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“We need images made of language.”

(*A Whistling Woman* 50)

Introduction

Vision is an integral part of Byatt’s quartet on many levels. On a purely descriptive level, Byatt strives to render what she sees before her inner eye as precisely as possible. Her writings also describe an ongoing discourse about the nature of perception. Consequently, she looks at how different people have varying perceptions of the world. Moreover, her texts are “performative responses to paintings” (Worton 17), drawing on images as points of reference and for inspiration. In this context, Byatt explores the relationship between verbal and visual representation and what they can achieve. Finally, visual elements also occur on a structural level, through overarching metaphors, recurring imagery and motifs as well as through colours.

The first chapter looks at how visual arts are important extratexts that inform Byatt’s writing, both in the form of ekphrasis and of verbal still lifes. Each of the novels centres on a specific image. For *A Virgin in the Garden*, Elizabethan iconography plays a vital role for the plot as well as for the metaphorical scheme of the novel. *Still Life* focuses on Vincent van Gogh and his paintings, which function as an icon of the “thing itself”. Byatt also explores the relationship between the verbal and the visual, thus partaking in the century-old debate around *ut pictura poesis*. In the following novel, the Tower of Babel stands as an icon of disintegration on several levels; visually, linguistically and structurally. In *A Whistling Woman*, Mondrian’s art appears as an icon of the belief in an all-encompassing system, while the figure of Alice in Wonderland stands for alterity and subversion. There is a special focus on how the perception of television constitutes a new way of seeing the world.

The second chapter takes a closer look at different perceptions of the world. There is a look at a woman’s imaginary inner space and a child’s real outer space. Visual arts influence the way people see the world and act in it. Thus, as description turns into narrative, visual arts move characters from inaction into action; hence, they also drive the plot. Some outsider characters perceive the world around them in very unusual, visionary but unreliable ways, which has a profound influence on their own as well as other people’s lives.

Colour as a basic element of perception is explored in chapter three. Byatt systematically uses colours as part of the visual and metaphorical structures of her novels. Colours, and with them, light and darkness, are associated with specific characters. As colours take on a semiotic function, they also characterise times and places. Furthermore, they are a notable component of the mood and atmosphere as they are associated with emotions. Colour gradations are also part of Byatt's effort to bridge subjective perception and objective description in her endeavour to transport vision as precisely and sensuously as possible.

Chapter four investigates in detail a selection of the visual imagery and motifs that recur in the quartet. They are part of Byatt's mental imagery when she visualises a piece of writing. She uses images in relation with the characters, to connect themes and to drive the plot. With body and mind arguably as the key terms of the quartet, bodily images of flesh and blood take on a central role. They are linked with female rites of passage, religion, visual arts and literature. Vegetarianism is explored as a symbol of otherness. Gardens and towers are significant symbolic spaces inspired by two myths which are central to Byatt's writing, the Fall from Paradise and the Fall of Babel. They can be physical or imaginary spaces with metaphoric, historic, psychological, literary and mythological implications. Finally, animals function as focal points of numerous themes. Snails and birds are linked to scientific and philosophical discourses, language, art, and architecture. Both animals' behaviour is juxtaposed with human behaviour, and they are connected with the discourse on life and death.

Byatt uses visual elements as a form of mnemotechnics in several ways. Images and motifs are repeated in differing contexts throughout the novels, thus structuring the texts and creating aesthetic cohesion. Moreover, certain individual scenes are highly significant as they contain image clusters and encapsulate central themes and ideas. Byatt has described them as "enclosed spaces" within the narrative:

I always have that pattern, which I got from reading Spenser really, in which there's a kind of linear narrative, and then an enclosed space which is a metaphor, or an object, or [...] a poem, which you interrogate differently, but which is part of the narrative movement; the line goes through it, it doesn't stop and start again. (Byatt qtd. in Tredell 65)

With these enclosed spaces, as well as recurring images, motifs and themes, Byatt creates a visual pattern made of language.

Foreword : A visual frame

Byatt opens her quartet in a museum, the National Portrait Gallery, in 1968. Three old friends meet to hear an actress do Elizabeth I as part of an exhibition called “People, Past and Present”. The name of the exhibition also points to the theme of the prologue, as these three people reconsider not only the nation’s past, but also their own past, namely their personal experiences of the early fifties. These centre around the production of a play about Elizabeth I and are presented in the main part of the novel.

In the prologue of *The Virgin in the Garden*, Elizabeth is not only present through the real-life actress Flora Roberts, but more prominently through the so-called Darnley portrait, which is introduced on the first page, when Alexander sees exhibition posters, “a repeating series of pale reproductions of the Darnley portrait of Elizabeth Tudor, faded coral, gold, white, arrogance, watchfulness” (VG 7). A more detailed description follows shortly after, but through this short introductory description of the portrait Byatt has already established themes that are central to the whole novel: the Elizabethan age, Elizabeth as a proud and clever woman, the iconicity of her portraits, and colours that reoccur throughout the novel. The paleness of the reproductions indicates that her glorious time is over (as are the fifties), while their number and the fact that they are reproductions of a representation of a person brings up the question of representation and ironically hints at possible threats to the individual and its identity.

Hence Byatt uses the prologue to introduce main themes, for which the portrait of Elizabeth I stands as an icon. Through the prologue’s setting in a gallery and the presentation of the portrait, as well as by the detailed description of the people that Alexander watches in the gallery, Byatt explicitly draws the reader’s attention to the act of looking. The importance of visual elements in the quartet is thus established from the beginning. Throughout the quartet they prove to be an integral part of the novels’ aesthetic structure, weaving motifs and themes and connecting different characters and plot lines.

Similarly, the quartet’s very last scene stresses the visual. Frederica’s state of pregnancy is revealed to Luk not through words but when the wind in the moors blows the folds of her dress around her belly. The readers are given a detailed description of Frederica’s Laura Ashley dress but not the words of this important exchange between Frederica and Luk. Instead, they ‘see’ the lovers shouting and making up only through

the eyes of Leo, who is standing apart. The scene ends with an image that is rich in allusions and that is strongly visually structured:

They stood together and looked over the moving moor, under the moving clouds, at the distant dark line of the sea beyond the edge of the earth. In the distance, the man-made Early Warning System, three perfect, pale, immense spheres, like visitors from another world, angelic or daemonic, stood against the golds and greens and blues. (WW 427)

Even though the lovers don't have a plan, they are optimistic. The world is open to them, and although it can be menacing, it is not necessarily so.

Thus, the quartet ends in a seemingly everyday image which is full of symbols and associations. The forces of nature are impressive and ever-moving (even the moor is moving!), and they influence people's lives, as Frederica's (unplanned) pregnancy shows. As the Early Warning System and the dark sea intimate, the forces of nature can be menacing; yet they can also be beautiful and man is not completely helpless against them. The scene is also rendered a touch of the sublime by the comparison of the Early Warning System with angels and demons, which occur throughout *A Whistling Woman*.

Finally, on a purely visual basis the three spheres are also a part of a picture which Byatt arranges before the reader's eyes, as they mirror the three people in the foreground on a tripartite background of moor, sea and sky in the three colours gold, green and blue.

These two scenes, which frame Byatt's quartet, show that the author deeply concerns herself with vision on several levels. Through visual elements she thus explores possibilities of describing something as truthfully as possible both in art and in real life, while at the same time establishing links with other themes of her quartet.

1. Every picture tells a story: visual arts as intertexts

As the scene with the Darnley portrait shows, Byatt likes referring to real-life works of art and incorporating them in the plot. With regards to Byatt's extratextual references, Worton argues that

Byatt's universe is a highly referential one in which language ... also refers the reader outwards from the text to a world that is decidedly non-verbal. One particularly significant part of this non-verbal extratext or paratext is painting. The references throughout Byatt's writings to works of art and especially to paintings are crucial both to the narrative drive of her fictions and to the central image-clusters of the individual texts. (16)

Indeed, paintings and other forms of visual arts reoccur throughout Byatt's work. Some of her short stories are explicitly inspired by painters and their paintings, such as *The Matisse Stories*, or "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary", which was commissioned as an ekphrastic tale on a painting by Velázquez (see Byatt, *Elementals* 232). Other texts describe fictional artists and their work.

The two scenes framing the quartet are also instances of two different kinds of description in Byatt's work, namely ekphrasis and verbal still lifes. Thus, Byatt can be placed in the long line of the literary practice of ekphrasis. In Antiquity, the term "ekphrasis" described "any verbal description of visual phenomena", while modern scholarship defines it as a "literary description of real or imagined pieces of visual art" (Klarer s.v. *ekphrasis*). In addition, Byatt depicts scenes taking place in her fictional worlds with such visual detail as if they were paintings. These depictions can be described as "verbal still lifes" (see Hicks 1 and passim).

Byatt self-consciously draws the reader's attention to the significance of verbal representations of the visual. Early in the quartet she includes a reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem which "reflect[s] [...] on the nature of representation itself", as Heffernan observes (304). Thus, the poem is both ekphrastic and at the same time a contemplation of the potentials and limits of ekphrasis, a theme that recurs in the quartet.

The paintings and drawings that inspired her short stories have been presented as proper paratexts. This means that they are physically part of the books, either on the cover or as frontispieces preceding the stories inside the book.

By contrast, Byatt's quartet does not offer such visual aids or inspiration for the readers. However, this would hardly be possible due to the sheer amount of artists and works of art referred to. *Still Life* alone mentions dozens of Van Gogh's paintings, of which several are central to the novel's plot and imagery or image-clusters. Among the other artists that occur in the quartet are Botticelli, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Titian, El Greco, Velázquez, Blake, Monet, Cézanne, Gauguin, Rodin, Chagall, Picasso, Modigliani, Miró, Warhol, Jackson Pollock, and the sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

In some ekphrastic descriptions it is mainly the person depicted in the painting or drawing that matters. Hence, the novels refer to contemporary portraits of Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh and draw on John Tenniel's famous illustrations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Moreover, Byatt invents artists and art work.

As Worton points out, this richness of allusions means that "in order to fully understand the narrative, the reader has to visualize the painting". This may require the reader to seek out the painting or a reproduction of it, upon which "the reader then returns to the text with an altered perspective" (16f.). Yet already before that the reader will have created a mental image of some form, induced by Byatt's evocation of the picture. In addition, Byatt also describes fictional works of art, which only exist in the author's and the readers' imagination.

Finally, it is important to stress that the works of art in Byatt's texts are never a mere decoration or *ornatus*. Rippl argues that they "add to the text's reality effect and immediacy" (531). Moreover, they constitute an integral part of plot, structure and themes.

1.1. *The Virgin in the Garden* and Elizabeth I

1.1.1. Elizabeth I and iconography

Even though Elizabeth I never occurs in person in *The Virgin in the Garden*, she is present through several representations both in pieces of art and through characters that resemble her in some way or other. She is central to the novel for what she represents. Consequently, as mentioned above, she functions as an icon.

Pictorially she is present in the Darnley portrait and as Virgo-Astraea in the frieze at Long Royston Hall. For these images, as well as for the imagery in Alexander's play, Byatt draws on the historian Frances Yates's account of Elizabethan iconography (see Byatt, *SL / NM* 9). Byatt makes a clear reference to her source of inspiration by letting Yates appear at the exhibition in the prologue, where the narrator explains that Yates's writings "signally changed the whole shape of [Alexander's] own life" (VG 11). Clearly acting as a mouthpiece for Byatt, Alexander states later on, "I took a lot of the machinery from Frances Yates on Queen Elizabeth as Virgo-Astraea" (VG 43).

In her essay "Queen Elizabeth I as Astraea" (1947), Yates describes how the identification of Elizabeth with mythological characters was part of a programme to establish and consolidate royal power. Thus, the Queen was identified with Virgo-Astraea, the Virgin Mary, Idea, Cynthia, and Diana, as well as England herself. As Elizabethan iconography and its history play a vital role in the novel, it is worthwhile to look at them in detail.

Virgo-Astraea goes back to classical sources. In his *Metamorphoses* Ovid, drawing on Greek sources, describes humanity's decline from a paradisiacal golden age to the age of iron, which is the age of war. The virgin Astraea, goddess of Justice, is the last of the immortals to leave the world in the fourth and last age. She then becomes the stellar constellation Virgo in the night sky. Virgil prophesies in his *Fourth Eclogue* that the golden age of Saturn is about to return, and with it Virgo-Astraea. In Christian times this same virgin was reinterpreted as the Virgin Mary. Later still, the Elizabethan Age was seen as a new golden age, a political, cultural and religious Renaissance, and hence Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, was identified with Virgo-Astraea (see Yates, 29-39).

Without giving its provenance or a translation, Byatt repeatedly quotes the line from Virgil's *Eclogue*, "Iam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna": "Now too returns the Virgin; Saturn's rule returns" (*Eclogue* IV,6; transl. Guy Lee). Part III of *The Virgin in the Garden* is entitled "Redit et virgo", with "Saturnalia" as its opening chapter. In this context, the implications of the word "virgo" are manifold: mythological for Virgo-Astraea; historical for Elizabeth I; and fictional, relating to Alexander's play and to characters in the novel, above all Frederica. By incorporating the iconography of Elizabeth I as Virgo-Astraea, Alexander's play alludes to the contemporary hope of a

new Elizabethan Age. Hence, the image of Elizabeth I indirectly also works as an icon for the 1950s and the hopes and expectations of post-war Britain.

Matthew Crowe, who believes a new Golden Age is coming with the reign of Elizabeth II, also quotes “Redeunt Saturnia Regna” (VG 85). This is especially fitting as Crowe is the organiser of the festivities or in other words the Saturnalia. In continuity with the classic imagery, he is also unfavourably compared to Silenus when he tries to seduce Frederica: “She [...] stared with cold judgement at his white Silenus-paunch and rosy appendages on the sheets” (435). This image is already hinted at as Silenus is usually depicted as bald and Crowe’s face is “surrounded with [a] mock-tonsure of wisps of white hair” and, like Silenus, he is “faintly ridiculous” (434). Though he brings champagne instead of wine (he likes extravaganza), he does offer Frederica grapes not just once, but two times as a precursor to his advancements, thus also calling into mind the companion of the wine god Dionysos.

Considering the importance of Elizabethan imagery for the novel, it is noteworthy how it is introduced. In the prologue, before Alexander looks at the Darnley portrait Lady Antonia Fraser, the notable author of history and novels, considers it “with a firmly courteous if critical gaze” (VG 12), thus drawing the reader’s attention both to the painting and to the very act of looking. It is remarkable that she is accompanied by an unnamed “dumpy woman in a raincoat”. Campbell has suggested that this is no other than Byatt herself (see 64). This is the more convincing as another anonymous woman similarly appears in the prologue to *Still Life*, “a smallish woman in a pine-green tent-like cloak“, this time accompanying the art historian John House. While Frederica is not interested in this lady, the latter looks at Frederica “with an apparently absent-minded scanning attention” (SL 4). Arguably, this too could be the author, considering her creation.

Lady Fraser is fitting the scene as *The Virgin in the Garden* is a novel heavily engaged in history. Moreover, she appears as a modern Belphebe, the huntress in Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* and an impersonation of the Queen in her private character. Thus the author – if indeed she is the anonymous woman - overtly associates herself with Elizabeth I as well as with Frederica, who appears as Britomart, the female

knight of the same epic.¹ These literary allusions are combined with comprehensive descriptions of both Frederica's and Lady Fraser's appearance and thus cast a strong visual image on the reader's inner eye.

Immediately after follows a detailed description of Elizabeth in the Darnley portrait, opening with "There she stood, a clear powerful image" (VG 12). Right away Byatt points at the doubleness incorporated by any painting, and especially any portrait, as it aims at showing the thing itself ("she stood", like a real person does) while it clearly is an image, a representation. Similarly, Elizabeth functions as a double icon in the novel, both as an example of a real powerful woman and as an image invested with symbols.

An icon as "a sign that stands for its object mainly by resembling or sharing some features (e.g. shape) with it" (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* s.v. *icon*). As Culler argues, a portrait is an icon, a sign which relates a form to a meaning (see 16; see also Wallhead, *Metaphor* 165f.). In other words, the portrait *means* the person it depicts; hence, in the case of Elizabeth's portraits, attacking the portraits meant attacking the Queen herself, and "men had died for meddling with them" (VG 12). However, there may also be additional meanings inscribed on the paintings:

Lakoff shows how in portraits, the 'Face stands for the Person' ... though in the case of Elizabeth I, the dressed body and the objects held in the hand or pointed to were also important. (Wallhead, *Metaphor* 166, referring to Lakoff & Johnson 37)

Elizabeth's dress is particularly important in her depiction in Long Royston Hall, where it is a map of Britain – a true Body Politic (see Wallhead, *Metaphor* 208).² Here, the monarch is identified with the body politic (the queen is the state), which in turn is identified with the body geographical. The message is clear: Elizabeth is Britain, Britain is Elizabeth. This fictional image of the Queen is explicitly linked to Drayton's Poly-Olbion frontispiece. Dating from 1612, it depicts the map of Britain represented as a young woman (see VG 180 and Olwig 67f.).

¹ Cf. Yates 69f. on Belpheobe and Britomart.

² Already in Greek Antiquity, the human body was used as 'an analogy of the the unity of the state' (Hale 19). This image was used by Stoic philosophers and Christian theologians alike, and was a popular idea in the English Renaissance when it was used to strengthen the position of the monarch (see Hale 47).

Another aspect of the image of Elizabeth-as-Britain in Long Royston is that she is holding a cornucopia. This links her to the goddess Virgo, who as an autumnal sign was associated with harvest; yet she was also linked with spring because of her connection with the golden age (see Yates 67). Other symbols of Elizabeth were for example “the Rose, [...] the Star, the Moon, the Phoenix, the Ermine, the Pearl” (Yates 78). Several of these images occur in *The Virgin in the Garden*, and Alexander incorporates them consciously into his play: “[H]e had 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” (VG 133).

It is noteworthy at which point Byatt introduces this second representation of Elizabeth. Frederica sees the frieze for the first time on her first visit to Long Royston. After the Darnley portrait in the Prologue, this is the second time in the novel that Frederica is shown literally face to face with what is her metaphorical counterpart, as she is to play the young queen in the production. Thus the frieze doubly marks her entry into the Elizabethan world: physically, as Long Royston dates back to Tudor times, and metaphorically, as she and the other characters are about to embark upon their rehearsals of a verse play on Elizabeth which is written in Elizabethan style.

Accordingly the further description of the myths depicted on the plasters and painted ceilings in Long Royston Hall leads Frederica, and with her the readers, deeper into the Elizabethan world of allegory. The characters look, amongst other state bedrooms, at the Sun room and the Moon room. While the sun was seen as a symbol of the king or of papacy, the moon was a symbol of the queen and of empire (see Yates 76 and Wallhead, *Metaphor* 207). In the Moon room there are depictions of Diana and Cynthia, goddesses of the moon, who are also seen as impersonations of Elizabeth.

Moreover, Diana is also the goddess of hunting. This links her to Frederica, who appears as a huntress after men and after knowledge in the first two novels. By contrast, she rather acts like a hunted deer at the beginning of *Babel Tower*, where her Cambridge friend Hugh Pink does not recognize her at first in her country clothes: “She is dressed for hunting. But she no longer looks like a huntress” (BT 4). Here, his image of her, as well as the readers’, must be reassessed. But the readers already know that she will become a fighter again, as in the 1968 Prologue of *The Virgin in the Garden* she appears as the female knight Britomart.

1.1.2. Elizabeth I and resemblance

Elizabeth's images not only make her formally present in the novel; they are also iconic with respect to the characters. The novel's title refers both to Elizabeth I and to Frederica, who is typecast as the young Queen Elizabeth in the play. This outward resemblance is also significant as both Crowe and Alexander are only attracted to Frederica as long as they associate her with her role. In the case of Alexander, this is partly narcissistic, as he falls in love with his own creation. For Frederica, Elizabeth is an example of a strong and independent woman: "In the image of the Queen, Frederica sees an aspect of herself as she struggles to establish and fix an identity for herself" (Wallhead, *Metaphor* 168).

Todd points out that the casting, also of the other characters, "is itself a kind of metaphor" (20). It is noteworthy that according to Foucault, in Renaissance thought there were three elements to nomination: signifier, signified, and resemblance (comparable to Wittgenstein's, or Ricœur's *Gestalt*). By contrast, classical thinking is based on a binary system of identity and difference (see Byatt, *SL / NM* 17). While Elizabeth is the signified and her painting the signifier, Frederica arguably appears as the third corner of the triangle, resemblance. Hence, instead of being identified with Elizabeth, Frederica is rather seen in comparison as well as in ironic contrast with the Queen.

Hence, Frederica does not know how to move as Elizabeth and clearly lacks the poise that befits a queen. The ironic contrast between the two can also be seen in connection with Elizabethan iconography. After the dress rehearsal Frederica is to sleep in the Sun room. In Elizabethan iconography, the sun has no specific significance, unlike the moon and its impersonations Cynthia and Diana. Yet the Moon room is already taken by Marina Yeo, the actress who plays the adult Elizabeth. This arrangement indicates that Marina, a strong woman who has achieved a lot and is always in control, apparently shares a closer resemblance to Elizabeth than Frederica does. This night, Marina is also more like Diana the huntress, who is depicted in the painting on the ceiling, as she is having an affair with the markedly younger Edmund Wilkie. By contrast, Frederica flees from the unwelcome advances of the elderly Crowe. Moreover, the actress likens herself to the moon after the first night when, referring to her advanced age, she quotes the lines from Shakespeare's sonnet 107, "The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured" (VG 481 and Shakespeare, *Sonnet* 107, 5).

Shortly after, Frederica is humorously compared to the Polyolbion frieze when, after fleeing from Crowe, she is wearing a makeshift toga: “She shifted the knot in the towel over her own shoulder, which pulled like Scotland over Polyolbion’s, and made a sketchy obeisance to the squat figure. She herself had no river, no cornucopia, no golden fruit.” She is well aware of her shortcomings in comparison to Elizabeth, but she is compared to the queen yet again when she walks into the winter garden and sits “cross-legged on the grass, much in the attitude of the Polyolbion icon” (VG 437). Campbell, too, notes that “[t]he iconography of the play [...] takes on aspects of irony and farce in relation to the real-life participants.” Thus Frederica is actually trying hard to lose her virginity (though not to Crowe), while Anthea Warburton, who impersonates the virgin Astraea, gets pregnant (see Campbell 64).

There is a deliberate ambiguity regarding Elizabeth’s gender which can also be seen as an example for Frederica:

Die Zeichenhaftigkeit des Körpers kann als Chance genutzt werden, wenn kulturelle Bedeutungen umgeschrieben werden. Die ikonographische Fiktion einer Doppelgeschlechtlichkeit, die auch von den Renaissance-Portraits bedient wurde (Jordan), erscheint somit als Befreiung aus den diskursiven Konstruktionen des Körpers. Byatt war zur Zeit des Schreibens an diesem Band von Woolfs und Coleridges These der Androgynität des kreativen Geistes beeinflusst (Dusinberre 192). Der Hermaphrodit, der als Bild an verschiedenen Stellen der Handlung auftaucht, wird zum Leitbild von *The Virgin in the Garden*, und symbolisiert den Ausweg aus den geschlechtlichen Festlegungen und aus der weiblichen Machtlosigkeit. (Brosch 54)³

Alexander, too, is associated with androgyny, and it is noteworthy that he has partly created Elizabeth in his own image and is mocked as “the Virgin Queen” (VG 474; see Gitzen 86). Here, the word “queen” takes on a double meaning as Wilkie suggests that Alexander might be homosexual. Yet it is no coincidence that Alexander has a reproduction of Picasso’s *Boy with a Pipe* in his room, which Byatt describes as “the purest picture of the androgynous being” (Dusinberre 192). Alexander put it there as “his private, his secret joke” and curiously feels something like “vicious envy” for him (VG 136).

³ Brosch refers to Dusinberre’s interview with Byatt (1983) and to Jordan, Constance. “Representing political androgyny. More on the Siena portrait of Queen Elizabeth I.” *The Renaissance Englishwoman in print. Counterbalancing the canon*. Ed. Anne M Haselkorn and Betty S. Travitsky. Amherst: Mass. UP, 1990. 157-76.

Finally, Byatt also sets up a historic parallel between the Elizabethan Age and the New Elizabethan Age in the twentieth century. Barnacle thinks that “[t]his never was a useful notion” (11). As a matter of fact, the comparison is not favourable to Elizabeth II, who “is seen as a weak 1950s stereotype, a ‘young wife and mother’ who lacks any grip on power” (Hanson 131). During the coronation ceremony she appears minute on the television screen. Any attempt to imitate the glory and the complex imagery of the Elizabethan Age is presented as minor by comparison or as a farce. Byatt self-consciously draws on a lost paradise, of which Elizabeth I functions as an icon.

Independent of Elizabeth II, the time of the production of the play can be seen as a golden age for those involved in it, though not necessarily so:

It is an irony possibly worth recording [...], that [...] whilst Alexander was never able in retrospect to see this high moment of his career as any kind of archetypal golden age, Frederica was easily able to do so. [...] At seventeen the world was all before her, unspotted, whatever it might become, whatever it was already doomed to be. [...] [I]n the sixties [...] she was able to fill her memory theatre with a brightly solid scene which she polished and gilded as it receded[.] (VG 419f.)

This personal golden age is another parallel between Frederica and Elizabeth I, who is associated with a golden age in history.

1.2. *Still Life* and Van Gogh

1.2.1. The “thing itself”

Byatt’s plan for *Still Life* originally was “that it should ... be very bare, very down-to-earth, attempt to give the ‘thing itself’” (*SL / NM* 11). In the novel itself she self-consciously explains

I had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse to reference to other people’s thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor. This turned out impossible: one cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. (*SL* 131)

Rippl points out that this attempt to give “the thing itself” can be seen in the context of traditional English empiricist discourse, while it also resembles the programme of the Imagism movement: “it is not accidental that Byatt admires Ford Madox Ford, Ezra

Pound and William Carlos Williams” (527). Indeed, Byatt explains that she was working on these authors, and that Williams’s “dictum ‘no idea but in things’ informs the novel” (*SL/NM* 11f.). Byatt’s belief that things are exciting and important as objects of consideration that give pleasure and help us understand the world can also be seen in her other works. As Campbell points out, “Byatt constantly reminds herself and her readers of the duty not to lose sight of ‘things’ and to strive for accurate, exact language” (7).⁴ In *Still Life*, she even makes a direct reference to Williams: “I had the idea, when I began this novel, that it would be a novel of naming and accuracy. I wanted to write a novel as Williams said a poem should be: no ideas but in things.” (SL 364)

The Imagists believed that “a hard, clear image was essential to verse” (*Dictionary of literary terms and literary theory* s.v. *Imagists*). This is precisely the kind of poetry that two fictional authors in *Still Life*, Raphael Faber and Hugh Pink, attempt to write (even though some of their poems are also metaphoric). For instance, one of Hugh’s poems describes a painting of a cup and saucer: “It described Fantin-Latour’s description of a cup. It had no apparent emotions in it and its words were memorable” (SL 242).

The Imagists’ plainer style, “a word for each object”, is what Byatt intended for *Still Life* (Dusinberre 183). She undeniably aims at giving clear, thorough descriptions. It is important to understand that Byatt is “afraid of, and fascinated by, theories of language as a self-referring system of signs, which doesn’t touch the world.” In *Still Life*, she wanted “at least to work on the assumption that ... accuracy of description is possible and valuable. That words denote things.” (*SL/NM* 11)

Alexander, who writes a play on Vincent Van Gogh, stands in for Byatt in this attempt. As in *The Virgin in the Garden* Frederica already points out, “You do like *things*, Alexander” (VG 178). He thus seems to be ideal for this endeavour: “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”. Yet for somebody like Alexander (and like Byatt), this proves impossible: “Language was against him, for a start. Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but

⁴ As an example, Campbell refers to the narrator of *The Biographer’s Tale* who gives up his PhD studies in postmodern literary theory in pursuit of ‘a life full of *things*’ (*Biographer’s Tale* 4). Similarly, Roland in *Possession* feels he is caught up in a life of theory and says, ‘we can’t see *things*’ (*Possession* 254) (see Campbell 7).

resembled the sun, the source of light.” (SL 2) For Byatt, analogy virtually offers itself everywhere. The way that the question of verbal representation is central to the novel reminds Gitzen of a ‘problem’ novel (see 87). In fact, Byatt’s endeavour to write about the thing itself touches upon two central problems concerning representation: the attempt at writing without figurative language, and the question how accurate any kind of representation can be.

1.2.2. Visual and verbal representation

The question of accurate representation is illustrated by painting. The fact that paintings are central to the novel can already be seen from its title, as “Still Life” is obviously a pun on the painting genre. The novel refers to several paintings by Van Gogh that belong to this genre: his *Yellow Chair*, his *Irises* and *Sunflowers*, and, as the name already tells, his *Still Life with Coffee Pot*. The novel’s title also points to the kind of scenes that the author describes in it, as well as to the themes of life and death, stillness and movement or change.

Still Life looks at how these things can be depicted in painting or in words. As Worton points out, “Byatt herself is acutely aware that the verbal and the pictorial exist in a dialectic relationship, wherein the central issue is not one of hierarchical supremacy, but the fundamental question of the nature and adequacy of representation” (24). In order to explore this dialectic relationship, Byatt not only shows Van Gogh’s struggle to convey what he saw as she quotes extracts from his letters to his brother Theo. She also describes his paintings and tries to adopt techniques from painting for the description of her fictional world. This means that Byatt stands in the long tradition of the debate around *ut pictura poesis*.

This classical maxim literally means “poetry like painting” and has been translated as “a poem will be like a painting“ since the Renaissance, though the correct translation is “it will sometimes be the case that a poem is like a painting“ (Schweizer 10f.; see also Rippl 528). Indeed, several scenes in *Still Life* are described like paintings, for example the beach party in France or the Pooles’s breakfast table, giving very precise descriptions of things and people, their positions and their exact colours. But also in the other novels of the quartet Byatt offers ample descriptions that are in the

tradition of *ut pictura poesis*. Especially in *Babbletower*, *Babel Tower*'s novel-within-the-novel, people and places are portrayed in great detail, especially through colour adjectives.

It is notable that before describing the people of the beach party at Les Saintes-Maries, Byatt describes the boats at the beach in terms of a painting that Van Gogh painted in the very same place: "the Phoenician auspicious eyes, white circled dot, were painted on the high prow then as in 1888" (SL 89). Thus, Byatt develops the ekphrastic description of the group of people on the beach starting from an ekphrasis of a painting.

The scene is pure description as well as a characterisation of the people who are prominently introduced or reintroduced in it. For example, Crowe, the energetic impresario of Alexander's play, has "the look of a man bronzed against nature by willpower and decisive planning, a man whose ruddiness was made for peeling crimson but who had constrained his skin to stay on [...] and go terracotta" (90). Terracotta is also the colour of the skin in the paintings from the Italian Renaissance in *Long Royston*. Thus, the colour points back to the previous novel and identifies Crowe as the owner of the Tudor hall.

The description of the ships that refers to Van Gogh's painting also contains a commentary on the way that Frederica perceives and relates to the world. It is stressed that she will "remember form and colour" of the ships by their names as "[w]ords were primary" (89). Accordingly, as Hicks notes, "[t]his scene demonstrates Byatt's insistence on the importance of language as a means of evoking visual images in the reader's mind" (69).

How central paintings are in *Still Life* can be seen already from the prologue. As in the prologue of the earlier novel, Frederica, Alexander and Daniel meet in a museum, this time to contemplate paintings by post-impressionists, notably by Van Gogh. Byatt describes eight paintings and weaves them into an introduction of the major themes of the novel: visual and verbal representation, individual perception, sexuality, life and death. The descriptions are also an exploration of what ekphrasis can achieve. An ekphrasis can be defined as a verbal description of a painting or, as Heffernan puts it, „the verbal representation of graphic representation" (299). This verbal description or representation can be more or less exact. As Rippl points out, Byatt is not very precise

in the sense that the reader is not told where exactly everything is to be found on the canvas. Yet the ekphrasis of Van Gogh's 'Poet's Garden'

tries to resemble Van Gogh's painting: Firstly, the colours and painting technique of 'Poet's Garden' are represented in accurate, even technical words ('viridian impasto'). Secondly, the values of the colours are associated with emotions ('geraniums like splashes of blood,' 'impassioned garden'). Her use of colour terms corresponds with Van Gogh's own ideas about the power of colour to express a certain spiritual state of mind or emotion. ... Byatt is also interested in an underlying meaning, in the emotional impact of colour. (Rippl 525f.)

Rippl's account of Byatt's use of colour can be extended beyond the author's description of art to the whole of her texts, which abound in colours. Generally speaking, Byatt employs colours not only to make vivid visual representations but also to convey emotions, to structure the texts, and for characterisation.

The ekphrasis in the prologue also aim at characterisation, as Byatt describes paintings from different points of view. She even quotes from Van Gogh's letters. The characters' reactions towards the paintings tell the readers a lot about them. While Alexander contemplates the basic problems that informed the writing of his play on Van Gogh, Daniel broods about death and mental hospitals, both part of his everyday world. Frederica, on the other hand, immediately "scribble[s] words, notes, in the margin of her catalogue" (SL 4) and "skim[s] the necessary accompanying print" (7). She is shown as a reader and writer, as somebody who must necessarily think in words. Alexander, on the other hand, has learned from Van Gogh that "you could see things before saying them, indeed without saying them" (198).

Similarly, Byatt has asserted that "I have come to see painting as, in a sense, the opposite of literature" and continues, "what I like about it [i.e. painting] is that element in the visual which completely defeats language" (Tonkin 17). This contradicts Hicks's argument that "[i]t may be said that Byatt's use of *ekphrasis* foregrounds her awareness that writing marks the limitation of art by its temporal unfolding of pleasure" (37). In an interview Byatt has said, "[o]ne of my great heroes is Gombrich" (Tredell 68). Sorensen states that "E.H. Gombrich was one of the few researchers of visual knowledge who refused the antagonism of this binary visual/verbal formulation and stressed a necessary continuum between the realm of speech on the one hand and the visual on the other" (*Eternal* 65). Indeed, Byatt thinks there is a way of looking at things that painters seem to be more aware of than writers:

[T]here is a third element, [...] neither people nor images, just what is there. Painters know naturally that the artist is concerned with that third element, but writers don't always. I think it very important to see what is there before any of it becomes related. (Dusinberre 182)

Consequently, even though Byatt unavoidably works with words, she repeatedly strives to make plain descriptions without moving into the realm of metaphor, without giving or even hinting at additional meanings. For this, Van Gogh functions as a “talisman, a symbol of plain seeing in a book that purports to do without symbols” (Sorensen, *Eternal* 68); his work has “almost totemic status” (Worton 21). His painting of the yellow chair, which also provides the title for Alexander's play, functions as a leitmotif, as Byatt explains:

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. Later, of course, one discovered cultural and personal connotations. ... But nevertheless it shone in its exact simplicity of representation. (Byatt, *S/LS* 25)

As Byatt has pointed out in a different place, “It turned out to be a complex metaphor, psychological, cultural, religious, aesthetic [...] Nevertheless it had an intention of accurate *rendering*, to use Ford's favourite word” (Byatt, *SL/NM* 14).

More obvious images are Van Gogh's paintings of the sower and of the reaper, “Van Gogh's natural image of death” (Byatt, *VGDS* 299). These are pictures that Byatt “always return[s] to again and again thinking about this balance, of human and inhuman, vision and artifice” (330). They occur throughout *Still Life* as icons of the main theme of the cycle of life (or birth) and death. Their colours, purple and yellow, can be found in the novel even when they do not explicitly refer to the paintings. For example, on the Pooles's breakfast table (a work of art in itself), there are “two lemons amongst the plums, to intensify the colour” (*SL* 198).

These paintings are used in the background of the stage in Alexander's play, and subsequently they decorate his walls. There they are when he shelters Daniel, who is distraught after Stephanie's death. Thus, Van Gogh's paintings frame the novel, as the same two men were already looking at the artist's pictures in the prologue. In the end, the men are in motion yet they appear like a part of Van Gogh's *Still Life with Coffee Pot*, with a blue teapot and a golden cup. Thus Byatt “paints” a verbal still life. It is noteworthy, however, that Daniel is given no solace by the pictures; “his gaze passed

them indifferently” (433). Similarly, words can offer no consolation for him. Thus Byatt admits to a point where both vision and language lose their power.

Interestingly, it is Stephanie who struggles with these visual and verbal modes of perception and expression throughout the novel, as she keeps having problems with finding the words for what she really sees or for what she sees before her inner eye. Sorensen sees Stephanie’s death as “a judgement on a character with the temerity to conjoin sight and word, to entertain high hopes both for the thought and personal life” (*Eternal* 69). Her argument that “Stephanie is clearly constructed as a religious sacrifice of some sort” (*Death* 132) is unconvincing. Rather, what Byatt presents is the shocking pointlessness of an accident. As Todd convincingly argues, “the appalling truth facing the reader of *Still Life* is that Stephanie Orton née Potter’s death is not *necessary* to the plot [...] No consolation is to be derived from arguing that the death of Stephanie enables those who are left to make any sense of it” (51). This is only partly true because Stephanie’s death is in fact necessary to the plot, as one reason why Frederica marries Nigel is that she is desperate after her sister’s death. Campbell, too, notes that “the immediacy and directness of the event represents sheer, senseless accident” (279 note 9).

On an aesthetic level, however, Sorensen justly observes that Byatt parallels Van Gogh’s life and Stephanie’s plot line (see *Eternal* 70). Both characters are shown to be deeply concerned with language and vision. It is significant that Daniel in later life, after Stephanie’s death, is full of “mistrust of figurative language. He never now made a sermon from a metaphor, nor drew analogies: he preached examples, cases, lessons” (SL 11).

In the following novel, *Babel Tower*, Byatt explores her anxiousness about language more deeply, as she looks at what language can and cannot express, and how it can mislead. In *Still Life*, however, despite all doubts, there is still a firm belief that language can denote things, that representation is possible and both desirable and rewarding; and Van Gogh functions as an icon of this belief. That it proves impossible for Byatt to describe without metaphor, that “things and metaphors inevitably commingle” (Levenson 167), loses its importance as Van Gogh’s paintings also work on both levels: they are pure sensual depictions but they also carry a deeper meaning.

1.3. Babel Tower and a mosaic of voices

Babel Tower and *A Whistling Woman* turn away from one single painting or one artist and his paintings as a focus for the whole plot and its imagery. Still, like the previous novels *Babel Tower* has its central image in the title. As Wallhead points out, “[w]hat Maggie Gee writes about Virginia Woolf’s novels is also true of A.S. Byatt’s: ‘[...] the title usually points to the central image around which the whole book crystallises’ ” (*Metaphor* 69).⁵ Even though the inside cover of the Vintage UK paperback edition of 1997 / 2003 depicts a reproduction of Hendrick van Cleve’s *The Building of the Tower of Babel*, Byatt does not refer to this painting nor to Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s famous rendering of the same theme. This is even more remarkable as it would have been an obvious choice to include one of these paintings in the text; and probably this is also why Byatt chose not to include it. Instead, she lets the myth of Babel stand for itself and discusses its moral, religious and linguistic implications.

1.3.1. Mosaics and cut-ups

There is, however, a concrete image in *Babel Tower* which points at the breaking up of language and the attempt to make sense out of chaos. It is Byatt’s first ekphrasis of a fictional work of art in the quartet; many more will follow. In this context, it is useful to differentiate between “notional” and “actual” ekphrasis (see Hollander 4; see also Hicks 22). The descriptions of the Darnley portrait and of Van Gogh’s paintings are instances of ‘actual’ ekphrasis, as they refer to real works of art. By contrast, a ‘notional’ ekphrasis describes a work of art that was invented by the author and which only exists within the realms of the fictional text.

In *Babel Tower*, Byatt describes the painted glass windows in St Simeon’s, the church where Daniel works. The windows used to depict stories from the Bible: Noah and the Flood, Lazarus, Christ at Emmaus, and Whitsuntide. These stories refer to crises and rebirth, the chance of making something new. Yet they indirectly also imply a darker side: the stories of Noah and the Flood as well as Lazarus point to death and destruction, while the apostles’ ability to speak foreign languages after the Pentecostal

⁵ Wallhead refers to Maggie Gee. “Fifty years of Virginia Woolf.” *Literature Matters: British Council Newsletter* 7 May 1991, p.5.

flames, a symbol of communion and communication, also reminds one of the confusion of languages that came with the Tower of Babel.

These windows were destroyed during the Second World War and rebuilt since, but the glazier “was not able, or even willing, to reconstitute the narratives as they had been.” Instead, he made new, colourful abstract landscapes:

It was too sad, he told the Vicar, to put the pictures together all smashed, with gaping holes. He thought it should all be bright and cheerful, and added modern glass here and there, making something abstract yet suggestive, with faces of giraffes and peacocks and leopards staring at odd angles out of red drapery, with white wings divided by sea-blue and sky-blue, angels and antediluvian storks and doves mingling with pentecostal flames. The peaks of Mount Ararat balance on a heap of smoky rubble, amongst which are planks of the Ark at all angles. Dead Lazarus’s bound jaw has survived and one of his stiff white hands; both make a kind of wheel with the hand breaking bread at Emmaus and a hammering Ark-builder’s hand. Parts of the primal rainbow flash amongst blue and white wave-crests. (BT 7)

The artist accepts that what is lost, is lost and cannot be regained, and tries instead to make something new that people will enjoy. By making use of what is left of the old stories, the new text works as a kind of palimpsest that re-contextualises the images, thus making the onlookers more aware of the individual elements but still reminding them of what they used to be part of.

At the same time Byatt introduces the readers to the art world of the sixties, when cut-ups, pastiches and collages were en vogue. Examples of this kind of art work are Desmond Bull’s paintings and collages and the art students’ works. One of Bull’s collages unites the past and the present, like the rearranged painted glass window, as it incorporates people from classical paintings in combination with contemporary people.

On the level of literature, inspired by William Burroughs, Frederica cuts up legal letters from her husband’s solicitor and rearranges them to new texts. Though formally similar to the rearranged glass painting, her aims are different as she tries to vent off her anger and fear by ridiculing the letters. In *Babel Tower* Frederica is generally shown as struggling with language as she tries to describe her experiences, especially those of her marriage, from an objective point of view.

1.3.2. A chaos of languages

The chaos of languages also appears as a theme on the structural level of the novel, as Byatt presents a large amount of different voices. This is apparent from the start, as there are four alternative beginnings, introduced with “It might begin” and “Or it might begin” (BT 1, 2, 4, 10). The last of these is the beginning of a novel-within-the-novel, *Babbletower*, whose title, with a pun on “babble” and “Babel”, even doubly refers to the Tower of Babel, which is an icon for a confused or unintelligible way of speaking. In the course of *Babel Tower*, Byatt introduces many other voices, amongst them letters by friends and solicitors, book reviews, newspaper snippets, extracts from D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* and E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*, the ‘transcripts’ of three extensive court hearings, and excerpts from two other fictitious novels in production, Frederica’s *Laminations* (itself a cut-up) and Amanda Mond’s *Flight North*. These texts are visually set apart, through the use of different type sets and through the drawing of a snail shell that is found at all beginnings and endings of the extracts from *Babbletower*.

These numerous voices throughout the novel can be seen in terms of Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, which describes “texts or utterances in which more than one voice can be heard”, where “a plurality of independent and equally valid voices which are not subordinated to any single authorial hierarchy” exist, and “the narrator counts merely as one voice in a dialogue of many” (Aczel s.v. *polyphony*). Thus the rupture of language that happened in Babel is not necessarily negative, as it can also be a chance for a new way of seeing and representing the world. This is mirrored in the glass mosaic in St Simeon’s, which is a metaphor both for the chaos and the variety of languages after Babel as well as for the fragmentation of the world as Frederica experiences it. But Frederica also consciously seeks fragmentation through her concept of “laminations”, a way to compartmentalise different parts of her life and thus being able to handle them. There is also a literal babble of voices, namely of the people that call in at the church’s help line, where Daniel listens to them, sitting in the crypt under the nave with the reconstructed stained glass window.

The image of Pentecostal flames also occurs in the description of the frieze in *Babbletower*’s Theatre of Tongues, which is also called the Theatre of Speech. A former chapel, it has been chosen as a meeting place for conventions and discussions of the inhabitants of La Tour Bruyarde, though it really is mainly the leader Culvert who holds the speeches. The tongues in the chapel’s name not only refer to language, but

also to the frieze depicting tongues of flame. Like the theatre's double name these flames are ambiguous: they may be the Pentecostal flames, symbolizing a new beginning and a plurality of voices and languages; or they may be the flames of hell. The countless rooms of the labyrinthine castle are yet another metaphor for the confusion of language.

Pentecost is also on the mind of Wijnobel when he remembers his grandfather, who was interested in the Tower of Babel and the Old Speech or *Ursprache* which was supposedly spoken before. He believed that the Pentecostal tongues of flame might also have enabled the apostles to speak a part of the original tongue. As Noble observes, “[t]he Tongues of Flame thus function as a doubly coded mnemonic that corporealizes not only the confusion of tongues but also the pre-Babel, original tongue“ (69).

1.4. A Whistling Woman: chaos and order

1.4.1. Systems of the world

If the Tower of Babel is a symbol of chaos, Mondrian and his paintings represent the very opposite in *A Whistling Woman*:

Mondrian believed that everything – the sum of things – could be represented by these three colours [i.e. red, yellow, and blue], with black, white and grey, within the intersections of verticals and horizontals. The colours were signs, denoting all the colour in the world, symbolising everything ... The straight lines represented the refinement of spiritual vision. ... They avoided the tragic capriciousness of the dreadfully particular curves of flesh, or even of the changing of the moon. The vertical line was taut, and was the tension in all things. The horizontal line was weight and gravity. The figure of the Cross was the meeting of vertical and horizontal, an intrinsic form of the spirit. ... Wijnobel thought this system was mad in its man-made purity, and yet found it endlessly beautiful in its own implacable terms. ... It was one vision of necessity, of the building blocks of the universe. A theory of everything. (WW 30f.)

Mondrian is not the only one in this novel who believes in an all-encompassing system. Indeed, Campbell observes that *A Whistling Woman* “warns against reductiveness”, of which Mondrian's theory is an extreme example (252). Wijnobel, who owns several paintings by his fellow countryman Mondrian, desires “a biological-cognitive Theory of Everything, which would not even be remotely possible in his lifetime.” It is this wish, and the belief that others must necessarily see the advantages of such a system too, that

makes him create a syllabus for the university “which required all the students to study some science, more than one language, and an art form”, in the true sense of *universitas*. (WW 29) Out of the same ambition he plans a conference on Body and Mind with all kinds of speakers, even those that are morally questionable. His belief in and passion for inclusiveness makes him blind to the different ambitions of the students and of the Anti-University, and this leads to the chaotic and dangerous events at the conference.

Even more dangerous are Josh Lamb’s religious theories, which lead to the death of three people. There are some striking connections between the religious fanatic and Mondrian. Wijn Nobel thinks Mondrian is mad and sees in him “spiritual extremity” (31); Lamb is extremely spiritual and clearly is mad. Mondrian’s lines avoid the “curves of flesh”, which Lamb also shuns and wants to make inexistent. Finally, it is noteworthy that Byatt mentions the moon in connection with Mondrian, as the moon is central to Lamb’s visionary experiences.

In a perfectly different context, the scientist Luk Lysgaard-Peacock sets up another system of the world. Frustrated in his unrequited love for Jacqueline and inspired by his studies on population genetics of slugs, human sexuality seems pointless to him compared to simpler methods of reproduction like cloning. In his fervour, he writes a paper for the conference on “the biological disadvantage of sexual reproduction” (281). Here Byatt shows in a more ironic way where an obsessive belief in a theory can lead.

A literary character that questions systems is Lewis Carroll’s Alice. Frederica presents the TV programme *Through the Looking-Glass*, which openly plays with Carroll’s work and Tenniel’s illustrations of it. In the programme, Frederica appears as a self-conscious parody of Alice: “She looked like a sharp, and knowing, and very adult Alice” while she also “*felt* like a clever child” (WW 140 and 142). There are cartoon creatures like Humpty Dumpty and Tweedledum and Tweedledee that wander across the television screen and are more or less related to the discussion.

In this way Byatt relates literature to the new medium of television. Frederica becomes a part of a visual work of art. The *Alice* allusions only partly require the watcher’s knowledge of the books, as the characters take on a new meaning for themselves. Thus, the twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee appear in connection with the

question of individuality and replication, while the egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty is presented in connection with chickens and eggs and a clay pot by Picasso that resembles both a woman and a hen.

This “Hen-in-Woman. Woman-in-Hen” (162) hybrid also relates to the saying that Byatt puts as the novel’s motto, “A Whistling Woman and a Crowing Hen / Is neither good for God nor Men”. This warning against women trying to cross the boundaries of gender roles and taking on male roles is taken up right at the beginning of the novel, in Amanda Mond’s novel-within-the-novel *Flight North*. Here she presents the Whistlers, a hybrid between women and birds who originally were ordinary women but secretly learned to shape-shift as only the men in their society could do. Now the Whistlers have the freedom to move around at their will but at the cost of living as outcasts that cannot return home. Obviously they are an allegory for the emancipation of women in the sixties that is exemplified by their creator Amanda Mond, Frederica and Jacqueline Winwar, who actively question the male world order.

Thus, the objects and the cartoon characters in the television show become part of a chain of associations and function as a commentary on the discussions. Based on existing images, Byatt uses them to create something new that relates to her themes.

1.4.2. Television

In Frederica’s television show Byatt uses television as a vehicle for introducing an intellectual discussion while she is also aware of the importance of the visual qualities of the medium. Frederica’s friend Edmund Wilkie, who produces *Through the Looking-Glass*, claims that “we are entering an age when language becomes subordinate to images” (50). Indeed, the introduction of television meant a revolution of the eye: things that could not be seen before, because of their small size or great distance, were suddenly made visible to the masses.

Byatt touches upon this already in *The Virgin in the Garden*, where she presents the key moment in British mass television, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. It was broadcast not only across the United Kingdom, but all around the world it was a festive social event where people gathered around the television with family and friends to see the Queen in close-up.

On television the Queen becomes a visual object, similar to Elizabeth I in the Darnley portrait; yet the description of Elizabeth II is not half as impressive as that of her Renaissance predecessor. The modern queen appears as a “matt and twinkling tiny doll, half an inch, an inch, two inches, a face maybe eight inches across, ... a black and white smiling *image*” (VG 315; emphasis added). The viewers, to whom television is still something new, are much more conscious of the fact that they are only looking at a representation than they might be with a painting or a photography, where they would not comment on the size difference. Campbell observes that “[b]oth the play and the televised coronation ... comment self-reflexively ... on the gap between subject and representation” (63). The Queen on television is and is not the real Queen.

Thus Byatt’s description also shows her interest in the way that television changes what we see and how we see it. Wilkie thinks that “the new metaphors, the ones now, are in that box. Wars are in that box, and beliefs, and persuasion, just as they were in *Paradise Lost* but infinitely more so” (WW 417). His programme is self-consciously devised as “the very first television about television” (51). By staging the show with the *Alice* characters and a changing studio decoration that refers to extratexts like *Snow White* or *Arabian Nights*, he creates a new kind of narrative that is based on visual logic.

Byatt herself has said that she loves television and that even though she finds it threatening, she also finds it exciting (see Tonkin 18). Byatt’s interest in the visual language of television and how its images function through the free association of other images or narratives can also be seen in her short story “Jael”, in which a producer of television commercials tells the story of how she came up with the colours and imagery of a Grenadine commercial.⁶

Frederica, too, is fascinated simply by the visual experience of watching television, by the colours and geometry of tennis and snooker, programmes on biology, geography and science, the war in Vietnam. Television, “full of mosaics of transmitted coloured light” (WW 51), both fractures the world into countless, unrelated images, and at the same time gives a more complete image of the world and all the exciting things in it.

⁶ “Jael” was published as part of the short story collection *Elementals* (1998).

2. Perceptions of the world

Byatt's interest in vision is not confined to visual arts. She is also interested in different modes of perception as well as in how different kinds of people see the world in different ways.

2.1. Women and children

One primary concern is women's perception of the world. Byatt describes different aspects of female sexuality: first period, sexual intercourse, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, celibacy, venereal infection, the Pill, and menopause. She even imagines internal spaces of the female body, which Stephanie sees before her inner eye when sleeping with Daniel and when giving birth to her son. On her wedding night, she vaguely perceives these inner spaces first in terms of dark flesh, then as a bright landscape: "dark interior flesh ... flexible and shifting, larger than she had imagined herself from the outside, with ... no apparent limits" turns into a "clear landscape" of caverns with water, fields of flowers, and the sea; a world "perpetually renewed" (VG 372f.). Obviously this is no realistic account of the insides of the body but it tells a lot about Stephanie and her visual imagination.

In *Still Life*, which is deeply preoccupied with vision, Byatt tries to imagine how a child perceives the world. She presents how a new-born child, Stephanie's son William Orton, might see his surroundings. It is no accident that William owes his name to Wordsworth. Stephanie admires this author a lot and reads his poetry in the ante-natal clinic and later in the library. There she contemplates Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, in which the poet incorporates memories of his early childhood when he enjoyed a "splendour in the objects of sense which is passed away", as he wrote in a letter to Catherine Clarkson (qtd. in Mahoney 198). The ode opens with the motto "The child is father of the Man" (Wordsworth, *Ode* 176); and interestingly, when Byatt describes how little William perceives the world, she also opens this particular passage with "the child" instead of William's name.

In this scene, Byatt leaves aside the philosophical implications that Wordsworth makes and concentrates on purely visual observations. William's world is composed of nothing but light, colours and vague shapes. He sees light "as through water, or it could

be said that he saw the air as a thick, translucent medium.” Light also seems “like the close roof of a sphere within which he lay.” Hence light appears as something tangible: states of matter are not fixed yet in his perception. Similarly, people’s faces and the light of the reading lamp alike simply appear as “spaces of brightness, shifting shapes [...] These circles shifted and yet held shape in the sphere of what he saw.”

Hence, the child’s perception resembles that of a painter, as he simply sees colours and shapes like on a two-dimensional canvas. The world of painting is pointed to by the coloured shapes that appear as “dashes and flashes of pale violet (from the irises) and chrome yellow (from the daffodils)” (SL 129f.). Though describing real irises in the hospital, this clearly is a reference to Van Gogh’s *Irises*, which are violet on a yellow background. This connection with Van Gogh, a central point of reference in *Still Life*, and the colours violet / purple and yellow, which reoccur throughout the novel, point to the importance of this scene in the novel’s network of ideas. Indeed, including the references to Wordsworth’s *Immortality Ode*, which reoccurs throughout the novel, this scene incorporates a cluster of motifs.

2.2. From description to action: the interdependency of life and art

Preoccupied with Van Gogh, Alexander, too, perceives the world like paintings. Hence he sees the Pooles’s breakfast table in terms of the painter’s *Still Life with Coffee Pot*: “The breakfast table was a still life” (SL 198). Shortly after he does not even recognise his landlady Elinor when she is walking naked towards him. Instead she appears like a nude in a painting, “shadowy and pale”, made up of “rounds and triangular planes [...] His eye, perhaps because his mind was preoccupied with surfaces, saw lovely repeating ovals and rounds”. Still without realizing who he is looking at he takes in, like a painter, “the deep purple inverted T between the breasts, the incurved arabesques of collar-bone”, before he finally recognises her and defines what he has seen as “a vision” (203f.).

Brosch observes that the description is informed by Alexander’s vocabulary of art description and continues, “Die Beeinflussung, die der Text nachzeichnet, geht von der Wahrnehmung bildender Kunst zur literarischen Verarbeitung zurück zur

Wahrnehmung” (58). Hence, Alexander’s perception is doubly mediated through art and language, and it is no wonder that it takes him so long to recognize Elinor.

Campbell also points out the connection with Alexander’s preceding attempt to describe a plum plainly and without metaphor: “But you cannot exclude from the busy automatically-connecting mind possible metaphors, human flesh for fruit flesh” (SL 199). Accordingly, the contemplation of the flesh of a plum soon leads to the flesh of a woman, Elinor. “[A]s if to show where metaphors can lead us, a few pages later Alexander is making love to his landlady” (Campbell 69). Indeed, this scene is an example of how Byatt develops action out of pure description.

However, Sorensen does not consider this development and criticises Byatt for not seeing “that human life takes precedence [...] over aesthetics” and that “[i]nstead, she invests great energy in deliberate, cool descriptions of a naked woman” (*Eternal* 74). She overlooks that this is also a commentary on Alexander. He is described as having a low libido – “he had never been quite overwhelmed by desire to touch anyone” (VG 54) - and from the beginning looks at women like at an aesthetic object. For example, the first time he is shown in a rendezvous with Jenny, he undresses her only partly in order to make “a folded *frame* of her clothing: she sat, still as a *statue*” (VG 54; emphases added). Similarly, the first time he is really looking at Stephanie is when she is in her ‘role’ as a bride: “a woman in a white veil, a long, wide skirt and a sash caught his attention in a way a woman in an apron – off-stage – never would“ (339). He immediately offers to adjust her clothes and hair, like he always does with amateur actresses backstage, having a good eye for clothes.

The fact that the scene with Elinor develops from a description into action is also remarkable in terms of ekphrasis, or the literary description of visual art. The oldest known example of ekphrasis is Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* (see Heffernan 297). As Heffernan explains, “classical ekphrasis ... often treats the work of art as considerably *more* than a static object. In Homer’s account of the scenes depicted on the shield of Achilles, for instance, many of the scenes turn into narrative.” Hence, “ekphrastic literature typically delivers *from* the pregnant moment of graphic art its embryonically narrative impulse” (299ff.; Heffernan’s emphases). Accordingly, and unlike Sorensen suggests, the scene with the naked Elinor undoubtedly and literally is

about human life - as Alexander's and Elinor's affair leads to (and ends with) a baby that is quite probably his.

While Alexander sees a real-life person abstractedly as if she were a piece of art, Frederica sees a piece of art as if it were real when she looks at Vermeer's *Look of Delft*. After falling asleep in front of the painting, she wakes up

and for a moment did not know where she was. She was in a calm place where golden buildings stood above water, where the sky was blue and still, the stone was pink, time was very quietly arrested. She stared at the *View*, which has the quality of being so wide that the eye must travel along it to see it. She saw it as though she was in it, and saw, simultaneously, the perfect art with which each element had been considered [...] (WW 424)

For a moment, Frederica feels she is inside the townscape that the painting depicts and she becomes a part of the illusion the painting creates. The paradisiacal calmness it emanates, too, is an illusion, historically incorrect. Yet in this moment Frederica, who had already known the painting through her reading of Proust, deeply appreciates the *View* precisely for the artistic "momentary illusion of reality" as well as "the adequate intelligence of the Master" (425), both for what the painting depicts and how it is depicted, marvelling at the art and the artistry.

In the context of the novel, this is a moment of epiphany and precedes an important decision in the protagonist's life. Frederica is pregnant and does not know what to do. Before going inside the museum, she meets Agatha and Saskia Mond in the company of Gerard Wijnobel, who appears to be Agatha's lover and Saskia's father. In a verbal still life, they are simply portrayed as "a family": "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" (423). They appear like a painting, like Elinor does to Alexander. Like with the *View of Delft*, art and life come together and almost become interchangeable; they also influence each other. After seeing this icon of a family, Frederica falls into a sort of healing sleep in front of the painting and then, in the *View*, "time [is] very quietly arrested" (424) for her. It is a moment of arresting life while also delving into it, as she delves into the hyper-real town in the painting. Right after this, her son Leo asks her about her pregnancy and pushes her to a decision, drawing her from passivity. Yet again, an ekphrastic description marks the turning point from inaction to action.

2.3. Extra-ordinary visions of light and blood

Byatt also describes people whose lives are influenced by their perceptions in a highly dramatic way. Marcus Potter and Josh Lamb / Joshua Ramsden are both characters that see things no one else sees. But while Marcus's vision is a talent that only gradually turns against him as he struggles to cope with it, Lamb appears as more clearly mad and is also dangerous to others.

As a child, Marcus was able to do instant mathematics by visualising a garden in which changing geometric forms represented figures. When pressured by his father to perform and explain, he broke down and lost this ability. He is still able to 'spread' himself, a game that he plays on the school's field, where he deliberately extends his field of vision so that he surveys the area from all angles at the same time, or from none. Byatt remarks that "Marcus is more like me in his 'spread' consciousness, which I afterwards discovered was exactly the word used by Wordsworth in *The Prelude* for that experience of feeling the spirit outside the body; and also in his asthma" (Dusinberre 194f.).

For Marcus, however, this experience of "spreading" becomes dangerous because he sometimes loses any sense of where he really is, and because it has become compulsive, so that he consciously has to hold on to the field's geometry to steady himself. There are several everyday things that bother him, like the whirlpool in the plughole and in the toilet, or ordinary steps. He adopts techniques for avoiding thought, so that he feels less menaced by the world.

This is similar to Vincent Hodgkiss, who, when alone in his room, "tried to behave as if no one was there, no personality, simply an observing, self-correcting intelligence. Disembodied, he could almost have said, but he paid fastidious attention to his body". However, the big difference is that Hodgkiss takes on this habit because he "lived largely in his mind" (WW 298). Hodgkiss's behaviour is the more remarkable as he later becomes the lover of Marcus.

Yet years before that, in *The Virgin in the Garden*, Marcus's integrity is more seriously endangered than ever when the very sunlight in the field seems to take on physical form. Suddenly, the light shifts and moves around in intersecting cones so that the rays of light might finally focus on him, like through a burning glass, and thus

shatter him. Vision itself, in the sense of visual perception, is at the very centre of this experience as “what had been a condition of vision became an object of vision” (VG 155).

One reason for Marcus’s extraordinary perceptiveness is his asthma, which “stretched time and perception so that everything was slow and sharp and clear” (117). Yet also under normal conditions Marcus has total recall, another reason why he tries to avoid taking things in consciously, as everything seems possibly menacing and full of meaning. When Lucas makes him record virtually everything that he sees, reality and imagination start merging: “He was in a perpetual daze of focused visions and things, real things, studied and learned with a hallucinatory closeness that was so like the visions that the memory-images of both ran into each other” (302). What saves him is writing these things down and putting them into an orderly, seemingly logical context. Later, Marcus excitedly discovers order in nature, when “like some nascent Buddha” (Wheeler 170), another visionary, he sits under a tree and maps its geometry. Later still, he studies the regularity of Fibonacci spirals like snail’s shells.

But as a teenager in *The Virgin in the Garden* he appears more mystical, as his maths, his musical talent (he has perfect pitch) and his intuitive acting skills are reminiscent of a medium.⁷ Moreover, he seems able to send and receive images telepathically. Leonard thinks that “[t]he assumption in this novel seems to be that what Marcus sees is real. ... Byatt allows for the possibility of something else really being there.” For her, “the reading of Marcus as experiencing a psychotic breakdown is far less interesting (and, I think, less textually tenable) than the reading of him having access to an alternate reality, or an alternate way of perceiving a reality that does exist outside the usual range of perceptions” (Leonard 241f.). She sees Marcus’s experiences as an instance of the “fantastic and supernatural” (245).

Yet Leonard ignores that Byatt is a realist writer and the fact that Marcus’s experiences are exclusively presented from his point of view. As Plotz observes, “[n]either the narrator nor any of the other reliable characters intervene to explain” (39). Obviously, the subjective experience is what matters here, as for Marcus these visions do happen and threaten him. Conversely, whether they really happen does not matter:

⁷ Cf. VG 29: “The boy’s acting had something of the same quality as his maths and his music: something simply transmitted, like mediumship.”

they stay inexplicable, though they may partly be explained physically (through the boy's asthma) and psychologically.

That "the light vision experienced by Marcus ... suggests no particular meaning" (Plotz 35) is an important difference in comparison to Lamb's visions. Marcus himself is wary of religion or any other kind of transcendental interpretation of his talents. Accordingly, he stresses that his mathematical garden was not a "vision" in a religious sense but "a kind of trick" (VG 78). By contrast, when Lamb sees objects and people covered in blood, he is sure that his visions are real, even though he knows that the others cannot see them, and he feels that these visions are connected to the purpose of his life. Without explicitly giving any psychological explanations, the text clearly indicates that the reason for Lamb's visions lies in the violent experiences of his childhood. His father, a religious fanatic, killed his mother and his sister and was hanged for murder. Lamb also has visions of meeting a Syzygos, a Heavenly Twin, the Other, who shows him the world in Manichean terms. These visions are clearly informed by Lamb's religious studies and seem to happen when he has epileptic fits.

Another man who has visions of blood is Lucas Simmonds, who is openly classified as mad. Like Josh Lamb, he seems to suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, as he appears to have gone through a traumatic event during the Second World War. These two men's visions clearly have psychological and physical reasons while Marcus's visions do not appear to be linked with his fear of his ever-shouting father.

Finally, a character that willingly changes his perception is Edmund Wilkie. He experiments with reversing glasses and coloured glasses. Thereby he wants to find out about the effect of colours on mood, though he mainly finds out that he is ruder the less people can see him. Byatt takes the coloured glasses up again with the scientist Hodder Pinsky. When Frederica tries on his blue glasses she feels like drowning in the Arctic seas, whereas for Pinsky they help his eyesight. This shows how everybody perceives the world differently, and what an important role colours play in our perception.

3. Colours

If vision is important to Byatt's writing, it is only logical that colours take on a significant role. Hazel Bell, when compiling indices to the first two novels of the quartet, put „colours” as an entry with several subentries that put the colours into context. The subentries for colours are for example listed under “Astraea”, “Festival of Britain” and “in Van Gogh's paintings” (254).

Byatt's use of colours can be purely descriptive as part of her endeavour to communicate to her readers the vision before her inner eye, in order to transport the pure pleasure of seeing. This is linked to her effort to describe things in words as clearly and exactly as possible. Moreover, they structure the novels, as in each of them certain colours appear more prominently. Finally, they characterise people, times and places.

3.1. Colour schemes as structuring elements of the novels

On *The Virgin in the Garden* Byatt explains that the central image is Botticelli's *Primavera*, and the colours are red, white and green (see Tredell 65; see also Campbell 63). Accordingly, these are also the prevalent colours in the cover illustration of the Vintage UK edition from 2003. Botticelli's painting and its colours are connected to what Byatt calls the “ruling” metaphor of the novel, that of metamorphosis – “of flesh into stone, or of flesh into grass – and a concomitant metaphor of language itself as flowers.” In fact, the image of flowers led her to the *Primavera* painting, itself an image of metamorphosis as it describes the change of seasons. The colours are intrinsically connected with the imagery of the novel: “red for blood, white for stone, green for grass” (*SL/NM* 10). Blood and stone also play an important part in Byatt's imagery in general. Frederica can be regarded as central to this colour scheme, as she is a pale redhead in the green gardens of Long Royston.

These metaphors and the associated colours are also part of Alexander's verse drama, both visually and verbally. Alexander incorporates into the play a poem about Elizabeth which uses the same colours, green, red and white: “Under a tree I saw a Virgin sit. / The red and white rose quartered in her face” (VG 132). Moreover the play also makes visual reference to the Darnley portrait. This painting shows Elizabeth in coral, gold and white and is described in the Prologue at the very beginning of the

novel. Hence red and white, green and gold are first suggested for the costumes; but finally the Queen's dresses are white and gold for imprisonment, and green and gold for the orchard. While gold is evidently used as imperial colour, white can be linked to the prison stones, while green clearly refers to the garden.

Of *Still Life* Byatt says that the main colours are purple and blue (see Tredell 65). Often, these colours are combined with yellow for contrast. These are the colours of Van Gogh's *Irises*, mirrored in the irises that Daniel gives to Stephanie upon William's birth; the colours of Van Gogh's *Sower* featured in the Prologue; and of his *Still Life with Coffee Pot*, mirrored in the enamelled pot on Alexander's breakfast table at the end of the novel and in the colours of the Poole's breakfast table. They are also the colours of the plum that Alexander contemplates at breakfast and of the cyclamen Stephanie gets for Mrs Orton as a welcome gift, the colour that Mrs Orton's flesh so uncannily resembles. Campbell notes that "[t]his small cluster of colour images encapsulates the novel's preoccupation with life and death as humans experience them and as they struggle to represent them through art" (69f.).

Babel Tower, by comparison, works with much starker contrasts between red, white and black, and between light and darkness. These colours abound especially in *Babbletower*, which is generally characterized by lush descriptions full of colours. This reflects the sensuousness of the community in La Tour Bruyarde. White is often associated with innocence and anything untouched, and appears in images like snow, pearls, ivory, milk, cream, shells, and stone, while red is linked with blood and flesh. Yet whiteness can also point to something gloomy, like the heap of bones at the end of *Babbletower*: "white bones, fresh bones, [...] with rags of cooked shins here and there upon them" (BT 617).

The colours are the same as in the opening of the novel-within-the-novel, when Culvert and his followers flee "the *red* light of Terror" in the direction of a "hidden valley, beyond *white*-capped fangs of the mountains", where La Tour Bruyarde can be reached across a bridge "across a *dark* and lifeless chasm" (10; emphases added). Hence, the colours black, white, and red speak of dystopia to come. By contrast, the colours red, white, and green are a symbol of metamorphosis in *The Virgin in the Garden* and with the central image of the garden, the optimism of the Festival of Britain and the hope for a New Elizabethan Age they appear as the colours of utopia.

When Lady Mavis makes a feast and commits suicide, she chooses the White Tower as location, which also goes by the more ominous name of the Pierced Tower. While the name White Tower may refer to Mavis's innocence, the name of the Pierced Tower can be seen as relating to the sorrow and pain inflicted upon her and points towards her painful death. She builds a canopy of red and black silk, and prepares

flagons of pink bubbling wine and garlands of holly, with leaves like needles and berries red as blood. And she herself wore a snow-white robe under a scarlet overdress, with a garland of the holly shining in her hair.

The key piece of her feast is a human-shaped cake, a symbol of the sacrifice she means to make for the community. In it, the same key colours meet: there is, amongst other things, whipped cream, meringue, rosepetal pies, red apple-cheeks, cranberry froth, sugared almonds and white syllabub:

The Sweet Human had long red shining nails, on its fingers and toes, made of pointed tartlets glazed with scarlet redcurrant jelly, from which dripped pendant tarts like goutts of blood, also glazed scarlet. The breasts of this confectioned Being were low circling mounds of pink marzipan sweetmeats, with a castle of chocolate truffles for nipples[.] (271f.)

This sensuous description of the sumptuous food items slowly takes on darker associations: buttons made of "red tarts of currants in scarlet jelly" appear "[l]ike flies drowned in blood" to two little boys, sadistic bullies who are licking their lips in anticipation. Finally there is the cake's "heart", "composed of a phalanx of tiny, blood-red, heart-shaped tarts", into which Mavis has "pushed a dark, triangular slice of cake, like a blade, covered with what appeared to be soot." (272) The comparisons with a phalanx, a blade and blood, as well as the actual soot of the dark cake that Mavis is going to eat, shift the discourse into the realm of violence that will eventually lead to the destruction of almost everybody by the primitive dark Krebs.

Yet black and red are not restricted to the *Babbletower* passages. These colours, together with silver, also feature prominently in Hugh Pink's "Pomegranate" poem, which is also a metaphor of Frederica's confinement in Bran House. Moreover, red and white are the colours of Frederica's nightmares. Once she dreams of two men made of stone, one red and one white, trying to make love to her, crushing her. In another dream she is wearing a flimsy dress of red and white paper, similar to the skirt she used to wear as Elizabeth in the play, and is followed by red and white stone women.

Similarly, *A Whistling Woman* also features a lot of white, red and black, but what is especially striking is the regular pairing of white and red. Examples are the blood on Lucy Nighby's sheep and the white walls of Dun Vale Hall "smeared with bloodstains" early in the novel (WW 77), red light on Lamb's white hair, references to Snow White, red and white corpuscles, and white rats with red eyes. At Christmas the choir singers have scarlet ribbons around their white necks, which bring up associations of the guillotine or sacrificial lambs. They resemble the Henry Moore statues after members of the Anti-University have painted "wide bloody bands around their necks, like the red ribbons worn defiantly by French aristocrats in the time of the guillotine, but dripping" (362). While at Christmas Mass the dark future is only hinted at through the choir singers' ribbons, the damaged Moore statues signal the beginning of the catastrophic events.

Somebody who is culpable for tragic events in the end is Joshua Lamb. From the beginning, Lamb/ Ramsden functions as a sign of the corruption of the innocent: calling himself Lamb, he has angelic white hair yet he sees blood everywhere. In connection with his belief in Manichaeism the contrast between light and dark is also significant, as the opposition of light and darkness and the belief that in the end the light will be cleared of the dark is a core belief of this religion.

Yet darkness is not necessarily negative: the Whistlers, who are dangerous but essentially well-meaning, have dark eyes. Similarly Luk points out that without the night we wouldn't be able to make out the individual stars in the sky, which would "shine with perpetual starlight": "I like the dark, said Luk, sitting darkly on his terrace wall, his hooded head thrown back, his dark beard silhouetted dark on dark" (413) By stressing the word "dark" through repetition, Byatt makes Luk appear as an emblem for the idea that darkness in itself is neither good nor bad. This scene takes place just after the burning of Dun Vale Hall, the dramatic ending of the sect's search for light. It implies that instead of demonising the darkness, people should rather accept and appreciate it and strive for a healthy balance. It also shows that people may choose for themselves how they perceive and judge the world and its colours, the light and the dark.

3.2. Colourful characters

Similarly to the way that darkness is redeemed from exclusively negative associations, the colour black does not have to be negative. Thus, Daniel appears solely in black, from the 1950s up until 1980 in the Prologue of *Still Life*. Consequently, Campbell identifies him as “a figure of stability in the midst of change” (68). He even has a “square black handwriting” (VG 70). The blackness might not only be connected to his profession but also to the way he uncompromisingly faces the dark sides of life.

But black is also associated with his grief. After Stephanie’s death he looks at Winifred with “black anger” (SL 411) and after the burial he is “walking on the black air” (414). Later “[h]e even paints his dreams with black ink” (BT 25), and he sees his dead wife as “a kind of black space walking in the garden” (361). He finds a black image for depression: “that *clear black state* – you see the world through a veil of coal” (59).

In connection with Eva Wijnobel, black is a sign of her otherness. With her black hair and her black and purple cloak she alternately looks like a cross between an ancient Egyptian priestess, a witch, a scarecrow and a madwoman. When she approaches Dun Vale Hall, the home of a sect that worships the light, she seems like an intruder from another world or another time:

Watchers in the farmyard saw the striding figure on the ridge, black with a solid core, surrounded by flapping movement in the wind. The head was up, a black disc on a blue sky, and the arms were flung wide from time to time, like a scarecrow, one thought, like a priest greeting the sun, another thought. Black sliding shapes rushed out from the whirling skirts, circled, and were apparently reabsorbed. Black crows went over, flapping strongly. (WW 307)

Her appearance is dramatically staged and evokes a clear picture in the reader’s mind. It is also a description of her ambivalent, uncanny personality, as she is both scarecrow and priestess, depending on the point of view. Her head, like “a black disc on a blue sky”, makes her seem like an anti-sun. This is interesting in connection with Ramsden, who sees in her “the Smudge into which dark matter would be gathered at the end of the process, when the light was separated out” (315). After her short mentioning in *Babel Tower*, her reappearance in *A Whistling Woman* is announced by black paint that she maliciously puts on her husband’s papers. Her disturbed relationship with the world can

be seen from her attitude that painting a room black is an act of “[b]rightening things” (33).

Another ‘dark’ character is Nigel Reiver, who is “a dark man in a dark suit, a soft armour, with the blue shadow of a dark beard on his solid chest”, watching Frederica with “dark eyes” (BT 34). He resembles Dis in Hugh Pink’s poem, the god of the underworld who abducted Persephone. Frederica quotes the according lines to herself when she watches him: “Such dark eyes / Are not seen elsewhere” (80). Moreover, his blue-black beard associates him with Bluebeard.

Thus Nigel differs strongly from Frederica’s following lovers. John Ottokar with his “golden hair” (BT 328) even has a “blond smile” (291), whereas red-headed Luk Lysgaard-Peacock is a “fiery-headed man” (WW 426) who appears like a “golden fire-demon” (365). Both appear colourful: Luk, matching his last name, wears a peacock scarf, while John has a sweater with rainbow-coloured harlequin triangles which makes Frederica think of dominos and masks. Similarly, John’s twin brother Paul owns a jester’s jacket and sometimes has multi-coloured fingernails. Butter sees John’s harlequin sweater in context with the alternative gender relations Frederica develops with him, and sees structural analogies with carnival in the double movement of “connection and disconnection” (*Transversalität und Vernunftkritik* 237). Indeed, carnival is a theme in *Babel Tower*, notably with the carnival ceremony that Culvert stages and that goes astray, but also with Frederica’s attempt at subverting the gender roles and taking her life into her own hands.

Ramsden is also described as colourful, yet here the colours stress his strangeness. Even though he is not old yet, his hair is white as wool. This is only one of his connections with lambs: not only is his adopted last name Lamb, he also thinks that in his father’s eyes he should have been sacrificed like Isaac, in whose place finally a lamb was killed. Thus, he identifies himself both with the intended sacrifice (Isaac) and the actual sacrifice (the lamb). Unlike his hair, his beard is “multi-coloured, blacks and browns and reds” (WW 57). Yet there, too, is a connection with white, which is also colourful as it is “all colours and no colour” (203). Similarly, he appears before Lucy Nighby as a “white figure” with “rainbow edges” (136).

As these examples show, clothes and the characters' general outward appearance are not just "props" that are carefully described, as Scurr criticises (6). On the contrary, they are a part of characterisation.

Moreover, the characters' appearance helps the reader to recognize them, which is especially important considering the amount of characters presented, many of which reappear throughout the volumes. Thus, the colours of the characters function as icons or mnemonics. Accordingly, Ruth can always be identified by her long golden plait, whereas Jacqueline is always described as brown.

Colours are also a means for grouping characters according to their personalities. Thus Frederica and Bill are the 'fiery' Potters, whereas Stephanie, Winifred and Marcus are the pale ones. In fact, Marcus is described as "an unnaturally colourless person" (VG 28).

Similarly, Jude Mason's greyness is regularly stressed, as in his first meeting with Frederica:

long greyish fingers, distinctly grey, once out of the coloured light, though whether intrinsically grey or by contrast is hard to say [...] a head clothed and veiled in long iron-grey hair, dead straight, smooth, long, iron-grey hair [...] A long grey leg [...] also cloaked in the long grey threads, and then the strange figure, all blue-grey in the daylight [...] jumps down [...] the genitals [...] clouded by iron-grey pubic hair. (BT 164)

His "hippo-grey" skin (441), in such stark contrast with the pink flesh of the characters of his novel, makes him appear as inhuman and not interested in personal sensuous experience.

When Frederica first sees him, he is bathed in coloured light and she thinks he is a sculpture. He introduces himself as "a living creature. The Human Form Divine" (163f.). In fact, he appears unreal and not of this world. Thus, his first visual appearance, as a part of an ekphrastic description, is clearly staged to set him apart and indicates that he regards himself as a work of art. As Butter observes, his identification with a work of art continues in his construction of identity, which is based on "literary images, references" like Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Oscar Wilde, and Marsyas (BT 576; see Butter, *Transversalität und Vernunftkritik* 219 note 208). The narrator also identifies him with pieces of art through the choice of words as the descriptions of the portraits

that the art students make of him do not speak of them as depictions. Instead, the descriptions repeatedly use “he is”, as if he really were the paintings (441). Finally, his clothes are obvious symbols: his blue “skirted jacket, from the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in style” (213), identifies him as the author of *Babbletower*. Jude declares himself interested in the semiotics of clothes:

My coat is sky-blue, the colour of truth, and it is the dress at once of the Enlightenment philosophers, and the licentious beaux of the courts. My skin is sullied, as truth is sullied. My hair is nature, untended. As is my skin. (524)

Hence, after Lady Mavis’s death, when Samson Origen predicts blood, Jude uncharacteristically wears red.

3.3. Distinguishing colour words

The fact that colours in clothes are important can also be seen in the character that Jenny Parry portrays in *Astraea*. She plays Bess Throckmorton, who was Sir Walter Raleigh’s wife and the queen’s maid of honour (see *Oxford Dictionary of Biography*, s.v. *Raleigh, Sir Walter*). In Alexander’s sketches she wears coral skirts on a background of white flowers. The usage of ‘coral’ is remarkable as this colour hardly ever appears in the quartet, even though Byatt describes many shades of red, constantly striving for synonyms, like crimson, scarlet, vermilion, purple, blood-red, flesh colour, ginger (for hair), cherry or tomato red, as well as gradations like red-brown, ruddy brown and gold-red. ‘Coral’ appears right at the beginning in the description of the Darnley portrait, and in *A Whistling Woman* Frederica is accordingly wearing coral and white silk when hosting a discussion about Elizabeth I. Apparently ‘coral’ is connected with Elizabeth I and her time, whereas other gradations of red appear in different contexts.

Consequently, finding exact and varied colour words is essential for Byatt. In *Still Life*, in a self-conscious digression on her idea of writing the novel with clear, objective descriptions without metaphors, she also reflects on colours:

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. ... I know that for some reader these words will call up clear images on an inner eye, they will in some sense ‘see’ purple and gold, whereas other will not. No two men see the same iris. Yet Daniel and William and Stephanie all saw the same iris. (SL 131)

This shows that even though Byatt is aware of the subjectivity of perception, she believes that two people can see the same thing, and that this thing can be described. The variety of colour words she uses is based on this belief, as the exactness of words is essential to transporting the images. Hence her use of colour adjectives has linguistic and aesthetic implications, aiming for precision and for transporting associations and a sensuous experience.

Sorensen criticises what she regards as an “effort to strain after synonyms for blue or for unusual metaphors” which for her “contains no emotional investment” (2004: 78). Yet on the contrary, there is emotional investment in the colours. Daniel’s mother, Mrs Orton, is “purple-fleshed purple-dressed” and thus resembles the colour of some cyclamens that have “a distressing purple I [i.e. Byatt] associate with death and depression” (SL/NM 13). When Stephanie puts cyclamens into Mrs Orton’s room to make her feel welcome, Mrs Orton puts them out on the corridor at night, as she has heard that one should not have plants in bedrooms because they reduce the oxygen in the air. In this scene, too, Mrs Orton, cyclamens and their colour are associated with sickness and death.

The colour of cyclamens reappears in another context, in *Babbletower*. At the beginning of winter, “[t]he Lady Roseace’s face developed a porcelain pallor and her red lips were tinged with blue, cyclamens rather than clove-sweet pinks” (BT 256). Culvert is already losing interest in her and instead discovers “the cruelties of religion, or the religion of cruelty” (258). The Lady’s loss of her rosiness in exchange for the colour of cyclamen thus already points towards her cruel end.

But Byatt’s choice of colour words can also be seen in a more technical artistic context. She paints with words. As Worton points out, “the verbal palette is a genuine artist’s one. There is a precision in her usage – and a marvellous metaphoricity, since terms such as ‘cobalt blue’ evoke minerals and mines as much as a deep bright blue” (23).

3.4. Time and place in colours

Byatt also uses colours to characterise certain points in time. The Elizabethan Age is associated with coral, gold and white, while the cruel times of La Terreur and the guillotine are blood-red.

By contrast, the fifties are characterised by an excitement about having colours after the harsh years of the war: “We have been starved of colour” says Miss Wells, thrilled about the preparation of costumes for *Astraea* (VG 137). People are happy just to decorate: “Winifred belonged to that generation of wartime housewives to whom ... colour, any colour, [was] indisputably liberating and cheering” (38). Similarly, “[t]he colours of the Festival of Britain sprouted incongruously, amongst the old slate, grey and white” (84). The Festival of Britain was organised in 1951 to commemorate the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and encompassed events related to arts and design, science and technology all over Britain. As Leventhal argues, “If it exaggerated the extent of British recovery from war, it did help to dispel some of the gloom and bleakness so pervasive in the late 1940s” (287). The pastel colours of Alexander’s walls in his room at school are typical of “those post-Festival years [...] : duck-egg blue, watered grass-green, muted salmon rose, pale sandy gold” (VG 127). By comparison, the colours of the sixties are more garish in retrospect:

The carpet of the 50s was woven of many colours, in fine threads, even if much of it was pastel, or fawn, or dove grey. Whereas the 60s were like a 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 52)

Generally the sixties are described as colourful. In this context, John Ottokar’s rainbow sweater, like the colourful clothes of the student representative Maggie Cringle, can also be regarded as a symbol of the sixties. When staging *A Winter’s Tale*, Alexander deliberately uses “new colours of the 60s, colours of the flower children” for the costumes (399). People in Hamelin Square paint their houses in cheerful colours, and people in night clubs appear different because of colourful strobe lighting.

The new paint on the houses of Hamelin Square as a sign of gentrification as well as the lights in the night clubs indicate that colours also characterise places. The Pooles’s flat is colourful and full of light; the children, with their self-made alphabet frieze on the walls, “sit amongst words and colours” (SL 209). Gitzen points out that

Alexander's room there with its sparse furnishing, its specific colours (yellow, white, grey) and the Van Gogh prints resembles a Van Gogh painting (see 87). His later flat is "pale and peaceful, straw and gold and blond wood", with "a lot of light" (SL 432).

Conversely, Raphael's room, with a Cubist collage on the wall, is "dustless, impeccable, *colourless* ... The walls were lined with books, which had an unusual air of geometric neatness and coherence" (252; emphasis added). Obviously Byatt characterises people through the rooms they inhabit. Thus, Agatha Mond's flat is introduced as a friendly haven from the beginning; there are white walls and carefully chosen colourful things. Bran House, by comparison, stands out through its claustrophobic darkness:

The bedroom is dark, and Nigel has drawn the curtains, which are dark red, a kind of damask, with red trees and red blooms on red ground. When Frederica is alone she leaves the curtains open and sees stars or clouds. She imagines Alan and Tony and Hugh in a large room with white walls and pale blue curtains, with open windows blowing the curtains, and sunlight coming in. (BT 119)

With its dark and heavy curtains, Bran House is an archetype of Old England and a posh conservative lifestyle from which Frederica wants to escape. By closing the curtains Nigel resembles Dis, god of the underworld yet again, who would not let Persephone see the light of the sky. This stands in stark contrast to another English manor, Long Royston. Built in Tudor times, the paintings it boasts are in Italian colours, "rich blue and terra cotta" (VG 182). While both manors stand in England and are associated with the past, Bran House stands for a reactionary stuffy old England, whereas Long Royston reminds one of Renaissance Italy and a desire to explore the world, to bring home images of far-off and imaginary worlds.

Accordingly, colours are also associated with geography. Southern France is mainly seen in terms of Van Gogh: places that he painted or place descriptions that remind one of the colours he used. Hence, the "bright dark blue" walls of Frederica's room remind her "of a postcard of Van Gogh's 'Starry Night', and even more of the colour behind the fleurs de lys on the banners in Olivier's film of Henry V" (SL 65). It is typical of Frederica that she should associate the colour also with a literary context. Moreover, as it is Shakespeare that she thinks of, it shows that you can take the girl out of England, but you cannot take England out of her. Consequently, her heart still lifts when she reaches the Yorkshire moors: "it is dark, it is windswept, it is the north from

which she comes” (BT 234). It is noteworthy that Byatt was also born in Yorkshire (see *Contemporary writers in the UK*, s.v. *Byatt*). In this part of the country the colours seem more intense:

There is a moment on the road north when red-brick houses give way to grey stone, and grey stone walls make their appearance. The colour of the sky and the grass changes in relation to these stones: the sky is a bluer blue, the grass a bluer green[.] (BT 348)

4. Visual imagery and motifs

Byatt uses visual elements in multiple ways as a means to structure her novels. It is not surprising, then, that visuality also plays an important part in her planning of a piece of writing:

I don't know how much is known about the difference between those who *think* with mental imagery and those who don't. I very much do – I see a projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I *see* other people's metaphors – if there is an iconic content to a metaphor I will 'see' a visual image on some inner mental screen, which can then be contemplated more precisely, described discursively [...] (Byatt, *SL / NM* 13f.; Byatt's emphases)

Thus, Byatt virtually 'plots' her novels through recurring colours and images that weave together different parts of the texts. Metaphors, too, are an important aspect in the novels' structures:

In my experience I know what the form of a novel is when I find what I think of as the 'ruling' metaphor. In the case of this novel [i.e. *The Virgin in the Garden*] this was a metaphor of metamorphosis – of flesh into stone, or of flesh into grass – and a concomitant metaphor of language itself as flower. (Byatt, *SL / NM* 9f.)

The metaphors and their respective imagery consequently function as starting points of the novels. The concrete images that Byatt creates help exploring and connecting themes that often are more theoretical or abstract like literature, arts, sciences, religion, social developments and the relation between body and mind. Her recurring motifs are part of clusters of images like the flesh, stone and flowers that Byatt refers to; they drive the plot; and they are linked to the characters, the ways they see and experience the world, their preoccupations, their hopes, ambitions and dreams.

4.1. Blood and flesh

When describing the images of the 'ruling' metaphor of *The Virgin in the Garden*, flesh is the only image that Byatt refers to twice. This shows how central this image is – and not only to the opening novel, but to the whole quartet. Indeed, Dimitrijevic has identified "body and mind" as "[t]he key terms of the tetralogy" (45). Moreover, she argues that the members of the Potter family "are themselves representative of different centres of gravity as regards the body-mind issue" (167; see also 46). Though not exclusively, especially the human body and its blood, flesh and bones are often used in

phrases: “You’d get blood out of a stone” (VG 109), “teaching is in her blood” (BT 221), “[w]e are her flesh and blood” (243), “she knows in her bones” (278), people “remember in their blood” (315), the public “has a hunger for blood” (WW 387). Thus, images keep the theme of the body in the reader’s mind even in scenes which do not directly deal with it, adding to the verbal and visual pattern. Indeed, flesh and blood provide the basis for a wealth of themes throughout the quartet.

4.1.1. Female flesh and blood

In *The Virgin in the Garden*, blood is linked to the novel’s central image of Elizabeth I through two quotations in Alexander’s play, the exclamation “I will not bleed” (VG 420 and passim) and the poem “Under a tree I saw a virgin sit / the red and white rose quartered in her face” (132 and passim). Both are quoted repeatedly throughout the novel and also reoccur in the later novels, thus creating continuity.

The latter quote presents the central image of Alexander’s play as a mnemonic, namely the image of the virgin under a tree. Echoing the title of his play and of the novel, it also presents several leitmotifs at the same time: the tree, the virgin, the rose and blood. The “red and white rose” can be read in several ways. On a purely descriptive level, albeit in florid language, they are simply a physical description of Elizabeth’s rosy cheeks, referring to the blood flowing through them. Given the historical context, the red and white rose obviously also relate to heraldry, namely the red and white Tudor rose, which was a combination of the house of York’s white rose and the white rose of the house of Lancaster. Indeed, “quartering” is a heraldic term meaning “the division of a shield into four or more parts” (*A Dictionary of Art Terms* s.v. *quartering*).

As Alexander explains, the word “quartered” has also other, darker implications: “Quartered had made him think of hanging and drawing there, as well as heraldry, and so the red and white, blood and stone, had grown” (ibid.). Elizabeth did not die a violent death, but the chain of association links her to women who did: “Elizabeth preserved her power in the world by not bleeding in any sense – she preserved her virginity, and was not beheaded, like her mother and her great rival, Mary Queen of Scots” (Byatt, *Ice, Snow, Glass* 158). In an extension of the metaphorical scheme that casts Frederica

as Elizabeth, her sister Stephanie appears as Mary Queen of Scots, who got married, sank and died (see Byatt qtd. in Tredell 71; see also Hanson 133).

The same opposition works on the level of mythology: while Frederica as the Virgin Queen can be identified with Cybele, Astarte and Diana of Ephesos, “fecund yet virginal”, Stephanie “is the opposite: she must be like Demeter and Persephone. She is the earth-myth of the goddess who is maternal and therefore of course she goes to the Underworld.” Thus, Byatt is making a statement about the two sisters’ different approaches to love and sexuality: “I was basically saying that marriage kills the imagination and separateness, and that lamination might save them” (Byatt qtd. in Tredell 71).

As Hanson notes, “Byatt’s women experience sex and orgasm in terms of an engulfment in physical experience, a movement into an unseen and potentially dangerous interior world which nonetheless has its own vivid shapes and contours” (133). Indeed, when sleeping with Daniel on their wedding night, Stephanie sees her flesh as an “inner world” which clearly is an underworld, in accordance with the myth of Persephone: “They have their own lights, Virgil said of his underworld, and this too [...] was seen in its own light, knowing it was seen against the dark, had risen out of dark, was in the warm dark” (VG 372f.). The caverns and the sunless sea of her inner world echo the lines from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”, “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through *caverns* measureless to man / Down to a *sunless sea*” (3-5; emphasis added). These literary allusions are a commentary on Stephanie’s literary mind, as she even sees her own body in terms of literature, as well as adding something mythical to this scene. It is noteworthy that there is no direct allusion to Persephone, however. Later, in *Babel Tower*, Frederica is explicitly compared to Persephone; but unlike her sister, she manages to escape from the underworld.

The other connection between blood and Elizabeth I is established through the exclamation “I will not bleed” (VG 420 and passim), voiced by Frederica as Elizabeth in the play. For the Queen, this means that she refused to marry in order to keep her power as a symbolically androgynous monarch. While her strength, pride and independence make her an example for Frederica, she is also a contrasting foil. As Butter points out, chastity is no more a sign of female autonomy and power; instead, “Keuschheit [wird] als identitätskonstituierendes Merkmal gänzlich verworfen.” Butter

suggests that this can be read as a move against patriarchal binary oppositions (*Babbling Voices* 369). Frederica plans to control everything through her intellect, including her body, and thus decides to lose her virginity to her friend but not lover Edmund Wilkie, who, fittingly, purports to act purely scientifically. The ensuing vast amount of hymeneal bleeding is in ironic contrast to Frederica's declaration that she will not bleed and to her will to control everything.

Later in life, in the sixties, she is able to gain more independence and control over her body through the invention of the Pill. In a significant scene, she is again bleeding in bed and with a man, this time John Ottokar. It is breakthrough bleeding caused by the Pill. Unlike menstrual bleeding, it does not imply the danger of pregnancy; unlike the "seas of blood" (VG 554) of Frederica's hymeneal bleeding, it is not painful or alarming. By contrast, it is a pleasant experience: "It's lovely. It's warm. A glow." John's reaction is significant for their relationship: he is not repelled, only curious and makes sure it does not hurt. Instead of using words, they have communicated through their bodies, and the blood prints all over their bodies are like writings: "'Signed in blood,' he says. 'You can read me on you and you on me'" (BT 433). This is reminiscent of the first opening of the novel, which describes a thrush on his anvil, killing and eating snails. There are characters carved on stones, resembling runes, but unreadable (see BT 1). They are a link to the theme of linguistic confusion after Babel. Similarly, the "whorls and runnels" (BT 433) of blood on the lovers' bodies visually link this scene to the theme of language, which is an overarching theme of the novel.

Butter interprets the references to reading and writing with regards to the blood prints in a Lacanian sense. According to her, these references place the scene in the Symbolic order. The mutual recognition of each other in the Symbolic order enables the Self to establish enough distance between the Self and the Other (see *Transversalität und Vernunftkritik* 224), instead of simply mirroring itself in the Other, or merging with the Other. This enables Frederica to establish with John Ottokar what Butter calls the double movement ("Doppelbewegung") of "connecting and disconnecting" (223), which goes with Frederica's idea of laminations.

Similarly, Frederica is bleeding in bed in important scenes with Nigel, though these scenes have different implications, both positive and negative. The two of them

get closer to each other when she is in bed in Cambridge one day, bleeding and suffering from menstrual cramps, and he drops in and massages her pain away. After that, Frederica feels both closer to him and distanced from him: “She felt protected from him by the bleeding, and close to him because of the heat of his fingertips” (SL 355). Afterwards, they go for a drive outside Cambridge and kiss for the first time. The scene shows that Nigel is a very physical person who communicates with his hands and knows how to use his body. He physically knows how to release her from pain, which will be crucial after Stephanie’s death.

Yet in their marriage, ironically it is him that causes the blood and pain, when he shows his cruel and brutal side, though he still tries to comfort her after hurting her. Even more ironically, he classifies verbal injuries as worse than physical ones. In bed, after a fight where they both injure each other, Nigel explains coolly that he could have killed Frederica and that he has been “taught how to find where it hurts”, continuing “I think it’s better not to talk, talking makes it worse [...] Talking *hurts*” (BT 94; Byatt’s emphasis). Consequently, he clearly thinks that violence is a more effective and more valid argument than words, for when he looks up Bill and Daniel to enquire after Frederica he hits both of them, making them bleed, in the hope of extricating information. This is in sharp contrast to Frederica’s father Bill, who is also a violent man, but raging in words, throwing objects and burning books. His verbal violence is less negative than Nigel’s physical violence, though especially Marcus suffers under his father’s fits of rage. Later in life, Bill undergoes a development and becomes a much calmer man.

When Frederica wins custody of Leo and is finally free from Nigel, his housekeeper, Pippy Mammoth, is infuriated and hits Frederica with her handbag, making Frederica’s face bleed. Campbell observes that this “repeat[s] in a minor form the bloody injuries of Frederica’s battles with Nigel” (235). To Frederica, “[i]n some curious way, this moment of violence is a release” (BT 599). This final moment of brutality marks that this bloody and violent part of her life is finally over. Pippy, the jealous and spiteful would-be-mother of Leo, has to retreat, while Frederica’s position as mother – of which she has sometimes been doubtful herself - has been officially recognised and reinforced. Thus, the bleeding induced by Pippy doubly marks a rite of passage as a mother and a free divorcee, away from violence.

4.1.2. “His flesh was her flesh”: the flesh of mother and child

Several rites of passage are described in the quartet, among them first sexual encounters, wedding and giving birth. The last two are depicted with regards to Stephanie. In her wedding night as well as when giving birth, Stephanie is portrayed as somebody acutely aware of her inner spaces and her physical perception. The process of childbearing is described with vivid detail, depicting the overwhelming pain and Stephanie’s reaction to it, her imagined inner spaces, and the nurses’ actions. Byatt depicts in violent words how Stephanie’s body and the pain seem distorted and uncontrollable:

[T]he pain was no longer defined and separate from her but total, grasping, heating, bursting the whole of her [...] The spine, Stephanie’s shrinking mind stated, is plane, *flat* on the bed, as though by butchery the belly is severed and the flanks fall. Beneath the helpless trunk a whole wall, a box-side of flesh and cracking bone seemed to rear and expand between the bursting thing and the air. [...] It could *not* be endured. (SL 112f.; Byatt’s emphases)

As it is to be expected, blood plays a significant role in the scene. Suffering from severe labour pains, Stephanie’s vision “filled with nasturtium pale-scarlet, and then with a curtain of blood”; her imagined inner space “can appear to be [...] silent underground caverns, receding endlessly, corrugated, velvet, blood-dark, gentian dark”. With these colour words the narrator differentiates between blood inside the body, stating that “[b]lood before it meets the air is blue”, and outside the body, as the new-born child has a “blood-red body”. The labour pains are metaphorically described as a “bloodstorm” (ibid.)

By contrast, Stephanie feels “bliss” when she sees the cleaned baby after the birth, and her body and mind seem at ease: “There was her body, quiet, used, resting: there was her mind, free, clear, shining: there was the boy and his eyes, seeing what?” (SL 114) Her body and mind seem to be in a balance again; by contrast, during her pregnancy she observed herself to be “sunk in biology” (SL 16). Significantly, though, the pairing of body and mind has been extended by a third party, the boy, who has metaphorically become a part of her. This can be seen when Stephanie, having left her son with her brother and her mother-in-law, returns home after reading Wordsworth in the library, “her *mind* on the platonic aspects of the ‘Immortality Ode’, her *body* extremely anxious about William” (SL 189; emphases added).

Byatt meditates on body and mind in an article from 2004: “I see now, as I didn’t dare to then, that the mind-body problem of an intellectual woman in the 1950s was also one of rigorous conflict. In those days the body required sex and childbearing, and quite likely the death of the mind alongside” (*Soul Searching* 2). Accordingly, Stephanie becomes more and more anxious about losing her vocabulary and her ability to think complex thoughts; and her conflict between body and mind is solved in a very radical way, as Uhsadel observes (166). Stephanie is accidentally killed by an unearthed refrigerator. Although there is notably no bloodshed involved in the accident, her flesh is visibly harmed as it is burned. As Hanson points out, Stephanie’s death can also be seen as part of a neo-Darwinian discourse (see 138). She refers to a nativity play that Stephanie watches earlier in the novel:

Parents are moved because childhood is so swift and vanishing. They are perhaps also more darkly moved by some threat in the law of flesh and blood itself. These small creatures are the future, they are only acting out what they will be. Not only childhood vanishes: men and women, having handed on their genes, are superfluous. (SL 50)

The identity of parents’ and children’s flesh is expressed with regards to Stephanie and her son: “His flesh was her flesh” (SL 274). When Frederica flees from Bran House and Leo follows her, he even seems to try to become a part of her body again, as he “grips, grips, and tries to burrow back into her body” (BT 128). Frederica feels very ambivalent about being a mother, as she both loves her son and feels he is literally sucking all her energy out of her:

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

The image of Leo “eating her life and drinking her life-blood” makes him appear like a vampire. As motherhood is also described to thin down Frederica, Fiander describes this process as “spiritual cannibalism on part of her child” (31).

Byatt not only depicts childbirth and the connection between a mother’s flesh and her child’s flesh. She also describes miscarriage as a psychologically challenging and very bloody experience. When Stephanie is pregnant and visits the maternity ward,

the reception area of the pre-natal clinic is ominously walled with “dried-blood-red tiles” (SL 14). Another woman, Mrs Owen, miscarries while waiting in line. The scene can be read as a socio-cultural statement, as the pregnant women are made to queue for a long time without being able to sit down, and being English, they are expected not to complain, even when they feel unwell. It also contains a statement on Stephanie, who, because of her pregnancy and because she wants to read, is oblivious to what is happening around her. Moreover, it is noteworthy what Stephanie is reading, namely one of Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy poems’, “A slumber did my spirit seal”. Stephanie thinks that “Wordsworth read differently amongst so much, so various flesh.” Ironically, while she feels deeply touched by this poem about life and death, she does not realise the dangerous state Mrs Owen is in, who is standing right behind her. The line “No motion has she now, no force”, over which Stephanie ponders and which is therefore repeated, is echoed in the description of the “motionless” Mrs Owen when she is taken away (SL 17f.). The miscarriage is also an early note in *Still Life* that horrible accidents do happen.

When a major character, Jacqueline Winwar, has a miscarriage in *A Whistling Woman*, the physical process is described in more detail, including what might have been the foetus, “a kind of jelly-bundle, with threads, which could have been a plug, or womb-lining”. The connection between the physical and the emotional, a connection which Jacqueline wants to avoid, breaks through: “Blood and tears poured out of her. She was appalled by [...] the sense that emotion was a bodily, unnameable, unmanageable *thing*.” It is noteworthy that she has the miscarriage right after she has found out that she is “quite certainly pregnant” (WW 187). As soon as she has lost the foetus, she breaks off the engagement with Luk. Despite the miscarriage being a horrible experience, it also functions as a rite of passage as it enables her to choose the life she wants. She only got engaged to Luk because she thought she was pregnant and because she wanted to do what society expects of her, namely to marry and to have children: “I want to want to get married, but I don’t” (188). Instead, she can now continue with her research. That the life of a scientist is natural to her can be seen after the miscarriage, when she happens to meet her supervisor, Lyon Bowman, and automatically remembers to ask him to look after her experiment while she is ill. This happens even before she sees Luk to break off the engagement.

4.1.3. Meat

Byatt does not only occupy herself with human flesh. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Marcus and his mother visit a butcher's shop. What follows is, as Wallhead observes, "a linguistic tour-de-force linking vision, art, geometry, the flesh-grass-connection, language and terms from the semantic field of butchery" (*Metaphor* 210). The chapter is entitled "Meat" and there is a long, detailed description of the shop window as well as of the shop itself. The description opens with "Allenbury's shop window was, in its way, a work of art [...] It combined the natural, the man-made, the anthropomorphic and the abstract in a pleasingly eclectic way" (VG 119). The arrangement of different objects, textures and layers is reminiscent of a classic still life painting. The shop window metaphorically functions as the frame of the still life. In her ekphrastic description, Byatt depicts the different animal carcasses, decorative pictures of anthropomorphised animals, the dishes, textures, colours, and different sorts of meat, their respective shapes and positions. The objects are described with such detail that the reader's eyes seem to travel along the shop window:

Vitals: kidneys both stiff and limp, some wrapped still in their caul of fat, the slippery bluish surface of meat shining through slits in the blanket, the cords dangling; iridescent liver; a monumental ox heart, tubes standing out above it, a huge gash in one side, darkening yellow fat drying on the shoulders. (VG 120)

The depiction conveys a joy in the aesthetics of everyday life, the butcher resembling an artist. At the same time, it is also a list, a literary form that Byatt likes to include in her writing, exploring the wealth of objects the world has to offer and the words relating to them. Consequently, it is also very much a *verbal* still life.

In the overall composition of the novel, this scene is central to the novel's imagery, as Byatt explains in her interview with Dusingberre:

[T]he red and white rose quartered in her face [...] made me think of hanging, drawing and quartering. That was linked with the image of meat in the butcher's shop, one of the original germs of the novel, which led on to 'All flesh is as grass,' a primary theme in the book. (183)

Byatt is thus referring to metamorphosis as a main theme in the book. Winifred sees the meat in terms of metamorphosis, how it can be turned into a good meal. She is "thinking of the cooking, the transformation into eating. His [i.e. Marcus's] pleasure perhaps" (VG 122).

Marcus, however, is repelled by the meat. Before Marcus and his mother get to the shop, the narrator explains how geometry is generally Marcus's device of dealing with everyday life, and he also tries to deal with the meat through geometry. The narrator observes that "[i]f all flesh is grass, all flesh at some other extreme is indeed geometry. The consuming human [...] is an artist in the destruction and reconstruction of flesh" (VG 120). Inside the shop, "[t]he geometrical defence was hard and close to the grain" (121). As they walk through the door, they virtually enter the meat, as the sides of the door are flanked by two halves of a carcass of beef. When the butcher's assistant cuts up some lamb's liver, Marcus cannot distance himself from the meat through geometry anymore: "To Marcus's sickening eye the fresh liver had a hot and bursting look. [...] Marcus stared. He arranged. He rearranged. He looked from side to side. He thought: people come in and out of here all day quite all right, people *do*" (122; Byatt's emphasis). This shows that while Marcus is trying to fit in, he simply is not able to because of the way he perceives the world.

His fear of meat seems to be linked to his general fear of the physical. This goes back to his early childhood, as Stephanie observes: "Marcus hates you – hates anyone – to touch him. Even as a baby, you couldn't cuddle him. He got asthma" (VG 222). Even in the last novel of the quartet, the narrator states that "Marcus hated touching people." Yet by then he has undergone a development and he actually takes hold of Lucy Nighby's bloody hand to help her: "The first touch was the worst. He went into her atmosphere of blood and sulphur and mess. He kept hold of her hand" (WW 76).

His fear may be linked to the circumstances of his birth. Notably, the chapter "Meat" also gives an overview of Marcus's biography as an overture to the visit at the meat shop. Byatt describes the circumstances of his conception, his birth and his first days, as well as the influence that his asthma has on his life, thus hinting at the significance of the scene at the meat shop for Marcus's life and character. He was born when the Second World War was looming, and already during her pregnancy Winifred was filled with fear for the baby's flesh: "She had fantasies of small bodies spitted on bayonets, of cots, and flesh, crushed in thundering rubble. The baby should not have been conceived, but since it was there must now be protected. If possible." Winifred may have passed on her fear to Marcus, just as she passed it on to Stephanie, as "[f]ear is infectious" (VG 113). Moreover, in her love for the baby, she also felt a fear of

crushing him when holding him close. This continues as he grows up, as before they leave for the butcher's "she wanted to touch him and did not" (115).

After his experience at the meat shop Marcus becomes a vegetarian. Apart from his physical repulsion towards meat, his vegetarianism also seems to be part of his evasion scheme. Being afraid of ordinary, everyday objects, by avoiding meat he does not need to think about other things to avoid. His vegetarianism also functions as a sign of his otherness. After all, vegetarianism was far from being a usual option in the 1950s, as eating meat simply was not questioned, especially after the war and food rationing. In the later novels, other vegetarians appear, namely Jude Mason and Joshua Lamb. Their refusal of meat also qualifies them as different. By contrast, the vegetarian students of the Anti-University simply follow a trend of their time.

Marcus's mediumship when acting might be another clue to the reason for his fear of meat; for just like he cannot distance himself from the role he plays, he cannot distance himself from the meat he sees. Hence, it is both a fear of meat and a fear of what happens to the meat. This can also be seen from a dream that Marcus has when living with Stephanie and Daniel in *Still Life*:

Marcus dreamed he had gone home and Bill was carving a meal to welcome him. The meat was cylindrical and bloody, and still had the furry skin on. Also, he saw at one end, pads and claws. [...] As [Bill] carved, it contracted painfully, still alive, apparently. (SL 40)

The meat is both alive and dead, signalling both what it used to be and what it is now, both unreal and physically very real. Similarly, the father gives off an ambiguous message in his dream, as he is both welcoming Marcus and carving the live meat. The boy's mother, wearing "a hat like a helmet" (ibid.), is of no help. The fact that the boy associates the paw from the dream with bears brings to mind fairy tales as well as a childhood picture of him, an image of his isolation where "Marcus was alone in space, dwarfed by a huge, unrelated, beady-eyed teddy-bear" (VG 34). It is noteworthy that he is not attacked in person: even in his dream, he avoids touch.

When Marcus almost faints in the butcher's shop and leaves it with his mother, Lucas Simmonds happens to come by with his sports car and offers to take them home. "Innocent and rosy" (123), Lucas appears like a guardian angel, even though he acts in a slightly odd way, as always. This is the first time he comes to help when Marcus is

overtaken by physical sensation, the other time being when he feels threatened by the light. In hindsight, Lucas convinces Marcus that he might have been there for him for a reason, and this is the beginning of their odd relationship. Marcus's fear of meat thus also drives the plot, as it moves him closer to Lucas.

4.1.4 Blood and religion

Like Marcus, Lucas himself has an uneasy relationship with blood and flesh. On the one hand, he is opposed to flesh and sexuality, ostensibly for religious reasons but also because of his suppressed homosexuality. He also suffers from castration fear and later cuts out the genitals and the internal organs of reproduction from the images of man and woman in the biology lab. At the same time, on the other hand, he has a (pseudo-) religious belief in the power of blood. When Lucas and Marcus perform a ritual based on Lucas's mixture of pagan and Christian mythology, he insists they offer some of their own blood in remembrance of Abel's offering of flesh to God. Again, Byatt combines the image of flesh with the grass, as they are out on a meadow and they also offer grass in remembrance of Cain. When Lucas finally goes mad, he sees a milk bottle filled with blood. When he publicly goes mad, he cuts his thighs with a knife and bleeds into the same pond where Marcus was seen at the beginning of the novel. It is noteworthy that he cuts himself not with any knife, but a butcher's knife, bringing to mind Marcus's earlier experience in the butcher's shop.

Another religious man with a difficult relationship to flesh and blood is Joshua Lamb. As Uhsadel observes, he represents another variant of the body-mind conflict, as his memory is split into a cognitive and a physical part. Intellectually he manages to deal with his horrible past by splitting his memory into manageable segments, "selecting and reinforcing certain memories, casting others into oblivion" (WW 111). Yet there is also a "bodily process of memory" (WW 98) which he cannot control (see Uhsadel 144). Neither can he control his visions of blood. He avoids everything fleshly and consequently, he and his followers are vegetarians. Yet in the end, he is the one who is responsible for other people's injuries and deaths in the fire of Dun Vale Hall; instead of saving them from the flesh, it is him that makes them bleed.

One of his followers, indeed his first follower, is Lucy Nighby. She is used to blood and injuries, as she regularly has bruises from her abusive partner, Gunner. It is normal to see her bruised until she decides one day not to suffer the abuse anymore and presumably attacks Gunner. Step by step, her narrative is connected to blood: when she appears in the novel for the first time, she has bruises in her face and she is carrying a basket of blood-smearred eggs. Her final fight with Gunner is announced by a bleeding sheep. While Lucy is bruised again and blood is dripping from her nose, it is Gunner who is badly hurt, his leg and his upper body bleeding. When Joshua Lamb sees her for the first time at the psychiatric hospital, Cedar Mound, he first sees her covered in a “veil of blood”, then in a “red mist” (WW 79). They are both people whose past is full of blood; and as they are the founding members of the sect at Dun Vale Hall, their bloody past already foreshadows the dramatic ending of the movement.

Joshua Lamb, Lucy Nighby and Lucas Simmonds are all characters that link blood and religion. Byatt explores this link also more generally, looking at it historically, sociologically and through art. Bill and Stephanie are characters that enjoy criticising the Christian religion and specifically its bloodier aspects. Hence, Bill “roar[s] about the repugnant, savage and bloodthirsty nature of Christianity, which worshipped a smashed body and a crushed self” (VG 488). Similarly, Stephanie finds Easter “repellent”: “A tarted-up blood-sacrifice, a fairy-tale with no evidence an historian would accept” (206). Daniel works at a church that is dedicated to St Bartholomew, a martyr who “had been flayed alive and subsequently beheaded” (495). When married, Stephanie’s way of dealing with his painting is to cover it up with flowers as much as possible.

4.1.5. Myths and fairy tales: blood in visual arts and literature

Throughout the quartet, blood and flesh are explored through art, as in the artfully decorated butcher’s shop window or through quotations from Alexander’s play. Blood and flesh are also a main theme in the novel-within-the-novel, *Babbletower*. Starting with a group of people fleeing the fire and blood of the French Revolution, the novel follows the group and their leader, Culvert, as they explore sensual pleasures with the aim to “fulfil in harmony every least desire, of body or soul” (BT 410) Consequently the book contains numerous depictions of the human body (often naked) and sexually

explicit scenes, which is why its author and publisher are charged with obscenity in a trial similar to the famous real trial about D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960. When it turns winter in *Babbletower*, this is clearly a symbolic turn away from the more lustful beginnings of the community's experiment. Instead Culvert explores the dungeons of the castle and contemplates paintings, Christian and pagan, all of them full of blood and human suffering: "He wandered from flagellation to flagellation, from bleeding handcuffed naked figure to bleeding handcuffed naked figure and asked himself to what deep lust in universal human nature these sights corresponded" (BT 257f.). This is when he becomes more interested in sadism (though he has been constructing his sadistic machine from the beginning).

Sadism in art is explored from the beginning of the quartet, when Frederica sees the painting of Marsyas, who is flayed alive, in Long Royston. However it is not such a negative image as it might seem. As Wallhead points out, "[h]is flesh is connected with life, death and rebirth to creativity" (*Metaphor* 210). The same painting reoccurs in *Babel Tower*, where Frederica discusses it with Vincent Hodgkiss and Raphael Faber. Their short conversation is in fact a discussion about the depiction of pain and sadism in art *in nuce*, their arguments similar to those in the *Babbletower* trial. Raphael thinks that it is "wrong" and "bad", and that the painting, as well as the Marat-Sade play fashionable at the time, are "simply disgusting, *Schadenfreude*, something in ourselves we should recognise and look away from. I do not say we do not need to know it. I say we should not indulge in bad imaginings." By contrast, Frederica, who did not like it at seventeen, now "feels a perverse desire to defend the picture, which has always given her a frisson of terror, disgust, and then pleasure of some kind." Similar to her judgement in favour of *Babbletower* due to its literary merit, Frederica cherishes the philosophical, humanistic idea behind the painting as well as its artistic accomplishments: "His [i.e. Marsyas's] anatomy is lovingly accurate [...] 'It is about art. And pain – ' [...] 'It's powerful,' Frederica persists" (249f.; Byatt's emphasis).

Apart from Marsyas, another painting from Long Royston Hall reappears in *Babel Tower*, namely that of Diana and Actaeon. The two paintings have several things in common, as they are stories taken from antique mythology depicted in Renaissance times, they are about metamorphosis and they are famous choices for the depiction of human flesh bleeding in agony. In *Babbletower*, Lady Roseace is cast as a double of Diana, as in her room there is a painting of Diana and Actaeon, depicted sensuously and

rich in colours. In it, Actaeon, bleeding but still beautiful, half man, half stag, is about to be finally killed by the hounds. This suggests that danger is lurking for Roseace from the beginning. When Roseace and Narcisse want to flee from La Tour Bruyarde, they are discovered in the wood and viciously attacked by hounds. Neither of them is killed yet, however, as Culvert has even crueller plans of killing them. Hence, he kills his erstwhile lover, Roseace, by drilling a machine shaped like a phallus through her uterus. Thus, he clearly turns against femininity and maternity. As Butter points out, he also turns the phallus into a fetish (*Transversalität und Vernunftkritik* 232). Culvert's utopian project in the style of the philosopher Fourier has turned into a Sadean nightmare, egotistical and narcissistic, and very harmful for others.

Actaeon and Marsyas are famous subjects in painting, but they originate in literature. Other reoccurring intertextual references are to the fairy tales Cinderella and Snow White. One section of Frederica's *Laminations* circles around blood: the Pill and breakthrough bleeding, Elizabeth I and Cinderella. Concentrating on the part of the story where the ugly sisters cut off parts of their feet in order to fit into their stepsister's shoe, Frederica asks, "Who cleaned the coagulated blood out of the shoes, twice over, before Cinderella inserted her virginal toes?" (BT 446) By focussing on the evil sisters, she gives the story a new twist and also points out how blood-thirsty it is. The stepsisters are metaphorically not virginal because they have bled. More dramatically, it is a story of self-mutilation and of the symbolic castration of women, whose loss of power is part of the system (after all, there is somebody who cleans the blood out of the shoes). While Frederica does not care so much for Cinderella herself, it is noteworthy that in the divorce trial Nigel is presented as somebody who "believed, perhaps, the story of the fairytale" and who "felt, perhaps, that he had carried away the princess for the ball" (BT 516). By contrast, when writing book reviews, Frederica at first feels "like an ugly sister clamping a bleeding foot into a glass slipper" (305).

Frederica is also compared to other fairy tale characters. When she tries for Wilkie's new television show, the strong studio make-up makes her look like "the Wicked Queen in Disney's Snow White" (WW 44). In fact, she later appears on the show as "Snow White in a glass coffin" (140). Apart from such visual references to Snow White, Byatt concentrates on the germ of the fairy tale, namely the scene when the Queen sees the drops of blood on the snow. This scene is quoted indirectly when the women in the Manichean sect embroider clothes, white on white, "with secret little

bloodstains of course, the poor things *prick themselves*, it's classic. Overdetermined" (324; Byatt's emphasis). In her programme on Free Women, Frederica contemplates the Queen's drops of blood in the context of pregnancy: "We fear their appearance, we often fear their absence, worse" (148). Jacqueline finds herself in this situation when she is fears to be pregnant and waits for her period "[l]ike a watchman on a high tower, looking for relief across a plain of snow" (183). Stephanie's daughter, Mary, going through a rite of passage when she has her first period, sees herself in the position of the princess rather than the Queen: "In her mind, darkly, she thought of the wet red traces [of blood] in terms of the tale of Snow White, whose mother had seen the drops of blood on the snow, had borne her daughter, red as blood, black as ebony, white as snow, and had died." (242) Hence, with the fairy tale image of blood on snow Byatt links different aspects of female sexuality.

4.2. Symbolic spaces: gardens and towers

Hanson argues that Byatt's fiction "is structured around two interlocking 'fall' myths", namely the biblical myth of the Fall, circling around death, resurrection and sexuality, and the fall into language (23). While the fall from Paradise is obviously represented through gardens, the fall into language is more ambiguous in its imagery. It may be linked to a garden as well, for the fall from Paradise also means a fall from a mythical state when words and things were one to the speakers. It may also mean the confusion of languages, in which case it is associated with the Tower of Babel or more generally a tower. Accordingly, towers and gardens are the most notable spaces in the quartet, taking on all sorts of meanings, and they also feature in two of the novels' titles, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Babel Tower*.

4.2.1. Gardens

As the title of the novel suggests, *The Virgin in the Garden* circles around numerous gardens, both real and imaginary. "I want the reader to stop and read the meaning of these gardens," Byatt has said in an interview (Kenyon 62 qtd. in Campbell 65).⁸ On the most obvious level, the title refers to Frederica and Elizabeth I, played by Frederica in a

⁸ Campbell quotes from Kenyon's interview with Byatt; see Kenyon, Olga. "Interview with A. S. Byatt." *The Writer's Imagination*. Bradford: University of Bradford, 1992, 9-21.

garden. Yet the first character of the novel to be seen in a garden is Alexander Wedderburn, who, through his association with androgyny, also shares a likeness with the Virgin Queen. He is walking across the school grounds, past the prosaic glass-houses and the “tidy, square and dull” Masters’ Garden towards the “grimy” Far Field (VG 26f.). These are certainly no romantic settings for an opening.

The Masters’ Garden and the Far Field are the settings of central scenes in the novel. Daniel and Stephanie celebrate their wedding in the Masters’ Garden, where the Potter’s family relations can be seen *in nuce*: while Bill is making a scene and, for the sake of his moral standards, embarrasses his daughter Stephanie on her wedding day, his wife Winifred is trying to fix things for her children, while Marcus is inconspicuous and Frederica is simply self-obsessed. In the Far Field, next to the Bilge Pond, Alexander happens upon Marcus. This introductory setting also hints at Marcus’s interest in biology. Marcus is introduced as strange from the beginning. The Far Field and the Bilge Pond are seemingly normal places where something abnormal happens. The field is where Marcus plays “spreading”, “a deliberate extension of his field of vision” (30), and where he later experiences “photisms” as he perceives a change in the sunlight. The Bilge Pond is the place where Lucas mutilates himself when he goes mad.

An even more prosaic place than the school gardens is the back garden of the Potter family home, a simple northern middle-class house. It is the backdrop of the secret meetings of Marcus and Lucas Simmonds. One evening, when Stephanie sees Lucas waiting for Marcus in the garden, she compares Lucas to Lady Chatterley’s lover. Alexander similarly appears as a parody of Lady Chatterley’s lover towards the end of the novel when he finds himself in the same garden, at the end of the chapter entitled “The Virgin in the Garden,” after Frederica has fled with Wilkie from her rendezvous with Alexander. “[L]ike Demetrius unenchanted by Puck and Oberon,” Alexander wakes up from his personal *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and decides to give up on Frederica, to leave this northern town and with it provincial life behind in order to follow his ambitions in London. The Potters’ back garden becomes a symbol for domesticity and suburbia, which he has been desperate to escape from all along: “there was nothing to prevent him getting out, out of the garden, out of Blesford Ride, out of the North of England, now” (553).

The allusion to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a closing link to the Elizabethan Age at the end of the novel. There is a more direct link with this era

through the more glamorous gardens of Long Royston, where Alexander's play on Elizabeth I is performed. As Wallhead observes, "[i]n the concept 'The Virgin in the Garden', because the garden is England, the place can refer to the events of the time" (*Metaphor* 166). This means that Crowe's gardens are metaphorically linked to Elizabeth I, England and the Renaissance. There is a similar connection between gardens, England and Elizabeth II during the Festival of Britain in 1952: "The Festival itself was certainly timed to coincide with the spontaneous outbursts of national and cultural fervour in parks and gardens all over the country in celebration of the Coronation" (VG 17).

The gardens of Long Royston are linked to a contemporary of the Virgin Queen, as they have been planted "more or less in accordance with Francis Bacon's prescriptions in his essay 'Of Gardens'." Through these gardens, Frederica and the readers symbolically enter the Renaissance era: they are immersed sensually, through vision and smell in a long description of the plants and their scents; and linguistically, as this description is actually a pastiche incorporating quotations from Bacon's essay. Thus, when Frederica "breathe[s] in: the double white violet; the wallflower; the stock-gilliflower" and many more, she inhales both the scent of Long Royston's flowers and, metaphorically, the Renaissance era and its literature, as these flowers are taken from Bacon's textualised April garden. Another unmarked quotation is part of the pastiche, from yet another Renaissance contemporary, Shakespeare: "though the moorland winds do sorely ruffle" echoes "the bleak winds / do sorely ruffle" (VG 167 and *King Lear* II, 4). The gardens are also aurally linked with Elizabethan times through Wilkie's bottle chorus, which is a parody of the music of the spheres, a popular concept in the Renaissance.

On a personal note, the gardens of Long Royston are a place of ambivalent emotions and experiences. On the one hand, they are a place of success: like many other actors, Frederica finds romance, and she finally gets recognition for her acting. On the other hand, they are also a place of frustration: sexually, as she does not get as close to Alexander as she wants, while her peer Anthea Warburton sleeps with Alexander's peer Thomas Poole in the gardens; and career-wise, as Crowe finally discourages her from acting. This happens on the last night, and when she leaves Long Royston and the play behind "[i]t really was like being shut out of Paradise" (VG 523).

The theme of Paradise reoccurs throughout the quartet. As Adam named things in the Garden of Eden, it is associated with language and metaphors in *Still Life* as well as modern linguistics and neuroscience in *A Whistling Woman*. Throughout the quartet, Byatt makes references to the arguably most famous literary reworking of the biblical myth of the fall in English literature, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Milton's drama *Comus* also plays a noteworthy role, as Frederica returns to acting as a student in Cambridge and plays the Lady in an outdoor production on a Cambridge lawn. This scene is a double parody. The character she plays is a symbol of chastity, while her friends and lovers in the audience are well aware of her unrestrained sex life. Moreover she has to speak the lines of the male character as well, who is trying to seduce the Lady. More generally speaking, however, Cambridge is also a sort of Paradise, as it was for Byatt herself: "Cambridge was my southern garden of Eden" (Byatt qtd. in Dusinberre 190). For Frederica, it means gardens full of knowledge, life and men:

She saw Cambridge in that first year as a garden full of young men. She knew that there were eleven men for every woman in the university [...] She ascribed much of the dullness of her earlier life to the absence of men. It is true that she had always lived on the perimeter of a boy's school. It is also true that the boys [...] had always seemed a dull lot. But at Cambridge they would be clever and interesting and be able to overpower her in argument and listen to what she said. They would be her friends. She would belong. (SL 134)

As Dimitrijevic points out, the two chapters about Frederica's Cambridge life entitled *À l'Éclat des Jeunes Gens en Fleurs* are a rewriting of a part of Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, a part of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, where the narrator sees young women as beautiful flowers (see 50). Later in life, Frederica considers writing a Ph.D. in Cambridge about Milton and metaphor and thinks about the garden in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In fact, Byatt herself considered writing a Ph.D. thesis discussing "temptations in gardens between *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Regained*" and states that "this unwritten work [...] has haunted both my novels and my reading patterns ever since" (*Introduction* 3; similarly, see also Byatt qtd. in Tonkin 17). As much as Frederica later sees her time in Cambridge with nostalgia, though, she does not want to return: "There is something 'bygone' about the Cambridge lawns and the Cambridge cloisters, the teacups and the tobacco" (BT 337). Her friend Hugh brings forth a similarly mixed judgement: "it was such an unreal, such an isolated, Paradisal time" (73). Similarly, for Stephanie, too, Cambridge is a garden, and she left it in defiance of a

life her father would have wanted for her: “she had clanged the gates of the Cambridge gardens behind her so the noise would resonate in Bill’s ears” (VG 89).

Instead, Stephanie creates a garden of her own when she becomes “obsessed with growing things.” The little garden she creates behind her house parallels her own fertility. As a *vanitas* or *memento mori* of sorts, her garden work becomes an image of life and death: “Stephanie found it hard to be ruthless. She found it hard [...] to thin out her seedlings properly, to pluck out some so that others might live” (SL 275). Yet she does manage to grow some things, most notably nasturtiums which climb up the wall, bright and colourful.

Significantly, there are no paradisiacal gardens in *Babel Tower*. This goes with its theme of the second fall of man, the Fall of Babel. Neither Bran House nor the fictional Tour Bruyarde has a garden, though Culvert initially announces that the castle is “a possible site for an earthly Paradise”, the opposite of which is soon proven (BT 11). On Hamelin Square, Frederica’s new home in London, there is only a rather depressing, dirty green, which, however, becomes gentrified after a while. Hence, it is even more noteworthy that Frederica’s lover John Ottokar is associated with the Garden of Eden. This goes with his link with carnival and alternative gender-relations. On the night when the two of them make love for the first time, he is wearing a “flowered shirt, a shirt like a garden of green chrysanthemums and blue roses, a busy Paradise” (346). Shortly after it is revealed that he grew up in a “Garden City planned by Quaker philanthropists”. Yet this is not entirely positive: “‘Toy houses in toy closes,’ he says ‘we said they were, in the 1950s. Solid though, with pretty gardens. We wanted to get out’” (348). Thus, although paradise is “pretty”, like the gardens of Cambridge it is not the real world.

The gardens in *A Whistling Woman* are noticeably enclosed spaces and, more often than not, menacing. This is specifically so in connection with Joshua Lamb, starting with the psychiatric hospital where he stays at the beginning: “The gardens at Cedar Mount were closed, of course, inside a high wall, with spikes, and shards of glass” (WW 134). Later, he himself creates a similar space at Dun Vale Hall, with a fence against the supposed evils of the outside world and “ceremoniously closed [...] gates” (354), thus sharing similarities with Eden. Yet it is an anti-Paradise, a prison for its inhabitants and, unlike luscious Paradise, with scarcely any plants to feed on. This reflects Joshua’s world view: “He said the Creator didn’t make the earth as a pretty

walled garden for humans to inhabit. It was forged out of chaotic matter, and the light it imprisoned was dimmed and in pain” (210).

In contrast, Luk’s garden in the moors is enclosed so that the plants can grow “sheltered from the weather by a high wall” (176). Thus, it is a safe place and a symbol of life. Marcus’s imaginary mathematical garden, too, is a positive space which only functions because it is enclosed. While Hodgkiss observes that when Marcus lost this ability, he was “[c]losed out of Paradise” (225), it is noteworthy that Marcus tells him about it in the first place, as it is a very private matter. Consequently, this signifies their growing relationship. Finally, the end of the novel, too, depicts a move out of an enclosed space: “The world was all before them” (427) is a quotation from the end of *Paradise Lost*, when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden (Milton XII, 646; see Uhsadel 139f. and Wheeler 175). As Wheeler observes, “Frederica is leaving the garden in which she began” (ibid.). She is moving into an open world.

4.2.2. Towers

Towers are often associated with different characters. For some of them, they function as places of retreat. Marcus likes to go to the café at the cinema in Blesford. For him, it is “the centre of this closed citadel”, a quiet, colourful place where Marcus “kept still and avoided thought.” The unnaturalness of the place is stressed as it is high up in the building but the café itself looks like a “palely lit underworld” (VG 73f.).

Towers are also places of intellectual retreat. Crowe imagines the time when his estate, Long Royston, will be turned into North Yorkshire University: “[I shall] rest from my labours in my little turret and survey the brand-new students in their little black gowns” (84). By contrast, when Wijn Nobel lives there years later, his room is on the ground floor, even though he is Vice-Chancellor of the university. Alexander’s room at school is up in a tower, following the cliché of the intellectual in his ivory tower. A more extreme example of this is Raphael Faber, the Cambridge don. His rooms are “at the top of a building” (SL 317). He worries about an essay on cloisters that Mallarmé wrote. As a democrat, Mallarmé was repelled by “the separate towers going up”, but he also saw them “as arrows rising into this time”, as places of solitude, which is necessary for thinking and writing. Raphael feels that he must stay shut in

Cambridge: “I am terribly unfitted for any life but this. [...] I am afraid of the outside world” (328f.).

By contrast, Hugh Pink feels that for him, the real life is outside college: “I don’t feel that I would be quite *real* if I spent the rest of my life inside the walls of a College – like Tennyson’s soul in the Tower in ‘The Palace of Art’ – although I do see that there is a perfectly tenable intellectual position from which this view is absurd” (BT 73; Byatt’s emphasis). This is similar to Frederica’s opinion that “[t]here is something ‘bygone’ about the Cambridge lawns” (337). Hence, Cambridge is associated with both towers and gardens. This is similar to Long Royston with its gardens and turrets and to Blesford Ride School where Bill and Alexander teach.

Another tower that serves as a retreat, but much bleaker and without a garden, is the tower where Jude Mason lives. Its name clearly marks Jude’s link to literature: it is the Wastwater Tower on the Wordsworth Estate. While this sounds romantic, it is deceptively misleading. Incidentally, Wordsworth described Wastwater Lake in his *Guide to the Lakes* as “long, narrow, stern and desolate” (*Prose Works* 237). Wastwater Tower is desolate indeed: situated in a poor part of South London, it is made of dirty concrete, it is smelly and run-down, and the asphalt around it is cracked. Jude’s flat is at the top of the tower, on the thirteenth floor: another bad omen. Like in his book, a girl once fell from this tower. This is a direct link to his novel, *Babbletower*, where Lady Mavis commits suicide by throwing herself off a tower and her little daughter jumps after her.

The castle or tower in Jude’s novel is called La Tour Bruyarde, indicating that it is a ‘noisy’ tower, but this is “only one of the names of the place” (BT 11). This reflects the oscillatory nature of the tower. Not only is it a mixture of architectural styles, “with layer upon layer of dwellings towering above them [i.e. the inhabitants], one corridor upon another, a Baroque balcony abutting a Gothic cloister, a series of classical windows” (26). It is also a pastiche of a medieval castle with turrets, a fairy tale castle, the Tower of Babel, a prison and a labyrinth as well as a foil for Bran House.

Through its association with the Tower of Babel, it is an image for the fall from a paradisiacal state, for chaos and for language, all of which are themes in *Babel Tower*. Chaos and language are also themes of Kafka’s *The Castle*, which John Ottokar discusses in Frederica’s extra-mural class. He observes that there is “a *mad* tower” and

that the officials in the novel “have language, but they can’t think with it, they fuss about. [...] The words in this book are all dilapidated like the Castle itself” (BT 287f.; Byatt’s emphasis). Ironically, by observing and criticising this linguistic mess, John Ottokar, the formerly silent man who has come to the class in order to learn language, finally finds his own voice (for a similar observation, see Good 50).

As a prison, La Tour Bruyarde is similar to the Bastille that the characters in the novel leave behind and where the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned. Jude Mason was also inspired by Swineburn boarding school he attended and where Nigel, a former “Hog” (558) or student of that school, wants to send Leo. Finally, it also bears a similarity with Bran House, where Frederica is held as a prisoner by Nigel, with his sisters and his housekeeper as her prison guards. As Todd puts it, “La Tour Bruyarde becomes a fantastic version of Bran House”; accordingly, Culvert resembles the “dominant” Nigel and Lady Roseace resembles Frederica (71). Earlier in life, Frederica has played another woman locked up in a tower, namely Elizabeth I in the Tower of London. In her Tower Speech, Elizabeth makes a decision against marriage and thus in favour of her political survival, as Uhsadel summarizes (see 87). In contrast, Frederica is imprisoned in Bran House because she got married, which is also the reason why she cannot pursue a career.

La Tour Bruyarde also serves as an image of the human psyche. More specifically, it reflects Culvert’s psyche, as Butter suggests: „characters:Culverts Abstieg “in[to] the bowels of the Tower” (BT: 260) und das Aufkommen einer Regressionsphase in ihm, als er in der Tiefe seine ehemalige Amme trifft [...], legen eine Interpretation der Architektur als Metapher für die menschliche Psyche nahe” (*Transversalität* 235f., n.230; see also *Babbling Voices* 364, n.39). Following this line of psychoanalytic interpretation, it is noteworthy that Culvert is inspired to put into action his sado-masochistic ideas when he is in the depths of the cellar, corresponding to the Id or the unconscious. Butter also reads the immeasurable amount of rooms in the castle along these lines:

Liest man die labyrinthische Architektur der Festung als Bild für die Psyche des Menschen, so impliziert die fehlgeschlagene Zählung die Unzulänglichkeit einer Betrachtungs- und Erfassungsweise von Menschen durch das Raster der instrumentellen Vernunft. (*Transversalität* 235f., see also *Babbling Voices* 364)

The interpretation of architecture as psyche also offers an explanation why new rooms always seem to pop up whenever they are needed, thus following a dreamlike logic. The narrator always gives the names and descriptions of the rooms, thus stressing their importance as a part of the narrative.

Indeed, as Noble points out, the plot “organiz[es] itself around the architecture of La Tour Bruyarde.” He continues that Culvert’s designation of specific rooms as the sites for social performance as well as his elaborate and symbolic ornamentation of these rooms [...] attests the significance of classical and Renaissance memory arts upon the function of Byatt’s text” (70). Noble is referring to the idea of the memory theatre, in which memory can be stored and retrieved, a form of mnemonics particularly popular in Renaissance times and which also had an influence on actual Tudor architecture (see 62). Thus, the decorated rooms and the gardens of Long Royston serve as such a memory theatre, as does St Simeon’s Church with its reconstructed painted glass windows. Noble points out that “Byatt characterizes her writing, and *Babel Tower* in particular, as consisting of ‘large static structures of mnemonics to put things into, to remember their relations.’” (Noble 61f. quoting Byatt, *Memory and Fiction* 66; see also Hadley 99).⁹

Hence, Byatt’s buildings function as mnemonics as well as metaphors. This is also true of the towers of North Yorkshire University: apart from the Administration Tower and the Central Tower, which are required for organisational matters, the Language Tower, the Evolution Tower and the Maths Tower are a constant reminder of the inclusive nature of the university’s syllabus. The creator of this syllabus, Vice-Chancellor Wijnobel, “believed strongly that universities should be what their name implied, places for the study of everything”, which is why “all students [were required] to study some science, more than one language, an art form” (WW 29). Again, there is a link to the Tower of Babel, for the Language Tower with the library is “a modified ziggurat” (28), thus evoking ancient Mesopotamia. These towers are reinterpreted by the students when they protest against the demanding study system. True to the hippie zeitgeist and the growing hype around Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, they see themselves as “elves and wizards marching on the Dark Tower” (370), thus casting a negative image on the symbol of what had started as an optimistic ideal.

⁹ See Byatt, A. S. “Memory and the Making of Fiction.” *Memory*. Ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, 47-72.

Tolkien's Dark Tower is not the only literary tower in the quartet. Nigel's manor, Bran House, has several literary counterparts. As a prison, it resembles La Tour Bruyarde. In the isolation which it imposes on Frederica, it resembles the tower where Tennyson's Lady of Shalott lives, weaving all day, her only contact with the world being a mirror which reflects the outside goings-on. Byatt observes that the Lady resembles Snow White with her "frozen death-in-life-state" (*Ice, Snow, Glass* 157). Frederica herself compares her situation in Bran House with that of another of Tennyson's lonely heroines: "I was locked up with his womenfolk, like Mariana in the Moated Grange, but worse" (BT 308). Unlike Mariana, however, she does not suffer because she longs for her lover, but because Nigel's absence means that she is controlled by "his womenfolk" and because she is envious of his independence and his freedom to move around, as Uhsadel observes (see 113).

These similarities move the story of Frederica's marriage into the realm of romance. Another intertext which reinforces the elements of romance is the fairy tale of Bluebeard (see *ibid.*). It is repeatedly referred to through Nigel's outward similarity with Bluebeard due to his blue-black beard and through his "Bluebeard's cupboard full or rubbery pink flesh" (BT 244). A tower, or castle, also plays a role in pinpointing this intertext. Nigel's solicitor ostentatiously derides Frederica's depiction of her marriage, claiming it is a fabricated story inspired by her reading: "the story is now Bluebeard's Castle, and the grisly exhibits have been duly viewed in the cupboard" (516). Yet Frederica's story shows that even though fairy tales are fictitious, similar things may happen in real life, for good or for bad. As an avid reader, Frederica automatically associates her experiences with literature; yet being a shrewd, critical reader, she is also well aware of the differences between fiction and reality. Thus, although she imagines Nigel as a "blue-black demon" (322), she thinks upon seeing him again that "[h]e is a whole, living, complicated human being, not a demon" (334).

4.3. Animals: Of birds and snails

4.3.1. Snails

Some of Byatt's towers are linked with an organic image, namely the snail. Thus, Wijn Nobel imagines the Tower of Babel with a "winding structure" (BT 190). Wallhead describes how the Tower of Babel and the snail are connected with a larger group of images and themes: "It is through his [i.e. Wijn Nobel's] meditations on the Babel myth,

in which the tower is conceived of as *spiralling upwards*, that it is connected to the spirals of ammonites, snails and the neurons of the brain” (*Metaphor* 172; Wallhead’s emphasis). In continuity with this connection between spiral buildings and the organic world, it is remarkably the Evolution Tower and not the Language Tower that has the shape of a spiral at the North Yorkshire University, of which Wijn Nobel is the Vice-Chancellor. Frederica, too, draws a connection between snails and towers: in her *Laminations*, she juxtaposes extracts from an article on snails with an extract from *The Lord of the Rings* describing a tower. In the extract, the narrator points out the “twofold meaning” of the tower’s name, Orthanc, as it can mean “Mount Fang” or “Cunning Mind” in different languages (BT 465). Thus, Byatt links the theme of linguistic confusion with the motifs of the tower as well as the snail.

While the tower of St Simeon’s church is square, the main building itself is reminiscent of a snail: the Victorian nave “has been only partly rebuilt, inside its old *shell*” (BT 6; emphasis added). Inside the crypt, the cubicles where Daniel and the other helpers work are “set round the base of a pillar”, thus resembling the spiralling shape of a snail’s shell. Daniel’s phone looks like a “black shell” (4). Thus, the third opening of *Babel Tower* is constructed in a Chinese box structure where the narrator begins with Daniel’s phone and gradually zooms out, repeating the image of the snail’s shell on each level. In fact, this spiralling structure can be seen as the overarching structure of the novel’s three openings, focussing on Frederica, Daniel and *Babbletower*, as well as of the whole novel, as Todd argues:

These alternative beginnings are of organic importance to both the book’s form and content, for they initiate an interwoven, braided structure. That structure can be figured as a helix or a spiral of arbitrary length which, when imagined vertically, assists the understanding of the book’s title. (63)

Byatt has similarly used the image of a spiral or helix to describe how she visualizes the structures of her writings: “My own [memory] structures are rather like abstract paintings – a rising series of increasingly acute triangles in complementary colours may represent one text in construction, a series of concentric spirals, or even a double helix, another” (*Memory and Fiction* 66 qtd. in Noble 73).¹⁰ The word “helix” is key for the weaving of motifs and themes in *Babel Tower*, as it entails visual, linguistic and scientific connotations. In her essay “Fiction Informed by Science,” Byatt explains how

¹⁰ See Byatt, A. S. “Memory and the Making of Fiction.” *Memory*. Ed. Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, 47-72.

she made a connection between snails and DNA when she realised that the Latin word for 'snail' is 'helix'. In a link which was first linguistic and turned visual, Byatt thus associated the spiral of snails' shells with the double helix of the DNA. This led to "a solid metaphor which I embodied in the language and the narrative of my novel" (295). It is a solid metaphor as there is also a physical, scientific link which is included in the plot. The scientists Jacqueline and Luk investigate the genetics of snails by studying the colours of their shells. When scientific advancement makes this way of research obsolete, Jacqueline turns to studying the snails' neurones in order to learn more about memory, which is another major theme throughout the novel.

The snails thus function as icons of genetics and memory. They are also icons of history, as they "carr[y] their histories, written like hieroglyphs, on the coiling, brittle houses on their backs" (WW 20). Moreover, the snails are connected with literality and language, as the hieroglyphs suggest. Indeed, Campbell observes that "the snail itself is a text" as its shell can be read (233). The hieroglyphs are reminiscent of the opening of *Babel Tower*, where broken shells lie around stones on which indecipherable characters are carved, "maybe runes, maybe cuneiform, maybe ideograms" as well as "broken alphabets" (BT 1). Noble observes that the repetition of the word "broken" links the "broken alphabets" and the "broken shells" (64). By inference, this means that the broken shells indicate a breaking up of language.

Butter points out that the colours of the snails also link them with language: "Beschreibungen wie 'Their lips are pure white [...] and shining black' [...] bringen Oralität und Literalität in Verbindung" (*Transversalität* 246 n.242 and *Babbling Voices* 373 n.73 quoting BT 1). Noble also sees a parallel between the snails and the typography on the actual page itself, as "the lines of the black words on the page" imitate the black and white snails, thus "highlight[ing] the page itself as the site of memory" (63). Scientifically, too, snails are connected with language. Luk explains that "I try to read the language of the DNA on the backs of my snails [...] The alphabet in the DNA has only four letters, but they can produce an apparently infinite variety. Even in snails" (BT 357f.). In her essay "Fiction Inspired by Science," Byatt describes the code of the DNA as "a 'hard-wired' language that [is] universally human, and indeed extend[s] beyond the human and unite[s] all the creatures of paradise or the planet" (295).

Byatt connects different helixes or spirals with each other. Hence, the effects of the helix-shaped DNA can be seen in the spiral-shaped snails' shells, which grow according to a mathematical pattern, the Fibonacci spiral. Marcus is continuously puzzled and fascinated by the occurrence of this mathematical phenomenon in nature. Contemplating a snail-shell, he observes that it "seemed constructed on a Platonic skeleton of the ordering of things" (WW 72). Byatt has explained how she herself "felt that the Fibonacci spiral was an example of a platonic order – a sense that an invisible mathematical order informed all our physical accidental world." Naturally, this would give a sense of security to a mathematical mind like Marcus. Indeed, Byatt explains that "[t]his is for him a kind of paradisaal completeness" (*Fiction Informed by Science* 295).

This association with Paradise moves the snails into the realm of the supernatural. In *Babbletower*, Culvert's former nurse, Griva, explains to him the "spirit-life" of snails: they are "wanderers, between this world and the next", moving between life and death; and they are "magical, as things undecided are magical, because they are not fixed." The consequences drawn from this for the feast of Carnival foreshadow the sadistic cruelty to come to La Tour Bruyarde. According to Griva, snails were ritually roasted alive on open fire and eaten. After that their shells were used as lamps, making a "hot fiery light in death". Culvert takes this as an inspiration "that [these] practices, reintroduced, might make in his community a new life of the blood, more subtle and profound as a source of energy than cool-headed local reasonings" (BT 262).

There are also other connections between snails and violence or death in *Babbletower*, with the snail symbolising vulnerability or, as Campbell suggests, a "sacrificial victim" (232). When the child Felicitas is bullied by other children, she hides in a corner where she lies "like a desperate snail in its shell" (269). A little later, her mother Mavis jumps off the tower to kill herself, and "her head hit a sharp rock, like a snail dropped by a thrush" (275). This recalls the opening image of the novel, where a thrush cracks a snail's shell on a stone. The image of shells that have been broken by the thrush and are scattered around stones is repeated at the very end of the novel, where a heap of bones - the remains of the Krebs' victims - resembles a heap of rocks and shells.

The connection between snails and fire is repeated in *A Whistling Woman*, as Gunner and Lucy Nighby burn old chicken-sheds and with them a substantial part of the snail population that Jacqueline and Luk are studying. While this clearly does not matter

to the Nighbys, it is a dramatic event for the scientists: “Both of them saw the ash [...] as vandalism and desecration”. The word ‘desecration’ points to a religious event. This idea is continued by Lucy’s commentary, which reveals a lot about her relationship with Gunner and her religious outlook. She suggests that they “could call Gunner an act of God [...] Acts of God don’t care what you’d rather have” (WW 21f.). Snails are also linked with a ritual fire when Luk is rejected by Jacqueline after she has visited him. In his frustration, he considers burning the shells which he put up as decoration in his house “in a rite of renunciation” (192).

The snails’ shells are not the only sort of snail-themed decoration that Luk owns. In his room at university he is “comfortable” with “a poster of the Matisse snail on the wall” (174). This bright, modern picture can be seen as a commentary on Luk’s character. Wijnobel, the Dutchman with an interest in the Fibonacci numbers, has “Rembrandt’s only etched still life, a conical shell”, on his office wall (30). By contrast, the stained glass windows at Dun Vale Hall have a more dramatic theme. One of them depicts a demon, while the other one shows a man who is probably a religious fighter, wearing “a helmet like a magnified snail-shell” (78). Thus, the motif of snails is repeated on the level of visual arts as well.

Finally, snails are part of the continuous discourse on individuality. Luk explains that the study of slug genetics has changed his outlook on life. The idea that human beings are “constructed by the coded sequence of DNA” appears comforting to him: “I think it does diminish your own sense of importance rather comfortably” (BT 463f.). Later, when he is working on his paper on the cost of sexual reproduction, he has a quite different opinion on the differences and similarities between humans and slugs. In her television programme, Frederica observes that the faces of people on the underground are “*all* unique, unrepeatable” (WW 329; Byatt’s emphasis). Luk, watching the show, feels comforted, as human uniqueness speaks in favour of sexual reproduction as opposed to the black slugs’ cloning, which leads to sameness.

On an early meeting, Luk and Frederica talk about the fact that John Ottokar has an identical twin, upon which Luk gives her two identical shells. He then hands her another shell with a bold pattern, marking it as a present. This last shell seems to reassert Frederica’s individuality, though it might also refer to Luk’s uniqueness. Luk’s interest in snails initially makes him interesting to Frederica. She has observed his devoted but unrequited love for Jacqueline, and suspects that he might be “another

laminated being”. This means that he is capable of focussing his attention on slugs and complicated thoughts about DNA while being filled by “furious, but *not incapacitating* sexual devotion” (BT 462; emphasis added). This ability to keep different aspects of his life apart makes him similar to Frederica and marks him as a suitable partner for her.

4.3.2. Birds

All novels of the quartet, apart from *The Virgin in the Garden*, open with birds. They function as images of life and death as well as of alterity. They are also used to introduce the novels’ main themes.

The epigraph of *Still Life* is taken from Bede’s *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The excerpt presents an extended metaphor, comparing the transience of life to a sparrow that swiftly flies through the king’s hall on a winter’s night. The fact that Byatt quotes both the Latin original and the translation turns out to be important, as the chapter describing Stephanie’s fatal accident borrows its title from the Latin quotation. The title “Unus passerum,” meaning “a single sparrow,” already draws the advertent reader’s attention to the importance of the sparrow that enters Stephanie’s kitchen. The scene takes place before Christmas, hence it is winter just like in Bede’s text. When the bird appears for the first time, the narrator draws attention to it in a peculiar way: “It was at this point that the white cat brought in the sparrow” (SL 399). Two grammatical tricks help to direct the readers’ attention: first, inversion (“It was at this point that” instead of simply “At this point”); and second, the unusual usage of the definite article, referring to “the sparrow” as if it were already known. When at the end of the chapter “a sudden sparrow plunged into the night” (404), this is a mirror image of Bede’s sparrow that flies out into the winter night.

As Sorensen observes, “[i]t is deeply ironic that a sparrow is the cause of Stephanie’s death. In several key biblical verses, the sparrow is the means of comparison demonstrating the greater worth of human life” (*Death* 129). While Byatt does not make any biblical references in this context, another intertextual reference indicates the transience of life: “No sound, no motion” is a double echo (SL 402). It alludes to the opening line of the second stanza of Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal”, “No motion has she now, no force” (5). Moreover, this is the poem, and specifically the line that Stephanie was reading earlier in the novel when waiting in the

antenatal clinic and a woman had a miscarriage. Byatt places this reference just after Stephanie has pulled the refrigerator from the wall, thus stressing the importance of this action.

The last word that Stephanie thinks is “altruism”. Obviously, altruism can be seen as the reason for Stephanie’s death, as she dies trying to save the sparrow, another “creature” (SL 403). It also sums up her activities of the day, helping whoever drops in. Moreover, it sums up her life, as Sorensen argues: “It is a powerful word, deliberately cited to indicate that Stephanie has ‘lived for others,’ that she knows what her life has signified, and that she has chosen this life” (*Death* 128). Todd observes that the circumstances of Stephanie’s death also take us back to the beginning of the quartet. When Stephanie is introduced, she is seen trying to save a litter of kittens (see 53). The narrator does not explain why Stephanie is surprised at the word “altruism”. One reason might be that Stephanie has been afraid of losing her vocabulary and this fairly sophisticated word proves the contrary.

Babel Tower introduces another bird that is associated with death. The novel’s first opening describes a thrush as it is standing on a stone, cracking a snail’s shell and eating the snail. While Bede’s sparrow is part of a melancholic but peaceful allegory of the evanescence of life as the bird swiftly flies through the hall, the thrush appears more brutal, actively bringing about death: he is looking for “his secret prey”, “[h]e stabs, he pierces [...] He extracts the bruised flesh”. Yet it is also a beautiful bird, and it “sings limited lovely notes”. With the question, “Why does his song give us such pleasure?” the narrator makes the reader aware of this contrast (BT 1). As the bird sings between the killing, Campbell argues that this question introduces the motif of pleasure in pain (233).

Considering that cruelty is part of the thrush’s nature, this opening introduces the questions of cruelty in nature and the nature of cruelty, which are central issues in the novel. The heap of stones and the broken shells around it are reminiscent of the heap of bones left behind by the cannibalistic Krebs at the very end of the novel. The Krebs are described as cruel by nature, though they are not necessarily evil. Similarly, Culvert follows his sadomasochistic impulses, arguing that everybody must follow their nature. Nigel, too, thinks that his violence is justified. Byatt also incorporates the public excitement and debates that Peter Weiss’s play *Marat / Sade* and the infamous case of the Moors murders created in the sixties. The image of a snail killed by a thrush is

repeated in the description of Mavis's death: "And her head hit a sharp rock, like a snail dropped by a thrush, and burst apart" (275).

The fact that the stone which the thrush is standing on may also be called an anvil or an altar, both of which are anthropomorphised metaphors (see Brosch 59), has several implications. As Noble observes, the word "anvil" occurs three times, each with a different meaning. At first, it serves as "a mechanical device for the thrush" (64). Secondly, the broken shells are compared to "helical whorls like empty ears in which no hammer beats on no anvil" (BT 1). Noble argues that "it represents the *incus*, a small bone in the ear". Thirdly, these meanings are merged so that "the activities of listening and of hammering become conjoined" (Noble 64; Noble's emphasis). While the word "anvil" also brings to mind crafts and artisanry, the word "altar" has clearly religious associations. In this sense, the thrush is not just killing but performing a rite.

While thrushes and thrush-anvils reappear throughout the novel, there are also linguistic connections. Several characters have bird names. Unlike the thrush in the opening, Dol Throstle, in Amanda Mond's novel-within-the-novel, *Flight North*, is a positive and helpful character. Turdus Cantor, a character from *Babbletower*, is one of the observer figures that survive at the end; his name is the Latin name of the song thrush, as Campbell states (see 233). The private detective Theobald Drossel, who follows Frederica everywhere on Nigel's orders, bears the German name for the thrush. Finally, an old Jewish professor who appears as an expert witness at the *Babbletower* trial has the name of the Jewish mythological bird Ziz. While these bird names are not particularly telling with regards to the individual characters – for example, the name of the thrush is used both for positive and negative characters – they are a remarkable multi-lingual play on words and create linguistic continuity throughout the novel.

An exception from this is Luk Lysgard-Peacock. The meaning of his name is contemplated by Luk and plays a part in the scientific discussions of the following novel, *A Whistling Woman*. His name is very visual, referring to colours and the Garden of Eden, as Byatt explains:

Lysgaard-Peacock was named originally for the alchemical thread of my patterns – he was the *cauda pavonis*, the peacock's tail of multi-coloured light before the single white light of the opus, the philosopher's stone. (Lysgaard is a common Danish name meaning garden of light, a paradisaal reference.) (*Fiction Informed by Science* 296; Byatt's emphasis)

Being Danish, Luk did not always know what his name means: “He liked his odd name [...] He remembered his childhood excitement when he discovered that ‘peacock’ meant *páfogl*, the brilliant, unearthly bird” (WW 176; Byatt’s emphasis).

Yet the peacock is also an icon of the scientific crisis and personal crisis that Luk goes through. Following his rejection by Jacqueline Winwar, he gets obsessed by the idea that due to biological disadvantages, sexual reproduction, and thus the male, seems rather pointless as opposed to other forms of reproduction. In a paper on this topic, he quotes how Darwin felt sick whenever he saw a peacock’s tail. It is Frederica who suggests that another, non-scientific view might be enriching: “Peacock feathers are completely improbable, completely beautiful things. [...] I don’t think even you can think up a useful evolutionary explanation for all those colours, and that sheen, and hundreds of eyes. [...] They’re absurd, and breathtaking. Every time” (383). This is not only an observation on science and aesthetics picking up themes of the novel. It also drives the plot, as Luk is now metaphorically released from the restraint of being a biologically redundant male, and the way is open for his beginning relationship with Frederica.

Luk himself plays with visual references to the peacock. He decorates his house with peacock feathers, which he considers throwing away, clearly identifying with them, after they have been criticised by Jacqueline: “The feathers had disgusted Darwin and were lovely. They were male excess, and had been rejected” (192). Needless to say, unlike Jacqueline, Frederica proclaims she loves the feathers. For his talk on the redundant male he self-consciously and defiantly puts on a scarf with a Liberty peacock feather design. During the talk, Frederica is entertained by the irony of it all, thinking that “he’s swooping around like a great peacock, showing off” (365), and she buys a Liberty peacock shirt in turn after their night together.

Luk’s wooing of Jacqueline is also compared to birds wooing. While at first he is amused by his own comparison to seagulls, he is haunted by images of wooing birds when he attends to Jacqueline at dinner, seeing before his inner eye seagulls and bowerbirds making a nest, dancing around the female, feeding her. This fits with the image he has of Jacqueline in his dream, where he sees her as a brown bird. She reinforces this image by holding her head to one side “like a watchful bird” and by asserting “I eat like a bird” (177f.). Other characters are also associated with birds. When Frederica meets Wilkie for the first time in *The Virgin in the Garden*, he is wearing “aquamarine lenses”

and a jacket whose colour is defined as “peacock”, thus making him stand out from the start (VG 168). Raphael is like a nervous bird that, after a “thin” kiss with Frederica, “draw[s] back bird-like immediately” (SL 329). When John Ottokar kisses Frederica for the first time, he, too, appears like a bird, but a very different one: “He [...] brings down his mouth like a gold bird striking. But gentle. At the moment of touch, gentle” (BT 345). It is worth mentioning that the fierce, sturdy, no-nonsense Nigel is never associated with any birds.

Jacqueline’s similarity with a bird also brings to mind the Whistlers, fictional characters from Amanda’s novel who are hybrids between women and birds, strong and independent. Another image of a hybrid is Alice in Wonderland, who appears like a bird-serpent when her neck has suddenly grown long. In a dream where Frederica is raped by Luk, he resembles the angry bird that accuses Alice of being a snake, while Frederica is in the position of Alice, like in her talk show where she dresses up as an adult Alice. There is an echo of the bird-serpent when Frederica later sits on Luk’s terrace: “He fetched his quilted eiderdown, and coiled it round her in a rough cone, with a trailing foot” evokes the image of Frederica as a coiling snake, while the description of the eiderdown as “a cloak of feathers” brings up the image of a bird (412). Remarkably, Luk is also a bird hybrid, as he is not only compared to birds but also appears like a demon, a fierce counterbalance to the milder and gentler image of a wooing bird.

The original scene with Alice as a bird-serpent from Lewis Carroll’s novel is quoted in the second epigraph, while the first epigraph quotes a saying: “A Whistling Woman and a Crowing Hen / Is neither good for God nor Men.” Campbell observes that “[t]he idea of the anomalous is thus linked with the questions that run through the quartet concerning women’s identity, what they want, how they are represented, and how they represent themselves”. The third, and final, epigraph is taken from Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Garden”. It depicts the soul as a bird that, “Casting the Bodies [sic] Vest aside” (51), flies into a tree “And, till prepar’d for longer flight / Waves in its plumes the various Light” (55-56). Campbell suggests that the image of the “spiritual flight” upon which the soul is to engage “introduces both the conference and the problems of women” (248). Arguably, as it is the final epigraph, its positive tone and imagery can also be read in connection with the novel’s ending, which describes a hopeful departure that metaphorically leads out of the garden, like the bird’s flight.

Conclusion

Byatt has used various metaphors to describe how she imagines a piece of her writing. It may be based on a specific image, like Botticelli's *Primavera* as a metaphor of metamorphosis; it may be a language-flower, a spiral or a double helix, or a geometric structure with colours and patterns. Byatt has also professed that she wants to be seen as "someone who *weaves* careful structures out of truths, lies, slanted comment, several originals" (*Reading, Writing, Studying* 6; emphasis added). Similarly, when Frederica is lecturing to a group of students, she compares this to knitting: "the knitting is a fishnet" (BT 213). All of these metaphors have one thing in common: they are extremely structured, highly visual mental images.

Consequently, it is no wonder that visual elements abound in her novels. Indeed, Byatt has used vision as an important part of her mnemonics when constructing her novels. Looking back on her writing of the quartet, Byatt has described how, inspired by science, "I was aware of the ordering operations of my own neurons, in a shadowy way, and I tried to construct, with mnemonics, conscious patterns and colours and rhythms that represented this sense of form" ("Fiction Informed by Science" 294).

Hence, on the level of structure, there is an elaborate verbal and visual patterning of the novels, both within the individual novels and across the whole quartet. Byatt uses images as a framework, to link recurring themes and mark and enhance their significance. Visual elements characterise and group spaces, times, characters and scenes and enrich them through metaphoric associations. Spaces thus become memory theatres. More generally speaking, through their interconnectedness the visual images and motifs are part of a highly dynamic network and are linked with each other as well as with varying themes.

Vision is also an integral part of the plot. This is specifically true for *Still Life*, which centres on Vincent van Gogh and his paintings that are an inspiration for Alexander's play. Yet all of the novels circle around specific images, which are repeatedly reconsidered, reinterpreted and rewritten. Hence, far from being static, the images are in fact dynamic and also induce the characters to action. The characters themselves are cast within this visual network.

The characters' visual perception of the world is also noteworthy. Women see the world differently from children. A writer tries to imagine in his own words what a

painter would have seen, and consequently his own visual perception of the world alters. There is also a hint at the supernatural with the world-view of visionaries.

Byatt self-consciously preoccupies herself with art and visual perception. Moreover, she looks at verbal and visual representation, their differences and similarities, their potentials and limits. With regard to the description of visual arts, this is part of a wider discussion as it touches upon the *ut pictura poesis* debate. Additionally, the differences between icons, notional and actual ekphrasis as well as verbal still lifes are considered. Rippl observes with reference to *Still Life* that “Byatt tries to evoke via language, via words, effects that usually belong to a visual medium, to paintings” (528). In fact, this is true for the whole quartet. The question of the adequacy of verbal representation is addressed through a constant strive to describe precisely, in detail, and to render sensuous immediacy. An important aspect in this endeavour is the deliberate and careful usage of colour words as a way of structuring and characterising.

Themes that are not immediately connected to vision are still part of Byatt’s visual network. In this context, an important part is played by what Byatt calls “the ruling metaphors” of her novels as well as by the imagery and motifs. They link the various subplots, characters and places, but also the themes with each other. Hence, bodily imagery, symbolic spaces and animals offer insights and often surprising connections with scientific, social, historical, linguistic, literary, religious, psychological and philosophical discourses.

Byatt’s novels are vast in scope, exceptionally rich in allusions and intertextual references. For each intertext and each motif discussed, there are many more that are worth investigating in more detail. A focus on the visual aspects of the quartet opens a gateway that provides insight into the deeper structure of the novels. Thus, it illuminates the intricacy and richness of the textual web that is woven through “images made of language” (WW 50).

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Abbreviations

BT – *Babel Tower*
S / LS – “ ‘Sugar’ / ‘Le Sucre’ ”
SL – *Still Life*
SL / NM – Still Life / Nature morte
VG – *The Virgin in the Garden*
WW – *A Whistling Woman*
VGDS – “Van Gogh, Death and Summer”

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Abstract auf Deutsch / German abstract

Die englische Gegenwartsautorin A. S. Byatt beschäftigt sich in ihrem Werk mit einer Vielzahl von Themen, von Gesellschaft und Identität über Literatur und Ästhetik bis hin zu Geschichte und Wissenschaft. Dabei schafft sie hochkomplexe Verweisstrukturen, die sowohl innerhalb der Texte vielfältige Bezüge herstellen als auch über die Texte hinaus verweisen. Wiederholt und eingehend greift die Autorin dabei auf visuelle Elemente zurück, die in ihrem Werk auf inhaltlicher und motivischer wie auch auf sprachlicher und struktureller Ebene eine bemerkenswerte Rolle spielen; so auch in ihrem Roman-Quartett (1978-2004). Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht die verschiedenen Formen und Funktionen von visuellen Elementen im Quartett.

Mit präzisen Beschreibungen verfolgt Byatt das Ziel, ihre imaginierten Welten den Lesern mittels Sprache vor Augen zu führen und so sprachliche Bilder zu schaffen – „images made of language“. Sie beschäftigt sich mit verschiedenen Arten der Wahrnehmung. Außerdem setzt sie sich mit Werken der bildenden Kunst auseinander. In diesem Zusammenhang lotet sie die Unterschiede und Gemeinsamkeiten von sprachlicher und visueller Darstellung aus. Mit der Frage danach, was diese unterschiedlichen Darstellungsformen erreichen können, bewegt sich Byatt in dem jahrhundertalten Diskurs um das Diktum „ut pictura poesis“. Zudem verwendet sie übergreifende Metaphern und Bilder, wiederkehrende Motive und Farben als visuelle Strukturelemente.

Werke der bildenden Kunst stellen wichtige Bezugspunkte in Form von Intertexten bzw. Extratexten dar. Davon inspiriert nehmen Ekphrasis, die literarische Darstellung von bildender Kunst, aber auch Szenen in den Romanen, die einem Stillleben ähneln, eine beachtenswerte Rolle ein. Die einzelnen Romane kreisen um zentrale Bilder, welche aus den unterschiedlichsten Jahrhunderten stammen. Trotz des Handlungszeitraums in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren ist der erste Roman strukturell und formell von der Ikonographie rund um Elisabeth I inspiriert, während im zweiten Roman Vincent van Gogh mit seinen Bildern als Symbol für reine Darstellung erscheint. Im Folgeroman ist der Turm von Babel ein Symbol für Chaos und Zerfall, was auf sprachlicher, visueller, inhaltlicher und struktureller Ebene widergespiegelt wird. Im abschließenden Roman steht Mondrians Kunst als Symbol für den gefährlichen Glauben an ein allumfassendes System, während ebendieses in Form von Alice im Wunderland bildhaft hinterfragt wird. Die Romane beschäftigen sich überdies

mit Fernsehen, das im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert eine neue Art des Sehens ermöglicht und dieses auch beeinflusst.

Bildende Kunst beeinflusst ebenfalls die Wahrnehmung und in Folge die Handlungen einzelner Charaktere, wodurch Kunst als handlungstragende Komponente fungiert. Auch sonst wird die individuelle Wahrnehmung verschiedener Charaktere dargestellt. So imaginiert Byatt das Innere eines weiblichen Körpers, die Farb- und Licht-Wahrnehmung eines Kleinkindes und die ungewöhnliche, übernatürliche Wahrnehmung von Außenseiterfiguren.

Einen speziellen Schwerpunkt in der visuellen Darstellung bilden Farben und die mit ihnen zusammenhängenden visuellen und metaphorischen Strukturen. Farben, Licht und Dunkelheit erhalten in Bezug auf Charaktere, Zeit und Ort semiotische Funktion und weisen zudem emotionale Konnotationen auf. Farbabstufungen sind Teil einer möglichst genauen sowie sinnlichen Darstellung von subjektiver Erfahrung wie auch bei objektiver Beschreibung.

Bilder und Motive verbinden die zahlreichen Themen miteinander. Darüber hinaus spielen sie eine Rolle bei der Figurenkonzeption und bei der Entwicklung der Handlung. Dies zeigt eine detaillierte Analyse von ausgewählten wiederkehrenden visuellen Motiven. Der Körper, sein Fleisch und sein Blut tragen zum zentralen Thema des Quartetts bei, dem Diskurs um Körper und Geist. Inspiriert von zwei zentralen Mythen in Byatts Werk, der Vertreibung aus dem Paradies und dem Turmbau zu Babel, fungieren Gärten und Türme als reale und imaginäre Symbolräume. Schnecken und Vögel eröffnen wissenschaftliche und philosophische Diskurse und stehen im Zusammenhang mit Sprache, Kunst und Architektur, Leben und Tod.

Bei der Textproduktion verwendet Byatt abstrakte und konkrete Bilder zur gedanklichen Visualisierung ihrer Texte. Dabei benützt sie, wie in den Texten selbst, visuelle Elemente bewusst für Mnemotechnik. Die Wiederholung von Bildern und Motiven in unterschiedlichsten Zusammenhängen nutzt die Autorin folglich zur Strukturierung ihrer Texte. Durch vielfältige Verflechtungen entstehen so ästhetische Zusammenhänge, die zu einem dynamischen sprachlich-visuellen Netz von Bildern, Motiven und Themen führen. So gibt der Fokus auf visuelle Aspekte tiefere Einblicke in das komplexe Bezugssystem von Byatts Quartett.