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To my mother: in memoriam

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Introduction

A.S. Byatt has enjoyed a reputation as a challenging writer for about thirty years now, ever since she brought out her first ambitious, complex novels in the Sixties. Although she is an equally respected author of works of literary criticism, and is a fine short-story writer, it is the six full-length novels that make up her production of long fiction to date, that form the subject of this study. The main objective is to determine exactly what material she finds most fruitful in terms of content, and what factors are important to her on the formal plane in the writing of fiction. Byatt creates her fictional worlds out of words and different discourses and makes the reader aware of the fact that these are verbal constructs. Another objective is to look into the ways in which she achieves this effect. As she draws upon the literary traditions she inherits within British literature, she places herself agonistically in a long line of novelists who are conscious of the fact that this rich source can offer opportunities but also impose constraints upon the neophyte writer. Her choices from amongst a myriad of possible models should tell us much about what she likes and believes in. All her works of long fiction have been considered, in the absence, (as yet), of a full-length study. But reference has been made to her non-fictional writings where these shed light upon her major enterprises in the world of fiction, for logically the ideas expressed and developed in them inform all her fictional works.

The approach taken in this study is logically an outside-

in one, starting with the tradition and the external circumstances affecting the writer and moving to the core of each novel. Within each novel, we start with the dominant themes and examine how they are structured. Then we move in to minute analyses of sections of text to see how the devices designed to endow the novels with cohesion and coherence function. Indeed, she herself declares she is no schizophrenic, but moves freely from fiction to non-fiction and back again, and in fact, has been criticised for combining the two and thus for 'preaching' in her fiction.

A combination of the diachronic and the synchronic approach is used; the former is necessary, as it enables us to see how a given novel continues to display the usual Byatt concerns, and also to see how the novels have developed in assuredness of subject and technique over the thirty years in which she has been publishing fiction. The latter lends itself to more detailed and exhaustive study of the text, and rather than show a development, the analysis demonstrates the functioning of examples of contemporary literary discourse and permits comparison without repetition.

As Byatt declares she is 'a non-belonger of schools', it would not be appropriate to submit her works to a critique from only one particular stance, be it post-modern, feminist, Marxist, psycholinguistic, or that of any school. As is typical of metafictional writing, she offers a multiplicity of viewpoints within her fiction, and inspired by this, we propose to analyse those aspects of her writing, those idiosyncratic interests and techniques, that she does admit to.

In general terms, we examine first the way in which she responds to and inscribes herself in a cultural and literary tradition. She inherits a rich tradition which includes the Western myths of Creation, and a revered canon of English literature (in these days of the questioning of canons)

channelled to her through F.R. Leavis. She admits to a fascination with language, its referential and ontological nature and attendant problems. Some of her most ambitious pieces of writing are attempts to tackle the relationship between language and the real world, and confront the aesthetic and epistemological difficulties of language and 'truth', language and perception, language and representation, that writing entails. A moral and philosophical concern, part of her inheritance from George Eliot, F.R. Leavis and Iris Murdoch, among others, informs all her writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

In a lecture at the University of Granada in 1988, she said that her three constants were the old, the new and the metaphor. If all these factors mentioned can be deemed 'old', stemming from the cultural and literary past which she makes her own, she is not less concerned with new material. As teacher and critic, she follows the latest currents of thought in Britain, and also emanating from the Continent and the United States. Moreover, she delights in offering the readers of her fiction detailed, almost technical information on 'new' topics, subjects she imagines her readers know very little about, and which they would not expect to find in a novel. Her curiosity about all aspects of life is boundless, and as she believes a novel is 'a large, loose baggy monster' (from Henry James, characterising Thackeray's *The Newcomes*, 1855), she makes them accommodate her interests. In so doing, she gives us a view of a multifaceted life, and shows how old things can always be seen in a new light.

The old, the new, and the metaphor: indeed, these together seem to be the hallmark of Byatt's work. Creation of metaphor is acknowledged by her to be a major tool in the structuring of her fiction and in the making of the fabric of the discourse. The role of metaphor in endowing her works with cohesion and coherence and creating a sharing attitude

with her readers will also be examined. In the hermeneutical aspects of the study of her fiction, we take an interpretative approach which is co-operative, taking into account the importance of the tripartite pragmatic axis of author, text and reader. The general framework in which this study is cast is designed to enhance a co-operation with the text through our personal reading and at the same time through an exploration of its lexicon and its meanings which is linguistic and intersubjective.

Chapter I is an initial overview of the state of the art in studies on the British novel in the immediate post-war years, the period in which Byatt started writing. It covers the movement from nostalgia for classic realism to innovation by some writers and the opting of a large number of them for metafiction. Chapter II looks at Byatt's response to the immediate tradition, and considers her mentors and her models. In response to these, she came up with her above-mentioned formula of the old, the new and the metaphor, and the overall effect of this interrelation of the ideological and the aesthetic is examined here. Chapter III takes a horizontal approach across the novels, bringing together different interests, tendencies and points of view. Through this, we go in search of points in common and intersections, relating themes to the principal objectives of her fiction, showing how they fit in with the new interests of the metafictional writer in general. In Chapter IV, the nucleus of our study of Byatt's metaphors, the approach is vertical in that the analysis is made of individual novels using certain descriptions of metaphor and myth, notably those of George Lakoff and John Vickery respectively. Applying the techniques contained in these descriptions, we dig deep into the material in order to analyse a section and draw conclusions. Although study on the two axes may suggest divergence, in fact, the different results, when juxtaposed, are beneficial in their complementariness, thus

we justify this dialectic between the interdisciplinary integrating approach and the monographic analytical approach. Chapter V examines an aspect of metafictional analysis: personal and social ritual as metaphor. Byatt has shown herself to be, along with other contemporary writers following a tradition of using fiction to portray the 'Condition of England', a chronicler of British post-war social history. Her fiction has a specific historicity which grounds it and which opens up a dialectic to discuss recent political and historical events and tendencies, inviting reciprocal speculation on them from her readers.

The design of this methodology is based on the hypothesis that the particular object of study in her novels – the creation of lexically self-conscious fictional worlds and the whole concept of literary creativity – is itself a linguistically self-conscious literary form, and only a combined and co-operative methodological practice can give satisfactory results. This is true particularly in the objective of understanding the thematic relationships that make up the macrostructures of the whole body of fictional works. The implicit underlying themes intuited by the reader are thus confirmed through the lexico-semantic dimension.

Our conclusions show that such highly complex fictions are successful partly because they are rooted in recognisable schemata or metaphors, which are minutely interlinked in different ways and foregrounded through repetition. On a higher level, they appeal to a reader more versed in literature, by their creation of added meaning through a web of references to admired authors and texts from the history of English literature, which are controlled by Byatt and which can even function at a structural level as well as at that of the surface text. Through her intuitions of reader response, she calls upon her more sophisticated readers to create meaning with her for the pure enjoyment of fictional worlds of the imagination. Ventures into the philosophy of

language and its ontological relations in this post-Saussurean world have been moderated in the later fiction, but her control over the possible evocations through precise metonymy and metaphor enables her to achieve considerable verbal precision and tightness, without sacrificing evocative power. The immense complexity of her long fiction has been sustained in her latest major novel, and continues to be a hallmark of her style. It may appear a paradox, but her fiction now has 'bestseller' status in addition to intellectual exigence, and our analyses show that there has been no betrayal, for the two are compatible, if only in a writer of Byatt's calibre.

A.S. Byatt's Novels, Chronology and Editions Used

The Shadow of the Sun	1964	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1991	Vintage
The Game	1967	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1987	Penguin 3rd Reprint
The Virgin in the Garden	1978	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1987	Penguin 4th Reprint
Still Life	1985	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1985	Chatto 2nd Impression
Possession: A Romance	1990	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1990	Chatto 2nd Impression
Babel Tower	1996	Chatto & Windus
Edition Used:	1996	Chatto 1st Impression

Chapter I
The State of the Art in Post-War British Fiction

1.1 Introduction: the novel and criticism in post-war Britain

In order to place A.S. Byatt in the panorama of post-war British fiction and to evaluate her contribution to it, it is necessary to examine what 'novel' means in the context of literary developments since the war, and to trace what the critical viewpoints have been. Byatt has made a place for herself in a site where the tradition which dominates is not seen with the same eyes by everyone. Perhaps more than at any other time in the history of the novel, the neophyte has difficult choices to make, choices hindered by a general insecurity concerning what the novel is and might be in the second half of the twentieth century.

The post-war period has been characterised in critical theory by an interplay between various stances, some of them at times enjoying a mutual accord, and others sustaining a permanent incompatibility, even conflict. As Douglas Tallack puts it, there are basically four movements: the first is the ground-breaking methodological advances brought by structuralism, but to the detriment of hermeneutic discussion; the second, deconstructive self-reflexivity, which has brought a new awareness of gaps and imperfections; third, an immanent form of critique de-

signed to distance oneself from a capitalism which is no longer thought to be definitively located; and, fourth, the substitution of power for truth as the primary focus for analysis.[1]

Byatt has lived through all of these and felt their impact upon, firstly, the medium she uses, language, and the various analytical approaches that have been directed towards it, and secondly, on the modes of fiction and criticism in which she expresses herself. If there is a basic common logic in most contemporary theory, it is anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist. However, it is useful to retain the familiar differentiating organising concepts of structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, feminism and Marxism in order to frame a discussion of the field in which she works. Since Byatt is ultimately more of a maker of fictions than a theorist of fictions, she has adhered to none of these schools. In later years, she has joined her voice to those of the discourses of psychoanalysis and feminism, but identifies with none in particular.

While entering into the heat of the dialectic fomented by the Continental theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Foucault and their apologists, and the opponents of these, she has been convinced by none of them. She has participated more in the discussions of theory specific to the novel that have been prompted by postmodern thinking. In the conflict between realism and experimentalism manifested in the work of a wide range of twentieth-century writers, she has taken no rigid stance. She has been called a realist, and defends certain aspects of 'traditional realism', but much of her work reveals postmodern concerns and approaches.

By so saying, we do not wish to suggest that realism is now obsolete as a serious mode of writing, superseded by

[1]Tallack 1995, p.3.

various postmodernisms. Indeed, 'traditional realism' has been questioned in numerous contexts and has risen to the challenge to represent a changing social world with the greatest possible credibility and fidelity. Byatt is at the fore of the impulse to reconceptualise realism in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique.

Recent research (cf. Cunningham 1994 and Lodge 1992, to single out rather arbitrarily but two critics) shows the so-called realism/experimentalism dichotomy to be largely fallacious. It is held to be formalist, construing realism as a set of narrative techniques which experimentalism subverts. Yet analysis of texts from writers seen as classic realists such as George Eliot and Dickens reveals formal techniques which belie their linguistic naïveté and are not so dissimilar to those used by the experimenters. Most of these are anti-mimetic and testify to the texts' self-consciousness as text.

Realism has always been a heterogeneous phenomenon, and post-war writing practices engage with it in great diversity and complexity. The multifarious reworkings of earlier realist modes to extend realism, using it as an ideological tool for different purposes, should be examined strictly within their particular contexts. Contemporaries of Byatt such as Angela Carter, John Berger or George Lamming, have their special uses for realism, namely, feminism, socialism and anti-colonialism. Byatt sees herself as a descendant of the classic realists, especially George Eliot, and does not adhere to a marked ideology or fixed formal technique, but can be seen as viewing realism as a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world, which has manifested itself in a variety of forms in different historical periods. As we shall see later, her hallmarks are the multiple viewpoint and the art of pastiche. Hence, within the so-called 'crisis of representation', her work reflects no rigid political position apart from the general leftism associated with the Arts since the War. It

applies a variety of narrative strategies to achieve at once the goal of accurate representation, and that of displaying different forms of representation and questioning representation itself.

The particular ways in which she engages with the epistemological and aesthetic difficulties entailed by representation will be examined in subsequent chapters.

1.2 Realism in the post-war period

In the decade after the end of the Second World War, serious writers involved in the numerous discussions of the novel's future shared concerns in two main areas. Byatt, growing up among them at the time, was later to find that they thought the novel was under pressure from the very fact of the war itself and its manifold repercussions and effects on pre-war expectations in general. Other menaces came from mass culture, in the form of radio, cinema, and later, television. While this did not dismay her personally, being an inveterate reader, it was seen as a potential threat to readership and taste in the novel. The growing power of mass culture from these media is attested to in most of her works. This concern is of an external nature, involving social change and cultural transformation.

The second area of concern focuses on developments internal to the novel, in the areas of technique, form and style. Modernism itself continued to be a threat, in spite of the fact that its subjectivism militated against the novel's power to confront social issues directly. Modes of writing which did deal with social problems were tending towards the journalistic, notably in authors like George Orwell. The story-telling function of the novel was under threat of being usurped by the cinema. The writing of Graham Greene springs to mind here; if he did not write straight-out film scripts like *The Third Man*, his novels were conceived with

an eye to filmic representation. In a recent study, Andrzej Gasiorek voices this fear in the following terms:

> The novel, exhausted as a form, unable to meet the demands placed on it by a changing world, and challenged by the mass media, was thus thought to be in terminal decline. (Gasiorek, 1995, p.1)

The fear of massification was felt by what was then a predominantly conservative literary intelligentsia. Elizabeth Bowen articulated an anxiety – an anxiety Byatt was later to share – about the threat to the imagination from the uniformity of urban surroundings and the democratisation of society brought about by Education Acts. These important factors in changes in socialisation are recorded in Byatt's work. Ironically, they stimulated the book industry to rise to the challenge of greater literacy and sophistication of reading taste to open a mass-market potential from which Byatt has greatly benefited in the last six or seven years.

In the immediate post-war period, calls were made[1] for the novel to display a coherent attitude in the face of the fragmentation of society. In later years, as she portrayed a focal event of the time, the 1952 Coronation (in *The Virgin in the Garden,* 1978), Byatt precisely underlined this fragmentation, thus problematising the premise of a coherent attitude. The period from the Forties to the Sixties, when Byatt began to write, was overtly seen as a straight conflict between experimental writers like B.S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose, on the one hand, and realists like C.P. Snow (helped by the neo-realist Angry Young Men) on the other. Kingsley Amis spoke in favour of empiricism and Anglo-Saxon common sense when he equated the experimental novel with deceitfulness and triviality as well as narcissism. This realist defence was contested by arguing

that modernism was necessarily the point of departure for post-war fiction. Brooke-Rose, influenced primarily by Pound and Beckett, spoke of drawing attention to 'the fictionality of fiction'. She felt the contemporary novel should investigate language, reveal its own provisional and fictional status, and refuse what was perceived as realism's univocal perspective.[2] Byatt, with her multivocal perspectivism and her self-reflexivity, has answered this call, without abandoning the heritage of classic realism.

In the Fifties, to defend realism was to be aligned with the English tradition of empiricism, common sense, social comedy along the lines of Dickens, but also with a broad commitment to liberal humanism. When this came to be seen as politically reactionary, some writers, such as Angus Wilson, distanced themselves from it. Yet realisms are multiple, and they can no more be equated with a particular political stance than with a given set of narrative strategies. The liberal humanism of such as Angus Wilson and John Fowles survives in spite of its political impotence; it is partly a Leavisite relic, and as such was inherited by Byatt.

Commentators linked the crisis of the novel with a crisis of society. A widespread malaise, a sluggish economy, a backward education system and a prevalent cultural philistinism were held to be the culprits of England's decline, and the symptoms were seen as persisting well beyond the immediate post-war fragmentation. Byatt is still analysing this phenomenon, as her latest work, *Babel Tower* (1996), demonstrates. The analysis of the decade of the Sixties is made both in terms of society and of fiction, especially the novel, and continues her analysis of the Fifties made in the first two volumes, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, of what is promised as a tetralogy.

It was at this time, the Fifties, that negative reverberations were emanating from the heart of English novel criticism. The contributors to John Lehmann's *The Craft of*

Letters in England (1956) concluded that no contemporary British novelist was of major international stature, none had adequately responded to post-war social change and none was especially innovative. The piece of critical writing that had most impact upon A.S. Byatt, and which was penned at this time, was Iris Murdoch's famous article 'Against Dryness', an analysis of the contemporary scene. She identified two dominant strands of writing, the 'crystalline' (symbolist) and the 'journalistic' (realist) (Murdoch 1961, pp.16–20). She argued that neither mode could offer a complex account of human personality, of moral dilemmas, or of a social reality that expresses the individual and the transcendent.

1.3 Realism and the thesis of the 'death of the novel'

The period we have been speaking of, from the end of the war up to the end of the Sixties – covered by the first three books that have appeared of Byatt's tetralogy, *The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life* and *Babel Tower* – saw the growth of adverse criticism of the genre to the point of its developing into a thesis about the possible 'death of the novel'. Ian Watt's seminal work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957) was largely instrumental in the dissemination of the idea of the organic nature of the genre. He equated the genre of the novel with capitalism and a bourgeois ideology, which was now moribund. In studying the origins of the novel from Defoe, he saw it as the representative form of an emergent mercantile class that developed concurrently with the social and economic changes instigated by capitalism. Since critics, Watt among them, felt liberalism had been undermined by recent historical events and tendencies, and liberalism was the keynote of realism and the whole genre of the novel, the

threat to these two concepts presented a powerful challenge to the novel genre. Other post-war critics, notably Bernard Bergonzi (Bergonzi 1970) and George Steiner (Steiner 1967), endorsed this view of a possible generic crisis.

The sense of liberalism is that of a general humanist sensibility, characterised by open-mindedness, tolerance and breadth of vision. Byatt inherited these qualities through her education and background, and all her work demonstrates respect for diversity and tolerance of different viewpoints. In searching for similarity in different contexts, she must have accepted, along with Watt, that the novel had its origin in a particular historical moment which gave it its *raison-d'être*, but the closure of that period did not mean, for a creative writer working subsequently, a total closure of the genre which was its expression. Literary forms can sometimes display a capacity for adaptation which transcends the physical events of political and economic history.

Bergonzi, and later Lodge, while rejecting the 'death of the novel' thesis, were worried about the direction the novel was taking. Bergonzi feared it would break up into sub-genres and pastiche, and by denying distinctive individuality and originality would turn against the ideology that had inspired it in its beginnings and sustained it throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. David Lodge, in his 1984 *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, gave us a powerful metaphor to illustrate the possible deviation, bifurcation, fragmentation or disappearance of the genre. Side-roads for him were the non-fiction novel or fabulation. These other narrative modes are seen as related, but less significant fictional forms. For Lodge, the novel's central highway is realism, but not everyone would agree with that thesis.

Robert Alter, in his 1975 *Partial Magic: the Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* had already shown that from its very

beginnings, in the ground-breaking work of Continental writers such as Cervantes, the novel has been multifarious, and that mimesis has not been more dominant than other attitudes such as deviation, parody, pastiche, playfulness and fantasy. As he says in his preface:

> [...]ontological critique in the novel, moreover, is carried on typically not as discursive exposition but as a critical exploration through the technical manipulation of the very form that purports to be reality. (Alter 1975, p.x)

Early novelists like Cervantes and Sterne explored what could and could not be put into this new container and what the materials for its construction could be. *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* are self-conscious in their presentation of themselves more as verbal artefacts than products of a mere mimetic impulse:

> A self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality. (Alter 1975, pp.x–xi)

As we have suggested elsewhere (Wallhead 1993), Byatt remains within Lodge's mainstream of realism, while exploring the alternatives at the crossroads at the same time, an act of multi-faceted virtuosity which Alter feels the early novelists performed anyway. Alter shows how Cervantes played on the reader's imagination with his simultaneous representations of reality and subversions of them:

> The moment when the impulse of consciousness darts from pole to pole is an illuminating one, for

> Cervantes understands that there is an ultimately serious tension between the recognition of fictions as fictions and the acceptance of them as reality, however easy it may seem to maintain these two awarenesses simultaneously. Knowing that a fiction is, after all, only a fiction, is potentially subversive of any meaningful reality that might be attributed to the fiction, while assenting imaginatively to the reality of a represented action is a step in a process that could undermine or bewilder what one ordinarily thinks of as his sense of reality. Cervantes's novel could be described as a comic acting-out of the ultimate implications, both moral and ontological, of this tension of attitudes. (Alter 1975, p.14)

In her creation of characters who write fictions and deliberately attempt to approximate, sometimes more, sometimes less, to a representation of reality, Byatt seems to be continuing the Cervantine practice, in a genre which rather than being moribund, was beginning to renew itself by going back to its roots.

Another Cervantine device Byatt uses in this 'reality' game, is authorial intervention. Cervantes put himself into his fiction both in a version of himself and reference to his published works, as Alter says:

> Cervantes himself [...] did not hesitate to open up a loophole in the fictional reality looking out to the frankly autobiographical reality of the writer. (Alter 1975, p.16)

Byatt, as we shall see later, appears as a significantly insignificant watching figure in some of her novels, and has characters refer to works she has had them pen. In her most ambitious work in this respect, *Still Life*, where both her

anonymous narrator and creative writers attempt to overcome the problems reality itself presents for mimesis, she takes up the challenge Cervantes had struggled with:

> For Cervantes [...] as a fundamentally secular sceptic [...] art is obviously questionable because it is understood to be ultimately arbitrary, while nature is still more problematic because it is so entrammelled with art, so universally mediated by art, shaped by art's peculiar habits of vision, that it becomes difficult to know what, if anything, nature in and of itself may be. (Alter 1975, p.28)

Or, in the words of Roland Barthes:

> To give the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real, while leaving this sign the ambiguity of a double object, at once verisimilar and false, is a constant operation in all Western art. (Barthes 1953, p.5)

We have dwelt on Alter's opinions on the errors contained in a monolithic view of the nature of realism in the novel for the reason that Byatt's explorations of the novel's possibilities for her personally appear to touch on the issues he discusses. The early conflict between realism and romance – explicitly discussed by Byatt in *The Game* (1967) – the comic-parodic strain running through Cervantes, Fielding and Sterne to the present day, and the traditions such as gothic fantasy and fairy tale, no doubt led other critics to formulate views of the novel that differ from that of the English critics Watt and Lodge.

Bakhtin, for example, rejects the equation of realism and the novel. Gasiorek summarises neatly for us Bakhtin's stance:

> On a Bakhtinian interpretation, for example, the novel is not a modern literary form because it developed realistic techniques but because it discloses the heteroglossic complexity of early modern societies. For Bakhtin, the novel is neither associated with any particular social group nor defined by any given form. It is characterised by its fluidity, for its features belong to no 'system of fixed generic characteristics'. Moreover, because it is associated with 'low' parodic-travestying literatures that ridicule 'high' culture and undermine the language of hegemonic groups, it becomes a transgressive, anti-canonic form that discloses society's stratified and conflictual nature. The novel, Bakhtin argues, 'has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic.'[3]

Gasiorek concludes, therefore, that because there is no agreement on one of the terms in the formula 'death of the novel', it is misleading to speak of a general crisis within the genre. For Gasiorek, the novel is 'a heterogeneous and mutable genre, which undermines its earlier forms in an ongoing search for new ways of engaging with a historically changing social reality.' (Gasiorek 1995, p.8)

But however one views this question at the end of the twentieth century, the fact remains that post-war writers saw realism in the novel as a problem of their time and for them. To examine the two viewpoints, we can compare a statement by the experimental novelist B.S. Johnson with one by Byatt's sisters Margaret Drabble. In a 1967 BBC recording Johnson maintained:

> It's silly to pretend that one can solve the problems of writing in the middle of the twentieth century with the methods of Henry James, and even less with the methods of Dickens.[4]

In the same recorded discussions, entitled 'Novelists of the Sixties', Margaret Drabble answered:

> I don't want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years, who will say, ah, well, yes, she foresaw what was coming. I'm just not interested. I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire, than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore.[5]

Byatt, a 'novelist of the Sixties' like her sister, but not so famous at the time, shared that conservatism at the beginning of her career. Bernard Bergonzi argued a few years later for continuance in the English tradition without problematising 'reality':

> The tradition of nineteenth-century realism, which underlies most contemporary English fiction, depended on a degree of relative stability in three separate areas: the idea of reality; the nature of the fictional form; and the kind of relationship that might predictably exist between them. (Bergonzi 1979, p.188)

He comments on the two sisters together, as embodying the English tradition, though we must remember that at that time Byatt had written only her first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game*:

> The notion that the literary transformation of experience is a form of mystification or lying is to be found in two accomplished recent novels, by authors who certainly do not share Doris Lessing's impatience with the established conventions of fictions. Thus, Margaret Drabble in *The Millstone*, lets her heroine

discover the manuscript of a novel that a supposedly loyal friend has been writing about her; she reads through it with mounting horror at the copious distortions and misrepresentations it contains. In A.S. Byatt's *The Game* one of the two sisters who are the central characters publishes a novel in which experiences involving the other sister are improved on and written up for literary purposes, with, in the end, disastrous results. For orthodox twentieth-century criticism the source has no rights and need not be considered. What counts is the finished work, in which disparate materials are transmuted by the author's imagination into a new aesthetic unity; this, certainly, is the critical tradition in which I feel most at home and which I would struggle to defend. (Bergonzi 1979, p.204)

1.4 The English novel in the Sixties and the rise of self-reflexive fiction

David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) is an example of what Wells called 'The frame getting into the picture', where the author's act of writing is included in the field of the novel. In his criticism, Lodge had suggested that explicit problematisation of the act of writing within fiction was a device writers at the crossroads, like himself, had found useful as a way of sitting on the fence:

> [...] there are formidable discouragements to continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism. The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to build their hesitation into the novel itself.[6]

Through exploring the paradoxical relations between art and life, making the act of writing part of the novelist's subject, writers like Lodge, John Fowles and Angus Wilson drew on a tradition going back through Beckett and Nabokov to *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*. But as Bergonzi shows, markedness only shows up when there is a neutral constant or control, thus innovation only manifests itself against a background of normality:

> By their shuffling levels of reality, their reliance on *collage* and pastiche and parody, they point to possible redefinitions of the novel, in which, as I have suggested, the distinction between fiction and other kinds of writing could become blurred. Yet all these novels depend for their effect on violating assumptions which have been previously established by existing kinds of fiction. (Bergonzi 1979, p.210)

Classic realism is the 'existing kind of fiction' Bergonzi means when he suggests innovations were made against this background. A sub-genre of this is the 'Condition of England Novel', which reappeared in post-war writing to be given new life in a new form. So in the two decades after the war, up until 1970, certain established writers embarked on long fictional explorations of the recent past in extended works, running into several volumes – Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, C.P. Snow, Lawrence Durrell. Perhaps as she embarked upon *The Virgin in the Garden* in 1978, Byatt intended writing herself into this particular strain of the English novel.

In his 1956 novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, Angus Wilson attempted to analyse Englishness – its moral stances, its illusions, its hypocrisies, indeed, its Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Wilson's moral sharpness and satirical bite on a panoramic scale pointed up social change and lack of it, within a basic