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**METAFICTIONALITY AS A TECHNIQUE IN  
THE SELF-CONSCIOUS REALISM OF  
A. S. BYATT'S FREDERICA POTTER  
QUARTET**

**Master's thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman*, the novel quartet by the contemporary British author A.S. Byatt, with the aim to explore the use of metafictional techniques that seem to be especially pertinent to Byatt's writing and appear to be among the most prominent features that contribute to her status as an author who successfully merges realism and experimentation, drawing on the former's self-conscious potential. These features are discussed against the framework of studies in recent British fiction and its relationship to self-conscious modes of writing.

The Introduction provides information about Byatt, major critical studies on the author, and the novels under discussion and examines the combination of realist and self-reflexive writing practices as one of the key characteristics of contemporary British literature.

Chapter 1 focuses on the theories of metafiction and discusses characteristics of metafictional texts, while also providing a framework for the analysis of the novels.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the metafictional preoccupation with reading: the chapter analyzes the ways in which the novels thematize acts of reading and the role of the reader. Chapter 2 also discusses intertextual references to various authors and texts as well as the metafictional characteristic of calling attention to the importance of stories and language in creating fictional worlds and the world outside literary works, which point to intriguing patterns of the fiction-reality relationship.

Chapter 3 focuses on the metafictional concern with writing and analyzes how the characters-writers are rendered in acts of writing. The chapter explores how both Byatt's character-writers and the quartet itself manifests formal preoccupations and structural incoherence created by including various textual types. The chapter also looks at self-reflexive comments as indicators of constructedness and discusses how both texts and the world outside literary texts can be seen as constructed.

The major findings are presented in the Conclusion.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BT – *Babel Tower*
- IS – Internet sources
- SL – *Still Life*
- VG – *The Virgin in the Garden*
- WW – *A Whistling Woman*

## INTRODUCTION

A.S. Byatt, born in 1936, is one of the leading contemporary British writers, an award-winning, prolific author of eight novels and six short story and novella collections to date. As noted by Olga Kenyon (1988: 51), Byatt is “one of the most imaginative and intelligent writers of English today”. Kathleen Kelly (1996: 13) has pointed to the power, poetry, and depth of Byatt’s fiction and argues that Byatt has established a firm place in the literary canon: “One cannot imagine a course on the contemporary British novel without her”. Her work is not only critically acclaimed but has also enjoyed a wide success among the general public: “It may appear as a paradox, but her fiction now has ‘bestseller’ status in addition to intellectual exigence, . . . for the two are compatible, if only in a writer of Byatt’s calibre” (Wallhead 1990: xiv). In addition to being a renowned author, Byatt is an acclaimed lecturer as well as a successful critic and scholar, who has widely published on William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Iris Murdoch.

Byatt’s first novel, *The Shadow of a Sun* (1964), focusing on the life of a girl growing up in the shadow of a dominant father, was followed by *The Game* (1967), a study of the relationship between two sisters, both creative writers. Her next novel *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) was followed by *Still Life* (1985), which won the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award. 1990 saw the publication of *Possession*, probably Byatt’s best-known novel, both critically appraised and widely popular among the general public. The novel was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction as well as the *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize and was made into a movie in 2002. Also *Angels and Insects* (1992), consisting

of two novellas, has been adapted to a movie (1996). Byatt is the author of *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), the latter presenting an intriguing mixture of biography and fiction. One of her latest books is *A Whistling Woman* (2002).

In addition to the works listed above, Byatt has also authored several collections of short stories and fairy tales. Her most recent book, *Little Black Book of Stories* (2004), offers a captivating collection of stories interweaving the themes of art and creation, death, memory, and fairy tales, the beautiful and the gruesome appearing side by side. Of her fictional works, *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman* form a tetralogy, or what has been called the Frederica Potter Quartet. The quartet undoubtedly occupies a major place in Byatt's career; the novels in the cycle have received literary prizes (such as PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award for *Still Life*) and the single works have been widely discussed in the scholarly publications. Due to the fact that the quartet is a major achievement, it will be the focus of the thesis.

*The Virgin in the Garden*, which Kenyon (1988: 59) calls "one of the most impressive works of the 1970s", is set in 1953, the year of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The novel introduces to the reader the Potter family – the ambitious, brilliant schoolgirl and an avid reader Frederica, the Cambridge undergraduate English major Stephanie, Marcus, their mathematically gifted and inwardly brother, their father Bill, erudite schoolmaster, and his wife Winifred, a highly intellectual woman, struggling with the demands of domesticity. As Juliet Dusinberre (in Todd 1983: 182) has suggested, the novel is "in tradition of realist fiction which goes back to George Eliot, but draws on modernist images and on contemporary interest in the novel as a mirror of itself". Kelly (1996: 64) calls the novel a "theater drama": "Byatt mixes the personal dramas of the main characters with the long preparation for and rehearsal in a play based on the life of Elizabeth I". The play, *Astraea*, in which Frederica

portrays the queen, is authored by the playwright and don Alexander Wedderburn. The novel captivatingly joins the rendering of the social and cultural sensibilities of the new Elizabethan age and the lives of the Potters, most notably the coming of age of Frederica.

*Still Life*, which Byatt attempted to write “in a very spare language without any metaphor at all” (Byatt in Dusinberre 1983: 194), covers the period from 1954 to 1959 and tackles the themes of marriage, birth, and death. Kenyon (1988: 78) points out that *Still Life* presents a remarkable capturing of real objects as well as real people: “Facts themselves resonate with real-life narrative. Like Van Gogh painting olive trees, there is both passion in their observation – and simple reality”. Frederica is now a student at Cambridge University; Stephanie chooses to abandon her career in the academic world and attempts to come to terms with her life as the wife of a curate Daniel Orton and as a mother of two children, trying to join the life of the mind and that of the hearth. At the end of *Still Life*, Stephanie is electrocuted by an unearthed refrigerator. A prominent subplot of the novel is connected to Alexander Wedderburn, who is writing a play on the life of Vincent Van Gogh; the novel contains Van Gogh's *Letters* and includes discussions on color theories, art, painting and painters.

*Babel Tower*, set in the 1960s, shows how Frederica, Leo's mother and the wife of the domineering Nigel Reiver, is trapped in an unhappy marriage; she decides to leave her husband and starts to work as a book reviewer and teacher of literature in London. Frederica also appears as the author of *Laminations*, a work of “cut-and-paste”, a way for her to “deal with the polyphony of the sixties” (Campbell 2004: 245). *Babel Tower* includes other books in it, most prominently *Babbletower*, a fantasy about a group of people trying to establish their own ideal community, by one of the characters, Jude Mason. A subplot is formed by following the work of a government committee which examines how English should and could be taught and learned at schools. *Babel Tower* tackles various aspects from the field of



sciences, introducing a group of researches who work on snails and ants and discuss their findings about genes. The novel culminates in two court cases – Frederica’s divorce and custody case and the trial of the supposedly pornographic *Babbletower*, both of which “produce a kind of degradation of language, in the sense that the language of the court degrades the language both of the book and of the marriage” (Byatt in Tredell 1994: 74).

In *A Whistling Woman*, the 33-year old Frederica, “the most fully developed and many-sided of all Byatt’s women” (Campbell 2004: 261), becomes a moderator of a BBC talk show, “Through the Looking-Glass”, which explores a wide variety of themes ranging from Sigmund Freud to creativity to Picasso’s art. The novel also depicts scientists working on snail memory and brain research as well as portrays how a religious community, gathered on the moors, turns into a threatening, violent force under their charismatic leader Joshua Ramsden. As pointed out by Campbell (2004: 247), “The diversity of the cast of characters, together with the number of minds to which we have access, makes *A Whistling Woman* the most polyvocal of all Byatt’s work”. One of the prominent subplots focuses on the mind and body conference hosted at the University of North Yorkshire, coinciding with a powerful anti-university campaign. The novel cycle ends with Frederica finding out about her unplanned pregnancy with the scientist Luk; Frederica and Luk look into the future, not quite knowing what to do next but assuring themselves that they “shall think of something” (573).

The four novels are accounts of the times in which they are set and give insights into the British society and culture of the 1950s and the 1960s, commenting on the new Elizabethan era, the layered culture of the 1960s, as well as the emergence of the multi-media and new forms of knowledge. The novels include a number of memorable characters, illustrating Byatt’s words, “I like novels with large numbers of people and centers of consciousness, not novels that adopt a narrow single point-of-view, author’s or character’s” (Byatt IS 1). In addition to Stephanie and Frederica, the texts follow the life of their family members and

include a host of friends, colleagues and students of Frederica's. Most of Byatt's characters are passionate about books, reading, and thinking and work as scholars, the world of academe being one of Byatt's most common settings. Additionally, her works do not only include masterful character portrayals but also illustrate technical ideas on narrative and form.

Naturally, an author of Byatt's caliber has given rise to debates among literary critics; in what follows, the thesis offers a chronological overview of aspects that a number of studies have emphasized about Byatt's work.

Juliet Dusinberre (1982) belongs to one of the first scholars to give critical insights into Byatt's work. In her article on *The Virgin in the Garden*, she concentrates on the notion of reality and the real, suggesting that the novel is "both experimental and realist, about images and about real people" (Dusinberre 1982: 55). Dusinberre (1982: 55) emphasizes the high believability, the "realness" of Byatt's characters, "recognizable, breathing beings who move in a definite social setting". Dusinberre (1982: 58) notes that the majority of Byatt's characters are extremely avid readers who "measure their acquaintance with life in terms of what they have read". However, the characters appear to be less excellent at reading their reality, "interpret[ing] literature impeccably while blundering destructively through life" (Dusinberre 1982: 59). Dusinberre (1982: 60) comments on how the characters "move in a world of competing realities" and examines how the characters manage or fail to put their experiences, their reality into a recognizable form. She (1982: 61) concludes, "[T]he real exists through the meditation of the unreal verbal form, which makes durable in words the human capacity for enduring things", thus pointing to the idea that the novel itself defines its own existence as a form of reality.

Olga Kenyon, another scholar also writing in the 1980s, places Byatt against the background of a number of other outstanding British female writers and traces the

characteristics her work shares with Jane Austen, the Brontes, Iris Murdoch, and George Eliot, suggesting that Byatt, “write[s] for adults with empathy, intelligence, humor, seriousness and passion which place women firmly in the great tradition” (1988:59) Kenyon is particularly interested in Byatt’s fusing of tradition with twentieth-century realism. She takes a closer look at *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, tackling Byatt’s female characters, metaphors, humor, the historical background, and, most prominently, various aspects of language in the two novels.

Kenyon (1988: 60) argues that language is one of Byatt’s strongest concerns: “Part of her distinction lies in examining the limits and power of language through narrative”. Kenyon (1988: 54) notes that Byatt draws a number of codes and influences into her highly self-referential work which does not lose its strong narrative pull; she is a “self-conscious novelist, brooding about the choice of words, mediating on theories about words”. Also her characters, as Kenyon (1988: 66) points out, are deeply conscious of language; indeed, “each major character represents a different way of coping, or failing to cope, with the world through language”. Related to the linguistic self-consciousness and the moving between the creative and the critical is also Byatt’s intertextuality, “the complex web created by interweaving from other texts, other discourses, other cultural associations” (Kenyon 1988: 61). Kenyon (1988: 82) further comments on the wide range of Byatt’s knowledge, greatly apparent in the intertexts she uses, leading to the idea that “the world she maps is vast, from prehistory to modern physics”.

Similarly, Alexa Alexander (1989) has explored Byatt’s use of language and artistic scope in her study of contemporary women novelists, in which she includes a perceptive discussion on Byatt’s “combination of intellectual rigor and a passionate interest in the depth and richness of human experience” (1989: 41). In her commentary on *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, she examines the main characters as well as the themes of art and language,

manifesting the works' preoccupation with seeing and naming and the Mapping out the general trends of contemporary British fiction, most notably its relationship to realism and experimental writing, Alexander (1989: 16) explores the ways in which Byatt sees "the traditional novel as having the potential for further development" (1989: 16). Alexander (1989: 18) argues, "In a highly sophisticated way, Byatt writes novels which employ essentially realist methods, while placing within the fiction an authorial commentary which develops thoughts about the complexity of perceiving, naming and recording", thereby pointing to the ways Byatt examines the notion of representation and extends the possibilities of realism.

Byatt's realist methods have interested also Kathleen Coyne Kelly (1996), who offers chronological close readings of Byatt's novels and short story collections and places Byatt in the framework of realism and postmodernism. As constant themes, Kelly (1996: 14) outlines Byatt's "preoccupation with the artist, the imagination, and the impossibility of love and the inevitability of loss". Kelly (1996: 91, 95) comments on the works' formal characteristics, authorial comments, the interest in how readers read and writers write, as well as the preoccupation with intertextuality, suggesting that for Byatt, "poems arise out of poems, and books out of books". Indeed, the richness of Byatt's knowledge has led to the idea that her books in themselves are monumental intertexts, her work being "the vast intertextual web that includes everything that she reads and thinks and sees" (Kelly 1996: 116). Kelly (1996: x) regards intertextuality as one of the dominant features that associate Byatt's works with the postmodern, which is characterized by "the ability to range over a number of periods and places and to create and amalgam of styles and moods".

Kelly (1996) offers valuable insights into the complexities of Byatt's writings by analyzing the tensions between realist and postmodernist modes of writing in Byatt's works. She (1996: 76) notes that "Byatt is a realist novelist who questions the project of realism; at the same

time, she is also a postmodern novelist who questions the postmodern project”. Kelly (1996: ix) argues that Byatt’s works move towards a more complicated vision of realism, as Byatt draws the reader’s attention to difficulties of representation, to “the thing to be represented and the process of representation itself”. Kelly (1996: 22) makes a revealing point, suggesting that “our reading . . . moves between absorbing the narrative that is the result of artifice and examining the artifice itself”. Byatt’s self-reflexive texts thus manifest the simultaneous absorption with the narrative and the awareness of the medium used for constructing the fictional world.

The concern with representation, realist and self-conscious modes of writing have been emphasized also in Richard Todd’s (1997) concise study covering Byatt’s body of creative works until the 1990s, gives a revealing overview of Byatt’s major themes such as familial relationships, creativity and artists’ vision, as well as the notions of autonomy, marginalization, erotic power, myths, violence and loss, the representation of complex moral issues, the interplay between fact and fiction, and the fascination with fairy tales and the supernatural. Commenting on Byatt’s style, Todd (1997: 17) points out that the reader might be tempted to regard several of Byatt’s novels as representatives of social realism, while he posits that, for example, *The Virgin in the Garden*, “is enriched beyond measure when the reader surrenders to its status as fiction about post-war English society that is unconditionally embedded in the cultural background designating that society”. Todd (1997: 64) thus shows that Byatt’s grip extends much further than social realism, as she succeeds in “relat[ing] portrayals of different orders of reality to each other”.

Todd (1997: 54) also comments on Byatt’s masterful character depictions and suggests that their artistic achievement is connected to Byatt’s emotional honesty which “is of the highest order, coupled with her conviction that her characters must be depicted as having thoughts, that those thoughts are frequently important, exciting, and painful”. Characters are for Byatt

one of the ways to examine the “battleground between real people and images” (Todd 1997: 5), a dominant theme in Byatt’s works. Todd (1997: 77) further suggests, “No contemporary English novelist so palpably blurs the distinction between *real* ‘real’ people and ‘images’.

Todd (1997: 5) highlights Byatt’s preoccupation with language and thought: indeed, for Byatt, “novels are made out of language”. Todd (1997: 5) explores how Byatt’s “intense passion for language, for the articulate expression of thought, coexists in her imaginative writing with the ways in which certain kinds of language may exercise deforming pressures on the reality they seek to describe”. Todd (1997: 63) discusses how language can function as a mask, as a net, as a disfiguring force in Byatt’s works.

Celia Wallhead (1999: xiii) has similarly discussed Byatt’s reoccurring thematic patterns; in her extensive work, Wallhead looks at “the thematic relationships that make up the macrostructures of the whole body of fictional works”, thereby examining Byatt’s recurring motifs of birth, growth, death, metamorphosis, the multiplicity of vision, the family and social life, language, British literature, and creativity. Wallhead (1999) outlines her study relying on three domineering aspects in Byatt’s works: the old – the familiar, the realist background as a basis for innovations; the new – innovations with content and form; and thirdly, metaphors as structuring devices.

In connection with “the old” and “the new”, Wallhead (1999), similarly to Kenyon (1988) and Alexander (1989), discusses Byatt against the realist and postmodern background. She (1999: 19) notes that Byatt is an author who stands “at the fore of the impulse to reconceptualize realism in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique”. She (1999: 19) points out that Byatt views realism as “a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world”. For Byatt, realism is “a technique for discovering more about reality, for describing the world as it is” (Wallhead 1999: 60). Wallhead (1999: 25) thus sees Byatt as

standing in the mainstream of realism while also exploring postmodern alternatives of self-reflexive awareness of texts as verbal constructs.

Wallhead (1999: 303) outlines a common pattern of Byatt's works: "Byatt creates a familiar Byattian scenario through repetition of themes and motifs like the problem of language, that of the artist and his heritage, and the individual in a changing society". Wallhead (1999: 48) emphasizes the idea that literary and artistic creativity is Byatt's favorite subject and foregrounds the idea that "from the very beginning she [Byatt] has been fascinated by the figure of the writer in every aspect of his life". Wallhead (1999: 81) discusses Byatt's interest in the writer or artist character in the process of creation, suggesting that Byatt depicts different sides of composition, "from the functioning of the brain, through perception and its expression, to the ways in which readers and observers of different levels of critical analysis may react to it".

Whereas Wallhead (1999) takes a more inclusive approach in analyzing the governing metaphors in Byatt's works and the ways the author represents both realism and postmodernism, Christine Franken (2001) looks specifically at metaphors connected to myths of creativity in three of Byatt's novels and puts her works primarily into feminist perspectives. In examining Byatt's *The Shadow of the Sun*, *The Game*, and *Possession*, she also relies on Byatt as a critic of her own writings. Franken (2001: xii) aims at analyzing "the contradictory, yet highly productive ways in which Byatt's criticism moves across and in and out of Leaviste, post-structuralist, and feminist debates about art, creativity and authorship". Looking at the writer figure in the selected novels, Franken's (2001: xiii) focus lies on "pos[ing] the question what happens when a young female novelist deploys theories of art, vision and creative identity as a medium for her anxieties and generation".

The year 2001 saw the publication of the first essay collection on Byatt's works, edited by Alexa Alfer and Michael Noble, who set the aim of reaching "a more comprehensive

understanding of what is perhaps the most recurrent and idiomatic of Byatt's intellectual and aesthetic concerns: the nature of fiction as the proxy of thought and as an object of knowledge in its own right" (Alfer and Noble 2001: 2). The authors of the essays examine Byatt's both intensely sensual and intellectual fictional worlds, the works' exploration of storytelling and critical thought, negotiations of history, the postmodern blurring of the boundaries between literary and critical genres, the mix of styles and forms, reinventions of Victorian poetry and thought, and Byatt's continual meditation on the novel form, as well as complications of the "real" in fiction and how to render it.

In her own highly revealing essay on *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, Alfer (2001) discusses the nature of time and historical knowledge, the social context, as well as metaphors, visual and verbal forms of perception, and the imaginary and the real in the two novels. Her emphasis lies on examining Byatt's use of both literary experimentation and realist allegiances. She (2001: 48-49) notes, "[I]t is her creative and ever-questioning experimentation *with* realist formats that not only marks her out as a highly innovative storyteller, but also renders her fictions valuable and important interventions in and contributions to the ongoing debates on our ways of worldmaking, both within and beyond the literary text", thus pointing to the ways in which Byatt's challenging of realist formats and her use of experimentation offers more general insights into the nature of meaning making. Alfer (2001: 57) also suggests that Byatt's experiments show how realism is a potentially self-conscious narrative mode, preoccupied not simply with the close mimicking of reality but with "the problems and pitfalls of our desire for such representations and the always textual strategies we employ in pursuit of them". Alfer (2001: 57) thus shows how realism and self-consciousness are not mutually exclusive modes of representation.

The intertwining of realism and self-consciousness has been emphasized also by Jane Campbell (2004), who presents one of the most comprehensive works on Byatt's fiction,



shedding light on all of Byatt's novels and short story collections to date, except for the recently published *Little Black Book of Stories* (2004). Her focus lies, somewhat similarly to Franken's (2001), on women's lives and creativity, and her broader emphasis is on "Byatt's overall growth as a novelist who has been constantly moving into new fictional territory, engaging with new subjects and devising new methods" (2004: 4). Campbell (2004) discusses at length the nature of Byatt's characters and, like Todd (1997), draws the reader's attention to their masterful portrayal. Campbell (2004: 5) notes that throughout her work, Byatt "has never lost the sight of the need to present the reader with credible characters evoking sympathy and with the related challenges involving story, narration, and morality". Campbell (2004: 9) points out that Byatt values characters who are both "openly fictive – 'papery' – and 'real'". She (2004: 9) claims that Byatt's highly believable, "real" characters arise from her belief that "a large part of the pleasure of reading fiction is rooted in a very basic, primitive response to characters, a response that can still be made even when postmodernism has taught us to distrust both language and the concept of character". In particular, it is Byatt's female characters who are of interest to Campbell.

Thus, Byatt's works have given rise to a number of critical studies that emphasize the high believability, the "realness" of Byatt's characters, their verbal minds and love for reading and the passion they find in thinking and feeling deeply. The studies highlight Byatt's preoccupation with the process of writing and the nature of creativity as well as her emphasis on language, naming, and representation and the relationships between the imaginary and the real. Most notably, the studies foreground Byatt's simultaneous use of realist conventions and postmodern techniques which challenge and extend both modes of writing and offer insights into the meaning making processes.

The present author hopes to add to the scholarly discussion of Byatt's works by taking a close look at the quartet, a thorough account of which as a unit has not yet appeared. In

particular, the thesis focuses on the use of such metafictional techniques that seem to be especially pertinent to Byatt's writing and appear to be among the most prominent features that contribute to her status as an author who successfully merges realism and experimentation, drawing on the former's self-conscious potential (Alfer 2001: 57). These features are discussed against the framework of studies in recent British fiction and its relationship to self-conscious modes of writing, introduced in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Self-Conscious Realism or Realist Self-Consciousness?**

The studies on Byatt's works, discussed in Introduction, have highlighted a number of characteristics that seem to be among the defining features of contemporary British fiction. Various studies on contemporary fiction, most notably these by Lynn Wells (2003), Andrzej Gasiorek (1995), Amy Elias (1993), Marguerite Alexander (1990), Alison Lee (1990), and David Lodge (1986), have outlined the concern with language, self-reflexivity, and the processes of creation and construction of an artifact as some of the dominant preoccupations of contemporary British fiction. The studies have also emphasized that contemporary works characteristically foreground adhering to realist formats and "reality" in depiction while also posing larger questions on the possibility or impossibility of representation.

Lodge (1986: 22) has proposed the framework of the "novelist at a crossroads", suggesting that the novelist, primarily the British novelist, after the 1970s stands at a crossroads facing the paths of the realist novel, the non-fiction novel, fabulation, which suspends realistic illusion and abandons realistic imitation, and the novel-about-itself. Lodge (1986: 22) views the latter, the problematic novel, as having affinities with both the non-fiction novel and fabulation but, importantly, "it remains distinct precisely because it brings both into play . . . the reality principle is never allowed to lapse entirely; indeed, it is often invoked, in the spirit of the non-fiction novel, to expose the artificiality of conventional realistic illusion".

Several scholars have expressed similar views. Malcolm Bradbury (1977: 8-16) comments on the distinction between the British novel's inclinations towards realism and its tendencies to focus on form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination, and draws attention to the fact that contemporary novels seem to be fascinated with displaying fictional processes, the relationships between the writer, character, plot, and reader. Also Randall Stevenson (1993: 118-124) has outlined a crossroads of convention and experiment, the alternations between tradition and innovation, as one of the defining characteristics of British literature after the 1960s. The combinations of the realist framework and the self-reflexive approach allows for novels with highly realist tendencies mixed with investigations of writing, reading, illusion, and artifice. Similarly, Dominic Head (2002: 224) points out that "the out-and-out experimental novel has never taken root in Britain" and suggests that contemporary British literature centers on reworking the realist contract and, instead of lapsing into the total laying bare of artifice and fabrication, involves the reader in accepting that the text is a bridge to reality.

Such claims can well raise the question about the content of the concept of "realism", and indeed, studies on contemporary fiction have been particularly interested in the exploring the dimensions of realism in the context of the contemporary. Lee's, Alexander's, and Gasiorek's definitions of realism examine techniques associated with the nineteenth and twentieth century writing practices and the notions of reality and art. Lee (1990: ix) defines realism as tied to "the literary conventions . . . which were developed in nineteenth-century England and France as a formula for the literal transcription of 'reality' into art". She (1990: 36) suggests that contemporary novels frequently create an illusion of being primarily realist renderings of "reality", while challenging these renderings from within, for example, by employing the device of verisimilitude, subversively using real-life personages and places as part of the fictional world, which questions realist conventions of historical documentation and fact,

pointing to the blurring of the real and the fictional. Alexander (1990: 40) highlights the ways in which in realist fiction, self-reflexiveness about recreating the world in the act of writing is concealed in order to “draw attention to the novelist’s representation of the ‘real’ world”. Gasiorek (1995: v) takes a more open-ended approach toward the notion of realism and views it “not in terms of more or less fixed formal techniques but as a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world, which manifests itself in a variety of forms in different historical periods”.

The works that “deliberately fall somewhere between what Barthes calls the *scriptible* and the *lisible*, and [which] . . . tend to try to reconceptualize realism rather than reject it outright in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique” (Gasiorek 1995: v), then, are especially interesting to study, posing questions regarding relationships between and the intermingling of realist and reflexive modes of writing. These works foreground mimetical rendering of “reality” in art and highlight the status of a work of fiction as a constructed artifact, emphasizing the role of language in building and mediating texts and reality. As suggested by Gasiorek (1995: 14-15), “Janus-faced, these texts look both outward to an external world that they attempt to depict in all its complexity and inward to the very processes by which such depiction is brought into being”. Byatt as an author certainly sets out to create such texts, her own credo being expressed in the following words, “Most postmodernist fiction cuts out any emotion very much earlier on. It doesn’t allow the reader any pleasure, except in the cleverness of the person constructing the postmodernist fiction. I think that’s boring. I think you can have all the other pleasures as well” (Byatt in Tredell 1994: 62). Her fiction indeed manifests the idea that a postmodern text can create a realistically definable and identifiable world, in which one can become immersed by the narrative, and at the same time retain the postmodernist interest in textual construction without the author necessarily showing off the experimental mastery.

Gasiorek (1995: 19) argues that distinctions between traditional or innovative modes of writing are not totally adequate. He goes a step further and claims that the concept of realism should be seen as inherently plural. Indeed, Gasiorek (1995: 22) regards realism as “flexible, wide-ranging, unstable, historically variable, and radically open-ended”, thus allowing for inherent multiplicity. The notion of realisms rather than realism is apparent, for example, in the variety of narrative forms and the mixing of genres. Gasiorek (1995: 19) observes that one of the most prominent characteristics of contemporary fiction is “the interanimation of forms, styles, and techniques”, the layered and interlocking usage of multiple genres and writing traditions. He notes that the writers he examines “cross-breed narrative modes, taking what suits them from a variety of genres, and creating new forms that cannot be easily classified” (Gasiorek 1995: 19).

Thus, what would traditionally be called realist texts have frequently been molded into new shapes that simultaneously incorporate realist and self-conscious techniques. For example, Gasiorek (1995: 93) examines works that manifest realism, fabulation, and the mingling of the two, and suggests the term “experimental realism”. Elias (1993: 9) has suggested the term “Postmodern Realism” to designate works which “seem different from ‘straight’ Realism – harder, more metafictional, *postmodern*”, while they also “seem different from – i.e., more realistic than – that of the ‘experimentalists’”. She (1993: 12) has noted that this new form of realism, when compared to traditional realism, renders the world which has become textualized and “records the multiple worlds/texts within contemporary culture and recognizes the inability to evaluate society’s conflicting values; it mimics the multiple selves of characters and recognizes the problem of articulating an essential Self in this social context”. Indeed, Postmodern Realism is a helpful term to account for the novels mixing experiment, verisimilitude, and realism, and can “open a discussion concerning the possibility

of an ‘experimental mimesis’, one within a long line of Realist re-visionings in British fiction” (Elias 1993: 28).

Such critical opinions and new terms offered by literary scholars closely resemble Byatt’s own characterization of her writing. Byatt (1993: xv) has commented upon the relationship between realist and experimental modes by noting that many of her novels represent “self-conscious realism”, a mixture of realism and self-reflexive aspects. Byatt (*op. cit.* 15) has pointed out that the idea to write self-consciously realist novels was influenced by Proust’s thoughts: “And what Proust taught me, in the early 1960s, was that it was possible for a text to be supremely mimetic, ‘true to life’ in the Balzacian sense, and at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world”. Byatt (*op. cit.* xvi) has also voiced her ambivalence regarding inward-looking, reader-written texts, or what she calls ‘solipsistic’ texts, claiming that, for example, in the worlds of self-reflexive works by Robbe-Grillet and Sterne, the reader meets only the sensibility of the novelist: it is the novelist who “teases the reader and demands total admiration and assent” (*op. cit.* xvi). On the other hand, George Eliot, for example, is not so restrictive to the reader, since “her reasonable proceedings leave room for dissent and qualification –indeed, she demonstrates and argues the case for independent thought, in reader as in characters and writer” (*op. cit.* xvii). She (*op. cit.* xv) also explains why she favors self-conscious realism by noting, “If I have defended realism, or what I call ‘self-conscious realism’, it is not because I believe that it has any privileged relationship to truth, social or psychological, but because it leaves space for thinking minds as well as feeling bodies”.

Byatt (in Tredell 1994: 65) has discussed at length her ideas on the notion of representation and on the postmodern concern with language, especially with how words are used to denote things. Byatt (in Tredell 1994: 65-66) points out that she does not adhere to the postmodernist view that language is a self-supporting system which is not related to things and suggests, “I

don't have any naive vision of words and things being one-to-one equivalents, but they're woven, like a sort of great net of flowers on top of the surface of things". She further adds:

I know that Iris Murdoch is right and that Wittgenstein is right, to say that, however much we may try to get at what is under the net, we're only ever describing the net. But if you make the meshes fine enough, the net is so beautiful that all the bumps and humps of things under it are so, yes, so accessible, you can actually sort of see them under the net. (66)

Thereby, Byatt provides insights into the relationships between the realist aspiration to create a recognizable, "true" reality, while the postmodern emphasis draws attention to the complex of questions related to the medium and the inherent artificiality of such representation; however, she suggests that language can nevertheless make it possible to get at the very heart of reality.

In today's critical idiom, self-consciousness of writing and artificiality of representation are closely connected to the notion of metafictional writing. The following sections of this chapter outline the concepts of metafiction and explore how the balancing between the realist approach and the foregrounding of the constructed nature and formal preoccupations of the novel highlights the relevance of examining Byatt's works from a metafictional point of view.

### **Attempts to Define Metafiction**

The coinage of the term 'metafiction' in the 1970s is generally attributed to the American novelist and critic William H. Gass (see e.g. Gass in Ommundsen 1993: 14). Various other terms have been used to refer to the phenomenon of metafiction, such as 'introspected', 'introverted', 'narcissistic', 'auto-representational', 'self-conscious', 'self-reflexive' writing, 'antifiction', and 'fabulation' (see *op. cit.* p. 14). It has been pointed out (*ibid.*) that the terms are not perfectly synonymous, foregrounding slightly different dominants and concerns and



are often associated with different authors, theorists and time periods. The present author has opted for the term 'metafiction', sharing Wenche Ommundsen's (*op. cit.* 15) view that "'metafiction' has established itself as the dominant designation for contemporary reflexive fiction, and so is the label most likely to be recognized".

There is a variation as to the ways in which the term 'metafiction' has been defined. For the purposes of the present paper, the most helpful definitions have been provided by Linda Hutcheon (1983), Patricia Waugh (1990), and Larry McCaffery (1982). Hutcheon (1983: 1) suggests that metafiction can be defined as "fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity". Waugh (1990: 2) has defined metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality". Waugh (1990: 20) also draws attention to the possible implications that metafictional texts might have for reality, stating that "[i]n providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text". McCaffery (1982: 5) regards metafictional "fictions which examine fictional systems, how they are created, and the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions", and uses the term 'metafiction' to refer to the "type of fiction which either directly examines its own construction as it proceeds or which comments or speculates about the forms and language of previous fictions" (*op. cit.* 16). These scholars lay emphasis on the ways in which metafictional texts manifest their preoccupation with texts: the relationships between constructing, reading and interpreting texts, as well as constructing, reading and interpreting reality. These aspects make the definitions relevant to the present paper by providing a framework for studying the novels by Byatt.

One of the defining characteristics of metafictional texts is their self-reflexivity, their awareness of themselves as fictions, as fictional constructs. Waugh (1990: 14) suggests that the metafictional text “self-consciously reflects upon its own structure and language”. Hutcheon (1983: 25) highlights the idea that the metafictional text sheds light on its inward construction and can “self-consciously present its own creative processes.” She (1983: 6) has noted that metafiction simultaneously creates a fiction and makes a statement about the creation of that fiction. Wenche Ommundsen (1993: 12) suggests, “Metafiction presents its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artifact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning-making systems”. Metafictional consciousness of reading, writing and meaning-making processes can be apparent in the ways the metafictional text points to fictional systems and construction of texts and meaning, both inside and outside works of fiction, through thematizing issues concerning reading and writing, as well as including commentaries on the work itself and on other fictions, and manifesting preoccupations with form and with the fiction-reality relationship.

### **Reading and Readers, Writing and Writers, Commenting and Commentators**

Metafictional texts can self-reflexively comment on the reading, writing, and meaning-making processes by disrupting the story line with intrusive comments, as well as by mirroring and thematizing acts of reading, writing, and interpreting through which the metafictional text can indicate different roles that readers and writers can assume.

A number of studies (e.g., Waugh 1990, Ommundsen 1993, McCaffery 1982, Hutcheon 1983) note that one of the defining characteristics of metafictional works is choosing the issues of writing and writers, reading and readers as their subject matter, and including writers

and readers as their characters and the talk about books as an integral part of the text. Waugh (1990: 9) suggests that by focusing on characters who are concerned with reading, writing, and interpreting written words and written worlds, metafictional texts point to the ways in which fictional systems are created – for example, by being written by the characters, interpreted and discussed and thereby newly created by other characters. Creating fictional systems acquires significance due to the fact that it can indicate larger meaning-making processes in the world, as "by exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated" (McCaffery 1982: 225).

The concern with books and authors, reading, writing and interpreting can often make the metafictional text manifest intertextuality, as the text and the characters within it can refer to other texts and other authors. Susana Onega and Jose Angel Garcia Landa (1996: 32) posit that metafiction is essentially tied to intertextuality, "the theory which asserts that no text exists as an autonomous and self-sufficient whole: the writer's and the reader's experience of other texts conditions its form and interpretation". Elizabeth Dipple (1995: 234) notes that metafictional texts, by including intertextual allusions to and quotations from other texts and other discourses and by other authors, manifests the idea of "texts infinitely talking to and illuminating each other". Intertextuality, then, shows how the given text can be related to other literary texts, generic conventions, and social discourses, or the critical commentary of the text reminding the reader that texts are potentially plural, reversible, and assembled from or interwoven with bits and pieces of already existent art (see Allen 2001: 209).

One of the features of metafictional texts is their tendency to comment on their own construction and the practice of writing fiction, often from theoretical perspectives. In Mark Currie's (1995: 2-5) introduction to the notion of metafiction, the interrelation of theory and criticism and the dramatization of the boundary between the two concepts are outlined as

constituting the very essence of metafiction. Ommundsen (1993: 16), examining the relationship between metafiction and literary theory and criticism, suggests that "metafiction presents a theory of fiction from within a fictional text and so blurs the distinction between primary and secondary writing, between fiction and writing about fiction". Also Robert Scholes (1995: 21) points out that when a novel adopts critical perspectives it acquires the power to comment on other texts and to include within itself insights that would usually be formed externally in critical theories. One could suggest that metafictional texts create their own critical commentary by setting up the theoretical frame of reference in which they are to be considered and by self-reflexively explaining the writing of the book at hand or commenting on writing processes in general.

The work of fiction can offer comments on its own construction or on the processes of writing with the help of the intrusive narrator. The use of the intrusive narrator indicates the text's self-reflexive awareness by providing comments and causing disruptions in the story with reflections on the process of fiction-making. The intervention by the narrator can be one of the factors which forms a new narrative level and thus breaks the reader's illusion that he or she is reading about 'true' or 'real' events and people. Ommundsen (1993: 8) has stated that the intrusion may be of personal nature, "referring to the act of writing or to the writer's real life" or it can also take a more theoretical approach and comment on the practice of writing fiction from theoretical viewpoints. Ommundsen (1993: 8) has also added that interrupting the narrative flow by focusing on the thoughts of the narrator or by theorizing about literature may leave an impression that 'real' life has stepped into the work of fiction. In explaining how texts can create a plurality of worlds within themselves by introducing elements that form an illusion of real life entering the novel, the present author found especially useful the account on postmodernism by Brian McHale (1987), especially his distinctions between the primary world of the work of fiction – the diegesis, and the world

within this primary world – the hypodiegetic world. The inclusion of self-reflexive comments and elements which create an illusion of real life entering the text can be seen as forming a new diegetic level.

Fictions including self-criticism or self-commentary pose various insights into the treatment of the author's and the reader's roles. As claimed by Ommundsen (1993: 65), one of the features of metafictional works is their emphasis on the role of the author in the writing process and that of the reader in the reading process, as they thematize and self-consciously comment on the reader's and writer's positions and functions in the meaning-making process. Similarly, Inger Christensen (1981: 13) claims that metafictionists tend to make the study of the relations between the author and his/her art and that between the reader and the work the subject of the text, thereby discussing issues in connection with fictional creation in general. To engage the reader and make him/her aware of his/her presence, metafictional texts may include the device of direct addresses to the reader, for example by insulting, commanding, provoking, referring to the reader (see Hutcheon 1983: xvi). It has been noted (see Hutcheon 1983: 141, Ommundsen 1993: 77) that the reader has always been an accomplice in the meaning-making process but writers of self-reflexive fiction make the reader aware of his/her active participation and also highlights that reading, not only writing, is an imaginative, creative act.

The positions of the reader and the author may also be established in more subtle ways than making the reader an aware participant in the processes of reading and constructing texts; for example, the role of the reader can be thematized by embodying the characters as dramatized readers thinking about, discussing and performing acts of reading. It has been pointed out (see Ommundsen 1993: 65-66) that by reflecting the reader in the processes of reading and interpreting the text, the novel might suggest patterns of behavior for the real-life reader, as through the reading characters "real readers are presented with a running

commentary on the nature of the text-reader (or author-reader) relationship: motivations for reading, attitudes and expectations fostered by other texts and other authors, enchantment or critical detachment, and so on".

Theorizing about the role of the reader by depicting a character as a reader in the act of reading or making the real-life reader an aware participant in the meaning-making process offers ways of guiding the reader in the act of reading. Gerald Prince (1995: 65-67) points out that metafictional texts may include a commentary which builds into the texts instructions on how to read and indicates how reading might proceed. Also Hutcheon's studies (1983, 1999) view metafiction which thematizes the reader's role as having a didactic purpose: it teaches the reader about the ontological status of fiction and about the complex nature of reading, also providing clues as to how to learn to read differently and acquire new reading techniques.

### **Concern with Form: Structural Incoherence and Multiple Textual Levels**

Metafictional texts frequently manifest preoccupations with form by creating structural incoherence and transgressing generic boundaries; these texts thereby introduce multiple genres and multiple discourses, which, by extension, point to the relationships between fiction and reality, between constructing a work of fiction and constructing reality.

Consciousness about and preoccupation with form belongs to one of the key characteristics of metafictional texts. Onega and Landa (1996: 30) foreground the importance of form by stating that "by metafiction we mean fiction which experiments with its own form as a way of creating meaning". Also Christensen (1981: 151) suggests that focusing on form is 'no mere exhibition of craftsmanship' but closely related to the message the author wants to convey while calling attention to the writing process. In connection with frequent concerns with form in metafiction, several studies have emphasized its 'playfulness' (Onega and Landa 1996: 31,

McCaffery 1982: 13, Waugh 1990: 14). Onega and Landa (1996: 31) have noted that metafiction can be defined as "a way of writing, or more precisely as a way of consciously manipulating fictional structures, of playing games with fiction". Also McCaffery (1982: 13) suggests that many metafictional texts are form-oriented and include various strategies, such as Burroughs' 'cut-out' technique and possibilities of graphics and typography as devices which can be used to explore formal possibilities.

The preoccupation with form can offer explanations for the notion of structural incoherence, a typical feature of metafictional texts, which may cause the text to defy usual expectations set up by the genre. Hutcheon (1999: 224) suggests that employing structural incoherence challenges "the border we accept as existing between literature and the extra-literary narrative discourses which surround it: history, biography, autobiography", which thereby makes the reader question the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Ommundsen (1993: 9) outlines different kinds of structural incoherence: the latter can include problematizing the coherence of fictional characters or the idea of a single ending, as well as transgressing generic boundaries by including within a work of fiction elements that are usually found in other types of writing or in other discourses. Ommundsen (1993: 9) has drawn the reader's attention to the fact that the presence of discourses which are commonly seen as belonging to spheres other than literature illustrates "how texts are sorted into categories and how the category itself determines our mode of reception". Additionally, different textual types and elements from other genres and other discourses can create a plurality of hypodiegetic worlds within the diegetic world.

The preoccupation with issues of form, structural incoherence, and the transgression of generic boundaries make metafictional texts call attention to their constructed nature. Including within the work of fiction several discourses and drawing attention to the ways in which the text has been written, the metafictional text indicates that the text is a made 'thing',

it is a 'linguistic and narrative construct' (Ommundsen 1993: 3). The constructed nature can become apparent also in the beginnings and endings of metafictional texts. Waugh (1990: 29) observes that "metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries"; she adds that "they often end with a choice of endings. Or they may end with a sign of the impossibility of endings". Alternatively, metafictional texts "may end with a gloss upon the archetypal fictional ending, the 'happy ever after'" (Waugh 1990: 29). The concern with beginnings and endings appears to point to the text's preoccupation with the ways in which it has been built and draws attention to the text's self-reflexive tendencies.

The notion of constructedness and the work's claim for reality can give ground to tensions within the work. Peter Standish (1993: 54) has pointed out that one of the characteristic features of metafiction, which creates fiction and makes a statement about the creation of that fiction, is its opposition between creating an illusion of reality and laying bare that illusion by manifesting the fabricated nature of the text. The fact that metafictional texts frequently draw attention to the ways in which illusion is created and broken in fiction points to the intricate relationship between fiction and reality.

### **Reality in Fiction, Fiction in Reality**

One of the most frequent concerns of metafictional texts is their posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, and examining the possible fictionality of the world. Waugh (1990: 36) has pointed out that one of the defining features that metafictionists share is their foregrounding of "the shift from the context of 'reality' to that of 'fiction' and the complicated interpenetration of the two". Metafictional texts can emphasize the notion of the reality-fiction relationship in various ways, for example, by tackling the concepts of



fictionality or reality of fictional characters and by discussing the importance of stories and language in fictions and in the world, as well as by looking at the reading of fictions and reality as texts, both of which manifest their constructed nature.

Metafictional texts can point to the complicated nature of the fiction-reality relationship by exploring the identity of a fictional character, "a non-entity who is somebody" (Waugh 1990: 90). On the one hand, fictional characters 'do not exist' because the reader knows they are created by the author. Metafictional texts further stress this idea by drawing attention to characters as fictional devices. The fictionality of the character can be indicated in the author's creation of characters who realize that they "do not exist, cannot die, have never been born, cannot act. Or start to perform impossible acts" (Waugh 1990: 91). On the other hand, the characters exist in the world of fiction and in the ways the readers usually discuss them as 'real' people; the characters might leave a strong impression of appearing as real-life personages. The question of the fictional or factual identity of the characters can be further highlighted by including real-life personages as literary characters in the world of fiction and making the characters of the novel interact with or think about the people the real-life reader knows exist in the world outside the fictional realm. This might lead to problematizing the borders between fact and fiction (see Huthceon 1983: 93) and offers intricate patterns for the fiction-reality relationship, for reality in fiction and fiction in reality.

The notions of reality and fiction can be examined also from the viewpoint of how the world of fictions and the world outside fictions are created, influenced by, and mediated via language. McCaffery (1982: 9, 13-14) draws attention to the "way our perceptions and methods of interpretation are influenced by our received language" and to the thought that "consciousness is embodied in a particular language and it is our language which generates our response to the world". Metafictional texts often discuss and foreground the role of language as the medium of literary fiction and the mediator of the world, as well as call

attention to the function of words in creating fictional worlds and the world outside literary texts (see Waugh 1990: 4, 14, 54; McCaffery 13-14).

In examining the fiction-world relationship and the issues concerning reading and language, metafictional texts support the idea that the world can be seen as consisting of fictions (e.g., Ommundsen 1993: 4, Onega 1995: 95-96, McCaffery 1982: 8, Calinescu 1997: 245, Holmes 1995: 207) and point to the processes by which the world can be read as a text, referring to the metaphor of the world as a book and people's lives as books. McCaffery (1982: 8) touches upon the wider significance of the fiction-world relationship, saying that "we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world". Metafictional texts indicate that everyday reality can be regarded as a text, as a fiction, similarly consisting of stories and similarly constructed, thereby also similarly 'written' and 'writable' and 'readable'.

In connection with seeing the world as a web of fictions, the metafictional text can manifest its preoccupation with narratives as essential elements in forming fictions and the world outside fictions. Metafictional novels often examine the relationship between fiction and reality by emphasizing the notion of narrative and by discussing the importance of stories in people's lives. Ommundsen (1993: 106) has noted that most readers and writers today share the knowledge that people's realities are infused with fictions and claims that stories can be viewed as 'monuments to the search for a specifically human truth'. Also Hutcheon (1983: 81) suggests that narrative is a basic human faculty that is transferred to art from life. Metafictional texts advocate the idea that narratives are 'one of the essential constituents of our understanding of reality' (Butor 1978: 48), as people are perpetually surrounded by narratives: "we do not take leave of fiction-making when we abandon fairy tales and childhood games. We always tell stories – to escape, to remake, to alter our past and our

future". Metafictional texts may encourage the view that the novel is a "continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience" (Hutcheon 1983: 89). By focusing on the notion of stories and their role in fictions and in people's lives in the world outside fiction, metafictional texts draw parallels between the processes of making fiction and constructing one's world out of stories.

Connected to the idea that metafictional texts draw the reader's attention to the world as a text is the notion of the constructedness of texts and the world outside texts. Waugh (1990: 24) has noted that "for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's reality". Waugh (*op. cit.* 9) foregrounds the importance of metafiction's treatment of the concept of the world as a construct by suggesting that "in showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'", since metafiction can offer accurate models for understanding the world as an artifice and a web of interdependent semiotic systems.

The metafictional characteristics and devices discussed above can vary in the extent to which they occur in the text. It has been suggested that some texts make their metafictional tendencies explicit, for example, by experimenting with form, by including self-commentary and discussing the relationships between authors and readers, whereas metafictional features can also be found in many works that seem conventional in form and content and are less explicit in their reflexive commentary (see McCaffery 1982, Ommundsen 1993). Several studies have noted that detecting metafictional characteristics and strategies, especially in texts in which they are not so unambiguously and explicitly manifested, depends on whether the reader chooses to read them reflexively or not (Ommundsen 1993, Onega and Landa 1996, Currie 1995).

In order to tackle the question of the extent to which different metafictional devices and features might occur in the text, the author of this paper found particularly useful the account of metafictional characteristics by Waugh. Waugh (1990: 18), stating that 'metafiction' is "an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions", proposes a continuum of metafictional tendencies. At the one end of the spectrum she places novels "which take fictionality as a theme to be explored" and "whose formal self-consciousness is limited", constituting "a form that can be 'naturalized' ultimately to fit realist assumptions" (Waugh 1990: 116) (e.g., the novels by Murdoch and Kosinski). Novels occurring at the next point of the scale foreground characters who are trapped within the novelist's script, within someone else's predetermined order or within language itself (*op. cit.* 119-129). The texts at the center of the spectrum "manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a total interpretation (which constitute, therefore, a 'new realism'), as in the work of Fowles and Doctorow" (*op. cit.* 18). The furthest extreme of the spectrum is occupied by fictions which "reject realism more thoroughly, posit the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions" (*op. cit.* 18) and engage in Wittgensteinian language games, seeing fiction and reality as a game with words (e.g. Sorrentino, Federman, Brooke-Rose) (*op. cit.* 139-149). Waugh (*op. cit.* 139) notes that in general, British authors tend to write metafictionally less explicit texts and rather take the processes of writing and reading as topics to be mediated upon. As seen above, Byatt is an exemplary figure of a contemporary British novelist at a crossroads who is also acutely aware of her own position on the scale between realist and experimental poles. As critical opinion (e.g., Campbell 2004, Kelly 1996, Todd 1997, Wallhead 1999) has stressed the importance of Byatt's 'lifelike' characters and their concern with the processes of reading and writing, the latter serving as an immediate signal of metafictionality. The following chapters will examine metafictional characteristics and

devices displayed in the Frederica Potter quartet, observing the modes of reading and writing in particular.

## CHAPTER 2

### Characters as Readers

Characters as readers are an immediately noticeable feature in Byatt's quartet – a characteristic that has been commented on by critics, e.g., Juliet Dusinberre (1995: 58) who writes: "[Byatt's characters] measure their acquaintance with life in terms of what they have read, and they are stunningly better read than most people", which becomes apparent in the number of references to various authors and texts. The majority of the central characters of the quartet – Frederica, Stephanie, Alexander, Raphael, and Bill – are involved in writing, reading, and teaching literature, thus being closely related to the world of books through their work and their passion for the written word and written worlds. The quartet abounds in references to literature and most of these occur in connection with the characters' sharing their reading experiences and thoughts that books have stimulated in them, "relat[ing] experience to what happens to people in books" (Byatt in Campbell 1997: 105-106).

The novels offer a myriad of examples of intertextual references. Indeed, as Byatt (in Wachtel 1994: 77-78) has noted, "[M]y books are thick with the presence of other books, but I feel that out there in the world must be other people who read as passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and the world". The selection of authors that her characters frequently refer to – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Marvell, Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne, to name just a few – echoes Byatt's own literary preferences (e.g., Byatt in Frumkes 1997: 15). Byatt (2001: 93) has commented on her

admiration for the authors belonging to the past, noting, “My sense of my own identity is bound up with the past, with what I read and with the way my ancestors, genetic and literary, read, in the worlds in which they lived. A preoccupation with ancestors has always been part of human make-up, and still, I think, comes naturally”. Various authors and works referred to also seem to signify some of the cultural icons, influential writers of the times in which the novels are set. For example, Byatt (IS 3) has pointed out that many of the authors and books that Frederica and other characters of *Babel Tower* refer to represent the influential figures, writers, and books of the era depicted in the novel, which is one of the reasons they are mentioned so often. She notes that *The Hobbit*, the Marquis de Sade, Norman O. Brown, Brook, Genet were some of the "powers ruling the landscape of our imaginations" (*ibid.*) in the sixties.

The majority of intertextual references in the tetralogy are made by the central character Frederica Potter, an avid reader whose thinking and ways of seeing the world and people are to a great extent based on literature. Indeed, in *Still Life* the narrator suggests, “The life of English literature lived in her” (SL 264). The variety of literary references reflects the extent to which authors and books are a presence in Frederica’s thinking and in her conversations with others. Most of such references are made in connection with Frederica pondering the books she has read, the texts and authors she is dissecting in her studies, the discussions she has with her family, friends, students, and Cambridge dons, and her job as a teacher and book reviewer. Frederica makes a number of references to Shakespeare, Milton, Kingsley Amis, Proust, Lawrence, Forster, Racine, Blake, Waugh, and Tolkien, among others. Among the novels she is preoccupied with it is Lawrence’s *Women in Love* and Forster’s *Howards End*, both of which become crucial in Frederica's thoughts on love and marriage, that stand out as the most prominent. Frederica responds especially strongly, and ambivalently, to Lawrence, noting, “I love Lawrence and I hate him. I believe in him and I reject him totally, all at the

same time” (VG 348). *Women in Love* is a book about which Frederica "feels a fierce ambivalence; it is powerful, it is ridiculous, it is profound, it is willfully fantastic. . . . Its existence is part of the way she sees the world. It matters to her that these students should see it" (BT 212), a comment illustrating the power with which Frederica feels, thinks, and talks about literature.

Frederica finds books of utmost importance in identifying herself and the world, and feels a hunger for thinking about books (e.g., in "Oh, but the bliss of talking about books . . . and not about houses, and things, and possessions" (BT 149)). Indeed, she is "magnetized by print, by lettering, she [takes] sensual pleasure in reading anything at all, instructions about Harpic and fire alarms, lists, or . . . the titles of books" (VG 99). When thinking about her life, Frederica thinks about literature; she thinks about *Paradise Lost*, which she sees as "a closed world, made of language, and religion, and science, the science of a universe of concentric spheres which had never existed, and had constructed the minds of generations. It was part of her" (WW 420).

The reader can sense the characters' hunger and love for reading and their need to talk about books and interpret themselves and the world with the help of books also in Stephanie. Stephanie "talks more about literature than life" (SL 110). Her desperate "*I must have my books*" (SL 89, italics in the original), cried out when she is waiting for the birth of her son, serves as a prime example of her almost physical need for books. In a strikingly powerful scene depicting Stephanie trying to come to terms with her decision to marry, the reader can similarly sense how deeply important reading is for her:

What she thought . . . was that she should not marry, she had lost, or buried, a world in agreeing to marry, she should go back to Cambridge and write a thesis on Wordsworth's fear of drowning books. . . She turned back to the beginning of the book and began wildly to read it all, as though her self depended on it. (VG 251)



Thematizing reading activities and the reader's response includes the depiction of characters reading stories and poems to each other. *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* recount the reading process by describing Agatha Mond, a housemate and friend of Frederica's, reading her fairy tales to a group of listeners. Portraying characters engrossed in the acts of reading and listening to poems and stories, at times forgetting about the world that surrounds them outside these texts, points to the ways in which the characters of a fictional world can become engaged in the fictional world of other fictional works, and, by extension, shows how the real-life reader might find himself/herself in a similar situation.

The quartet offers especially revealing insights into the reading processes in the scenes showing Stephanie and Frederica engaged in dialogs with texts. Stephanie, reading Keats's "Ode to the Grecian Urn", comes to realize that this is "the poem she most cared for, saying ambivalently that you could not do, and need not attempt, what is required of you to do, see the unseen, realize the unreal, speak what was not, and that yet it did it so that unheard melodies seemed infinitely preferable to any one might ever hope to hear" (VG 78). She further thinks that people "might so easily never have hit on the accidental idea of making unreal verbal forms, they might have just lived, and dreamed, and tried to tell the truth" (VG 78). The scene clearly illustrates thought processes accompanying reading and the character's tackling the concepts of reality, truth, imagination, and fictionality. Another interesting scene of mirroring a character in the process of reading occurs in connection with Stephanie reading Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal' and commenting on it as she follows the poem line by line, analyzing the words Wordsworth uses and their effect on her (SL 12-15). The scene offers a revealing account of the reader engaged in a dialog with the text, going through process of meaning-making and analyzing.

One of the most masterful depictions of the reading process occurs in *A Whistling Woman*, which includes a scene describing Frederica reading *The Great Gatsby* with her extra-mural students and “really seeing” the brilliance of the excerpt:

She felt something she had always supposed was mythical, the fine hairs on the back of her neck rising and pricking in a primitive response to a civilized perfection, body recognizing mind.

She stopped in mid-sentence, and began again, urgently. Look, she told them, I’ve just *really seen* how good this paragraph is. Think about the adjectives, how simple they look, how right every single one is, out of all the adjectives that could have been chosen. (WW 269)

The reader can sense Frederica’s extremely powerful, strong physical and emotional response to reading. The moment is crucial in making her realize that teaching, interpreting verbal worlds, is what she is meant to do:

For the rest of her life, she came back and back to this moment, the change in the air, the pricking of the hairs, of *really reading* every word of something she had believed she “knew”. And at that moment, she knew what she should do was teach, for what she understood – the thing she was both by accident and by inheritance constructed to understand – was the setting of words in order, to make worlds, to make ideas. (WW 270)

Characters like Stephanie and Frederica serve as prime examples of Byatt’s literary characters for whom thinking about abstract concepts is crucial: it is an intellectual, physical, and emotional need for them. As Frederica notes, “I don’t want to *act*, I want to think. Clarity. Curiosity. Curiouser and curiouser” (WW 138). Indeed, as Byatt (in Kenyon 1992: 14) points out, “I see thinking as an activity like running, experience isn’t all narrative, and love and relationships. Many of my important experiences have come from seeing what Milton is saying”. Byatt’s characters manifest the author’s intent: “I want to convey that the experience of thinking very hard in abstract terms is just as immediate as the experience of standing next to a rosebush” (Byatt in Tredell 1994: 70). Indeed, the reader can sense the immediacy and

power behind the characters' thinking and feeling deeply, indicating that thinking in abstract terms can be a vital source of experience.

### **Fictional Characters and Real-Life Personages**

The tetralogy describes the ways in which the literary characters of the novels view literary characters and events they encounter in their readings, which allows for analyzing the fiction-reality relationship. The idea that fiction can be closely linked to reality is hinted at in the ways literary figures and books have influenced several of the characters' lives, and in the ways literature and literary characters have intruded into the 'real' life of the characters of the quartet. Showing how the literary characters who exist outside the worlds of the novels step into the lives of other fictional characters can cause a mix of diegetic levels, as it introduces elements from extradiegetic level into the diegesis of the novels. The idea that literary characters from other books enter the lives of the characters of Byatt's novels is manifested in the ways in which Byatt's characters compare themselves and others to literary personages, how they relate situations in their lives to the ones they have encountered in books, and how they contemplate the realness of imaginary characters.

Imaginary personages and situations met in books seem to be constantly on the minds of Byatt's characters: certain people and events in their lives remind them of people and events encountered in books. Frederica frequently compares the people surrounding her to various literary characters; for example, Nigel resembles Puck from *Puck of Pooks' Hill* by Kipling (SL 296); she compares Nigel to Don Juan and Byron (BT 98), Leo to the Old Man of the sea (BT 128), and herself to Anna Karenina (WW 264); Jude Mason is compared to the Ancient Mariner (BT 440), to Jean-Paul Sartre's Saint Genet and Dostoevski's Idiot (BT 555). The fact that real-life fictional characters, existing outside the realm of the four novels, step into

the thoughts of Byatt's fictional characters blurs the borderline between fact and fiction, causing a mix of diegetic levels.

Moreover, Byatt's characters at times see themselves as, perhaps uncomfortably, close to other, as it were, real-life literary characters. Frederica talks about *Women in Love* and notes:

I was suddenly afraid I might be Gudrun, I mean, I saw the house as an awful trap, like the red-brick Brangwen house in that book, and Daddy was really beastly to me, and I thought of how Stephanie and I used to talk about it, and thought Stephanie was Ursula, and then I got really put out because that only left Gudrun, and I don't want to have to be her. (VG 348)

The phenomenon is especially intriguing as it shows how Byatt's imaginary characters, "real" to themselves, connect their lives to literary characters who the reader knows belong to real life and are thereby "real" while also being in essence "imaginary", fictional.

Byatt shows how her characters have aspired to be other, real-life characters, through acting. Frederica "had been Alice, and wanted, foolishly, to be Juliet, to be Mary Queen of Scots, to be Cleopatra. She had wanted to be full of Shakespeare's words about life – and love" (WW 137). Moreover, Mary Queen of Scots and Cleopatra serve as intriguing examples of doubling, as they are both historical figures and literary characters, thereby blurring the boundaries between the fictional and the historical. Another layer is added by making Frederica, an imaginary character, dream of acting them, becoming them.

Interestingly, Byatt also points to the idea that her characters and the real-life literary characters can become inseparable. For example, Alexander, looking at Marcus, who played Ophelia, "called up this boy's face and voice when he thought of Ophelia, and worse still, Ophelia immediately came to mind when he saw the boy" (VG 352). Byatt thereby foregrounds the dual dimension of intertwining a literary character with a specific person, which influences both the ways in which Alexander thinks of Ophelia and how he thinks of Marcus. Also, Byatt's characters at times feel that they have lived through and in some

author's fiction. For example, Frederica, listening to a speech from Alexander's *Astraea* realizes that the soliloquy "by the young Princess, thrust into the Tower by Mary Tudor, [is] a moment of history, and fiction, that Frederica had lived often enough, since she had grown up on the heady romantic emotion of Margaret Irvin's *Young Bess*" (VG 100). Interestingly, the idea of having lived in a real-life author's fiction comes to Frederica while listening to *Astraea*, the fictional work by her friend.

To Byatt's characters, literary characters are at times more real or at least as real as the people they meet in everyday life. For example, Leo goes to listen to singing at the anti-university and, seeing Tolkienish people in the audience, realizes that these people look made-up and unreal, diminishing the "shiny reality of the Tolkien-world in his head" (WW 317). The works by Tolstoy, George Eliot and Austen are to Frederica "books full of people she knew and loved, inside and out" (SL 215). Frederica often thinks of the 'real' people in her life and finds literary characters easier to love and their behavior and thoughts easier to interpret; for example, she tries to get to know Raphael and sees that he gives her information about himself which she is "simply not equipped to imagine as she could imagine Birkin and Pierre" (SL 215) from Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, respectively. In *A Whistling Woman*, however, Frederica comes to realize the possible balance between the idea that the fictional world and characters are real, immediate, and the idea that the world outside books is similarly real: "The Golgi-stained slide, the flashing movements of the snooker balls, the new-born child . . . – these existed, outside the classroom, outside the book-covers. These were real. These were also real" (WW 270).

Real-life authors and the fictional characters of their books have a profound influence on the 'real' life of Byatt's literary characters. Stephanie finds relief in thinking about authors, choosing it over thinking about her own life: "She thought of her childhood, and it was nothing to do with her. She thought of Daniel, and decided not to. She thought of

Wordsworth, and felt a momentary relief” (VG 255). Frederica turns to books and literary characters in search for instructions on how to lead her life and interpret people. Indeed, Frederica’s ideas about good manners derive from the characters created by Trollope, Austen, Lehmann, Waugh, Thirkell, and Lawrence (SL 110). For example, pondering complex connections between literature and life, Frederica realizes that her decision to marry Nigel was greatly influenced by the power of Forster’s *Howards End* and Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, their ideas of oneness and connectedness, and characters such as Mr. Wilcox, whose traits Frederica seemed to have found in Nigel (BT 308).

The novels show how Byatt’s characters’ relationships with one another, especially regarding the opposite sex, can be filtered through a fictional prism, heavily influenced by literary characters. Frederica frequently comments on connections between literary characters and the ‘real’ people in her life, especially men. Thinking of Alexander, she notes that “he too, like Daniel Orton and unlike Mr. Rochester, was flesh and blood” (VG 190). Frederica thinks about the idea that one can fall in love with or through literary figures; already before meeting Alexander, she had wanted to know him, as she had a similar ‘character type’ in her imagination, in the way that “some women might desire unknown actors at first, and through them Benedick [from *Much Ado About Nothing*] and Berowne [from *Love’s Labor Lost*] or Hamlet, and through them a dead playwright” (VG 325). Alexander illustrates the idea that one’s perception of romantic relationships is deeply influenced by the imaginary, sometimes making the imaginary and the real trade places: “He liked the imaginary relish. He liked imagined contact with real women, and real contact with imaginary women” (VG 343).

The relationships with members of opposite sex also illustrate the extent to which the characters’ minds are infused with literature, as they cannot stop thinking about literature even when making love. Alexander, cradling his lover Jenny in his arms, murmurs, “Don’t take on, ah, don’t . . . , wondering, even then, where he had got an idiom like that, northern

and not his own” (VG 346) and “track[s] it down wryly a few moments later to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” (VG 346). In another scene of Alexander and Jenny making love, Alexander thinks of T. S. Eliot, his voice and tenses (VG 45). Similarly, Frederica, making love to Wilkie, thinks, “with a moment of nausea, of Lawrence’s descriptions of Constance Chatterley’s florid spreading circles of satisfaction” (VG 420). Indeed, her mind, like Alexander’s, abounds in images and thoughts she has obtained from reading.

Frederica is fascinated by the fact that ‘real’ people can speak of fictional characters with such passion as if the latter truly existed. Frederica notes that her extra-mural students “talk about characters in books as though they were people whose fates were real, important and interesting” (BT 223). She adds, “These grown-up human beings speak wisely and foolishly of other human beings: Margaret and Ursula, Forster and Lawrence, Birkin and Mr Wilcox as though they were (as they are) people they know (and don’t know). They know perfectly well, if reminded, that four of these six beings are actually made of words, are capering word-puppets, not flesh and blood” (BT 329). By making her fictional characters talk about other fictional characters who are real in the world outside the novel but in essence are still fictional, Byatt introduces an interesting metafictional level which blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Byatt shows how her imaginary characters – like the ‘real’, existing reader outside the text – talk and think about literary characters, both Byatt’s and other authors’, as if they were ‘real’ people they know and at the same time do not know.

Frederica’s students make a relevant point that for them, Forster and Lawrence are similarly made only of words; just like the literary characters, the novelists “cannot be touched or tasted, the evidence for their thoughts is considerably more suspect and partial than the evidence for those of Margaret and Ursula” (BT 329). The authors, although ‘existing’ and ‘real’ are necessarily not more accessible or more easily understandable than their literary characters. Byatt’s literary characters, then, speak of both literary characters of other books

and their authors from a similar standpoint, making guesses about the reasons behind both the characters' and the authors' actions. Byatt's characters share views on what Margaret from *Howards End* and Ursula from *Women in Love* 'really wanted' or 'should have done', which Frederica thinks is what Forster and Lawrence "might have wanted their readers to discuss" (BT 328). This, Frederica concludes, is how people learn to understand the world and books, as by "connect[ing] the prose and the passion, in linguistic and imagining eddies of speculation and comment, understanding and bafflement" (BT 329), Frederica's students, and readers and literature lovers in general, "bring themselves to the text" (BT 329).

The fictional characters do not only think and talk about real-life personages as if they were fictional; in metafictional texts, real-life characters may step into the world of fiction (see above p ... [21]). In the four novels, one can find examples of real-life persons appearing in fiction, which mixes the diegetic levels and blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. For example, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *A Whistling Woman* record how the characters meet with real-life professors, biographers, and scholars, such as Helen Gardner, Lady Longford, and Frances Yates (VG 12, 246), as well as politicians, producers, and art historians, such as Michael Foot, Jonathan Miller, and Roy Strong, among others (WW 82, 135, 320). In *A Whistling Woman*, real-life personages, such as Hodder Pinsky and John Dee, appear as guests in the TV show that Frederica hosts. *Still Life* recounts the characters' meetings with Forster and Kingsley Amis and offers Frederica's comments on the two novelists (SL 120-124).

Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction manifests itself in an especially evocative way in *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Babel Tower*, in which the reader may get confused and start to wonder whether the texts or authors referred to actually exist, as they are often discussed side by side with real-life works and writers. For example, Frederica, looking at a pile of poetry books at home, mentions that "[t]here is Yeats, there is Mallarmé, there is



Raphael Faber, there is a Shakespeare” (BT 90). Here, the fictional character Raphael Faber is listed together with the real-life authors. Also, Frederica, being deeply engrossed in comparing Shakespeare, Racine, and Shaw, finds herself thinking that tracing recurrent images in the authors’ works, for example, “blood and babies in *Macbeth*, blood and light and dark in *Phedre*” . . . [make] both Shakespeare and Racine seem very much like Alexander Wedderburn” (VG 201). Her comment shows how the real-life and the fictional can be seen in the light of one another. Additionally, Byatt’s characters are reminded of real-life characters and books through the fictional works of their friends; for instance, Stephanie, watching Alexander’s *Astraea*, sees in the play a parody of the resurrection of Hermione in *A Winter’s Tale* (VG 362).

An interesting example of creating another layer which mingles the boundaries between fact and fiction occurs when Byatt makes real-life authors step into her fiction as characters. For example, Byatt includes the writer and literary journalist Anthony Burgess as one of the characters in *Babel Tower*. Burgess writes a review of Jude Mason’s *Babbletower* and later acts as a witness in the trial which prosecutes the book for obscenity. As the literary critic John Stinson has noted, “Byatt’s impersonation of Burgess’s voice, first, his writerly voice as a reviewer, and then his public speaking voice as a witness at a celebrated trial, is deft and highly accomplished” (IS 10). Also, real-life professors, literary critics, and novelists are referred to when the literary characters discuss who should be asked to come and speak for the literary benefit found in *Babbletower* – Prof. Frank Kermode, Prof. Barbara Hardy, Prof. Christopher Ricks, Dr. Leavis, William Golding, and Angus Wilson (BT 473).

The concern with the relationship between fiction and reality, the thought of fiction blurring with and becoming reality, is prominent in the case of Jude, who, talking about his *Babbletower* in court, says that the events occurring in *Babbletower* formed his real life: “*I lived that story, I lived through all these things –*” (BT 566, italics in the original). Jude

discusses the relationships between books and reality, stressing the quality of reality that can be found in books:

A book is a passionate thing, it is made of experience, it is lived as it is written, it is more immediate than reality. I think if most people were honest, they would admit that imaginary experiences are more real than actual ones. It is like the smell of coffee – the thing itself is never so good, it is always a bit musty. I began to write to avoid life as it is lived, and found I had found it more abundantly. (BT 574)

Similarly, Frederica senses that fiction can be somehow truer and more real than reality, reaching the core of human essence. Frederica, from early on influenced by literary ideas of her father, is shown to think about the quality of ‘realness’ of fiction:

So, early injured to the knowledge that *Lear* was truer and wiser than anything else, she had never been surprised enough to ask herself why, why a man should want to write out a play and not simply dealt at no removes with the grim truths of age, age, recalcitrant daughters, folly, spite and death. Or why a man should want to write *O Western Wind* rather than lie in bed with his love or the pleasure and pain of absence. Knowing nothing, she imagined that poem and play were somehow more what they were than those things they were images of. (VG 104)

The way literary characters, situations, and thoughts encountered in books influence Byatt’s characters and the fact that the characters-writers, such as Jude, perceive their own fiction as their own reality, as well as the idea that real-life authors can appear in the lives of fictional characters and step into the events of the literary work, point to the blurring boundaries between fictionality and reality in the lives of Byatt’s characters and, by extension, in the lives of people in general. By making her characters mirror or reenact works of art, either those produced by real-life authors and historical figures, or those produced by herself, Byatt appears to “reverse the classical precept that art ‘holds the mirror up to nature’, demonstrating instead how reality may imitate art” (Gitzen 1995: 84). Indeed, Byatt makes the reader ponder how difficult it is to define the boundaries between fiction and reality. As Frederica and other

characters realize, fiction can become reality and reality can become fiction. Like Lawrence, who “wants to talk about everything, all life, not books” (BT 216), Frederica and Byatt show how reality can be perceived through fiction – both wish to talk about all life, all reality, with the help of books.

### **Concern with Stories**

The metafictional concern with reading is prominent in all of the four novels; *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* also manifest the metafictional preoccupation with stories. The two novels include the character Agatha Mond, who actually writes stories, and other characters who think that telling stories might have a healing power. The healing power of telling stories is advocated by the organizers of a weekend course of the Center for Field Studies who encourage the members of the Center to tell a true story about themselves, as this would make them understand one other better (BT 188). Culvert, a character from *Babbletower*, values the importance of story-telling, saying to his followers, “There may be those among you who suppose story-telling to be primitive and childish, but I say that story-telling is the primal human converse, since we are the only animals who look before and after, referring to past events and wisdom, and envisaging the future in the light of these things” (BT 65); he thinks telling and understanding narratives gives people better understanding of the passions and desires that rule their lives.

*Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* describe story telling sessions where Frederica’s son Leo, Agatha’s daughter Saskia, and Frederica herself listen to the stories written and narrated by Agatha which in the last novel of the quartet are published as *Flight North*. By providing pages of these tales, Byatt invites the reader into a world different from the diegesis of the novel. The characters themselves feel the world of the story to be another world, captivating

and real. *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* show how the characters like to live in that other world and in that other story by describing the effect that listening to the story has on them: Frederica “gets a frisson of ancient pleasure from watching Leo and Saskia lost in another world; from time to time she is lost herself, for the story is intricate, and Agatha tells it with conviction, inhabits it herself” (BT 316).

Byatt’s characters express the thought that people can learn something essential about human existence by reading books and following the life of literary characters and figures from fairy tales and myths. Agatha says, “I wrote it [*Flight North*] for bookish children. Like myself, like you. For children despised because they read. To say, you can *learn to live* from books. Not didactically” (BT 316, italics in the original). The protagonist of her tale, Artegall, is a prince who survives in the world with the help of knowledge acquired from books. Artegall confirms the usefulness of books: “Books describe the world, and are useful” (WW 247). In the following excerpt from *Flight North*, included in *A Whistling Woman*, Artegall provides a particularly interesting insight into the idea that verbal worlds can be helpful and also suggests that worlds of words are real, although they appear in fiction:

Just because it is written in books doesn’t mean it isn’t real. The books take notice of every little detail, how every stone lies, how every twig is broken. They have drawings of how sand is disturbed, and how deep fast footprints differ from light springing ones. . . In the schoolroom, there was neither one nor the other. Only the words. I liked the words. But out here, there’s the things, and of course they’re different, but you’ve got to admit, the words have helped. Now and then. (WW 345)

In one of her articles, Byatt (IS 2) has commented upon the importance of myths and fairy tales in people’s lives, saying that “fairy stories rely most simply and most powerfully on the imaginations of readers and hearers, who create and recreate worlds, old and known in part, new and unknown in part”. As Agatha notes, “[P]rinces and princesses are what we all are in our minds” (BT 316), pointing to the idea that patterns from stories are inherent in readers. It

can be claimed that figures and situations known from stories help readers think about their own histories and their own life-stories. Indeed, Frederica notes, “I happen to believe you think better for yourself if you know something about what other people have thought, and the ways they have thought it” (WW 45), one of the primary reasons she has dedicated herself to literature. As concluded by Byatt, “[m]aking up worlds is as natural and as necessary to human beings as breathing and sleeping” (IS 2).

The novels’ preoccupation with stories and writing also points to the fiction-reality relationship. Byatt suggests that the characters’ lives can be seen as stories, both by the characters themselves and by the reader. For example, Frederica’s talk with her solicitor about Frederica’s divorce process is described as her first “legal narrative. It is an official tale, told to a partial, official listener. Frederica selected its narrative elements; Arnold Begbie [the solicitor] sorted, assessed, rearranged and added to them” (BT 280). The idea that life can be seen as a story manifests itself also in the way Frederica thinks about a court session on the divorce: she realizes that the story of her life has been changed by the way it was told that day: “both the true bits, and the velleities, and the flat lies, one part of a new fiction, a new story, in which she – who is she, does she exist? – is entangled as in a fine voluminous net” (BT 519-520). In *A Whistling Woman*, the narrator remarks, “All human beings tell their life-stories to themselves, selecting and reinforcing certain memories, casting others to oblivion” (WW 105). The narrator thus points to the universality of thinking of one’s life as a story.

The metaphor of the characters’ connecting their lives to narratives, by extension pointing to how the readers can see their lives and their reality as stories because of people’s “essentially narrative way of understanding the world” (Nünning 1997: 229), seems to echo Byatt’s reflections on life, stories, and life-stories. In one of her essays, Byatt (2001: 132) has suggested, “[W]e are narrative beings because we live in biological time. Whether we like it or not, our lives have beginnings, middles and ends. We narrate ourselves to each other in

bars and beds”. Byatt’s characters appear to manifest her belief that “[w]e are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles and ends” (Byatt 2001: 166).

### **Concern with Language**

Closely related to the issues of reading and story-telling is the concern with language. Byatt’s characters frequently ponder the use of words, their effect and the associations and images words evoke. Byatt, who has stated, “I write novels because I am passionately interested in language” (IS 4), tackles the metafictional concern with language from various viewpoints, looking at the ways in which language creates fiction and the world outside fiction.

Throughout the quartet, Byatt depicts characters, most notably Frederica, Stephanie, and Alexander, who feel the utmost importance of words. Frederica learns the world around her and makes it familiar by first relying on words. The reader can sense her reliance on words particularly clearly in the following paragraph:

She had never, she realized, looked at a picture or a carving or even landscape without some immediate verbal accompaniment or translation. Language was ingrained in her. Bill had done that. He had described her own early words to her, sung them back at her, repeated them admiringly to others in her presence, improved on them unconsciously. He had read and read and read. (VG 104)

Frederica’s highly verbal thinking is apparent, for example, in a scene in which Frederica looks at names painted on a prow: the reader will find out that “by these words she would remember form and colour. Words were primary” (SL 73). Also, when thinking of Rodin’s La Danaide, Frederica’s “sensuality was to find a word for the shape; ‘plump’ was her word, also ‘yowl’” (SL 268). Stephanie is similarly acutely aware of the fact that her connection to the

world is built with words; she moves around the world verbally: “[W]hat she touched with words was for her defused and neutralizes; acceptable” (VG 280).

Alexander reflects upon his word-based thinking, realizing that he is “so much in the habit of rendering things into language that he found them hard to see or touch without some kind of mental naming and comparing, in words” (SL 163). Also, Alexander becomes aware of the power of words to construct or change one’s reality. After saying, involuntarily, to Frederica, “I suppose I love you too” (VG 333), Alexander is shown to realize, “He was a man of words. Once those were said, they took hold of him” (VG 333). Alexander finds out that words, once spoken, can make certain phenomena come true, which points to the performative power of language: “He [Alexander] saw with a kind of haggard horror that those were, now, true, that he had made them true. That perhaps, though unfortunately not certainly, it was only leaving them unsaid that had kept him so coolly secure from them” (VG 333).

The concern with language is manifested also in the characters’ preoccupation with discussing words and word associations. Stephanie ponders the effect the words of Wordsworth’s poems have on her: these are “ordinary words, in an extraordinary arrangement” (SL 12). Stephanie’s love for words manifests itself also in her suffering from having to use a limited vocabulary, which, as she realizes, is largely due to her choice of dropping her university career and marrying Daniel. Reflecting on her diminishing vocabulary, Stephanie feels that she cannot use the words in which she has learned to think, the words which are essential to the way she sees herself and the world, as people would not understand most of the words she cares about. So her thinking words, such as “[d]iscourse. Discourse of reason. Sophistical. Catalyst. Anacoluthon. Mendacious. Realism” (SL 306) or “[p]eripeteia. Anguish. Morphology” (SL 307) “wander loose and unused” (SL 307) and become haunting ghosts or lose half of their associations in her vocabulary of everyday life. Stephanie’s passion for words does not abandon her even at the moment of death, as her last

thought before she loses consciousness due to the unfortunate electrocution is the image of the word ‘altruism’ (SL 334).

The novels abound in references to word etymologies and their dictionary definitions. Frederica and her friends Hugh and Allan discuss words for twilight: dusk, gloaming, *crépuscule*, *Dämmerung* (BT 109), Mr. Shepherd thinks about the etymology of the words ‘translate’, ‘transmute’, ‘corporeal’, ‘orifice’, and others (WW 107). Frederica, reading Blake, thinks about the word ‘Golgonooza’ and the fact that she has always been annoyed by that word, since it is “infant-babble, not truly language-forging. It is unintentionally comic” (BT 161). The notions of denotation and connotation are tackled also at the trial of *Babbletower* where, in the quest for objectivity, it becomes highly important to trace the dictionary meanings of words such as ‘deprave’, ‘corrupt’, ‘obscene’, and ‘pornography’ (BT 529). Similarly, words associated with Frederica’s court case acquire special significance. Frederica feels like a caged beast in a net of words belonging to legal discourse: “The net is made by words which do not describe what she feels is happening: adultery, connivance, pre-nuptial incontinence, petitioner, respondent” (BT 324). She thinks about the words and their connotations: “These legal words carry with them the whole history of a society in which a woman was a man’s property, and also a part of his flesh, not to be contaminated” (BT 324). Frederica’s thoughts point to the ways in which legal discourse constructs her world and the society surrounding her, also showing how a dominant discourse can construct reality outside fiction.

The characters whose minds are ingrained with words and who often discuss and think about word associations and word origins are contrasted with the characters who draw the reader’s attention because of their near absence of words. For example, Daniel, Stephanie’s husband, acknowledges that the Potters are “a verbal lot” (SL 19) and assumes that “words help them, apparently” (SL 19), but he himself is not passionate about words. When



comparing himself to the Potters' obsession with words, he realizes that "his imagination could not correlate black marks with an informed knowledge of the precise passion of Racine, with writing clearly, at least, about the terrors of Hamlet and Lear" (VG 377). He is a man of monosyllables, admitting, for example, that his "day was better left without conversion into narrative, amusing, querulous or appealing" (SL 19).

Stephanie's and Frederica's love for words is contrasted with the lack of words in the mind of their brother, Marcus, who distrusts words. He assumes that words are "crude indicators anyway and their messages only approximations at best" (VG 145). Marcus's thinking is geometrical and based on spatial, visual, and mathematical relationships. Frederica's love for words is also contrasted with the lack of words in Nigel, who is not a "verbal animal" (BT 38). Also, Frederica's student and later boyfriend John Ottokar, "a man of few words, diminishing to no words" (WW 14), has a different experience with words, as John and his twin brother grew up using a language of signs and gestures, which made them communicate with each other only. Indeed, John comes to Frederica's literature classes in order to learn to use words, as he says he feels confident only when communicating in computer languages (BT 290). Similarly to Frederica's brother Marcus, John does not think in words but in shapes and feelings. "Those words, the word 'shape', the word 'feeling' don't quite describe what I mean, what I thought", he says (BT 290).

In these characters, Byatt also portrays different readers, as the characters less reliant on words are in striking contrast to the passionate reading of the Potters. Marcus "had been allergic to poetry, which had lain about his house all his life, like so much dust or pollen, all over, and he now considered himself desensitized" (VG 310). Daniel, a slow and not passionate reader, however, takes up *King Lear* and discovers that the verbal world can have truth and honesty in it:

He had been driven to it [reading *King Lear*] by a kind of wrath and a more obscure desire to deal with the Potters, particularly Stephanie. He did not know, as he read, exactly what he was reading for, and so read for the story . . . admiring, without awe, Shakespeare's cleverness in creating so hugely real old man, so maddening, so injured, so inevitably broken and cracked . . . he knew, at a point where he asked no questions, that the world was like this. *King Lear* was true. . . As he came to the end, he realized he had learned something about pain. (VG 56)

The preoccupation with words and language manifests itself to a great extent in the themes tackled in the novels, most prominently in *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*. *The Virgin in the Garden* mirrors Alexander's writing of *Astraea*, and the novel depicts how Frederica and Alexander talk about language and meter. The book also shows how Frederica attempts to love in language: "He [Lawrence] loved language, he lied in a way when he indicated all those values 'beyond' and 'under' it. I like language why can't one love in language. Racine's people speak the unspeakable" (VG 349).

In *Still Life*, the concern with language becomes apparent in the discussions about portraits in words and portraits in paint, images in words and images in art, which leads to examining the question how accurately language represents actual phenomena. Alexander, who in *Still Life* is working on visual images and painting in connection with his play on the life of Van Gogh, titled *The Yellow Chair*, often ponders the relationship between words and paintings, language and visual art. For example, he examines the ways of accurate rendering the color purple of plum skins in language as opposed to the possibilities of doing so in painting. He asks, "Do we have enough words, synonyms, near synonyms for purple?" (SL 164). He sees that the answer lies mainly in the use of adjectives, which makes him think that "it is interesting that adjectives in a prose or verse style are felt to be signs of looseness and vagueness when in fact they are the opposite, at their best, an instrument of precision" (SL 164). Alexander finds out that if one wants to render the color in language as exactly as possible, one cannot refrain from evoking possible metaphors. This leads him to think, "[I]t

was possible for – say – Vincent Van Gogh to get nearer to the life of the plums than he ever could. Both metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language” (SL 165).

*Still Life* points to the text-world connection, especially in its focus on issues involving words and life, the meaning-making through words and that through paintings, the bond and the gap between words and their referents. For example, Alexander analyzes the quality of paint to evoke metaphors, concluding that “[i]t is impossible *not* to think about the distance between paint and things, between paint and life, between paint and the ‘real world’ (which includes other paintings)” (SL 165). He adds, “It is not at all impossible, it is even common, not to think about the distance between words and things, between words and life, between words and reality” (SL 165). This seems to indicate that people tend to forget that they think about other people, things, and events with the help of language, a tool through which reality can be mediated and manipulated. Indeed, words seem to stand for the ‘things’ themselves, in fiction and outside fiction, making words and reality blur into one.

Alexander proceeds with discussing the effect of reality evoked by words and by paint, claiming that mimetic deception in writing is hard to achieve because of the influence of language. He points out that even if one perceives characters such as Mr. Rochester or Mme Bovary as real, they still tend to remain ghosts who cannot be grasped wholly, whereas in painting, the sense of reality is more acute (SL 165). However, Alexander notes that what accounts for the effectiveness of images in writing as opposed to that in painting is the power of language: although “we have always known these creatures [literary characters] are made of words” (SL 165), they might be more immediate when compared to images in paintings since “words are our common currency, we all have words, we may not be able to paint an apple but we can certainly utter a view on why Elinor liked live yogurt or the young Proust neurasthenic” (SL 165). Elsewhere, Byatt (2002: 1) has similarly commented on images in

literature and in art, claiming that “[a] portrait in a novel or a story may be a portrait of invisible things – thought processes, attractions, repulsions, subtle and violent changes in whole lives, or groups of lives”. The thought calls attention to the idea that while portraits in paint can be seen as an artist’s record of a physical presence which does not allow for endlessly varying visual images, descriptions in language create numerous images which vary from reader to reader.

In *Babel Tower*, already the title of the novel and some of the titles of the books by the characters of *Babel Tower*, for example, *Babbletower*, *Language Our Straitjacket*, *The Oppressor's Tongue*, *The Tongues of Men and of Angels*, suggest that Byatt and her characters are interested in various aspects of language, in the “mixed blessings of language, its power to obscure as well as reveal, to enslave as well as liberate” (Gray 1996: 72). This interest manifests itself in the characters’ thoughts on language – the power of language, the teaching of language, the artful manipulation of language, and its efficacy at representing or altering reality. Indeed, Byatt (IS 3) has noted that “*Babel Tower* was planned to be a novel about language, a novel about the ways in which language distorted, created, changed life and the social world”, which can be observed in the ways in which Frederica’s divorce trial constructs and distorts her reality.

The preoccupation with language is mirrored in Jude’s *Babbletower* in which the characters want to reinvent language in order to reflect more accurately, without previous word associations, the relations between themselves and those between themselves and the world. Also, the thoughts about language are expressed in the work of the Steerforth Committee, the members of which visit schools, analyze the work of teachers, and listen to and participate in debates on how English should be taught and studied. Byatt presents a thorough debate on how language is, should, and could be taught and learned at contemporary schools. Byatt proceeds from talking about the Tower of Babel and the *Ursprache* to

discussing the theories of the philosopher Wittgenstein and the linguists Saussure, Jakobson, and Chomsky. When debating on whether rules, forms and norms should be taught, Byatt stresses their importance in the words of Professor Wijnobel, who believes in the teaching of the forms of language because “if we have no words to describe the structure of our thoughts, we are unable to analyze their nature and their limitations. *What we can think* is the function of our linguistic competence. If we do not teach words to describe the structure of language, we have no means to consider the structure of thought” (BT 186, italics in the original).

The Committee claims that “even young children should be familiarized with and alerted to language’s manipulative potentialities” (BT 479). The Committee’s concern with the “proper and increasing interest in language as an instrument of power, of subjection and manipulation” (BT 479) is something that also Frederica has to face, mainly in connection with legal discourse which makes her feel trapped in a net “made by words which do not describe what she feels is happening” (BT 324). It seems that her “divorce and child custody hearings give legalese two more opportunities to (mis)interpret the language of the human spirit” (Brichetto IS 5) and point to the ways in which discourse can construct reality.

A *Whistling Woman* adds another dimension to the preoccupation with language by exploring the theme of verbal worlds versus the language of the emerging multi-media in the 1970s, particularly TV and the reliance on visual images. Frederica is afraid that TV screens might take the place of “the hearth in nineteenth-century fiction, the coals where Dickens’s characters saw the generation of fantastic images, the warmth around which stories were read aloud, or told, or lived” (WW 48). She is, nevertheless, convinced that novels will not disappear: “We *need* images made of language” (WW 48). However, Frederica’s friend Wilkie proposes that they are about to enter the world in which language is subordinated to images (WW 48). Later, Frederica starts seeing a connection or crossover between the world of books and that of TV, suggesting, “[t]he *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 410).

Byatt explicitly examines language also in the Body-Mind conference, one of the plot lines of *A Whistling Woman*. The novel discusses aspects of translation; one of the characters suggests, “A man thinking in Latin is not thinking the same thoughts as a man thinking in English” (WW 107), as some words cannot be translated and also “the shape of the words, and the shape of the sentences changes the shape of thoughts” (WW 107). The presenters at the conference examine findings about the brain and language development, which makes Byatt’s characters think about Noam Chomsky’s grammar theories (WW 344) and the etymology of words like transcription, encryption, code, information, and translation, which are “derived from factual descriptions of writing and speaking, of human language, talking about itself” (WW 353). Frederica comes to realize, “We are fated – *not* designed, but fated as we are shaped into embryos – to entwine ourselves in, with words” (WW 355). Frederica makes an interesting point, suggesting that she knows the words synapse, dendrite, and neuron, but if microscopes, telescopes, and identified cells disappeared tomorrow, “she *would not know where to start*, though she might be able to write down quite a lot of *Paradise Lost* by heart” (WW 355). She thereby points to the idea that the vanishing of phenomena that the words stand for would leave her at a loss, even if she knows the words and their etymology.

In summary, the metafictional preoccupation with readers and reading is manifested in the characters who are closely related to the literary world and whose talks thus frequently focus on books, allowing for numerous intertextual references to authors and texts. The quartet thematizes the role of the reader by mirroring the reader in the act of reading and interpreting texts, which points to analogous situations in the world outside fiction. The four novels comment on how the literary characters, events, and thoughts encountered in books influence the lives of Byatt’s characters. Real-life literary characters as well as real-life personages step

into the lives of Byatt's literary characters, causing a mix of diegetic levels, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, and drawing attention to the fiction-reality relationship. Byatt tackles the link between fiction and reality by calling attention to the importance of stories in the lives of the characters. This includes implications also for the real-life reader by showing how one's life and the world can be read and narrated as stories. The metafictional concern with language is manifested in the characters whose world-view is heavily word-based, as well as in themes such as images in paint and on TV versus those in language, teaching and learning language, and the power of language to create, manipulate, and distort reality.

## CHAPTER 3

### Characters-Writers

The characters are not only avid readers but also devoted writers. The tetralogy includes major and minor characters who write books, plays, poems, articles, and book reviews. Creating characters who are writers and depicting them in acts of writing point to the metafictional feature of thematizing writing activities and taking writing as a subject to be examined, as “[b]y exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated” (McCaffery 1982: 6). Byatt’s characters frequently comment on their writings, writing styles, and authors who have influenced their writing techniques.

The major writer figures in the quartet are Alexander Wedderburn, who is the author of a lesser-known play *The Buskers*, written in line of “metaphysical puppetry” (VG 317), and during the events of *The Virgin in the Garden* is working on the play *Astraea*, the performance of which forms one of the central events of the novel. Alexander is the most prolific author among the central characters also in *Still Life*, in which he is writing a play on Vincent Van Gogh titled *The Yellow Chair*, and is working on a smaller project, a parody of the story of Cabestainh. In *A Whistling Woman*, Alexander stages mainly other authors’ works, as his own “inspiration [is] burned out” (WW 385). The other central characters of the quartet’s novels who turn out to be writers include Frederica, the author of *Laminations*, her



friend Agatha Mond, and Jude Mason, who authors *Babbletower: A Story for the Children of Our Time*, presented in full in *Babel Tower*.

In addition to discussing books by real-life authors, observed in Chapter 2, the characters often talk about their own writings and writing processes among themselves, which exemplifies the metafictional device of “presenting and discussing the fictional work of an imaginary character” (McCaffery 1982: 23). For example, Alexander, a “writer of the fidgety, costive kind whose works are long in the planning, and meticulous in the execution” (SL 66-67), comments on his work and writing style: having finished *The Yellow Chair*, he notes that the play is a ‘made’ thing, it “had been put together as jigsaws are, as patchwork is, with a templet – it was made of language, which could be jigged, adapted, re-ordered” (SL 253-254). Jude speaks about his being a writer, saying, “There was never a time when I was not writing, I was writing when I was a little boy, and before that I was telling stories to myself” (BT 565). He also comments on the question of plots, claiming that he was always writing the same story, the story about a group of friends who run away to a better place to make a better life (BT 565).

The characters often discuss the images they have used in their works and point to influential authors, which suggests that the characters feel a need to explain their works, rather than let their writings stand on their own and speak totally by themselves. Alan explains that in his poem about mirrors he uses images from Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and from Chinese poems (SL 222); Hugh’s poems echo Keats (SL 221); and Raphael, when presenting his poem “Lübeck Bells”, prefaces his reading with information to guide his audience’s responses, showing that his poem resembles a collage, as he has taken scraps from Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, bits of *Faust*, and the Brothers Grimm, thoughts on German folklore and language, as well as extracts from Hitler’s speeches (SL 222). Alexander recognizes that the writings of Dr. Frances Yates on the images of Elizabeth Tudor as Virgo-Astraea had

“significantly changed the whole shape of his own life” (VG 12), an illuminating example of the possible far-reaching impact written works can have, indicating that somebody else’s writing can intrude with another person’s reality.

In addition to talking about their own works, the characters also dissect the works of Byatt’s other characters. The most telling examples include the discussion of *Laminations* in *A Whistling Woman* and, most prominently, the discussion unveiling around *Babbletower*, a “text read through the lens of another” (Hansson 1999: 452), as throughout *Babel Tower*, the characters discuss Jude’s fantasy in their conversations and in critical articles, culminating in the obscenity trial. Sometimes the characters’ works cause Byatt’s other characters difficulties in understanding. For example, Frederica has troubles with understanding Raphael’s poem “Lübeck Bells”: she is depicted in a confusing net of literary echoes – allusions to Shakespeare, Mallarmé, Goethe, and Mann (SL 215), with “the words of the poem occurring in little blocks, without punctuation, arranged on the page in patterns of rectangles and steps like a visual code or intelligence test she couldn’t break” (SL 216). Later Frederica returns to the poem and notices a number of additional references, but still admits that the disconnected fragments of the poem hardly form a whole. This makes her conclude that “[w]hat had, on a first reading, seemed impenetrable, now seemed impalpable. Absence again” (SL 224). Frederica’s notes may self-reflexively magnify one of the ways the real-life reader might think about and respond to texts rich in puzzling intertextual references and allusions.

The characters also discuss their aspirations as writers and examine what makes an outstanding writer. Frederica’s acquaintance Elvet Gander suggests that a great artist “descends like Orpheus into the abyss, embraces the demons of his unspeakable desires and fears . . . and returns them to consciousness where he makes an image of them which allows them to be contemplated steadily” (WW 152). He draws further analogies: “So Sophocles went and stared at the Oedipus . . . and brought back the knowledge of it, so that we might

experience the horror as beauty and order. So Shakespeare went with Hamlet, to look at the roots of fratricide, patricide, incest and inhibition” (WW 152). The passage points to the idea that great writing offers the author and later the reader an opportunity to take a profound look at what it means to be a human being. Indeed, one can claim that Byatt’s highly realist characters who examine their thoughts, feelings, and life with a deep passion make a similar journey within and without themselves, being both readers and writers themselves.

### **Writing Characters Writing: In the Constructing Process**

In addition to presenting characters who are writing or have written different texts and talk about their own work or that of the other characters’, the quartet thematizes the process of writing by following several characters in their constructing of texts. The novels comment on the decisions, anxieties, and rewarding moments these characters face as writers.

Alexander and Frederica offer particularly revealing portrayals of writers in the act of writing. The novels draw the reader’s attention to the thought that writing is hardly a smooth process and illustrate problems and anxieties that writers might face. *The Virgin in the Garden* shows, interestingly, how Alexander, despite working with words, can find uttering them cumbersome, as his true medium is writing, not speaking; when talking to Jenny, he says, “No, no. I would . . . I would . . .” (VG 142). As the narrator notes, “He [Alexander] could have written it. He could not speak it” (VG 142). Moreover, the novel records Alexander’s difficulties with finding his own voice as a writer: “He had a moment of panic. He would never have a voice of his own. There was a line he had thought was his, or at least his with a clever modern-Renaissance echo of Ovid, which he must change, he must remember to change, the damned cadence was certainly Eliot’s” (VG 45). Indeed, Alexander feels like his

voice as an author has become blurred with the voices of other authors, making him lose track of which thoughts are his and which belong to the others.

An interesting account of Alexander's wrestling with other authors can be observed in the following passage, recounting Alexander's dream of Shakespeare:

He woke up with sweat cooling in rivulets all over him and thought of Spencer. This poet, more remote, more apparently inaccessible [than Shakespeare], had proved easier to deal with . . . Eterne, is mutabilitie, as Spencer might, himself an incorporator of archaisms, have said of the language, and had said of Adonis; Alexander had incorporated the phrase itself in *Astraea*. From where, in due course, it found its way into O-level and A-level footnotes. (VG 13)

The idea of Byatt's character struggling to find his own voice amid the voices of other, real-life authors points to an intriguing mix of the fictional and the 'real' outside Byatt's work, showing how the two can merge in the reader's or writer's consciousness. The passage also points to the idea that Byatt's literary characters who are writers can become textualized, can become texts, and thereby stand next to the real-life texts and find their way to schools and academic discourse. Indeed, after Alexander has written *Astraea*, Frederica asks, "Do you know you are now an established O-level set text?" (VG 12).

Frederica starts to contemplate writing in *Still Life*, but despite her being an avid reader whose thinking is filled with authors, books, and literary characters, she fails in her attempts to write fiction. Frederica, similarly to Alexander, faces problems with finding her unique voice: depicted in the act of trying to record landscape, she finds out that her efforts are closely intertwined with influences by Shakespeare and Wordsworth, who seem to haunt her vision and choices as a writer (SL 59). Frederica feels that seeing her carefully thought out words on the page makes them stale and derivative. She also thinks she has no proper plot and, being a good critic, admits that "writing was not her *métier*" (SL 60).

However, Frederica becomes more involved in writing in *Babel Tower*. The novel investigates writing processes by mirroring Frederica creating different types of texts. The

passages focusing on Frederica's job as a critic describe the techniques she uses and the words, analogies, and clichés she chooses when writing the reviews (BT 305). *Babel Tower* recounts Frederica's feelings and thoughts after she has written the reviews, her pleasure and energy acquired from thinking and writing: "She has enjoyed the act of writing, of watching language run black out of the end of her pen: this has in turn made her feel that she is herself again, and has made her body real to her, because her mind is alive" (BT 155).

*Babel Tower*, similarly to *Still Life*, observes the difficulties met while writing by showing how Frederica tries to write a report on her marriage and finds out that she cannot do it. The novel presents Frederica's attempts in different fonts: the text she is writing appears in one font type, interwoven with her comments in another. The reader can see how Frederica compiles the text, rereads it, crosses out words and lines (e.g., "She writes: Shit. Fuck. She crosses them out" BT 308), replaces words (e.g., "She has changed the word 'struck' to the word 'hit'. 'Struck' carries a stronger emotional charge" BT 306), constantly thinking about the associations the words evoke and the images and values they seem to carry. Frederica's attempts to write the account of her experience in the marriage end with her having to admit, "I can't write this *stuff*. Every ink-blob destroys a bit more of the truthful balanced memory I am trying to hang on to – I could write if it was a parody of this sort of document, a work of art or fiction *pretending to be* one of these" (BT 308, italics in the original). Frederica's comment shows how providing a truthful account of one's thoughts and experience can make them seem less real on paper, whereas a fictionalized or parodied rendering – turning facts into fiction – may appear more accurate.

Another example of depicting a writer during writing processes occurs in connection with Frederica writing diary notes. As was the case with legal documents, Frederica confronts challenges when writing. *Babel Tower* shows the steps Frederica goes through in her attempts. Her first sentence in the diary, "Much of the problem appears to be one of vocabulary", is

followed by a sentence, a week later, “There is no vocabulary to provide the next sentence” (BT 380). Returning to her diary a month later, Frederica advises herself to try simplicity and start with describing a day; however, when writing about her day, she remarks that she does not enjoy writing in this style, as it makes everything in her life slightly worse. This makes her conclude, “[w]riting is compulsive. And useless. Stop writing” (BT 381).

When writing her diary notes, Frederica finds herself tackling the notion of whether she and her voice become imaginary and fictional or remain essentially ‘real’, which offers insights into people’s textual identities and gives a chance to explore the relationship between fiction and reality. Her diary notes make Frederica reflect on the possible implications of the ‘I’ in the sentences “Do I love him?” and “I hate I”. She hypothesizes the following:

I hate "I" because when I write, "I love him," or "I am afraid of being confined by him," the "I" is a character I am inventing who/which in some sense drains life from ME into artifice and enclosedness. The "I" of "I love him" written down is nauseating. The *real* "I" is the first I of "I hate I" – the *watcher* – though only until I write that, once I have noticed that, that I who hates "I" is a real I, it becomes in its turn an artificial I, and the one who notices that that "I" was artificial too becomes "real" (what is real) and so *ad infinitum*. Is the lesson, don't write? It is certainly, don't write "I". (BT 382, italics in the original)

The passage presents a perceptive analysis of different aspects of reality or artificiality connected to using the first person singular, which points to the metafictional feature of exploring the nature of writing and of characters examining their own realness or fictionality. Frederica’s notes examine an interesting paradox: writing something down can make it less tangible. It seems that writing about her life makes Frederica feel that her life is less real to her, which suggests that it is hard, if not almost impossible, to write without artificiality and without fictionalizing oneself and one’s life.

Frederica’s diary notes, reports on her marriage, and book reviews become, among a myriad of other texts, part of her *Laminations*. Showing Frederica putting together the texts

for the book provides one of the most revealing accounts of writing processes depicted in the tetralogy. The process of writing the book and its reception occupy a central place in the last two novels of the quartet. Frederica gets the idea for laminated knowledge in *The Virgin in the Garden*, in which she realizes that laminations produce a “powerful sense of freedom, truthfulness and even selflessness” (VG 209). Frederica becomes obsessed with an idea from *Howards End* – ‘only connect’ – and by Lawrence’s thoughts on Oneness; however, she loses her faith in the mystic Oneness and thinks that there is a much greater power in keeping things separate.

Moreover, the idea of fragmentation and different layers of knowledge is crucial to how Frederica sees herself. She thinks of herself as “a woman whose life appears to be flying apart into unrelated fragments” (BT 379), as “a woman who sits at her desk and rearranges unrelated scraps of languages, from apparently wholly discrete vocabularies: legal letters, letters about the Initial Teaching Alphabet from Leo's school – the literary texts and the quite other texts that dissect these texts; her reviews, her reader’s reports” (BT 380). Lamination, thus, is a concept that governs both Frederica’s sense of self and her conduct as well as the ways in which she creates her writings.

The idea of keeping things separate – separate objects of knowledge, systems of work, or discovery – forms an underlying thought behind *Laminations*, representing “an art-form of fragments, juxtaposed not interwoven, not ‘organically’ spiraling up like a tree or a shell, but constructed brick by brick, layer by layer, like the Post Office Tower” (BT 359). In mirroring Frederica as she is putting together the book, Byatt seems to particularly emphasize the idea of the constructed nature of texts. Indeed, *Laminations* serves as a prime example of a book constructed of cut-ups, extracts, and full versions from and of different texts, both by the fictional character Frederica and by real-life authors other than Byatt.

Frederica's heavy reliance on using cut-ups or collage in her book is influenced by William Burroughs's technique of cut-ups. She ponders Burroughs's words: "All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read overheard. Clear classical prose can be composed entirely of re-arranged cut-ups. Cutting and re-arranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation" (BT 379). She describes *Laminations* as "a form that is made partly by cutting up, breaking up, rearranging things that already exist" (BT 384). While writing, she discovers that in order to create new texts, one has to rearrange and reuse words that have made previous texts: "*the point of words is that they have to have already been used, they have not to be new, they have to be only re-arrangements, in order to have meaning*" (BT 384, italics in the original).

Frederica comments on her use of quotations in *Laminations*: according to her, quotation is another form of cut-up: "It gives a kind of papery vitality and independence to, precisely, cultural clichés cut free from the web of language that gives them precise meaning" (BT 385). She realizes that there are many texts she might quote and that several authors have used this technique before; she discovers that she could quote newspapers, her own life, her lawyer's letters, her lectures on Mann and Kafka and thereby creates a text where "raw materials, worked motifs" (BT 385) stand side by side. The concept of quotations as one way to achieve laminated knowledge significantly contributes to the number of different textual types and genres, both by Frederica, the other characters inhabiting Frederica's world, and real-life authors.

*A Whistling Woman* adds another dimension to the processes of writing by shedding light on the concept of writerly identity and the notion of reception. Even until the very end of the quartet it seems that Frederica remains somewhat ambivalent about *Laminations* and her role as a writer. After hearing that her book is to be published, she keeps claiming, "[I]t isn't a



book, not a real book, I'm not a writer. I seem to have had an education designed to incapacitate writers" (WW 46). Indeed, Frederica does not appear to see herself as a writer. She compares her work to Agatha's fairy tale book *Flight North*, and sees that Agatha's mind "naturally inhabited the world of living metaphor which was myth and fable, whereas she, Frederica, was confined to stitching and patching the solid, and you could still see the joins" (WW 240). Moreover, she notes that anybody could come up with a work like her book of "jottings, cut-ups, commonplaces and scraps of writing" (WW 38), a thought clearly expressed in the following passage:

She was not now either writing or planning anything other than more the same, more laminations, more discontinuous jottings, and anyone, really, could do that. She felt a writerly distaste for her own product, now it was out in the open. . . . She never opened it herself. It had a nice enough cover, made of Escher-shapes, scissors where the gaps made Chad faces. (WW 256)

The novel thus offers insights into the nature of an author's relationship to his or her writings and how it might change after the work has been published. Additionally, it can be argued that in this passage, Byatt shows her critical approach towards overtly or radically experimental texts, especially since her own novels, although incorporating a lot of structural incoherence, do not go as far as Frederica's cut-ups and laminations, the latter being an extreme form of piling texts on top of and next to other texts.

*A Whistling Woman* gives an account of the critical and general response to both *Laminations* and *Flight North*, the publications of which coincide, and thereby examines the concept of reception. At first, *Flight North* receives very little attention while *Laminations* is widely reviewed. Later, however, *Flight North* meets tremendous success and is reprinted numerous times: "Everyone reads it. Children and adults. Culture and counter-culture. People remembering their childhood reading, and kids looking for a story" (WW 384). *Laminations*

faces wide critical acclaim. Both the reviewers who liked Frederica's work and those who did not admit that the work is very clever:

The friendly ones compared the cut-up technique to Burroughs and Jeff Nuttall, but said that the woman writer lacked the lunge for the jugular or the absolutely subversive intention of these models. They asked if the whole added up to the more than the sum of its snipped-off torn-up parts and concluded that on the whole, it probably didn't, but it was just as clever. (WW264)

Interestingly, the reader might wonder whether in this passage, Byatt, within her own fiction, is anticipating a possible critical response to her work outside her fictional world, as indeed, the structural grandiosity of including a myriad textual types is what strongly characterizes both *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*.

Frederica tries to create a book of different voices, different vocabularies: she tries to create a "coherently incoherent work" (BT 462) out of language that "rustles around her with many voices, none of them hers, all of them hers" (BT 380). The examination of a text as a narrative construct, a made thing, is apparent also in the ways in which *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* call attention to their own constructed nature, their worlds within worlds and texts within texts. Indeed, what Frederica has been doing while constructing the text of various voices and fragments mirrors Byatt's constructing the quartet.

### **Texts as Constructions**

#### **Multiple Textual Types, Discourses and Genres, and Worlds of Words**

The inclusion of various textual types which introduce different registers, voices, and hypodiegetic worlds within the diegesis allows to examine the constructed nature of texts and points to their preoccupation with form. Compared to the other three novels of the quartet, the presence of different textual types is less significant in *The Virgin in the Garden*, manifested

mainly in quotations, a few letters and articles. In *Still Life*, probably the most prominent hypodiegetic level is created by excerpts from Van Gogh's *Letters*, inserted into the main text. The extracts are presented predominantly in connection with Alexander's inner world and his work on the play on Van Gogh. The extracts illustrate Alexander's thoughts on rendering images in words and paint (SL 8), colors (SL 61, 84, 169), various paintings by Van Gogh (SL 7), and the art of painting (SL 109), among others, as well as thematize how the playwright collects and interprets his material and creates his own work. *Still Life* also provides longer extracts from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Comus* and Donne's "Love's Growth", and presents Hardy's "Heredity" in full. The novel includes some texts created by Byatt herself, but representing other genres – a couple of letters, an article on Alexander's *The Yellow Chair* in *Manchester Guardian*, and a list of names of grasses.

Structural incoherence occurs to a much larger extent in both *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*. The reader can certainly see how the two novels move into the domain of texts that are "more fragmented up into a series of stylistic gestures and textures" (Byatt in Tredell 1994: 73). Byatt has used both original material by real-life novelists, poets, and playwrights, and texts produced by her characters. The texts by real-life authors include quotations from poems (by Blake, Rilke, Wordsworth, Auden, Donne, and numerous others), extracts from novels (by Forster, Lawrence, Tolkien, and Mann), plays (by Shakespeare and Beckett), philosophical or psychological texts (by Nietzsche and Laing), and the Bible. Byatt also introduces various text types which are evidently created by herself, such as reports, book reviews, stickers, posters, leaflets, course schedules, cut-ups, excerpts from novels, personal and legal letters, lists, poems, lecture notes, court cases, diaries, fairy tales, articles, interviews, notices, epigrams, logs, and lyrics.

Byatt has often been called a brainy writer with "an astonishing mass of erudition and encyclopedic knowledge" (Schwartz 1998: 110) and has been referred to as the author of

“information novels” (Seymour 2000: 5) who frequently includes “large chunks of nonfiction” in her novels (see also Taylor 1989: 60-61). Probably many of her readers feel that “one is reading less a novel than a fictionalized disquisition on various topics, rendered always with immense erudition” (Brooks 1996: 64). Also Byatt herself (1993: 23) has commented on her tendency to include a myriad of topics and genres in her works and has expressed her admiration for the novel as a form into which “you can get the whole world”. In one of her interviews, she has mentioned, “The nice thing about a novel is that everything can go into it, because if you’ve got the skill between sentence and sentence, you can change genre, you can change focus, you can change the way the reader reads. And yet you can keep up this sort of quiet momentum of narration. It is a wonderful form” (IS 1). The comment offers insights into the ways in which the novel as a genre can further its limits and become multilayered in form, giving the author a chance to incorporate and weave together different registers and styles, while also offering a challenging reading experience.

Indeed, by incorporating a large body of knowledge and making her novels structurally incoherent, Byatt creates a multilayered text, particularly predominant in the two last novels of the quartet which “teem with the voices of a dozen imaginary books” (Miller IS 10). Byatt (in Davey 1998: 1546) has commented on the vast range of disciplines touched upon in her novels, stating that besides literature, “all sorts of other things are good and beautiful, paint, philosophy, mathematics, biology – there are many ways of coming at an inevitably partial vision of truth”. Moreover, same themes often serve as connecting links between the hypodiegetic worlds. Kate McDonnell (IS 8) has pointed out that in each of the textual types Byatt illustrates one or more of her themes (the nature of education, the role of women, passion and love, and the degree to which society should permit individual freedoms, among others) so that the book becomes “a dizzying pattern of repeating motifs”.

### Self-Reflexive Commentary and the World as a Text

The constructed nature of texts can become apparent in the use of the intrusive narrator who provides comments, interrupting the story and manifesting his or her preoccupations with the process of writing fiction. Allen Tate (1993: 60) has noted that by rendering an action and letting the reader enjoy the illusion of freedom in his or her involvement with the text, Byatt instructs the reader in thought and reaction. Self-reflexive comments can stress the roles of the reader and guide him or her in reading, making the reader engage with the text and the meaning-making process.

Byatt (2001: 102) has commented on her use of narrative voice, pointing out, “My instinct as a writer of fiction has been to explore and defend the unfashionable Victorian third-person narrator, who is not, as John Fowles claimed, playing at being God, but merely the writer, telling what can be told about the world of the fiction”. Indeed, the tetralogy appears to be written predominantly in the third person, with the occasional introduction of the characters as the first person narrators in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* and the inclusion of the first-person extradiegetic narrator in *Still Life* and, to a lesser extent, in *The Virgin in the Garden*. As pointed out by Ommundsen (1993: 8), the intrusion made by the narrator may be of personal nature, providing comments on the narrator’s life, thoughts, and feelings, or it can include comments on the act of writing and approach the process of writing from theoretical viewpoints.

*The Virgin in the Garden* is mostly rendered in a realist mode of writing in which the omniscient third-person narrator maps out the events and people in the fictional world as true to life. However, in several cases the reader can sense the organizing influence of the intrusive narrator who introduces ideas on writing and the nature of characters. For example, the reader can notice the presence of the narrator in a scene where Marcus reads writings by his friend

Lucas Simmonds: “He [Marcus] had no desire, unlike every other person in this story, to prove his skill at reading people” (VG 145). The phrase “unlike every other person in this story” evokes the presence of the narrator who is putting the story together, relying on necessarily fictive, made-up characters. Another interesting case of the presence of the narrator, commenting from outside the fictional world, occurs in a scene in which the don Alexander holds Frederica, his student, on his lap: “[T]here were no doubt no private or star-separate schoolgirls to hold on your knee, if the truth were to know. And *Lolita* still unwritten” (VG 351). The reference to *Lolita* indicates the narrator’s leap in time, coming clearly out of the possible consciousness of the characters, which lets Alexander and Frederica be seen as manipulable, created literary figures, like the ones in other literary works such as *Lolita*.

One of the most intriguing instances of self-reflexivity, allowing for insights into the ways the narrator comments on his or her thoughts on the writing at hand, occurs in the following passage which maps out some of the difficulties of writing about an event such as reading:

Some passions are the regular subjects of fiction and some, though certainly passions, are more recondite and impossible to describe. A passion for reading is somewhere in the middle: it can be hinted but not told out, since to describe an impassioned reading of *Books* [by Wordsworth] would take many more pages than *Books* itself and be an anti-climax. Nor is it possible like Borges’ poet, to incorporate *Books* into this text, though its fear of the drowning of books and its determination to give a fictive substance to a figure seen in a dream might lend a kind of Wordsworthian force to the narrative. (VG 251)

The narrator discusses what must also be among the central concerns of Byatt’s – how to write about the passion for and the act of reading without losing the narrative pace and making the characters and the plot seem papery and fictive. The narrator further comments:

It is not easy to describe a careful, conscious reading as an event. What Stephanie found in *Books* was a superfluous fear, a fear of drowning, of loss, of dark powers, ambivalent about

whether it was life or the imagination that was the destroyer, or where these two became one, where, if at all, the undifferentiated narrator tells a solid tale. (VG 251)

Although commenting on the difficulty of seeing the act of reading as carrying narrative power, Byatt's novels undertake to prove the opposite and show that reading can indeed be written about in a manner that renders it as an inspiring, immediate, and powerful act.

Through the voices of the characters, the narrator also comments on aspects of form. Frederica, in response to Wilkie's arguments that verse and psychological realism are unfashionable, claims that no form is inherently unsuitable: "A form is as good as the writer who chooses it" (VG 359). Wilkie suggests, "When you decide to be a lady novelist, and get set to write a long novel by Proust out of George Eliot, and it won't get up and walk, its words decay and real people turn out to be hectic puppets" (VG 359). Frederica's and Wilkie's discussion can be seen to highlight some of the key concerns that the narrator and Byatt are facing: Byatt's novels are interested in exploring the realist dimension, while recognizing the contemporary distrust of nineteenth-century modes of writing, and are preoccupied with creating characters who would appear not as "hectic puppets" in the writer's hand but strike the reader as "real people" who can be related to.

*The Virgin in the Garden* provides an intriguing discussion on the fictionality and reality of the characters by showing how the characters examine what if they were fictional, what if they occurred as characters in somebody's novel. Alexander tells Frederica that he loves her because she is very clever, and Frederica responds by pointing out that she loves him because he can write; to Alexander's question whether these are good reasons, Frederica replies, "Well, novels would say not. People in novels don't love each other because they can both see that Racine is – is what he is . . . If we were in a novel it would be most suspect and doomed to sit here dryly discussing literature" (VG 349). Alexander suggests, "If we were in a novel they'd just cut this dialogue because of artifice. You can have sex, in a novel, but not Racine's

meter, however impassioned you may be about it” (VG 349). It can be argued that Byatt, again, tries to claim the opposite, and show that a novel can indeed talk about Racine’s meter and characters can indeed fall in love because they both think similarly or with a similar passion about writing and literature. Indeed, Frederica and Alexander, in the same scene, continue talking about Pound, Lawrence, and Wordsworth and the authors’ ideas about emotions, poetry, pleasure, and love (VG 349), with little regard to the idea that discussing literature might doom them as dry.

In *Still Life*, the comments by the intrusive narrator occur mostly in connection with the narrator’s explanations on the fiction at hand, manifesting the text’s awareness of the ways in which words, characters, tropes, and the plot are used to construct the text and textual reality, while also providing comments on writing processes and a general response to literature. The narrator’s comments on the act of writing occur in the narrator’s explications on the words he or she employs in constructing the text. For example, the narrator’s use of the word ‘half-bourgeois’ to describe Frederica’s beliefs is followed by a sentence, in brackets, stating, “When I write ‘bourgeois’ I mean the word in the sense of which Frederica had learned to understand it as a term of opprobrium from reading *La Nausée*” (SL 280). A similar case of commenting on the choice of words is presented in connection with Stephanie’s thoughts after making love to Daniel: “Charles Darwin, it appears, tried not to personify the force that chooses egg-cell and sperm, embryo and offspring, mate and victim, not to use for it verbs of conscious intention as I have just used ‘choose’ in order not to write ‘select’” (SL 236).

*Still Life*, similarly to *The Virgin in the Garden*, illustrates the awareness of characters as elements in the constructed reality of the book, arranged in the novel according to the plans and will of the author. This awareness can be observed, for example, in the phrase in which the narrator talks about Nigel’s sister: “Olive and Rosalind, who do not come into this story and knew nothing of what had passed of it” (SL 355). A similar case can be found in how the



narrator notes that a conversation between two of the characters, about the ambivalence one of them feels towards Israel, “is not part of the stuff of this novel, and Frederica was not aware of its substance, nor that it had happened” (SL 284). The narrator, providing a comment on his or her aims in the narration, notes, “I am trying to account for the paradox of the *sameness* of so many accounts, in language, of the strange, the exotic, the new. Frederica will do as an example to illustrate the difficulties of writing about strangeness” (SL 59). The examples create the sense of an organizing figure behind the work and indicate that one is reading a story with characters manipulated in the hands of the narrator figure, and, by extension, those of the author.

The fact that Frederica is a character whose life and thoughts are recorded by the narrator becomes apparent in further instances; for example, the reader is faced with the following remarks: “The language with which I might try to order Frederica’s hectic and somewhat varied sexual life in 1954-5 was not available to Frederica then” (SL 126) and “I wrote that Frederica fell in love with a face and a concept. This was the way in which she put it to herself” (SL 205). The idea that there is an organizing figure rendering the lives of the characters can be traced, for example, in the passage on the Suez crisis and the Hungarian revolution, the images of which Frederica compares to the unlived knowledge she has acquired from literature, especially from *King Lear*, *Oresteia*, and Owen's poetry; the paragraph is followed by the comment, “I record these usual images of the unspeakable in order to wonder at what kind of knowledge they were to Frederica, powerful, second-hand, undeniable” (SL 280).

The presence of the narrator in constructing the text can be observed in the narrator’s comments on the writing process when, describing the feelings of grief after Stephanie’s death, he or she remarks, “Shakespeare managed, it occurs to me as I write, to include the different pain of grief in the resolution of tragedy” (SL 344). The narrator’s comments on the

work include the narrator's hypotheses on the reader's response to the work, more specifically, to the color words used, as the narrator states, "I know that for some readers these words will call up clear images on an inner eye, they will in some sense 'see' purple and gold, whereas others will not" (SL 108).

An example of the narrator who offers intrusive comments which supposedly pertain to his/her experience and the world outside the text includes a comment, separated from the main text by brackets, that is made in connection with Frederica's feelings when reading Donne:

This is not, in my experience, true of modern students, who see Donne as a cryptographer, a philosopher of desire, or a narrator of fictions, who do not see with the mind's eye a bracelet of bright hair about the bone, nor the bright air that clothes angels, nor gold to airy thinness beat, who do not shiver at the mind's capacity to call up a sun in a bedchamber, a star in a tomb. (SL 285)

One of the most interesting cases of the narrator's comments on writing the book at hand can be detected, for example, in the following passage which centers on the narrator's intentions and plans concerning the novel – the narrator's attempts to write a book without using metaphors and the impossibility of doing so:

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 to be impossible: one cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. We all remake the world as we see it, as we look at it. – we always put something of ourselves – however passive we are as observers, however we believe in the impersonality of the poet, into our descriptions of our world, our mapping of our vision. (SL 108)

Intriguingly, the passage appears to refer to the author of the novel, by suggesting that it is nearly impossible to create a work of fiction, indeed, to look at the world in general, without

putting one's own self into it. The narrator returns to comment on the nature of the book and his/her intentions and the desire to write a novel without metaphors, explaining:

I had an 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. I even thought of trying to write without figures of speech. But had to give up that plan, quite early. It may be possible to name without metaphor, to describe simply and clearly, to categorise and distinguish, one specimen from another. (SL 301)

The haunting presence of metaphors preoccupies Alexander who is similarly concerned with the fact that he had wanted to write “a plain, exact verse with no figurative language” (SL 2) but realizes that this cannot be done, as he is unable to escape metaphors which seem to be embedded in language and in people's minds (SL 2). Indeed, Byatt (2001: 3-11) herself, in one of her essays, has indicated that *Still Life* was an attempt to dispense with metaphors and to write about birth and death, plainly and exactly – an attempt in which she failed, as she discovered that one cannot escape metaphors.

In another passage, the narrator provides a comment on the central image of the novel in which the narrator shows that metaphors can occur even in what seem to be facts, pointing to the idea that metaphors are impossible to dispense with:

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

The scene is also rendered in the novel: several pages before the narrator's comment on the essential motif of the book, Stephanie is described as becoming obsessive with growing things and plants nasturtiums with her child Will (SL 227-228).

In *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, the diegesis does not include such self-reflexive commentary as was the case with *Still Life* and *The Virgin in the Garden*. In *Babel Tower*, the

presence of the organizing and commenting narrator is manifested in one of the hypodiegetic worlds of the novel – in Jude’s *Babbletower*. In the excerpts of *Babbletower* interwoven with the diegetic world of *Babel Tower*, one can notice the organizing presence and references to the reader in the following instances:

The details I will leave you to imagine for yourselves, for I know your imaginations will prove more fertile of quick breaths and jissom than my pen and ink shadows of desire. (BT 72, my underlining)

...

So I will somewhat brutally summarize his sayings, in order to speed my narration. (BT 202).

...

. . . the heaving surface which was now more like chamois leather, or ripe peaches, or whatever other delicate simile excites my reader. (BT 409)

The constructed nature of texts is manifested in the plot organization of *Babel Tower*, showing that next to the levels of words, characters, and tropes, the text can be aware of itself on the level of plot. The idea of an author behind the novel who constructs the book by arranging fragments of texts in certain order and who has the power to decide what happens in the novel, as “fictional materials – however lifelike, however absorbing, have been assembled in the imagination of the writer” (Alter 1975: 17), can be noted in the way Byatt has chosen to begin *Babel Tower*. Namely, she offers several possible beginnings:

It might begin: The thrush has his anvil or altar on one fallen stone in a heap, gold and grey, roughly squared and shaped, hot in the sun and mossy in the shade. (BT 1)

...

Or it might begin with Hugh Pink, walking in Laidley Woods in Herefordshire in the autumn of 1964. (BT 2)

...

Or it might begin in the crypt of St Simeon's Church, not far from King's Cross, at the same time on the same day. (BT 4)

...

Or it might begin with the beginning of the book that was to cause so much trouble, but was then only scribbled heaps of notes, and a swarm of scenes, imagined and re-imagined. (BT 10)

By using this technique of offering multiple beginnings the author points to the main story lines that she is about to develop in the novel and draws attention to the “arbitrary nature of beginnings” (Waugh 1990: 29).

The quartet also illustrates the metafictional preoccupation with endings as frames. A *Whistling Woman* provides an insightful account of a readerly response to endings by depicting the characters’ reaction to the unexpected ending of Agatha’s *Flight North*; they are “shocked and affronted by Agatha’s brutal exercise of narrative power” (WW 10). Leo, especially, is not willing to accept the ending: “We’ve waited and waited and waited to know these things, and now you say, now you say . . .” (WW 10). The unsatisfying end makes Frederica think about the nature of endings and which endings she as a reader responds to most strongly. Later, she lectures on Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* and sees the novel as one of the few which have as great an ending as everything that has happened before: after reading it, she feels “complete, and passionate, and unselfconscious, considering the narrative miracle” (WW 268). Frederica realizes that an end is always the most unreal part and argues that we all share the human need to be “mocked with art”, to find a happy ending even if one knows in life it will not happen (WW 395).

In *The Virgin in the Garden*, the reader confronts an unconventional, ‘uneventful’ final picture of the central characters:

He [Daniel] gave her [Frederica] a cup of tea and the two of them sat together in uncommunicative silence, considering the still and passive pair [Stephanie and Marcus] on the sofa. That was not the end, but since it went on for a considerable time, is as good a place to stop as any. (VG 459)

The ending especially clearly indicates that there is an author behind the text, manipulating the characters. *Babel Tower* draws attention to the conventional endings found in fairy tales: the novel ends with Jude's *Babbletower*, which ends with the motif similar to "they lived happy ever after": "And they went on walking, and if the Krebs did not catch up with them, they are walking still" (BT 617). Indeed, in one of her essays, Byatt (2001: 166) has called attention to the importance of stories and the belief in "happy ever after" endings in people's lives by suggesting that story-telling "consoles us for endings with endless new beginning. Stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the end of the story".

Thus, the metafictional concern with writing is explored by presenting several characters as writers, which allows for comments on how the characters see their own work and those of other characters. The quartet examines the writing process by depicting the characters in the acts of writing, particularly noticeable in Alexander and Frederica. Significantly, *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* present a multitude of textual types, both by Byatt and other real-life authors, and manifest formal preoccupations, drawing attention to the ways in which the works have been constructed. The majority of different textual types occur in connection with *Laminations* which seems to stand for *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* themselves, as both the text by the fictional character and the text by the creator of the fictional character are multilayered and include various discourses and registers. *Still Life* and *The Virgin in the Garden*, on the surface more realist texts, illustrate the novels' constructed nature in the self-reflexive commentary on the ways in which the works have been written, as well as in the comments made on texts and literature in general. By calling attention to the constructedness of texts, the quartet highlights the idea that also the world outside literary works can be seen as a text, in essence similarly constructed.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Byatt's quartet shows that the novels display a number of characteristics that the studies by Ommundsen, Hutcheon, Currie, Waugh, and McCaffery have outlined as major concerns of metafictional texts. *Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, *Babel Tower*, and *A Whistling Woman* share the metafictional features of foregrounding the preoccupations with reading, writing, and interpreting processes. Indeed, the processes of reading and creating texts and meaning become the overarching themes of the quartet. The tetralogy examines the notion of representation and highlights the role of language in constructing texts within and without literary domains. The novels manifest an awareness of themselves as constructs and point to the ways in which the quartet, texts, and reality in general are created.

In all of the four novels, most of the characters are closely connected to the literary world through their work and passion for books and reading. The characters' discussions and thoughts frequently center on books and authors, allowing for numerous intertextual references. Indeed, literature provides characters such as Frederica, Stephanie, and Alexander with a lens for creating and interpreting themselves and the people around them. The novels thematize reading activities and the reader's response by mirroring the characters reading or looking at other people reading – reading texts by both real-life authors and the characters themselves. In all of the novels, the reader can sense the intellectual, emotional, and physical need, the hunger, and passion the characters feel for thinking and talking in abstract terms, about literature, imaginary characters, and ideas. Byatt's characters, for whom reading is a

love, need, and art, show that deep thinking and concentrated, careful reading are powerful and immediate actions and can function as vital sources of knowledge and experience.

The novels tackle the metafictional preoccupation with the real and the imaginary and the possible blurring of the two in providing comments on how the characters of the two novels see literary characters, events and thoughts encountered in books, and their influence on the characters' own life. In all of the four novels, the characters often compare the people around them – in essence, other fictional characters – to the imaginary characters they have met in books that exist also in Byatt's readers' reality. Byatt's characters also feel that they themselves can be uncomfortably close to other, real-life literary characters. This shows the reader how Byatt's imaginary characters can take on a role of another imaginary character who is, paradoxically, real in that he or she exists in the reader's real life. Byatt additionally examines the blurred line between the real and the imaginary by demonstrating how her characters and real-life literary characters or roles can become inseparable and shows how her characters feel that they have lived through and in some author's fiction.

Real-life imaginary characters and books have an immediate impact on Byatt's characters' lives, as the characters discover that several important decisions in their lives stem from literary works. Noticeably, the characters' imaginations abound in images from literature in their relationships with the opposite sex, which makes them see the real people of their lives through imaginary relish, even to the extent that they are unable to stop thinking in literary terms even when making love. Byatt's characters find it amazing how 'real' the imaginary personages seem, even more real, better understood and more easily interpreted than the real people of their lives. This points to the metafictional concern of examining the identity of fictional characters who exist in the world of fiction and in the thoughts of the reader, and at the same time do not exist, being imaginary constructs. Byatt further complicates the line between fact and fiction by introducing real-life personages as characters into her fiction as



well as by placing the works by her own characters next to the ones by real-life authors. Byatt's characters venture to claim that they sometimes feel that real-life authors are like literary characters for them, as authors are similarly made of words and are not necessarily reachable, 'touchable', in their 'real life'. The borders between fiction and reality become even more blurred when the characters realize that the fiction they have been writing is their own real life, leading to the thought that fiction can seem more real than reality itself.

While the preoccupation with reading and tackling the relationships between Byatt's literary characters, real-life literary characters and authors are prevalent in all of the four novels, the metafictional concern with story-telling becomes more apparent in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, which depict how Agatha Mond writes and reads stories. The story-telling sessions provide insights into how the characters and, by extension, the real-life reader, can become engrossed by the text and imagine and live in another world. Moreover, the characters believe in the healing power of stories and also suggest that the reader can learn about other people and life in general from stories and fairy tales, even though these are fictional. Additionally, Byatt points to the idea that it is universal to perceive one's life as a story with beginnings, middles, and ends.

The four novels display a strong interest in the nature of language. Throughout the quartet, the worldview and mindsets of the majority of the central characters are heavily based on words, as the characters rely on and familiarize the world for themselves through words. The characters think about and discuss word meanings, etymologies, associations, and connotations, drawing the reader's attention to the idea that language has a performative power by making certain phenomena happen through the very act of uttering words. The characters with heavily word-based thinking are contrasted with those who lack words and are unable to manipulate and master language. The concern with language manifests itself also in the themes examined. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, the characters attempt to love in language,

to love via the meter, rhythm, and rhyme of poetry; *Still Life* discusses portraits in art and portraits in language, shedding light on visual and verbal images. Byatt takes an especially close look at different aspects of language in *Babel Tower* in which she discusses the teaching of language, the gap between private and public language, and the power of language to create, captivate, alter, and distort reality. *A Whistling Woman* adds another dimension to discussing the nature of language by concentrating on scientific aspects which pertain to language and brain research as well as by shedding light on the theme of verbal worlds of books versus the language of the new multi-media.

The tetralogy prominently illustrates the metafictional concern with writers and processes of writing. The four novels include a number of characters who write books, plays, poems, and book reviews. The quartet shows how the characters talk about the construction of their own works, the images used, and the authors who have influenced their writing styles. The fact that the characters-writers discuss their own writings points to their need to explain their works and perhaps guide the readers. The characters also talk about the works of Byatt's other characters, most apparent in the discussions revolving around Jude's polemical *Babbletower*. The novels examine various aspects related to the writing process; the quartet sheds light on problems and anxieties writers can be confronted with and explores how the writer can face difficulties with finding his or her true voice. Additionally, the novels illustrate how the writer can become textualized and turn into texts discussed at schools and in academic circles, next to real-life authors.

The processes of writing are most closely observed in connection with the quartet's central character Frederica. *Babel Tower* mirrors Frederica in acts of writing by showing how she creates different texts such as book reviews, reports, and diary notes. Frederica discusses her voice as a writer, the reality or irreality of it, thinking whether the use of 'I' makes her seem less real to herself. She discovers that it is hard, perhaps impossible, to write without

fictionalizing oneself and one's life. Frederica's reviews, reports, and notes become part of her *Laminations*, a book of cut-ups, quotations, and fragments. *A Whistling Woman* examines Frederica's thoughts about her role as a writer after the book has been published, showing that she does not see herself as an author, as she suggests that a book of cut-ups is in fact something that anybody can do. The last novel of the quartet examines how a literary work can be received and responded to by the critical and general public by depicting the response to *Laminations* and Agatha's *Flight North*.

Frederica's writing of *Laminations* reminds of the ways in which *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* are constructed – compiled of various texts, discourses, and registers – resulting in a multilayered text, although Byatt's own work is less radically experimental than Frederica's. Both Frederica's work and Byatt's writings call the reader's attention to formal preoccupations and the constructed nature of texts. *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, more so than the first and the second novel of the quartet, contain both material by other novelists, poets, and playwrights as well as Byatt's own texts imitating different genres. The novels thus underscore the fragmentation of texts and the everyday textuality of the surrounding world as well as emphasize the myriad of different textual types and genres that can be included in the contemporary novel.

The constructed nature of the earlier novels *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* becomes apparent in the self-reflexive commentary by the intrusive narrator who provides comments on the creation of the work at hand and gives insights into the writing processes and literature in general. The self-reflexive commentary shows an awareness of the words, characters, tropes, and plot in forming the fictional construct. The intrusive narrator's comments leave the reader with the sense that there is an organizing influence behind what the reader is reading and point to the idea that the literary characters are manipulable, essentially fictive. The idea that there is a narrator recording and shaping the narrative is

apparent also in the beginnings and endings of the novels, manifesting the metafictional concern with beginnings and endings as frames. Highlighting the idea of texts as constructs, the quartet invites the reader to think that the world outside the literary text can be similarly seen as a writable, readable and constructable text.

However, the novels paradoxically also appear to encourage a realistic reading. The idea of the novels supporting a realistic response is manifested in the ways the four books have a distinctly recognizable social and cultural setting, picturing the characters' lives unfolding against the background of the new Elizabethan Age of the 1950s, the introduction of the Pill, the emergence of counter-culture, ideal communities, and anti-universities, as well as the new language and new forms of knowledge found in television and the multi-media. The novels thus have a distinct sense of time and place, recording the history and development of the British society and culture and setting it in a wider cultural context. In addition to the strong sense of time and place, the novels inspire a realistic reading also in the portrayal of characters. The characters of the four novels strike the reader as not as fictional constructs but 'real' and life-like, believable people who the reader can relate to. Just like Frederica is amazed at the realness of literary characters and the ways in which people talk about them as if they existed in reality, so is the real-life reader who tends to refer to and think about the characters of the novels as if they existed in the world outside fiction.

*The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* appear on the surface as more overtly realist texts; however, a closer look at the first two novels suggests that they both employ self-reflexive characteristics, examining the processes of writing, reading, and constructing the real and the imaginary. *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* could strike as more overtly experimental texts due to the ways they manifest structural incoherence and the inclusion of multiple hypodiegetic levels, different texts and discourses. Nevertheless, the two last novels of the

series do not lose the sense of the immediacy, the 'realness' and believability of the characters and the events. The rendering of the characters supports a realistic reading and the novels do **not** leave a general impression of being fabricated constructs.

All in all, it can be claimed that Byatt's achievements in the hybrid mode that has been described as 'experimental realism' and 'Postmodern realism' by literary scholars and 'self-conscious realism' by herself, stem from her deft employment of metafictional devices while drawing on a narrative tradition with a strong realist dominant. Thus, it can be argued that the quartet belongs to the center of Patricia Waugh's continuum of texts displaying metafictional tendencies, as they do not only take the subject of fictionality as a theme to be explored without manifesting formal self-consciousness, but also point to the ways in which the texts at hand have been constructed, drawing attention to form and including self-reflexive comments. Yet the novels do not lapse into rejecting realism and seeing the work of fiction and the world at large as total fabrications, which would characterize metafictional texts at the furthest extreme of the spectrum. One can thus see the quartet as a particularly good example of a postmodern British novel's position at the crossroads, examining both paths of the realist and more self-reflexive writing practices. Byatt's work thus gives valuable insights into the ways the writer can challenge, extend, reshape, or combine both realist and more inward-looking modes of writing by examining realism self-consciously or self-consciousness realistically.

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## RESÜMEE

Tartu Ülikool  
Inglise filoloogia õppetool

Hiie Saumaa

### **Metafiktsionaalne võttestik A.S. Byatti Frederica Potteri kvarteti eneserefleksiivses realismis**

Magistritöö  
2005  
102 lk.

Magistritöö “Metafiktsionaalne võttestik A.S. Byatti Frederica Potteri kvarteti eneserefleksiivses realismis” käsitleb metafiktsionaalsust väljapaistva briti nüüdiskirjaniku Byatti tetraloogias, millesse kuuluvad *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) ja *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Üks Briti nüüdiskirjanduse iseloomulikke jooni on nn eneserefleksiivne realism, mida kujukalt esindab ka Byatti looming. Töö näitab, et Byatti puhul saavutatakse eneserefleksiivse realismi efekt eelkõige metafiktsionaalsuse võttestiku abil, mis võimaldab Byattil viljelda talle iseloomulikku kirjutamisstiili, milles mõjusalt põimuvad eksperimentaalsus ja realismi tunnusjooned.

Kaasaegse briti kirjandusele omaseid jooni ja eneserefleksiivset realismi vaadeldakse Marguerite Alexanderi, Andrzej Gasioreki ja Alison Lee toreetiliste tööde põhjal. Teoste lähemale vaatlusele loob teoreetilise raamistiku metafiktsionaalsusteooria, eriti Mark Currie,

Linda Hutcheoni, Larry McCaffery, Wenche Ommundseni ja Patricia Waughi teoreetilised käsitlused.

Byatti kvarteti analüüs näitab, et tetraloogias on tähtis roll metafiktsionaalsel lugemis-ja kirjutamisprotsesside tematiseerimisel ning eneserefleksiivsel reaalsuse ja fiktsionaalsuse suhte problematiseerimisel. Enamik kvarteti nime tegelastest on kirjandusega väga tihedalt, kirglikult seotud: lugemine on nende jaoks emotsionaalne, intellektuaalne, peaaegu füüsiline vajadus. Tetraloogia portreerib lugemisprotsessi, kujutades tegelasi lugemas ja loetut arutamas, loetu üle mõtlemas. Kvartett illustreerib metafiktsionaalset fakti ja fiktsiooni suhte rõhutamist ja diegeetiliste tasandite hägustumist, näidates, kuidas Byatti fiktsionaalsed tegelased mõtlevad teistest—lugejale ‘reaalses’ maailmas—eksisteerivatest tegelastest, võrreldes oma sõpru ja lähikondseid kirjandustegelastega. ‘Reaalses’ maailmas eksisteerivad kirjandustegelased ning ‘tõelised’ inimesed astuvad Byatti tegelaste ellu, hägustades fiktsionaalsuse ja reaalsuse piire. Byatti tegelased leiavad end tihti mõttelt, et neile on fiktsionaalne maailm reaalsem kui ‘reaalsus’, jäädes samal ajal usutavateks, realistlikus võtmes tõlgendavateks tegelasteks.

Tetraloogia illustreerib metafiktsionaalset huvi kirjutamis-ja loomisprotsessi vastu. Mitmeid keskseid tegelasi—eriti Fredericat ja Alexanderit—kujutatakse kirjutamas. *The Virgin in the Garden* ja *Still Life* sisaldavad jutustajapoolseid eneserefleksiivseid kommentaare antud teoste ja kirjanduse üle laiemalt, näidates, et tekstide taga on neid organiseeriv ja ülesehitav üksus. Tekstide konstrueeritus torkab eelkõige silma teostes *Babel Tower* ja *A Whistling Woman*, eriti silmapaistvalt esindatud Frederica kirjutatud ja fragmentidest koosnevas tekstis *Laminations*, mis hõlmab arvukalt erinevaid tekstitüüpe nii Byattilt endalt kui teistelt kirjanikelt. Toonitades tekstide konstrueeritust, kvartett viitab teostevälise maailma samasugusele konstrueeritusele ja ‘reaalsuse’ tekstilisusele.

Tööst nähtub, et Byatti eneserefleksiivne või postmodernne realism tuleneb metafiktionaalse võttestiku kasutamisest, tuginedes ühtlasi jutustamistraditsioonile, mis rõhutab realistlikku vaatepunkti. Seega on kvartett kujukaks näiteks, kuidas kirjanik võib luua usutavaid, 'tõelisi' tegelasi ja samaaegselt eneserefleksiivselt tematiseerida tekstide konstrueeritust ning näitab, kuidas kirjanikul on võimalik muuta, ühendada, laiendada nii realistlikku kui eneserefleksiivset kirjutamisviisi.

Märksõnad:

A.S. Byatt, briti nüüdiskirjandus, metafiktsiooniteooria, eneserefleksiivne realism