In "that Borderland Between": The Ambivalence of A. S. Byatt's Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis explores the conceptualisation of subjectivity, the past and language in the work of one particular English novelist and critic, A. S. Byatt. In doing so, it examines significant points of overlap between Byatt's fiction and criticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the discourses that have contributed to their formation. Whilst Byatt's work is inflected by recent critical examinations of the three concepts, this thesis is less concerned with how it reflects prevailing notions of subjectivity, the past and language, than with its participation in an ongoing examination of each. Although I do investigate the interplay between Byatt's fiction and criticism, my focus is on how this is played out in Byatt's fictional texts, in particular the novels.

The Introduction offers a brief summary of other criticism on Byatt's work, summarises the recent definitions of 'text' and broader discussions of postmodernism that have impacted on my approach to her fiction, and proposes a reading of these texts that accounts for their ambivalence. In Chapter One, I focus on the reconfiguration of subjectivity in Byatt's writing, particularly as it relates to textuality. Chapter Two explores the relationship between present and past in Byatt's fiction that is partly enacted through the texts' own engagement with past literatures, in particular nineteenth-century literature, and the related issues of historiography, linearity and memory that these texts investigate. Language, in particular Byatt's interest in its relation to 'things', is the focus of the third and final chapter of this thesis.

Throughout each of the chapters is an exploration of Byatt's engagement or re-examination of a persistent 'thread of two' in Western discourse. Although each chapter focuses on one of the three concepts, each also explores the issues that arise from the conjunction of 'two things' in these fictions: text and subject, present and past, language and the world. Related to this is my consideration of how Byatt's fiction is characterised by a number of contradictory impetuses. Of particular interest is the ambivalence that arises from Byatt's partial engagement with recent critical theory - not only because it reflects larger cultural and discursive movements, but also because it contributes to a productive forging of new forms of fiction that combine an awareness of the concerns of literary and cultural criticism *with* a desire to evoke pleasure in the texts.

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

Novels:

SoS *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964)

G *The Game* (1967)

VG *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978)

SL *Still Life* (1985)

P *Possession: A Romance* (1990)

BT *Babel Tower* (1996)

TBT *The Biographer's Tale* (2000)

Collections of stories:

S *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987)

AI *Angels and Insects* (1992)

MS *The Matisse Stories* (1993)

DNE *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994)

E *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998)

Critical works:

DF *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1994)

UT *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time* (1989)

PM *Passions of the Mind* (1991)

IC *Imagining Characters* (1995)

OHS *On Histories and Stories* (2000)

Interviews:

NT Nicholas Tredell, with A. S. Byatt.

JLC Jean-Louis Chevalier, with A. S. Byatt.

Varia:

NB 'A New Body of Writing.'

MMF 'Memory and the Making of Fiction.'

IW 'Identity and the Writer.'

SC Preface to *Strange and Charmed.*

PR 'The Pleasure of Reading.'

Introduction

The Ambivalence of A. S. Byatt's Fiction

> Novelists sometimes claim that their fiction is a quite separate thing from their other written work. Iris Murdoch likes to separate her philosophy from her novels; David Lodge says that his critical and narrative selves are a schizoid pair. I have never felt such a separation, nor wanted to make such claims. From my early childhood, reading and writing seemed to me to be points on a circle.
>
> A. S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind.*

> Based on the notion that any theorising must derive from that which it purports to study, my focus here is on those points of significant overlap of theory with aesthetic practice which might guide us to articulate what I want to call a 'poetics' of postmodernism, a flexible conceptual structure which could at once constitute and contain postmodern culture and our discourses both about it and adjacent to it.
>
> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism.*

Inside / outside literature

Since the 1960s, A. S. Byatt has extensively published both fiction and criticism. Her fictional texts include seven novels, from *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) to the most recent *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), and five collections of stories, from *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987) to *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). Byatt's criticism ranges from uncollected essays and reviews, on a wide range of topics, to her early collections of essays on Iris Murdoch, *Degrees of Freedom* (1965), and *Wordsworth and Coleridge In their Time* (1970), and the more recent collections *Passions of the Mind* (1991) and *On Histories and Stories* (2000). Byatt's claim, in the Introduction to *Passions of the Mind*, to maintain a close connection between "reading" and "writing" identifies an inextricable relationship between critical and creative practices that her fiction also makes apparent. In this thesis I will examine the interplay between the two strands of Byatt's criticism and fiction, focusing on how this is played out in Byatt's fictional texts, in particular the novels. My approach to Byatt's criticism is thus principally through a consideration of its relation to the fictional texts - partly because, as Byatt puts it in the Introduction to *On Histories and Stories*, she sees herself "primarily as a writer" (*OHS* 1).

The ambivalence that Byatt's identification as a writer-critic can produce in her work has sometimes seemed problematic to contemporary reviewers. One reviewer, Marilyn Butler, claims that "as a novelist", Byatt has "tended to sound like a critic", whilst "as an academic critic, like someone wondering if she wouldn't prefer to be a novelist." Butler claims that in her most recent fiction, Byatt resolves this tension and

advocates a new kind of fiction that melds a critical interest with storytelling, which she terms "ficticism" (22). Unlike Butler, Ruth Franklin regards Byatt's latest novels, *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale*, as "stiff and brittle and dry", or too much "like academic papers: assemblages of facts, evidence, and specimens"; while her most recent collection of essays, *On Histories and Stories*, are deemed "superficial" and not critical or analytical enough (38-9). Judgements aside, both reviewers do highlight the position *in between* criticism and fiction in which Byatt's fiction (and criticism) is often placed. What is at issue here is the question of whether or not this position is problematic.

At the same time, Byatt's identification of a connection between "reading" and "writing" also intimates the extent to which fiction is always inextricably bound up with other cultural practices and other discourses - within which it is situated, from which it is formed, and to which it contributes. One preoccupation of *On Histories and Stories* is with the effect on fiction of recent critical theory, or what Byatt terms the "encroachments being made by literary criticism into the forms of creative writing", often resulting in an "impossible desire for scholarly exactness in good fiction writers - like dancers changing places in an eighteenth-century dance" (*OHS* 5). The purpose of my study is to examine significant points of overlap between Byatt's "writing" and "reading", or, to put it another way, between Byatt's fiction and criticism on the one hand and, on the other, the discourses of the culture, place and time that contribute to their formation. In particular, I concentrate on three specific topics that have come under scrutiny in mid- to late-twentieth century theoretical discourse and Byatt's fiction alike: subjectivity, the past, and language.

Whilst Byatt's fiction is in some respects informed by critical examinations of these three concepts, I am not so much concerned with how these novels *reflect* changes to notions of each, as with their participation in an ongoing re-examination and interrogation of how subjectivity, the past and language have been conceptualised and defined since the mid-twentieth century. In particular, I want to consider the ambivalence that arises from what one critic, Michael Westlake, describes in his essay 'The Hard Idea of Truth' as a "partial and problematic" engagement in Byatt's fiction with recent critical theory, especially poststructuralism (33). The partial nature of Byatt's engagement with recent theory is partly a consequence of her attachment to approaching literature with a sense of "moral seriousness and social responsibility" inherited from 1950s Cambridge (Byatt, *PR* 132). In the Introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* and in

Passions of the Mind Byatt describes the influence of modernist poet and critic T. S. Eliot and critic F. R. Leavis on the study of literature during the early twentieth century which was still apparent in "Leavis's Cambridge" of her undergraduate years (*SoS* viii). Leavis "was certainly the most powerful force in the Cambridge English of my own time", she reiterates in *On Histories and Stories* (*OHS* 2).[1] The *equivocal* nature of Byatt's relationship to Leavisite criticism is also outlined in 'The Pleasure of Reading', where she claims that "although all my books have also been fighting a more or less overt battle with Dr Leavis and the Cambridge-English school of moral seriousness and social responsibility, I have also been deeply influenced by it" (*PR* 132). My study is less concerned with the specifics of Byatt's "battle" with Leavis, which has been variously described, for instance by Kathleen Kelly, in *A. S. Byatt* (1996), and Christien Franken, in *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (2001), than with her "partial and problematic" engagement with contemporary cultural theory, to which the legacy of "Leavis's Cambridge" contributes.

The ambivalence that arises from Byatt's engagement with different critical or theoretical positions *and* the close relation that she identifies between her creative and critical practices are bound up with and reflect what has been termed a "crisis" in English, or the study of literature, in the late-twentieth century. Over the course of Byatt's career as a writer and academic English has undergone a shift (although this is something of a simplification), from advocating the study of great literary works or authors to a more contextual approach to literary texts. Her fiction and criticism reflect this shift. As Westlake argues, the "contradictions and formal equivocations" of Byatt's novel, *Still Life* (1985), "can be read productively as an index of our larger cultural crisis" (33). Similarly, in her study of the three novels *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game* (1967) and *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Christien Franken also outlines some of the ways in which Byatt's *criticism* testifies to the "warring forces of signification" that determine both content and aim of English studies (xi).[2] It is the apparent "battle" *within*

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[1]One result of Leavis' influence, or the influence of a Cambridge approach to literature, on Byatt - that she identifies - was an inhibition to write anything that was not criticism. In the essay 'Reading, Writing, Studying', Byatt claims that Leavis' "students lost the desire to write novels, or poems" (4); in the Introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* Byatt writes of a similar anxiety: "It went without saying that anything you wrote yourself would fall so woefully short of the highest standards that it was better not to try" (*SoS* x).

[2]Barbara Johnson. *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980: 5. Qtd. in Franken, xi.

Byatt's fiction and criticism that compels a reading of these texts in the context of the discourses within which they are formed and to which they contribute. My aim, therefore, is to situate Byatt's fiction (and my own reading of it) in the wider context of cultural practices, or more widely still, in the discursive network within which meanings are generated, highlighting how it can be read as an "index of our larger cultural crisis". This aim is encouraged by Byatt, who claims to explore "the complicated relations between reading, writing, and the professional and institutional study of literature" in *On Histories and Stories* (*OHS* 1).

The transformation of English has been variously described by a number of critics whose writings have also contributed to my approach to these texts. Foremost among them is Linda Hutcheon, who begins *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) with a description of the poetics with which she engages as moving beyond the study of literary discourse to include the study of cultural practice and theory. Her intention, to expand her approach from a formalist and pragmatic study of literary texts to one which includes historical and ideological considerations, has coincided with what Frank Lentricchia describes as a "crisis in literary studies". This crisis is precipitated by the urge to "essentialise literature and its language" and the contradictory "urge to make literature 'relevant' by locating it in larger discursive contexts" (Hutcheon 1988, x).[3] The latter endeavour is both familiar and necessary. Catherine Belsey, in 'Towards Cultural History' (1989), outlines the necessity and advantage of such a shift and situates the study of the "signifying practice" within the wider context of cultural studies, making the related point that the literary text (or any text) must be regarded as part of a much larger network, a perpetually changing historical, discursive and ideological context, rather than as a single entity, stable and contained. Belsey's own contextualisation of the literary text is an adaptation (or adoption) of New Historicist Louis Adrian Montrose's "refusal of traditional distinctions between literature and history, between text and context", and resistance to the "traditional opposition of the privileged individual - whether an author or a work - to a world 'outside'" (Montrose 304; qtd. in Belsey 1989, 553). Similarly, in *Outside Literature* (1990) Tony Bennett contextualises the literary text in relation to that which might be considered to lie "outside" the parameters of literature, for the purpose

[3]Frank Lentricchia. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980: xiii. Qtd. in Hutcheon, 1988: x.

of overturning such a distinction, and in order to discuss the way in which this inside / outside relation has been variously described.

The difficulty literary criticism has with defining its boundaries is the inevitable consequence of literature's engagement with that which lies beyond itself, writes Robert Young in *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (1996): "discussion of books about the world quickly turns into deliberations about the world which they represent". He goes on to outline literary criticism's uncertainty about its "borders", which takes the form of defending them, or exceeding them to encroach upon the borders of other disciplines or fields of study (10-11) - including literature itself, as Byatt herself asserts in *On Histories and Stories*. Like theory, literature bears some relation to other forms of cultural production yet is not absorbed by them; it is part of the social and political world, yet often claims distance enough to represent it. Literature is "relentlessly entangled with other discourses", writes Young, hence the attraction of the term "culture", which seems to have no borders, and can encompass "the context of all literary production, the social world that goes on around it, while at the same time including literature" itself (11).[4]

Just as criticism displays an awareness of how literature is always inextricably bound up with other discourses - and other cultural practices - so too does fiction. A. S. Byatt's fictional texts perpetually return to the issue of how literature, along with other forms of "art", relates to other discourses and to life or the "world". The self-consciousness or self-reflexivity in Byatt's fiction is shared with other fiction written in the mid- to late-twentieth century, such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979). Indeed, the shift of English, or literary studies, toward cultural studies and the re-examination of distinctions between the 'inside' and 'outside' of literature are bound up with changes to the form of mid- to late-twentieth century fiction. Thus, Hutcheon's intention to expand her approach from a formalist and pragmatic study of literary texts, precipitated by the

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[4]While there are advantages to be gained from a shift from literary to cultural studies, Young also points out the problematics of such a move, suggesting that the "enforced nomadism" of cultural studies resembles the "transgressive cultural formations and operations of capitalism itself" (11) - indicating perhaps that such a shift could result in the loss of borders, or distinctions, altogether, to the point of homogeneity, or mass conformity. Such issues are debated elsewhere, in *Torn Halves* for example, and in *Outside Literature*; I mention them here simply to draw attention to what sometimes appears as a certain ambivalence in (or precariousness of) the position of literary studies, as simultaneously distinct from, and connected to, what it is not.

contradictory urge in literary studies to "essentialise literature and its language" and to make it relevant by locating it in larger discursive contexts, mirrors *at the same time* as it describes the way in which the "paradoxical" postmodern fictions she examines shift the boundaries of their own generic constraints. My examination of the fiction of A. S. Byatt will illustrate that these texts show a particular consciousness of their relationship to the world "outside" literature at the same time as they highlight the limitations and possibilities of their own practices and form.

Plastic possibilities: the novel and the text

Related to the shift of English toward cultural studies are changes in how 'text' has been conceptualised in literary and cultural theory since the mid-twentieth century. Rather than attempt to locate, and therefore contain the text within, a specific meaning, English has come to acknowledge the indeterminacy of a text. As Belsey has shown, the study of the signifying practice needs to make apparent the degree to which any "bid for truth" will be characterised by contradictions and conflicts; readings or interpretations of a literary text are part of a process, ongoing, and cannot fix or stabilise the text's meaning, which will constantly change, as it is part of a wider network of changing relations (1989, 559-60). Every text, as Jerome McGann argues, is a "social text" (21).

In particular, Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the novel, in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), has contributed to an awareness that the literary text is open-ended and indeterminate, and "social", existing in relation to that which lies outside its boundaries. In addition, Bakhtin's theories of dialogism provide a means of interpreting cultural practices, such as the study and production of the literary text, and encourage the crossing of boundaries of disciplines (and cultures) in keeping with cultural studies' interdisciplinary approach. What is particularly relevant here is the way in which Bakhtin's theory of dialogism enables us to *examine* a text whilst resisting the attempt to *resolve* its contradictions: his conception of the novel is that it is in perpetual *dialogue* with other texts, other structures, and other forces which constantly change, therefore constantly contribute to and alter the text's meaning/s. Bakhtin's influence on the changing conception of 'text' is recognised by a number of theorists: Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), suggests that Bakhtin "was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure". What Bakhtin introduces

is a "dynamic dimension" to literary theory, and an awareness that any text is intertextual, constructed as "a mosaic of quotations" (1995, 111). Similarly, Hutcheon considers Bakhtin to be an exponent of the notion that the "single, closed 'work' shifts to one of plural, open 'text'" (1988, 80).

The concept of text is one of those 'travelling concepts' which is perpetually redefined and reformulated, particularly in its relationship to other concepts for which it is sometimes used synonymously, such as 'book', or to similarly mobile and indefinable concepts, to which it also bears a complex relation, such as 'subject'.[5] A number of theorists have offered various definitions and elucidations on 'text' (see Roland Barthes; Mieke Bal 1996, 136; John Mowitt 4-5; Jerome McGann) and its relation to 'subject' (see Kristeva 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' (1969)), some of which will be discussed in the following chapter. At this point, I want to highlight one issue in particular that has arisen from the debate surrounding the concept of 'text' that is relevant to this thesis: Jonathan Culler's discussion, in a recent paper 'Text and Textuality', of the distinction between the concept of 'text' (as the product of a nexus of discourses) and 'work' (as the product of an individual author). Culler argued that Roland Barthes' distinction between 'text' and 'work' (or *œuvre*) is "asymmetrical": either 'text' as entirely produced by a network of interacting systems, or 'work' as the product of an author's intention, is on its own an impossible ideal. He went on to point out that to see 'works' as 'texts' functions to usefully animate them, what is less easy is to find the "radical text" which retains no element of the concept of 'work' (Culler 2000). In *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey summarises different conceptions of 'work' and 'text'; even though she outlines the difficulty of attributing intention to an author, and therefore of discussing an *œuvre* in terms of work which expresses the ideas of that author, she nonetheless agrees with Culler that the "totally writable, plural text does not exist" (1980, 105).

This concept of text, as neither the "radical text" nor the straightforward 'work' but something that hovers in between and is a combination of the two, is the rather fluid concept with which this thesis engages. Each of Byatt's novels, stories and essays shares important factors in production, including the writing-subject, and reading-subject; the historical moment(s) of production, which nonetheless varies within almost a forty year time period; and a range of cultural and discursive influences, which primarily include

[5]Mieke Bal borrows the phrase "concept nomade" from Isabelle Stengers, *D'une science à*

Western or European literary, critical, scientific and philosophical discourses. The ambivalence of Byatt's conception of a literary text, or work of art, and its relationship to the 'writer', outlined in her essay 'Identity and the Writer', is related to this and will be considered in the following chapter. My approach to these novels is to regard them simultaneously as the work of A. S. Byatt *and* as texts that are contributed to by the interaction of different discourses. Having said that, there is little focus in this thesis on the relationship of Byatt's *life itself* to these novels. While this may be a fruitful line of enquiry, and certain critics have highlighted issues that arise from a consideration of Byatt's life in relation to her fiction (see Todd 1997), my approach to Byatt is to regard her, as she claims to want to be regarded in 'Reading, writing, studying', as "someone who weaves careful structures out of truths, lies, slanted comment, several originals, and wants her texts read *as texts*" (*RWS* 6).

Just as a concept of 'text' is difficult to entirely distinguish from 'work', so too is it imbricated in a conception of the *novel*. *The Dialogic Imagination*, which has contributed so much to the reconceptualisation of 'text', begins, after all, with Bakhtin's discussion of the novel as a genre. What is particularly germane for this study is Bakhtin's account of the novel as open-ended and perpetually evolving, crossing the boundaries of what is strictly fictional literature and merging with "the genres of everyday life", incorporating them into its own form. Phenomena such as these characterise the novel as an "ever-developing genre" that is imbued with "plastic possibilities" as it continually shifts the boundaries between what lies inside and outside its form, and what does and does not constitute literature (1981, 33, 6, 3). A. S. Byatt's fiction - from her first novel *The Shadow of the Sun*, to her short stories, novellas, fairy tales and later novels, *Possession*, *Babel Tower* and *The Biographer's Tale* - explores and extends a conception of what does and does not constitute fiction - or even literature. One aspect of this thesis is to look at how Byatt's novels engage in the process of renovating their own form and transgressing their own generic constraints.

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l'autre des concepts nomades. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987. Qtd. in Bal 1994, 34.

The curiously symbiotic relationship between realism and experiment

Existing scholarship on A. S. Byatt's novels has highlighted a stylistic shift from straightforward literary realism toward a more experimental mode. One of the three book-length works on Byatt is Kathleen Kelly's short *A. S. Byatt* (1996), which forms part of the Twayne English Author Series. Kelly approaches the novels chronologically, intimating a progression of both thematic and stylistic concerns. Both *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game* are written in a "realist vein", she writes, and "focus on family relationships", like the first two novels in the tetralogy, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (24). The more explicitly 'experimental' *Babel Tower* is the third novel in Byatt's proposed tetralogy, the fourth volume of which is expected to be published in 2002. Although Richard Todd's slim book, *A. S. Byatt* (1997), which forms part of the British Council series 'Writers and their Work', approaches the texts thematically rather than chronologically, it also retains a "sense of continuum" in its account of Byatt's fiction (3). Other of the many critics and reviewers of Byatt's work make similar note of the changing style and form of Byatt's fiction, contributing to what is almost a *narrative* of development. From the beginning, writes Julian Gitzen, Byatt's "chosen framework was the traditional realistic novel" (84).

Responses to *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* have often been in terms of the literary realism of the texts, as focusing on the Yorkshire based Potter family and their network of friends and associations. D. J. Taylor, in *After the War* (1993), writes that these two novels at times read like "the Victorian social novel" and are "at the most basic level a study of 'ordinary' family life" (92-3). Iris Murdoch's review of *The Virgin in the Garden*, entitled 'Force Fields' (1978), suggests that while the novel is "highly intellectual" it is "no tract or treatise; it is a strong, confident, very long traditional novel". By traditional, Murdoch means that, unlike much contemporary fiction, *The Virgin in the Garden* does not exhibit "brevity, narrowness, dryness and ultimate degeneration into a 'text'" (586). Olga Kenyon makes a similar point about *Still Life*: that Byatt "achieves a kind of reality that has seldom been novelised before, so giving a new lease of life to realism in the modern novel." Like Marcel Proust, Byatt "celebrates 'ordinary things and everyday life'": marriage, birth and ageing (78-9). In addition, Byatt's intention of making Stephanie's accidental death shocking to the reader "owes much to considerations of realism", writes Michael Westlake (34-5; see also Todd 1997, 48-54).

Conversely, Byatt's more recent fiction has met with the opposite response. In her review of *Angels and Insects* (1992), Marilyn Butler claims that with this text and *Possession*, Byatt 'abandons' "the pretence that life is what she is imitating in favour of full-hearted literariness" (22). Hal Jensen, reviewer of *The Biographer's Tale*, agrees when he suggests that "stories, characters or dramatic scenes" are of less interest to Byatt (now) than "the relation of language to things, the arrangement of those things in the world, and exposure of the tricks of literary composition [which] are not just occasional intruders in this novel, they are its very subject" (23). Ruth Franklin also regards *The Biographer's Tale*, and *Babel Tower*, as an indicator that Byatt's most recent "writing" is "more accurately, assembling" which lacks the "building suspense'" of a novel like *Possession*. According to Franklin, Byatt's latest fictions *fail* to demarcate themselves from the "narrowness, dryness and ultimate degeneration into a 'text'" that Murdoch warns against, and are "stiff and brittle and dry" (38). Butler, Jensen and Franklin each attest that Byatt's most recent fiction reflects a change from her earlier works in both style and thematic concern. The pivotal textual event, according to Butler, which marks this shift in direction, is *Possession*. Byatt seems to support this claim. In the recent essay 'Old Tales, New Forms' she writes that: "By the time I wrote *Possession* in the 1980s my interest in both character and narration had undergone a change - I felt a need to *feel and analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously" (*OHS* 131-2).

Even though it is possible to trace - and important to note - the development of Byatt's fiction from realism to a more experimental mode, it is *also* important to retain an awareness of the ambivalence, including a kind of stylistic duality, of even the earliest novels. My own approach to Byatt's fiction is not, therefore, chronological, but structured according to an examination of each of the three concepts (subjectivity, the past and language) in order to better explore this duality. Even Byatt's first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game*, are works of realism *at the same time* as they display a concern with the function of language and the medium of fiction. Several contemporary critics of Byatt's first novels do point out that alongside the narrative is a commentary on language and literature. Over the decades that she has been writing, argues Todd, Byatt consistently displays a "passion for language" and explores "the ways in which certain kinds of language may exercise deforming pressures on the reality they seek to describe" (1997, 5). All of Byatt's fiction, writes Taylor, including *The Shadow*

of the Sun, is "preoccupied with literature" itself (1989, 60). Even as he regards *Still Life* as on one level a "social novel", Taylor also points out that it exists "simultaneously on a number of levels" and is, "among other things, an argument about signification" (1993, 92). The combination of realism and self-consciousness that Taylor identifies in the novels from *Shadow* to *Still Life* highlights an important characteristic of Byatt's early fiction that other critics, including Julian Gitzen, Caryn McTighe Musil and Kathleen Kelly, also name.

Gitzen's essay 'A. S. Byatt's Self-Mirroring Art', gives an overview of Byatt's fiction, highlighting the ways in which it is endlessly reflective of itself. The "hybrid form" of *Possession*, writes Gitzen, has been anticipated in Byatt's previous novels which qualify her, "at least in a minor key, as a writer of self-reflexive fiction" (84). Likewise, Jane Campbell suggests that *The Game* "takes its place beside other 'self-reflexive' pieces of contemporary fiction in which novelists examine the procedures of their art". The novel points to the limitations of language, and of art which uses language, to tell the 'truth', or as Campbell puts it, the idea that "no order of language can hold the chaos of experience" (1988: 147-50, 159-60). Often quoted is Byatt's summary of the influence of Marcel Proust, who taught her that "it was possible for a text to be supremely mimetic, 'true to life' in the Balzacien sense, and at the same time to think about form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world" (qtd. in Gitzen, 80).[6] Like Byatt, Proust engages in a reworking of realist fiction that also reconsiders and explores the concepts of subjectivity, or the place of an 'I' in the text; the past, that is recuperated through memory and language or art; and language itself, in particular in its relation to visual perception. What I want to highlight here is Byatt's claim that she aims for the same *doubleness* that is apparent in Proust's long novel which is "true to life" and aware of "its own formation".

One means by which Byatt's novels, from *The Shadow of the Sun* through to *Possession* and *Babel Tower*, consider ways and means of "perceiving and inventing the world" is through the characters themselves, who are often novelists or aspiring writers,

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[6]As in Byatt's texts, Proustian discussions of these issues do not simply interrupt the narrative (à la George Eliot), but are threaded into the very fabric of the text itself. Focusing on the various strands of the intertextual relation between Byatt's tetralogy and Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* would require greater scope than this thesis allows - although it does attempt occasional points of comparison. The same applies to the influence of Iris Murdoch (see Franken; Westlake; Levenson) and George Eliot (see Levenson; Kelly; Shinn 1995).

or literary critics (see Gitzen 87; Campbell 1988). By this means, a reconsideration of language and literature is *represented* within the bounds of a realist narrative, through the experience of the characters. In *Still Life*, for instance, Byatt uses what Gitzen terms "her customary mirror-image structure", comparing the art of Vincent Van Gogh with the novel's own experiments with representation *and* those of its playwright, Alexander Wedderburn (87; see also Kelly 76-7). The would-be-writer, Anna Severell, in *The Shadow of the Sun*, looks to the two influential (male) figures in her life: her father, the novelist Henry Severell, and his most persistent critic, Oliver Canning, for appropriate models with which to perceive and represent the world. Anna's 'life', which has been read as a textual enactment of the "anxiety of influence" (Kelly 14), is figured in terms of a choice between literature and literary criticism; Musil writes that novelist Henry Severell represents "life as a visionary, a creator" while his critic Oliver Canning is "a realist, a critic, a commonsense practical man". Anna's situation of finding herself "helplessly trapped between the two men and the two world views", is, Musil claims, analogous to Byatt's own experience of being "sandwiched" amid the curiously symbiotic yet antagonistic dialogue between novelist D. H. Lawrence and critic F. R. Leavis (196-7). The dilemma of the *choice* between art or criticism for Anna Severell is repeated in *The Game* in which the two sisters, Julia and Cassandra, represent the two alternatives of a creative or academic life.[7] Other characters have similar choices: in *Still Life* Frederica Potter tries to choose between writing a PhD and writing for *Vogue*; *Possession*'s Roland Michell ponders a decision to write poetry or pursue an academic career. The choices

[7]Different critics offer variations on this reading: Taylor, for instance, writes that "*The Game* is much more than the juxtaposition of personalities. It is also a novel about two different ways of looking at the world" (1993, 185). Several readings of *The Game* attribute the opposition between the two sisters as indicative of a 'split' in Byatt herself; Joanna Creighton argues that the "sisterly paradigm" functions in *The Game* as a fictional construct to illustrate a 'split' within the female artist. She likens this to the monster/angel polarity of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's woman writer in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), only this "schizoid split [is] between the social and reclusive, the sexually experienced and the innocent, the gregarious and the contemplative, and ultimately between the real and the imagined" (19). Giuliana Giobbi's 'Sisters Beware of Sisters' compares *The Game* with *Sense and Sensibility* and suggests that Byatt's novel is a kind of postmodern rewriting of Austen's text; it also draws on Gilbert and Gubar's hypothesis that the nineteenth-century woman writer represented her own 'duality' in two very different characters - so that the author is "partly mirrored by both heroines" (241-2). It is "fruitful to consider Julia and Cassandra Corbett as representing two split facets of the creative writer's imagination", argues Todd, neither of which is represented as "absolutely 'right'" (1997, 10).

each faces function as part of the (realist) narrative, and are decisions about 'life', as well as choices between different approaches to literature and writing.

However, the idea that it is possible to do (or be) *both* is also considered in Byatt's fiction. What if, as Edmund Wilkie puts it to Frederica Potter in *Babel Tower*, it is not a question of "either/or" but "both/and, and a few things more as well"? (*BT* 341). Phineas Nanson, in *The Biographer's Tale*, resolves his dilemma over which of his two lovers to choose precisely by *not* choosing: he stays with *both* Vera of "the shimmering greys of the dark" *and* with Fulla "in the colours of sunlight and pollen" (*TBT* 238). Like their characters, the texts themselves are "both/and": the choices the characters face are analogous to the texts' own participation inside *and* outside realism. As Heidi Hansson suggests, there is an "internal struggle" in *Angels and Insects* "between the level of narrative and the level of language" (461). On the one hand, the narrative flows toward coherence (and conclusion); on the other, the 'double-voiced' metaphorical language creates an instability and flux in the text which leaves it open-ended, renders any single interpretation difficult and is at odds with the narrative structure. It may be that this ambivalence is particularly apparent in Byatt's later fiction, but a complex interplay between realism and experiment is also at work in the earlier fiction, as critics' (sometimes conflicting) descriptions of the novels attest. Whilst Murdoch hails *The Virgin in the Garden* as a "traditional novel" that lacks the "dryness" of its contemporaries, Michael Irwin's review claims the opposite, that *The Virgin* is "a very bookish novel" which indicates "the writer's comparative lack of interest in the routine chores of realist fiction" (1277).

In the essay 'People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-war Fiction', included in *Passions of the Mind*, Byatt explores how other contemporary works of fiction attempt to remain within the constraints of literary realism *and* display an awareness of the medium within which they operate. She highlights what she terms a "curiously symbiotic relationship between old realism and new experiment" in the fiction of Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Angus Wilson and other English novelists of the mid- to late-twentieth century who play a "typically English experimental game, with layers of literary precedents and nostalgias" (*PM* 170-4). The same dual engagement can also be identified in Byatt's fiction; in particular, as I will discuss in Chapter Two: 'The Presence of the Past', Byatt's novels display the same "real, concrete imagining of the

past" that is "somehow permitted to be by a politically and linguistically self-conscious framework" that she identifies in novels by J. G. Farrell and John Berger (*PM* 176).

Many of Byatt's reviewers and critics do consider how Byatt's novels are engaged with *both* realism and experiment (see Kenyon, Alexander, Kelly). Juliet Dusinberre's essay, 'Forms of Reality in A. S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*' refers to David Lodge's comment that the choice for contemporary novelists is between the "'great tradition' realist novel and the experimental 'novel-about-itself'", stating that Byatt's novel manages to do *both*: "*The Virgin in the Garden* functions as naturalistic fiction in the George Eliot mode and as the Proustian self-reflecting text" (55). Byatt also suggests that *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* are "both less classic realist novels than they look" (*NT* 74). Not explicitly experimental, but not straightforward or "classic" realism either, these two novels can be usefully considered as "metafictional" texts, which Linda Hutcheon defines, in *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*, as differing from "formal realism" in that they show an awareness of their medium, of language, of words and are not simply concerned with "character, action, morality, representation of reality" (1980, 11). The "line between realism and postmodernist metafiction" also "becomes blurred" in *Sugar and Other Stories*, writes Jane Campbell. All of the stories "are about real life and also about the art that tries to capture it." She also uses the term "metafiction" to describe several of the stories in *Sugar* which fit into the category that Patricia Waugh defines, in *Metafiction* (1984), as "those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation" (Waugh 19; qtd. in Campbell 1997, 106). Campbell goes on to suggest that the collection moves "from the more realistic to the more metafictional end of the scale". In the concluding stories, "the confecting process, the imagination's shaping activity, itself emerges gradually as a subject". The sequence of the collection not only highlights the thematic links between the stories, it also forms an overall metanarrative which finally proves to be about the process of writing itself, or "the process of confection that is Byatt's metaphor for storytelling" (ibid., 105-6).

The terms "metafiction", "Proustian self-reflecting text", or, to quote Byatt, "self-conscious realism", suggest something of the ambivalence of the texts' relation to formal realism (*PM* 4). In some cases, however, Byatt's novels display a more radical conception of their own status *as texts* than the term "self-conscious" allows, and are

closer to an explicit "mosaic of quotation" or nexus of discursive strands that is dynamic and changing. Although it is possible, again, to identify a progression toward explicit textuality in Byatt's work (if that is not a contradiction in terms), it is also necessary to maintain an awareness of how it is also at work in earlier novels. Kenyon, for example, writes in her discussion of *Still Life* that for Byatt "the novel is explicitly - not just implicitly - what Barthes defined as 'text': 'a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'" (Barthes 1977, 148; qtd. in Kenyon 54). In addition, it is important to note that even as the later novels are perhaps more explicitly experimental and self-conscious *texts*, concerned with the function and nature of language, they nonetheless draw on the conventions of realism. *Babel Tower*, for example, shows an awareness of its own medium and makes explicit its use of intertextuality, yet, even as it contextualises itself in relation to other forms of cultural production and acknowledges it is part of social and political world, it also paradoxically distances itself enough to claim representation of that world.

The explicit and self-conscious intertextuality of *Babel Tower* returns in *The Biographer's Tale* with Phineas Nanson's punning (and intertextual) statement that: "Postmodern ideas about intertextuality and quotation of quotation have complicated the simplistic ideas about plagiarism". Phineas' image of "lifted sentences, in their new contexts", which is a metaphor "from mosaic-making", has long been a part of scholarship, he claims, and cannot be solely attributed to the postmodern (*TBT* 29). Of Byatt's fiction, *Possession* and *Babel Tower* make the most explicit use of "lifted sentences", or fragments of sentences, or images. *Possession*'s pseudo-Victorian poetry borrows not only from nineteenth century poets, like Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti, but from twentieth century literary theory.

Incorporating different kinds of writing is something of a feature of Byatt's recent novels, which are comprised of a variety of sometimes incongruous elements *and* can be seen as textual hybrids of generic forms. This is where Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that the novel is "ever-developing", transgressive of its own generic boundaries and capable of perpetually searching out new formal or "plastic possibilities", can offer insight into the novels' changing form. One critic, Thelma J. Shinn, offers the term "meronymic" [sic] to describe *Possession* as a text which is comprised of seemingly oppositional parts: including different genres, such as "the Romance and Realism styles of the Victorian and

contemporary novel" (164). *Possession*'s status as a "Romance" has been the subject of much discussion amongst its reviewers and critics: "Romance is the underlying genre, and its relevance for the postmodern present is discussed in implicitly and explicitly metafictional passages" writes Christin Galster (2). The way in which Byatt's novel draws attention to the resemblance or relevance of romance, as a genre, to postmodern fiction has proven to be a fruitful line of enquiry amongst *Possession*'s critics (see Brink; Bronfen 1996; Buxton; Shinn 1996), as has *Possession*'s use of and resemblance to fairy tale (see Sanchez; Shinn 1995 and 1996).

While *Possession* offers the clearest example of a text comprised of a variety of generic components and intertextual quotations, it is not Byatt's only novel to be so. Byatt's fiction is characterised by a tension which arises from the juxtaposition of incongruous elements, the most significant of which are produced by its concomitant engagement with critical theory and with a realist and/or experimental fictional mode. Existing work on Byatt's fiction that is most useful comes from those critics who identify an ambivalence or *doubleness* in the texts: in particular, Michael Westlake's essay on *Still Life*, 'The Hard Idea of Truth', and Levenson's review of *Angels and Insects*, 'The Religion of Fiction'. Together, Westlake's claim that the "appropriation of *Still Life* to a tradition", or "traditional" literary mode that displays "the virtues of 19th century high prose" held up by the "pillars of organic, humanist belief", does not take into account the extent to "which its allegiance is partial and problematic", and Levenson's suggestion that Byatt's "postmodernity finds its ground in something else, something older", or that Byatt is that "odd-sounding but perfectly intelligible creature, the postmodern Victorian", have spurred me to further examine these contradictions in Byatt's fiction (Westlake 33, 37; Levenson 41). Christien Franken's book *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship and Creativity* (2001), which was published shortly before completion of this thesis, takes a similar approach. Although, as I discovered, there are points of overlap between Franken's *concerns* and mine, particularly in my first chapter on subjectivity, her study is limited to an account of the three novels *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game* and *Possession*, whilst my own is more wide ranging. In particular, my discussions of *Babel Tower* and, to a lesser extent *The Biographer's Tale*, examine the two most recent of Byatt's novels which have thus far received very little critical attention.

Of particular significance to this thesis is Westlake's claim that *Still Life*'s "hesitations, contradictions and formal equivocations, its failure to secure the stability it

seeks, can be read productively as an index of our larger cultural crisis", within "a particular historical moment", which encourages a reading of Byatt's fiction in the context of the doubleness that characterises postmodernism (33). "The double voice of postmodern fiction presents a challenge because it requires that we question the way we read and interpret not only postmodern literature but also literature as a whole", writes Heidi Hansson. This doubleness is particularly apparent, she goes on to suggest, in works which "openly display their affiliation with generic conventions or older works" or "literary hybrids", such as Byatt's *Possession* (452). The paradoxes within Byatt's fiction can be usefully interpreted in terms of larger cultural movements, as this thesis argues. My consideration of Bakhtin's account of dialogism in *The Dialogic Imagination* adds a further dimension to this debate, as Bakhtin provides a useful means of interpreting - without, however, attempting to resolve - some of these contradictions and ambiguities.

Dialogic relations and hybrid combinations: the paradox of A. S. Byatt's fiction

One ambiguity of A. S. Byatt's fiction arises from its apparent position inside / outside postmodernism. In part, the equivocal position in which Byatt's fiction is placed in relation to postmodernist cultural practice is the result of the indeterminate or multi-faceted meanings of the term 'postmodern' itself, which initially referred to a mode of architectural practice (see Hutcheon, 1988; Lyotard, 1989). While there is not the scope, here, to embark on an account of the various and diverse definitions (and effects) that have been attributed to postmodernism, I do want to highlight key issues that are relevant to a critique of Byatt's fiction. In 'Defining the Postmodern', Jean-François Lyotard distinguishes three (related) areas of debate around the term, the first of which is to do with the opposition between postmodernism and modernism "or the Modern Movement (1910-45)" (7). As I shall return to throughout this discussion, postmodernism's relation to modernism is characterised not so much by a break or rupture as an evaluation or *analysis* of its concerns, some of which it shares. In this light, we can read Byatt's equivocal stance in relation to Leavisite criticism, or, as I shall consider further, D. H. Lawrence's fiction, as indicative or even characteristic of a postmodernist dialogue with modernist culture.

Intertextuality, or the process of what Lyotard describes as "*bricolage*: the high frequency of quotations of elements from previous styles or periods", including the modern but also other periods (ibid., 7-8), fosters and reflects the ambivalence of

postmodernism's relationship to the past. Of course, this point returns us to Phineas Nanson's argument, in Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*, that postmodern ideas about intertextuality appear to unnecessarily complicate what has long been a straightforward practice of borrowing and quotation in literature. André Brink makes a similar point about language, when he argues that "what has so persistently been regarded as the prerogative of the Modernist and Postmodernist novel (and of a few rare predecessors), namely an exploitation of the storytelling properties of language, *has in fact been a characteristic of the novel since its inception*" (7). To highlight this, Brink discusses novels like Byatt's *Possession* alongside Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. In part, Brink's argument owes something to Bakhtin's account of language in the novel; indeed, Brink regards Bakhtin's study as further evidence of his claim that the "roots" of "what Joyce rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century" lie much further back and can "justifiably be called the novel experience" (5). What Brink *does* go on to acknowledge, however, is the extent to which postmodern fiction disrupts the sense that the novel has *developed* an increasing awareness of language as a medium precisely by returning, self-consciously, to the texts of the past (19). It is to disrupt the very idea of *progress*, as Lyotard points out, and to re-examine the long accepted tenets of Western thought, that postmodernism incorporates repetition and quotation of past texts into new contexts (ibid., 8-10).

Postmodernism, according to Linda Hutcheon, is an "ongoing cultural process or activity" that investigates, rather than possesses a fixed or definable identity or essence (1988, 14). If we accept this broad definition, there is a sense in which Bakhtin anticipates the concerns of postmodernism - for example in his assertion that the novel engages in "dialogic relations and hybrid combinations" in order to foster productive re-examinations of concepts like the individual, the past, or language itself (1981, 27-8). The extent to which Byatt's fiction *is* postmodern, or engages in a practice which can be termed postmodern, lies in its approximation to a cultural activity that *investigates* and *re-examines*, partly through a process of making "hybrid combinations" of *different* things.

Like the novel of Bakhtin's description *and* like the postmodern fiction that Hutcheon discusses in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Byatt's fiction "incarnates" the crisis in literary studies which Lentricchia describes - not, however, by "choosing sides", between the 'tradition' and its antagonists, "but by living out the contradiction of giving

in to both urges" (1988, x). In their engagement with realist fiction and with the related conceptions of narrative and history, as Chapter Two will explore, *Possession* and *Babel Tower* participate in the "contradictory phenomenon" of postmodernism "that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges". In this, Byatt's novels resemble the form of aesthetic practice on which Hutcheon focuses her study: that sub-genre of fiction which she terms "historiographic metafiction" (ibid., 3, 5). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon picks up and expands upon her consideration, in *Narcissistic Narrative,* of the "metafictional paradox" of works of self-conscious fiction which simultaneously evoke detachment and involvement in their reader. Historiographic metafictions are "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages": 'living out' the very contradictions described above (ibid., x, 5). Several critics have ascribed Byatt's *Possession* as belonging to this category, although this categorisation can also be regarded as problematic (see Janik; Holmes 1994; Galstor; Alsop and Walsh).

An important thread of this discussion is to consider how Byatt's fiction partakes in this process of investigation and is characterised by a number of contradictory impetuses. In particular, this study looks at how Byatt's novels investigate the concepts that have also been particularly subject to re-examination in postmodern theory: subjectivity, the past, and language. Each chapter focuses on one of the three concepts, or, rather, each explores the issues that arise from the conjunction of 'two things' in these fictions: text and subject, present and past, language and the world. Within each chapter, however, a number of other related paradoxes or "hybrid combinations" that are at work in the texts are also considered. The interaction between literature and theory, "reading" and "writing", criticism and fiction, is one such conjunction which remains a concern throughout the thesis; the role of theory in the production and investigation of literary texts and the inside / outside literature conundrum which Tony Bennett explores is related to this.

Chapter One: 'A Symbiosis of Text and Subject', will consider the role of the 'text' in the formation of subjectivities. One aspect of this chapter will be to consider the representation of the construction of the individual subject in Byatt's fiction in relation to conceptions of subject formation in recent critical theory, with particular focus on psychoanalytic theory. It will examine some of the questions Byatt's fiction raises regarding the possibility of constructing a stable identity and consider the issues of

gender, the male / female binary, and the relationship between the 'self' and 'other', including the role of love and desire. The chapter will close with a deliberation on the complexly imbricated relationship between subjectivity and textuality which recent critical theory explores and Byatt's fiction describes, examines and enacts.

Chapter Two: 'The Presence of the Past', is concerned with the relationship between past and present in Byatt's texts, such as the Victorian past and its relation to the 'present' in *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*. Its focus, however, is on Byatt's projected tetralogy, which so far includes *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*, in relation to the concepts of history and historiography, and related cultural beliefs and practices. It examines the concepts of memory, linearity and narrative - as they relate to fiction but also to historical sites, museums and galleries which are often included in Byatt's fiction as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the text. This chapter will also consider other paradoxes, including the conjunction of matter and spirit in relation to nineteenth-century concerns and writings, and the idea that Byatt's fiction, or more generally literature, or textual 'matter', itself has the function of a "conduit" to the past. This chapter will also look at other works of contemporary fiction, including novels by Graham Swift and Peter Carey, for the possibilities they offer of re-examining the past and historiography. The regenerative capacity that Byatt, like her fictional poet Randolph Henry Ash, attributes to language is a point of consideration that leads this chapter into the next.

The final section of the thesis, Chapter Three, 'The World / The Word: Language and Metaphor', deals with what is perhaps its major thread. Primarily concerned with Byatt's engagement with recent theories of language, this chapter is itself structured by the twists and turns of the metaphors of Byatt's texts: beginning with the Garden of Eden, then moving through Byatt's discussions - in both fiction and criticism - of the language of flowers, heliotropes, the centrality of the sun and the significance of light in Western discourse, and the Tower of Babel. Throughout, this chapter returns to a recurring paradox or tension in Byatt's fiction: that language bears simultaneously some relation, and no relation, to the world of things. Part of this discussion will consider the idea of representation in relation to Byatt's interest in painting and the visual arts and her engagement with realism - again, with particular focus on the novels that so far comprise the tetralogy. Like historiographic metafiction, which Hutcheon considers to be engaged in "less a destruction than a productive problematising of the whole notion" of language

(1988, 141), Byatt's tetralogy employs the strategies of postmodern theory to question the relation of language to reality. However, the ambiguity which arises from these texts and this process is productive, contributing to the forging of new forms of fiction which combine an awareness of the concerns of literary and cultural criticism, with a desire to evoke the pleasure in the text which characters, narrative and conclusion can produce.

On the one hand, Byatt's consideration of the three concepts - subjectivity, the past, and language - highlights the significance of their reformulation for its impact on fiction: in particular, the relationship of each to literary conventions - such as the formation of character, the structure of narrative and the use of rhetorical language. The discussions in the following chapters are all concerned, to some extent, with issues of textual realism and the changing form of fiction. They illustrate how Byatt's fictional texts exemplify Bakhtin's description of the novel as a genre of "becoming": ever evolving in a process of development produced by internal contradictions *and* by perpetual contact with that which lies outside of the texts themselves (1981, 5). Indeed, part of what characterises these literary texts is their very struggle to ascertain what lies inside and outside of literature and language.

However, there is a sense in which Byatt's investigation exceeds this self-conscious project and considers the reconceptualisation of an individual subject; or the past, historiography and memory; or metaphor, language and its relation to things, in a philosophical mode that is *not* solely determined by an interest in their relevance to fiction. Like her literary "foremothers" Iris Murdoch and George Eliot (Shinn 1995, 165), Byatt engages in a form of philosophical enquiry that has as much to do with how changing conceptions affect 'life', as with how they affect 'books'. Just as Murdoch's fiction is not simply informed by her philosophical studies - like her work on French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre - but is itself engaged in a reconsideration of the concepts of 'truth' and 'morality', Byatt's fiction engages in an examination of subjectivity, the past, and language, as concepts to be re-examined in and of themselves, and not just for how they relate to questions of character, narrative or fictional language.

The fact that literature, "art" and other cultural practices not only disseminate meanings and concepts of truth, but also engage in producing or contributing to them, has been highlighted in contemporary cultural theory. One concern of recent cultural and philosophical discourse that is of particular relevance to Byatt's fiction is its examination and deconstruction of the predominance and function - in philosophy, cultural practices

and in language itself - of binary oppositions. In *Torn Halves* Robert Young makes the point that one of poststructuralism's major contributions to discourse is its assertion that identity "does not have to be absolute: it is possible to be both the same and different at once". Related to this, he claims, is the "fundamental basis of language in metaphor, the assertion of identity between two things that are unlike, [which] can extend into identities and other forms of conceptualisation" (80). As suggested, the relationship between 'two things' in Byatt's early fiction, *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game* and even *The Virgin in the Garden*, is often read in terms of contrast or opposition. Critics and reviewers consistently suggest that these novels offer the possibility that women in particular are faced with two choices in life: in *The Shadow of the Sun* Anna Severell "is torn between what she sees as her only two options" (Musil 196-7) and *The Game* sets up an opposition between 'creativity' and 'criticism', along with other binary terms. A similar opposition is found in *Still Life*, argues Taylor, which is a novel of contrasts - one of which is between "child-bearing Stephanie and lickerish, ambitious Frederica, between the life of action and the life of the mind" (1989, 63). In her recent essay 'Ice, Snow, Glass', Byatt writes that she used to "puzzle over" W. B. Yeats' dictum that "A man must choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work". Several of her fictional female characters, or "frozen, stony women", are representative of the choice for "the perfection of the work", although she also claims to have tried, in life, to have both: "I have done my best to keep my apple and swallow it" (*OHS* 164).

Sometimes concerned with the opposition between two things, more often Byatt's fiction enacts a productive recombination of different things, intimating that it is possible to be both the same and different at once. In particular, this conjunction is achieved through metaphor and analogy. In *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, 'Cold' is a fairy story which tells of the paradoxical conjunction of the two title elements, personified in the ice-woman Fiammarosa and the desert Prince Sasan. Ice burns, the story reminds us, and at their most extreme point of difference heat and cold become virtually indistinguishable. *Angels and Insects* also explores the oppositions and points of contact between the two terms of its title. What are we, the characters in *Angels and Insects* ask - spirit or matter? Humans are "hybrid beings" who neither scrabble in the earth with the insects nor dwell in the angel's sky, but are both, who "go wrong" if they attempt to achieve "purity of any kind", writes Michael Levenson in his review of *Angels and Insects* (43). In *The Matisse Stories* the juxtaposition of two primary colours

produces a "dance of unreal yellow" between them that entrances the painter Robin Dennison and exemplifies the productive problem of his own neo-realist art, that is neither one thing (the thing itself) nor its 'other' (abstract art) (*MS* 67).

Byatt's identification of a relationship between "reading" and "writing" - unlike Iris Murdoch's separation of "her philosophy from her novels" or David Lodge's distinction between "his critical and narrative selves", which are "a schizoid pair" - is indicative of the texts' own yoking together of different things. Another of the dialogic relations that my thesis considers Byatt's fiction to enter into is encapsulated in the image, from *Babel Tower*, of the double helix spiral of the Language and Evolution tower/s at the fictive new University of North Yorkshire. The relationship between the arts and sciences, or the impact on Byatt's fiction (and other contemporary works of fiction) of developments in the sciences, is one point of consideration throughout the thesis. In particular, I explore how *Babel Tower* highlights the *symbiotic* or two-way relation between the discourses of science and literature or literary theory that contemporary theorists engaged in a critique of scientific discourse also describe (see Evelyn Fox Keller, N. Katherine Hayles and Richard Doyle). The "evolution" of contemporary concepts of chaos that N. Katherine Hayles explores, for example, is affected by the interaction or movement "across disciplinary lines" between literature and literary or cultural theory (in particular poststructuralism) and the discourses of the physical sciences. In the 1960s and 1970s the study of complex or non-linear systems in physics coincided with a "significant intellectual shift" in the human sciences, writes Hayles:

> As books became texts, they were transformed from ordered sets of words to permeable membranes through which flowed the currents of history, language and culture. Always already lacking a ground for their systems of signification, texts were not deterministic or predictable. Instead they were capable of becoming unstable whenever the slightest perturbation was introduced. The well-wrought urn, it seemed, was actually a reservoir of chaos. (1990, 2)

It is not so much that the concept of the fluid, unstable and permeable 'text' is a direct result of a convergence of the disciplines of humanities and physical sciences, rather, it arises from what Hayles terms a "cultural matrix", or "cultural field", within which meanings are generated (ibid., 3). That the field of science contributes a significant

thread to Byatt's textual knots is an issue that this study consistently returns to but does not have the scope to fully explore and would therefore benefit from further investigation.

One kind of criticism made of Byatt's texts is that they possess an "extraordinary density of signification" (Barrell 18), or are contradictory, or that a clear narrative thread or singularity of concern in each text is often difficult to attain. Barrell's review of *Angels and Insects* identifies a contradiction in this text which tries to "persuade" its reader of the relevance of the past, at the same time as it emphasises the "irredeemable pastness of the past" and "announce[s] that these are no longer our concerns, at least not in this way, in these contexts, in these words and forms". He goes on to recount his own attempt to locate "instances of connectedness", to give shape to the many issues and discourses with which the text engages, only to get embroiled in and frustrated by the "complexity of its organisation" (18). Just as the form of *Possession* can be termed "meronymic", comprised of seemingly oppositional parts, so too are its meanings, as Louise Yelin argues. Even though *Possession* "calls into question the universalising values of Arnold" it also tries to "recuperate an Arnoldian notion of culture" (38). The problem of affixing a single meaning to each novel, the inability of each text to *limit* itself to one central concern, is precisely what is most interesting about Byatt's fiction that also highlights a problematic element of literature and language itself. In the following chapters, I will explore the productive relations that arise from the conjunction in A. S. Byatt's fiction of what she terms "symbolic oppositions" (*OHS* 155), including the double or ambivalent nature of the texts in their position inside / outside postmodernism.