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The Gendered Memories of Frederica Potter: A.S. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman*

An invitation to discuss A.S. Byatt's work in relation to issues of gender is a challenge I welcome, for which I thank the Freiburg *Centre of Gender Studies and Anthropology*. That this is a challenge will be immediately obvious to those who have followed the career of this quintessentially English author since her acclaimed novel *Possession* launched her onto the international scene in 1990. Before then, A.S. Byatt had been a reasonably well-established author within the U.K., but her reputation had not crossed the Channel outside the realm of the academy, a realm in which she herself had been active before leaving her post as a senior lecturer at the University of London in 1982, to become a full-time author.

Byatt's sardonic touch coupled with a propensity to generate comic effects when translating literary theory into fiction has become a constitutive hallmark of her literary persona, overriding perhaps the more serious concerns woven in the overall bulk of her fiction. When it comes to questions of gender, how can we forget the abrasive criticism of radical feminist thought camouflaged as parody in the character of Leonora Stern in *Possession*, "a kind of verbal Cleopatra, creating appetite where most she satisfied, making an endless pillow-book out of the new oratory of the couch"?[1] The formidable sexual appetite of this character, unbounded by the confines of gender, was a salient feature of this portrait and Byatt may well have used her satire of Stern to launch an attack on the kind of feminist and psychoanalytical critical theories which may misrepresent the meaning of literary texts by allowing their approach to be dominated by sex-related concepts or, as Beate Neumeier also explains, by "ideological fixation".[2]

Byatt's ambivalence towards literary theory, including radical feminist theory, is well-known among critics. However, this ambivalence should be understood in the context of different learning traditions affecting the way we read and interpret literature in different countries. English literary criticism has frequently seen in the Continental tendency to favour theory over textual analysis, a totalizing effect threatening the appreciation of the literary text. This is, of course, an old issue. Yet,

it can still remind us that the different learning traditions of Europe are the product of distinct national cultures, often failing mutually to acknowledge one another.

One can even trace a precedent for this kind of biting criticism outside the context of Byatt's novels, in a review of *The Lesbian Body*, a well-known work by the French feminist theorist Monique Wittig whose vision Byatt judged in 1974 as "thin and chill and simple and dogmatically, narrowly erotic".[3] However, it is my contention that these views have meanwhile evolved toward a new approach to gender, an approach which leaves satirical effects aside for the sake of a constructive confrontation. Because *A Whistling Woman* (2002) depicts changes in women's lives in the Sixties, highlighting social attitudes to questions of gender, sexuality and women's struggle for autonomy in the public sphere, the novel can be considered a storehouse of collective memories.[4] Indeed, commenting on the germs of her *roman fleuve*, Byatt stated:

> I thought I had a perspective on time in the early sixties, with young children growing. It seemed a long time since I'd left school in 1953. Now I see that's absurd, but I wanted to write a historical novel (...) I wish I had more feeling for social patterns, because I certainly wanted to say something about English society.[5]

The author's collective memories are therefore closely connected to a sense of history, indicating a retrospective understanding of the past from the viewpoint of the present. In her fictional world, however, intensely personal and emotional responses that could qualify memory as a form of collective remembrance in the terms described by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs,[6] become conceptualized and discussed in scientific and cognitive terms. Therefore, Byatt's narrative produces a more distanced perspective on the past, since emotional responses and instinctual behaviour are discussed during a fictional interdisciplinary conference towards the end of the novel, by scientists, psychologists, geneticists and linguists who study the human brain as an apparatus.

As Jane Campbell has also shown, the novel charts the gains of women in the Sixties through the lived experience of her characters. However, in order to address the biological dilemma of women's relation to their bodies, the author interweaves scientific and philosophical thought in her narrative. Wishing to deconstruct the old binary between woman as flesh and matter, and man as mind, the novel enacts an ancient philosophical debate interlocking with new developments in the neurosciences. Therefore, the gendered memories announced in the title of my essay address a twofold aspect, namely memory as a framework of knowledge and acquired conventions collectively shared by women, as well as memory as a cognitive function intertwined with the feminist critique of rationality. It should also be noted that Byatt is particularly interested in questions of sense perception and experience organized as intuition, affecting the inner life of her characters, some of whom are, indeed, scientists.

Before I venture any further into the content of the novel, let me place it into its proper context for those of you who may not be familiar with Byatt's work. In what follows, I shall then be referring to the symbolism contained in the title of the novel and in the subsequent epigraphs introducing it, which succinctly translate the gender-related concerns of the novel into playful literary allusions, metaphors or witty remarks. In the second part of my essay, I shall be addressing the broader social and intellectual concerns underpinning the novel by focussing on the particular type of gendered community portrayed in it. While new trends in science, education, television, visual culture and the counter-culture of the Sixties affect life in England during the decade, television becomes the most prominent medium for addressing public argument and discussion. The novel does indeed show this gradual transition towards visual culture, when women's issues first enter television, reflecting changes in cultural values and society. Finally, I shall attempt an analysis of the intellectual debate on the body-mind question informing one of the main episodes in the novel focussing on the academic conference held at the fictional University of Northern England. Strictly linked to this fictional event is a consideration of the kind of academic community portrayed in *A Whistling Woman* at a time when many European countries were transformed into hotbeds of student activism, protests and radical culture.[7]

The placing of *A Whistling Woman*

A.S. Byatt's *A Whistling Woman* concludes a vast and ambitious project which began more than a quarter of a century ago with the aim of reproducing both a segment of English provincial life and life in the capital in four major novels covering roughly two decades, from 1953 to 1970. Though *A Whistling Woman* ends in 1970, the long sequence affords a fleeting glimpse into a later period through the prologue to *Still Life* – the second novel in the series – which proleptically describes a real-life event occurring in 1980, i.e. the Post-Impressionist exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. This chronological detail may be easily overlooked in a brief outline of the plot. Yet, it is highly significant not only because it self-referentially announces the theme on which this particular novel is centered, namely the relation between verbal and pictorial representation, but also because it exemplifies the kind of structural complexity characterizing the overall project: by continuously deferring the ending of the tetralogy, we are reminded of the illusory nature of fictional narrative and of the existence of an invisible threshold between real life and storytelling, which becomes the very site of a socially constructed microcosm and of Byatt's own literary edifice. The setting of each novel within a specific time frame with multiple flashbacks and proleptic anticipations contained in the prologues, shows that the narrative is firmly rooted in a chronology of events shifting constantly back and forward, inviting the reader to compare and assess the

development of characters and situations spanning more generations and evoking "the inner picture of a historical epoch".[8]

A Whistling Woman shows the same density and elaborate plot characterizing the preceding volumes, though the openly fragmented mode of earlier works is here purposely suspended. The author had always intended to resume a more conventional realistic structure in the final part of her *roman fleuve*, wishing to achieve an intrinsic balance between experimental and open forms characterizing the artistic climate of the Sixties mirrored in her long narrative, and a much debated, if anachronistic, self-conscious realism. Coherence, development and closure are, in fact, narrative values which Byatt has favoured in the face of ever increasing threats posed by literary theories and experimental writing to former ways of apprehending and representing reality. On these issues, the author has repeatedly expressed her views, recorded both in critical statements and interviews.[9]

In *A Whistling Woman*, the plot splits and spawns endless story lines. While the protagonist Frederica enters a new career in television, a young woman scientist named Jacqueline Winwar conducts research on the memory of snails. Both women are caught up with the demands imposed by their female and gendered condition while seeking to pursue work of an intellectual nature. Both have to fight their way to achieve some recognition in the public sphere, though this is still controlled by men who define the terms in which they move. In turn, the aloof and self-sufficient civil servant Agatha Mond, who shares a flat with Frederica and is, like her, a single mother, seems to lead a life of her own, whose secret is only revealed at the end of the novel. Meanwhile, student activism spreads in and outside the fictional university of Northern England in Frederica's home county, while a Quaker therapeutic community is taken over by a visionary charismatic leader, named Joshua Ramsden, who witnessed his father's murder of his mother and sister during his childhood.

Byatt immerses her fictional students' community into a climate of social malaise, showing signs of personal spiritual and mental crises. Individual traumatic memory coupled with allusions to the collective traumas of twentieth-century European history, become enacted in the novel through the character of Joshua Ramsden. This seems largely a constructed figure stemming from Byatt's thorough theoretical investigation of the processes of memory in all its multifaceted aspects, both with regard to the cultural forms of archival retrieval and symbolic representation exemplified by the memory theatre [10] in the opening novel of the tetralogy *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and to the small-scale, individual experience of personal loss and family trauma.

Overarching the entire project is Byatt's concern with memory both in its rhetorical and dialectical concepts of retrieving and ordering, inspired to ancient practices of memorization and Renaissance forms of systematizing thought, and in its more scientific aspects relating to the physiology of the mind intertwined with the old philosophical debate of the mind-body problem. Significantly, the climax of the novel occurs when a multi-disciplinary conference on the relation between body and mind taking place in 1969 at the university of Northern England – in the same

Renaissance building which had provided the ideal setting for the staging of the verse play *Astraea* in *The Virgin in the Garden* – is abruptly interrupted by the followers of a counter-culture movement based outside the university campus. Leading towards this climactic moment, is an ongoing discussion of theoretical and cultural issues, taking many forms and involving a great many characters cast in a variety of situations. These range from television programmes to therapy groups and research laboratories and also include the personal correspondence of social scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists. Because introspection and creativity were focal points of the counterculture of the Sixties, the novel can be said to mirror the inner picture of those years in England. In this sense, Byatt's fictional narrative carries the memories of the past within it, a past which is as learned as it is densely organized. In turn, this densely-layered subject-matter is held together by a complex narrative structure and a series of recurring metaphors belonging to scientific discourse.

As we shall see, Byatt continues to nurture her literary construct with metaphors derived from the neurosciences which have their early literary antecedents in the fiction of George Eliot. These also inform the highbrow discussion among scientists in the novel and in many ways, Byatt can be said to be translating the aims and concerns of the nineteenth-century novelist into her own contemporary context, namely our time dominated by one overriding computer metaphor. Because the history of the computer interlocks with the history of close links between technology and theory, between technical apparatus and ideas relating to mathematics, logic, philosophy and linguistics, the meaning of this pervasive metaphor cannot be overemphasized in its association with the overall narrative structure of the novel and its content. As Douwe Draaisma has pointed out in her study of *Metaphors of Memory* (1995, 2000):

> Metaphors as literary-scientific constructs are also reflections of an age, a culture, an ambience. Metaphors express the activities and preoccupations of their authors. Without intending to, metaphors capture an intellectual climate and themselves function as a form of memory.[11]

Of birds, snakes, mirrors and gardens

The title of Byatt's novel is a playful allusion to one of her grandmother's sayings which also provides the first of three epigraphs on the opening page:

> A Whistling Woman and a Crowing Hen / Is neither good for God nor Men.

Thus, the implicit irony contained in this old proverb meets the reader as a humorous greeting while also hinting at the more lighthearted part of the novel's plot: Frederica Potter, the protagonist of the entire quartet, has left the most cumbersome phase of her life behind, marked by an unhappy marriage to a violent and

uncongenial husband and a subsequent divorce case allowing her custody of her small son Leo. She is about to embark on a new life in London as a TV journalist, after having taught in a class of adult education at an arts'college. From now on, her life appears to unfold freely on a path towards emancipation from the old social constraints imposed on her gendered condition, as described in the earlier part of the novels' quartet.[12] Therefore, her whistling through the streets of London is an act of deliberate defiance to her unsympathetic grandmother's veto on her earlier behaviour: "a sort of image of a woman walking off into the future, able to whistle" and having access to an unprecedented range of activities.[13]

The second epigraph is a longer extract from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which playfully refers to the imminent transformations affecting Frederica as she takes on a new social role, both as a single mother and as a working woman in her capacity as TV journalist. Significantly, the new television programme she will be asked to conduct is entitled *Through the Looking Glass*. Frequently throughout the novel, Frederica will be referred to as "an adult Alice".[14] The excerpt contained in this second epigraph describes a dialogue between Alice-as-serpent and the pigeon who, questioning the little girl's identity, remarks: "I can see you're trying to invent something!" [15] Whereupon the pigeon immediatly reaches the conclusion that Alice's long neck makes her more akin to a snake than to a little girl, though Alice tries to persuade him otherwise, "rather doubtfully" though "she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day". Nevertheless, the pigeon insists contemptuously: "A likely story indeed!… I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it".

This detail offers us another instance of Byatt's endless play with analogies and multiple allusions characterizing her style and narrative strategy. The snake motif evokes first of all the biblical account of Adam and Eve and their consequent fall from Paradise. Thus, the pigeon's contemptuous remark is also more than a passing tip on the hat to Milton's famous lines in *Paradise Lost*: "Out of my sight, thou Serpent!"[16] Moreover, by referring to the animal-like appearance of little Alice as a precedent for Frederica's new glittering TV role, Byatt is symbolically incorporating the vexed question of gender and social identity into the novel, echoing a question which has underpinned the entire novels' sequence and which came openly to the fore in *Still Life* when Stephanie, Frederica's sister, mused: "Where is the borderline between nature and culture?"[17] Self-absorbed and in contemplation of both her young child uttering his first words and the surrounding garden reawakening into spring, the young mother had pondered on the implications of biological and mental growth mirrored in her own predicament.

Yet, the snake simile does not exhaust itself: its multiple symbolism needs to be unravelled further. Readers of A.S. Byatt's fiction will be familiar with her frequent metaphor, derived from S.T. Coleridge, of a snake symbolizing the power of the imagination "forever uncoiling",[18] prominent in one of her early novels, *The Game* (1967). Here, a young fictional novelist, Julia Corbett, who will reappear as a guest

in one of Frederica's TV programmes in *A Whistling Woman*, is described as being endowed with a devouring imagination which eats up reality, unbalancing any possible harmony between these two realms. On this problematic dichotomy, Byatt had provided her own critical comment in an interview with Juliet A. Dusinberre: "The serpent is both sex and destruction, and imagination and preservation, and these two are curiously and intimately combined. Coleridge certainly knew that his serpent of the imagination was also derived from Milton's depiction of Satan."[19]

This dual symbolism of the snake as both a force of destruction and an imaginative source is mirrored in the opening page of the novel through the familiar picture of Alice,[20] while the reference to Milton will surface again at the end of *A Whistling Woman*. It will be recalled, moreover, that Milton's depiction of Satan is highly problematized in that it is suggestive of the negative vagaries of the imagination, of the mind in its dividedness during the thinking process. As Kenneth Gross tells us, "Satan is the only character in the poem who thinks… He is Milton's picture of what thinking looks like, an image of the mind, of subjectivity, of self-consciousness".[21] Yet, between this early symbolic conception of thinking as self-delusion and its later rendering in Byatt's latest work, there occurs a shift towards a more balanced relation between imagination and reality, which is also reflected in one of Byatt's more recent critical statements: "I see the imagination much more in a Coleridgean way as being that part of your mind which very slowly forms an adequate image of the world outside, as a mirror and a lamp (...)"[22]

Though the old Romantic idea of a Coleridgean imagination is still much cherished by her, the author refuses to submit her rationality to the language of the body unconditionally and her setting of her novels against the cultural turmoil of the Sixties, when sexuality was forced into the realm of cultural and social politics, is therefore all the more significant. In a sense, her chosen setting becomes the ideal battlefield for a renewed dialogue on the dualist nature of being, but while the dreamlike transformations of Alice reflect Frederica's imminent change of public role and her new entry into the world of simulacra, Frederica retains her capacity to distance herself rationally from the endless and overpowering games of her new professional environment. Consequently, the metaphor of a mirror or lamp slowly shedding a warm light onto reality loses any threatening connotation as it describes the condition of the imagination unfolding from the inner depth of a stable self.

The third epigraph on the opening page contains an excerpt from one of Andrew Marvell's poems, *The Garden*, which is worth looking at here as it symbolically alludes to one of Byatt's most cherished topoi:

> Here, at the Fountains sliding foot,
> Or at some Fruit-trees mossy root,
> Casting the Bodies Vest aside,
> My soul into the boughs does glide:
> There like a Bird it sits and sings,
> Then whets, and combs its silver Wings;
> And, till prepar'd for longer flight,
> Waves in its plumes the various Light.[2]

Byatt has repeatedly alluded in her fiction to the archetypal motiv of the garden as both a source of regenerative and creative power and as a mythical locus of paradisal bliss and love. In *Possession*, for example, one of Ash's poems was significantly entitled *The Garden of Proserpina* and contained one of the clues of the novel pointing to the yet undiscovered relation between two Victorian poets, resulting in enigmatic traces underlying their creative work and in the birth of their illegitimate child. However, the intertexual allusion to Marvell in the epigraph to *A Whistling Woman* excludes any glorification of sensuality and refers only to the garden as a place of inner meditation where reason rules above sense. As Frank Kermode remarks in his critical comment to Marvell's poem, "the true ecstasy is in being rapt by intellect, not by sex,"[24] a statement which wittily seems to fit Byatt's own views mirrored both in her novel and critical writing. A recent article by her published in *The Guardian* elucidates her own reflections on the unresolved question of the relation between body and mind further, tracing developments in the neurosciences and the literary representations of this old topos.[25] Among these, she quotes the imagery of much metaphysical poetry highlighting the inherent conflict between body and soul, and sets it against T.S. Eliot's own interpretation of seventeenth-century poetry in terms of a mythical undissociation of sensibility which had also cast a spell on her as a young woman in the Fifties.[26] One of her most pertinent comments in the article tellingly refers to another well-known poem by Marvell, "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body," where the body speaks of itself as being "impaled" on the "tyrannic soul".[27]

Further to this, the excerpt of Marvell's poem in *A Whistling Woman* includes reference to a singing bird and its colourful plumage, a well-known symbol for the disembodied soul ascending towards ecstatic contemplation and pure light. By casting the neo-platonic symbolism of a metaphysical poem onto the plain level of folk wisdom and traditional language as expressed in the old proverb contained in the first epigraph, Byatt plays with a double form of consciousness, both literal and allegorical. It is no coincidence that the colourful pictures of both a hen and a peacock are printed on the cover of the novel, thus rendering its embedded literary symbolism in visual terms.

Significantly, the novel abounds throughout with references to birds of all kinds and the fairy-tale contained in the first chapter opens with a dialogue between a thrush and Artegall, one of the protagonists in the children's story which Frederica's son Leo and his friend Saskia had begun to listen to in *Babel Tower*. It is equally significant that the prologue to this preceding novel featured a thrush singing its solitary song in a barren landscape. If its broken notes may have suggested the consoling power of the spoken word in the waste land of modernity, the visual peculiarities of the bird's feathers connect with one of Byatt's favourite metaphors describing the inner workings of the mind in its attempt to re-imagine and re-construct a given picture of reality.

These metaphors have become a set of recurring images which the author first referred to in a critical article on "Memory and the Making of Fiction".[28] Here, as I

have already noted elsewhere,[29] Byatt outlined two types of mental pictures which she associated with the writing process as it unfolds and with the inner workings of the mind in its unceasingly reconstructive labour. Because this pair of iconic images vigorously resurfaces among the fictional pages of *A Whistling Woman*, it will be useful to highlight them once more and to juxtapose them to their new version in the novel. The first image was one of "Feathers – being preened, until the various threads, with their tiny hooks and eyes, have been aligned and the surface is united and glossy and gleaming".[30] Here, the colourful picture of a glossy and bright feather has significant overtones connecting the bird symbolism of the epigraphs with the mnemonic activity of the brain and the endless ramifications of memory. In fact, the second image Byatt referred to in her article is that of "a fishing net, with links of various sizes, in which icons are caught in the mesh and drawn up into consciousness – they come up through the dark, gleaming like ghosts or fish or sparks, and are held together by the links".[31] As it will become apparent, this is not just an iconic and mesmerising image describing the various operations of the brain in a literary fashion, but also a powerful analogy for the larger implications binding memory to its social and historical context. It is this aspect of the novel which I now wish to turn to.

Of groups, TV, culture and community

In an authorial aside providing a temporary suspension in the unfolding of the plot, Frederica is said to be looking back on her youth in the Fifties, but her actual memories of this time are too flimsy and elusive to be recalled with any certainty: then, the mind had been too actively absorbed by the turmoil of living to retain any memorable impressions of the time. What she remembers instead is a patchwork of semantic constructions sent down to memory in a literary shape and intertwined with random fragments describing objects and vague emotions or sense perceptions:

> Her idea of her own youth was a densely patterned carpet of mnemonics and rhythms, from T.S. Eliot, first tastes of banana, melon, whalemeat, lobster, exam questions recalled in total irrelevant detail, minor humiliations, dreadful, unfocused, unsatisfied sexual desire. The *carpet* of the 50s was *woven of many colours, in fine threads*, even if much of it was pastel, or fawn, or dove grey. Whereas the 60s were like *a fishing net woven horribly loose and slack* with only the odd very bright plastic object *caught in its meshes*, whilst everything else had rushed and flowed through, back into the undifferentiated ocean. (p. 50, emphasis added)

In seeking to represent a comprehensive image of society as recalled in her mind, Frederica can only appeal to the cultural patterns available to her as literary memory or else produce an indifferentiated list of loose objects and primary sense perceptions. On the same page, her tentative record of individual and collective

memories proliferates in a longer enumeration attempting to convey her own feel of the past with only scarce references to larger historical issues. One of these is a sketchy allusion to "the plumes of smoke and towers of flame in the rainforest in Vietnam" (p. 51). And what is perhaps most striking in this sequential enumeration of random memories are just the two iconic symbols of a woven pattern and of a fishing net which have become accommodated into the texture of the novel.

Ultimately, Byatt is giving shape in her novel to a gradual and unrelentless transition towards a visual culture permeating all facets of reality, as Frederica's old friend Edmund Wilkie – now producer of a new BBC cultural programme – will make clear to her in his preliminary instructions (pp. 47-48). In a long passage reproducing the mesmerising and manipulative workings of television on people's consciousness, Byatt captures its transformative power and phantasmatic effects associating them with the mimetic games encountered by Alice in her nonsensical Wonderland:

> *Through the Looking-Glass* was, from the beginning, a rapid and elaborate joke about the boxness of the Box. As it opened, the box appeared to contain the hot coals, or logs, the flickering flames and smouldering ash, in the hearth which had been the centre of groups in vanished rooms before the Box came. The fire in its shadowy cave was succeeded by a flat silvery mist (or swirl of smoke), in an elaborate gilded frame. The mist would then clear to reveal the interior of the Looking-Glass world. There was a revolving Janus clock, with a mathematical and a grinning face. There were duplicated mushrooms and cobwebs and windows. At the back of the box was what might have been a bay window, or a mirror reflecting a bay window. In the middle was a transparent box within a box, in which Frederica sat, into which the camera peered and intruded. All through the programme, round the edges of the contained space, from time to time, animated creatures and plants sauntered, sped, shot up and coiled. (p. 134)

As we follow Frederica in the broadcasting room of a BBC television network, we are reminded of the old fireplace where previous generations had spun their tales by the only force of the spoken word, now superseded by McLuhan's 'global village'.

In dealing with the impact of television on national and popular culture, the novelist is addressing a multiplicity of issues in her characteristic cumulative style. First of all, there is the overlapping of the fates of television and the family during the decade, when most programmes were meant for evening relaxation and entertainment. As Stuart Laing remarks in his study of "The Television Revolution in Britain in the Sixties", programmes such as "Coronation Street" and game-shows like "Sunday night at the London Palladium" or "The Black and White Minstrel Show" were "the dominant recipe for securing and retaining the 'family audience' in a decade when the single-set household was very much the norm".[32] As he further explains, this tendency presupposed the unity of the family nucleus and a shared taste.

However, by the end of the decade which produced a new legislation on abortion, divorce and homosexuality and a growing awareness of feminist issues, this ideal unitary family audience no longer held. Therefore, television addressed new issues with a more focussed political and social content, as well as women's issues for women's culture. Ordinary life, relationships, emotions and the politics of the personal entered the Box vigorously and Byatt's novel does capture the workings and impact of such programmes in an eloquent way. Consequently, Frederica can be said to embody the movement of British television in the Sixties from the margin into the centre of culture, but since she is also a single mother, her character is meant to represent the changing condition of women in British society during the decade. Ironically, the result for Frederica is double-edged, since she becomes transfixed into a public icon with significant ambiguities: "She sat about dressed as a clever metaphor, in an-easy-to-grasp metaphorical glass box, like a mermaid in a raree show, and posed trivial superficial questions with trivial superficial brightness" (p. 326). Indeed, the novel shows the transformation required of the individual, and of women in particular, when they take on a public role, though it also abounds with a variety of character-types testing alternative life patterns. Homosexual couples, singles and single parents all contribute to populate Byatt's distinctly complicated plot.

Secondly, the novel grapples with complex issues relating to the physiology of the mind and the technology of television. One of Frederica's colleagues, a TV producer working on the programme conducted by Frederica but controlled by him, keeps abreast of these changes. For him, all products of creativity should mirror even the most trivial facets of reality and be conceived to be seen on TV in coloured images: "and all this can be woven together, as the technology advances, into one great living tapestry" (p. 48).

What I would like to emphasize here is the very notion of a woven tapestry to represent both the single artistic object and the dynamic process of culture, because this leads me to one of the key principles underlying Byatt's leaning for constructivist theories of memory and the discussion among scientists in the fictional academic conference. Byatt is fascinated by metaphors derived from scientific discourse and resembling those conceived by George Eliot in her fiction, such as, precisely, the image of a woven cloth symbolizing the social structure of the provincial world of *Middlemarch* or that of a pier-glass with random scratches on the surface which a radiant and powerful eye must order and give shape to in its vision. Transposing these images into her fictional world of the Sixties, Byatt superimposes them on the general scientific discussion on the physiological activity of the brain engaged in visual perception. Jacqueline Winwar, for example, the young woman scientist conducting research on the memory of snails, explains her interest in neurotransmitters as she refers to a real-life scientist (Hebb) who had "seen the brain as a system of flashing lights, building electric links" (p. 53). During the fictional interdisciplinary conference, Hodder Pinsky, an American cognitive psycholinguist with left-wing ideas reminiscent of Chomsky, speaks of metaphors engrained in the language of neurology and psychology, such as dendrite "derived from the Greek word for tree"

(p. 353) and "the 'entry' of a sense impression into the brain" (p. 354). Tellingly, his paper bears the title "Metaphors for the Matter of the Mind" (p. 353).

Chapter 9 describes the cultural experience of television by showing real-life characters such as Jonathan Miller and Richard Gregory who shaped the intellectual climate of the period with their versatile theatre productions and path-breaking neurological research into the workings of mind and brain. Their discussion on Frederica's TV programme focusses on matters of visual perception, optical illusion and mirror games and also refers to the playful adventures of Alice in Wonderland who puzzled over words, ideas, paradoxes and jokes. The virtual reality of television is therefore suggestive of a similar playing with mirrors, images, light and vision. It also evokes, however, Plato's famous allegory of the cave whose shadows function like images in a mirror, and one is struck by Byatt's adjectival virtuosity in translating a well-known philosophical allegory into imaginative fiction: "The fire in its shadowy cave was succeeded by a flat silvery mist (or swirl of smoke), in an elaborate gilded frame" (p. 134).

This leads me to the constant juxtaposition of light and darkness interspersed throughout the novel. Especially with regard to the student protest, the novel reiterates the dichotomy of light and darkness as a fixed binary opposing reason to chaos. We have, for example, the character of a young anarchist, Jonty Surtees, portrayed as a caricature. He emerges from dark venues to join Nick Tewfell, the legitimately elected leader of the student union. They will both move gradually into the commune located outside the college campus which is controlled by the forces of chaos and unreason. Similarly, the university vice-rector's wife is a rather mysterious figure with a leaning for mysticism and the occult, while her husband, a grammarian and mathematician, is a man who clearly favours the refinement of abstract thought and rationality. In his study, he has etchings of Mondrian and Rembrandt hanging on the wall, which seem the objectified emanations of his inner virtues, clear vision and the logic of rational thought. Later in the novel, he is described as "the Architect of Babel… intent not upon chaos, but upon the discovery and communication of extraordinary order" (p. 327). He is also a polymath who sees "the artificial invisible barriers between disciplines" and recognizes that it is "natural for the mind to erect them and to work within them – they were forms, philosophy, bio-chemistry, grammar – to which the Towers of the University gave a metaphorical solidity" (p. 326). He also sees, however, that "such towers were lookouts, from which other forms could be seen, to which other forms could be linked" (p. 326), while a little later Elvet Gander, the psychoanalyst loosely modelled on the real-life author of *The Divided Self* Ronald D. Laing, observes that "ideas are stronger than individuals, so are forms of spiritual life, they twist, they pull. They mould" (p. 328).

A gender-sensitive awareness will be clearly suspicious of such fixed binaries. Indeed, the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray had already hinted at the negative imagery embedded in the dark symbolism of Plato's cave which relies on masculine definitions of concepts of truth and rationality. In her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray sees the cave in Plato's allegory as representing the

woman's womb; therefore "breaking out of the womb means breaking into truth and knowledge", as Susan J. Hekman notes in *Gender and Knowledge*.[33] Similarly, the earth seems to be defined in terms of dark holes threatening the light of reason, a dichotomy which, significantly, also colours Byatt's persistent symbolism in the novel.

Byatt does not seem to question this rigid dichotomy, but rather to reinforce it. The novel does truly celebrate the life of the mind, including the minds of women, but it does not seem to replace the phallocratic language of rational thinking. I will argue, however, that Byatt's solution out of the impasse caused by this standard binary lies elsewhere, namely into an alternative conception of rationality which points both towards George Eliot's idea of an incarnated mind and to the work of a contemporary neuro-scientist, the Portuguese Antonio Damasio.

As we have seen, science features prominently in this novel. Indeed, many of its characters are scientists and its climax provides scope for an imaginative rendering of both gender-related and philosophical issues. Though the fictional academic conference is interrupted at the end of the novel by the turmoil following 1968, the novel as a whole is a celebration of the life of the mind and of the complexities it generates in the existence of human beings. One of Byatt's critics, Jane Campbell, commenting on "Morpho Eugenia" – one of Byatt's pair of novellas in *Angels and Insects* – observes that it "stresses the revelation of the woman's selfhood" through the appropriation of scientific discourse by Matty Crompton.[34] As you may recall, Matty Crompton is the clever governess who becomes allied with the male character, the entomologist William Adamson, in "Morpho Eugenia". It seems to me that this can also be said of *A Whistling Woman*, where Byatt casts the chief concerns of modern science in the shape of a novel even more pervasively. Weaving together various fields of knowledge, the novelist is ultimately rejecting the old division between the two cultures of science and the arts and, I would add, of emotion and intellect, though she does so in a way which seems paradoxical.

A.S. Byatt and the feeling brain

In the concluding page of *A Whistling Woman*, the author acknowledges the work of Antonio Damasio, an influential Portuguese neuro-scientist from the university of Iowa College of Medicine who has recently achieved great international acclaim thanks to his work on the neurology of emotion, memory and language. In *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999), for example, he describes in detail the process by which consciousness arises in the mind, while in *Looking for Spinoza* (2003) he suggests that human experience is founded in "feelings of myriad emotional and related states, the continuous musical line of our minds, the unstoppable humming of the most universal melodies". In a way whose appeal to Byatt can easily be recognized,[35] he investigates the biological structure underlying emotional processes which are the basis for feeling and sketches a very clear distinction between feeling

and emotion,[36] reminding us that the original Latin word *affectus* did not divorce emotion from feeling and questioning throughout his work "the Cartesian idea of a disembodied mind".[37] Tellingly, one other work by Damasio bears the title *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994). What he reiterates in his study is the idea that feeling is the mental representation of the change affecting the body and causing emotion. In other words, a state of emotion is triggered off by an external object and is rooted in the body. Since a whole philosophical tradition has placed emotion at the opposite end of reason, Damasio is introducing a fundamental change in this process, which Byatt in a way appropriates. Because the brain's regulatory operations depend on the creation of mental images in the process we call mind, the mind is the idea of the body. Damasio claims in *The Feeling of What Happens* that the "mind's pervasive aboutness is rooted in the brain's storytelling attitude".[38]

Similarly, Byatt's persistent attempt to capture the sensuous movement of consciousness in its interrelation with biological and cognitive processes seems to suggest that, rather than subscribing to the idea of a mind which subjugates the body, the novelist is paying close attention to the narrative rhythm of the feeling brain rooted in the body and immersed in a social environment. Accordingly, many characters in a *Whistling Woman* are cast both as scientists and as sexual beings engaged in problems of finding a suitable partner or of parental existence. Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, for example, is a geneticist who agonizes over unrequited love for Jacqueline Winwar, the young researcher who studies the physiology of memory. Ironically, the paper he discusses at the fictional academic conference in chapter XXIII deals with the redundancy of males in the human species.

A further and last point that needs to be stressed is the writer's intertextuality, a connective tissue in a densely-layered fiction which eschews strict boundaries and challenges the reader with new questions. The workings of cultural memory have been compared to the shape of neural networks active in the brain by Wolfgang Iser, an idea replete with allusions to the ongoing developments in cognitive science and the media. These allusions also refer us straight back to George Eliot, whose scientific metaphors in *Middlemarch* continue to fascinate Byatt. In a passage from *The Essence of Christianity* quoted by Byatt in *Passions of the Mind*, Eliot referred to ideas which "revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit".[39] What fascinates Byatt is precisely Eliot's capacity to "make certain ideas thoroughly *incarnate* (...) ideas that she apprehended in the flesh".[40] *A Whistling Woman* shows the extent of this ongoing kindred affinity in Byatt's work. The fictional conference portrayed at the end of the novel makes it even more explicit: "There were various literary and historical papers, including one on George Eliot's metaphors from anatomy, perception, tissue study and webs in *Middlemarch*" (p. 363).

For Byatt the creative process is best described as the activation of synaptic connections in the brain, an idea which she has expressed both in a critical essay with regard to her own mental workings when writing fiction, and in her novels.[41] When Hodder Pinsky remarks in *A Whistling Woman* that human beings cannot think

without metaphors, we enter the realm of cognitive science and of the constructivist theories of memory that animate the fictional academic conference in the novel. The germs of this lively discussion, however, can be traced back to *Still Life*, the second novel in the series, where the narrator claims that "we cannot resist the connecting and comparing habit of the mind" (p. 236). The protagonist in this work, set in the Fifties, is Frederica's sister, a young and clever woman who has swapped the promises of intellectual life for the relatively dull tranquillity of married life and motherhood. Looking back on her life as a university student at Cambridge, she remembers

> the sensation of *knowledge*, of grasping an argument, seizing an illustration, seeing a link, a connection, between this ancient Greek idea here and this seventeenth-century English one, in other words. Knowledge had its own sensuous pleasure, its own fierce well-being, like good sex, like a day in bright sun on a hot empty beach. (p. 153)

This remark gives us a measure of the aesthetic appreciation involved when discovering a new form and order, while also hinting at the emotional and sensuous responses that inform the life of the mind which Byatt seeks to capture in her fiction, shifting the free flow of mental processes described by the neurosciences to the realm of the literary imagination. Indeed, if the "mind's pervasive aboutness is rooted in the brain's storytelling attitude", as Damasio observes in *The Feeling of What Happens*, Byatt is simply rendering these processes more explicit by reinscribing the sensuous realm of the body onto the written page, translating complex theoretical notions into imaginative fiction. One is also struck by the fact that, at the end of her ambitious novel quartet and almost twenty years after the publication of *Still Life*, the same idea resurfaces in *A Whistling Woman* and it is this time Frederica who voices it:

> She had thought she had wanted womanhood and sex. Knowledge had been there, and she had swallowed it wholesale, because she was greedy and had a good digestion, but it hadn't seemed to be what mattered. Now, perhaps after all, it did. (p. 137)

Anmerkungen

1 A.S. Byatt: *Possession*, London 1991, p. 315.

2 Beate Neumeier: "Female Visions: The Fiction of A.S. Byatt," in: Irmgard Maassen/Anna Maria Stuby (ed.): *(Sub)Versions of Realism: Recent Women's Fiction in Britain*, *Anglistik und Englischunterricht* 60, 1997, pp. 11-25 (22). See also A.S. Byatt: "Reading, writing, studying. Some questions about changing conditions for writers and readers," in: *Critical Quarterly* 35.4 (1993), 3-7. Here, Byatt states: "I myself, being an older and more individualistic feminist, find myself very ambivalent about being taught on courses about 'women's discourse'" (...) "The fear of being appropriated by an individual critic modulates into the fear of being appropriated by – or supported by – a group. Doris Lessing has expressed her own ambivalence about this, and so have other writers". A perceptive account of Byatt's feminist positions is also provided by Lena Steveker in a chapter of her dissertation currently in progress. On the same theme, see Jane Campbell's accurate analysis of Byatt's work: *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, Waterloo, Ontario 2004 (see especially pp. 1-25). See also Christien Franken: *Art, Authorship, Creativity*, London 2001. Finally, the author reiterated her ambivalent positions towards literary theory in a personal interview she gave me in 1997, when she stated that a lot of modern literary criticism "uses literature as a secondary material to prove the point that it already knows it wants to make… They don't seem to hear the language anymore". In this statement we can hear the voice of the creative writer seeking her own autonomy from any pre-conceived adherence to schools of thought or group loyalty. Elsewhere, she claims: "I have, however, nothing but admiration for a woman like Carmen Callil whose Virago Press is a necessary and very successful publishing venture as well as a women's organization" (...) "I think there is a danger that sisterhood could be the enemy of objective truth, in that one is so busy supporting and being supported by other women that one becomes cocooned against unpalatable realities and criticisms which might create growth". See Juliet Dusinberre: "A.S. Byatt," in: Janet Todd (ed.): *Women Writers Talking*, New York 1980, pp. 181-95 (here 187).

3 "Monique Wittig: The Lesbian Body", in: A.S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind*, London 1993, p. 276.

4 The term evokes the well-known definition of memory as *Speichergedächtnis* coined by Aleida Assmann. However, I am referring here to a different set of observations focussing on how gender may shape memory. For a preliminary discussion of this theme, cf. Odile Jansen: "Women as Storekeepers of Memory," in: John Neubauer/Helga Geyer-Ryan (ed.): *Gendered Memories*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 35-43.

5 Olga Kenyon: *Women Novelists Today*, Brighton 1988, p. 75.

6 The term collective memory was first conceptualized by Maurice Halbwachs who described the ways in which social groups construct a shared past in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris 1925. Cf. also Maurice Halbwachs: *La mémoire collective*, Paris 1950.

7 I have dealt with these particular aspects relating to the legacy of 1968 in a separate article. See Mara Cambiaghi: "'Moving Times – New Worlds': The Sixties on both Sides of the Channel," in: Martin Procházka/Ondřej Pilný (ed.): *Time Refigured. Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities*, Prague 2005, pp. 296-312.

8 Thomas Mann: "Einführung in den Zauberberg," qtd. in Alexa Alfer: "Realism and Its Discontents: The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life", in: Alexa Alfer / Michael J. Noble (ed.): *Essays on the Fiction of A.S. Byatt. Imagining the Real*, Westport (CT) 2001, p. 49.

9 See, for example, Juliet Dusinberre: "A.S. Byatt," in: Janet Todd (ed.): *Women Writers Talking*, New York 1980, pp. 181-95 (193); Nicolas Tredell: "A.S. Byatt," in: *Conversations with Critics*, Manchester 1994, pp. 58-74; Boyd Tonkin: "Antonia S. Byatt in Interview with Boyd Tonkin," in: *Anglistik* 10.2, 1999, pp. 15-26 (18).

10 I have commented on the significance of this term in a separate article. See Mara Cambiaghi: "Unraveling the Past: A.S. Byatt's theatres of memory and the spell of recall," in: Otto Heim / Caroline Wiedmer (ed.): *Inventing the Past: Memory Work in Culture and History*, Basel 2005, pp. 77-93.

11 Douwe Draaisma: *Metaphors of Memory*, Trans.: Paul Vincent, Cambridge 2000, p. 4 (original Dutch ed.: *De Metaforenmachine – een geschiedenis van het geheugen*, Groningen 1995).

12 On this point cf. Mara Cambiaghi: "The Power of Fiction in A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower,*" in: *Symbolism* 3 (2003), pp. 279-304.

13 Margaret Reynolds/Jonathan Noakes: "An Interview with A.S. Byatt", in: Dies: *A.S. Byatt. The Essential Guide,* London 2004, p. 29.

14 On the significance of this intertextual allusion cf. also Katharina Uhsadel: *Antonia Byatts Quartet in der Tradition des englischen Bildungsroman*, Heidelberg 2005, pp. 131-133.

15 Lewis Carroll: qtd. in A.S. Byatt: *A Whistling Woman*, London 2002, n. pag.

16 John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Ed.: Gordon Teskey, New York 2005, p. 253 (Book Ten).

17 A.S. Byatt: *Still Life*, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 265 (1985).

18 Juliet Dusinberre, New York 1980, p. 193.

19 Ibid.

20 A conventional literary topos frequently refers to the snake as female. A seductive woman-serpent, for example, is the subject of a narrative poem by Keats, titled "Lamia", while the imagery of serpents, water-nixies and Melusine pervades the narrative in *Possession.*

21 Kenneth Gross: "Satan and the Romantic Satan: A Notebook," in: John Milton : *Paradise Lost*, Ed.: Gordon Teskey, New York 2005, p. 423.

22 Mireia Aragay: "The Long Shadow of the Nineteenth Century: an Interview with A.S. Byatt," in: *BELLS: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 5 (1994), p. 152.

23 Andrew Marvell: *The Garden*, qtd. in A.S. Byatt: *A Whistling Woman,* London 2002, n. pag.

24 Frank Kermode: "The Argument of 'The Garden'," in: Arthur Pollard (ed.): *Andrew Marvell Poems*, London 1980, p. 205.

25 A.S. Byatt: "Soul Searching," in: *The Guardian on the Web,* 14 February 2004, 24 February 2004 http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4858136-110738,00.html.

26 T.S. Eliot developed his well known myth of the undissociated sensibility in his essay on "The Metaphysical Poets", expressing the conviction that the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century could feel thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. Byatt refers to this artistic credo in her collection *Passions of the Mind*. See A.S. Byatt: *Passions of the Mind*, London 1993, p. 2.

27 Andrew Marvell: "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body," in: Helen Gardner (ed.): *The Metaphysical Poets*, Harmondsworth 1985, p. 246.

28 A.S. Byatt: "Memory and the Making of Fiction," in: Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson (ed.): *Memory*, Cambridge 1998.

29 Cf. Mara Cambiaghi, Basel 2005, pp. 77-93.

30 A.S. Byatt: "Memory and the Making of Fiction," in: Patricia Fara / Karalyn Patterson (ed.): *Memory*, Cambridge 1998, p. 65.

31 Ibid.

32 Stuart Laing: "The Television Revolution in Britain in the Sixties," in: David Alan Mellor/Laurent Gerverau: *The Sixties*, London 1996, p. 174.

33 Cf. Susan J. Hekman: *Gender and Knowledge. Elements of Postmodern Feminism*, Cambridge 1990, p. 34.

34 Jane Campbell: *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, Waterloo (Ontario) 2004, p. 159.

35 In *A Whistling Woman*, for example, Byatt places a reference to the work of the neurophysiologist Charles Sherrington in the text: "The brain is an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern". A.S. Byatt: *A Whistling Woman*, London 2002, p. 344. I also connect the poetic quality of this image with Virginia Woolf's unforgettable metaphors for mind and consciousness, such as the well-known "luminous halo" described in *The Common Reader* or "the beam from a Lighthouse" in *Orlando*, and I have explored the implications of this interrelation in a separate article: see Mara Cambiaghi: "Unraveling the past: A.S. Byatt's theaters of memory and the spell of recall," in: Otto Heim / Caroline Wiedmer (ed.): *Inventing the Past: Memory Work in Culture and History*, Basel 2005, pp. 77-93.

36 Damasio suggests that the very etymology of the word "emotion" describes the physiological process involved in emotional states: Lat. *exmovere*, to move away, to stir up. Cf. Antonio R. Damasio: *The Feeling of What Happens. Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, San Diego 1999, pp. 35-42, 50-56.

37 Antonio R. Damasio: *Descartes' Error*, New York 1994, p. 250. Cf. also Antonio R. Damasio: *Looking for Spinoza. Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, London 2003, pp. 183-220.

38 Antonio R. Damasio: New York 1994, p. 189.

39A.S. Byatt, London 1993, p. 98.

40 Ibid.

41 A.S. Byatt: "Memory and the Making of Fiction," in: Patricia Fara / Karalyn Patterson (ed.): *Memory*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 47-72.

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