Byatt's 'Female Vision': An Attempt at Connecting[1]

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> Female visionaries are poor mad exploited sibyls and pythonesses. (Introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* x)[2]

> Coleridge saw the human intellect as a light like the moon, reflecting the light of primary consciousness, the Sun. My Anna was not even a reflected light, she was a shadow of a light only, who had partial visions in clouds or stormy moonlight, or the glare of Cambridge's blood-coloured street-lighting; I feared that fate. (*SS* xiii)

Byatt expresses her concern with 'female vision' in her Introduction to the paperback edition of *The Shadow of the Sun*, written nearly thirty years after the first publication of the book in 1964. Also, in an interview in 1990, she acknowledges her sustained preoccupation with 'female vision', saying, 'All my books are about the woman artist — in that sense, they're terribly feminist books' (Byatt, quoted in Tredell 66). Her books are particularly a study of reading and (or) writing women, a study of the difficulty with which these women are faced. Accordingly, Neumeier defines, in her 'Female Visions: The Fiction of A. S. Byatt', that 'Byatt's female vision seems to be characterised by a recognisable if ambivalent link to feminist positions, as all her novels in different ways are concerned with women's struggle for independence, acted out through contrasting familiar images of self-assertive and self-abnegating femininity' (22). The objective of this paper is to explore the meaning and significance of the 'female vision' which Byatt seems to have been trying to configure in her novels. To give a rough idea of 'female vision', here, I would only say that it is a kind of wholeness or integrity that Byatt's women try to achieve through their struggle to cope with contradictory elements — their desire for self-realisation and for the fulfilment of the roles and expectations imposed on them. More importantly, in Byatt's case, 'female vision' implies not only such integrity but also a creativity involved in it. Christen Franken has acknowledged this point in her book on Byatt, which is so far one of the few non-introductory but theme-specific books on Byatt. She states that her work is supposed to 'do justice to Byatt's patient and often ambivalent questioning of the connections between creativity, art, authorship and gender' and maintains that in Byatt's work female identity is realised only when accompanied and reinforced by their creativity (*A. S. Byatt* xv).

Specifically, I wish to examine Byatt's central women characters and emphasise the significance of the creativity and language which inform the lives of those reading and (or) writing women. What characterises Byatt's important women figures is that they are both talented and ambitious, but they are often entrapped in either self-absorption or self-abnegation. In principle, their attempt to achieve 'female vision' is an attempt at connecting, balancing, and ordering among opposing factors, external and internal. In the course of this discussion, I will try

to give a defining explanation of Byatt's 'female vision' through many instances of her women characters. In particular, I shall focus on Frederica and Stephanie in *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*.

Byatt seems to suggest in her introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* that she has finally succeeds in configuring 'female vision' with the symbolism of sun:

> [...] I was afraid that my light was a lesser one, a cold one, that could only mildly illuminate, however, hauntingly. But I did go on from there, to Queen Elizabeth as Corn Goddess, to Van Gogh's Death the Reaper working happily, to a poem in *Possession* by Randolph Henry Ash about the Norse Creation myth, in which the light that gives life to the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, is a female sun. (Introduction to *SS* xvi)

Neumeier also asserts that 'it is only in *Possession*, her acclaimed novel about critical reconstructions of the past that Byatt's female vision finally seems to find a female voice' (22). Thus, in considering Byatt's 'female vision', I hope to pose the question as to whether *Possession* is a feminist text.

1 Shadowed Creativity: *The Shadow of the Sun*

Anna in *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) is oppressed by the shadow of her novelist father Henry. Henry and Ash in *Possession* are powerful and exact representations of 'great' writers. Franken explains the 'great' writer as a visionary genius and analyses that the 'great' writer has basically been attributed to a male who has sublime visions which are 'constituting his identity as an artist' (*A. S. Byatt* 33 – 59). Henry first experienced 'attacks of vision' as a boy and has gradually assimilated them. He sees these times as his source of creativity:

> He knew [...] that his visionary moments were a direct source of power and that his only way to make a statement as high and as demanding was to write a very violent, stylised action, remote on the whole from the way most people lived, most of the time, which should rarefy, or concentrate what he knew to the bright intensity with which he knew it. (*SS* 59)

However, Franken also points out that Henry's identity as an artist and his vision are realised on the basis of his wife's devotion to him and also through the sacrifice of a loving paternal relationship with his daughter Anna.

Although Anna is aware that she does not have the same explosive creativity and vision as her father she hopes to write something by herself. She is thus faced with a dilemma between the desire for some kind of achievement and her own 'limitations and the kitchen sink', a fact which Oliver, a critic of her father, tries to make her understand. She articulates her aspiration:

> A lot of time I feel as though I could live life tremendously — as though if I could find just the one *thing*, the event that would happen, all these little annoying bits of life would fall into place, and become important. (*SS* 200)

However, her possible moment of epiphany passes without leaving any vision:

> She was looking, into this leaping light, for what he [Henry] would have seen.
>
> And then the cutting edge of the vision melted, the mill race no longer sliced her whole landscape but was only a fall of water, the lightning was no longer the defining limit of a world to understand, but merely an aimless flickering, the horizon eased and expanded and settled and ceased to insist, and Anna knew that whatever it was was over, and that she was very cold and alone. (*SS* 238)

There is also an indication that what prevents her from her vision is her gender:

> She feared that she lacked his [Henry's] bodily strength, that she was not his size, that she could not be prodigal of power as he was, but must husband her resources or be easily exhausted, even when she had found out how to use them. This was partly because she was a woman; also because she was a woman she was constantly tempted as he would never have been, to give up, to rest on someone else's endeavour, to expend her energy 'usefully' at the kitchen sink. (*SS* 201)

Anna's vision cannot be achieved partly because she is a woman. Her father, the great 'male' artist, can neither understand her desperation nor help her escape from her doomed destiny as a woman and an artist, even when he seriously faces his daughter for the first time in her room at college and when he learns that Oliver has made her pregnant. Oliver insists on her limitation and is in her way on her path to becoming an artist. Moreover, her vision is too weak and ephemeral to create something substantial. Her possible 'female vision' will come when she finds the way to achieve something on her own in spite of her limitations, in spite of her prospective 'kitchen sink' life style and male obstruction, which, however, seems unlikely to happen at the end of the novel.

2 Imaginative and Critical Creativity: *The Game*

Cassandra and Julia in *The Game* (1967) are described as opposing kinds of artists: Cassandra is visionary and has too much creativity to keep in balance with the real world, whereas Julia is over-critical and has a creativity which often harms others. While Cassandra's scholarly work as well as the stories she made as a child possesses elements of creativity, Julia's novels remain 'on a level of complaining about facts' (*GM* 122). Here the opposition is Cassandra's creativity and Julia's critical realism. Importantly, it is suggested that their opposing attributes are what they both need to connect and balance.

In this novel, the traditional relation between a novelist and an academic (a critic) is reversed, as Rossen notes, 'the novelist preys on and steals from the imagination of the scholar' (172). Literally, Julia steals material from their childhood game, that is, the creation of a mythic world, and submits parts of it as her own short story. The title alludes to this game and it symbolises the battle between the two opposing kinds of creativities represented respectively by Cassandra and Julia. Julia also steals Cassandra's first love, Simon, who was her sister's source

of intellectual and spiritual stability but was seduced by her while Cassandra was away from home at college. Moreover, Julia writes a novel, *A Sense of Glory*, in which she uses her sister as a model and also adapts the real relationship between Cassandra and Simon for the story. The novel's theme is the 'dangers of imbalance between imagination and reality' but ironically it destroys Cassandra's sense of reality and eventually leads to her suicide (*GM* 122).

Although Julia writes women's domestic novels, she does not sympathise with a young mother, whom she meets at Cassandra's party, who has given up her academic pursuits and who expresses her dissatisfaction to Julia. While Julia enjoys her sexuality, she has not established her identity as an independent adult. She has developed 'a sleekness' and is 'both apprehensive and complacent about her own girlish appearance' (*GM* 27). As we know from the first chapter of the novel, she is dependent on her husband for any judgement concerning her self-esteem, who is 'waiting for her [Julia] to grow up, forget and settle' (*GM* 60). She does not allow her daughter to call her 'Mummy' because it makes her 'feel sick' (*GM* 66). She denies motherhood and her daughter complains that '[s]he doesn't let me [her] exist' except in her fictions (*GM* 66–7).

Cassandra does not care about her appearance, something which always disgusts Julia. Cassandra's way of dressing gives her 'a certain monastic, anachronistic grace' and she looks 'sexless'. The description of her clothes and her carriage has connotations of an old witch or a creature of another world: Byatt comments that Cassandra is 'the woman closed in the tower who has given her soul for her writing but is also somehow destroyed' (Tredell 66). Metaphorically, Cassandra, an Oxford don, lives in the ivory tower of the University, the image of which is monastic and secluded, and her own imaginary world. Cassandra's life is one of the mind, being introverted and cloistered, and Julia's is of body, being materialistic and superficial. Cassandra is a non-woman while Julia is very much a woman.

Franken unfolds an interesting analysis of these two types of creativity represented by these two sisters. According to her, Cassandra's vision is 'absolute', but 'problematic' as it comes from her 'fragile ego-boundaries' which 'contribute to an increasing imbalance of real and imaginary worlds' (*A. S. Byatt* 68–74). She also adds: 'The narrator describes her as longing for being a "genius" but she lacks the autonomy and impersonality which are inherent in the concept of the "great" writer'(*A. S. Byatt* 73). On the other hand, Julia has 'Proto-feminist' vision, which may equate her with the 'great' writer but which she uses in the wrong way. Franken points out that her violent imagination and intrusive curiosity suggest that '[t]he disembodied imagination that runs into pure vision is a seductive but perilous myth' and she concludes that the book indicates the 'serious moral disadvantage' of such vision as Julia's (*A. S. Byatt* 79).

Thus the result of their childhood game is difficult to determine, for they are both the extremes and both are failed visionary artists: neither can establish her stable position as an artist and woman in the real world. The answer is not in the extreme but in the balance between reality and imagination, as Julia's novel about her sister ironically causes Cassandra to kill herself. Thus the eternal separation of Cassandra and Julia signifies the unattainability of any reconciliation and connection between being a woman and being an artist, between vision and corporeality, imagination and fiction, or the visionary and the realistic.

3 Ambitious Frederica and Being a Woman

Frederica in *Still Life* (1985) has one point in common with Anna: they both go to Cambridge and their association with people at the University leads them to the deep recognition that they are women. Frederica's 'female vision' and the establishments of her selfhood are also greatly involved in negotiation between her sex and her surroundings. However, while Anna is overwhelmed by her position as an over-shadowed woman and an artist, Frederica does not see her sex as a disadvantage even though she gradually learns what it means to be a woman. In Byatt's words, 'Frederica is the survivor' (Tredell 71). In face of gender-discriminating discourses and a part of herself netted in the social female myth, she remains resilient. Kenyon puts it: 'In *Still Life*, Frederica symbolises the modern woman who enjoys her sexuality, her intelligence, her education and her power' (75).

Taylor acknowledges, '*Still Life* is a good analysis of the pre-1960s feminist mind, vainly trying to reconcile romantic upbringing with an appreciation of broader possibilities' (254). Indeed, we see Frederica faced with reality in the broader world of Cambridge (broader than her hometown in North Yorkshire) and entering into adulthood where she is forced to see herself as a woman. Even though she comes to Cambridge with full expectations, 'there were many things [...] which she was not fitted to understand. She came, after all, not in utter nakedness but cocooned by her culture in a web of amatory social, and tribal expectations which was not even coherent and unitary' (*SL* 153). For example, she has the questionable belief that 'a woman was unfulfilled without marriage, that marriage was the end of every good story' (*SL* 153). However, her belief in marriage as a goal results from the social myth of woman in love and in wedlock, without deep and proper recognition of what marriage and being in love really mean to her. For example, there is a scene in *The Virgin in the Garden*, in which Frederica sees a poor display of bridal veils in a local department store and feels the absurdity of the constructed myth of marriage (*VG* 252 - 53). However, she cannot make out where her feeling comes from. Although she believes that women should marry, she also 'wanted not to be like her mother's generation, free and powerful only during this brief artificial period before concession and possession' (*SL* 155). She cannot solve the contradiction in herself and there remain two Fredericas, one who accepts current gender discourses and one who opposes them.

Cambridge is also a place where Frederica hopes to be noticed for her intelligence and to escape the destiny of obscurity in its marginal sphere. The narrator puts it: 'her social life was a battle to establish the idea that she was intelligent, was capable of intelligent talk, in the minds of others' (*SL* 254). She despises her suitors and her understanding of men is also only of taxonomy. She is 'remarkably ignorant about how most people lived, remarkably unprovided with ways of distinguishing between one young man and another' (*SL* 134). Yet she reflects, 'The world was their world and what she wanted was to live in that world, not to be sought out as a refuge from or adjunct to it' (*SL* 155). But she finds herself being seen as 'the object of pacts and agreements made without her knowledge' (*SL* 142). She comes to the realisation that she is a woman who tends to be an object of men, even though she is ready to fight for her self-achievement and never gets desperate.

In addition to her recognition of her sex, she also learns the significance of her origin. One of her expectations of Cambridge is that it would cultivate her taste.

> Here, of course, she differed from those of her contemporaries who came from the world of débutantes and gossip columns, who were armed with a very large vocabulary to indicate acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, appearance, provenance. Frederica would have liked to have had a sense of style and knew she had not —not yet. Her ideas about good manners were derived from Jane Austen, Trollope, Forster, Rosamond Lehmann, Angela Thirkell, Waugh, Lawrence and many other useful and nugatory sources. (*SL* 135)

However, through her acquaintance with her politically self-conscious friends, she comes to know that her origin is impossible to obliterate:

> Frederica found herself in the common and difficult position of disliking the parts of the culture to which she felt she belonged rather more than those to which she felt antagonistic. She saw herself as shrewd, classless, free from artificial desire to climb an illusory ladder, or romantic identification with what was good about what had gone before. (*SL* 221)

Her feeling, that there is something she does not know now but she wants to and should know, is also generated by her dissatisfaction about her origin, her styleless family in North Yorkshire.

Taylor remarks, '*Still Life* proclaims its affinity to the literary culture of the period by serving as a full-scale assault on the aesthetic values of *Lucky Jim*' (101). Frederica's distaste for the novel is related to both sex and morality and she accuses Jim's supposed 'scrupulousness' of being only 'elementary school antics' (*SL* 148 - 49), which makes her 'more sympathetic to Matthew Arnold and High Seriousness' (*SL* 149). She thinks that one should be discreet in judging people because there is an absolute, if difficult to identify, distinction between being pompous and pretentious and being serious and responsible. Jim is also an anti-woman hero, because the language of 'Angry Young Men' is one which celebrates 'masculine vigour and the contempt for physical and moral weakness' (Davies 26). They are concerned exclusively with style but does not care enough about morality of their action. Thus '[i]t was not easy for Frederica to sympathise with these differing assertions of British masculinity' (*SL* 342).

On the whole, Frederica's difficulty lies in her impossible desire in having both: romantic love and a husband in realistic terms; marriage and academic; domestic life and professional life. 'The trouble was [...] that the two Fredericas were really indissolubly one' (*SL* 343). Her predicament is the difficulty in balancing both opposing choices, when society does not allow her to do so because she is a woman. Frederica recognises the difficulty, but determines to fight: 'Surely, surely it was possible, she said to herself in a kind of panic, to make something of one's life and be a woman. Surely' (*SL* 223).

4 Dispirited Frederica and Language

In the third novel of Byatt's projected tetralogy, *Babel Tower* (1996), we find Frederica in an unhappy marriage. She reflects back that '[p]art of Nigel's attraction was Forster's incantation "Only connect". He had Mr Wilcox's attraction of otherness, but was not, is not, obtuse' (*BT* 310). She further contemplates on Forster's words:

> Inside her head she goes over and over what she has done, how she could have done it, how it cannot be undone, how she can live. Only connect, she thinks contemptuously, only connect, the prose and the passion, the beast and the monk. It can't be done and isn't worth doing, she thinks on a long repetitive whine, she has been here so often before. She thinks of Mr Wilcox in *Howards End*, thinks of him with hatred, that stuffed man, that painted scarecrow. Margaret Schlegel was a fool in ways Forster had no idea of, because he wasn't a woman, because he supposed connecting was desirable, because he had no idea what it meant. (*BT* 33–4)

Nigel is not 'a verbal animal' but knows the proper time at which to say 'I love you' to a woman. He is one of 'those who handle this solid currency [language] with its few words' and 'would be able to add those other simple ringing ones, I love you, I love you. They have clear meanings in this world, and women everywhere wait for them as dogs wait for titbits and sustenance, panting and slavering' (*BT* 39). Her attempt at connection to others and at connection between mind and body failed partly through a sexual power relationship, for she thinks that she married Nigel for sex. She realises that the myth that 'the body is truth' is not right to her.

At the same time, she becomes aware that she 'cannot do without them [words]' (*BT* 126). This reveals that her attempt is connecting her strong need for language and thought, and sex and body. Although her desire to connect those leads her to the failed marriage, through the marriage she learns new aspects of language that she has been ignorant of. She realises that language makes reality and it creates a Frederica that she does not identify. She confronts public language for the first time in legal documents about her marital status. In her divorce court, 'Frederica sees herself as a caged or netted beast. [...] The net is not Nigel. [...] The net is made by words which do not describe what she feels is happening: adultery, connivance, pre-nuptial incontinence, petitioner, respondent. [...] The 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). To cope with the several identities she finds she is supposed to take on, and to separate apart several realities that language constructs and to make meanings out of them, she starts a certain operation which she calls 'lamination'. This is an experimental work in which she cuts up a letter from Nigel's solicitors, juxtaposes passages from Lawrence, Forster and other writers and puts together anecdotic descriptions of the day she has. The idea of lamination goes back to her school age when she believes:

> Knowledge was power, as long as one did not muck it up by confusing one piece of knowledge with another and trying to ingest it and turn it all into blood and feelings.
>
> One could let all these facts and things lie alongside each other like laminations, not like growing cells. This laminated knowledge produced a powerful sense of freedom, truthfulness and even selflessness. (*VG* 274)

Todd explains the lamination Frederica does in *Babel Tower* as her 'articulate response to the threat to her inherent existential selfhood': she is near to the full recognition that language constructs realities and therefore she desperately needs to separate things to get the picture of those realities (69). However, her selfhood, that she used to hold through her understanding of language as a transparent tool of representation, is undermined in *Babel Tower*. Her belief that

language can represent things and her experiences without fail needs reconsideration. Language was expected to give order to the world which seems to be difficult to comprehend, as understood from the passage above that she supposed it to do so. But what she goes through because of her failed marriage convinces her that language does not stand up to the immediacy of such experience and that language, on the contrary, alienates her in an actual world.

Babel Tower is, as I have so far tried to show, Byatt's productive investigation of language. The author comments that the book 'was planned to be a novel about language, a novel about the ways in which language distorted, created, changed life and the social world'.[3] However, it contains some weakness in its technical aspects. Reaching *Babel Tower* from *The Virgin in the Garden* through *Still Life*, it is noticeable that Frederica is tamed and less appealing to us, the readers, for the last volume places a disproportionate focus on the scrutiny of the problem of language at the cost of a deeper exploration of character. More to the point, the scrutiny is rather insipid and without subtlety. In this sense, it seems that the device of intertextuality using *Babbletower* is the most serious problem. Todd asserts the intertextuality of *Babbletower*, saying, '[t]he inexactness of the parallels [between the main plot of the novel and *Babbletower*] raises a larger point that has informed Byatt's novel-writing from the very beginning, which is that (like Iris Murdoch) Byatt explores the battle between "real people" and "images" in ways that involve intense scrutiny of the inadequacy of "either/or" readings of symbolic language'(72). However, the insertion of the tale is not effective because it is bereft of artistic elaboration and the story is only a sensational one, bursting with descriptions of barbarity and torture, while Byatt succeeds in the use of intertextuality in the previous two volumes and *Possession*. For instance, poetry in *Possession* is supposed to convey the fictionality of the story in a parodic way. On the other hand, the story of *Babbletower* even seems to have been inserted into *Babel Tower* only in order to facilitate the introduction of the obscenity trial of this tale. Its content seems to be a hideous propaganda device that displays human cruelty and adds unnecessary gloominess to the novel. Therefore, in my view, *Babbletower* is largely a manipulation at the level of the plot and hardly accomplishes a thorough exploration of the characters or a profound questioning of language and reality.

Thus mostly because of the unelaborated emphasis on the problem of language and reality, we do not find Frederica transforming remarkably in *Babel Tower*. However, it is possible to follow her transformation, if it does not occur dramatically like an epiphany. In *Still Life*, in Cambridge, as we have seen in the previous section, she aspires to have both romantic love and a husband, a profession and family life, life in the academic and lively London, literature and real life, and mind and body. Thus she marries Nigel, for she expects that she can get both, that is, she can connect both. As a consequence she realises that her expectation is betrayed in face of social and gender discourses, and mostly because of her hunger for language. Her attachment to and dependence on language cannot be demolished by anything. Most importantly, the realisation of the insufficiency of language gives her a belated opportunity to reconsider the construction of her own identity with and without the means of language.

5 Passive Resistance of Stephanie: Literature and the Mundane

Stephanie, Frederica's sister, is presented as an opposite to Frederica, and this opposition

dramatises the problem of connecting different parts of the universe. Even though both are intelligent and Cambridge-educated, their choices make a contrast: Stephanie returns to her grammar school as a teacher, as 'an extreme act of passive defiance' (*VG* 89) to her father, Bill, while Frederica 'inherited greed for learning, greed for knowledge, and information [...] from him'(*SL* 320). Frederica is arrogant, ambitious and eager to escape to a world of intelligence and discussion, typified by a city life in London, or a flamboyant world of theatre. Frederica thinks that 'she had perhaps relied on Stephanie to do for both of them things she herself feared doing, perhaps couldn't do' (*SL* 431).

Stephanie abandons her intellectual pursuits and marries a curate, Daniel, in spite of her father's objection. She marries him because he 'succeeds in evoking her own sensual desire' (Rossen 49). Like Frederica's her choice of marriage to Daniel also turns out to be her attempt at connecting. She tries to interpret her dream:

> What Stephanie found in *Books* [the fifth book of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*] 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. [...] Then she thought she herself was afraid of being in the same place as her attention, body and imagination at once, and that Daniel would require this of her, and there would be no place for urn or landscape in their own terms. (*VG* 332)

One of the things that she loses through her domestic life is language as coexisting with a real life. Her propensity and need for language is emphasised in that she requires her books of Wordsworth during her labour.[4] However, her domestic life takes away from her correlation between life and literature. She complains to Daniel that her vocabulary has deteriorated and she cannot use thinking words: 'The worst things are the words that do have meaning in the tiny vocabulary I do use, like real and ideal, words that lose half their associations' (*SL* 370).

As opposed to aggressive Frederica, a nurturing aspect characterises Stephanie. Byatt describes her as 'the earth-myth of the goddess who is maternal and therefore of course goes to the Underworld' (Tredell 71). For example, she is taking care of dying kittens when she is first introduced in the novel. But the roles of mother and curate's wife demand her self-abnegation and erode her intellectual and literary pursuit. The narrator tells us that: a 'word, confinement, reminded her [Frederica] of Stephanie' (*SL* 156). Their small cottage is a symbol of confinement and Stephanie 'filled the cottage with the lost and unhappy' (*SL* 25). Her death has symbolic meaning in that she is a victim of domestic life and others' demands. She is trying to free a sparrow from the back of a refrigerator in her kitchen when she is killed by an electric shock from the unearthed refrigerator, a symbolic setting of domesticity. It can be said that Stephanie is like Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End*, but whereas the other succeeds in an attempt at 'Only Connect' in Forster's novel, Stephanie fails in her attempt: connecting of domesticity and her intellectual interest, prose and poetry, and connecting mind and body.

Even though Frederica and Stephanie have opposing personalities and as a result are led to different lives, the basis of the difficulty that they go through is the same, the struggle to connect opposing desires. However, neither of them can succeed in their attempt, partly because of social and gender obstruction, and more importantly, because of their own absorption in and excessive

hunger for language. Frederica is too self-centred and aggressive, blind to the reductive aspect of language, and bereft of human relationships. Stephanie is too self-abnegating and sacrifices herself to other people. Therefore Byatt's 'female vision' is not established or achieved yet. If so, has it been achieved in *Possession*?

6 *Possession* : A Feminist Text?

The difficulty that the women characters in *Possession* confront is entangled with the double meaning that the word 'possession' bears in the novel. The dichotomy of the word is the opposition between 'to possess' and 'to be possessed', that is, possession and obsession. For the women characters, the difficulty is to maintain creativity and autonomy while they take on their traditional role as angels or muses of men. They fear that their inner desire would demolish their external feminine figure, at the same time they want to fulfil their desire to achieve their autonomy, even if it is not socially acceptable. Showalter puts it: '[t]he problem of autonomy [...] is [...] whether to sacrifice personal development and freedom as an artist to a collective cultural task, or whether to sacrifice authenticity and self-exploration and accept the dominant culture's definition of what is important to understand and describe' (318). What underlies this is the common myth that women have double faces — demonic and angelic — and it is socially unacceptable that they have both at the same time. Thus *Possession* is a study of the working of this myth. However, it is questionable or at least needs reservation, if, as some critics argue, it is a feminist text that 'subverts the notion of predetermined, fixed gender roles' (Brink 303).

Most of the women in *Possession* are repressed women, because '[i]n their fear of being completely excluded, most women in this novel accept the available comfort of small houses or the protective silences within a patriarchal marriage to avoid exposure' (Shinn 109). Ellen Ash, Randolph's wife, is the representative of those women. Maud and Beatrice, modern scholars, find her journal 'baffling' and Beatrice expresses her confusion: 'I got the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid — oh, I think of it as *panelling*' (*PR* 220). We learn more of Ellen's inner life in a section in which Byatt employs an omniscient point of view. Ellen reflects on her life:

> My life, she thought, has been built round a lie, a house to hold a lie.
>
> She had always believed, stolidly, doggedly, that her avoidances, her approximations, her whole charade as she at times saw it, were, if not justified, at least, held in check, neutralised, by her rigorous requirement that she be truthful with herself.
>
> Randolph had been complicit. She had no idea how the story of their lives looked to him. It was not a matter they discussed. (*PR* 457)

This passage suggests that Ellen is enmeshed by the myth of female doubleness. She hides her inner self and remains an exemplary and self-effacing wife as Victorian society expects. She knows the flaming desire and raging despair of all reading women in her society, as she reflects: 'It may be that this is the desire of all reading women, as opposed to reading men, who wish to be poets and heroes, but might see the inditing of poetry in our peaceful age, as a sufficiently heroic act. No one wishes a man to be a Poem. [...] But I now think — it might have been

better, might it not, to have held on to the desire to be a Poet?' (*PR* 122). She 'wanted to be a Poet and a Poem' but she finds that she is 'making him [Randolph] a thousand small comforts, cakes and titbits' and that she becomes 'his slave' (*PR* 459). She is intelligent enough to write something but she dares not in the face of the social expectations she is supposed to fulfil. Randolph is also committed to the conspiracy to ignore their failure to consummate their marriage. Though she knows about the love affair between her husband and Christabel, she remains silent. She also refuses female alliance with Christabel by not delivering her letter to her husband, the letter in which Christabel reveals her true feelings and thoughts about their love affair and asks Randolph to forgive her.

Blanche Glover, Christabel's supposed lesbian lover, makes a parallel with Ellen. Although she pursues autonomy and independence in a life with Christabel in a house that they name Bethany, she is defeated by the norms of Victorian society. Her creative work, her painting, does not sell and she loses her financial independence. Moreover, she loses her partner in the competing sexual politics: Christabel leaves her for Randolph, and this means that her homosexuality is defeated by heterosexuality, dominant Victorian sexual discourse. She commits suicide and in her will, she describes herself as 'a *superfluous* creature' [Italics mine] (*PR* 309).

The word 'superfluous' appears in Roland's girlfriend Val's expression of her despair and rage, when she exclaims to Roland that she is 'a superfluous person' [Italics mine] (*PR* 218). Her despair and dissatisfaction comes from 'too much confinement, too little money, too much anxiety, too young' (*PR* 126). She has, in fact, financially supported Roland's studies and sacrifices herself by doing 'menial' work. As a result, she becomes 'mournfully bright menial Val', as Roland puts it (*PR* 14). Ironically, as Roland secretly wishes (PR 14), she is rescued and transformed, in a problematic way from the feminist viewpoint, by a rich solicitor into a new Val who is 'all muted violets and shot-silk dove-colours, all balanced and pretty, stockings, high shoes, padded shoulders, painted mouth' (*PR* 433).

Byatt remarks in an interview that 'Christabel is actually inventing a whole feminist religion' (Tredell 64). Whether this is the case or not, it is at least certain that the character of Christabel raises a serious feminist concern which exposes the difficulty that aspiring women confront. The difficulty is intricately related with creativity and 'female vision', Byatt's sustained preoccupation. Therefore, the examination of Christabel and Byatt's handling of this woman character will prove what is her 'female vision' and what is questionable about it, given the current feminist theory. The questions I will tackle here are those that Gilbert and Gubar pose: 'could a creative woman be a lover and a mother without losing her self-possession, her autonomy? And given patriarchal historiography, could a literary matrilineage survive, and if so, who would possess it?' (389)

Christabel explains to Ash her autonomy through a metaphor of an egg in a Riddle.

> An egg is my answer. What is the Riddle?
>
> I am my own riddle. Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to dread — oh the terrible tower, of the thickets round it — no companionable Nest — but a donjon.
>
> But they have lied to us you know, in this, as in so much else. The Donjon may frown and threaten — but it keeps us very safe — within its confines we are free in a way you, who

> have freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine. [...] my Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. (*PR* 137)

And her desperate need for language:

> You should understand my very phrase — the *Life of Language*. [...] words have been all my life, all my life — this need is like the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she must spin out — the silk is her life, her home, her safety — her food and drink too — and if it is attacked or pulled down, why, what can she do but make more, spin afresh, design anew — you will say she is patient — so she is — she may also be Savage — is her Nature — she Must — or die of Surfeit — do you understand me? (*PR* 180)

Her metaphor of the spider suggests that her own self-image also reflects the myth that women bear dual faces. It also seems to be the case that she is aware that those who cannot conform to the norms of society will be labelled as dangerous witches. However, more emphasis has to be given to her claim that to a woman, creativity and autonomy are interrelated and inseparable.

In spite of her will as expressed above, her autonomy and solitude are destroyed by Ash. She then becomes his muse and is rendered as Proserpina in his poem, as Ellen justly recognises that women are always a poem but not a poet. Brink explains Ash's debt of creativity from her as a debt for his wholeness: 'if males also aspire to it [autonomy], their definition of it is a distortion of and a borrowing from *female* wholeness, of which the egg is the metaphor' (304). Ash possesses language and is allowed to put his thought into a direct and dignified language and in a public space, while Christabel is 'allowed to participate only inasmuch as she is predestined by the male gaze' (Brink 292). She can only express her thoughts in the form of a fantasy, children's tales, and poems with riddles.

Melusina in Christabel's poem, 'The Fairy Melusine' is an incarnation of the duality of women and its story is their tragedy. Melusina's double aspects are 'an Unnatural Monster' and 'a most proud and loving and handy woman' (*PR* 174). The subversion of this duality would serve to achieve 'female vision'. Brink notes that '*Possession* may also be read as attempting a measure of restitution and rewriting: Melusina is restored to her position of benign power through an act of historical correction' (305). Similarly Franken takes the view that by the use and modification of the Melusina story Byatt succeeds in presenting 'female vision' as completed (*A. S. Byatt* 83 - 108). However, there seems to be another perspective which should negate such an understanding as well as Byatt's own view expressed in her Introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun*. For, in fact, the subversion of the duality of women does not seem to take place in the novel and other solutions are not offered either.

For example, Christabel's procreativity as well as creativity is undercut by her isolation after she leaves Ash, even as she lives with her daughter. She lives as her daughter's aunt, isolated like Tennyson's Lady of Shallot, like 'an old witch in a turret' (*PR* 500), and like 'a spinster in a fairy tale' (*PR* 501) as her daughter puts it. Her daughter, Maia, is portrayed as Earth goddess, who is in Christabel's words, 'a happy soul — a sunny creature, simple in her affections and marvellously direct in her nature' (*PR* 501). She liked playing boy's games with boys and has married a visiting cousin and now is a squire's wife. The image of Maia is opposite to Christabel's. Maia has a place for herself in a patriarchal society, because she does not have an

obsession with creativity. When Christabel gives her small tales she writes, the daughter puts them by (*PR* 502). Maia also tells Randolph, when he secretly visits her, that she does not like poetry (*PR* 510). Thus Christabel is not rewarded by her procreativity, at least, not fully, because her creativity does not descend to her daughter. However, it is because Maia does not inherit her mother's literary creativity that she can occupy her place in a public space unlike her mother, Christabel. Although Gilbert and Gubar consider the novel as 'the most optimistic' (of all the works they discuss in their feminist book, *No Man's Land*) and as more realistic analysis of social institutions and experience of maternity, Christabel's creativity and procreativity cannot coexist (369). They do not complement each other in *Possession*: her creativity and autonomy do not coexist with her being as a lover.

Furthermore, it should be understood that the emphasis on the women's duality is, in the opposite view, the emphasis on wholeness. The 'female vision' desired in Byatt's text will need this wholeness to be achieved. As Toril Moi points out in her criticism of *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar, the emphasis on wholeness is a patriarchal construct. She interprets the feminist aesthetics of these two critics as follows:

> The emphasis here is on wholeness [...] women's writing can only come into existence as a structured and objectified whole. Parallel to the wholeness of the text is the wholeness of the woman's self; the integrated humanist individual is the essence of all creativity. A fragmented conception of self or consciousness would seem to Gilbert and Gubar the same as a sick or dis-eased self. (66)

Thus, in Moi's view, 'gradualists', as Gilbert and Gubar define those who believed in working within established social structures in order to achieve change, would be subjected to accusations about their optimism (Gilbert and Gubar 369). Given Moi's criticism of wholeness as a patriarchal construction, what Cixous presents as a 'propriety of woman' in her essay 'Laugh of the Medusa' may produce an alternative picture of female identity and therefore provide a suitable counterargument against the wholeness-orientation demonstrated by Byatt: 'If she is a whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble [...]' (889). It seems that in Byatt texts only one ideal whole of female identity is presented, in which art and creativity occupy the dominant space and all the other elements of life are merely opposed to them.

Possession also has the implication of heterosexual orientation, as Louise Yelin points out:

> The end of *Possession* romantically unites critics of different genders and persuasions, not only Maud and Roland, but also and more improbably Leonora and Blackadder. Like the coupling of LaMotte and Ash, which occurs on a journey from which Ash's wife, Ellen, and LaMotte's life companion, Blanche Glover, are excluded, the romantic unions of the Lacanian Leonora and the biographical Blackadder and Maud and Roland entail exclusions and transformations: Leonora (re) turns to heterosexuality, and Roland's neglected girlfriend Val, who supported him before he had a job, now takes up with a wealthy lawyer. Not only heterosexual romance but woman-manly Ash — is made possible, Byatt seems to be suggesting, by money and a suppression of homoeroticism or a redirection of women's desire from women to men. (39)

Romance, as Yelin argues above, does not subvert but reinforces patriarchal discourse in *Possession*. Maud, the heroine in the twentieth century, is also presented as 'a princess' who lives 'at the top of Tennyson Tower' (*PR* 39). She is rescued by Roland and regains sexual pleasure from him. She did not know what to do with her doll-mask which is '[i]cily regular, splendidly null' (*PR* 506) but at least she was an independent feminist scholar. Now she seems to be tamed by love with Roland, while she still has a fear of invasion as she tells Roland, 'I feel as she [Christabel] did. I keep my defences up because I must go on *doing my work*. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy. I don't want to think of that going' (*PR* 506). Then Roland assures her, 'I'll take care of you' (*PR* 507). When she takes away her defence for her autonomy against male invasion, she seems to lose her independent spirit and surrender to her prince, Roland.

Thus, Byatt completes a patriarchal wholeness of the text in her romance, a female genre. It is the case in some way that 'Christabel's lifelong sorrow has made her into the destined prophetess who will help "establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness,"' for Christabel's poetry is now in the interest of feminist scholars (Gilbert and Gubar 389). However, the ending of the story seems to suggest that Christabel helps to preserve the patrilineal literary past of Ash rather than her own. Ash's creativity is inherited by Roland in an epiphanic way, for he suddenly realises that he can write poetry himself other than critical work on Ash. Ash's patrilineage has a justified presence both in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In contrast, Christabel cannot bequeath her creativity to her descendants. Her literary matrilineage is only recovered in the twentieth century and Maud, who is disclosed to be Cristabel and Ash's descendant at the very end of the novel, does not seem to inherit her creativity but to have only feminist theory, which she does not know how to adopt in her life in practical terms. If giving an answer to the questions of Gilbert and Guber I mentioned previously, the answer is that Christabel could not be a lover and a mother, a lover and an artist at the same time. She fears losing autonomy and creativity so profoundly that she is forced into a marginal place in Victorian society.

Finally, I would like to consider Ash's poem 'Ragnarok' with which Byatt seems to think that she has encountered her 'female vision'. Ash, the male great poet writes this poem about the Norse Creation myth and in it, the light which gives life to the first man and woman is a *female* sun. However, it is doubtful that the splendid presence of the female sun in this rewriting poem of the myth by the male poet alone really outweighs Christabel's portion of tragic destiny as an excluded artist and mother. This will also involve the question of the effects which both the series of Byatt's fictional poems inserted in the text and the whole plot respectively have on the whole story and theme of this novel. Nonetheless, it seems that the short appearance of this female sun seems to have only too weak a force to offset Christabel's suffering as narrated throughout the novel and as envisioned in her own 'Melusina' poem.

7 Byatt's 'Female Vision'

What is the 'female vision' in Byatt's understanding? Do her novels actually tell us how it can be achieved? First, we have seen that her women characters are, in general, repressed by gender

discourse and face difficulty on their way to self-achievement. They face a dilemma between their passion, desire and ambition on one hand, and the pressure of the social myth of women as a domestic angel or devoted nurturer on the other. Secondly, Byatt's characteristic in the depiction of those women is that most of the women characters are reading and (or) writing women. At this point, her use of the word 'vision' comes to bear an artistic implication. Byatt's 'female vision' is a wholeness or integrity achieved through the effort to connect, balance and unite opposing desire and social norms. However, this does not mean that 'female vision' can be achieved only once women solve the conflict between opposing elements in their lives in materialistic terms. Rather, it can be achieved only when women manage to preserve their creativity and combine their obsessive need for language and thought into their lives.

Language and thinking are in Byatt's view, essential to a meaningful life. In this respect, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* are excellent demonstrations of women struggling with this dilemma and those defeated and in resignation, an examination which is deployed with a rich cultural relevance. Frederica and Stephanie are convincing characters who bring to the fore the difficulties with which women in post-war Britain were faced and the strong aspirations that they held in the face of dominant gender assumptions. They also convey the urgent and essential need for language, for a life of thought. The resilience that Frederica and Anna show makes a contrast with the flatness and submissiveness of the women characters in *Possession*. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Byatt comments that she has reached *Possession* in her search for 'female vision'. However, as I believe that I have made clear so far, *Possession* does not offer a satisfactory figuration of 'female vision'. Instead, in her novels before *Possession*, Byatt describes the attempts by the women characters to harmonise their lives in the most convincing way.

The emphasis on dichotomy and wholeness may be amenable to criticisms of totalitarian and universalisation, and the emphasis on language and thought to essentialism. From radical feminists' view such as Moi's, Byatt's 'female vision' could be criticised as a kind of mantra, which brings up an ideal unity of female identity but privileges only one homogeneous kind. However, it is also the case that Byatt's 'female vision' can suggest an idealised, though falsely, wholeness as one of the possible models which would bring women some self-realisation. Her fixed view may give us one possible form of female identity. Furthermore, what distinguishes Byatt's 'female vision' is its emphasis, in the establishment of female identity, on the significance of creativity, language and thought, and the integration of them into life. At the same time she does not fail to describe the situations in which her characters' desire for these are so extreme that it hinders their attempt at connecting their need for those elements of life and for love and consequently isolates and alienates these women. Thus it can be said again that her major contribution is, though exclusive and homogeneous her view of female identity may be, that Byatt succeeds in presenting many truthful and convincing pictures of connecting attempted by women who are faced with the dilemma, isolated and alienated, and fails: that she acknowledges and conveys the difficulties or impossibilities of achieving 'Only Connect': that she does not create a new Margaret Schlegel.

Notes

[1] This essay is a revised version of a part of my MA thesis, submitted to Gakushuin University in December 2001.

[2] Hereafter, Byatt's works will be cited in parentheses as follows:
SS The Shadow of the Sun (1964)
GM The Game (1967)
VG The Virgin in the Garden (1978)
SL Still Life (1985)
PR Possession: A Romance (1990)
BT Babel Tower (1996)

[3] Byatt quoted from her website essay '*Babel Tower*'.

[4] Cf. Tess Cosslett (117 – 54). Cosslett relates Stephanie's childbearing to the 'Immortality Ode' in Chapter 4 'Subjectivities: Two in One, One Becomes Two'.

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