that he felt unable to cope with Dorina, he felt no spring of interest in her, he almost felt resentment at seeing her now. To walk by was an expression of his own despair. (*AM* 346)

However it must of course be acknowledged that the sense of guilt which he bears for failing to respond to Dorina has its source in that parental influence and social conditioning which have driven his actions to date in the novel. On hearing of Dorina's death, Ludwig's established pattern of life immediately breaks down:

> He had to take flight into loneliness. A sense of absolute confusion about the deep bases of his life had rendered him almost mad with misery. ... He did not think that Dorina had done it on purpose. The thing was pure chance and yet weighted with a significance of horror which he could not bear to contemplate. That he had actually seen Dorina on the day that she died and had passed her by was so nightmarish ... It was something to brood upon for ever ... So he had run ... And now everything seemed at stake, everything in doubt, every issue once more wide open. (*AM* 361)

A contingent moment, a meeting on a street, overturns Ludwig's life – because he is morally conscientious, as he has been conditioned to be. The reader has been presented with two other equally momentary chance encounters on public streets (described on page 120) in the lives of Matthew and of Garth Gibson Grey. These brief moments have haunted Matthew and Garth but have not altered the course of their lives. Ludwig's life is shattered. It seems to me that it is Ludwig Leferrier who is the accidental man of the novel's title, rather than the self-proclaimed victim Austin Gibson Grey. (' "I am an

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accidental man," Austin had once said' (*AM* 412).) Contingency is seen to be a force able to act on people's lives with immense power and appalling consequences.

In Austin Gibson Grey, Murdoch presents us with an exception to normal attitudes and behaviour. He lives 'simply by egoism':

> Austin, with nothing particular to boast of, never seemed to doubt his own absolute importance. Just because he was himself the world owed him everything, and even though the world paid him very little, he remained a sturdy and vociferous creditor. Misery could not crush Austin. Simply being Austin enabled him to carry on. (*AM* 37)

Almost a decade later, Murdoch creates another such character who rules the life of his family by means of his own distorted sense of having been denied or deprived by the world. This is George McCaffrey in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. He will also instinctively act in a violent and destructive manner upon those who wield power in his life and, in spite of his anti-social behaviour, he will achieve a sense of peace and well-being.

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4.3 The enchantment of power

Where people form community, power exists. Frederica, for example, as a schoolgirl, was conscious of the power of the school system while she was trapped within it:

> Lists are a form of power. Frederica spent much of her school-time studying the forms of the exercise of power. Control of pace of feet, of numbers of girls abreast, of socks, knickers, stockings, size and colour of gingham checks. Inclusion, exclusion, prominence, failure, were regulated and embodied in public lists. (*VG* 70)

The operation of power within the family structure fascinates both authors. For example, Murdoch's novel *Henry and Cato* documents the shifting balance of power between mother and son. Gertrude Marshalson, a regal widow living upon an estate which she had loved 'before she loved her husband' (*HC* 17), loses her much-loved blonde and athletic older son Alexander. Now the estate is the inheritance of small dark Henry: '[S]he had not anticipated how deep the instinct would go, or how violent it would be, to

grieve, so that she could have wailed and cried, that Henry was alive while Sandy was dead' (*HC* 60). Although this grief is not expressed in words, it is communicated. Henry and his mother talk, but it is 'maimed' (*HC* 73) talking. The mother asks about the son's life in America but 'scarcely listened' to his answers or he to her questions:

> What she was saying was: I need you. I want to know you. I can be patient, you'll see. And he was saying: Why do you pretend to be interested now? You never wanted to know before about what I was doing or who I was ... It's too late now. To which she replied: it isn't too late, it isn't, it isn't. (*HC* 73)

Power has passed from mother to son, and the son sets about destroying his mother's life: paintings and tapestries are dispatched to the auctioneers and the house and land are put on the market. He insists that his actions are in response to 'a test or a challenge' and are not a consequence of 'madness – or – I don't know – revenge – ' (*HC* 158).

John Forbes, a widower, lives on land which adjoins that of the Marshalsons, and in this family too the reader notes how power is exercised. John Forbes is taken aback when his daughter informs him that he frightened his son into the church:

> '[Y]ou made him run away, he had to escape to somewhere, he was frightened of you. I'm frightened of you. You always ridiculed us when we were young. And you raise your voice so. You mustn't talk to people like that, even if they are your children. You don't know how strong you are, how you can hurt.' (*HC* 89)

This outburst is echoed in the Byatt novel published two years after *Henry and Cato*. The effect of a forceful parent on his children is documented in *The Virgin in the Garden*. Outraged to hear that his Cambridge-educated daughter intends to marry the local curate Bill Potter exclaims indignantly: 'You'll become a cow. A cow and a slave and a tweedy tea-pourer. You can't' (*VG* 198). Shortly after this he cries out: 'I am at fault. I am at fault, I must be. I have failed somewhere. All my children lack guts, they lack guts and persistence. They creep and sidle away from the real challenges' to which his daughter Frederica replies:

> 'You are at fault,' said Frederica. 'You are at fault because you do what you're 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. I should think she's marrying the curate just to spite you, just to shut up your voice grinding on and on so sure what's right and good ...' (*VG* 198)

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Marriage is of course another relationship, brought into existence by custom and bolstered by law, in which power operates and shifts. Murdoch's second novel, *The Bell*, begins with Dora Greenfield's decision to return to her husband:

> She was returning, and deliberately, into the power of someone whose conceptions of her life excluded or condemned her deepest urges ... That was marriage, thought Dora: to be enclosed in the aims of another. That she had any power over Paul never occurred to her. (*B* 17-18)

In *Henry and Cato* Henry Marshalson decides to marry Stephanie Whitehouse, the woman he believes to have been his older brother's mistress; she is to be powerless in this partnership. Complaint is her only weapon against Henry's will and his response is crude: 'Stop whining, Stephanie, or I'll hit you. We've come together and it's fate, you were made for my situation and my problem. I asked the world a question and you were the answer' (*HC* 207). He then quite deliberately removes a driving glove with which 'he hit her across the face' (*HC* 208). He is entirely pragmatic: 'You don't have to have me, you can clear off. But if you marry me, I'm the boss and we do what I want, OK?' (*HC* 208). Stephanie appears to choose to accept his conditions.

Aside from relationships, whether they are made by birth, by choice, by chance or by law, power resides in personality. Many Murdoch novels present readers with one particularly forceful and manipulative character[14] who dominates and overawes the others – examples from novels discussed in the first chapter are Julius King (*A Fairly Honourable Defeat*), Hilary Burde (*A Word Child*), Charles Arrowby (*The Sea, The Sea*) and John Robert Rozanov (*The Philosopher's Pupil*). Byatt chose a 'guiding presence' which exuded power for each of the first two novels of her tetralogy: Elizabeth I for *The Virgin in the Garden* and Vincent Van Gogh for *Still Life*. She explains this in conversation with Iris Murdoch in the filmed discussion in the *Writers in Conversation* series made in 1983. She describes both these famous and real persons as 'rather fierce', 'terribly solitary', 'unmarried and unmarriageable'; she feels that they each 'carry difficult areas of prickly power with them'. In *The Virgin in the Garden* the reader first meets Frederica Potter; in this first novel she is given weight and importance by her association with England's virgin queen. In Frederica Potter, Byatt has created a character who wields power and occupies centre stage in the manner of certain of Murdoch's characters. Matthew Crowe tells Frederica that she has presence, drive and power. As Crowe is a public figure and

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extremely wealthy, Frederica retorts that it is he who has power. 'Not in the way you have, my dear,' he replies. 'Yours is in the blood' (*VG* 217).

4.3.1 Frederica presented as Elizabeth I

That Byatt casts Frederica as a modern and muted version of Elizabeth Tudor, Virgo-Astraea, invests her with increased interest and fascination; Frederica plays the part of the young princess Elizabeth in the play written by Alexander Wedderburn and produced by Matthew Crowe as part of the festivites which mark the coronation of Elizabeth II. However Frederica is related to Elizabeth Tudor in myriads of more subtle ways such as colouring, temperament, character and force. Frederica is neither a beauty nor an actress, despite her confident assumption 'that she could walk into rehearsals and assert her natural superiority as an actress, a queen' (*VG* 235). Instead she secured the part because she was type-cast. Her father chooses to underline the connection between his daughter and the Tudor princess at a party he arranges to celebrate her outstanding A-level results. His congratulatory speech includes quotations from Roger Ascham's praises of the learning of the young Princess Elizabeth.

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Adolescent Frederica is confident of 'the glories of her mind and body' (*VG* 47) and painfully aware that it was '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' (*VG* 48). To any number of the characters in the first two novels of the tetralogy, Frederica is a source of horror and embarrassment. For example we are told that she

> had no idea how horrible she was to have in any drama class, or play-reading. It was impossible for a teacher to distribute parts without becoming aware of Frederica's desperate concentration, fingers, toes, eyes, mouth, strained with eagerness. If she was cast, she read aloud with throbbing *brio*, embarrassing other girls. (*VG* 71)

Schoolgirl Frederica is fiercely in love with her father's colleague, Alexander Wedderburn. Theirs will be a life-long friendship. In the prologue to *Still Life* set in 1980 (almost three decades after the time in which the novel takes place and ten years

after the end of the final novel of the tetralogy which is set in January 1970), Alexander muses: 'She had been a nuisance, a threat, a torment and was now a friend' (*SL* 1). In 1980 he waits to meet her at the Royal Academy of Arts and 'thought with warmth of her certain approach' (*SL* 1).

In 1953 Alexander's feelings are quite different as, through his window, he watches Frederica walk towards his rooms. The narrating voice describes the approaching girl but as the point of view is clearly Alexander's, the tenor of the observations reflects his distaste. He notes that 'she was done out like a ballet dancer in mufti ... with her hair scraped into a knob, and her sharp nose up, snuffing the air' (*VG* 96); having to deal with her felt 'like trying to ignore a boa-constrictor with a crush on you' (*VG* 97). However, it is clear that the narrator shares such views, for example in the description of Frederica's 'stick-like and knobby limbs' (*VG* 47) and her 'foxy hauteur' which 'invested her glances with a lewd, hinting quality which was not intentional' (*VG* 117). Frederica herself is often aware of her own unprepossessing figure. In *Still Life* she approaches a beach party in the south of France made up largely of people who had been involved in the production of Alexander's play. Her 'quick mind's eye' can see the self she presents:

> A figure broomstick-thin against the dune, splay-footed in sensible sandals, thin-shouldered in the provincial flowered sundress ... [t]he long red tresses ... had in the hot sun of Provence slowly crimped, frizzled and broken off lustreless. They stood out now in a fat triangular fan, with a ginger haze of split ends. Her skin ... had passed beyond the russet and the Negro, back to a strange peeled patchwork, toast-cinder brown, radish-crimson, freckled bone and the translucent grey of flaking skin still shifting. At the end of the play she had declared to Crowe her ambition to be an actress. Crowe had told her to get a new face. This glaring thin skull, striped and quilted with bites, was hardly an improvement. (*SL* 74-5)

In the last two novels of the tetralogy the attitude of narrator and characters towards Frederica has changed completely. She is described by the narrator in heroic terms. She is, for example, compared to Britannia and Britomart (*BT* 392) and when her estranged husband gives her a charcoal grey Courrèges dress 'woven with red silk braid and embroidery' we are told that this 'brings out the fire in her hair and the gold in her dusting of freckles' (*BT* 239). She puts it on and '[s]he 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). During the course of both *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* it is apparent that Frederica is widely admired

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and fiercely loved. Also significant, is that Frederica now likes herself too. Watching playbacks of an interview for a television series, 'Frederica gazed at her own face. What she liked in it, she saw ... was that it was a woman's face, not a girl's. Alert, watchful, grown up. Attractive, even to its owner. She was not used to this' (*WW* 47). It seems that this change in attitude of the novels' narrator and characters and Frederica herself is wrought by her empowerment achieved by the exercise and recognition of her abilities.

All four novels in Byatt's tetralogy examine the intellectual and emotional growth and development of Frederica. Central to this process is the concept which she develops and names 'Laminations'. This represents her conscious decision to 'let ... facts and things lie alongside each other like laminations, not like growing cells' (*VG* 209). This process of 'seeing things either separate or linked', feels to Frederica 'like an exercise of power, which she had been most ambiguously, by her father, taught to eschew theoretically and pursue in practice' (*VG* 210). Years later, as she alternately works on a lecture and tries to make notes for her lawyer to use in her divorce proceedings, she recalls the development of her concept of laminations:

> She remembers a day, long ago ... when a word hit her as a description of a possible way of survival. Laminations. She had been young, and greedy, and acting Princess Elizabeth, the Virgin in Alexander's play, who had had the wit to stay separate, to declare, 'I will not bleed', to hang on to her autonomy. And she, Frederica, had had a vision of being able to be all the things she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously separate, *laminated*, like geological strata, not seeping and flowing into each other like organic cells boiling to join and divide and join in a seething Oneness. Things were best cool, and clear, and fragmented, if fragmented was what they were.
>
> 'Only connect,' the 'new paradisal unit' of 'Oneness', these were myths of desire, the desire and pursuit of the Whole.
>
> And if one accepts fragments, layers, tesserae of mosaics, particles.
>
> There is an art form in that, too. Things juxtaposed but divided, not yearning for fusion. (*BT* 312)

Frederica is bony, awkward, greedy, red-haired, flaming, extremely clever and passionate. All these characteristics she shares with Elizabeth Tudor, whose presence pervades the novel. We first encounter the Virgin Queen in the National Portrait Gallery in which the prologue of *The Virgin in the Garden* is set. In the 1985 ICA video *Writers*

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in Conversation, Byatt is complimented by Murdoch on the technical expertise evident in her use of prologues[15] set several years ahead of the time of the action of her novels. Byatt responds by relating how, once she had decided to use Elizabeth I as the central image of *The Virgin in the Garden*, she was by 'a wonderful happenstance/accident' invited to the National Portrait Gallery by Antonia Fraser to hear Flora Robson present verbal portraits of Elizabeth I. This became the prologue to the novel – in which Byatt's game-playing is again evident, for we are told that while waiting for Frederica to arrive 'Alexander amused himself by counting powerful women' (*VG* 12) in the crowd of people taking their seats in the long gallery. He has counted to five by the time he identifies Lady Antonia Fraser. The next woman noted by Alexander is undoubtedly powerful, but she is not one whom he is in a position to identify for it is Byatt[16] herself, I presume, for Lady Antonia Fraser is 'accompanied by a dumpy woman in a raincoat' (*VG* 12).

The next candidate on Alexander's list, and certainly a powerful one, is Frederica; the last woman to be added to the tally is Queen Elizabeth I herself, as Alexander turns his attention to the Darnley portrait, his favourite. In this portrait the queen stands, 'a clear powerful image … chalky, bleak, bony … the black eyes under heavy brows knowing and distant' (*VG* 13). Thereafter she will be represented to us again in other paintings, in plaster relief and recorded speeches – the Tudor public relations and marketing machine still doing its work centuries on. Frederica comes face to face with the Queen on a guided tour of the interiors of Long Royston Hall. An icon over the entrance to the Hall, Elizabeth is dressed in a map of England:

> [T]he figure … was heavy and exuberant, castle-crowned. The left hand held a naked sword: the scales of justice depended from the right; the cornucopia rose powerful and huge, a stiff curving horn, a river of plenty, between the monumental knees, spilling to its earth and along the architrave a cascade of plaster flowers and fruit, ears of corn and gilded apples. (*VG* 139)

Matthew Crowe has undertaken to show Frederica his beautiful home and teach her to see detail. Together they gaze upon the plaster icon of Elizabeth:

> Frederica … observed that the queen seemed to be squatting.
>
> 'Indeed she does. That's partly an effect of foreshortening. But mostly because her garment is the map of England which necessitates some squashing and extending of the body. You see Land's

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> End fluttering beyond her left knee. And Scotland knotted over her left shoulder ... This is Elizabeth as Virgo-Astraea. Astraea, last of the immortals, goddess of Justice, ascended to heaven in the iron age and became conflated with the zodiacal Virgo. She acquired Libra's scales, but also Virgo's harvest-attributes, since Virgo and Libra are the signs of harvest.'
>
> 'I know. I was born under Virgo. August 24 th, St Bartholomew.'
>
> 'An unexpected conjunction of portents. ... She was born under Virgo, Elizabeth.' (*VG* 139)

This plaster propaganda reveals some of the tactics by which Elizabeth sought to extend her authority, as do discussions among the novel's characters of 'the iconography of the idolisation of Elizabeth ... [who] had acquired many of the traditional attributes of the Queen of Heaven. Rosa Mundi, tower of ivory. *Ego flos campi*' (*VG* 102). Alexander remembers how he 'worked on Elizabeth's metaphors, winding into her verse the iconography of her cult, the phoenix, the rose, the ermine, the Golden Age, the harvest-queen, Virgo-Astraea, virgin patroness of justice and *foison*' (*VG* 103). By these means the reader's attention is drawn to Elizabeth's political skills, ability and power. The staging of the pageant is an imaginative visual recreation of her rule and imposing person. Elizabeth's power and influence are indisputable.

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4.3.2 Murdoch and Byatt present as Prospero

In addition to a consideration of how people practise upon each other, whether the power they wield be fleeting or established, Murdoch and Byatt also draw attention to the author's role as creator and manipulator. In the Shakespeare play *The Tempest*, the character Prospero controlled his environment because he controlled all the spirits who inhabited it; his manipulation of these spirits enabled him to shape the destiny of each person who set foot on his island. In the same way the author exercises absolute control over the actions and future of every character in her cast. Prospero makes it clear that his power lies in his mantle and his books – just as the author's power is limited to the world of her story and the techniques she uses to tell it.

By chance (or not?) Shakespeare's Prospero is used by both Murdoch and Byatt as a figure of power and a representative of author-ity in a novel published in 1978. In the

novel *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Charles Arrowby's failure to achieve spiritual growth and maturity is reflected in Murdoch's identification of Arrowby with Prospero: as he assesses his life he cannot embark upon the spiritual wrestling of a Hamlet nor is he able to learn from his mistakes and grow in understanding as does the ancient Lear. Instead he continues to play a manipulative and controlling Prospero: 'I had my ambitions ... but I always funked Lear and the less said about my Hamlet the better. I think I was a good Prospero ... That was my last great part' (*SS* 38). He is playing it still: 'I sit here and wonder at myself. Have I abjured the magic, drowned my book? Forgiven my enemies? The surrender of power, the final change of magic into spirit?' (*SS* 39). The magic to which he refers is of course the 'technical trickery of the theatre' (*SS* 29). As has been discussed in the second chapter (see from page 25), Charles Arrowby is self-obsessed and incapable of surrendering his 'magic'; instead it merely takes on different forms. His cousin James Arrowby will succeed in this surrender; the sign of his success will be his ability to choose the moment of his own death. James explains to Charles:

> Our lusts and attachments compose our god. And when one attachment is cast off another arrives by way of consolation. We never give up a pleasure absolutely, we only barter it for another. All spirituality tends to degenerate into magic, and the use of magic has an automatic nemesis even when the mind has been purified of grosser habits ... The last achievement is the absolute surrender of magic itself ... Goodness is giving up power and acting upon the world negatively. (*SS* 445)

Charles Arrowby is able to fool himself that he has drawn apart from the world to the seaside 'to repent of a life of egoism' (*SS* 1) and 'to become ... pure in heart' (*SS* 122). However, by message, by letter, by telephone, by hiding and pursuing, he continues to manipulate all the people who comprise his sycophantic court. Eventually he sells his seaside estate and returns to London where he takes possession of his inheritance from his cousin James: a flat and a considerable collection of eastern artefacts. The size and value of this collection reflect James Arrowby's moral stature, for Murdoch frequently endows those of her characters who have achieved a measure of spiritual growth and insight with valuable possessions which reflect aesthetic taste and material wealth. Charles Arrowby has not attained any measure of spiritual insight and this fact seems to be made concrete by his actions as he begins to dismantle the collection and redistribute his cousin's possessions.

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However, in *The Sea, The Sea*, it is Murdoch rather than Charles Arrowby who is playing the role of Prospero, for trickery lies at the heart of this novel. The extent of Charles Arrowby's ignorance and delusion is steadily revealed to us as various strata of self-deception and failure of comprehension are revealed. For example Charles Arrowby desired to possess the actress Rosina Vamburgh which involved 'detaching her permanently from her husband' (*SS* 72), Peregrine Arbelow. Arrowby thereafter values the latter's display of 'masculine solidarity' and believes that he 'remains very attached' (*SS* 74). However Peregrine Arbelow's rage and resentment is such that he will attempt to murder Charles Arrowby by pushing him off the rocky causeway which forms a bridge – into the churning depths of Minn's Cauldron – a fall and submersion which he should not have survived. What Charles Arrowby disapproves in the behaviour of his ex-lover Lizzie ('a truly relentless power of self-preservation' (*SS* 401)) he fails to recognise in himself when, for example, he postpones mourning the death of Titus (a surrogate son who seemed to offer an opportunity for salvation) citing as his reason the fact that 'I had my own troubles and I had to survive' (*SS* 426).

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The grand central delusion of Charles Arrowby's life is that of Mary Hartley Smith ('Hartley') as '[m]y first love, and also my only love ... *On n'aime qu'une fois, la premiere*' (*SS* 77). He will himself acknowledge the untruth of this claim in his musing at the novel's conclusion: 'Who is one's first love?' (*SS* 502) The reader will ultimately understand that Hartley fled from Charles Arrowby's obsession forty years before the action of the novel commences and is horrified by his reappearance in her life. He, however, does not wish to perceive or accept this. Even her bald explanation for running away from marriage cannot convince him: 'I didn't want you to be an actor ... we were too much like brother and sister and you were so sort of bossy and I decided I didn't want to' (*SS* 216). It seems clear that his life-long love affair with Clement Makin, a beautiful older actress, was his grand love. He confesses: 'In a way if there were justice it was Clement who spanned my life and made me, and about whom this book should be written' (*SS* 244) and 'Clement was the reality of my life, its bread and its wine' (*SS* 484).

More deeply hidden than this truth, which he seldom acknowledges, is another truth even more interesting: his first love was not Hartley, but his mother. His descriptions of and devotion to his father almost obscure this truth. For example he speaks of a long and

miserable mourning of his father's death, so that his mother's death not long after 'seemed less an individual event than a sort of doomed extension of the loss of my father' (*SS* 65). However there are a few clues, easily missed, which suggest that a much-loved mother held him in thrall. He describes his experience of the wonder and joy of his relationship with Hartley in terms of dread and fear and speculates that this relationship might be 'the only true light of my life, the light that reveals the truth. No wonder I feared to lose the light and be left in the darkness forever. All a child's blind fear was there, the fear that my mother so early inspired in me: the kiss withheld, the candle taken.' (*SS* 79). The overt Christian imagery employed in these descriptions of the women he loved and longed for suggests Charles Arrowby's penchant for religion despite his failure to achieve or exercise any spiritual discipline.

In her 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt also offers her readers a Prospero figure: Yorkshire millionaire Matthew Crowe who is orchestrating the magnificent pageant which will have ripple effects across the countryside. It is being staged to celebrate the crowning of the second Elizabeth. The narrator deliberately presents Crowe to the reader as Prospero both in the title of the chapter ('Prospero' (*VG* 65)) and by the choice of vocabulary which suggests the exercise of magic. Crowe means '*to call into being* music and flowers, midnight shout and revelry, dancing tipsy and solemn' and he '*spun out* his eloquence over local bodies large and small' (*VG* 65; my italics). Crowe intends to donate his stately home to the newly instituted University of North Yorkshire. He proclaims his intentions: 'I mean to go out in a burst of fireworks and a froth of pleasure, leaving behind me one or two enduring monuments … touched with my touch … Then I shall break my rod, if not drown my books, and rest from my labours' (*VG* 66).

However, it is of course Byatt who is exercising magical ingenuity as a Prospero as she spins her tale depicting a pageant which celebrates both Elizabethan ages. Not only are the rise and fall of the cadences of her own flowing prose very beautiful, but she effortlessly weaves into her prose the poetry of several ages,[17] so that Crowe wants 'to make the land remember its old sweetness and loveliness, to make the too-much loved earth more lovely with the real old flowers' (Philip Sidney); Stephanie Potter teaches the Keats' poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and the reader cannot but compare the graceful marble men and maidens with Stephanie's class of 'buzzing, crashing, laughing' (*VG* 71)

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schoolgirls or Frederica dancing for the audition in the previous chapter: 'Woodenly, now, crashing down heavily on wood, she thrust furiously up in a straight line, heavy-footed amongst the thicket of tossing arms and feat toes' (*VG* 73). This notion that Byatt weaves poetry into her prose is confirmed in her discussions with Ignês Sodré who asks: 'I was wondering if one could actually think about bits of poetry, that may be somewhere in the writer's mind, even if not explicitly, consciously there, having an evocative function – ' to which Byatt replies 'I'm sure that's right. I think one gets haunted by the rhythm and phrases and imagery and patterns of colour' (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 90).

Byatt points to her own penchant for weaving literary allusions into her prose (which is a form of artistic wizardry) when the narrator breaks into the narrative of *The Virgin in the Garden* to comment, in a conversational and friendly tone, on the creation and production of Alexander Wedderburn's play about the first great Elizabethan Age: 'It might at this point be useful briefly to indicate the structure of Alexander's play, both as he devised it, and as Lodge [the director] now elaborated it' (*VG* 287). In addition to an outline of the play's action, the narrator also comments on his language. So, for example, of the third act it is said '*King Lear* got in here, echoed and slyly quoted, often only in the casual incorporation of powerful nouns' (*VG* 288). This of course is a characteristic of Byatt's own writing. In this very discussion of the structure of Alexander's play, she incorporates quotations which please her. The narrator describes the death of Spencer which takes place in the third act and comments: 'At the putting-out of that light, in Alexander's play, the shadows began to lengthen and grow cold' (*VG* 288), echoing both *Othello* ('Put out the light, and then put out the light' Act V Scene 2 line 7) and a poem by Louis MacNeice ('The sunlight on the garden/Hardens and grows cold ...').

Another example of Byatt making magic with her text for the delight of the percipient reader is her naming of Jenny Parry's baby son, Thomas Parry. Jenny Parry is the wife of a master at Blesford Ride School and she is playing Bess Throckmorton in the play. She is in the middle of an unsatisfactory (and unconsummated) dalliance with Alexander Wedderburn, author of the play which celebrates Elizabeth the Virgin Queen as part of the festivities staged for the coronation of Elizabeth II in *The Virgin in the Garden*. Elizabeth the fourteen-year-old virgin princess was almost seduced by her much older rash and charming 'stepfather', Thomas Seymour (as related on page 100). And it was

Sir Thomas Parry, who had charge of the young princess's financial affairs, who agreed to watch and if possible curtail the daily romping enjoyed by the princess and her stepfather – behaviour clearly inappropriate to both of them. In Byatt's novel, Jenny's small fat baby is unfortunately present on the first occasion on which Jenny and Alexander are able to engineer some privacy. He is supposed to be asleep, but hearing the sounds of tentative love-making, he 'twisted his tiny body with total competence and could be seen peering with large dark eyes at their nakedness, a domed head raised over the pram-side, wobbling with intent interest' (*VG* 324). All desire is thereby quashed and the relationship ceases shortly thereafter, as did the relationship between Thomas Seymour and Elizabeth Tudor.

Another example of Byatt's Prospero-like interference in her own text is revealed as she converses with Murdoch in the 1985 ICA interview *Writers in Conversation* (during which discussion she is congratulated by Murdoch for achieving that rare feat: an accident described in literature which entirely shocks and takes the reader by surprise). Byatt claims that she never uses the future tense[18] in any reference to Stephanie, by which the percipient reader might be forewarned of her premature death. Murdoch notes that she had already been made uneasy about Stephanie's future when her reading the prologue in which Daniel is present, alone and clearly unhappy. By these devices, the author communicates with her reader and tells a story beyond the words on the page.

The Murdoch novel *An Accidental Man* published in 1971 concludes with a chorus of social chit-chat at a cocktail party. There is a stream of talk in which individual speakers are heard but not identified. Amidst the farewells with which both novel and party are brought to an end, one of the voices pronounces the words of Prospero: 'Our revels now are ended' (*AM* 429). In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* Prospero speaks these words to his small audience: Miranda and Ferdinand. He has just treated them to a pageant in which the goddess Iris, among others, has appeared and performed:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air;
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. *The Tempest* Act IV Scene I lines 148-156

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I would like to imagine that in the Murdoch novel, this is the author herself, Prospero present at the party, speaking to her readers.

5 PATTERN AND SHAPE

5.1 Introduction

In the BBC Four Omnibus documentary on Iris Murdoch, a group of her friends is filmed drinking and reminiscing around a table presided over by John Bayley. The question arises whether Murdoch was Christian, or possibly even Christian Buddhist. (This is an astute observation for in a 1983 interview with John Haffenden, Murdoch comments: 'It seems to me that some kind of Christian Buddhism would make a satisfactory religion because of course I can't get away from Christ, who travels with me. ... I want there to be religion on this planet' (Haffenden 1985: 206-207)). Derwent May (who is described merely as 'friend' by a subtitle) suggests that Murdoch was not a Christian but, like any mind educated in the west, 'she was very much imbued as we all are with a kind of Christian morality – everyone brought up in our part of the world is'.

This makes a point which can be extended beyond Christian morality to all the resources of myth and literature which would have shaped Murdoch's thinking and writing. Every published author active over a roughly similar period functioning within the same cultural milieu, educated within the same system, participating in the same debates and grappling with the same issues, draws material from the same pool of resources. Murdoch and Byatt are particularly closely allied in thought, attitude, image and inspiration. The western world view which informs the writing of both Murdoch and Byatt includes the influences which I have discussed and now again briefly consider: Greek mythology, Christianity, Shakespeare and painting. These have bearing upon the pattern and shape of each author's writing.

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Murdoch and Byatt take up their positions within the realist tradition of novel writing. Fictitious Frederica shares her creator's views, which is why in *Babel Tower,* when she gives a lecture entitled 'Nostalgia for Tolstoi' in her tentative early days of teaching extra-mural classes to adults, '[s]he takes her texts from Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, both of whom express a sharp dissatisfaction with fragmentary modern forms, and consequent moral simplicities and simplifications' (*BT* 223).

In her essay 'People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Post-war Fiction', Byatt notes:

> Respect for the tradition of the realist novel is apparently a very rooted fact … many novelists now seem to feel that they exist in some uneasy relation to the afterlife of these texts, as the texts themselves once coexisted with the afterlife of Genesis and the Gospels. They are the source of enlightenment, but not true. Or not true for us.
>
> Thus it seems that much formal innovation in recent English fiction has concerned itself, morally and aesthetically, with its forbears; and in a way for which I know no exact parallel in other literatures. This has its dangers … the true enemy of good art is not mass society or technology, but … the great works of the past which must be absorbed and rejected simultaneously. (Byatt 1991: 167)

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Within this discussion, Byatt plots the progress of Murdoch, who 'calls herself a realist, and claims that she is in the English tradition' (Byatt 1991: 170). Byatt felt, as she read *The Bell,* 'that something odd was happening':

> I was able imaginatively to inhabit a fictional universe, to care about the people and their fate, in what I judged to be a 'good' book, in a way I thought, then, was confined to my reading of nineteenth-century novels and my stock of non-literary 'bad' books or children's books. (Byatt 1991: 170)

She charts the progress of her personal interaction with the developments in Murdoch's writing:

> By *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), my sense of achieved imaginative reality was much more strained. The reason was the obtrusive presence of Henry James … of Jane Austen, and with her, of Lionel Trilling's reading of *Mansfield Park.* … *An Unofficial Rose* cannot be called parodic, but a trained reader senses its relation to the past in a way that makes its fictional world less accessible, less immediate to the imagination. (Byatt 1991: 170 - 171)

Byatt notes the frequent criticism that Murdoch limits her fictional world to the upper bourgeoisie and suggests that this criticism arises from the readers' sense that 'the Tradition' was made by and for just such a society, helping to create and perpetuate it:

> The world she studies has already 'come to resemble' the world of the Victorian and modernist novelists, having seen itself in their mirrors. To be realistic about this world is to encounter pervasive and powerful images of it, in itself, in novels, in readers, which make the imaginative process thinner, more second-hand, more difficult. (Byatt 1991: 171).

Later, Byatt believes, Murdoch achieved 'a striking degree of success as a realist by shifting, partly, her model. The plots of several later novels are parodies, overt, acknowledged by the characters, of Shakespearean plots' (Byatt 1991: 171). The examples she cites include the games played with *Much Ado* in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and with *Hamlet* in *The Black Prince.*

> These plots could be called experimental devices, obtrusive, making no claims to psychological probability, or development ... They, too, are related to Dickens's comic plotting. Their formality has liberated an imaginative space for reader and character to inhabit; their artifice has created a new-old language for realism. (Byatt 1991: 171-172)

In a critical review of *The Black Prince*, Byatt considers possible reasons for Murdoch's increasing use of Shakespearean plots and references to Shakespeare in her novels:

> This is partly because she is so concerned to identify the difference between good and great art – if one sees one's improvement, as man and artist, as a process of contemplating the truly good, the question of the nature of Shakespeare's gifts, of his vision of human beings, of reality, must arise. It is also partly because she sees him, with the great nineteenth-century novelists, as a high example of the 'realism', moral and aesthetic, that she wishes to understand and achieve. (Byatt 1994: 274)

I now consider how Murdoch and Byatt have managed the difficult process which must be undertaken by contemporary authors and which is thus identified by Byatt: '[T]he great works of the past ... must be absorbed and rejected simultaneously' (Byatt 1991: 167).

5.2 Making pattern and shape: lifting from literature

In my chapter 'Art and Destruction' I have noted the fascination which each author feels for the Greek myth of the slaying of Marsyas by the god Apollo. It functions as an image of art for spirit and body are forcibly split – art is created by the spirit and for the spirit.

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From a different culture and century, Murdoch and Byatt each rework the famous image of the brevity and relative unimportance of each individual human life recorded by the historian and scholar Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* finished in 731:

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

In Murdoch's 1970 novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Morgan (who functions within the narrative as the representative mortal absorbed in a quest to find herself), at the height of her perplexity and distress, attempts to save a pigeon which has found its way underground into the Picadilly Circus station. Her hopeless attempts to catch the bird and her frantic chasing up and down the escalators function as a picture of the impotence and muddle of her life which she lives without an accurate understanding of herself. 'The idea of the bird trapped in that warm dusty electric-lighted underground place filled her heart with pity and horror' (*FHD* 291). Tired, thwarted and on the verge of tears, she realises that in order to save the bird she had put down her handbag; it has now been stolen and she feels 'maimed, naked' (*FHD* 293). She is filled with a sense of '[t]he horror, the horror of the world' (*FHD* 295). This seems to be a reworking by Murdoch of Bede's image of the sparrow. The bird's flight through the hall of the king on a winter's night functions as a picture of the fleeting and insignificant nature of the individual human life on earth. Byatt prefaces *Still Life* with this extract from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. This is a pointer to Stephanie's accidental death, in her attempt to save a sparrow which had taken refuge under her refrigerator (*SL* 331). The refrigerator is unearthed and Stephanie is electrocuted:

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

Daniel will return from a long day to find his home inexplicably full of people and thereafter to face the body of his dead wife which will haunt him always; in the misery and confusion no one in the house notes that over their heads 'a sudden sparrow plunged into the night' (*SL* 335).

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Another ancient influence is both the language and the stories of the Bible. Frederica contemplates Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Forster's *Howards End*:

> [B]oth are *imbued* with religious language. Ursula's beauty is 'immanent' like a strange golden light. Forster makes love incarnate 'the salvation that was latent in his own soul', connecting beast and monk. Sexual love for Lawrence confuses and abolishes grammatical categories, no I and you, no subject and object, but 'my' and 'her' in a paradisal One 'where everything is silent', where language is unnecessary and defeated, thinks Frederica. (*BT* 311)

Byatt creates a distressing scene in the prologue to *Still Life* when she uses Biblical language to reflect the degree of alienation which exists between Daniel and his son Will, who believes Daniel has failed him as a father. The encounter takes place in a hospital corridor; Daniel has been consoling a mother whose child has overdosed and Will is one of the hospital porters wheeling the child's body away. Daniel recounts their meeting to Frederica. Will speaks to his father in words from both the Old and New Testaments, intending both to mock Daniel's vocation (for he knows that his father, although ordained, does not believe in God) and to reflect his own contempt for religion. And so, for example, he uses the description in the Old Testament book of *Job* of the devil 'going to and fro in the earth' (' "Quoting scripture for his own purposes," said Daniel. "That was rather funny, I thought," said Frederica'):

> ' "Hi," he said. "Going about your father's business, are you?" So I asked him what he was up to and he said he was going to and for in the earth and walking up and down in it, and then he pushed th' trolley in ... and Will said "Well, I'll walk off and leave you to it." And I said, "Where are you going, then?" And he said, "I told you. To and fro." That was the last I saw of Will.' (*SL* 10)

An example of Biblical subject matter intertwined in Murdoch's writing is Randall Peronett in *An Unofficial Rose* who operates as a corrupt form of Adam. The consequence of his temptation and 'fall' is the rupture of his family, and separation from his only surviving child, a daughter: 'A whole world of innocence was broken and gone forever' (*UR* 216). He is to be shut out from his own garden: '[N]ow he felt an agonising sense of exclusion. Never is a long time' (*UR* 217). The garden is his own creation: 'He felt like a sorcerer who has created a vast palace and adorned it with gold and peopled it with negroes and dwarfs and dancing girls and peacocks and marmosets, and then with a snap of his fingers makes it all vanish into nothings' (*UR* 218). He planted and named roses which 'would live on, these purer distillations of his being, when their namesakes were only so much manure' (*UR* 218). And he is met in the garden by Nancy Bowshott

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who has long been secretly in love with him. She is the gardener's wife, a perverted figure of Eve, whom he kisses savagely (*UR* 221).

Randolph Henry Ash, Byatt's fictitious Victorian poet in the novel *Possession*, uses this same Genesis imagery to communicate with the poet Christabel LaMotte once they have ended their relationship and she has resisted all his attempts to contact her. In his poem *The Garden of Proserpina* Ash addresses LaMotte: 'Since riddles are the order of our day/Come here, my love, and I will tell thee one' (*P* 463). His 'riddle' employs the account of God's creation of the world and the Genesis story inevitably calls up the image of Adam and Eve's sin, and therefore Ash and LaMotte's sexual transgression. Ash also draws on the well-established image of the garden as a picture of the creative processes of the author and poet:

> There is a place to which all Poets come
> ...
> 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
> ...
> And are these places shadows of one Place?
> ...
> Was he a dark Lord whom we dispossessed?
> Or did our minds frame him to name ourselves
> Our fierceness and our guile, our jealous grasp
> At the bright stem of life, our wounded pride?
> ...
> 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 ...
> (*P* 463-465)

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Ash and LaMotte travelled away from London together aware of the potential harm of their deception; there has been minimal mutual planning but each has brought a 'wedding' ring (*P* 276). Ash gazes at Christabel LaMotte aware of 'her possession of him' (*P* 279); in her face he detects 'harshness and fierceness and absolutism' (*P* 278). All these elements of his observation are reflected in the extracts from his poem quoted above. By means of his published poetry, Ash appeals to his one-time lover LaMotte who now views herself as a monster and who has in consequence removed herself from society.

As an old woman she will write: 'I have done great harm though I meant none … I have lived in a Turret like an old Witch, and make verses nobody wants' (*P* 450). She identifies herself with the monster fairy Melusine of her poetry '[f]orever banished from the hope of Heaven' (*P* 289). In his poem, Ash reminds her that they mutually inhabit the garden of creative composition where 'I see the Tree all rugged-thick … You see it like a silver pillar' (*P* 465). With his argument that their different interpretations have equal value, he seems to be assuring her that there is no condemnation: 'All these are true and none. The place is there/Is what we name it, and is not. It *is*.' His use of italics is a direct clue that it is LaMotte to whom he addresses himself for she published a poem about the doomed love of Dahud, drowned in the city of Is (*P* 330).

This use of the Garden in the nineteenth-century story of *Possession* has a counterpart in the twentieth-century section of the novel. Roland and Val are a kind of Adam and Eve. They met at a Freshers' tea party since which time 'they had never not been together' (*P* 11). Together they rent a garden flat from an octogenarian landlady who 'enticed them in like an old witch … by talking volubly to them in the garden about the quietness of the place, giving them each a small, gold, furry apricot from the espaliered trees along the curving brick wall' (*P* 17). We are told that 'in the beginning' Val and Roland did not know that the garden was out of bounds, 'forbidden', once they became tenants. However, once Val has effected her fairytale escape in the sportscar of her new boyfriend and Roland has scored an academic triumph and established a relationship with Maud Bailey, the prohibition on access to the garden is lifted with the departure of the landlady to hospital. Roland returns to the flat to find that in his absence a heap of job offers has arrived in the mail. He has already begun to make lists of words which will soon leap into life as poetry. He experiences a 'blood-rush of success' (*P* 468). Roland regards the enjoyment he took in reading as a scholar before his discovery of the Ash letter as 'the days of his innocence'; he regards his 'find' as 'a sort of loss' (*P* 470).

In this mood, Roland rereads the poetry of Ash:

> He saw the tree, the fruit, the fountain, the woman, the grass, the serpent, single and multifarious in form. … he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless *lists* … and saw what they were. He saw too that Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he understood it, that he laughed aloud. Ash had started him on this

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> quest and he had found the clue he had started with, and all was cast off, the letter, the letters, Vico, the apples, his list. (*P* 472)

He feels that he has learned from Ash that the lists of words which he has been drawing up are important for they were

> the words that named things, the language of poetry. ... He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself. ... What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not. (*P* 473)

He steps out into the forbidden garden and stands on the earth under the trees as words come out 'from some well in him' and arrange themselves into poems; an hour before there had been no poems, 'and now they came like rain and were real' (*P* 475). Roland's access to the garden represents his new access to words, his new state of grace.

Of course the great Tradition of literature which precedes Murdoch and Byatt is employed in far more complex ways than mere allusion. Each has a fascination with the power and wisdom of fairytale, for example, and with Shakespeare, the great impersonal talent. Elements of fairytale and the plot of Shakespearean plays lurk within the texts of both authors and form an intertextual commentary on their action and form.

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5.2.1 Embedding elements of fairytale

Both Murdoch and Byatt embed fairytale in their realist fiction. Fairytale derives its power from the magic which is its subject matter, from its pattern and shape which the reader knows and anticipates with pleasure and because it offers a world with meaning. In conversation with Sodré, Byatt comments upon Murdoch's creation of a magic world within the bounds of realist fiction:

> That 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. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 180)

In order to explain Byatt and Murdoch's use of fairytale I shall consider one novel of each author (Byatt's *Possession* and Murdoch's *An Unofficial Rose*) in which two

specific fairytales (*Sleeping Beauty* and *Rapunzel*) are embedded. In each case the story and the fairytales explore the ways in which women may be trapped and powerless and then released and empowered. In Murdoch and Byatt's novels, as in fairytales, it is a woman who is captured and passive – as it is generally women who are reduced to a captive and powerless state by social convention. The evil magic of the fairytale which imprisons the woman or stops off her energy is reflected in the novels by the modern-day power of convention. Only extreme ingenuity or magic will save her. The release and happy ending of the fairytale is denied to the woman trapped by social convention.

Byatt's novel *Possession* tells of a Victorian poet, Christabel LaMotte, who forges an independent life in seclusion with a fellow woman artist, Blanche Glover. They pursue their arts and keep house and are intensely happy. Each fulfills the other's emotional and sexual needs until a married male poet, Randolf Henry Ash, intrudes upon their domesticity. Christabel leaves her home with Blanche for a brief period in order to be with Ash; Blanche, in despair, commits suicide. Christabel LaMotte loses both her lovers for one is dead and the other married. She loses the child she conceives with Ash, because convention and social constraints prevent her from raising the child on her own. Her early fiction and poetry was haunted by the notion of women entrapped. At the end of her life she herself has become the wicked witch (for she is isolated, elderly, lives in a tower and unnerves her own child) who would generally be responsible, according to the convention of fairytale, for the imprisonment or entrapment of the innocent and unwary.

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The paradox of Christabel LaMotte's situation is that her fairytale seclusion began as her strength. She writes to Ash in her old age that he threatened her '*solitude and* self-possession' (*P* 502); she wonders whether '*if I had kept to my closed castle, behind my motte-and-bailey defences – should I have been a great poet ... ?*' (*P* 502). LaMotte's writing reflects her awareness of the horror of the trapped woman. Her fiction includes the short story 'The Glass Coffin' (a reworking of the traditional tale of *Sleeping Beauty*) in which a resolute and kind but unremarkable craftsman releases a beautiful blonde princess trapped in a glass coffin by a wicked enchanter (*P* 63). Of course within the narrative of *Possession*, the reader sees Maud Bailey play the role of the little tailor who saves the princess, for she is the twentieth-century champion of Christable LaMotte's

work. Maud Bailey's research and teaching has been one of the means by which LaMotte has been released from silence and obscurity.

Another example of the reworking of fairytale by Christabel LaMotte is to be found in a poem without title. It describes the anguish of a silent watcher who observes 'the foul Old One' or 'the humped One' in full control of an imprisoned woman. This is LaMotte's reworking of *Rapunzel*. 'The black claws go clutching' up the 'Filaments Glosses' which 'Run trembling down/Gold torrent loosened/From a gold crown'. The princess is imprisoned in a thicket which is thorny where 'Up snakes the glassy Tower' (*P* 35). This is where LaMotte ends her life: '*I live in a Turret like an old Witch, and make verses nobody wants*' (*P* 450). Her initial seclusion was power; she ventured out of the seclusion and chose to be debilitated by the consequences (the birth of an illegitimate child and the suicide of her companion Blanche Glover). She is trapped and isolated like Rapunzel and like Sleeping Beauty because she chooses to collude with the convention and attitudes of her day with the result that she acts like a social pariah and exiles herself from society. She has chosen to condemn and punish herself as her society would have done had her situation been made public.

These same fairytale stories of *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty* are identified by Byatt and Sodré within the structure of the Murdoch novel *An Unofficial Rose*. Randall Peronett is caught between two women – his wife Ann and Lindsay Rimmer, assistant to the writer Emma Sands, his father's one-time mistress. Ann is aware of his dissatisfaction; his long absences in London suggest the existence of a mistress, but she chooses to continue the pattern of her life as though she does not know, thinking this the best way to protect and preserve what she values. Her countryside home (Grayhallock) is a rose nursery but its 'pair of lateral battlemented towers' (*UR* 25) suggest the fairytale setting of a castle. Ann is consciously adopting the role of Sleeping Beauty – her wilful refusal to know is Sleeping Beauty's enchanted slumber. Murdoch explores this passive behaviour as a possible form of goodness.

The moment at which Ann is forced to acknowledge her husband's infidelity is when Emma Sands visits Grayhallock and is telephoned there by Lindsay Rimmer, who intends to prove to Randall that Emma is away from the flat and that his sexual conquest may

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finally commence. Ann knows who is on the phone and the moment of knowing is signalled by the pricking of her finger. Emma moves to the phone: 'The roses clung by their thorns to Emma's dress. Ann picked them off and pricked herself in the process' (*UR* 159). She eavesdrops on the conversation and understands what is afoot, all the while 'looking with fascination at the little bead of blood which had appeared upon her finger' (*UR* 159). The magical prick of the thorn has woken her up, rather than putting her to sleep – the reverse of Sleeping Beauty's story where the pricking of her finger on a spindle is the evil charm which sends the princess to sleep.

The temptress who is luring Randall away from home is presented to the reader as Rapunzel, for she has cascades of blonde hair and is in the keeping of her employer, the aged detective-story writer Emma Sands, who is described in ways calculated to call to mind a hag or witch of fairytale. The source of Emma's 'magic' is her fame and her wealth; the latter she will use to interfere in the future of her ex-lover's family when she visits his home, interviews his family, and makes a will in favour of his visiting Australian grandson, Penn Graham (*UR* 324), who is something of an outsider at Grayhallock. Her intention, clearly stated, is to sow confusion in the family. To mark them with her mark. The witch's cave is a dusty drawingroom, filled with 'golden afternoon sunlight, spread out in a soft web upon the permanent mist of tobacco smoke' (*UR* 69). Emma Sands, 'whose witchery it was to seem older than she could possibly be' (*UR* 70), moves about with the aid of a silver-topped walking-stick which seems like some kind of wand.

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Randall clearly casts himself in the role of the saviour prince, for he makes frequent reference to the moment when he will carry Lindsay off: ' "One of these days … I'll put Lindsay across my saddle and carry her away." He often said this' (*UR* 78). Randall is given to understand that he cannot have access to Lindsay until he has produced the funds which she requires. Lindsay relents sooner than she'd intended and it is difficult for Randall to switch from the magical world to the real one:

> Now that he was passing, as he thought, out of fantasy into reality, the real world seemed a region even more fantastic than the dream palace he had inhabited before. He felt like a favourite slave who has been kept on cushions and fed on sherbert and who is suddenly put at the gate and told he is free. Such stories end with the sword. (*UR* 142)

Fearing the castrating sword of the witch, Randall is unable to perform sexually: 'I'm not going to be any good ... I wish I hadn't talked so much about Emma. I'm poisoned.' (*UR* 151-2). He fears the presence of Emma Sands even in her absence. He searches for evidence of her presence, kneeling down and peering under the bed, his heart 'beating violently' (*UR* 139). He is further unsettled by Emma's disembodied voice when Lindsay activates a voice recording (*UR* 148). He is later to feel that his achievement of Lindsay was in fact orchestrated by the women and was not his own success: 'his action was stolen from him' (*UR* 208). This accords with early versions of *Rapunzel* in which the wicked fairy does in fact castrate the saviour prince. Emma Sands achieves a figurative castration when she robs Randall of his sense of achievement. Randall believes that by requiring his father to sell a Tintoretto which releases vast funds to him, he has succeeded in stealing Lindsay away. Emma claims to have orchestrated Lindsay's campaign and so robs Randall of his triumph.

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5.2.2 Borrowing the bones of Shakespeare

Both Murdoch and Byatt engage with the art of Shakespeare and weave his plays into the fabric of their fiction. The result is greater reader satisfaction, a richer text and proof of the continuing truth, value and relevance of great art. In her tetralogy, Byatt uses Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*[19] to parallel and comment on the twentieth-century story of the Potter family. The text of the play is discussed by Bill and Winifred Potter:

> He disliked *A Winter's Tale*. Partly because it was said to have christian overtones, primarily because it was strictly improbable ... A man does not lose his wife for twenty years and get back an animated statue and profess joy in a deception as though it was a miracle, not so easily. This was Shakespeare's real failure at the primitive level of plausibility of plot, Bill said. And what about Hermione, Winifred said mildly. All the years of her womanhood gone, and her two children, one dead, one vanished, and no feelings required but gratitude and joy. His class, Bill said, had tried to tell him that the statue represented a resolution of the pains of life in Art and he had said, some things could not be so resolved. (*VG* 86)

Hermione loses her children and the years of her womanhood, for she lives hidden from the king's presence for sixteen years[20] to escape his unrighteous anger. Winifred married Bill to escape the life she observed her own mother living:

> She had been most afraid of living like her mother, too many children, too little money, mastered by a house and husband which were peremptory moral imperatives and steady physical wreckers. ... Bill had lent her *Lady Chatterley* and preached about freedom: he was in flight from a more harshly defined version of the house, man, woman she herself meant to step beyond. (*VG* 86)

They both fail in their aim. Winifred has to acknowledge

> that it is not possible to create the opposite of what one has always known, simply because the opposite is believed to be desired. Human beings need what they already know, even horrors. The unknown is hard to get at, because it is the unknown. (*VG* 86)

For Bill Potter domestic life leads to rage, which Winifred chooses to endure:

> He was now constantly enraged by cooking, cleaning, crying daughters. But she knew he was not like this at work: he was patient, persistent, forbearing. And she discovered in herself a fatal and steady need for tasks and reprobation. Maybe rage and patience were all that could be left. (*VG* 87)

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 length of time that Hermione passes as a statue, living out the term of the king's displeasure. This is a possible mode of existence which holds a great deal of terror for Byatt:

> I've always had a sort of horror of Hermione as a figure of death. I find her deeply alarming. Possibly because Shakespeare invented her, and literary criticism seems quite happy to accept her, as a benign figure of resurrection. She's in fact somebody who has had all her adult life and the growing up of her children taken from her by being closed in the tomb, and is only allowed to come to life when she's too old to live her life. And so she is in a sense a real figure of life-in-death, which was Coleridge's great terror, and which George Eliot understood. A fear of having a life that isn't a life. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 92)

As Hermione lost her children, so Winifred loses her children who are alienated from their parents by their father's wrath. The third child 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. The queen's living presence is shown to the repentant King Leontes first as a statue which is thereafter revealed as his wife. Hermione can be reunited with her child. Winifred is given charge of her two grandchildren after her daughter Stephanie's

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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): '[w]ith 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 he draws comparisons with his own situation (although he would be incapable of comparing himself to Leontes or Winifred to Hermione, as the reader is invited to do):

> He 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)

Byatt's tetralogy began with the production of a play at Long Royston; it is the central event of the first novel. After the destructive fire at the University of North Yorkshire which takes place in the fourth novel, Alexander is invited to put on a play at Long Royston in aid of the university's appeal for funds for damage reparation. Byatt's tetralogy is to end with the staging of a great drama, which is how the tetralogy's first novel, *The Virgin in the Garden*, ended. Alexander has selected *The Winter's Tale*: 'A play about rebirth after tragedy. Appropriate' (*WW* 385). The reader has already seen Byatt's use of this play as a foil to the Potter saga of rebirth – Bill and Winifred have endured a dysfunctional marriage and raised a dysfunctional family but are given a second chance. They raise their grandchildren after the tragedy of the accidental death of their daughter.

Frederica tells Alexander that Bill Potter has always hated the play and is asked why. She does not speak her answer out loud, possibly because she too reads the action of the play as a comment on the course of her parents' marriage: 'For being a wilful device for

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making comedy out of tragedy by ignoring real feelings. By ignoring the feelings of a woman shut in a vault for sixteen years who then conveniently comes back to life as a statue' (*WW* 385). But out loud, she explains by way of quotation: ' "As we are mock'd with art," she said, thoughtfully.' (These are the words of Leontes, king of Sicilia, as he gazes upon the 'statue' of his lost wife and declares it to be lifelike in Act 5 Scene 3 line 68 of Shakespeare's play.)

Mary Orton, daughter of Daniel and grand-daughter of Bill, is cast as Perdita (daughter of Leontes and Hermione) in Alexander's production. This casting and the restoration it will bring about for the father and husband of the dead Stephanie is prefigured on a summer's day on the lawn of Bill Potter's home where Mary dances while her father and grandfather make daisy-chains to adorn her. Bill says to Daniel:

> 'She reminds me. She is very like. Very like.'
>
> 'The movements of the neck. The wrists.'
>
> The dead woman is dreadfully present. The two men measure each other's apprehension of her absence. Mary jumps high, fluttering her flying feet. They applaud Mary. Bill says, 'When you do dance,/I wish you/A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do/Nothing but that, move still, still so – '
>
> 'What is that?' says Daniel.
>
> 'Nothing,' says Bill. 'A play I used not to like. I begin to see the point of it.' (*BT* 361)

The words are those of the young prince Florizel when he sees the lost princess Perdita whom all believe to be a sherpherd's daughter. Perdita's mother Hermione will be restored to her family when her 'statue' is brought to life. In Mary there is to be, for Stephanie's husband and father, some measure of restoration of the dead wife and daughter. At the performance of *The Winter's Tale* Mary, in the role of Perdita, is enchanting:

> Daniel was quite unprepared for the effect this would have on him. ... She was in her own world, not trying to charm, but enchanting. He saw, not his daughter, but his wife. Only for a moment, but entirely, and remembering life he remembered death, automatically, and his eyes filled with tears. He heard a small sound next to him. Bill Potter was rubbing his cuff angrily across his faded eyes. An audience is one, and many, it is moved separately, and together. Daniel ... touched Bill's knee, to show he knew they knew. (*WW* 394)

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Here too is reconciliation between father and son-in-law, for Bill had for years raged against Stephanie's choice of Daniel as a husband. As Byatt moves her tetralogy to a close she is restoring and resolving. Shakespeare, by contrast, disappoints:

> The play swept on, and broke up into the irritating little runnels of scenes in which the greatest of playwrights evaded the recognitions, reparations, climax, everyone had a right to expect, and fobbed off his audience with *oratio obliqua*, reported speech, when the father met the lovely living daughter who replaced both his dead son, and her exposed infant self, for whom he had mourned for sixteen unstaged years. What a *mess*, Frederica thought, as she always thought. 'I can see why he did it, and we find ways to excuse it, because it is what *he* did, but *what* a mess – ' (*WW* 394)

'Mocked, tricked, Daniel Orton and Bill Potter wept, and pushed away their tears' (*WW* 395). Bill Potter is not only reconciled to his wife, restored as a father figure within a family and at peace with Daniel, he is also reconciled to the play:

> 'I've just *understood*. Never too old. Never too old to understand something. The thing about the late comedies – the thing is – that what they do, the effect they have, isn't anything to do with fobbing you off with a happy ending when you know you witnessed a tragedy. It's about art, it's about the necessity of art. The human need to be *mocked with art* – you can have a happy ending, precisely because you know in life they don't happen, when you are old, you have a right to the *irony* of a happy ending – because you don't believe it.' (*WW* 395)

As discussed already, Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince* interrogates itself in the light of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Since the production of an 'art object' (*BP* 55) is a central focus of Bradley Pearson's work, it is appropriate that a work of art is at the heart of Bradley Pearson's story. Pearson's disquisition on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is physically positioned at the heart of the story (*BP* 163 and 364). In his exploration of the relationship between art and artist with which the story is prefaced, Pearson has noted:

> I am aware that people often have completely distorted general ideas of what they are like. Men truly manifest themselves in the long patterns of their acts, and not in any nutshell of self-theory. This is supremely true of the artist, who appears, however much he imagines he hides, in the revealed extension of his work. And so am I too here exhibited, whose pitiful instinct is alas for a concealment quite at odds with my trade. (*BP* xi-xii)

Pearson will outline his impassioned belief that *Hamlet*, of all of Shakespeare's works, is the one in which Shakespeare chooses to position himself as the central character, for

> [h]e is speaking as few artists can speak, in the first person and yet at the pinnacle of artifice; ... [he] makes the crisis of his own identity into the very central stuff of his art. He transmutes his private obsessions into a rhetoric so public that it can be mumbled by any child. (*BP* 164)

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Hamlet is 'a supreme creative feat' –

> A work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very substance, a Chinese box of words as high as the tower of Babel, a meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of those without identity, that is human beings. *Hamlet* is words and so it Hamlet. He is as witty as Jesus Christ, but whereas Christ speaks Hamlet is speech. He is the tormented empty sinful consciousness of man seared by the bright light of art, the god's flayed victim dancing the dance of creation. (*BP* 164)

In *The Virgin in the Garden,* Alexander Wedderburn muses on Marcus Potter's portrayal of Ophelia in a school production of *Hamlet*: 'No other performance of Ophelia had ever made it so clear that the play's events simply cracked and smashed the innocent consciousness' (*VG* 26). In *The Black Prince* Julian Baffin embodies the innocent consciousness which will be cracked and smashed. Since *The Black Prince* is, like *Hamlet*, '[a] work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very substance' (*BP* 164), Julian Baffin is presented to the reader as a figure of both a Hamlet and an Ophelia. Her father is murdered, she is distanced from her mother, her parents are unfaithful despite an apparently loving marriage and she is betrayed in her relationship with another. We are given permission to connect Julian with both Hamlet and Ophelia by Bradley Pearson's assertion that '[t]he unconscious mind delights in identifying people with each other. It has only a few characters to play with' (*BP* 160).

We first meet Julian in the guise of Ophelia. She seems to Bradley Pearson to be 'a young man ... strewing flowers upon the roadway, as if casting them into a river ... chanting some sort of repetitive litany' (*BP* 30). This is not Ophelia maddened by betrayals and about to drown herself, but Julian Baffin casting away shredded love letters. She will deeply engage Pearson's interest when she informs him that she once played the part of Hamlet (*BP* 164) and he will only be able to consummate their relationship when she surprises him dressed as Hamlet and clutching the skull of a sheep (*BP* 280-281). Critic Martin Amis points out that Pearson's writing (the body of the novel) is exactly what he claims *Hamlet* to be for Shakespeare: '[T]he means to create a "special rhetoric of consciousness", a self-purging in the glare of art; Bradley's book is Julian's "deification", and so she becomes the *Hamlet* he never wrote' (Amis 2001: 84).

The commentary on *Hamlet* provided in this novel asks the reader to admire the daring of Shakespeare who inserts his creative self into this text and no other. Murdoch appears to

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seize the opportunity to insert herself into the text of *The Black Prince* – she is humorously inviting the reader to see her own career in that of the fictitious Arnold Baffin, the prolific author despised by the purist Bradley Pearson for his facility. Murdoch has been similarly criticised for producing novels at a steady rate. In a review published in *New Statesman* in March 1974, Martin Amis wrote:

> I suspect that Miss Murdoch's huge productivity is, paradoxically, a form of self-defence or self-effacement: 300 pages a year disarm a lot of criticism. She can't, in the nature of things, revise much and probably she never re-reads; she just 'gets on with the next one'. Were she to slow down – were she to allow one of those ominous 'silences' to gather, silences such as more tight-lipped novelists periodically 'break' – she would be accepting a different kind of responsibility to her critics and to her own prodigious talents. She would, in short, begin to find out how good she is, that strange and fearful discovery. (Amis 2001: 87)

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Murdoch biographer and friend Peter J Conradi endorses this view that Murdoch has used her creation of the author Arnold Baffin to insert herself into the text and explore criticism of her own work:

> The titles of Baffin's books ...parody Iris's own, as does the sole account of a Baffin plot ... Baffin's daughter ... describes him tellingly as living 'in a sort of rosy haze with Jesus and Mary and Buddha and Shiva and the Fisher King all chasing round and round dressed up as people in Chelsea' - satirising earlier Murdoch novels such as *Bruno's Dream* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Pearson typifies Baffin's novels as a congeries of amusing anecdotes loosely garbled into racy stories with the help of half-baked unmediated symbolism. He empties himself ... 'like scented bath-water over the world, seeing significance everywhere'. (Conradi 2001: 520)

Baffin offers a defence and again, Conradi believes, 'Iris ... speaks directly through his mask':

> 'Most artists understand their weaknesses far better than the critics do ... Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one only has one life ... any artist has to *decide* how fast to work. I do not believe I would improve if I wrote less. The only result would be that there would be less of whatever there is ... It would be unthinkable to run along beside it whimpering "I know it's no good".' (Conradi 2001: 520)

However, Conradi believes that she is exploring aspects of her own ability in *both* of her fictitious authors: 'Pearson, the blocked writer, represents that "chaste and strict" mind that produced *Against Dryness* and *A Severed Head*; Baffin the "journalistic" discursive self that in the 1980s would churn out shapeless novels of over six hundred pages' (Conradi 2001: 519). Murdoch demonstrates her power by this insertion of self into the

text and by using Shakespeare's great play as a medium for exploring the power inherent in such an exercise.

5.2.3 Rereading other writing

Byatt and Sodré, in their analysis of the Murdoch novel *An Unofficial Rose*, decide that it 'takes off' from Murdoch's reading of *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen's account of the young and penniless Fanny Price who is sent to live in the grand home of her superior cousins where by passive resistance she ultimately proves her superior wisdom, insight and moral standing. Sodré explains that this reworking of a great classic by Murdoch is

> both about feeling a tremondous affinity with Jane Austen, but also wanting to work from something already there and established and loved, to transform it, to work out different solutions ... and different ways in which the characters in the first novel can be transformed, and have different destinies. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 189)

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Byatt and Sodré discuss, for example, the portrayal of goodness – Fanny Price's passivity is to be read as virtue; Ann Peronett's passivity gives an *appearance* of virtue but the reader will ultimately acknowledge that it is self-destructive. They mention the symbolic use of a knife in each novel – Fanny's two little sisters' squabble over a knife is a picture of sibling rivalry. Penn Graham yields up the Nazi dagger which he treasures to his cousin who has stirred his sexual interest: both his cousin and the knife are unfamiliar and dangerous and therefore alluring. The theatricals in *Mansfield Park* are a mechanism for the young adults to act out sexual desires in a way which would not be tolerated in their real world. Married Randall Peronett lives an enchanted existence in the fairytale world of desire established by Emma Sands the 'witch' and Lindsay Rimmer the 'enchantress'.

As has been pointed out in the chapters above, Murdoch's work is, on occasion, echoed, extended or commented upon in Byatt's writing, whether it be the playful employment of a single word as part of a private game (Byatt's use of the word 'rebarbative' in *The Virgin in the Garden* as an echo of the use of the word in *The Bell*) or the allegorical use of mythology (the flaying of Marsyas to represent the painful and creative process of artistic production) or the reworking of an ancient image into a twentieth-century context (Bede's description of a bird's brief passage through the warmth and light of the king's

hall as a picture of the brevity and relative unimportance of the individual human life – reworked by Murdoch in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and Byatt in *Still Life*). More elaborate than this, I would now like to argue that *Babbletower* within Byatt's *Babel Tower* actually 'takes off' from a Murdoch play, *The Servants and the Snow* (*S&S*); Byatt is reworking a situation which has been presented in Murdoch's work which has intrigued her. She is working out different solutions for the same dilemma and she alters the destinies of the characters as part of the exercise.

Murdoch's play *The Servants and the Snow* is a showcase of her thinking, as the limitations of time and writing style imposed by the nature of a stage play have resulted in the simple and blunt statement of Murdoch's view of the moral responsibility of the individual in a community no longer operating within a religious framework with a belief in God. The entrenched power of custom and convention is revealed by the action of the play. Historical time and physical location (Richard Todd suggests that the feudal estate is Balkan, the time 'impossible to determine' (Todd 1984: 73)) do not affect the argument and the revelations. The deep snow and the isolated setting of the country estate preclude travel and communication; both are commonly held to generate a little bit of communal madness (*S&S* 75). Two forces which might potentially exercise a controlling influence are eliminated from the social experiment early on in the action of the play. God and the middle class are absent. The play commences with the arrival on the estate of Basil, the new master, and his wife Oriane.

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Babbletower (to which reference has been made in the chapter 'Fire and Flood') is a cautionary tale which unwinds itself through the text of Byatt's *Babel Tower*, announcing itself by its smaller print and introduced always by the depiction of a small shell. The identity of the author is eventually revealed (*BT* 227). Once it is published, the work is condemned as pornographic and legal proceedings are set in motion to suppress it. As in Murdoch's play, exact time and location are not revealed. Groups of aristocrats and their servants arrive at a remote fortified location (La Tour Bruyarde), having escaped some terror which might have been the French Revolution. They are determined to create a new community of equal opportunity without making any social distinctions and to escape 'rhetoric, fanaticism and Terror' (*BB* 11). The community is headed by Culvert,

who owns the vast and ancient sprawl of buildings; he is partnered by the beautiful Lady Roseace.

In Murdoch's play, Basil enters into his inheritance and declares that his rule over the two hundred servants on his family estate is to be quite different from the tyranny practised by his forbears. The systems of check and control which might have been enforced by the structures generated by established religion are ruled out of this social experiment when, early in the first act, Oriane declares to the priest that she and her husband do not make a practice of going to church. Speaking to Father Ambrose, she explains:

> My husband and I are not churchgoers ... We are enlightened - sorry - modern - for better or worse, if you see what I mean. ... I mean we are not religious people in the old-fashioned sense. ... We believe in ethics, very strongly, in ethical duties, in virtue, of course, very strongly - (*S&S* 24)

Father Ambrose himself opposes Basil's plans for the building of a new church insisting that on his demise 'these people will revert to a paganism which is very much more natural to them than the religion which I have preached and failed to practise' (*S&S* 59). Basil is unaffected by this declaration and insists that a church will be built for, he proclaims, even if religion is 'purely symbolic' it still plays 'an important ethical role' (*S&S* 59).

Culvert is far more radical and extreme, for he is determined to condemn not just the church but every social institution which exerts control over human behaviour:

> It will be found, Culvert said, I believe, upon just reflection, that many of the evil distinctions and oppressions in our world come from institutions we have not dared to question. Most of us have already questioned and rejected the religion of our forefathers and compatriots, seeing to what evils they have led, but we have not sufficiently studied how those *unnatural* institutions – marriage, the family, the patriarchy, the pedagogic authoritarian relation between teacher and pupil – have also harmed our natural impulses and inclinations. (*BT* 64)

Each community comprises only masters and servants: oppressor and oppressed. The moderating influence of the middle class has been excluded. Grundig, the estate manager, leaves Basil's estate before the snow precludes travel (*S&S* 76) and the two social extremes (master and servant) which remain invite extreme reactions. Beyond the ancient hierarchy in operation upon Basil's estate lurks a gipsy community which operates outside the established order. No members of the middle class have

accompanied Culvert's party which is made up only of aristocrats, military commanders and servants. Beyond the fortifications of La Tour Bruyarde a cruel and barbaric race of Krebs hunt and kill and practise bloody fertility rituals. Their existence is a constant threat and source of fear. Gipsies and Krebs represent the disorder and lawlessness into which any community might collapse should the operation of convention and ritual fail.

On the death of his father, Basil has inherited the country estate on which he grew up. Unlike his father, who killed a manservant in order to take his wife (*S&S* 71), his grandfather 'who kept a harem' and his great-grandfather who 'used to have all the local girls on their wedding night' (*S&S* 19), Basil is a determined social reformer. Newly arrived on the estate, he addresses the assembled servants in the Servants' Hall:

> My friends, we are all servants of necessity. ... This is a time of rebirth and renewal and at this time I would like you all to feel that we are not master and servants so much as fellow workers in an enterprise which concerns us all and belongs to us all. You have your work and I have mine and it is to our common advantage that this estate should flourish: ... I have in mind equality and shared responsibility, I have in mind a recognition of the dignity of labour and the dignity of the individual. I have in mind everything that is meant by justice. All authority ought in the end to rest upon mutual need, the need for each other which is felt by different members of a happy family. ... I look forward with the warmest anticipation to our joint labours. (*S&S* 25-26)

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Culvert is also given to magniloquent speechifying by which he intends imposing his own revolutionary views on his community. As a direct result of his own passion for the dramatic, he introduces drama, debate and story-telling as a means to reveal 'the true patterns of passion and desires that rule each of our lives' in order that 'the community will the more easily be able to see how these energies may be cunningly put to good use for the common good and the common delight' (*BT* 65).

However much Basil might advocate equality and protest against the tendency of his servants to fall to their knees before him, he is flummoxed by his introduction to Maxim, son of the servant Francis James who was murdered by his father, grandson of the devoted retainer Peter Jack. When Basil tries to prevent Maxim from falling to his knees it is embarrassing when all present realise that obeisance was never Maxim's intention. Basil generously offers him the position of huntsman which Maxim, voice of progress and reason who rejects the old order, brusquely turns down. 'He shall be my huntsman,

as his grandfather was before him,' (*S&S* 27) cries Basil, not awake to the irony of his attempt to perpetuate the very order of subservience which he thinks he is intent upon overthrowing. Culvert will be similarly perplexed (but somewhat more accommodating than Basil) by the refusal of his valet, Damian, to attend to his comfort and pleasure once the distinctions between servant and served have been declared no longer to exist. Damian reveals that he was only able to exhibit joy in the performance of the services Culvert required by means of fantasies of violence and cruelty, which enabled him to fulfil his duty to his master (*BT* 70).

The experiences of the women in Murdoch's play function as a parallel image of oppression. Just as the servants are submissive and disempowered within the estate, so are the women in relationship to men. Oriane repeatedly expresses her adherence to the social ideal of the dutiful wife which she has espoused despite her deeply troubled marriage. She exhibits an insight into social mechanics to which her husband is blind. Her rejection of the advances of her servant who in the new liberal era dreams of being her lover (*S&S* 101) and her execution of her husband indicate that she will not tolerate dishonour and has a higher regard for social convention than for personal happiness. She exacts the death of Basil when it becomes apparent that he intends to revert to custom and take his father's mistress, Marina, as his own. In a public ceremony before the people of his estate Marina is married to the servant Peter Jack, but it is clear that her future lies with Basil. The enactment of this ritual is designed to suggest that he has taken over his father's mantle of authority.

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Culvert and the Lady Roseace's relationship develops differently. Culvert encourages Roseace to accept the advances of Damian, his valet, by requiring her to act out such an attraction in a theatre performance. Theatre is used as a tool in his community to explore potential desires. The acted desire soon becomes real and Culvert defends himself against this development by denigrating the couple: 'He had concluded, for himself, that Roseace's breasts were crumpled in texture and that Damian's buttocks were overweening and absurd. ... He had never noticed that Roseace simpered' (*BT* 202). Lady Roseace is also the source of resistance within the *Babbletower* community. She will ultimately flee with the beautiful Narcisse as an accomplice but Culvert will not tolerate her freedom of choice and will kill Narcisse and torture Roseace to death with a

refined instrument which will at first deliver physical pleasure which graduates into exquisite pain. Roseace realises that the design and perfection of such an instrument must have taken a considerable time; she says to Culvert: 'You must have planned the Instrument, from the earliest days of our coming here, or even before ... So when we came you knew it would end here?' (*BT* 413). The satisfaction of all appetites within Culvert's community has merely created more and more perverse desires, ending in the desire to torture, to delight in the pain of others, and finally to die.

Culvert and the Lady Roseace (before her defection) are united by mutual passion, while Basil and Oriane are bound by honour and duty. Oriane's reluctance to leave the city and immure herself in the countryside has resulted in a delay of six months between the death of Basil's father and Basil's arrival on the estate. His happiness on his arrival is evident and Oriane intones: 'A good wife must be consoled by her husband's happiness. I am consoled' (*S&S* 20). Marina, mother of Maxim and mistress to Basil's tyrannical father, proclaims: 'A married woman is a slave. ... All men are violent in the end' (*S&S* 39). Marina is beguiled by several options which the power of her sex appeal grants her. She appears to have enjoyed her role as mistress of the house when she lived with Basil's father. Now betrothed to Peter Jack who is willing to honour her wishes and treat her with dignity, she pines for a life beyond the river, which she has never crossed; a life which promises new sights and sounds. She believes the promise of Patrice the gipsy that life with the gipsies means 'no more servitude, no more work. ... There are no masters and servants there, and women are the equals of men. ... All gipsy marriages are happy' (*S&S* 44). She attempts to flee with Patrice, apparently incapable of believing her son's caution:

> The big gipsy camps are places of horror where every man's hand is against every other man and the strong rule the weak without mercy. Where there is lawlessness and total freedom all men are swine. What they call liberty is the war of everyone against everyone. Their lives are nasty, brutish and short. ... It may not be very gay here and the arrangements may be stupid, but at least there are arrangements and there are rules and that's better than having none at all. (*S&S* 56)

Peter Jack, in conversation with his fellow servants, agrees that he does not believe in the existence of God but suggests: 'I think we should live as if there were God' for 'human beings aren't made for perfection. We have very little goodness in our hearts and yet we have to live with each other' (*S&S* 36). These are of course Murdoch's own views

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expounded in the philosophical essay entitled 'The Idea of Perfection' in which she points out that people living in community are called to love their neighbour 'in a practical and not a pathological sense' (Murdoch 1964: 21) and to look 'outward at Christ and not inward at Reason' because 'self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else' (Murdoch 1964: 31). Looking inward at Reason is precisely the course which damns Culvert's project in Byatt's *Babbletower*.

The uneducated but dignified Peter Jack has been made Murdoch's mouthpiece. It is Peter Jack who intervenes between the enraged Maxim and Basil, his terrified master. He is shot dead (*S&S* 111). He has refused to support the community view that justice is required of Basil for the sins of his father and has paid for his views with his life. Peter Jack, although not articulate, is percipient. When Basil proclaims his desire 'to rule by love' and for 'the whole estate to be a house of virtue' (*S&S* 46) Peter Jack attempts to explain that this is impracticable, which is subsequently proved by the action of the play:

> PETER JACK: You can't hustle a lot of people into being good. All you can do is stop them from hurting each other, and let them do things for themselves which are fairly sort of harmless. When people are all together they aren't even decent unless they have to be.
> [PETER *is desperately trying to express something important which he can only partly grasp.* BASIL *is authoritative, impressive, explaining gently.*]
> BASIL: Peter. Unless we attempt far more than we can achieve we won't achieve anything. Morality is a matter of at least *aiming* at perfection.
> PETER JACK: Well, yes, but the estate - it's different - it isn't quite like that just a matter of morality -
> BASIL: What could be more a matter of morality than when we decide about the most general arrangements of our lives!
> PETER JACK: No, I mean - When men try to be decent together it isn't like when a man tries to be good by himself.
> BASIL: Why?
> PETER JACK: Forcing oneself isn't like forcing other people. ... And if, just by yourself, you try too much and get in a muddle, that's your affair. But if we are all together trying for too much and we get in a muddle everybody will suffer and bad people will take advantage.
> [FATHER AMBROSE *is nodding agreement.*]
> HANS JOSEPH: That's what I say, Sir, you must keep them down, keep them down.
> PETER JACK: I don't mean that either. Sorry, I can't put it. (*S&S* 47)

Murdoch has explored the notion of the death of a scapegoat or an innocent as punishment of the community's sins. Maxim brings in the frozen body of the unlettered and innocent boy Mikey (*S&S* 108) and in language with a strong Biblical bent condemns Basil: 'Because one little one has been utterly lost I condemn you' (*S&S* 110). Father

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Ambrose argues against the taking of Basil's life for Mikey's death and instead offers up himself, revealing that he murdered Basil's father: 'I confess it now. Let my life be given here and then let all rest' (*S&S* 110). This offer is not accepted. Peter Jack foils Maxim's attempt to take Basil's life in payment for Basil's father's sins (*S&S* 101); the payment of Peter Jack's life will not appease the community.

This idea of the death of the innocent or the scapegoat and its failure to redeem the sins of the community is extended by Byatt as has already been outlined in the chapter 'Fire and Flood' (see pages 40-41). In the community established at La Tour Bruyarde, the children of the Lady Mavis are bullied, tormented and then fatally harmed by a group of young boys who have been encouraged to act without restraint. The distraught mother will thereafter prepare a feast for the community at the climax of which she will leap to her death from the battlements. Culvert, whose action in nurturing a permissive community is the direct cause of her loss and distress, will exert himself strenuously to save her, without success. She sacrifices herself in an effort to stem the blood-lust and 'deep-rooted desire to hurt' (*BT* 274) which has emerged from the community's mutual exploration of their hidden longings. Instead she provides a further goad towards the behaviour she strove to end. 'Hers was the old illusion,' comments one of the wise old men who observe the life of the community without succumbing to its vices, 'that self-punishment will shame the wicked. So many women hurt themselves, thinking their pain will hurt their persecutors, who take pleasure in it' (*BT* 276). The community is in fact only urged on to self-destruction all the faster. The story will end with a heap of white bones lying at the foot of La Tour Bruyarde.

Basil is drawn back into the primitive law of the peasants who people his estate when he agrees to fulfill the requirements of custom and take his father's mistress to his bed on the night of the ritual ceremony of her marriage to another. Oriane's response is to shoot and kill him. The arrival of her authoritative brother the General on the estate almost immediately thereafter suggests that she will be protected from the consequences of her act (*S&S* 112). Culvert actively searches out primitive rites in order to provide his community with entertainment and diversion. He *wants* to be lashed and tormented in the course of the topsy-turvey rites he revives. He in fact longs for his own death which will eventually come when his community is overwhelmed by Krebs who roast and eat all but

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the wily old men (one of whom has a long and varied history in the military) who escape. Oriane's brother is an officer and he too employs his training for survival – but it is his sister's honour rather than his life which he preserves.

Culvert's proclaimed intention was to liberate his community from the constriction and limitation imposed by social convention. He employed ancient rituals such as the staging of the Rite or Play for the New Year on the Shortest Day (*BT* 264) which is designed to relieve the 'lassitude and disaffection' (*BT* 256) evident in his community as winter closes in. As the Lady Roseace perceived, Culvert knew from the start that his social experiment would end in destruction and death and he had applied his mind well in advance to the torture to which he looked forward to performing. By comparison Basil's attempt to liberate the people on his estate and do away with social distinction was more earnest although possibly not entirely sincere. However, he finally submitted to the deeply entrenched rites and customs and brought dishonour on his wife. The ancient rites transgressed her social code and she exacted the penalty of death. Although this occurred in full view of the community, her brother's military rank commands sufficient social influence to ensure that the blame can be laid elsewhere. Both social experiments fail. Basil and the people of his estate cannot move beyond the deeply entrenched custom which informs their lives. Culvert and his cronies are destroyed by their own inherent impulse to harm and destroy which is an even more ancient force than custom. Both Murdoch and Byatt are preaching the need for a moral social ordering to regulate human behaviour.

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5.3 Denying pattern and shape: accident and chance

The intricacy of pattern and the delight of shape please the questing human eye and the curious human mind – whether it is pattern and shape which occurs in nature or which is created in art. It is inevitable that as Murdoch and Byatt shape into fiction the observations which come to mind and the stories which come to hand, they create their own patterns with the material. Any number of examples could be noted; here are two. Murdoch's novels *An Accidental Man* (1971) and *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983) make

patterns with each other. Each features a self-styled victim who uses his seeming powerlessness as a means to manipulate and control his family. Each 'victim' claims for himself the role announced in the novel's title. (Austin Gibson Grey regards himself as an accidental man, George McCaffrey believes himself to be the philosopher's rightful pupil.) An entirely different character is ultimately shown to own the title.

An Accidental Man features the self-styled victim Austin Gibson Grey who abuses his friends and relatives and regards himself as an accidental man; I argue that his tactics are consciously planned and executed and are not a result of accident (see page 104). He uses his apparent weaknesses as a source of power. The accidental man (as I have argued – see pages 124 – 125) is in fact Ludwig Leferrier who has been conditioned by his devoted parents and their careful upbringing. All his decisions and actions are taken or performed in consequence of this. Even his accidental encounter with the distraught wife of Austin can only operate upon his life and change its course because he regrets not reacting to this encounter in the manner dictated by his education and principles. George McCaffrey, another self-styled victim, regards himself as the rightful pupil of the philosopher John Robert Rozanov in Murdoch's novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*. He is rejected by Rozanov both as a suitable candidate to be a student of philosophy and as a personal pupil. Just as Austin is not the accidental man of that novel's title, I do not believe that George McCaffrey is the pupil referred to in the title of this novel. Rather the pupil is Hattie Meynell, Rozanov's grand-daughter whom he loves with sexual passion. He finds her an apt pupil for philosophical debate (*PP* 323) and once he has confessed his secret to her she begs him to be her teacher (*PP* 541) but it is too late. Both Austin and George destroy precious possessions of those they believe to wield power over them. Both emerge in more powerful positions at the close of each novel. Here, in two of Murdoch's novels separated by more than a decade of the author's writing life, is an established pattern for the percipient reader to find and wonder at.

Byatt achieves something similar in the two novellas *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel*, published under the joint title *Angels & Insects*. The stories are set roughly ten years apart. The first invites the reader to consider whether we are not fully human unless we acknowledge ourselves to be in part animal; the second story considers our spiritual aspirations. There is a practical link in that the couple who set out on a voyage at the end

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of the first novella are aboard a ship reported lost at sea in the second novella. However there is hope at the end of the whole, when the ship returns safely: Byatt's blessing on the human project of life, wonder and investigation.

However it is not pattern and shape that I wish to consider, but rather the acknowledgement by both Murdoch and Byatt that real life denies pattern by the operations of accident and chance. As discussed in the preceding chapter, both authors are fascinated by the manipulation and wielding of power in human interactions. In the 1985 taped discussion between them, Murdoch complimented Byatt on the construction of an accident the unexpectedness of which shocks the reader and therefore recreates the true horror of accident. She also complimented her on the technical expertise apparent in her use of prologues which frighten and torment the reader who senses disaster but doesn't know what is to happen. This readerly anxiety might be aroused, for example, by the narrator's comment in the prologue to *Still Life*, set in 1980, that Daniel 'had become a specialist in wild blows of chance' (*SL* 9). The action of the novel commences in 1953: the reader is left to speculate fearfully on the operations of chance in the action.

Sometimes power falls to the individual by chance or circumstance and Murdoch and Byatt also explore the role played in human affairs by these forces. In his brief examination of the theoretical beliefs which underlie Iris Murdoch's prescription for the contemporary novel, Richard Todd notes:

> Under its aspect of standing in some representative relation to reality, art must to some extent be false to reality, since that form which is its way of being recognised as 'art' and which it manifestly possesses is at variance with the irrelevance and messiness (or to use a Murdoch word, 'contingency') which characterises experience of life. In aiming to depict life, art must therefore lie to life whenever it imparts a sense of form where none is actually present. (Todd 1979: 12)

He points out that for the academic reader of Iris Murdoch's novels it is difficult to reconcile her self-confessed concern for pattern-making with her 'forcefully expressed beliefs that life is random and incomplete and that art should not shirk from reflecting these qualities' (Todd 1979: 12). Murdoch and Byatt appear together in the 1985 ICA video *Writers in Conversation* which was filmed shortly after the publication of Byatt's *Still Life*. Murdoch expresses admiration for the accident which takes the reader by surprise in the novel and this gives rise to much discussion of the role of chance and accident in literature and in life. During the time for questions a member of the audience

asks both authors to elaborate on 'the imperative of the random'. In her reply, Byatt notes:

> One starts up expecting life to have a pattern and a shape and to get better and ... to have a certain goal and an aim and one meets philosophies which reinforce this, which, as it were, offer you norms of conduct to achieve ways of being ... The older you get the more you see that the world is not like this and if one does not take the blows of chance and the vulnerability of the human being ... the city ... of the whole world by now, you're not looking at the nature of things. (*ICA video*)

She suggests that accidents recounted in fiction are an imposition of the author rather than an experience of accident and then realises that this is not true of Iris Murdoch, so that she adds: 'I think Iris really *does* understand that chance operates in the world in this terrifying way and can change things overnight and that all our best endeavours are subject to its laws' (*ICA video*).

As a result of Murdoch's fascination with contingency, those of her characters who are given to introspection and philosophising often ponder its role and significance in human affairs. In the novel *An Accidental Man*, Garth Gibson Grey considers work which he might undertake: 'The contingent details of choice disturbed him. Everything that was offered him was too ... accidental, not significant enough' (*AM* 159). People appear to be powerless and ineffectual in the face of contingency. Austin Gibson Grey casts himself as a victim in order to manipulate friends and family. The more typical mindset of his class and era is evident in the thinking of Byatt's character Frederica Potter who blames herself rather than chance or circumstance for her choice of marriage partner:

> She is accustomed to telling herself her marriage is unhappy, but she is also accustomed to blaming herself for this. She made a wrong decision, she did not take account of the circumstances, wise little remarks of this kind she makes constantly to herself ... Poor Frederica is so desirous of being responsible for her own fate. Human beings invented Original Sin because the alternative hypothesis was worse. Better to be at the centre of a universe whose terrors are all a direct result of our own failings, than to be helpless victims of random and largely malevolent forces. (*BT* 80)

The chance or unforeseen circumstance which drove Frederica into her ill-considered marriage was the accidental death of her sister. She was able to consider the sensual but unintellectual Nigel Reiver as a suitable husband 'because Stephanie's death annihilated me, at least temporarily, so I was able to live in my body' (*BT* 126). Frederica has thought much about the accident and chance which gave rise to her marriage:

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> Frederica thinks she perhaps married Nigel because Stephanie had married Daniel, and was dead, is dead, will be dead. Stephanie had stepped outside the Cambridge circle of talk and endless discriminations, moral and aesthetic; she had grasped at sensuous happiness. (*BT* 125)

Another Byatt character who shares Frederica's attitudes two decades later on is Roland Michell, one of the central players in *Possession:*

> He thought of himself as a latecomer. He had arrived too late for things that were still in the air but vanished, the whole ferment and brightness and journeying and youth of the 1960s, the blissful dawn of what he and his contemporaries saw as a pretty blank day ... In the expansive 1960s he would have advanced rapidly and involuntarily, but now he saw himself as a failure and felt vaguely responsible for this. (*P* 10 - 11)

Roland's partner Val shares this sense of failure which makes her very aware of her vulnerability in the face of contingency. Her sense of failure is more concrete for when Roland does 'steadily and predictably well' (*P* 12) in the Finals, Val does badly; she writes her Required Essay ('Male Ventriloquism: The Women of Randolph Henry Ash') on the works of the poet in whom Roland has specialised: '[It] was judged to be good work and discounted by the examiners as probably largely by Roland, which was doubly unjust, since he had refused to look at it, and did not agree with its central proposition' (*P* 12). Not able to pursue an academic career, Val takes on temping jobs and constantly describes all aspects of her new way of life as 'menial'. She is aware of the fragmented and senseless nature of life:

> I see some things, from my menial vantage point. Last week, when I was in that ceramics export place, I found some photographs under a file in my boss's desk. Things being done to little boys. With chains and gags and – dirt - This week, ever so efficiently filing records for this surgeon, I just happened to come across a sixteen-year-old who had his leg off last year ... - and it's started up for certain now in his other leg, he doesn't know, but I know, I know lots of things. None of them fit together, none of them makes any sense. There was a man who went off to Amsterdam to buy some diamonds ... and as he's walking along a canal admiring some housefronts someone stabs him in the back, destroys a kidney, gangrene sets in, now he's dead. Just like that. ... Oh it's very *interesting*, my menial keyhole observations, make no mistake. Just it doesn't make sense and leaves me nowhere. (*P* 19-20)

Salvation comes for Val in fairytale style: not quite a knight on a charger, but a young lawyer (Euan MacIntyre) with a scarlet Porsche (*P* 124) and part ownership of a racehorse (*P* 414). Val thinks that her lover's face bears a resemblance to his horse and quotes Robert Graves to him: 'Oh Love, be fed with apples while you may' (*P* 417). The line of poetry suggests that the state of intoxication which love is may be only temporary.

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This view is supported by the lovers' exchange after Val has suggested that Euan's love might be '[a]n act of charity' (*P* 417):

> 'Don't be silly.'
> But he had always loved mending things. Broken models, stray kittens, grounded kites.
> 'Look, Euan, I'm no good at being happy, I shall mess you up.'
> 'That depends on me. On me too, that is. O love, be fed with apples while you may.' (*P* 417)

Of course the most destructive operation of chance is accidental death. I have already noted Murdoch's commendation of Byatt's description of Stephanie Orton's accidental death which takes the unwary reader by surprise – unless the reader has noticed that the narrator has never made reference to Stephanie's future as has been done of other characters, most often Frederica. For example into the narrative of 1968 when Frederica is thirty, Byatt interjects Frederica's thoughts as a woman of sixty – a woman the reader can never meet or know: 'Later – much later – when Frederica who had felt old at thirty was surprised at how she did not feel old at sixty – she looked back on this time' (*WW* 49).

In Byatt's novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, the only son of the headmaster of Blesford Ride School 'had one day in 1947 fallen from a low bench in a playground, hit his head and died instantly, aged ten' (*VG* 225). The effect of this accident on the life of the boy's mother is described during an account of the party of people who assemble at the Thones' home to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on television. There are various reactions to the grandeur and significance of the occasion but Mrs Thone is 'little moved':

> Her interest in the future, and her real interest in the outside world, had ceased with her son. Once she had understood exactly that between a good breakfast and an end of break bell a boy could run, fall, smash, twitch, stop moving forever and begin to decay, she understood also that nothing could be undone, no air raid, no death camp, no monstrous genesis, and that the important thing about herself was that she had not much time and it did not matter greatly what she did with it. In lieu of caring ... she had developed a sharp and pointless pride in the keeping up of appearances. The Coronation was an appearance that was at least being pretty well kept up. ... The dead king was buried and his daughter was his future. For her his going was simply another landmark, a further indication that her own real life, including any future she might have cared for, was in the past. (*VG* 243)

This description of the invisible destruction of the life of a mother after the chance death of her child is made all the more poignant by the dedication of the novel by Byatt to her eleven-year-old son Charles (*VG* 5):

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For my son

Charles Byatt

July 19th 1961 – July 22nd 1972

'Death happens, love happens, and all human life is compact of accident and chance' (*NG* 307) is a comment mediated through the consciousness of Mary Clothier, a character in Murdoch's novel *The Nice and the Good*. She is haunted by the accidental death of her husband and is aware of herself as a 'piece of earth', a 'concoction of frailty' and 'a momentary shadow upon the chaos of the accidental world' (*NG* 307). Both Murdoch and Byatt are acutely aware of this aspect of human living; both reflect it in their fiction and each has appreciated it in the work of the other.

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6 TRESPASS AND TRANSGRESSION

6.1 Introduction

The exploration of the shared philosophy of Murdoch and Byatt which has been undertaken in this thesis has revealed an element of destruction at work in the process of transforming life into literature. The chapter entitled 'Fire and Flood' examines the ways in which the ancient images of established religion have been reworked in the fiction of Murdoch and Byatt to preach a new message of salvation: that spiritual hunger can be fulfilled, and moral exemplars provided, by the work of art.

The chapter entitled 'Art and Destruction' examines the creative ways in which Murdoch and Byatt use the visual arts in their fiction created by the written word. Their fiction reveals both that the process of art can involve destruction and that the urge to destroy is latent in human nature and is a crucial element in the power struggles which characterise human community. The chapter entitled 'Power and Enchantment' considers the

machinery of power: it exists within the unspoken social agreement to abide by convention and ritual which has evolved through the ages; it exists within charasmatic personality; and it exists in the genius of the artist who exploits the resources of art and history to create a fiction which conveys truth. The fifth chapter, 'Pattern and Shape', examines both the shared resources drawn on by Murdoch and Byatt to shape their art (for example their use of mythology, Shakespeare and fairytale as substructure for their fiction) and how these authors treat those elements of human life which deny pattern and shape: chance, accident and death.

Murdoch and Byatt's art involves pillaging and repositing what has gone before, but this is the nature of art. If an artistic process does not forge new techniques and make provocative new claims, then it is decoration, and not art. Murdoch and Byatt have reshaped the world which they have observed and recorded but this creative process seems inevitably to involve a more sinister form of destruction. The author appears to find raw material irresistible and in consequence crosses the boundaries of what is acceptable and becomes guilty of trespass and transgression.

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6.2 Trespass: violating real life

Byatt has declared herself to be acutely conscious of the damage which can be caused when novelists succumb to the temptation to use the events and experiences of real people's lives as raw material for their work:

> My early attempts at fiction were, formally, very concerned with its dangers. My second novel, *The Game*, turned on various metaphors of the writer, the narrator, the storyteller, as one who eats up reality. ... Coleridge used the image of the serpent for the Imagination. I saw novelists as consumers. I quoted Dr Johnson, who wrote of 'the hunger of the imagination that preys incessantly upon life', and used the cliché 'food for thought' to represent the fate of people attacked by the novelist-in-the-novel with the sharp teeth and gaping jaws of her fiction. I have known, personally, human beings whose lives have been wrecked or mutilated by being made objects of other people's fictive attentions. (Byatt 1991: 22)

Despite this declaration, Byatt appears to have used John Bayley's published accounts of Iris Murdoch's decline into illness and death as material for fiction in the short story 'The Pink Ribbon' published in the 2003 collection *Little Black Book of Stories*. The similarities between Byatt's characters (James Ennis and his wife Madeleine) and the

Bayleys are too numerous to ignore. Even the choice of the surname 'Ennis' for the fictitious couple seems to be game-playing for it calls to mind Murdoch's 'discreet and self-effacing narrator' (*PP* 16) who introduces himself in the novel *The Philosopher's Pupil* only as N. So, in the interests of anonymity, the narrator names the town in which the action takes place as ' "N's Town," or, let us say, "Ennistone"' (*PP* 16).

Both couples, the fictitious James and Madeleine Ennis and the real John Bayley and Iris Murdoch, met at university (*BB* 245) and thereafter entered into long, apparently happy, childless marriages (*BB* 240). The wife of each couple worked for a government ministry during and after the war (Madeleine Ennis in the Ministry of Information (*BB* 247) and Murdoch in the Treasury) and both husbands served as officers in the armed forces (James Ennis in the airforce (*BB* 234, 241) and John Bayley in the infantry) and were teachers thereafter in civilian life. Madeleine Ennis is suffering from an unspecified degenerative disease and is no longer in her right mind. John Bayley published three books recording the exhausting and emotional experience of caring for Murdoch once she had succumbed to Alzheimer's disease.

Byatt's description of the ailing Madeleine Ennis could equally describe the grim and uncomprehending face of Murdoch in any number of the photographs taken of her towards the end of her life: 'a heavy grey face with an angry mouth and dark eye-caverns' (*BB* 234). The first words the reader hears Madeleine utter are 'Maddy Mad Mado' (*BB* 233) which include the M, d and o of Murdoch. John Bayley wrote an account of how he awoke one night to hear his wife conversing with people: 'Who were these new friends of Iris, with whom she was chatting as if they were already old friends?' (Bayley 1999: 10). Mad Mado complains of too many visitors (*BB* 243). Mad Mado is given to accidents 'which happened constantly, of every description' (*BB* 234). Bayley is more specific and less kind when he describes his wife's 'toilet habits' as 'unpredictable' (Bayley 1999: 141) and makes the unlikely claim that cleaning up after her is merely a 'small domestic challenge' which he doesn't mind, especially as 'Iris seems to enjoy seeing me do it' (Bayley 1999: 141).

Mad Mado can be distracted by children's programmes on television, particularly the Teletubbies: 'portly coloured creatures, purple, green, yellow, scarlet, titupping and

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trotting' (*BB* 235). The BBC Four Omnibus documentary on Murdoch briefly cuts to excerpts from the Teletubbies as Bayley explains how they intrigued and amused his wife in her child-like state. James Ennis refers to occasions when his wife tries to get out and rattles the door (*BB* 236) and John Bayley describes Murdoch's 'endless agitations – banging on the front windows to alert passers-by, jerking endlessly at the locked front door' (Bayley 1999: 19). James Ennis knows himself to be 'a vessel of seething rage, against fate, against age, against, God help him (but there was no God) mad Mado herself' (*BB* 241); exasperated by his wife's failure to settle to sleep, he 'raised his hand to slap or punch the moaning creature, and she backed away, bubbling' (*BB* 264). Bayley records similar sensations:

> Hardly a days [*sic*] go by without my flying into a brief frenzy ... She knows the violence that is in me at moments ... Once she put her hands over her head and whimpered 'Don't hit me'. She knew better than I did what might happen. At one level I felt horribly shocked: at another I simply accepted the possibility of what she was saying. I did want to hit her. (Bayley 1999: 62)

James Ennis finds a measure of relief from the stress of enduring his home-bound 'captivity, with its sick smell and its lurching violence' (*BB* 242) by torturing the Teletubby called Dipsy which he bought for his wife (chosen because 'it's a slightly bilious colour and the name's appropriate' (*BB* 240)). He twists Dipsy's wrist and stabs him repeatedly with steel hairpins (*BB* 250, 265). The daily employment of a pink ribbon in his wife's hair is another expression of his anger, resentment and frustration, for pink was a colour which, in her normal state of mind, she had found distasteful (*BB* 256).

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Dido, the beautiful 'fetch' who bursts in upon James Ennis's lonely evening vigils, wears a 'flimsy scarlet silk shift' (*BB* 21) which might owe its colour and substance to the red silk dress worn by the young Iris in Richard Eyre's 2002 feature film *Iris* which was based on John Bayley's books. In the film Iris Murdoch and John Bayley slip away from a university function and go up to Bayley's room. After seizing the champagne out of Bayley's fumbling hands, the young Iris (played by Kate Winslet) drapes her red silk shawl over a lamp and initiates a kiss. Her calm authority and sexual self-confidence are similar to those of Byatt's character Dido, who is in fact a manifestation of Madeleine Ennis as a young woman. John Bayley records his personal creation of such a fantasy figure to whom he refers as 'the Perfect Woman': 'Her perfection consists in not existing,

which is what fantasy requires. ... I need all the distraction I can get from mere physiological reality. Escape is all' (Bayley 1999: 168). Bayley also records his indulgence in 'memories ... memory-creations ... charms created or invented by the past, charms against the despair of the present' (Bayley 1999: 145) which might well describe Dido's role in Byatt's short story.

Byatt's short story describes 'two people whose calm lives were a form of frenzy' (*BB* 237). Mad Mado is wholly dependent on James Ennis. Once she 'had not liked to tell him – no, she had not liked to tell him – where she was going or for how long' (*BB* 238). John Bayley endured a number of sexual and emotional liaisons conducted by his wife during the course of their marriage and allowed his own literary career to languish as hers flourished. In the BBC Four Omnibus documentary, biographer Peter Conradi describes the Bayley marriage as 'a happy base' to and from which Murdoch freely moved. She was able to 'have adventures, excursions, diversions, go out into the world, fall in love sometimes – and John was always there'. Byatt's Mad Mado had been the social success, for 'she was the one who had had a network of friends and acquaintances, some of them known to him, many of them not' (*BB* 237) and her work also excluded him for she was 'always secretive about what she actually *did*, earning more than he did, which he tried not to mind' (*BB* 248). Each husband has a twofold impulse to revenge: for humiliations borne during the course of a long marriage and for the frustration of caring for a wife who is utterly dependent and no longer sane.

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Despite her mental state of infancy, Madelaine Ennis seems to be conscious of her husband's impulses to revenge, for she speaks of it in riddles:

> 'They want?' said Deanna.
> 'Lamb cutlets,' said Mad Mado. 'Cold cutlets. Very cold, with sauce.'
> 'She means revenge,' said James. 'A dish best eaten cold. It's somehow encouraging, when there's any sort of meaning.' (*BB* 243-4)

I would argue that John Bayley's three books written about Iris Murdoch's illness and degeneration are a gentle form of revenge for a life lived in the shadow of a talent greater than his own. Byatt's use of the last tormented years of John Bayley and Iris Murdoch's life together as raw material for a short story is an equally selfish and destructive act, for

it is a form of betrayal of her early apprenticeship to and life-long friendship with Murdoch.

Yet it may be possible that a writer cannot pass up the opportunity of working the raw material of real life into fiction. Early in her career as a writer, Byatt identified 'the writer, the narrator, the storyteller, as one who eats up reality'; she 'saw novelists as consumers' and identified with Dr Johnson's image of the hungry imagination 'that preys incessantly upon life', which she extended with her own image of the novelist-in-the-novel who attacks people (Byatt 1991: 22). Despite this awareness, she too has attacked real people, her friend and mentor, 'with the sharp teeth and gaping jaws of her fiction' (Byatt 1991: 22). Yet from the combined confessions and revelations of John Bayley and AN Wilson in their accounts of Murdoch's life, it is clear that Murdoch operated in the same way and was incapable of resisting the opportunity when the pain of real life offered material for her fiction.

AN Wilson identifies one such instance in his account of a revelation made to him by John Bayley in 1977. After their marriage, Murdoch wrote her second novel (*The Bell*) which she showed to Bayley before publication. He claimed, in a private conversation with AN Wilson, to have been appalled by what he read:

> He hated the whole tone of the book. He felt it emanated from a mind which he could not like, let alone love. Moreover, IM had plainly used in this story things which JOB had told her in confidence. He felt betrayed, felt she had woven secret things, his secret things, into the texture of the story, as if absolutely anything was just *there* to be plundered by the Novelist.
>
> I was completely stunned by this confession. (Wilson 2003: 172-3)

John Bayley reveals some of his 'secret things' perfectly cheerfully in the books which he writes about his wife and upon which he piggybacks his own autobiography. The story relevant to Murdoch's novel *The Bell* is that of an older woman (whom Bayley calls Mary) with whom he fell in love shortly after the war during the period he was writing his first novel and while living and teaching at St Antony's, a former Anglican convent. The face of 'Mary' (AN Wilson identifies the woman as Katherine Watson) surfaces in the memories he records in *Iris and the Friends: a Year of Memories*:

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> And scarcely was the novel finished before I had another fact to dream about … The new face had come from a nunnery itself, as it happened, but its owner had finally been rejected as a postulant, and had come out again, however reluctantly, into the world. As soon as I saw that face I felt myself to be seriously in love. (Bayley 1999: 124)

AN Wilson met 'Mary' at a lunch party at the Bayleys which she attended with a companion:

> When the two women had gone, IM announces, her eyes ablaze, 'You realise that John and Katherine Watson were once engaged?' … 'You see,' said IM. And she paused. One felt she had choreographed the whole afternoon around the sentence she was about to utter. 'When John first knew Katherine, she was a nun.' (Wilson 2003: 179, 180)

Based on this experience, Wilson claims that

> Katherine Watson, a neurotic woman who could not quite become a nun, becomes the barely altered Catherine Fawley, the poor aspirant sister in *The Bell* who is secretly in love with homosexual Michael Meade, and who is carted off to a clinic in London. One begins to see why JOB found the novel unwelcome reading in 1958. (Wilson 2003: 181)

However, Wilson revises this view before the end of the chapter, possibly realising that it is too naïve, or merely withdrawing a claim which was made largely for its dramatic impact:

> Miss Watson is not Catherine Fawley in *The Bell*. I was wrong there, twenty-five years ago when I wrote up the experience of meeting her. That is not the way novelists work. They do not simply 'put' people into books. They do use them, though; and use them ruthlessly. Without Miss Watson, Catherine Fawley is unimaginable. Without what must once have been the private pain of a young postulant, the melodrama of *The Bell* would not have caught fire. (Wilson 2003: 183-4)

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6.3 Transgression: violating the conventions of narrative

The definition of 'transgression' which I would like to explore in this chapter is not the notion of committing a sin or breaking a rule, but rather of exceeding a limit or transcending a limitation. I would like to consider ways Murdoch and Byatt choose to violate the convention of realist narrative. Iris Murdoch and AS Byatt have been positioned within the realist tradition of writing. Byatt notes: 'Iris Murdoch has always described herself as a "realist" when talking about her own fiction. "Realism" is for her a

technique for discovering more about reality, for describing the world as it is, when not distorted by private fantasy or desire' (Byatt 1994: 269).

Richard Todd notes of Murdoch:

> Her idiosyncratically fabulist understanding of social realism requires that in fiction an individual be presented with utmost specificity against the background of a real and dynamic picture of human society. (Todd 1984: 23)

Michael Levenson suggests that

> Byatt accepted from Murdoch, who accepted it from George Eliot, the urgent literary imperative to make struggle against fantasy. This is Byatt's version of their realist credo: 'That there is a hard reality, not ourselves, which is not amenable to our planning, plotting and power-strategies.' (Levenson 1993: 340)

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Both Murdoch and Byatt are acknowledged to be authors of considerable genius; Murdoch's output was prodigious. Martin Amis noted in a review written in 1983: '[H]er *oeuvre* now outbulks that of Tolstoy or George Eliot' (Amis 2000: 91). Byatt is still in full production. Inevitably, however, both authors have been trenchantly criticised for artistic shortcomings and for lapses in the planning and execution of their work. Byatt herself wrote of Murdoch in an essay entitled 'The Art of the Novels':

> She has been castigated for whimsy, deliberate weirdness, wilful obscurity – there is something in these criticisms ... About Miss Murdoch's tremendous narrative vigour and inventiveness there can be no question. ... She can create a narrative, if not always a real emotional tension. (Byatt 1994: 207-8)

Richard Todd notes that the Murdoch novels of the early to mid-60s constitute a problematic phase which 'alienated some of her early admirers and provided more fuel for her detractors than has any other. It brought her wide notice as a novelist of ... fiction which could show an alarming tendency to turn into unconscious self-parody' (Todd 1984: 46); in *An Unofficial Rose* he notes 'a certain stylistic "staleness" ' (Todd 1984: 50) and in the novels which followed 'reworkings of former themes, while at the same time the grasp on stylistic freshness becomes less secure than ever' (Todd 1984: 51).

In an extremely critical review of *The Philosopher's Pupil* published in *The Observer* in May 1983, Martin Amis claims that Murdoch's prose is full of 'needless emphases and

train-wreck adjectives', 'flailing repetitions' and 'paranoid overkill'. The prose 'has no basis in the rhythms of the spoken language' (Amis 2000: 92). Mimicking the narrator of the novel (who declares that an Anglo-Irish character is 'utterly utterly not English' (*PP* 124)), Amis condemns the narrative as 'utterly, utterly not English' and adds that it is 'non-writing, unwriting, anti-writing'. However he believes Murdoch's love for her characters saves her novel:

> Miss Murdoch's style was never elegant, but it was crisp and precise, capable of preserving her macabre and often beautiful perceptions. Here it is a hectic, ragged thing whose only function is to establish the dramatis personae and launch them on their amorous dance. Miss Murdoch believes in her characters – the good, the bad, the ugly – and it is a belief ignited by love. That love is palpable, inordinate, scarily intense. It is far too strong a force to tolerate the thwarting intercession of art. (Amis 2000: 92-3)

Interviewer John Haffenden notes that in May 1983 Victoria Glendinning wrote of *The Philosopher's Pupil* in *The Sunday Times*:

> *Can* one combine a grand metaphysical fable with situation comedy set in a provincial town and hope to get away with it? *Is* Iris Murdoch's controlling mythology powerful enough for us to go flailing after her as she 'swims lengths' indefatigably, sometimes absurdly, in pursuit of the Good? The answer to that last question is yes – unwillingly. (Haffenden 1985: 192)

In a review of Murdoch's contribution (her 'unfastidious, robust productiveness' (Sage 1992: 82)) to post-war fiction published in 1992, Lorna Sage notes Murdoch's 'slatternliness in the matter of minor points of style and structure' (Sage 1992: 82). Criticism of Byatt's fiction has already been noted. For example in a review of *A Whistling Woman* published in *The Guardian* of 7 September 2002 Alex Clark describes the reader's sense of a novel spinning out of control as its author pursues innumerable interests. The reader is presented with 'a constant parade of dense and complex ideas' which Byatt has tried, but failed, to combine into a 'fictional unity' with the result that her fiction breaks apart. Byatt displayed her consciousness of this possibility in the novel *Possession*, in the musings of her character Roland Michell:

> And it is probable that there is an element of superstitious dread in any self-referring, self-reflexive, inturned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognises that it has got out of hand, that connections proliferate apparently at random, that is to say, with equal verisimilitude, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, not controlled by conscious intention, which would of course, being a good postmodernist intention, *require* the aleatory or the multivalent or the 'free', but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some – what? – end. (*P* 421-2)

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Alex Clark adds: 'Watching it [*A Whistling Woman*] break apart, one senses, is just as interesting for her as watching it struggle to cohere. For her readers, this is not always the case, but it's a close-run thing.' These sentiments are echoed by Robert MacFarlane, who reviewed *A Whistling Woman* in *The Observer* on 15 September 2002. He judged the novel to be 'an over-ambitious jumble', which suffers even more acutely 'from the same sins which beset its forerunners – the excessive use of symbols (spiders, spirals, fire, webs, mirrors), a narrative gnarliness, an overbearing sense of allegory'. The excess of ideas in the novel, he suggests, induces bewilderment in the reader.

However, this chapter is not a study of the criticism or dissatisfaction of Murdoch and Byatt's readers and reviewers on the occasions when they believe that the prose of these authors has transgressed received notions of fine writing. Rather it is a brief survey of ways in which two writers, positioned among the great realists, play games with narrative structure and contravene conventions for their own enjoyment or from other motivation at which the reader can only guess, such as sending messages to reviewers and critics or sharing jokes with specific readers. Murdoch appears, for example, to use her novel *The Black Prince* to thumb her nose at her critics. Her prolific and successful novelist Arnold Baffin is a 'one-book-a-year man … never long out of the public eye' (*BP* 2) who 'hardly ever revises' (*BP* 33) which was a process Murdoch always resisted no matter how her editors urged. At the conclusion of the novel Apollo records a postscript in which he insists on the fact of his own existence and that of the narrator, Bradley Pearson. Murdoch makes humorous reference to her own existence at the same time: 'I hear it has even been suggested that Bradley Pearson and myself are both sinply fictions, the invention of a minor novelist' (*BP* 364).

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It has already been noted that one of the narrative intrusions practised by Byatt in her tetralogy is a penchant for making reference to future events in the lives of her characters. This happens most often in relation to Frederica so that her life is constantly transcending the bounds of the fictitious present as the narrator relates anecdotes out of her far distant future, a time far beyond the timeframe of the tetralogy. Earlier I cited the example where into the narrative of 1968 when Frederica is thirty, the narrator interjects Frederica's thoughts as a woman of sixty – a woman the reader can never meet or know: 'Later – much later – when Frederica who had felt old at thirty was surprised at how she

did not feel old at sixty – she looked back on this time' (*WW* 49). This particular example is followed by an irrelevant interjection which is even more strange: 'What do you remember of 1968? Snakes and snooker and a set white face, with a frown, and tears brimming in proud eyes' (*WW* 51). This seems intensely personal and irrelevant to Frederica's story.

Byatt pushes boundaries in another revolutionary manner when she permits the critic Richard Todd to extend the story of her novel *Possession* in his critical work which at its end modulates from analysis into fiction (Todd 1997: 77). The student of literature becomes a reader of fiction and hears the story of Roland Michell and Maud Bailey as it has progressed beyond the limits of the text: they are married (Maud now styles herself Bailey-Michell) and have a daughter, Rowan. Byatt characteristically works the language of a myriad discourses into the fabric of her fiction; it must have given her great pleasure to allow Richard Todd briefly to turn his literary criticism into fiction.

An earlier digression occurs in *Still Life*. Frederica is shuffling a sheaf of invitation cards. These move 'from the future tense, which is a fiction, next Saturday, Friday week, Wednesday at eight, to the past, or the might have been' (*SL* 310). Frederica wonders what she might have missed ('guitar-singing, a hangover, a new friend') and the narrator tells us: Ralph Tempest. The narrator informs us it was 'by chance' Frederica did not meet him at the formal gathering, the debate, the smoky talk, but of course she did not meet him by the author's disposition. As though innocent of such a charge, Byatt points indignantly to 'chance' created by EM Forster, 'who proposed, disposed and judged' in the lives of his characters (*SL* 310). There follows a detailed account of Ralph Tempest, his nature, his education, the course of his career. The all-knowing narrator informs us that Ralph Tempest 'knew little about sex and would not have dared to touch Frederica' (*SL* 298) and tantalises the reader with the sad and useless knowledge that '[h]e would have made her happy and left her free, Frederica'. The last we hear of Ralph Tempest is an account of someone he did meet at the gatherings which Frederica missed, and it seems to have been Byatt herself for she has clearly enjoyed inserting herself into these first two novels of her tetralogy:

> Ralph Tempest ... sitting on Mike Oakley's bed in Christ's with his arm round the waist of a girl with an incipient double chin in a dark peacock brocade dress, a girl who, like Frederica, is writing

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> an essay on blood and light in *Phèdre* but has not read Proust (neither has Ralph Tempest) and has her own reasons for not considering a Cambridge PhD. (*SL* 298)

Byatt also has some literary fun in her creation of playwright Alexander Wedderburn. Byatt herself is his creator; she chooses to make him a writer like herself, but although he wins the acclaim of friends and peers he and the narrator (and therefore the reader) are intensely aware of his limitations. Despite his public success, Alexander is conscious that his work is mediocre. The narrator says of his play *The Yellow Chair* that 'he did not like to think too closely about it, as he did not like to think too closely about any of his past work' (*SL* 1). In an essay Byatt refers to Alexander as 'my second-rate verse-dramatist' and points out that the language employed in his verse drama *Astraea* is described in the narrative of *The Virgin in the Garden* as 'florid' (Byatt 1991: 10). In *Still Life* Alexander 'put the last words to his play' which is clearly unsatisfactory:

> He had got the language as right as he could. As he levelled and counted the pages he thought that a play neither came together nor achieved its own life in any way to which the comparison of childbirth was helpful. This had been put together as jigsaws are, as patchwork is, with a templet, not a germ-cell, to guide its formation. Its scales were stuck on like the panoply of the Pearly King, not grown like fish scales or fowl feathers. It was made of language, which could be jigged, adapted, re-ordered. It was *made*, that was the point, its 'growth' was metaphorical. Wasn't it?
>
> Any way, it was finished. (*SL* 254)

This contrasts strongly with Byatt's perception of the moment of 'germination' of her own creation of *Still Life*:

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

We know that this experience was Byatt's own, for she speaks to Murdoch of this moment of the novel's conception (which occurred after the birth of her son), in the ICA video in which the two authors discuss *Still Life* shortly after the publication of the novel. She describes how 'the whole idea started' at the exact moment when she stood with a tray of nasturtiums which she had allowed to die because she had not been able to bear the notion of thinning them out. However, she insists that this authorial voice is not her own, but is rather a character within the cast of characters who people *Still Life*. This character invites comparison with two others who also employ words to make a living:

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Alexander Wedderburn who is widely acknowledged as a successful playwright but who labours to produce plays and Daniel Orton the curate who must preach. Their individual efforts of verbal creation are offered to the reader to compare – and so 'real life' crosses the border into fiction. Daniel views a dark Xavier Mellery painting in the National Gallery 'described in the catalogue as "creating a light which is the negation of that which envelops our immediate visual experience of things; it is rather the interior light of the mind" ' and the narrator informs us:

> Daniel was used to such language; it was his daily, or anyway weekly, pabulum. He knew about the light shining in darkness, and had become, for reasons completely different from Alexander's desire for exactness, specificity, to mistrust figurative language. He never now made a sermon from a metaphor, nor drew analogies: he preached examples, cases, lessons. (*SL* 10)

Alexander's 'desire for exactness, specificity' (*SL* 10) arose from his engagement with Vincent Van Gogh as he struggled to make a play which would explore the painter's life and work. Alexander's first notion was to 'write a plain, exact verse with no figurative language' (*SL* 2) but '[l]anguage was against him, for a start. Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but resembled the sun, the source of light' and 'Van Gogh's idea of things had also been against him'. For example, Van Gogh's intention was that the white walls of the Yellow House which he intended should house 'a company of artists … should blaze with sunflowers as the windows of Gothic cathedrals blazed with coloured light. Not only metaphor: cultural motif, immanent religion, a faith and a church' (*SL* 2).

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As discussed above, *Still Life* is somewhat startling since part of its narrative fabric offers the reader an account of the first beginnings of its own germination.

I turn next to a consideration of Byatt's game-playing with the novel's moment of beginning in words on the page. *Babel Tower* begins in an extraordinary fashion, for the reader is offered several possible starting points which are detailed below. Twenty-three years earlier, Murdoch experimented with this possibility when she began a novel with two (fictitious) forewords and then four possible starting points. The editor P Loxias (Apollo) of *The Black Prince* supplies the first foreword, and Bradley Pearson the narrator the second. Part One then begins on page one: 'It might be most dramatically effective to begin the tale at the moment when Arnold Baffin rang me up and said,

"Bradley, could you come round here please, I think that I have just killed my wife" ' (*BP* 1). This is an arresting introduction which prefigures the end of the 'tale', when Rachel will telephone Pearson with a similar request in order to set him up (successfully) as a suspect in the murder of her husband. However 'some half an hour before Arnold's momentous telephone call', Francis Marloe arrives on Bradley Pearson's doorstep and 'initiates the action' (*BP* 1); the story could also begin, the reader is informed, with the tears of Pearson's sister or the tears of Arnold Baffin's wife:

> Where after all does anything begin? That three of the four starting points I have mentioned were causally independent of each other suggests speculations, doubtless of the most irrational kind, upon the mystery of human fate. (*BP* 1)

The first of Byatt's various starting points for *Babel Tower* is an account of a thrush crushing snails: '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' (*BT* 1). A reader *re*reading will recognise this as the physical setting of La Tour Bruyarde, the sprawling estate owned by an aristocrat who has renamed himself Culvert. He has prepared his estate for the reception of a group of aristocrats fleeing the chaos and danger of revolution. Together they intend to build a community of equal opportunity where every desire is identified and satisfied. That this 'beginning' of *Babel Tower* is part of the story of Culvert's social experiment is confirmed by the signature sign of the shell at the head of the page. This is an extract from *Babbletower* and this 'beginning' is giving away the ending of the story of that community. The 'roughly squared and shaped' stones no longer compose a complex of buildings. They lie in a heap of rubble. The story of Culvert's community apparently ends in ruin and destruction.

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The next beginning which is offered to the reader is 'Or it might begin with Hugh Pink, walking in Laidley Woods ...' (*BT* 2). Hugh Pink is about to encounter Frederica, trapped in the moated grange by her Bluebeard husband; he will form one of the intrepid band of friends who will rescue her in the middle of the night and bear her away in a Land Rover (the twentieth-century version of the fairytale horse). The third possible beginning is 'Or it might begin in the crypt of St Simeon's Church ... at the same time on the same day' (*BT* 4). This is where Daniel is working, where he has finally come to rest

after fleeing the site of his wife's death and abandoning his two small children, such is his grief. The last possible beginning is 'Or it might begin with the beginning of the book that was to cause so much trouble ...' (*BT* 10). And at this point the first chapter (*'Of the Foundation of Babbletower'*) begins. This is the beginning of *Babbletower* – which itself it a story the 'relinquishment of the old world, and new beginnings in the new' (*BT* 11). As pointed out above, the reader has already read the end of this story (*BT* 1), without being aware of this.

Byatt's fascination with novelty and her willingness to experiment seems spent by the end of the tetralogy; the reader senses that the multitude of pairings with which *A Whistling Woman* is concluded is the consequence of the author's exhaustion and does in fact amount to 'a simple tidying up of the narration' (Todd 1979: 71 - Richard Todd records such an accusation levelled by critics at Murdoch's work). The newly formed couples include Luk Lysgaard-Peacock (for so long despairingly in love with Jacqueline Winwar who lost the child he had fathered when she suffered a miscarriage) and Frederica (pregnant with Luk's child); Daniel (who seemed to have formed a bond with Agatha Mond) and Jacqueline; Agatha Mond, whose little daughter (according to Frederica's son Leo (*WW* 419)) has suffered silently the lack of a father, and Gerard Wijnnobel ('A man, a woman and a child, a girl, were leaning on the stone balustrade, considering the swans. The man had his arm about the girl's shoulder. The woman stood with her body pressed slightly against his. A family.' (*WW* 417)); and Marcus Potter (loved hopelessly for years by Jacqueline) and Vincent Hodgkiss. Byatt has tied up every possible loose end; the fairytale conclusion smacks of an author exhausted by many decades of work with characters who appear in the four novels of which her tetralogy is comprise. She seems to be getting them off her hands with brisk efficiency.

An alternative possibility is that Byatt is using the conclusion of her fourth novel, and so of her tetralogy, to illustrate the argument articulated by Bill Potter when he believes he has reached a new understanding of the unlikely resolutions with which Shakespeare concluded his late comedies. Bill Potter suggests that the artist is not 'fobbing you off with a happy ending' (*WW* 395). Instead a human need is being fulfilled in a way only art can achieve. Bill Potter identifies this as the 'need to be *mocked with art* – you can have a happy ending, precisely because you know in life they don't happen, when you are

old, you have a right to the *irony* of a happy ending – because you don't believe it' (*WW* 395). He identifies this as a reason for the 'necessity' of art.

A Whistling Woman begins with an examination of endings. *Flight North*, the fairy-tale adventure told by Agatha Mond which punctuated *Babel Tower*, is brought to a conclusion in the first eight or nine pages of the novel's opening chapter. The ending is judged unsatisfactory by its audience. First there is 'an appalled silence' (*WW* 9). Everyone present was 'shocked and affronted by Agatha's brutal exercise of narrative power'; '[t]here was no satisfaction in the end of the story. It was as though they had all been stabbed' (*WW* 10). This ending which is postioned at the beginning of the novel (and which is true to life, since real life does not provide satisfactory endings) forms a striking contrast to the conclusion constructed by Byatt for this novel and so also for the tetralogy which it brings to an end: the bizarre number of pairings which are unexpected and pleasing but unlikely outside of fiction.

Frederica and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock move towards their own new beginnings and endings on the night of the riot at the North Yorkshire University, when they take refuge in Luk's cottage on the moors:

> Frederica thought, because it was the way her life seemed to go, and because she had dreamed it, that perhaps Luk intended to make love to her. These were the days of sexual liberty, when love-making was more likely than not. Frederica also thought, for she had been there many times, that if this was a beginning, it was the beginning of an ending, that was the way it went. (*WW* 377)

When the moment comes 'Frederica thought, that is the end of the wooing, and the beginning of the sex, and the end of the, the end of the, the end' (*WW* 379).

Byatt's decision to yield to convention (by ending her tetralogy with the romantic pairing of most of her significant characters) stands in stark contrast to the conclusion of *The Virgin in the Garden*, the first novel of the tetralogy, which ends with various players in the drama sitting inert and silent in the Orton living room with cups of tea. The narrator informs the reader in a peremptory fashion: 'That was not an end, but since it went on for a considerable time, is as good a place to stop as any' (*VG* 428). This seems to echo the ending of Murdoch's novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*. The entire story is narrated by N,

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who inserts himself on occasion into the narrative, and yet who is omniscient as no mere human could ever be. The novel concludes on this note:

> The end of any tale is arbitrarily determined. As I now end this one, somebody may say: but how on earth do you know all these things about all these people? Well, where does one person end and another person begin? It is my role in life to listen to stories. I also had the assistance of a certain lady.
>
> THE END
>
> (*PP* 576)

Still Life and *Babel Tower* end on rather more conventional notes of hope. *Still Life* concludes with Daniel choosing life over death. He has been tramping the countryside as he mourns Stephanie's death: '[T]he idea was to finish myself off, tire myself out, like – go to nothing ... But it's time I came back to life' (*SL* 357). *Babel Tower* concludes with a multitude of endings just as it began with several possible options. Fiery Frederica waits for the train in the Underground 'smelling old, old soot' (*BT* 615); in the train she smells John Ottokar 'amongst the soot and cigarette smoke' (*BT* 616). Although the smells suggest that which is stale and dead, there is apparently hope for this relationship for the two then 'smile at each other's shadow in the glass'. The penultimate fragment announces that the censorship of *Babbletower* (the fantasy tale threaded through the narrative) has been overturned; Daniel tells Jude Mason, its author, to get up and live again and he answers that he 'might' (*BT* 617).

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Finally, at the very end of the novel, there is the ending of *Babbletower*: the Krebs have roasted and eaten the community of the Tower except for three canny old men. This is an ending which smacks of fairytale: the community which sought to satisfy every desire of every member has been destroyed by the wayward and destructive behaviour to which its philosophy gave rise. The only survivors are three old men who represent wisdom and experience. Turdus Cantor is an aristocrat and a member of the original band – he is old and wise (*BT* 10); Colonel Grim tricked his way into the community and is a professional soldier (*BT* 31) and Samson Origen has travelled the world and observed that every society practises a religion which he rejects for he chooses to 'abstain from imagination' (*BT* 257). Their insight, wisdom and skill appears to have saved their lives and theirs is the fairytale ending with which the whole novel is concluded: 'And they went on walking, and if the Krebs did not catch up with them, they are walking still' (*BT* 617).

7 FORM AND FOCUS

7.1 Introduction

From the preceding chapter which examines 'violations' of the conventions of fiction in the work of Murdoch and Byatt it seems that the germination of some of Byatt's ideas begins in the work of Murdoch. It is as though Byatt identifies the fascinating, bizarre and innovative direction in which Murdoch's fiction moves and develops it into something stagey and dramatic of her own. And so, for example, the multiple beginnings over which Bradley Pearson muses as he begins to narrate his own story which forms Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince* might have been the genesis of the four fully developed opening scenes of *Babel Tower*. The tentative insertion of the author's persona into the text as a 'minor novelist' (*BP* 364) or a helpful source (*PP* 576) might be an idea which became the detailed description of the young mother surveying a tray of withered seedlings (*SL* 237) which Byatt identifies as the moment in which *Still Life* was born. Games played with the structure of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* underlie the action of Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. The structure of another of Shakespeare's late comedies, *The Winter's Tale*, is replayed in the twentieth-century drama of the Potter family. Byatt threads this connection through all four novels of her tetralogy. Bill Potter's analysis of the power of the play's resolution can be applied by the percipient reader to Byatt's conclusion of *A Whistling Woman*, and therefore her whole tetralogy (see page 185).

This chapter is an examination of the techniques and devices employed by Murdoch and Byatt to reflect and explore consciousness in the minds of their characters. I use elements of the narrative theory of Dorrit Cohn and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan as tools for this analysis. The pattern uncovered so far is here repeated: Byatt uses the devices and techniques which are evident in the work of Murdoch, but develops them further in explosive and exciting ways. This is the inevitable nature of the progress of the composition of art, as Byatt points out when she quotes from the *Philosophia Secreta* of Pérez de Moya in an essay about the craftmanship of art.[21] The philosopher notes that

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'no matter how skilled anyone may be in 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' (Byatt 2000 (a): 142-3).

7.2 Form: who is thinking – and how?

In her doctoral thesis, Roslyn Sulcas concisely summarises the technical problems facing 'self-styled realists' (which is how both Murdoch and Byatt have on occasion chosen to describe themselves) who set out to evoke 'formlessness through form':

> [R]ealism as an idea is essentially at odds with itself in that it must transform unstructured, quotidian life into an aesthetically unified representation of events. At the same time it involves the necessary retreat of the authorial voice, the hypothetical emptying of the author's power and personality from the work of art in order to create the illusion of autonomy. This is evidently an impossible undertaking; every realist writer must tangle with the concrete problems of narration, point of view, closure, temporality, and all the other terms in our vocabulary of form, whilst attempting to render an unmediated 'reality'. (Sulcas 1988: 6)

Presenting consciousness is one of these 'concrete problems' faced by an author. The title of Dorrit Cohn's 1978 exploration of narrative theory – *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* – points out that the 'transparent' nature of the narrative process is an illusion carefully crafted by the author using various literary devices. Cohn suggests that the oldest mode of narration (traditionally called 'omniscient' and renamed by Cohn 'psycho-narration') is in fact the most efficient medium by which to access a character's unconscious mind – for this is an area of human experience which operates beyond language (Cohn 1978: 56) and which is thus by definition not fully accessible to the character. Stream-of-consciousness and interior monologues are limited to the mind, and so to the words, of the character. Cohn points to the irony of a situation in which 'the least conscious strata of psychic life is [portrayed] … by way of the most indirect and the most traditional of the available modes' (Cohn 1978: 56).

Dorrit Cohn begins her study of psycho-narration with a brief reflection on its history and development, noting that well into the nineteenth century the authors of novels with third-

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person narrators tended to avoid psycho-narration entirely. Instead they preferred to reveal their characters' inner selves through descriptions of their behaviour and by means of their gestures and direct speech. The first-person form provided opportunity for characters to reveal their thoughts and emotions but the third-person narrator tended to create a barrier between the reader and his character's thoughts for '[n]ot only is he [the narrator] far more interested in his own commentary on events than in the meditations these events may release within his characters, he is also committed by his narrative stance to explicit, often didactic evaluation' (Cohn 1978: 22-23). She then cites 'the growing interest in the problems of individual psychology' as the reason for the disappearance of this 'audible narrator ... from the fictional world' (Cohn 1978: 25). She believes that the authors who removed these 'vociferous narrators' from their fiction in consequence 'were also the creators of fictional minds with previously unparalled depth and complexity' (Cohn 1978: 26) and that when twentieth-century novelists reintroduced the audible narrator into third-person fiction they 'put him at the service of individual psychology' (Cohn 1978: 26).

In order to examine Cohn's notion of psycho-narration, I would like to consider the portrayal of the thinking minds of a Murdoch character and a Byatt character in a moment of extreme perturbation: Toby Gashe (the young boy whose innocence and happiness are briefly disturbed by a kiss from his mentor and friend, Michael Meade, in Murdoch's 1958 novel *The Bell*) and Marcus Potter (a schoolboy whose troubled existence is further complicated by the sexual interference of his teacher and mentor Lucas Simmonds in Byatt's 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden*). Given the function of water as a symbol of the human unconscious, it is not surprising that each boy is encountered early in each novel idling away his time on the verge of a pool of water. Dora Greenfield, through whose consciousness *The Bell* is largely mediated, encounters Toby, dressed only in a sun hat, stirring the mud at the bottom of a pool with a long stick. Toby seems to Dora to have the grace and beauty of Donatello's sculpture of the young David.

Because she has shared this 'pastoral vision' (*B* 77) with Michael Meade, Dora believes she can sense a 'complicity' and 'a tremulous beam of physical desire' triggered in Michael for her own potential nakedness and desirability. She will never discover that Michael is 'unmoved by women' (*B* 99) and that his new 'delightfully shy' (*B* 77)

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demeanour has to do with his own attraction to Toby rather than any apprehension of Dora's potential attractions. The reader notes Dora's failure of understanding but because it is given expression only in her thoughts, no other character in the novel will be aware of it. Alexander Wedderburn, the Byatt character who encounters Marcus Potter on the verge of the school Biology Pond 'bent awkwardly over it, stirring with a long stick' (*VG* 25), perfectly comprehends the boy's troubled state but prefers not to get involved. '"I'm OK," the boy repeated, in one of his more dutiful, robotic tones. Alexander was quite clever enough to know that the boy wanted this statement setting aside. But he said only, "May I walk home with you?" ' (*VG* 27).

In the instances of mental perturbation examined below, both authors have opted for a mode of psycho-narration which Cohn has dubbed 'dissonance': the stance of the narrator is quite separate from the thought processes which the narrator describes and the narrator's insight exceeds the character's own. For example, Michael Meade's kiss is, according to the narrator, a lesson – and one which Toby has 'not yet digested':

> Toby had received, though not yet digested, one of the earliest lessons of adult life: that one is never secure. ... Toby had passed, it seemed to him in an instant, from a joy that had seemed impregnable into an agitation which he scarcely understood. He could not ... quite make out whether anything very important had happened or not; at least, at the surface of his mind he debated this. Deeper down he knew that something extraordinary had occurred though he did not yet know what it was. (*B* 160)

Toby's thoughts are in a state of confusion, but the narrator's understanding of his situation (and therefore also the reader's understanding of his situation) is complete. The narrator distinguishes between Toby's conscious thought processes – for example the debate 'at the surface of his mind' about whether something important had happened – and his subconscious wordless apprehension that what had happened was indeed significant. In the same way Byatt's narrator makes clear to the reader that, after the sexual incident involving his schoolteacher Lucas Simmonds, Marcus Potter knows by a similar process of subconscious wordless apprehension that Simmonds will probably ignore him in future. Marcus does not think this through, he intuits it. The narrator tells us that he reaches this conclusion 'recognising without thinking, and without previous experience, a state of sexual extremity in his friend that would make this the only possible course of action' (*VG* 335). Marcus does not choose to dwell on his own reaction, for the narrator tells the reader that only 'on the edges of thought' was he aware

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that his reactions 'would be somewhere in the area between mild distaste and violent disgust' (*VG* 335). Toby's reaction to Michael Meade's kiss, which takes place in a car after an outing, turns from surprise to disgust and then fear:

> Like all inexperienced people, Toby tended to make all-or-nothing judgements. ... His immediate emotion had been surprise. It was soon succeeded by disgust and an alarming sort of fear. He felt a definite physical repugnance at having been touched in that way. He felt himself menaced. Perhaps he ought to tell someone. Did the others know about it? Obviously not. (*B* 161)

The incident involving Marcus Potter occurs after he has spent a day with schoolteacher Lucas Simmonds; together they have been conducting experiments in 'training consciousness' (*VG* 126) over the course of several months. All 'moments of Marcus's consciousness' have been 'docketed and recorded: dreams, visions, periods of meditation, encounters' (*VG* 164). This is at times 'a covert form of torture' for Marcus: 'Days he had been able to make into ordered geometric webs of cross-referencing, black and white grids of threaded thoughts that were safe to think as pavement cracks were safe to walk on, now became technicoloured phantasmagoria' (*VG* 162). The narrator is conveying the state of Marcus's mind, his mode of thinking, in the form of geometric patterning. Because Marcus's mind does not function as more conventional minds might, he does not choose to indulge in the emotional appreciation of beauty. This is revealed when Marcus and Lucas Simmonds are engaged in an exercise in the transmission of thought. Marcus calls to mind a picture which he will attempt to convey to Simmonds and it is a picture of grasses. Marcus finds them beautiful although he thinks, according to the narrator, without words:

> [T]hey seemed almost impossible in their intricacy and difference from one another. Also beautiful. Marcus was not one for beauty: he had early given that up as a value, in his imaginary mudscape: ... He did not now use the word to himself – in any case, he was occupied simply with seeing – but the pleasure that accompanied the seeing was an intense recognition of something satisfactory in colour, variety, form. (*VG* 263)

The sexual incident between Marcus and his schoolteacher takes place in the car at the end of a day during which their studies of consciousness have not been successful. Marcus wants to offer consolation to his distressed mentor: '[He] had not the wisdom to know how or why to console. So, like many of us, he offered himself instead' (*VG* 310). Lucas Simmonds asks him 'just to touch' (*VG* 311) so that he can feel a connection; the embarrassment caused by the intimate contact will of course sever their connection:

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> He had supposed it likely that Lucas would never again acknowledge his existence, recognising without thinking, and without previous experience, a state of sexual extremity in his friend that would make this the only possible course of action. He didn't ask whether he himself wanted to recognise Lucas, or to continue with the experiment. He considered himself committed: and responsible for Lucas. He had made that plain by putting out his hand, and more so by leaving it there. Again on the edges of thought he was aware that if he consulted his own sexual feelings they would be somewhere in the area between mild distaste and violent disgust. But this was, or should be, a matter of no importance besides the responsibility and commitment he felt, the first, the unique experience of these things in his curiously null life. He had involuntarily, nevertheless, received enough moral training to recognise these at least for what they were. (*VG* 335)

As in the Murdoch narrative, the reader notes what Cohn describes as the 'perceptible hiatus between the narrator's and the character's idioms [which] is one of the clearest signs of authorial orientation in the descripton of inner events' (Cohn 1978: 29). Marcus is not in a position to declare his experience of life to date as 'curiously null' (*VG* 335) just as Toby could not have declared his sense of the joy of life as seeming 'impregnable' (*B* 160). Both narrators make announcements about their characters *ex cathedra*, which also stresses the degree of separation between character and narrator. The knowledge and insight of the latter is superior. Toby senses the pleasure of the power shift in his relationship with Michael Meade but does not have the tools to analyse from what source this experience arises:

> And as he lay there in the darkness Toby found that after all what had happened had its interesting side. It certainly constituted an adventure, though a somewhat rebarbative one. And what he then experienced, though he did not at the time recognise it as such, was a feeling of pleasure at being suddenly in a position of power *vis-á-vis* someone whom he had so unquestioningly accepted as his spiritual superior. (*B* 162)

In the same way, the narrator of Marcus's story informs the reader that Marcus had '*involuntarily* ... received enough moral training' (*VG* 335, my italics) to recognise his sense of commitment and responsibility to his teacher.

However, in her presentation of the consciousness of Marcus Potter, as has already been suggested, Byatt has broken new ground. An asthmatic and a mathematical genius, Marcus does not function as an average individual. Thinking for Marcus can be frightening and dangerous. As a schoolboy he spent his weekends in the café of the local cinema because it was 'the centre of ... [a] closed citadel, whose outer walls were blank and blind'; here he 'courted vacancy' (*VG* 57) and practised various techniques for

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'avoiding thought' (*VG* 58). He struggles with all the normal aspects of life such as reading, walking down stairs and flushing a toilet:

> Every day something new became problematic and difficult. An early thing was books, always bad and now impossible. Print reared off the page like snakes striking. His eye got entangled by the anomolous, like the letter *g* ... Reading was unmanageable ... Any word will look odd, stared at, as though it was incorrect or unreal or not a word. ...
>
> And the bathroom. When the water rushed into the lavatory pan, burst from the front, sheer fall from the sides, plain trickle at the back, all knocked into a turmoil by the others, and sucked away down, he was afraid, yet had to watch the lines pulling. (*VG* 118)

Byatt has used concrete images to envisage the mind of her character – for example the geometric patterning already noted. Next she uses the image of a room: we are informed that 'Marcus's mental furniture was meagre' (*SL* 33). His own perception of his home 'was a pattern of relations, lines between chairs, window-oblongs, stair numbers with corner-segments'; 'home for Marcus was a few dangerous objects that were extensions of people, Bill's ashtray and pipe ... his mother's rubber gloves, his bed' (*SL* 33).

The non-verbal working of minds of rather more ordinary people is investigated in moments of extreme perturbation. There are three such moments described in *Still Life* which occur in the life of Stephanie Potter Orton. For example, the pain of the onset of labour precludes speech and thought. She cannot achieve more than a repeated attempt at a sentence: 'I think ... I think' (*SL* 86). After the birth of her first-born her ecstacy limits her to single word utterances: 'there' and 'you' (*SL* 94). 'She had not expected ecstacy' the narrator informs us (*SL* 93):

> 'There,' she said to him, and he looked, and the light poured through the window, brighter and brighter, and his eyes saw it, and hers, and she was aware of bliss, a word she didn't like, but the only one. There was her body, quiet, used, resting: there was her mind, free, clear, shining: there was the boy and his eyes, seeing what? And ecstacy. ...
>
> 'You,' she said to him, skin for the first time on skin in the outside air, which was warm and shining, 'you.' (*SL* 94)

The last occasion on which the reader will enter into Stephanie's mind (the mind of a woman who loves to use and consider words) and find a single word there, is at the moment of her death. Stephanie is trying to save a bird from under the refrigerator; she does not know it is unearthed:

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

In the extract below (another instance of mental perturbation) from the 1971 novel *An Accidental Man* Murdoch combines psycho-narration with two other techniques for conveying the activity of the mind which Dorrit Cohn has identified and named: quoted monologue and narrated monologue. Austin Gibson Grey has been dismissed from his employment; he is separated from his wife and his relationship with his brother causes him to feel inferior and inadequate. Ever since a childhood incident involving his brother (who was at the time overweight and wearing a football jersey) he has suffered from a sense of humiliation and has lost the use of his right hand. He is sitting alone in a pub:

> He started to eat a pickled onion and bit his tongue. He always bit his tongue in moments of crisis. Perhaps he had an abnormally large tongue? How did the tongue survive, leading its dangerous life inside a semicircular guillotine? ...
>
> Looking-glass man, he thought, trying vainly for the millionth time to flex the fingers of his right hand. ... Need I despise myself for ever because of a fat boy in a football jersey?
>
> When he was ten he had had to learn to write with his left hand. Every nerve of his being resisted this. He had fallen through the looking-glass and could never get back. Even now when he was tired he formed his letters the wrong way round and the old weak penetrating feeling of impotence swept over him again. ...
>
> That was all long ago ... and the fat boy in the football jersey was an elderly Buddha, an ambassador, a 'Sir'. 'Oh, are you Sir Matthew's brother?' people would say with ill-concealed amaze. Let Matthew stay away from him forever ... Indeed, Austin had already come to believe that Matthew was dead, for only so could his own heart be at rest. (*AM* 22-25)

By means of the psycho-narration, the reader is given information about the consciousness of Austin Gibson Grey, for example that he is given to a 'weak penetrating feeling of impotence' when he is tired and his defences are not in place and that his chief defence is choosing to believe that his brother is in fact dead. The narration modulates easily from one technique to another. In addition to psycho-narration, there is quoted monologue and narrated monologue. Quoted monologue comprises the thoughts of the character recorded like the spoken word, for example the question 'Perhaps he had an abnormally large tongue?' and the phrase 'Looking-glass man' which the narrator informs us 'he thought'. Narrated monologue appears in the guise of the narrator's

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discourse, but the percipient reader recognises the character's thoughts and words, for example the comment 'He had fallen through the looking-glass and could never get back'. This is Austin's intensely personal imagery and not the language of the narrator. Austin has named himself 'Looking-glass man' because he chooses to view himself as an Alice-figure: one who has passed into an alien world which is frightening him and from which he does not feel he can escape. Austin, unlike the omniscient narrator, cannot know that against all the odds he will flourish, by trading on his self-styled status as a victim. He will even regain the use of his frozen hand. Another example of narrated monologue is the comment about Austin's brother Matthew: 'the fat boy in the football jersey was an elderly Buddha, an ambassador, a "Sir" '. These are the terms in which Austin thinks of his brother; it is not the imagery or diction of the narrator.

There is something else of interest to note in this description of the anguished thought, debate and decision-making occurring within a character's mind, for there are also interesting examples of 'focalization' which is a term adopted by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan from the work of Gerard Genette. The focus in the above extract is always changing. First the focus is Austin's and he concentrates on his tongue: 'How did the tongue survive, leading its dangerous life inside a semicircular guillotine?' In the next quoted paragraph Austin is still the focalizer and the object of his attention is himself, portrayed in his own private imagery as 'looking-glass man'. In the third paragraph the narrator is the focalizer and Austin's state of mind is under consideration. In the last paragraph the focalizer is first Austin and then the narrator. The focus of the narration – and Murdoch and Byatt's awareness of that focus – is considered in the next section.

7.3 Focus: who is seeing – and what?

Rimmon-Kenan adopts Genette's term 'focalization' to identify the agent through which a story is mediated but suggests that the 'optical-photographic connotations, and ... purely visual sense' of the word must be broadened 'to include cognitive, emotive and idealogical orientation' (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 71). It is pointed out that narration and focalization are not interchangeable activities. The 'centre of consciousness' is designated as 'the focalizer', the voice which tells the story is the narrator (Rimmon-

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Kenan 1983: 73). In addition to being focalized *by* someone, a narrative is also focalized *on* someone or something. In other words, focalization has both a subject and an object. The subject ('the focalizer') is the agent whose perception orients the presentation, whereas the object ('the focalized') is what the focalizer perceives (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 74).

It has been established in the course of this thesis that Byatt habitually notes trends and then moves beyond them into new territory. I next examine her experiments with this notion of 'focalization' in her tetralogy. This investigation is made possible by Byatt's generosity for she has repeatedly proved willing to publish accounts in essay form of the work and thought which lies behind the structure of her novels. In her account of the writing of *Still Life*, Byatt describes how when she first began to write fiction she felt ambivalent about its relation to her own life. The discovery of Proust enabled her to embark on the tetralogy, 'a series of what might be described as self-consciously realist novels about my own time and my own culture' (Byatt 1991: 22):

> And what Proust taught me, in the early 1960s, was that it was possible for a text to be supremely mimetic, 'true to life' in the Balzacian sense, and at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world. (Byatt 1991: 22)

Byatt's text considers its own form and formation when she intervenes and lays bare within the narrative the intellectual framework on which she as the author has constructed her story. By means of essays such as '*Still Life/Nature Morte*' (written for, and first published by, the Society of French Studies in 1986) she provides detailed accounts of the personal experiences, trains of thought, mental imagery, reading and artworks which inform *Still Life* in particular.

In the fourth chapter of my thesis ('Power and Enchantment') in the subsection which explores Byatt's association of Frederica Potter with the power and personality of Elizabeth 1 (see page 129), I noted, in a description of Frederica, the distinction between figural and narrating consciousness. There is no physical marking or verbal clue to the moment of modulation from one to the other; it is the reader's percipience alone which notes, for example, that as the narrator describes the approach of Frederica towards the rooms of Alexander Wedderburn, it is the figural consciousness of Alexander through

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which the description is mediated. The narrating voice informs the reader that having to deal with Frederica felt 'like trying to ignore a boa-constrictor with a crush on you' (*VG* 97), but this is Alexander's image. The more general descriptions of Frederica's 'stick-like and knobby limbs' (*VG* 47) and her 'foxy hauteur' which 'invested her glances with a lewd, hinting quality which was not intentional' (*VG* 117) are mediated through the narrating consciousness.

In the next novel in the tetralogy, *Still Life*, this disparity between the figural and the narrating consciousness is no longer covert; instead attention is deliberately drawn to it. In this novel the narrating voice is frequently intruded into the fabric of the narrative and thus operates as a separate character within the cast of *Still Life*. One of the roles performed by the narrating voice is to analyse and discuss, on occasion, the identity and the limitations of the mediating consciousness. This narrative technique is made into an element of the novel, it is not merely a technical means to achieve an end.

The narrating voice chooses Frederica as the first subject for a consideration of how culture, time and education act upon vocabulary and shape and limit thinking. When Frederica travels to the south of France to work as an au pair she travels through countryside which has been made famous by many artists, but most notably Van Gogh, whose writing and work pervades *Still Life*. This gives the narrator the opportunity to meditate on the differences between recording what one sees in paint or in words. Frederica, 'word-obsessed' (*SL* 58) and bored, determines to become a writer. The narrator muses:

> I do not think the compulsion to *write* about foreign places can be very closely compared to a painter's sensuous delight in new light, new forms, new colours ... Pigment is pigment and light is light in any culture. But words, acquired slowly over a lifetime, are part of a different set of perceptions of the world, they have grown with us, they restrict what we see and how we see it. I am trying to account for the paradox of the *sameness* of so many accounts, in language, of the strange, the exotic, the new. (*SL* 59)

The reader is then informed that Frederica 'will do as an example to illustrate the difficulties of writing about strangeness' (*SL* 59). What will be illustrated is how the words we acquire from our culture limit our point of view. Frederica has read Wordsworth and his words are 'known, tested, thought about'; the result is that she shares in a 'tradition of looking at landscape' which is 'deeply Wordsworthian' (*SL* 59). Her

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schoolgirl life experience has provided her with 'words for tea party behaviour and shopping discriminations in North Yorkshire matrons'. She is developing her own increasing vocabulary with which to discuss Shakesperean plot and metaphor (*SL* 59). However the south of France is not part, yet, of Frederica's reading and experience; when she tries to write about what she sees the vocabulary currently available to her renders her descriptions 'stale, *déjà-vu*, derivative' for Frederica sees 'that the light was gold, that olives were black and warm, the olive trees were powdery-grey, that lavender was a purple haze' (*SL* 59).

Stephanie Potter Orton is next used by the narrator for a digression into a consideration of how 'seeing' orders our world. This is demonstrated with the example of flowers viewed from dramatically different human perspectives. Daniel has brought the flowers to Stephanie's bedside after she has given birth to their son, William: 'Dutch irises, pale violet-blue, streaked yellow, golden daffodils ... [t]heir soft, earthy-airy smell crept through the disinfectant and synthetic *muguet*. Their stems were stiff pale green tubes, their leaves awkward spikes in a vase' (*SL* 107). Next these flowers are viewed through the innocent gaze of the newborn who is conscious for the first time of light:

> [T]he wide swathe of light that scarfed and followed his slow-moving gaze was streaked and stroked with delicate repeated dashes and flashes of pale violet (from the irises) and chrome yellow (from the daffodils). ... The particles he saw in the flowing waves of light were streaked with the colours of the flowers, mauve, lilac, cobalt, citron, white-gold, sulphur, chrome, though of course he could not name or distinguish these divisions of light as he could not see the lip of the iris, the frilled trumpet of the daffodil.
>
> If he had been capable of simile, which he was not, he could have said that the glistening particles he saw were like overlapping fish scales. Or ... like delicate quills ... Or like small, curving, repeated candle flames. (*SL* 107-8)

This account of the view of the 'innocent eye' which 'acts and orders' (*SL* 108) is juxtaposed with a meditation on the eye which creates art and which cannot be innocent:

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

Next Byatt will consider her own ability to 'make it new', with words. We know this is Byatt herself addressing us, because she has addressed us thus in her essay '*Still Life Nature Morte*':

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> I decided to try and write a novel which should be as plain as possible – a novel eschewing myths and cultural resonances – a novel, I even thought, which would try to forgo metaphor. This essay is an account of the failure of that project ... I offer it ... as an example of the self-conscious novelist brooding about the choice of words. (Byatt 1991: 9)

She further confirms her own personal presence by the admission that 'we always put something of ourselves – however passive we are as observers, however we believe in the impersonality of the poet, into our description of our world, our mapping of our vision' (*SL* 109). Perfectly directly, she addresses us within the text of her novel:

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

Byatt acknowleges that William does not yet have the tools to see and remake his world. Yet she named all the colours he saw out of her own delight both in their various existence and in the words which have been created to name them:

> I wrote in the colour words, mauve, lilac, cobalt, citron, sulphur, chrome out of an equal delight in the distinction of colours and the variety of words. Communication is a partial and incomplete business: I know that for some readers these words will call up clear images on an inner eye, they will in some sense 'see' purple and gold, whereas others will not. No two men see the same iris. Yet Daniel and William and Stephanie all saw the same iris. (*SL* 108)

She concludes with an account of how Van Gogh ordered his vision of the world 'with the mapping, the patterning of his brushstrokes' (*SL* 109). She considers *The Sower* in which the brushstrokes are 'almost tessellations ... thick and solid: they are the movement of light over things, of the eye over things'; in *The Reaper* he 'radiated brushstrokes in a self-portrait from his own eyes like twin suns' (*SL* 109). She has led the reader through a consideration of the transforming nature of art. The newborn William cannot undertake the process. Byatt and Van Gogh have made the transformation by imposing something of themselves upon the record of what they have seen and '[i]t is new and the opposite of innocent: it is seen, and thought, and made' (*SL* 109).

Byatt again breaks new ground in the process of exploring the notion of focalization when she causes one of her characters to create a fictitious narration out of her own (fictitious) life. Frederica, made miserable by the divorce procedures which are

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humiliating and which threaten her life with her son, uses writing as a form of therapy: 'Like many human beings who feel that they are exploding with grief, confusion, or anger, Frederica has thought of controlling, or venting (both contradictory verbs are appropriate) her pains by writing' (*BT* 380). In a notebook she writes a first sentence: 'Much of the problem appears to be one of vocabulary' (*BT* 380). A week later she writes 'There is no vocabulary to provide the next sentence'. One month later she writes: 'Try simplicity. Try describing a day.' She embarks upon this project (beginning 'I woke up too slowly. My tongue was furry' (*BT* 38)) but finds it nauseating:

> We had the usual fight about who ties Leo's shoes because we are late. The usual fight. Describe it. Come on. I can't. This style fills me with 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 you hadn't noticed them 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. ... Writing things down makes everything *slightly worse*. Slightly worse, what a fate. Writing is compulsive. And useless. Stop writing. (*BT* 381)

Frederica is the focalizer and her efforts to think and write are the focalized. The next step in her progression towards a satisfactory mode of narration is to write an account of her feelings for her lover John Ottokar. This gives rise to an overwhelming distaste for 'rows of sentences beginning with the first person singular' (*BT* 381) and this results in her shredding her writing 'into scraps and flakes' (*BT* 382) and discarding it with the tea-leaves and sprout-peelings. Next in her notebook she writes 'I hate I' which she finds interesting (*BT* 382). She adds 'the intellectual's question. "Why?" And an answer':

> 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 ME into artifice and enclosedness. The 'I' of 'I love him' written down is nauseating. The *real* 'I' is the first I of 'I hate I' – the *watcher* – 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 write? It is certainly, don't write 'I'. (*BT* 382)

Finally Frederica begins a piece of writing describing her own experience but without the 'I' as she writes 'A woman is sitting in Vidal Sassoon's salon ... having her long hair, which she has always had, shorn into one of those smooth, swinging cuts' (*BT* 388). Two young men are cutting her hair: 'The woman under their hands tries to look up and is jerked down. She thinks, I will always remember this, but doesn't know why; there are

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many humiliations, many disasters, why will she always remember this one? They let her head up. She sees her face through tears' (*BT* 39):

> 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 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* 389)

The final chapter of the final novel of the tetralogy (*A Whistling Woman*) is bound up with sight (and insight) and seeing – and this is suggested by the many different uses of the word 'look'. The chapter opens with two themes which have been a focus of this thesis: fire and destruction. Fire is figuratively present in the 'ruddy bronze' of a chrysanthemum flower which Frederica is stripping of its petals and the 'shining bronze mass' (*WW* 412) of her son Leo's hair. The destruction is being wrought by Frederica who is practising a superstitious form of 'seeing': as she pulls the petals from the chrysanthemum she recites alternately with each desecrated petal '[t]o bleed, not to bleed' (*WW* 412) in order to establish (according to which phrase coincides with the plucking of the last petal) whether she is pregnant or not.

Her oracle fails her, for Frederica is dismayed to find she is pregnant at a time when her 'life had appeared to be taking on a new, fluent, elegantly provisional shape' (*WW* 412). This pregnancy seems to her 'the closing jaws of the trap of caring for someone as she cared for Leo' (*WW* 415). The narrator uses quoted monogue for Frederica is clearly meditating on this notion of 'caring for': 'In both senses, cared for. Looked after, as best she could. Loved. Oh yes. Loved' (*WW* 416). She contemplates abortion but does nothing for '[i]f you don't look at it, it isn't there' (*WW* 416). She is angry and unsettled and the narrator tells us that '[t]he person who was looking at her, Leo, said he didn't know what had got into her' (*WW* 416). Four months pregnant she travels to Holland to film paintings. Paintings require a viewer in order to be appreciated; filming requires the eye of the cameraman and of the viewer. Frederica and the crew travel to The Hague to film Vermeer's *View of Delft* (a painting of an outlook which must be appreciated by looking) which Frederica has never seen; she wears bulky clothes and wonders when her companions will observe her condition. On the steps of the Mauritshuis they stop to look at the moat and encounter '[a] man, a woman and a child … considering the swans' (*WW* 417). It is Agatha and Saskia Mond and Gerard Wijnnobel: for a moment Agatha

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contemplates pretending not to see Frederica, then she looks at Wijnnobel, who smiles. In a few short pages, Byatt's narrative has invited us to consider the practice of 'looking' which involves predicting the future, caring for, acknowledging, appreciating, perceiving, reading body language – one verb but a constantly changing focus.

In the museum after the filming, Frederica falls briefly asleep before Vermeer's *View of Delft*. She awakes but is disoriented and feels as though she is within the painting 'in a calm place where golden buildings stood above dark water, where the sky was blue and still, the stone was pink, time was very quiety arrested' (*WW* 418). She is aware of two different aspects of the painting: 'She saw it as though she was in it, and saw, simultaneously, the perfect art with which each element had been considered, and understood, analysed geometrically, chemically, so that the colours could be reconstructed, and harmonised' (*WW* 418). This is how Byatt signals the moment for Frederica when not only writing (her concern discussed on page 201) but now also looking is separated from the 'I'. The narrator notes Frederica's consciousness that '[t]his artist is not present in the traces of his hand' (*WW* 418); what Frederica will remember about this instant is that the painting gives her a 'momentary illusion of reality … [a]nd beyond that, the adequate intelligence of the Master. Who had set himself problems only he could solve, and had solved them, and made a mystery' (*WW* 419). The solution has been found in paint which Frederica had previously found in writing.

It is Leo who finally precipitates action in Frederica's life when he proclaims 'I notice things' (*WW* 419) and urges contact with Luk. In the car as they drive Leo sits 'stolid and alert, staring around him' and it is Leo who sees freshly cut gorse in a stone jar inside the house and cries '*Come on* … He's still here. We must look for him' (*WW* 420). They see Luk's car and they run to find him. Through the medium of psycho-narration the reader can read and visualise what Frederica thinks and feels:

> She thought about her life. She found herself thinking about *Paradise Lost*, which seemed to float beside her mind like a great closed balloon of its own colour of light, a closed world, made of language, and religion, and science, the science of a universe of concentric spheres which had never existed, and had constructed the minds of generations. It was part of her. She thought of the *Faerie Queene*, and Britomart the female knight, who saw her lover in the magic glass sphere made by Merlin … She looked at the earth under her feet, and the cobwebs and the honey-scented gorse, and the peat, and the pebbles, and thought of Luk's world of curiosity. She thought that somewhere – in the science which had made Vermeer's painted spherical waterdrops, in the humming looms of neurones which connected to make metaphors, all this was one. And in front

> of her, another creature, another person, contained in a balloon of fluid, turned on the end of its cord, and adjusted to the movement. (*WW* 420-421)

'We were looking for you' cries Leo (*WW* 421) and Luk looks up and sees Frederica and 'her state [is] perfectly visible at first glance': in her shapeless dress scaring the sheep Frederica 'looked like an absurd shepherdess' and together the new family stand and look over the moving moor (*WW* 421) which the reader knows from the earlier description is bowing and flickering with vegetable flames for the gorse is out and 'spread like a sea of fire' (*WW* 420).

And the percipient reader who 'looks' with the keen mind's eye will see that Byatt did not burn down the unwieldy structure of her overburdened narration (as argued by Alex Clark in the review in *The Guardian* – see page 38) but has rather woven all the disparate elements into an ending worthy of cinematography: her destructive fires have been transformed into vegetation 'burning' with bright colour; Frederica's reading and thinking (and so the fantasy worlds of myth and literature) have been transformed into personal mental images of balloons (worlds) of thought and colour which seem present and part of her makeup just as the new life of her second child is present in her ballooning body. She is conscious that she knows the history of 'science' ('the science of a universe of concentric spheres which had never existed, and had constructed the minds of generations') which was every bit as mythical as Merlin and Britomart.

This forms a contrast with Luk's scientific research which investigates neurones and the process of thinking and which is raised up in Frederica's mind when she gives her attention to the world around her which is the environment in which he conducts his meticulous investigation. She thinks about the technical expertise which creates paintings, the humming neurones which make possible the techinical expertise – and finally she has found the Oneness and connection which she has struggled to create for herself throughout all the novels of the tetralogy. And beyond Frederica's mental imagery and beyond her thoughts given verbal expression in the text, the reader is conscious of the techniques identified by theorists who analyse the structure of narrative; the reader reads with an informed consciousness of psycho-narration and of focalization and of the sure hand of Byatt at work.

8 CONCLUSION: death and resolution

Romantic pairings and death are two of the most satisfactory devices available to novelists and dramatists for bringing their works to that unnatural point – the ending. Two people's decision to form a couple is the end of two solitary individual lives and death is the most decisive of all life's various endings. The narrating voice in Byatt's *Still Life* ponders the nature of endings as the novel draws to a close:

> Once novels ended with marriages: now we know better, we lumber on inconclusively into the sands and swamps of married life, ending in a query, an uncertainty, a bifurcation of possibilities that allows the reader to continue the story with his own preferred, desired projection. Death is more of an end than marriage. Tragedies end with death. Watching the quietus of blind Oedipus, the multiplied nevers of old Lear upon the rack, we feel, Aristotle told us truly, something like relief, a slackening out of the importunities of pity and the tension of terror, a space for the flooding in of clear light, perhaps. (*SL* 344)

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I selected the phrase 'romantic pairings' to cover all the various forms of mutual commitment with which Murdoch and Byatt have brought novels to a close. Some of their characters pair off at a novel's end without any talk of a legally binding commitment to a shared future. On occasion this might be because marriage is a legal impossibility because the couple is homosexual or one partner is married. However, where marriage is a possibility not contemplated, this might be the authors' acknowledgement that marriage is no longer forever and thus not the cause for celebration it once was. Falling in love (and the mutual commitment which generally follows), in the words of Byatt's character Roland Michell, 'combs the appearances of the world ... out of a random tangle and into coherent plot' (*P* 422). Coherence and closure, Roland notes on the reader's behalf, are 'enchantingly desirable'. Frederica Potter, studying at Cambridge and catapulted into a largely male society, was 'cocooned by her culture in a web of amatory, social and tribal expectations ... She believed unquestioningly, with part of herself, for instance, that a woman was unfulfilled without marriage, that marriage was the end of every good story' (*SL* 127).

Murdoch has a decided taste for happy pairings as an end to her novels. It is a technique typical of Shakespearean comedies – characters are paired off and dismissed into happiness. Richard Todd suggests that a defence of Murdoch might be

> that her seemingly arbitrary pairings demonstrate novelistically Iris Murdoch's belief that her characters should be free to act in ways which may surprise even their creator, and that her formalised endings, far from amounting to a simple tidying up of the narration, show that the style of the characters has not, in fact, been cramped by authorial intrusion. (Todd 1979:71)

An Accidental Man, for example, ends with a party hosted by Gracie Tisbourne, so recently inconsolable after Ludwig Leferrier broke their engagement. She has married Garth Gibson Grey. It is her first party in her own home – she is married, pregnant and deliriously happy. Hattie Meynell and Tom McCaffrey are married by the close of *The Philosopher's Pupil*. Martin Lynch-Gibbon has Honor Klein unexpectedly restored to him at the end of *A Severed Head* (*ASH*). Byatt notes that Martin addresses Honor 'in Miss Murdoch's worst sloppy style' (Byatt 1965:133): 'Well, we must hold hands tightly, and hope that we can keep hold of each other through the dream and out into the waking world' (*ASH* 252). Crystal Burde and Arthur Fische marry at the close of *A Word Child*, ignoring Hilary Burde's prohibition. Burde himself appears to give in to his mistress's insistence that they too will marry. There is such a flurry of pairings at the close of *The Nice and the Good* that one character remarks to another 'It does seem to be the mating season, doesn't it' (*NG* 339). Byatt seems gently to mock the 'happily ever after' couplings at the end of novels when she concludes *A Whistling Woman*, and thereby her tetralogy, with a bizarrely large number of sudden and unexpected pairings, all revealed in a rush in the closing throes of the story. Despite its rather fanciful nature, this resolution is deeply satisfying for the reader who desires closure.

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Death brings fiction to an end in a more disturbing way, although both Murdoch and Byatt argue rather that death is a revelation, something to be desired. *Henry and Cato* is brought to a close with the earnest discussion between Cato and a fine theologian, Brendan Craddock, who is a lecturer and a Roman Catholic priest. Craddock argues that 'god' is, in truth, 'redemptive death':

> 'Death is what instructs us most of all, and then only when it is present. When it is absent it is totally forgotten. Those who can live with death can live in the truth, only this is almost unendurable. It is not the drama of death that teaches – when you are there facing it there is no drama. ... Death is the great destroyer of all images and all stories, and human beings will do anything rather than envisage it.' (*HC* 336)

The reader of this novel has already been given a practical demonstration of the power of death to generate truth. Lucius Lamb, an elderly failed poet who made a profession of being beautiful (*HC* 11) and who has sponged a living on the Marshalson estate for many years, dies alone in his room. His life has been fruitless; its promise has not been fulfilled. Throughout the course of the novel the reader has been subjected to his many poor attempts at haiku. However, the reader is the only witness as Lucius suffers a stroke; before he dies he writes one fine haiku:

> So many dawns I was blind to.
> Now the illumination of night
> Comes to me too late, O great teacher. (*HC* 330)

This is the revelation which Brendan Craddock was offering Cato: truth lives in death – and this makes death the great teacher.

In *Babel Tower*, near the beginning, Byatt offers her reader a very beautiful meditation on the increased pleasure in life afforded by the knowledge of the inevitability of death and, by contrast, the enduring nature of words. This is mediated through the consciousness of the poet Hugh Pink, as he walks through the English countryside with Frederica and Leo, whom he has just met quite by accident. Hugh has 'a feeling'for which he can't find words:

> It is a brief knowledge of his own temporary body, all the soft slippery dark organs … It is the knowledge that he is *inside* this skin, and it is intensely pleasurable because it always goes with a sense of the huge sweep and intricacy and age of what is *outside* … It is the irrational pleasure of a creature in the fact that its surroundings were there long before its own appearance, and will be there long after. It was not a possible pleasure, Hugh thinks, before he had lived a certain time, before the repeated crossings of local earth, in his case England, had become part of the form of the soft pale mass in his skull … You cannot have this particular pleasure in living, Hugh tells himself, before you have begun to know you are dying. (*BT* 16)

This intense pleasure in these particular surroundings also arises from all the writing which has described the land through generations, and which has become a part of his own thinking:

> The thing which can flash into the brain a memory of *this* thing, is the repeated reading of words which like turf and stones are part of the matter of the mind: the Immortality Ode, say, the Nightingale, Shakespeare's sonnets. There again the pleasure of the sense of one's own vanishing briefness … is part of the pleasure in the durable words. (*BT* 17)

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In spite of this celebration of human 'vanishing briefness' (*BT* 17), the careful reader will notice how Byatt effects healing and restoration for those of her characters who have endured the pain of loss occasioned by death. These moments of resolution are a form of 'ending' which break with convention for they are not placed at the novel's end. A scene already discussed is such an example: Mary Orton, daughter of Daniel and grand-daughter of Bill, is cast as Perdita in Alexander's production of *The Winter's Tale*. To father and husband, there is in her some measure of restoration of the dead daughter and wife: 'Daniel was quite unprepared for the effect this would have on him. ... She was in her own world, not trying to charm, but enchanting. He saw, not his daughter, but his wife. Only for a moment, but entirely ... ' (*WW* 394). Daniel, even if only for a moment, is able to see the beauty of his lost dead wife; he is released from the haunting of the dead face from which he has suffered since fleeing from his children and his hometown after her death. This haunting is described on several occasions in the tetralogy. One such example is the moment when Daniel hears that his daughter Mary has been injured in the playground and lies unconscious in hospital:

> But he cannot see Mary's face, conscious or unconscious. He sees Stephanie his wife lying on the kitchen floor, with her lip pulled back over damp teeth. This is who he is, the man who looked at that face. This is what she is, a terrible face, this sight persists in his brain. This is her after-life. He is hunted through his waking life by that face, he has developed the cunning of a hunted creature who twists and darts to avoid anything in the passages of the brain that might trigger, might switch on that remembered face. There are words, there are innocent, pleasant memories, there are smells, there are whole people, whom he avoids with ferocity in case they call up that dead face. He even paints his dreams with black ink, he clamps his dreaming head with a vice of will, he never slips into dreaming that face and waking with the memory. (*BT* 25)

Having noted how Byatt creates 'endings' within the body of her novels, it seems fitting to bring this concluding chapter to a close with a brief consideration of specific endings: a Murdoch novel which ends on the water and a Byatt novel which closes with flickers of fire. This seems particularly appropriate given the significance of water in the majority of Murdoch's novels and fire in Byatt's tetralogy which is explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

An Unofficial Rose is set primarily in a rose nursery situated in the English countryside; it is presented as a kind of topsy-turvey Eden. The novel opens at the funeral of Hugh Peronett's wife Fanny; we are told that '[i]t was many years now since Hugh has stopped wondering to what extent he had married for money' (*UR* 13). He is equally unsure how

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close he came to deserting his wife in favour of the mistress Emma Sands, whom he had loved; at the funeral 'he wondered fruitlessly and for the thousandth time' (*UR* 18) how close he had in fact come to starting a new life. The novel closes with Hugh having lost Emma Sands a second time. This time he is not witnessing the consignment of a coffin to a grave but is aboard a ship and gazing at the sea, that other ancient symbol of life's end:

> Behind the ship the pale road of the wake stretched away back into the night. The black empty water surrounded them, the old eternal preoccupied ruthless sea. Hugh worshipped its darkness, its vastness, its utter indifference. He felt lighter and happier ... than ever before. Yet how did one know? One forgot, one forgot. What hold had one on the past? The present moment was a little light travelling in darkness. ... Hugh had rejected Emma for reasons, and forgotten the reasons. His consciousness was a tenuous and dim receptacle and it would soon be extinct. But meanwhile there was now, the wind and the starry night and the great erasing sea. And ahead there was ... the unknown future, however brief. (*UR* 347-8)

The reader is conscious that Hugh's mind appears to have the capacity which he attributes to the 'great erasing sea'; as a measure of self-protection unconsciously adopted, he appears to have forgotten his own experiences of loss and pain and, together with these, cast off any sense of guilt or responsibility which he might have carried. As Hugh muses over his past he regards the sea as ruthless, dark, vast, indifferent and erasing. Byatt suggests that Murdoch is using here the

> ancient image of the sea as the boundary of human consciousness, out of which we come, and into which we disappear. The different descriptions of it that succeed each other in Hugh's – or Murdoch's reader's – mind move from the anthropomorphic, with human emotions – 'ruthless preoccupied' – through an intermediate *half*-anthropomorphic 'indifferent' to the inhuman 'great erasing', where the sea becomes both separate from our readings of our fates and an instrument of forgetting. Iris Murdoch is attached to images of the sea, both as swallowing fate to be fought (many of her characters nearly die while swimming), and as the inhuman which transcends us. (Byatt and Sodré 1995: 257)

But I would like to conclude not with Murdoch on the sea of human consciousness, which she and Byatt have so conscientiously explored, but with fire, death and endings which are beginnings, in Byatt's writing. *Still Life* draws to a close very quietly with a short chapter entitled 'Three Scenes'. Each scene is a form of communion or fellowship – it is the social rite of taking tea, sharing food, around a table and next to a fire. All or some of the participants in each gathering are struggling to keep grief and despair at bay as they mourn the death of Stephanie Orton. Bill and Winifred Potter nurture their grandchildren; Frederica has her first taste of the elegant formal tea at Bran House with Nigel's reserved sisters; Daniel is fed and comforted by Alexander at the end of a long

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journey. A careful reader detects a quiet beginning in these endings. This is apparent in a binding together which is achieved by subtle reference to a Van Gogh still life, by repetitions of the word 'living' or 'alive' and by several brightly burning fires, the outward sign of passion or of a spiritual life. Before discussing these brief scenes with which *Still Life* is concluded, I would like to consider how Van Gogh's still life is introduced into the text.

In her article in the journal *Mosaic*, Sorenson has noted that although Van Gogh is 'a guiding presence' in the novel *Still Life*, 'equally skilled with words and images' (Sorenson 2004: 65), he is not given a 'fleshly character' (Sorenson 2004: 68). Van Gogh's passion and vigour and his engagement with the world are present in Byatt's use of extracts from his letters and her meditations on the nature of his craft (see page 200). The Van Gogh painting which interacts most effectively with Byatt's story is a still life which Byatt names *The Breakfast Table* (see Illustration 20 on page 211). Van Gogh himself described the work in a letter to his brother Theo:

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

First Byatt introduces a real breakfast table in the London flat of Thomas and Elinor Poole where Alexander Wedderburn is temporarily boarding. Thomas Poole is in disgrace for having committed adultery with schoolgirl Anthea Warburton during the production of Alexander's *Virgo Astraea* in the gardens of Long Royston House. There is consequently a coolness at the breakfast table and Alexander notices that 'communication in that flat was centred in, conducted through, things. He had no idea what Elinor thought about Thomas, or Anthea, or indeed himself but he knew exactly what she thought about potatoes, coffee, wine' (*SL* 163):

> The breakfast table was a still life, with the easy life of vegetables and culture [live yogurt]. Thomas offered Elinor pale yellow butter: Elinor lifted the coffee pot: Alexander slid yogurt into the dusty seeds and flakes of his muesli. There were two lemons amongst the plums, to intensify the colour. (*SL* 164)

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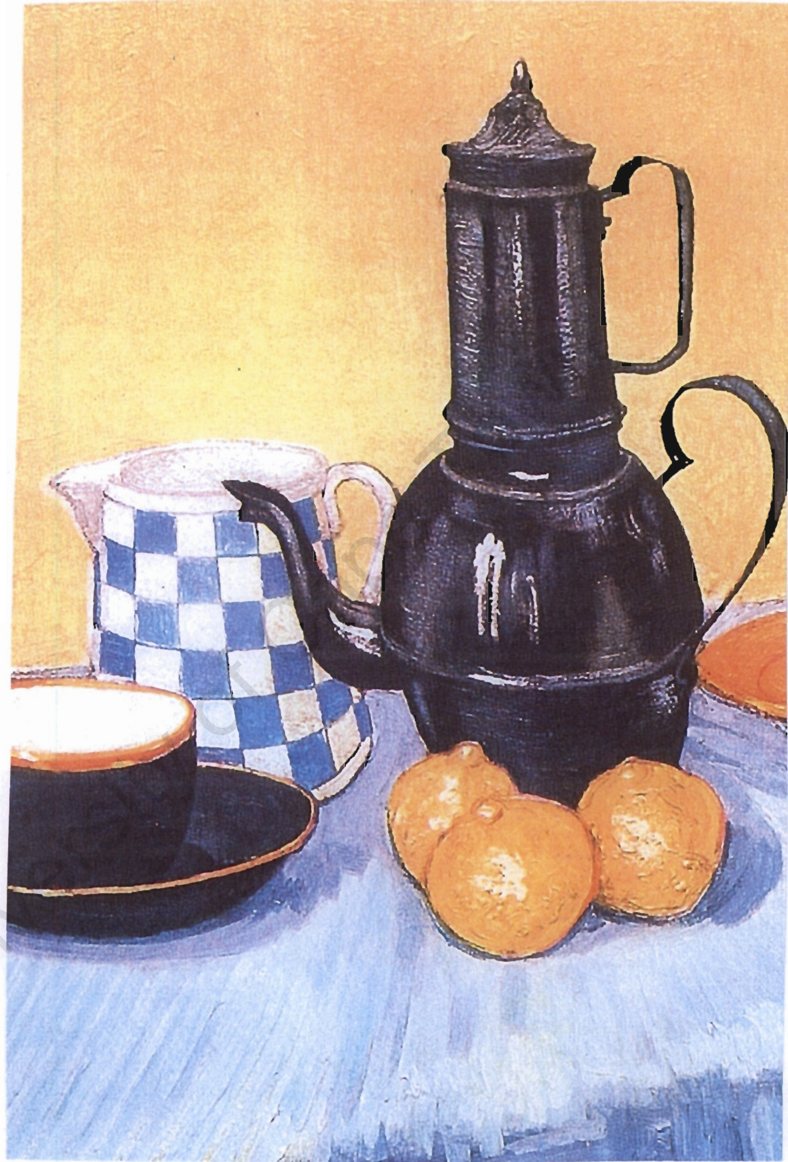
Illustration Twenty Van Gogh still life: *The Breakfast Table*



'The Van Gogh painting which interacts most effectively with Byatt's story is a still life which Byatt names *The Breakfast Table*.'

Alexander contemplates the sight of the plums and lemons which 'together, made a pattern that he recognised with pleasure, and the pleasure was so fundamentally human it asked to be noted and understood' (*SL* 164). He then wonders whether English is adequate to describe the plums so that the reader can picture these plums, rather than different plums:

> The nearest colour Alexander could find, in his search for accurate words for the purple of the plum, was in fact the dark centre of some new and vigorously burgeoning human bruise. But the plum was neither bruised nor a bruise nor human. So he eschewed, or tried to eschew human words for it. (*SL* 164)

Alexander concludes that it was possible for Vincent Van Gogh 'to get nearer to the life of the plums than he ever could'; with paint he could make statements:

> 'This is a plum.' 'This is a lemon.' 'This is a chair.' 'This is a breakfast table.' Brushstrokes, skill, the signature of the one mind that said 'This is *my* plum, lemon, table, chair' were also connecting links, little lines of power, one man's vision of the world. It is impossible *not* to think about the distance between paint and things, between paint and life, between paint and the 'real world' (which includes other paintings).
>
> It is not at all impossible, it is even common, not to think about the distance between words and things, between words and life, between words and reality. (*SL* 165)

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The next reference to Van Gogh's *Breakfast Table* is introduced with a pun (given that it depicts light in paint): 'A curious light was cast on the *Breakfast Table* by chance, at a BBC formal luncheon' (*SL* 175). Alexander talks to Professor Wijnnobel, who had written a series of talks on the representation of light in Western painting, for the BBC. After the lunch Alexander accompanies Wijnnobel to his office where there stands, on his desk, a small print of *The Breakfast Table*. They fall into discussion and Wijnnobel points out that

> 'Freud ... equates light and *eros*. Light is what makes our stony, inorganic world stir with life, light calls up and holds together complex forms. ... In Freud's myth the peace of the inanimate came before the striving of life, and the peace of the Aristophanic hermaphrodite before the constructions and cell-divisions of Eros. In Freud's vision things secretly resent the calling to life of light: they wish to return to the state in which they were – instincts are conservative.' (*SL* 179)

This, he suggests, might account for the viewer's fascination for works of still life:

> 'Maybe we could see our fascination for still life – or *nature morte* – in these terms? Maybe the kind of lifeless life of *things* bathed in light is another version of the golden age – an impossible

> stasis, a world without desire and division? I have made your coffee-pot into the unfallen circular hermaphrodite of Plato's symposium. Is that dramatic?' (*SL* 179)

This fascination with Van Gogh's still life *The Breakfast Table* takes on a new form in a series of short scenes after the accidental death of Stephanie Orton: one involving Daniel and his children shortly after her death, and three scenes in the final chapter (referred to above, see page 209) which occur some months later. Each scene involves the implements used for eating and drinking (sustaining life) such as are shown in Van Gogh's painting. In each scene fire burns – reflecting rage or comfort or cosy homeliness and continuing life. In each scene those deeply affected struggle to adjust themselves to the fact of Stephanie's death: they face the dark of terror and grief. What is conveyed by author to reader is that the act of living slowly reasserts itself after the loss and grief occasioned by the wild blows of chance which punctuate life.

First the vicar and his wife, Gideon and Clemency Farrar, visit Daniel's home. Clemency puts biscuits on a plate on the table. Daniel will not eat with them and when they try to commiserate 'dark bars, lit with fire, stood out before his eyes, bizarrely carving Gideon's benign face into burning sections' (*SL* 351). Daniel punches Gideon and momentarily feels peace until 'the rage flared again' (*SL* 352). The little family relocates to the home of Bill and Winifred in Master's Row. Here '[t]he large brown teapot shone mildly on a blue-checked tablecloth. Toast was in the toast rack and bread-and-butter cut in overlapping slices on a willow-patterned plate' (*SL* 352). Winifred has a new lease of life for '[s]he had made a coal fire again, where once she and Bill had sat in cold silence with one bar of the electric fire. ... Winifred could not have said she was happy. How could she be happy? But she had a purpose, which had put life in her' (*SL* 352). Winifred had been a 'tight-lipped' mother and Bill a father who 'roared, castigated, laid down his expectations' (*SL* 353). Winifred is 'a cuddly, indulgent, gentle grandmother' and Bill is now a grandfather who plays. They read stories and poems together with their grandchildren: 'They all four sat together over these firelit teas and kept back the dark' (*SL* 353).

Frederica, in a state of shock and grief, takes tea with Nigel Reiver and his sisters in their ancestral home. Outside there are mown lawns and a moat with water in it. Inside is yet

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another tea table which calls to mind the Van Gogh still life. It is even described in telegrammatic sentences which bring to mind Van Gogh's account to his brother of his still life *The Breakfast Table*:

> Georgian silver teapot, reflecting firelight and misty outside light, delicate Spode cups, a platter of fine sandwiches, a crumbled half chocolate cake, on a lightly starched damask cloth on a large dark tray. There was a silver creamer, and a saucer of sliced half-rounds of lemon, glistening and acrid. (*SL* 355)

For Frederica '[t]he idea of her sister was always monstrous, because always dying' (*SL* 356) and Nigel is present. It is he who 'held her tightly against the dark. He was very much alive' (*SL* 356). Finally Daniel, who has expressed his grief and his battle with the dark by mortifying his flesh with a long mindless tramp from the north of England to the south, arrives at the door of Alexander's London flat. Here too is the presence of a fire and the elements of a still life: a table at which, and utensils with which, Daniel consumes food. The still life is finally physically present: Alexander 'had put a vase of irises on his desk, next to his little image of the *Breakfast Table* (*SL* 357). Daniel announces to Alexander 'it's time I came back to life' (*SL* 357) and Alexander 'poured coffee from a blue enamelled Polish pot, into a gold Vallauris pottery breakfast cup' and offers to Daniel: ' "Coffee. To put some life in you" ' (*SL* 358).

The novel ends, life has triumphed and Byatt has illustrated the philosophy she shares with Murdoch that art (whether in the form of words or visual images) 'is the light by which human things can be mended' (*BP* 364). The novel does not appear to have ended in any very satisfactory manner unless the reader has followed Byatt's argument about the power of paint to represent the world and record life, and the entrance of Van Gogh's still life *The Breakfast Table* into the very fabric of Byatt's tale. Paint and fiction are united in an entirely satisfactory way.

I conclude with words which encapsulate Murdoch and Byatt's shared philosophy. They are the words, most appropriately, which Murdoch gives to Apollo, god of art and destruction, at the conclusion of her novel *The Black Prince*: 'Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you all, nothing' (*BP* 364).

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End notes

[1] These comments can be found on page 224 of AN Wilson's memoir *Iris Murdoch: As I knew her* which masquerades as biography but is in fact an emotional and personal account of his relationship with both Iris Murdoch and John Bayley onto which Wilson piggybacks several autobiographical details of his own.

[2] This essay was written as an introduction to the French translation of the Byatt story 'Sugar'. Entitled ' Sugar/*Le Sucre*', the essay appears in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*, a collection of AS Byatt's writings published in 1991 by Chatto & Windus.

[3] In her essay 'People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Post-war fiction', Byatt illustrates her argument with three examples which include Murdoch's *The Black Prince* and the Lessing novel *The Golden Notebook* (*GN*). The central character in Lessing's novel, Anna Wulf, might well have informed the later creation of Byatt's Frederica Potter. Each character is young, divorced and living in London in the middle of the twentieth century. Each is the mother of one child for whom she seeks to create a secure routine while she makes order out of her world by means of a written record. Frederica names her process 'laminations'; it is a collection of writings, of her own and others. Anna Wulf makes notes and sticks newspaper articles into four notebooks of different colours: 'She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognises, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness – of breakdown.' (*GN Introduction 1971* xi). Each of the five sections of Lessing's novel is called 'Free Women' and then numbered one to five. However this is ironical as Anna Wulf is not free and neither is her close friend Molly nor the character Ella in her novel. Anna is miserable without a man; Molly finally marries for financial security. Frederica, however, achieves financial and emotional freedom during the course of Byatt's tetralogy.

[4] In his essay entitled 'To Civilize our Gentlemen', Steiner expresses the opinion, which both Murdoch and Byatt would surely endorse, that 'Literature takes a great deal of living with and living by' (Steiner 1984: 25). In the course of his argument he identifies and analyses the assumptions upon which faculties of English Literature were founded:

> The study of literature was assumed to carry an almost necessary implication of moral force. It was thought self-evident that the teaching and reading of the great poets and prose writers would enrich not only taste or style but moral feeling; that it would cultivate human judgement and act against barbarism. (Steiner 1984: 27)

This is certainly the strong belief of both Murdoch and Byatt. Steiner, however, believes that a radical alteration has taken place in 'the confident link between literature and civilized values' (Steiner 1984: 30):

> The simple yet appalling fact is that we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*. … What is worse – a certain body of evidence points the other way. When barbarism came to twentieth-century Europe, the arts faculties in more than one university offered very little moral resistance … Literary values

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> and the utmost of inhumanity could co-exist in the same community, in the same individual sensibility. (Steiner 1984: 30)

[5] This might well be the modelling of Byatt's character Ruth 'with her pale plait hanging between her shoulders' (*BT* 459) on the character Lindsay Rimmer from the 1962 Murdoch novel *An Unofficial Rose*. Byatt discusses with Ignês Sodré how Lindsay Rimmer is made immediately distinctive by her appearance for she has 'long golden braids of hair' (*UR* 72). This point is discussed in my introduction on pages 2 and 3.

[6] Byatt herself embarked upon this project: 'My first novel grew out of a PhD thesis I never finished on the nature of religious metaphor – the relations between the world of sense and the world of spirit – in the English Renaissance' (Byatt 1991: 17). Frederica explains her thinking to Luk Lysgaard-Peacock:

> 'I had the idea – it wasn't mine, it was very common in the 50s – that the seventeenth century was when people really *stopped believing* as they once had. When all those words – like creation, like real – became riddles. I thought, if you looked at the metaphors you could trace the thinking processes, you could see how the mind works.' (*WW* 410)

[7] Byatt was saved by her quick-thinking and practical husband who flipped the switch and turned off the refrigerator, unlike Marcus Potter:

> Marcus was slow. Later he was to think it out, how, if he had been Daniel, he might have switched the thing off, instead of standing there, smelling burned flesh, watching his sister's incomprehensible rigid drumming, hearing the gasp, and then the horrid relaxed silence, full of burning. He went to the door, opened it and called 'Help' soundlessly from a dry throat. (*SL* 334)

[8] Byatt indicated her dislike of the phrase in a letter written to Peter Conradi in December 2000. (Conradi 2001: 653 fn 105.)

[9] It is intriguing to note that Byatt gives this image of a carpet to Frederica at sixty, contemplating the changing character of the decades through which she has lived:

> Her idea of her own youth was a densely patterned carpet of mnemonics and rhythms ...The carpet of the 50s was woven of many colours, in fine, threads, even if much of it was pastel ... Whereas the 60s were like fishing-net woven horribly loose and slack with only the odd very bright plastic object caught in its meshes, whilst everything else had rushed and flowed through, back into the undifferentiated ocean. (*WW* 50)

[10] There is, for example, the 'badger smell' of his unwashed bedclothes (*AWC* 1); at the Impiatts' home he 'always acted the goat'; the brightness of their hearth made him feel 'like a slinking sniffing wolf' (*AWC* 7) and a chance encounter to which he reacted badly leaves him with the urge to 'expunge the vile impression of myself as a frightened cur' (*AWC* 167). Learning to trust Thomasina Uhlmeister 'let loose a lion of desire' (*AWC* 36) and he muses on the possibility of 'bright innocent surprises to prick the weary and depraved hide' (*AWC* 58).

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[11] Byatt writes: 'The sea, in a Murdoch novel, represents what the priest of no god in *The Time of the Angels* called "power and the marvel of power, chance and the terror of chance" '. (Byatt 1965: 283)

[12] Having painted the night sky, Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo: '[T]he sight of the stars always starts me thinking' and 'Just as we take a train to go to Tarascon or to Rouen, we take death to go to a star' (Bonafoux 1987: 111).

[13] This was a short-lived movement characterised by a new painterly freedom in which colour was made to serve art. It seemed brash to its first viewers and when art critic Louis Vauxcelles first entered an exhibition hall in which a conventional sculpture of a young boy stood amid the paintings he is said to have exclaimed that it was like Donatello 'parmi les fauves' – among the wild beasts. In this way the movement was named.

[14] Murdoch commentators have named these characters 'enchanter' figures; Richard Todd, for example, describes the presence in Murdoch's fiction 'of a central "enchanter" figure, who stage-manages, with their apparent connivance, the characters who surround him' (Todd 1979: 20). In the light of Todd's use of the imagery of the stage, it is interesting to note that the two characters who seem to be avatars of Prospero (Charles Arrowby in Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* and Matthew Crowe in Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*) have both been directors in the theatre. Arrowby admits that his success came to him as a director rather than as an actor or playwright (*SS* 38);Crowe 'had had a brief career as a West End director as a young man' (*VG* 18).

[15] The prologue to *The Virgin in the Garden* is set in the National Portrait Gallery in 1968; the action of the novel is set in 1953. The prologue to *Still Life* is set in the Royal Academy of Arts in 1980; the novel begins in December 1953. In both prologues Frederica has invited Alexander Wedderburn and Daniel Orton to join her. On both occasions she and Alexander end their afternoon with refreshments at Fortnum and Mason's and on both occasions Daniel, morose and uneasy, will not join them. Byatt has set up a pattern as a further link in the continuity of the novels of her planned tetralogy.

[16] Another element in the pattern created by the parallel prologues with which each of the first two novels of the tetralogy begins is what I am sure is another personal appearance by Byatt in the prologue to *Still Life* as a 'smallish woman in a pine-green tent-like coat' (*SL* 3) in the company of John House, the organiser of the exhibition which Frederica is attending:

> He ... kissed Frederica and introduced the woman, fumbling her name, as 'a colleague' ... Frederica did not attempt to ascertain the fumbled name, having given up interest in stray new people until it was clear that they were of real concern. She assumed wrongly that John House's colleague was an art historian. (*SL* 3)

The woman in the pine-green coat is never mentioned again, yet she has a career and an identity which are known but carefully not stated. I am certain that this, too, is Byatt inserting herself into her own fiction, just for the fun of it.

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[17] Literary allusion is described by Byatt in conversation with Murdoch (in the 1985 ICA video) as 'the breath of my life'.

[18] Byatt does not in fact use the future tense with reference to her characters. What she does do quite often (and what she means to indicate by her claim to use, or not to use, 'the future tense' with reference to a character) is to look ahead, particularly into the life of Frederica and the social life of England. So, for example, as Frederica and Alexander walk on the Camargue in 1954 the reader is informed that this was a period prior to the invasion of the area by tourists, gipsies and hippies.

> In the Sixties any vaguely holy and distant place became heaped and congested with the bodies of the seekers of the holy and distant. Frederica at that time wrote an essay on overpopulation, relics of individualism, the collective soul and Glastonbury. That was before Stonehenge, in 1980, became enclosed in a concentration camp cage, designed to keep people out ... A world was coming in which it would almost certainly never again be possible to walk quietly, as Frederica and Alexander walked, through the village where Van Gogh tramped and set up his easel in the clean dust. (*SL* 81)

Byatt does not offer the reader any glimpse into Stephanie's future, because there is none.

[19] On occasion referred to by Byatt as A *Winter's Tale*: 'He disliked *A Winter's Tale.*' (*VG* 86).

[20] Bill Potter claims that a man 'does not lose his wife for *twenty* years and get back an animated statue and profess joy in a deception' (*VG* 86). Sixteen is in fact the correct number of years. Frederica, musing on the subject several years later, is characteristically accurate when she contemplates the shortcomings of a play which ignores 'the feelings of a woman shut in a vault for *sixteen* years' (*WW* 385).

In the text of the play itself Paulina, answering the complaint of the king viewing the 'statue' that the Hermione of his recollection was not so wrinkled, claims: 'So much the more our carver's excellence;/Which lets go by some sixteen years and makes her/As she liv'd now.' (Act V Scene III lines 30, 31)

[21] Byatt's essay 'Arachne' was commissioned for a collection of reworkings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published in 2000.

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Byatt and Murdoch: works of fiction

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