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Material pleasures: the still life in the fiction of A. S. Byatt

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MATERIAL PLEASURES:

The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt

There are . . . things made with hands . . . that live a life different from ours, that live longer than we do, and cross our lives in stories . . .

(Byatt, A. S. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” 277)

Elizabeth Hicks
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which English writer A. S. (Antonia) Byatt’s veneration of both realism and writing informs her use of ekphrasis, investigating the prominence of the still life in her fictional output to 2009. In doing so it distinguishes between visual still lifes (descriptions of real or imagined artworks) and what are termed for the purposes of the study ‘verbal still lifes’ (scenes such as laid tables, rooms and market stalls). This is the first full-length examination of Byatt’s adoption of the Barthesian concept of textual pleasure, demonstrating how her ekphrastic descriptions involve consumption and take time to unfold for the reader, thereby elevating domesticity and highlighting the limitations of painting.

In locating what may be termed a ‘Byattian’ aesthetic, this study combines several areas of scholarship, particularly literary criticism of Byatt and others, food writing, and feminist and postmodernist criticism. It investigates the ways in which Byatt’s still lifes demonstrate her debt to both French writer Marcel Proust and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of nineteenth-century Britain. The study also shows how, in her depictions of paintings by artists such as Henri Matisse, Byatt subtly engages with the issue of female representation. Further, it explores similarities between her writing and that of English modernist author Virginia Woolf.

The study reads a number of Byatt’s verbal still lifes as semiotic markers of her characters, particularly with regard to economic status and class. Further, it reveals how her descriptions uniting food and sexuality are part of her overall representation of pleasure. Finally, it discusses Byatt’s use of vanitas iconography in her portrayals of death, and shows how her fiction’s recurring motif of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” teases out the still life’s inherent tension between living passion and ‘cold’ artwork.
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My supervisor, Dr. Louise D’Arcens, has contributed substantially to this thesis, providing detailed reading and insightful commentary. In particular, I am grateful for her suggestions regarding the vanitas still life and the Proustian direction. I also wish to thank my co-supervisor, Dr. Anne Collett, for encouraging my inclusion of Woolf. In addition, I would like to acknowledge both the assistance of my initial supervisor, Dr. Cath Ellis, and the considerable insight gained from Dr. Dorothy Jones’s seminar on food memoirs at the University of Wollongong in April 2007. Finally, I wish to thank Professor Gerry Turcotte for his encouragement when this thesis was merely an idea.
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INTRODUCTION

It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking . . . Novels have their obligatory tour-de-force, the green-flecked gold omelette aux fines herbes, melting into buttery formlessness and tasting of summer . . . They do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading.

(Byatt, A. S. Possession: A Romance 470)

Still life, in all its manifestations, has demonstrated that it is a remarkably flexible device for exploring not just the domestic areas of human experience but also much broader areas of experience . . . .

(Lloyd, R. Shimmering in a Transformed Light 157-58)

This thesis proposes an innovative way of approaching the writing of A. S. (Antonia) Byatt through a discussion of the still life descriptions embedded in her fiction. A close examination of these still lifes will demonstrate their centrality to the author’s own “ways of seeing”, to borrow John Berger’s phrase.¹ This study regards the descriptions as examples of ekphrasis, a rhetorical term originally used for poetry that describes art, but which has expanded to encompass depictions of artworks in other literary genres such as fiction and travel writing. The still lifes will be discussed in two ways: firstly, as written representations of still life paintings, whether they be real or imagined works of art; and secondly, as passages that depict meals, kitchen scenes, rooms and market stalls using a similar lexicon to that which describes artworks. For the purposes of this study this second category of descriptions is termed “verbal still lifes”, a phrase also employed by Rosemary Lloyd in her study Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life (2005), to describe literary passages which resemble realist descriptions of still life paintings. Byatt’s fiction contains many examples of these extremely detailed sentences and paragraphs that employ painterly

¹ Berger’s 1973 BBC television program and book are entitled Ways of Seeing, and adopt a Marxist approach to art, particularly oil painting.
language and are separate from, yet at times ‘spill over’ into, the text in which they are embedded. This category also encompasses lists of objects which, while brief and factual, nevertheless convey the sense of a room, a table or a person. Lists figure prominently in Byatt’s fiction, as may be observed in her statement in the novel Possession, that “the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry” (473). In the current study such lists are regarded as verbal still lifes because, like visual still lifes, their purpose is to present a tangible and material arrangement of ‘things’ which tell a story.

It may at first appear to be stating the obvious to argue for the still life genre in the work of an author who has entitled one of her novels Still Life. However, such a study is warranted by the abiding preoccupation with visual and verbal still lifes throughout Byatt’s body of work. Like those of many writers, her texts feature lengthy descriptions of artworks, whether still lifes, landscapes or portraits. However, this study will show that, in addition, Byatt also describes interior and exterior settings in a manner which may be termed ‘painterly’ in that these descriptions evoke the visual through the incorporation of vivid imagery, metaphor, simile and colour adjectives. This technique is not, of course, unique to Byatt and is, in fact, how most writers write if they in any way aspire to a realist descriptive style. In the words of Malcolm Kelsall, “[w]riters interpret what they see, and the way in which things are seen is conditioned by how they are described. There is no firm division between the visual arts and literature” (8). What sets Byatt’s work apart, however, is the presence of a certain ‘knowingness’ about this technique which ultimately distinguishes her from practitioners of so-called conventional realism. Not only does she include what may be termed ekphrastic representations of still life paintings in order to comment on, explain or elucidate aspects of both the narrative itself and of art, but her employment of terms such as memento mori and vanitas clearly evokes associations with the still life genre.
Many critics, as well as Byatt herself, have discussed the *ekphrastic* descriptions of artworks in her texts as reflecting the attempt to achieve a ‘visual’ language, or as a means by which to compare the relative effectiveness of the visual and verbal. In her explorations of the relationship between the two modes of representation we recognise her debt to E. H. Gombrich, one of her “great heroes” (Tredell 68). In *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, he has famously written of various correspondences between sight and sound, including sounds which “can indeed imitate or match visual impressions” and the existence of synesthesia as evidence of the close association between the two senses (310). Gombrich asserts that “[a]rtists at all times have been interested in these correspondences, which are invoked in a famous poem by Baudelaire” and proffers numerous examples such as the fact that “Rimbaud assigned colours to the five vowels” (311). This relationship between the visual and verbal is strongly evident in Byatt’s texts. Michael Worton attests to the visual qualities inherent in her writing, asserting that she “sees paintings very well; she also knows how to make her readers see them” (28). Byatt also admires this quality in other writers: speaking of her esteem for American writer Willa Cather, she notes that she “liked to use painting as an image for what she was trying to achieve” (2006 6), quoting Cather’s statement in a letter² that “[s]ince I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of St Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something like that in prose” (7). Most previous analyses have pointed out that Byatt’s fiction does indeed achieve a comparable but distinctive visual-verbal fusion.

However, the current study goes further in its exploration of this relationship between the visual and the verbal. It shows that Byatt venerates the act of reading as offering an experience to the reader which does not have an equivalent in viewing a work of art. This is because as a writer she is celebratory of the unique pleasure afforded by the unfolding of a

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² In *Commonweal* 7 (27 Nov, 1927)
written text. The current study argues that this unfolding is intricately bound up with the act of consumption. In other words, the reader ‘consumes’ words quite differently to the way in which a painting is viewed because, while a painting can be taken in relatively quickly, a written text takes time to read. It may be argued that looking at a painting could or should take just as long, or longer, than reading about it. However, for the purposes of this study, the presumption is that, on average, reading an *ekphrastic* description is the more time-consuming activity. In addition, reading may be regarded as a more intimate pursuit than looking at art, in that viewers experience paintings at a distance whereas literature demands a more direct consumption by the reader. This idea of ‘consuming’ is integral to the current study in that, as will be demonstrated, Byatt’s verbal still lifes display considerable pleasure in the consumption of food, art and literature. Consequently, her language itself is sensual, evoking the pleasure to be experienced through eating or looking at a painting. Further, this study will show that Byatt’s deliberate choice of the still life genre indicates her awareness that her writing and the act of reading keep the artworks described ‘alive’. The quartet’s motif of the urn from Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” draws together these related concepts of pleasure, consumption and the inherent tension between impermanent life and the permanent yet ‘still’ work of art. These qualities may also be regarded as the central tenets of still life painting.

The verbal still lifes in Byatt’s fiction, then, convey her sheer pleasure in description, revealing her fascination with materiality, a hitherto unexplored aspect of Byatt scholarship. Her writing reflects what may be regarded as ‘creature comfort’, encompassing the pleasures to be experienced through such activities as eating and drinking. Through her still lifes Byatt taps into a realist literary tradition which celebrates the sensual appeal of food through language. Indeed, the first epigraph to this Introduction draws out not only Byatt’s pleasure in “the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking” (470) but also her veneration of literature. This
is her most overt statement regarding the pleasures of reading and writing, one of
Possession’s major themes. It occurs near the end of the novel when Roland Michell, one of
its two main protagonists, experiences an epiphany regarding the work of fictional
nineteenth-century poet Randolph Henry Ash, and becomes free to write his own poetry. It is
located within a paragraph which obliquely references The Pleasure of the Text by French
theorist Roland Barthes (from whom, arguably, Roland derives his Christian name). Barthes
states:

In an old text I have just read . . . occurs a naming of foods: milk, buttered
bread, cream cheese, preserves, Maltese oranges, sugared strawberries. Is this
another pleasure of pure representation (experienced therefore solely by the
greedy reader)? . . . [P]erhaps, the novelist, by citing, naming, noticing food
(by treating it as notable), imposes on the reader the final state of the matter,
which cannot be transcended, withdrawn. (45)

Here, Barthes’s concept of the “pleasure of pure representation” ties together textual and
gastronomic pleasure, the reader “greedy” for both food and words. The joys of reading and
eating are also described in Byatt’s passage. Just as she refers to the pleasure of the “green-
flecked gold omelette aux fines herbes” (470), Byatt also conveys Roland’s knowledge that
“(n)ow and then there are readings which make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt,
stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and
exact” (471). This passage clearly shows Byatt’s delight in “the language of poetry” (473) as
well as in the sensual pleasure of food, thereby paralleling Barthes’s text.

Barthes’s use of the term “pleasure” distinguishes between the two meanings of
“pleasure (contentment)” and “bliss (rapture)” (19). Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle
elaborate on these definitions as “pleasure of the ‘comfortable’ sort and pleasure of a more
disturbing and subversive kind” (264). It is this latter meaning to which Richard Miller
One point of difference between the idea of pleasure in Byatt’s fiction and in Barthes’s theory concerns the concept of narrative closure. According to Barthes, “pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)” (10). In other words, textual pleasure does not depend on closure for Barthes, whereas Byatt has stated that “I think closure is the really revolutionary narrative

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3 Jouissance: (Fr. ‘bliss’, ‘pleasure’, including sexual bliss or orgasm) a term introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, to refer to extreme pleasure, but also to that excess whereby pleasure slides into its opposite. Roland Barthes uses the term to suggest an experience of reading as textual bliss. Similarly, Jacques Derrida suggests that the effect of deconstruction is to liberate forbidden jouissance. (Bennett and Royle 293)
mode at the moment” (Tredell 59). Her desire for narrative satisfaction is further expressed through her statement in Possession that “[c]oherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frighteningly and enchantingly desirable” (422). Possession, in a sense, has it both ways. While we as readers are able to admire Byatt’s cleverness in the use of techniques such as authorial intervention, self-reflexivity and ‘knowingness’, we come away from the novel having experienced narrative pleasure in a number of ways: Roland’s relationship with the academic Maud Bailey has a ‘happily ever after’ ending; the novel’s literary detective story ends with the finding of the letters in Ash’s coffin; and, finally, the reader witnesses the meeting between Ash and his illegitimate daughter, Maia. In this last scene, the reader experiences narrative pleasure in a way that the majority of characters in the novel cannot. As Chris Walsh has noted, “what Possession offers is an elaborate and fascinating meditation on the pleasures and problems of ‘reading as a form of life’” (emphasis added 186). Byatt’s pleasure in reading informs her use of ekphrasis which, by taking time to unfold, provides a more pleasurable and direct experience for the reader than viewing a painting.

However, Byatt acknowledges that not all reading is pleasurable, referring in Possession to “the regressive nature of the pleasure, a mise-en-abîme even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so ad infinitum, thus making the imagination papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy” (470). Here she demonstrates her veneration of realist narrative, associating its pleasures with those to be experienced through sex or the consumption of food. She expresses writing’s ability to engage the reader’s senses of sight, touch and smell in a way that paintings cannot. The examples of ekphrasis in her fiction engage the reader more fully because they take time to
convey the materiality of objects. Indeed, when Phineas Nanson in *The Biographer’s Tale* feels “an urgent need for a life full of things” (4), he echoes Byatt’s pleasure in ‘things’.

As the current study will show, both the still life genre and the medium of oil resonate strongly with Byatt, who espouses materiality as integral to her pleasure in writing. When art critic John Berger somewhat bluntly declares that “[o]il paintings depict things” (83), he is referring to the fact that oil is a medium which is extremely successful in rendering the palpability of material objects. As he suggests further,

> [w]hat distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts . . .

Although its painted images are two-dimensional, its potential of illusionism is far greater than that of sculpture, for it can suggest objects possessing colour, texture and temperature, filling a space and, by implication, the entire world.

(89)

Thus, glassware, china, cutlery, fruit and other foodstuffs are given depth and life-like qualities through the oil painting technique. Byatt strives to capture this tactility and realism through her highly mimetic verbal still lifes.

British author Evelyn Waugh has commented on the experience of describing food in literature. In the introduction to the 1959 edition of *Brideshead Revisited*, he states that he had originally written the novel during the latter years of World War II in “a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster – the period of soya beans and basic English – and in consequence this book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful” (9). Here, Waugh applies the term “gluttony” to the consumption of both food and literature, paralleling Byatt’s own linking of the pleasures to be experienced through eating and reading. Even though Byatt was writing at a later time
than Waugh and the privations of war were far behind her, she too may be said to have instilled her fiction with a similar “kind of gluttony”. While Waugh was later to reject what he saw as his previous “ornamental language”, many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes strongly demonstrate that sensual and vivid language is integral to the pleasure conveyed by realist description.

In Byatt’s novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, Marcus Potter and his mother Winifred visit Allenbury’s butcher shop\(^4\), an event described through a lengthy verbal still life which conveys visual pleasure through the description of the “consuming human” as “an artist in the destruction and reconstruction of flesh”, who creates “from sweated suet, mangled breast of calf, chopped parsley, bread and beaten eggs an incurving sculptural spiral of delicate pink and white and green and gold” (93). In the use of the word “consuming”, Byatt ties together both eating and reading about food as acts of consumption. Rosemary Lloyd has labelled this scene “a sardonic doffing of the cap to such writers as Dickens and Zola” (70). She states:

> The way in which this passage begins with an apparently exuberant tribute to the artistry of the butcher, bringing us through aesthetics and folklore to the unvarnished vision of butchery and decay becoming such artistry, is of course a *tour de force* compelling us to look directly at elements of the still life that are generally overlooked when aesthetics take precedence over pragmatics.

(71)

To this I would add that the passage also venerates realist description as a form of consumption, Byatt’s enthusiasm and detail exhibiting certain similarities, as Lloyd has indicated, to those of French realist writer Emile Zola. Bettina Knapp, in her analysis of Zola’s novel *The Belly of Paris*, which is partially set in the Parisian markets Les Halles, states that “Zola’s descriptions of foods in piles, baskets, boxes, encouraged some to call him

\(^4\) According to Norbert Schneider, “paintings of butchers’ shops” (34) were a subgenre of still life paintings.
the ‘Courbet of literature, so precise were his delineations with regard to form, colour, and texture . . . . Like ‘an immense still life’, a ‘gastric poem,’ Zola takes his readers from one stall to another, one canvas to the next, brilliant, frenetic, vital, and impressionistic” (59-60). The art critic Meyer Schapiro states that in Zola’s “depiction of the food in the market are expressed his great appetite for life” (Apples of Cézanne 18). He notes that, ironically, while Zola lamented the lack of realism in visual still lifes by artists of his acquaintance, he placed a great deal of importance on the verbal equivalent. Schapiro is of the opinion that The Belly of Paris “monumentalises still-life and reveals its enormous fascination as a part of existence and as a symbol of the animal forces in social behaviour” (18). Byatt’s fiction, too, may be said to both elevate verbal descriptions of food to an artform and to express her own “appetite for life”.

Olga Kenyon describes the Allenbury’s butcher shop scene as “an evocative visual image for the disintegration of material objects, yet represented in discourse which recalls [food writer] Elizabeth David’s joy in cooking dead flesh, transforming it for one’s children to eat” (62). Kenyon here points to another likely influence for Byatt’s exuberant food descriptions in British food writer Elizabeth David, whose books such as Italian Food may be regarded as a reaction to post-war rationing in Britain during the 1950s. Indeed, Byatt’s verbal still lifes bear subtle but vital similarities to those of David. In the sensuousness and exuberance evident in her descriptions of markets and meals, Byatt may be said to pay homage to the earlier writer. In The Virgin in the Garden, Frederica Potter is an inexperienced teenager unsuccessfully planning a seduction meal for teacher Alexander Wedderburn. Her limited knowledge of cooking becomes evident as she deliberates over potential menus. Byatt’s authorial voice intrudes with the observation that

[it] was before the days of Elizabeth David and her ideas of what constituted a nice dinner for two were derived from Woman’s Own and her mother’s
exceedingly infrequent practical example. Grapefruit with cherries in, and a roast duck, and fresh fruit salad and cream? Hors d’oeuvre and steak with jacket potatoes and salad, followed by baked bananas with rum and cream? Soup with hot rolls followed by trout followed by trifle with lots of sherry in it? (412)

The influence of David is more clearly signposted in Still Life, where the narrator states that “a civility of Alexander’s life at this time was the discussion, the repetition, of the detail of [Elizabeth David’s] cookery books with Elinor Poole” (195). Also in this novel, Byatt writes of “Elizabeth David’s descriptions of the colours and patterns of fish on the stalls” (68). This is arguably a reference to “the great heaps of shiny fish, silver, vermilion or tiger-striped, and those long needle fish whose bones so mysteriously turn out to be green” (5) in the introduction to David’s classic 1950 text, A Book of Mediterranean Food.

In Still Life, Byatt’s verbal still lifes of market stalls in Bloomsbury employ similarly intense visual and olfactory imagery, with “Italian grocers smelling of cheese, winecasks, salami, Jewish bakers smelling of cinnamon, and poppyseed, Cypriot greengrocers overflowing with vegetables unobtainable in the North, aubergines, fennel, globe artichokes, courgettes, glistening, brilliant, green, purple, sunshine-glossed” (195). David uses a similar listing of foods in her description of the same market, when she advises that

[t]hose who make an occasional marketing expedition to Soho or to the region of Tottenham Court Road can buy Greek cheese and Kalamata olives, tahina paste from the Middle East, little birds preserved in oil from Cyprus, stuffed vine leaves from Turkey, Spanish sausages, Egyptian brown beans, chick peas, Armenian ham, Spanish, Italian and Cypriot olive oil, Italian salami and rice, even occasionally Neapolitan mozzarella cheese and honey from Mount Hymettus. (10)
As this description reveals, David introduced a certain continental cosmopolitanism to the British public who began to take pleasure in at least reading about these foods, whether or not they consumed them. She is an indispensable point of reference for Byatt because of her introduction of this idea of gastronomic pleasure which so thoroughly permeates Byatt’s fiction.

Rosemary Lloyd terms Byatt’s market scene from Still Life “an attempt to seize a particular moment, when the English left food-rationing behind and, under the influence of such gifted food writers as Elizabeth David, began to expand their tastes and indulge their senses” (148-49). Here she likens the pleasure to be found in Byatt’s description to that experienced in reading David’s cookery books. In writing of David’s A Book of Mediterranean Food, Marion Halligan terms it “one of the few truly vicarious recipe books in existence, since at the time it was written its readers would have had little chance of finding any of the ingredients needed. It was designed to comfort them in those dreary late 1940s of rationing and shortages . . .” (Taste of Memory 45-6). As British author Julian Barnes writes in his preface to the 2006 edition of David’s book, “[w]eather, food, herbs, colours, smells, tastes: the austerity-ridden housewife of the early 1950s must have been . . . astonished by the way David piles up potential – and at the time, often unobtainable – ingredients like a small stall-holder skilled in the art of temptation” (x-xi). As David herself notes,

even if people could not very often make the dishes here described, it was stimulating to think of them; to escape from the deadly boredom of queuing and the frustration of buying weekly rations; to read about real food cooked with wine and olive oil, eggs and butter and cream, and dishes richly flavoured with onions, garlic, herbs and brightly coloured Southern vegetables. (9)
The experience of reading David’s books indulges the senses and brings a vicarious pleasure to the reader in a similar way to the depictions of food in Byatt’s fiction.

The resemblance between Byatt’s verbal still lifes and David’s non-fictional descriptions of food is evidence of her employment of realism in her fiction. In the opinion of British critic David Lodge (1977), realism is “the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in non-literary texts of the same culture” (italics in original 25). Byatt’s realist style may be seen in Still Life, in which she intended naming to be a way of cataloguing the world of the novel in an orderly manner. She has stated in the essay “Still Life/ Nature morte” that she “wanted to write about birth, about death, plainly and exactly” (11) in Still Life. In this she resembles Zola who, according to Wendy Lesser, described his writing process as “‘copying life exactly and meticulously’” (65). As further evidence of her commitment to the realist project, Byatt has said: “I am resistant to the idea that the world hits us as a series of random impressions (V. Woolf) and that memory operates in a random manner. I wanted at least to work on the assumption that . . . words denote things” (Still Life/ Nature morte 11 parentheses in original). Byatt goes further, stating rather bluntly that “[w]hen Virginia Woolf says that life hits us as a series of random impressions, it jolly well doesn’t” (Tredell 60). For Byatt, the denotative capacity of words is extremely important as she believes that language can capture the ‘truth’ of a person, object or experience. She has stated in a television interview with Iris Murdoch that “[w]e live at a time when there are a great many theories about, as it were, the untrustworthiness of language, and not many theories about the enormous power of it, . . . so that you can describe a flower or a hospital room and none of your readers will see the same flower in their minds but none of them, if they can read at all, will not see more accurately” (n. pag.). For Byatt, language can provide the right words if one looks hard enough.

See Byatt’s discussion of Zola and his relationship with Cézanne in Portraits in Fiction (32-41).
Consequently, she shuns what she regards as the relativity of the structuralists and poststructuralists, and disagrees with the concept of slippage of meaning.

As part of her desire to tie words strictly to their meanings, Byatt states that in writing *Still Life*, “I found myself writing into my text ‘taxonomies’ – from one girl’s study of all young men in Cambridge, to a formicary and an essay in field grasses, from children’s pictures representing alphabets to a long discursus on a child’s pre-speech” (*Still Life/ Nature morte* 17-18). She also includes taxonomies in *The Biographer’s Tale*, such that Jane Campbell states of this novel, “Byatt’s fascination with the relationship of words and things, always present in her fiction and non-fiction, is for the first time set squarely at the centre of the text” (216). Byatt also comments on the importance of words in the short story “On the Day That E. M. Forster Died”, in which the writer Mrs Smith espouses Byatt’s own view that “she felt no doubt about being able to translate everything she saw into words, her own words, English words” (133). Byatt’s desire for words to denote things is arguably the reason for the prominence of lists in her fiction. But despite her efforts, these often unintentionally move away from words and naming to become imbued with metaphorical associations.

In the short story “Loss of Face”, Byatt comments on the central descriptive practice of realism. Her opinion is that “[r]ealist novelists are humbler magpies of significant things” (120), alluding to the emphasis such writers, including herself, bestow on the materiality of objects. However, one of the aspects which characterises realism is the fact that language features are not “foregrounded so that they become the focus of the attention”, while “the narrator does not draw attention to her or his role in interpreting events” (Montgomery et al. 213). Clearly, then, Byatt cannot be said to be solely a realist as she employs techniques such as irony, puns and the intrusive narratorial voice as part of her realism. Rather, as has been pointed out by Kathleen Coyne Kelly, she combines her version of realism with a postmodernist stance, in that “she passionately uses description and allusion and metaphor as
if they could capture some truth, while her plots are often open-ended and celebratory of the inability to do so” (xiii). Indeed, Alexa Alfer refers to Byatt’s “creative and ever-questioning experimentation with realist formats” (“Realism and Its Discontents” 48). These comments highlight the fact that, while Byatt venerates realism, her relationship to the realist canon encompasses an awareness of its limitations. Furthermore, she engages with the realist form in a pleasurable way through her use of ekphrasis, and it is this pleasure that gives realism purpose for her.

Until now, analyses which focus on the art in Byatt’s fiction are primarily confined to The Matisse Stories and the depictions of Van Gogh’s art in Still Life. This leaves ample scope for a full-length study which focuses on her ekphrastic descriptions of still life paintings and, more importantly, which draws together the multitude of ‘verbal still lifes’ in her fiction. In addition, even though various studies have analysed Byatt’s use of the artist-figure in her better-known works, such as Alexander Wedderburn and Frederica Potter (The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life, Babel Tower and A Whistling Woman), Henry Severell (The Shadow of the Sun), and Sheba Brown and Robin Dennison (“Art Work”), there are also many other artists and writers whose Künstlerromane are described by Byatt, but who have not received adequate attention until now. Because the present study argues that Byatt’s use of ekphrasis draws attention to the limits of art, several visual reproductions have been included where appropriate to highlight the relative pleasures to be found in viewing art and reading ekphrastic descriptions.

As Lloyd points out in the second epigraph to this Introduction, the still life is a highly suitable vehicle for exploring “not just the domestic areas of human experience but also much broader areas of experience” (157-58). Consequently, her own study draws out the ideological implications of the still life genre, focusing particularly on issues of class and gender. Referring specifically to the Bloomsbury market scene in Still Life, she states that,
“[w]hile this list is partly a sign of linguistic pleasure, it also acts as social commentary, comparing English North Country life with that of London” (148 emphasis added). In these two quotations, Lloyd positions the still life within the broader social fabric which has shaped it. Similarly, the current study encompasses the ideological implications inherent in the feminine and domestic associations of Byatt’s verbal still life descriptions. Her fiction coincides with second and third wave feminism, being set at a time when there is a desire to revalue domesticity. Consequently, the fact that Byatt views domesticity as integral to the pleasure experienced in the consumption of food is shown in her attention to the domestic objects associated with meals and market stalls. At the same time, however, her fiction demonstrates an awareness of a certain tension between the domestic and the feminine, in the fact that marriage can prove stifling for some women. Byatt’s fiction addresses this, relieving females of the domestic burden by depicting male characters engaged in shopping for and preparing food. In addition, she separates the still life from the domestic through meals taken outside the home in settings such as parks and restaurants.

In conclusion this study will, to adopt Christien Franken’s phrase, “counteract a narrow-minded image” of Byatt as “traditional” and “highbrow” (A. S. Byatt 4), showing that aspects of her writing which have hitherto been taken to be ideological or class-affiliated might also be viewed as a vivid experiment in the critical and technical question of textual pleasure. It will demonstrate that Byatt’s engagement with the realist canon in fact assumes an awareness of its limitations, and that her verbal still lifes explore realism in a pleasurable way by enabling the reader to take time to ‘consume’ the text. The study positions Byatt within the visual-verbal debate by demonstrating her awareness that it is her writing that brings art to life. It deems her choice of the still life appropriate because the genre underscores this association between art and the consumer by depicting objects ‘frozen’ before or during consumption. Further, the still life is the genre that perhaps best illustrates
this tension between ephemeral life and passionless but eternal works of art, as does Keats’s urn. Because of the centrality of the still life to this study, it is pertinent at this stage to explore the origins of the term, as well as to offer examples of the various ways in which the genre has been interpreted over time.

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The Still Life and *Ekphrasis*

The still life genre originated in the *still-leven* of seventeenth-century Holland, paintings which depicted objects that were regarded as ‘still’ and immovable. As Charles Sterling points out, the *still-leven*, “in contradistinction to the paintings of figures or animals, was the painting of things incapable of moving” (63). Ingvar Bergstrom defines the genre as “a representation of objects which lack the ability to move (e.g. flowers, shells, plate) and which are for artistic purposes grouped into a composition” (3). The term came to be closely associated with the French expression *nature morte*. Schneider draws out this comparison, stating that the “Dutch word *stilleven* originally meant no more than ‘inanimate object’ or ‘immobile nature’ (*leven* or ‘model’). . . . A century later, in France, the term *nature morte* was coined”, which referred to a painting of “‘inanimate things’ (*les choses inanimées*)” or “‘immobile objects’ (*objets immobiles*)” (7). Carolyn Korsmeyer’s view of the French term is that it “came into use in the mid-nineteenth century, probably under the influence of academicians who expressed their contempt for the genre with the notion of ‘dead nature’” (156). Interestingly, Byatt endows the terms ‘still life’ and ‘*nature morte*’ with equal emphasis in the title of her essay “*Still Life / Nature morte*”, acknowledging the close relationship between these two facets of the still life. The essay states that the ruling
metaphor for her novel *Still Life* was that of “flesh into grass” (10), this concept of mortality being an inherent element of both the still life and *nature morte* genres of painting.

As E. H. Gombrich asserts, the subject matter of the still life is predictable, in its “dead pheasants or peeled lemons, of skulls and leather folios, pewter or flowerpots” (“Tradition and Expression” 96). The general purpose of still life painting was traditionally to celebrate the bounty of nature, through descriptions of breakfast tables, kitchens, market stalls, fruit baskets and flower arrangements. According to Anne W. Lowenthal (1996), this was taken to extremes in the case of *pronk* still lifes, as they represented “a concentration of *objets de luxe*” (29), such as nautilus shells, Chinese porcelain, silver, and even citrus fruits, which were difficult to grow. Within the still life genre are several subgenres, such as game still lifes, depictions of the five senses, flower still lifes (*tulipomania*), *vanitas* still lifes, kitchen scenes (*bodegones*), breakfast or laid table (*ontbijte*) and fruit still lifes (fruit baskets). In Byatt’s fiction, each of these groups is represented, as her verbal still lifes depict a range of objects from arrangements of flowers, fruit and other foodstuffs, to the skulls and dead animals which are traditional subject matter of the *vanitas*.

The well-known art critic Norman Bryson emphasises the still life’s associations with the domestic and the material in his definition:

Still life can be said to unfold at the interface between these three cultural zones:

(1) the life of the table, of the household interior, of the basic creaturely acts of eating and drinking, of the artefacts which surround the subject in her or his domestic space, the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are not at all the large-scale, momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance;
the domain of sign systems which code the life of the table and ‘low plane reality’ through discourses which relate it to other cultural concerns in other domains (for example those of ideology, sexuality, economics, class);

(3) the technology of painting, as a material practice with its own specificities of method, its own developmental series, its own economic constraints and semiotic processes. (14)

In the current study, the discussion of the still lifes in Byatt’s fiction will foreground the ideological implications of the genre, including aspects such as class and gender. It also takes into account material considerations such as cultural practices and the processes of production.

In addition to the still-leven of seventeenth-century Holland, the still life has as its basis a second tradition of the visual representation of food: the xenia of ancient Greece and Rome. According to John Hollander, the xenia (hospitable or friendly gifts) were written about by the historian Vitruvius (ca. 20 BCE). Sterling states that favourite subjects of the xenia of ancient Greece were “loaves of bread, fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs and dairy products, seafood, choice meats such as game and fowl, jugs and vases containing water, oil and wine, together with terracotta ware, fine glassware, metal bowls and goblets, and table napkins” (The Gazer’s Spirit 28). Bryson refers to the xenia as “things standing still, nature reposée, things at rest; such things as fruit, baskets of flowers, loaves of bread, ewers, platters, fish, seafood, game – the familiar repertoire of the later genre” (17). As an example of what could be termed a verbal xenia, both Hollander and Bryson relate a description of a painting, thought to be imaginary, by the third-century CE writer, Philostratus, from his work, the Imagines:

Purple figs dripping with juice are heaped on the vine-leaves; and they are depicted with breaks in the skin, some-just[sic] cracking apart to disgorge their
honey, some split apart, they are so ripe. Near them lies a branch, not bare, by Zeus, or empty of fruit, but under the shade of its leaves are figs, some still green and “untimely” [figs that are pickled while green and usually don’t ripen], some with wrinkled skin and over-ripe, while on the tip of the branch a sparrow buries its bill in what seems the very sweetest of the figs. All the ground is strewn with chestnuts, some of which are rubbed free of the burr, others lie quite shut up, and others show the burr breaking at the lines of division.

See, too, the pears on pears, apples on apples, both heaps of them and piles of ten, all fragrant and golden. You will say that their redness has not been put on from outside, but has bloomed from within. Here are gifts of the cherry tree, here is fruit in clusters heaped in a basket, and the basket is woven, not from alien twigs, but from branches of the plant itself. And if you look at the vine-sprays woven together, and at the clusters hanging from them and how the grapes stand out one by one, you will certainly hymn Dionysius and speak of the vine as [and here Aristophanes’ Peace is being quoted] “Queenly giver of grapes”. You would say that even the grapes in the painting are good to eat and full of winey juice. And the most charming point of all this is: on a leafy branch is yellow honey already within the comb and ripe to stream forth if the comb is pressed; and on another leaf is cheese new curdled and quivering; and there are bowl [sic] of milk not merely white but gleaming, for the cream floating on it makes it seem to gleam. (qtd. In Hollander, “Writing of Food” 199-200)

This passage has been quoted in full as it bears a considerable resemblance to Byatt’s own realist style of description. Philostrates’s urging of the reader to “See too” and “look”
foregrounds the visuality of the passage, as do the vivid adjectives such as “purple”, “quivering” and “gleaming”. Byatt’s still lifes similarly employ rich visual imagery and colour adjectives.

With the introduction of the novel, verbal depictions of food became popular, Hollander noting that “the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presented many occasions for the description of food” (“Writing of Food” 205). Writers such as Flaubert and Dickens described visual still lifes in their fiction, a practice which was, as Lloyd states, closely related to the transposition d’art – “a technique many nineteenth-century writers loved, taking a work of visual art and transforming it into prose” (62). Arguably the most well-known example of a verbal still life is a product of the early twentieth century, that being the “exquisite minutia of Proust’s madeleine dipped in tea” (Hollander, “Writing of Food” 206). Among Hollander’s many proposed reasons for the popularity of the still life, perhaps the most pertinent here is “the sheer joy of naming” (201). This reiterates Barthes’s assertion that “naming of foods” is a “pleasure of pure representation” (Pleasure of the Text 45). Byatt’s verbal still lifes also reflect this joy in naming, as many of them may be regarded as lists of food or other objects.

In addition, while Byatt’s visual still lifes such as her description of a Velázquez in her short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” depict uncooked foods such as garlic, eggs and fish, her verbal still lifes convey a range of cooked and raw foods, including such complex dishes as syllabub, roast dinners and full English breakfasts. This highlights one of the differences between verbal and visual still lifes in that, according to food writer Reay Tannahill, “[a]rtists in general have been inclined to paint [food] in its natural rather than its cooked state” (Fine Art of Food 122). She posits two reasons for this: firstly, the fact that, in its raw state, the food “was easier to identify”; and secondly, “it side-stepped the fact that food depends as much for its appeal on sense of smell as it does on sight, by showing the
fresh colours and crisp shapes of raw materials, by offering the appetizing promise of food tomorrow rather than an aroma-less substitute for food today” (122). For readers of Byatt’s verbal still lifes the experience of food is more pleasurable than if they had merely seen a painted still life because reading takes more time and so engages their other senses such as smell and taste. This resonates with the opinion of Marion Halligan who, in speaking of D. H. Lawrence’s writings on food, “would not swap his words for half a dozen photographs, however wonderfully atmospheric, of the vegetable market at Palermo” (*Taste of Memory* 50). Like Lawrence’s descriptions, reading Byatt’s verbal still lifes constitutes a more engaging and rewarding act of consumption than viewing an image of the same scene.

A point which is central to this study is the fact that, in considering painters of various genres, “[t]he lowest type is the painter of still-life” (Steiner 12). The reason for the low status of the still life is its link to ‘rhopography’, or “the depiction of those things which lack importance” (Bryson 61). As Sterling has outlined, “still life painting was originally designated in Greek by the term ‘rhopography’ (i.e. depiction of insignificant objects, of odds and ends); then, forcing the pejorative nuance a little, it was mockingly baptized ‘rhyparography’ (i.e. painting of the sordid)” (27). According to Bryson, there is a paradox inherent in this, for while “‘rhyparographer’ means painter of *rhyparos*, literally of waste or filth”’ (136), he points out that “[t]hough humble, the *forms* represented in still life are virtually indestructible” (137). Thus, ironically, the iconography of the still life genre was characterised by objects which were indeed lowly yet which were essential for human survival.

Despite its domestic associations, the still life has been extremely popular with major artists such as Caravaggio, Cézanne, Matisse and Van Gogh. While Rosemary Betterton contends that “food is culturally gendered as feminine” (160), these artists worked within the genre largely because of its “potential for isolating a purely aesthetic space” (Bryson 81), and
because its subject matter was easily accessible. Bryson has pointed out that for Caravaggio, “the value of food as nourishment is denied, and food becomes the pretext for a bravura display of artistic strength. Similarly, in Cézanne, the table is ignored as a place of nourishment and converted, instead, into the space of the studio, where creatural dependency turns into extraordinary aesthetic ambition” (174). The still life for these artists is more about solving problems associated with artistic composition than about faithful representation. In twentieth-century permutations of the genre, then, we see domestic objects disassociated from their original purpose of providing nourishment and instead being adopted by artists for their aesthetic qualities. Of ‘actual’ still lifes depicted in Byatt’s fiction by far the majority are by canonical male artists such as Van Gogh, Velázquez and Matisse. As in her relationship to the realist literary canon, Byatt reveres these artists yet shows an awareness of the visual canon’s limitations through the choice of writing as her preferred artform. In other words, for her verbal representation through ekphrasis is a more total pleasure than visual representation.

A fundamental strand of feminist art criticism has long been the paradox inherent in the fact that canonical male artists have dominated the still life genre even though it possesses associations “between the conventional subjects of still life and the domestic space to which women have traditionally been relegated” (Lloyd 118). As feminist critic Linda Nochlin points out in her seminal essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists”, the assertion of a “quintessentially feminine style” is an invalid one, as “the Dutch Little Masters, Chardin, and the impressionists – Renoir and Monet” (4) have all depicted domestic subject matter in their paintings. In the 1970s, Marxist feminist art critics began to question why, in cases where women did paint within the still life genre, their achievements were not recognised. As Griselda Pollock notes in Vision and Difference, prior to the nineteenth century, women were forced to participate in the ‘lesser’ artistic genres due to “[t]he simple
fact of prevention of study of the nude”, and were thereby “regarded as artists of lesser
talent” (44). On this matter, Korsmeyer points out that, paradoxically, “at the time when
women were granted the opportunities to excel at this type of painting, it was slipping in
esteem and headed for its nadir of reputation as a ‘minor’ branch of painting” (164). Perhaps
in Byatt’s choice of an artistic genre in which canonical male artists excelled, yet which in
many ways appeared to suit women more than men, she is subtly pointing out the issue of
gender inequality in the genre and signalling her reclamation of female territory.

Notwithstanding these ideological questions, it is unsurprising that an author as
overtly visual and driven by artistic interests as Byatt, should employ the still life genre so
prominently throughout her writing. Over time, the term has expanded considerably from its
origins in the still-leven, coming to possess a much broader, cross-disciplinary meaning
within such diverse fields as art, food writing and interior design. Among artists who have
recently reinterpreted the genre is the Australian, Donna Kendrigan, who employs the
wunderkammer, or ‘cabinet of wonders’, a term referring to a collection of objects arranged
as a still life, as part of her 2005 installation entitled Transplants. Another is Gregory
Bonasera, who has also created what he terms a ‘wunderkammer’ of curios such as a
“Chicken/Emu/ostrich egg, Chicken femur vase”, in his postmodern take on museum culture.
The term is frequently used in the interior design context, often synonymously with
‘tablescape’, the expression coined by British interior designer David Hicks, who describes
these constructions as “objects arranged as landscapes on a horizontal surface” (168).
Furthermore, a glance at film titles from the past two decades indicates the extent to which

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6 “Transplants is an ‘unnatural history Wunderkammer’, housed within an 18th century French style botanist's cabinet constructed by Lindon Davey-Milne. Within lies a fantastical botanical garden comprising genetic hybrid plants from a far future. Via a touchscreen interface, one explores the garden and brings it life literally through touch, gradually revealing a love story”.

7 See www.bonasera.com.au
the term ‘still life’ has become embedded in popular culture. A search on the Internet Movie Database reveals a list of thirty-two films entitled Still Life, with several variations on the term, such as Still Life with Small Cup and Still Life with Flowers. Such modern and postmodern manifestations of the genre have ensured that the still life remains relevant in the twenty-first century. The ubiquity of the genre in Byatt’s fiction, then, is of significance in the current cultural milieu.

Turning to Byatt’s modes of representation, the current study maintains that she depicts the still lifes in her fiction through the rhetorical technique of ekphrasis. In 1958, ekphrasis was defined by Jean Hagstrum as follows: “I use the noun ‘ecphrasis’ and the adjective ‘ecphrastic’ . . . to refer to that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object . . . my usage is etymologically sound since the Greek noun and adjective come from ekphrazein . . . which means ‘to speak out’, ‘to tell in full’” (18). This definition adheres closely to its ancient Greek origins, in which, according to Steiner, Simonides claimed that “painting is ‘mute poetry’ and poetry a ‘speaking picture’” (5). Byatt is clear about the equal standing the two media demand, stating in Portraits in Fiction that “[p]ortraits in words and portraits in paint are opposites, rather than metaphors for each other” (1). Horace proposed in Ars Poetica that “poetry is like painting because both have as their subjects existent reality and both are limited in their mimetic adequacy to that reality” (qtd. in Steiner 8). Another important critic in the field, Michael Benton, has provided a historical overview of ekphrasis:

The classical paradigm is Hephaestus’ description of Achilles’ sword in Book 8 of Homer’s Iliad; the nineteenth-century locus classicus is Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn. Both are examples of what Hollander has usefully termed notional ekphrasis’[sic], (3) that is, where the poem describes a purely fictional

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8 See www.imdb.com
work of art. More recent descendants are virtually all instances of ‘actual’ ekphrasis where the visual work not only exists but is accessible to the viewer. Of these, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnets on his own pictures are central to the tradition, particularly his celebrated poem ‘For Our Lady of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci’, thought to have been written in front of the painting in the National Gallery. The doyen of ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century is Auden’s ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’, where Bruegel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus is the main focus of attention. (n. pag.)

There are two types of ekphrasis, then: notional ekphrasis, or imagined works, and actual ekphrasis. Regarding the former, as Cynthia Messenger states, if “the poet actually creates the art about which she talks, then she has managed to take over the role of painter, bridging the gap between the sister arts and making, crucially, visual image depend upon word” (103). In her analysis of Byatt’s short story, “Art Work”, Laurence Petit defines ekphrasis as “the ‘textualizing’, or in other words, descriptive verbalizing, of actual paintings” (395 emphasis added). However, both Petit’s essay and the current study encompass both ‘actual’ and ‘notional’ ekphrasis. Examples of ‘notional’ ekphrasis in Byatt’s fiction are the artworks in the Samuel Palmer School of Art and Craft in Babel Tower and Sheba Brown’s sculptures in “Art Work”; while ‘actual’ ekphrasis is seen in various descriptions such as Van Gogh’s paintings in Still Life and Matisse’s still life at the centre of “Art Work”.

Prior to the twentieth century, ekphrasis was discussed as early as 1766 in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry. Rather than stressing the similarities between the written and the visual, he argues that the likeness should be played down, stating that “[p]ainting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbours” (110). James A. W. Heffernan’s comparatively recent definition of 1993 indicates that the term has expanded somewhat, coming to designate “the verbal
representation of visual representation” (3). Further, Anja Muller, in her article on the use of *ekphrasis* by Irish author John Banville, states that the term encompasses “literary and non-literary writing on art (more recently even art criticism) as verbal representations, and a wide range of real or imaginary visual objects as visual representation” (n. pag.). Byatt’s fiction, apart from some relevant artworks represented on book covers, includes very few visual representations. They are limited to some black-and-white drawings and photographs in *The Biographer’s Tale* and *Little Black Book of Stories*, and drawings by Matisse in *The Matisse Stories*. Therefore, in the majority of cases, readers must take time to picture the artworks in Byatt’s fiction. In doing so, they are putting into practice the argument surrounding *ekphrasis* in that, whereas painting occurs at a distance, literature involves a temporal unfolding of pleasure. Perhaps by including so few visual representations, so that readers can engage with certain artworks solely through *ekphrasis*, Byatt is allowing them to decide whether reading does indeed mark the limitations of art.

This idea of temporality has been captured by Kathleen Wall in her study of Virginia Woolf’s use of *ekphrasis* in *Jacob’s Room* in her statement that “it takes time to read words. But our experience of a painting has the capacity to occur in a single, ‘still’ moment” (n. pag.). The impact of time on *ekphrasis* has been discussed at length by Lessing, who argues that the difference between the two arts is that “succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the artist” (109). Lessing’s discussion is based on an analysis of the statue of Laocoön, the Greek poet who predicted the sacking of Troy by the Greeks, and who was subsequently killed, together with his two sons, by sea serpents. Lessing’s opinion of the sculpture is that “suffering is not expressed in the countenance of Laocoon [sic] with the intensity which it would lead us to expect” (2). He contends that the reason for this is that “[s]ince the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, . . . the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen” (16), while “. . . nothing obliges the poet to
concentrate his picture into a single moment. He can take up every action, if he will, from its origin, and carry it through all possible changes to its issue” (21). In Lessing’s opinion, then, the difference between the two modes of representation may be summarised as that between a static artwork which captures a moment in time, and the more slowly evolving written description that can ‘capture’ time in motion. W. J. T. Mitchell has summed up Lessing’s argument as “[r]eading occurs in time; the signs which are read are uttered or inscribed in a temporal sequence” (98), whereas in visual art, the “perception of both medium and message is instantaneous, taking no appreciable time” (99). Lloyd has applied Lessing’s deliberations on space and time to the still life genre, whereby “the complex time structures that the written text can so satisfyingly develop find only a clumsy and schematic equivalent in a painting” (134). This issue of time is vital to Byatt’s argument regarding ekphrasis in that she believes that realist description involves a gradual unfolding of pleasure which surpasses that to be experienced when viewing a painting.

The present study forms part of a growing critical oeuvre which analyses fictional texts containing examples of ekphrasis. This comparatively recent incarnation of contemporary literary theory incorporating discussions of visual representations may be said to be in part a result of the advent of poststructuralist theory four decades ago. With the increased emphasis on the importance of the sign in the late 1960s and the accompanying impact of semiotics on literary theory via Barthes and others, the relationship between the visual and verbal subsequently became the focus of much critical attention and led to an increased scholarly interest in ekphrasis. Indeed, Paola Spinozzi develops the idea of postmodern ekphrasis, in which “[c]anonical and fictional masterpieces of painting appear as objets d’art, which the writer metamorphoses into stories and introduces as threads of narration while weaving the plot” (228-29). Many instances of Byatt’s ekphrasis match this definition, such as the Van Gogh still life which she uses as the motif of Still Life or the
references to Vermeer’s *View of Delft* throughout the quartet. Even though Spinozzi associates this technique with postmodernism, these examples nevertheless demonstrate Byatt’s undisputed pleasure in the realist form.

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**Previous Scholarship**

This analysis of the still life in Byatt’s fiction is informed by a combination of traditional literary and art criticism as well as certain critical strands which have developed largely as a result of the rise of feminism and poststructuralism in the late 1960s. Of considerable relevance to this thesis is the fact that the feminist movement has been accompanied not only by a desire to revalue domesticity but also by a rise in the *Künstlerroman* by women. Byatt’s work may be said to participate in this genre, as a dominant trope of her fiction has been, from her very first novel *The Shadow of the Sun*, the artist-figure. This may be a writer or visual artist, and be either male or female. Likewise, one of her principal subjects has been the nature of art. As Sarah Fishwick has noted, “[the] texts contained in *The Matisse Stories* provide further evidence of Byatt’s fascination with art, and painting in particular; a fascination already apparent in fictional works which predate this collection, such as *Still Life* (1985) and the short stories ‘Precipice-Encurled’ and ‘Sugar’, the tenth and eleventh stories respectively in her 1987 collection *Sugar and Other Stories*” (53). Studies of fiction by women which feature representations of art and female artists generally find that the authors overtly identify with feminism, making this explicit throughout their texts. In Byatt’s case, however, she does not foreground feminist arguments in her fiction. Rather, she focuses on feminism by linking it to pleasure through her depictions of domesticity and by demonstrating the limitations of the male artistic canon.
The majority of critical material on texts by women about artists generally foregrounds the writers’ feminist views. For example, in the novel *Spending: A Utopian Divertimento* (1998) Mary Gordon tackles the twin issues of the exclusion of females from High Culture, and the positioning of women through the male gaze. She does this by depicting against-the-grain readings of the deposed Christ by canonical male artists, interpreting the figures as post-orgasmic. By making her artist-protagonist a female who paints nude males, she also interrogates the traditional artist-model relationship. In addition, by referring to feminist art critic and friend, Linda Nochlin, author of “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, in the acknowledgements of both *Men and Angels* and *Spending*, she signals her engagement with feminism in these novels. Also, like many feminist art critics, Gordon uses the example of female modernist artist Mary Cassatt as the subject of an essay which explores the plight of the female artist, an issue which she was later to examine in detail in *Spending*.

Unlike that of Byatt, fiction by many women about art and artists often promotes a strong feminist argument. For example, Charles B. Harris’s analysis of Carole Maso’s *The Art Lover* (1990) states that the painting *Noli Me Tangere* “appears to illustrate the novel’s motif of the abandonment of men by women” (n. pag.). Roberta Buffi analyses the work of Australian women writers such as Janine Burke and Drusilla Modjeska, noting that they address the issue of female representation “by creating a language which opens specifically onto the field of the visual arts and evinces distinctive narrative modes of representation in the construction of women’s subjectivity” (“Mapping, Weaving and Grafting” 34). Further, in her full-length study of Australian women’s fiction, Buffi also examines depictions of interiors by female artists such as Grace Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen in Drusilla Modjeska’s works *The Orchard* (1994) and *Stravinsky’s Lunch* (1999), showing that these spaces are part of the artists’ “endeavour to shape a feminine space” (*Between Literature and*
Painting 146). Nathalie Cooke’s critical study of Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988) states that the novel highlights the flaws in society relating to ‘the male-dominated artistic tradition, one in which women tend to be models rather than artists and in which the classic novels describing an artist’s coming of age focus on the male artist’ (98). Philippa Kelly’s analysis of *Painted Woman* (1989) states that author Sue Woolfe rejects “the success/failure binary opposition by which patriarchal standards judge female activity” (156). Even though the subject matter of much of Byatt’s writing is also art and artists, her texts tend not to foreground the ideological arguments regarding female representation in the way that these other women writers do.

Rather, as the first chapter of this thesis analyses, Byatt’s own aesthetic view has been more fully shaped by artists from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular the Pre-Raphaelites and French writer Marcel Proust. Byatt and Proust share an aesthetic which has its basis in both their descriptions of artworks and their verbal still lifes of interiors and food. Reading the fiction of both writers involves the temporal unfolding of pleasure, similar to that to be experienced in the consumption of a meal. Over the past three decades, many critical analyses of Proust’s texts have highlighted his privileging of the visual, with critics reading his work in terms of the influence of artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Édouard Vuillard and Édouard Manet. For example, Gerard Genette highlights the visuality present in Proust’s style by writing about metaphor and metonymy in his novel; Heather McPherson examines the potential models for the fictional artist, Elstir; and Meike Bal, Richard Bales and J. M. Cocking emphasise the visual through their analyses of artworks in *In Search of Lost Time*. Paradoxically, while many Proustian critics analyse the artworks in his novel, they tend to ignore his descriptions of interior settings and food. As Diana Fuss’s study of the Parisian building which shaped Proust’s writing notes, “virtually all the commentaries on Proust take pains to distance him from the
domestic sphere” (152), but “[p]erhaps no writer describes better the sense of a room – its sights, sounds, odors, and textures – than Marcel Proust” (19). The present analysis confirms this view, and performs a reading of Proust’s novel which foregrounds its representations of visual art and food, relating these back to his previous essay on Chardin, which he published prior to his novel, and forward to Byatt’s own verbal still lifes.

Another area of study relevant to this thesis is one which may be said to encompass literature of space and place. Byatt’s fiction foregrounds not just a sense of place, but one which is essentially ‘English’, its domesticity enacted from within a tradition in which considerable importance is placed on the private house. Several male writers such as Herman[n] Muthesius, Richard Gill and Malcolm Kelsall have documented the importance of the English house. For Muthesius, writing in 1904, the preference of the English for owning their own homes was due to the “powerful sense of the individual personality. The Englishman sees the whole of life embodied in his house” (7). Writing much later and more critically, Kelsall is of the opinion that in England, “[c]ountry house visiting is a national pastime” (14) and suggests that the reason for this is that “certain signs should define identity, and those signs are essentially conservative, the preservation of the landmarks of the past, peculiar to the history of this tribe in this place” (5). Of course, over time, the idea of the English ‘house’ has come to incorporate such examples as flats, sharehouses and loft apartments. Byatt’s fiction portrays a diverse range of English dwellings, particularly in Possession and the quartet, including family homes such as the humble Yorkshire abode of the Potter family and the large London house of the Pooles, the country estates of Nigel Reiver, Matthew Crowe and the Baileys, and flats owned by single women such as Maud Bailey, Frederica Potter and Agatha Mond. She minutely describes furnishings and interior

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9 See Joshua Lobb, Laminations: The ‘Self Conscious Realist’ Techniques of A. S. Byatt: A Narratological Approach for a detailed discussion of Byatt’s concept of ‘Englishness’ as it is manifested in her fiction through what she terms the “English feeling” (31-62).
decoration in the homes of her characters, even down to such minutiae as Spode china and Peter Rabbit crockery, as well as Laura Ashley and William Morris fabrics and wallpaper patterns. These last details indicate the continued reference to ‘Englishness’ in Byatt’s anatomising of these residences, and is part of the gradual unfolding of pleasure for the reader.

With the advent of feminism, women began to contribute to this body of writing about space and place, which has since come to incorporate domestic space. Philippa Tristram’s analysis of houses in British fiction to World War I states that “[t]he novel is invincibly domestic, partly because it functions like the house as a little world we think we can control” (268). In their writings on space and place, many feminist critics have tended to emphasise the relationship between the house, the psyche and language, influenced by the theories of Jung and Bachelard. As Kathy Mezei (“Domestic Space”) has proffered, “attentiveness to the domestic ‘effect’ implies noting the effects of the house, its exterior façade and surroundings, its interior decoration and arrangements, and its material objects on the individual’s identity and on the composition of the written or visual text” (83). Marilyn R. Chandler is of the opinion that houses in novels “reflect not only the psychological structure of the main character or the social structures in which he or she is entrapped but the structure of the text itself, thereby setting up a four-way, and ultimately self-referential, analogy among writer, text, character, and house” (3). This is certainly exemplified in Byatt’s fiction, where living spaces constitute more than backdrops to the action. For example, in Possession, arguably Byatt’s most overtly postmodern novel prior to The Biographer’s Tale, the characters express their awareness that they are ‘reading’ spaces. In this novel, too, the concept of space as a psychological map of a character’s persona is reflected in the image of empty white beds which both Roland and Maud see as ideal. Maud states, “How good it would be to desire nothing . . . . An empty bed in an empty room. White” (267). It appears, then, that Byatt’s
fiction corresponds with these other feminist interpretations of space, in that domestic
settings exert influence over characters and visa versa.

Byatt’s fiction, written in the period from 1967 to 2003, corresponds directly to the
rise of second and third wave feminism in western society. It is no coincidence that this
period was characterised by an increase in scholarly writing on British modernist writer
Virginia Woolf. While Byatt attempts to distance herself from Woolf, their writing bears
certain affinities. But it was not only 1970s feminists such as Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar
and Carolyn Heilbrun who may be said to have ‘rediscovered’ Woolf. Later still, both male
and female critics have considered the effects of Post-Impressionist and modernist aesthetics
on Woolf, and her writing in turn on those who followed. For example, Mary Ann Caws and
Sarah Bird Wright have analysed the influence of artists such as Matisse on Bloomsbury art;
critics including J. Fisher and J. Hillis Miller have discussed the artworks in Woolf’s novels
such as To the Lighthouse; Jane Goldman has written on Woolf’s feminist aesthetics; and
Patricia Waugh, Victoria Rosner, Christopher Reed and Douglas Mao have analysed Woolf’s
relationship to modernist aesthetics. To my knowledge, only one previous study, Joyce
Karpay’s “This Fountain and Spray of Life”: Virginia Woolf’s Polysemous Influence on
Three Generations of Women Novelists directly links the work of Woolf and Byatt, showing
how Byatt, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Toni Morrison, Margaret Drabble and
Jeanette Winterson share Woolf’s influence through their portrayal of female characters.
However, Karpay’s analysis does not explore the depiction of art in the texts, so my study
will extend and deepen this area of scholarship.

Byatt’s female characters reflect the preoccupations of many women during the late
twentieth century, particularly the increasing importance of the relationship of food to
communication, gender, body image, power, sexuality and social status. While the verbal still
life descriptions in her fiction primarily highlight the idea of pleasure in their depictions of
cosmopolitanism and materiality, they nevertheless at times reflect the social status of her characters. One feminist-influenced body of criticism in recent sociological and literary theory that illuminates this aspect of Byatt’s work is that which examines food as a cultural phenomenon. Anthologies on the subject by such writers as Deane Curtin and Lisa Heldke, and Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik reflect the growing academic interest in exploring the philosophical relationship between food and culture. Roland Barthes’s essay, “Toward a Psychosociology of Food Consumption”, views food as a social signifier, while Miriam Meyers incorporates personal narratives about meals and eating into her critical writings about food and social communion. Lisa Heldke points out that “some feminist theorists have begun to turn serious attention to food, cooking and eating” (xxvi). Many feminist writers have addressed the growth in food-related disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, including Sarah Sceats (“Flesh and Bones” 2000) who has applied the trope of “not eating” (140) to Doris Lessing’s fiction. Rosemary Betterton, looking at filmic representations of women and eating, points out that “[a] link between food, fat and insanity in women is further reinforced within popular cultural forms” (131). Sceats’s full-length study, Food, Consumption and the Body, which discusses reasons for the desirability of the thin female body, states that one of the causes of this is advertising, through which women “are simultaneously exhorted to be thin and to consume” (66). The verbal still life descriptions in Byatt’s fiction on the one hand celebrate the concept of pleasure in consumption, yet on the other are underscored by these considerations of gender and power for her female characters.

Accompanying this growth in writing about food, power and gender has been a body of criticism which links food and sexuality. This is particularly important in analysing Byatt’s work because the temporal unfolding which is part of reading finds a parallel not only in the
consumption of food, but also in the pleasure of sexuality. Sceats explains the link between food and sex as

. . . complicated, for there is an intertwining of two drives or appetites that are not easy to disentangle or identify as distinct. The link is constantly reinforced in western culture, from images insinuating the fellatio of chocolate bars, sausages and asparagus to the almost routine comparison of breasts with fruits or the attribution of aphrodisiac qualities to oysters and other genitally suggestive foodstuffs. Even the term sexual appetite makes the connection, somehow conflating food and sex. The link is made linguistically, so that what is subject-specific language moves freely between the two areas of food and sexuality, people being described as ‘tasty’, a ‘dish’ or a ‘tart’, or people being said to ‘feast their eyes’ on the object of desire, to be ‘hungry for love’. It works the other way around too, with ‘sinful’ pudding or cream cakes which are ‘naughty but nice’. (Food, Consumption and the Body 22)

Here, Sceats’s reference to explicitly visual images such as food resembling either the phallus or female genitals calls to mind depictions of seductively shaped foodstuffs in Byatt’s verbal still lifes. Her suggestion of a linguistic link, too, is borne out in these scenes, with their use of words such as “hunger” or “satisfy” which conflate food and sexuality.

In addition, Betterton has detailed the relationship between food and sexuality in images drawn from the literary, artistic and advertising worlds:

Sweets and chocolate have long been metaphoric substitutes for sex in popular songs and in advertisements – like the notorious invitations by Haagen Dazs and Milk Flake to orgasm over icecreams and chocolate bars – while cookery books offer us seduction by recipe. In the language of lovers’ appetites, women and girls are often ‘sweeties’, ‘sugar’ or ‘honey pies’, metaphors of
Jeremy Iggers has traced the beginning of the relationship between food and sexuality in popular culture to “[w]hen Tony Richardson’s film *Tom Jones* appeared in 1963” (xv). In the opinion of Delys Bird, “[p]erhaps the most famous literary meal in the English novel is the one in Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones* (1749) in which eating expresses at once physical and sexual hunger” (87). This article also includes the Boeuf en Daube scene from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, as well as various meals in works by Dickens, Norman Lindsay, Helen Garner and Olga Masters (87). As will be explored in this thesis, while Byatt’s fiction is not overtly sexualised, in that it does not convey explicitly erotic scenes, certain passages link food and sexuality in the unfolding of pleasure. Indeed, in *Possession* Byatt laments the fact that, while writers predictably describe “the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking” and “the creamy human haunch, firm and warm, curved back to reveal a hot hollow, a crisping hair or two, the glimpsed sex” (470), they neglect “equally intense pleasure of reading” (470), an imbalance which she intends to redress.

Finally, in the field of Byatt criticism itself, the current study represents the first major assessment of her complete fictional output prior to 2009. It is also the first full-length work to explain how her use of *ekphrasis* shows her engagement with the realist form in a pleasurable way, and to explore the implications of the pleasure of reading as an act of consumption in her fiction. While previous analyses have sought to position Byatt in relation to feminism, postmodernism and art respectively, the current study unites all three areas as part of Byatt’s exploration of pleasure. It also links her realist descriptions of food to those of Marcel Proust, a hitherto largely unexplored but undeniably vital literary predecessor of Byatt’s. While much has previously been written about the *ekphrastic* descriptions of artworks in Byatt’s texts, comparatively little of this attention has been given to her inclusion
of the still life genre. One essay by Michael Worton which does focus on the representations of still lifes in Byatt’s fiction also captures her pleasure in writing the “always infectiously passionate verbal descriptions” (28) of paintings by Matisse, Van Gogh and Velásquez.

Essays by Sylvia Bigliazzi, Daniela Carpi, Sarah Fishwick, Isabel Fernandes and Laurence Petit likewise discuss the Matisse still life at the centre of “Art Work”, while Margarida Esteves Pereira evokes Byatt’s use of Van Gogh’s paintings in Still Life. Susan D. Sorensen’s thesis, entitled Verbal and Visual Language and the Question of Faith in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt, provides a detailed analysis of the art in the first three books of what has come to be termed the ‘Frederica’ or ‘Powerhouse’ quartet or the tetralogy, as well as The Matisse Stories. She terms the verbal still lifes in The Virgin in the Garden “florid” (176), referring specifically to “a series of manic department store tableaux” and to Marcus Potter’s aforementioned “hallucinatory, Bosch-like view of a butcher shop, running to nearly 1000 words” (176). Sorensen also comments on the presence of the genre in Still Life, stating that the “still lifes and portraits of Still Life are more restrained . . .” (177), and referring to the descriptions of a picnic and Maud’s living room (176) in Possession.

While there had been no major full-length study of Byatt’s work until Sorensen’s PhD, this situation has since been rectified. A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity by Christien Franken gives considerable attention to Byatt’s criticism as well as her fiction, examining her attitudes towards postmodernism and feminism. Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real, edited by Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble, contains essays on topics ranging from artworks to realism in Byatt’s texts. Of considerable value to scholarship on Byatt’s fiction are the aforementioned essay by Michael Worton, Alexa Alfer’s assertion that Byatt combines postmodern techniques with traditional realist narrative, and Michael J. Noble’s in-depth analysis of the alternative beginnings of Babel Tower. Jane Campbell’s study entitled A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination discusses the way that Byatt’s
image of the heliotrope may be used to explore how “she shows her women characters experiencing adventures of the mind and feelings that bring them into the sun’s light” (2). Joshua Lobb’s thesis entitled *Laminations: The ‘Self-Conscious Realist’ Techniques of A. S. Byatt: A Narratological Approach* demonstrates how Byatt combines her admiration for realist authors like George Eliot with her knowledge of metafictional techniques such as self-reflexivity in her own narratological style. It also traces the impact of the fiction of E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence and Iris Murdoch on her work, cleverly showing how Byatt’s own fiction resembles the *Laminations* created by Frederica Potter in the quartet.

There was very little written on Byatt prior to the publication of *Possession* in 1990. Three earlier critical works on which I have drawn are her interview with Juliet Dusinberre after the publication of *The Virgin in the Garden*, and chapters by Olga Kenyon and Flora Alexander in *Women Novelists Today* and *Contemporary Women Novelists*, respectively, both of which were published after *Still Life*. Nicolas Tredell’s 1990 interview covers the first two novels of the quartet and *Possession*, and has also proven useful to this study. Sorensen’s thesis has critiqued the monographs by Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Richard Todd, both entitled *A. S. Byatt*, stating that they are similar in their “lack of attention to irony, to religion, and to the field of visual art” (*Verbal and Visual Language* 7). Helen Wilkinson analyses the art in “Art Work” within a cultural materialist paradigm, an approach which resonates with the current study’s examination of materiality and cosmopolitanism in Byatt’s fiction. My thesis not only builds on and strengthens the current body of criticism, but is also the first Byatt study to be informed by a substantial cross-section of academic opinion on *ekphrasis*, the still life, food writing, feminism, the body, sexuality, place and space. It is also the first to make substantial connections between Byatt’s fiction and that of Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. In addition, it is hitherto the only study to demonstrate how Byatt’s pleasurable engagement with realism involves the reader in a temporal act of consumption, in contrast to
the distance experienced when viewing an artwork. It also shows how Byatt’s feminism is manifested through a valuing of domesticity and a highlighting of the tension inherent in the relationship between women and marriage. Finally, this study foregrounds Byatt’s argument that the act of reading keeps art alive, a point that is underscored by her choice of both the still life genre and the motif of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”.

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Methodology

In the Prologue to *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt references T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, which states that “[n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (15). This quotation illustrates a premise on which Byatt relies heavily in the representations of art in her fiction, that is, the importance placed on her literary and artistic predecessors. As Alfer and Noble point out, Byatt’s referencing of Eliot’s essay signals that it is “one of the principal texts Byatt writes back to” (6) in *The Virgin in the Garden*. This study will demonstrate how Byatt shows her appreciation of “[her] relation to the dead poets and artists” through her extensive intertextual references to art and literature. It acknowledges that Byatt’s literary and artistic influences have been many and varied, as evidenced by the fact that she draws on the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Eliot, T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Ford Madox Ford and Iris Murdoch, to name but a few. However, my argument necessarily confines itself to an examination of those influences on Byatt’s work that foreground pleasure, realism, gender, domesticity and art, particularly the still life.
This analysis of the still lifes in Byatt’s fiction has as its basis the premise that these
descriptions may be regarded as “enclosed space[s]”, a concept elucidated by Byatt in her
interview with Tredell, in which she discussed her then latest novel Possession. When
interviewed, she said that she always has “a kind of linear narrative, and then an enclosed
space which is a metaphor, or an object, or . . . a poem, which you interrogate differently, but
which is part of the narrative movement” (65). The notion of an “enclosed space” is central to
this thesis as, even though Byatt does not directly equate this space with visual art in the
interview, I believe that her references to “metaphor”, “object” and “poem” could be
expanded to include the visual and verbal still lifes embedded in her texts. Her idea of
“interrogat[ing] differently” is more problematic, however; I read it to mean that these spaces
act to impede the narrative flow and thus force a consideration which is outside and separate
from the diegetic world of the novel itself.

While this is particularly true of the fragments of poetry, short stories and letters in
such novels as Babel Tower, A Whistling Woman and Possession, I believe that it also applies
to the visual and verbal still life descriptions in Byatt’s texts. Because these still lifes may be
said to be ‘representations of representations’, by their very existence they pose questions
about the issue of representation itself. Due to the fact that they take time to unfold, they
prompt an examination by the reader of such things as the ways in which objects are arranged
and described within these spaces, and what this tells us about the ‘constructedness’ of art.
These spaces represent a type of metafictional device, in which Byatt foregrounds an
awareness of the artwork as text. This idea that the paintings are extensions of Byatt’s
postmodernist project, prompting the reader to consciously read and interpret them, is
suggested by Worton’s view that “Byatt’s intergeneric fictions reveal themselves as
performative responses to paintings, which challenge the reader both to read for him/herself
and to recognise that all reading, be it of a painting or text, is the trace of an encounter, and

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will, indeed must, lead to a writing of and for the self” (17). The present study examines Byatt’s still lifes in two ways. Firstly, they are regarded as passages which engage the reader with realism in a pleasurable way, thereby highlighting the limitations of visual art; and secondly, they are seen as integral to the argument concerning the tension between the impermanence of living passion and the permanence of lifeless art. As an extension of the latter, it shows how Byatt’s characters live and are defined through the use of visual still lifes as cultural and class indicators.

This study examines the visual and verbal still lifes in a broad range of Byatt’s fictional texts, in particular the quartet or tetralogy, which traces the fortunes of Frederica Potter and her family over a period of almost twenty years. It also discusses Byatt’s other novels, as well as the majority of her short stories. As Sorensen’s dissertation notes, in much of Byatt’s fiction, “paintings provide shorthand for character analysis” (Verbal and Visual Language 164), and “[a]rt works are also used by Byatt as ancillary, if not fundamental, plot elements” (165). Despite being completed before the publication of A Whistling Woman, Sorensen’s study acknowledges that “in The Virgin in the Garden the discussion of visual knowledge reaches its peak” (138), but that as the quartet progressed, Byatt became increasingly less concerned with the visual and more with language: “In recent years, Byatt’s expectations of visual knowledge, or of verbal/visual fusion, have been reduced” (161). Even though the depiction of visual still lifes became less prominent in Byatt’s fiction over time, representations of verbal still lifes continue to be found in large numbers in her later works. This study discusses both types of still life depictions by Byatt, reflecting her belief in the power of the verbal over the visual in that it is the act of reading which keeps art alive.

Broadly speaking, the visual and verbal still life descriptions in Byatt’s fiction are used in four ways: as a reflection of her aesthetic, which is informed by a diverse range of literary and artistic forebears; as an intrinsic element of her dialogue with postmodern
theories of art and literature; in order to tease out the implications of a domesticity which should ideally be enlivening for women but which can potentially enslave them; and finally as microcosms of the narratives themselves, representing the novels’ wider concerns about life and death. Consequently, this analysis is divided into two sections. The first of these, **Part 1 The Life of Art**, elaborates on the fact that Byatt, like those who have influenced her, uses *ekphrasis* to engage with her own realist form in a pleasurable way. **Part 2 The Art of Living** assumes a second use to which Byatt puts verbal still lifes, that is, as a means to explore both living passion and static art. These sections are further subdivided into four chapters:

**Chapter 1: Aesthetic Pleasure:** This chapter analyses the ways in which Byatt as a writer produces works which take the reader time to ‘consume’ and that, consequently, her language is a sensual experience for the reader, like eating. The first section shows that in the unfolding of pleasure through description, her writing resembles that of French author Marcel Proust. It also draws out the fascination of both Proust and Byatt with the ideas of British aesthetic theorist, John Ruskin. The second section continues with the Ruskinian aesthetic, as manifested by the art of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. It argues that not only does Byatt adopt Pre-Raphaelite imagery in order to tease out the relationship between industrialisation and romanticism, but that this imagery is also used in verbal still lifes as integral to the aesthetic pleasure of the reader. Section three shows how Byatt’s depictions of paintings by male, canonical, European artists is informed by an awareness that writing marks the limitations of this artistic canon because it is able to offer the consumer a more comprehensive pleasure. The final section discusses Byatt’s pairing of characters whose discussions of artwork prompt the reader to evaluate the merits of *ekphrasis*.

**Chapter 2: Postmodern Pleasure** demonstrates the ways in which Byatt’s metafictional techniques are integral to the unfolding of the pleasure to be found in reading. Despite the
fact that she distances herself from a postmodernist philosophical stance, these descriptions may be seen as means by which she draws attention to the constructedness of art. This chapter discusses framing in the context of Derrida’s *parergon*, showing that ‘frames’ play a twofold role in Byatt’s fiction. Firstly, readers are able to compare the artworks in the peritext with their *ekphrastic* descriptions, the latter’s themes and colours ‘bleeding’ into the text in which they are embedded. The other application for ‘frames’ to Byatt’s writing is in her self-conscious use of the metafictional technique of narrative framing, evident in her employment of such devices as prologues, epigraphs and the manipulation of narrative time. Overall, Byatt’s self-reflexive use of framing in these ways is integral to the textual pleasure which permeates her fiction.

Chapter 3: Domestic Pleasure: This chapter takes up the point that the domestic subject matter of the still life, the “culture of the table” (Bryson 13), has historically situated it squarely within feminine culture. The first section begins by examining the pivotal figure of Virginia Woolf, as many critics of twentieth century feminist fiction have done. It re-examines Franken’s assertion of the paradoxical nature of Byatt’s relationship with Woolf, in which Byatt has stated her preference for realism over modernism, yet adopts Woolf’s concept of the androgynous artist. However, the current study reveals hitherto undiscovered commonalities between Byatt and Woolf, particularly in their depictions of Matissean and Proustian visions of bourgeois domesticity. The second section indicates that, while Byatt has at times stated that she is a feminist, her fiction depicts the representation of women in art and the difficulties of female artists without mounting a political discussion as some other female writers have done. The final section shows that many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes depict marriage as stifling for women, highlighting a certain tension in the relationship between the domestic and the feminine. To counteract this, Byatt at times separates the still
life from gender by portraying both male and female characters participating in the preparation of food and by relocating some meals to settings outside the home.

Chapter 4: Mortal Pleasure examines the intrinsic tension within the still life in that it represents passionate ‘life’ that has been frozen in ‘still’ works of art. The first section asserts that the still life is related to “other cultural concerns in other domains (for example those of ideology, sexuality, economics, class)” (Bryson 14), perceiving many of Byatt’s representations of meals as examinations of social and class concerns of Anglo and Eurocentric society of the mid- to late-twentieth-century. Also, characters’ choices of what to eat (and, conversely, what not to eat) are used by Byatt to delineate their personalities and to explore power relations between them. It also examines the tentative relationship of these meals to the notion of ‘place’. The next section deals with Byatt’s linking of the still life with passion through the association between food and sexuality, her meals signifying either sexual tension or an absence of attraction. The final section demonstrates how her utilisation of a subgenre of the still life — the vanitas — shows the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures, the vanitas becoming, in Byatt’s hands, a subtle but profound memento mori.
He didn’t want a woman. He wanted another visual idea . . . He mixed purple, he mixed orange, he made browns . . . He was happy, in one of the ways in which human beings are happy.

(Byatt, A. S. “A Lamia in the Cévennes” 94-5)
Proust came to mind, his cork-lined room stuffed with the transformation of life into words, everything he knew, feathers on hats, Zeppelins, musical form, painting, vice, reading, snobbery, sudden death, slow death, food, love, indifference, the telephone, the table-napkin, the paving-stone, a lifetime.

(Byatt, A. S. “On the Day That E. M. Forster Died” 132)

The windows of the Gothic dining-room . . . could be seen doubly by the active imagination, embrasures to frame ladies in the latest modes, ready to slip away to trysts, or magic casements behind which Guenevere and the Lady Maid waited with beating hearts for their lovers. Mr Morris’s sofa acknowledged both worlds; it could be sat on, it hinted at Paradise. Emily liked that.

(Byatt, A. S. “The Conjugial Angel” 178)

As has been suggested, Byatt’s use of ekphrasis foregrounds her awareness that writing marks the limitations of art by its temporal unfolding of pleasure. Consequently, her long descriptive passages of food and meals provide a sensual experience for readers, shaping her aestheticism in a way which resembles that of Marcel Proust, whose fiction also contains numerous verbal still lifes. The close association between Byatt and Proust may be further observed in the fact that, as part of their obvious passion for art and artists, both writers share a certain admiration for nineteenth-century British writer John Ruskin. This leads, in Byatt’s case, to what may be termed a ‘Ruskinian’ aesthetic in her fiction, made tangible through her many references to the art of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. These nineteenth-century British artists looked back to earlier influences such as the medieval and the biblical, their effect on Byatt’s fiction identifiable mainly through her use of motifs such as the artist-figure of the Lady of Shalott and of the colour palette that they favoured. Byatt uses this imagery in many ways, such as for decoration, irony, and in order to hold up bourgeois characters for criticism. Through these verbal still lifes many of her characters display both a fascination and an abhorrence for middle-class life. In addition, Byatt portrays pairs of characters who, in their
*ekphrastic* descriptions of artworks, become mouthpieces for Byatt’s own pleasure in realist description.

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**The Proustian Vision**

Before looking at the similarities between Byatt’s and Proust’s respective uses of the still life, I will delineate the broader associations between their work. Kenyon states that Byatt “shares [Proust’s] use of the novel to speculate on consciousness, on death; and on the impossibility of fully knowing another person . . . . They both use language to attempt to make permanent moments in time” (68-9). Kathleen Coyne Kelly quotes Byatt as saying that “the novelist I most love is Marcel Proust” (2) relating how, at the time of writing *The Shadow of the Sun*, “I purchased Proust in French, read all of his work, and stopped writing my thesis. I needed to read Proust to learn how to write from him at that time, and Proust is all over *Shadow* in big chunks . . .” (8). In the introduction to the novel’s 1991 edition, almost thirty years after it was first published, Byatt describes her exposure to Proust’s text during the process of writing her own: “Between the first Cambridge draft and the final one, made in Durham in 1962-3, I had read Proust . . .” (xii). Despite Byatt’s acknowledgement of the influence of Proust’s writing, she does not specifically allude to his sensual passages of domestic scenes as a source of inspiration for her own work. In *The Shadow of the Sun*, Proust’s influence is reflected primarily in the long, descriptive sentences, rather than specifically in any still life descriptions. Indeed, depictions of artworks are conspicuously absent from this novel, as are passages which describe food and interiors, which later proliferate in her quartet. In this first novel, Byatt seems more concerned with portraying the characters’ actions and speech, and the psychological reasons behind these, rather than in
locating the characters within a vividly and aesthetically depicted environment. However, by
the time Byatt began writing the quartet, she had begun to include verbal still lifes and
descriptions of artworks in a way which does bear a distinct affinity to Proust.

One notable example of the influence of Proust’s writing on Byatt is that *Still Life* was
her attempt to write free from metaphor. She states that

Proust, in ‘Noms de pays’, distinguishes between metaphoric names – names
invested by his imagination with metaphoric life – and les mots . . . (‘Words
present us with a small, bright, everyday image like those pictures hung on
school walls to give children an example of what a workbench, or a bird or an
anthill is, that is to say as things thought of as similar to all others of the same
type’.) I tried to put in my novel lists of such simply denominated things –
even an image, as I said, of such children’s object-pictures on a nursery wall.

(“*Still Life*/ *Nature morte*” 18)

Byatt’s affinity with the precision of language used by Proust resulted in her inclusion of his
sentence (presented in brackets above) as one of the epigraphs to *Still Life*. However, she also
has an obvious admiration for, and at times freely uses, the other type of language he
employs – description which is metaphorical and allusive. In *Still Life* Byatt by her own
admission failed in her attempt to write free from metaphor. In “*Still Life*/ *Nature morte*”,
she refers to Michel Butor’s analysis of *In Search of Lost Time*, also known as *A la recherche
du temps perdu*, which shows how works of art in Proust’s novel “become metaphors for
Proust’s undertaking, the colour patterning of the imaginary paintings, stages, music, spills
over into and patterns the shape and texture of the *Recherche* itself” (10). In his essay, Butor
delineates the ways in which Proust sets up metaphorical chains linking the fictional artworks
to the text in which they are embedded. To summarise the essay’s section on visual artworks,
Butor says “Elstir [Proust’s fictional artist]10 will disclose fields of reciprocal metaphors, two
different vocabularies which in the given picture will reveal one another, particularly the
earth and the sea” (161). The examples of this which he gives from Proust’s novel are: the
painting of Carquethuit Harbour which links to the biblical theme of Jacob’s ladder; the
marine metaphor of the aquarium which spills over into the Balbec dining room; floral
metaphors which recur throughout; and the etymological roots of the name ‘Balbec’, which
lead to yet more metaphorical chains (163-74). Victor E. Graham has noted that in “the
pictorial field, Elstir utilizes techniques common to literature and painting”, citing his
“transposition of sea and land effects” (27) as resembling the use of metaphor in poetry.

In addition to metaphor, Proust also makes connections in his novel through allusion,
whether classical, artistic or literary. The allusive quality of his writing is captured by
Virginia Woolf in her essay “Pictures” when she says that Proust never describes “a crystal
jar as if it were an end in itself” (141). In other words, in Proust’s writing, “objects, however
precisely delineated, however vividly evoked” represent something beyond themselves
(Mares 333). For example, I. H. E. Dunlop has noted that “[c]haracters in A la Recherche are
frequently compared to portraits by the Old Masters” (106). Byatt shares this predilection for
allusion, several examples having been discussed by Sorensen:

For example, Frederica notes that an actress in The Virgin in the Garden
reminds her of the “Tenniel illustration of Alice as serpent” (132), and an
embrace between two characters is seen as “a straining parody of Rodin’s
Baiser”(329). In Still Life Frederica and her sister Stephanie, as feminists
struggling to lead independent lives, react negatively to a Henry Moore
sculpture of a woman with a small head, “like a powerful staring doll,” while

10 Elstir’s identity has long been disputed by critics: McPherson states that his art “synthesizes the
impressionism of Monet, the symbolism of Moreau, the poetic ambiguity of Whistler, and the intimist
vision of Vuillard” (170), while Cocking claims he is modelled on Manet (135).
her erect male partner stands with head “raised to the sky”(277). (Verbal and Visual Language 164)

She also notes other examples from the quartet, such as Alexander being associated with portraits of Elizabeth I, and Stephanie with Keats’ Grecian urn and Venus Anadyomene.

Byatt and Proust share an aesthetic which is heavily reliant on “visual representation: an image, a painting, an engraving, or a photograph” (Bal 3). One visual text that strongly links the two writers is Vermeer’s View of Delft [Fig. 1]:

![Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, View of Delft, Mauritshuis, The Hague](image)

It is unsurprising that this artwork appealed to Proust, given his fascination with space and time. Christopher Braider believes that the painting is concerned with “. . . light and space, water and sky, gable, wall, and buff-colored sand, and above all time, glimpsed in the mysterious way the moment portrayed is less the one we actually look at than the one
immediately to follow . . .” (197-98). While not a still life, this painting is integral to the discussion of Proust and Byatt because it is a hitherto unacknowledged and vital link between both writers and their views on art. Figuring prominently in In Search of Lost Time and, indeed, in Proust’s life, this artwork also forms a recurring motif in Byatt’s quartet. Her admiration for View of Delft is clearly a homage to Proust; in fact she speaks of Proust’s representation of it rather than the painting in its own right. This is a clear attempt by Byatt to show how writing and reading keep works of art alive.

The importance of View of Delft to Proust has been noted by numerous critics. Bales is of the opinion that the author considered it “the most beautiful painting in the world” (184), while McPherson has described Proust’s visits to see the painting both in The Hague and Paris:

When Proust visited The Hague with Bertrand de Fenelon in 1902 he was enraptured by the View of Delft. In a letter to Fenelon dating from 1904, Proust expressed his admiration for the master from Delft. . . . Proust (accompanied by Vaudoyer) visited the Vermeer exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in 1921. The visit, which almost proved fatal, inspired the unforgettable scene in A la recherche du temps perdu in which [the writer] Bergotte expires while standing before Vermeer’s View of Delft, muttering “petit pan de mur jaune”.

(173-74)

Proust’s fictional description of the event may be found in Volume 9 of In Search of Lost Time, entitled The Captive (also known as The Prisoner). In this episode, Bergotte had previously experienced an attack of uraemia and been ordered to rest. However

. . . one of the critics had written that in Vermeer’s Street in Delft (lent by the gallery at The Hague for an exhibition of Dutch painting), a little patch of yellow wall (which he could not remember) was so well painted that it was, if
one looked at it by itself, like some priceless specimen of Chinese art, of a beauty that was sufficient in itself . . . “That is how I ought to have written,” he said. “My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with several coats of paint, made my language exquisite in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall”. (249)

Here, Proust presents the view that the act of reading should be like experiencing a work of art for the reader. I would argue that his use of *ekphrasis*, like Byatt’s, takes this concept a step further in that the time and pleasure of its unfolding marks the limitations of art.

Byatt uses *View of Delft* in the quartet as both a visual motif and a recurring narrative device. This extended meditation on the painting culminates in Frederica and Alexander in *A Whistling Woman* travelling to The Hague to film it for a television program. When she sees the painting, Frederica identifies with Vermeer, who “had set himself problems only he could solve, and had solved them, and made a mystery” (419). Byatt had previously paid homage to the painting in *Babel Tower*, referring to “the yellow patch of roof and the perfect spherical bubbles of light on the wet sides of the ships” (228), and the fact that the artist “solved problems quietly in the corners of his paintings” (227). Byatt makes the important point that Frederica is familiar with the painting, not in its own right, but from reproductions and her reading of *In Search of Lost Time*. This is significant in that it reiterates the fact that it is Proust’s experience of *View of Delft* that Byatt evokes. Similarly, Gerard Wijnnobel in *A Whistling Woman* also experiences Vermeer through the lens of Proust, stating of the painting that “[t]hey say it has been so much restored that the brush-strokes Bergotte so lovingly traced on the little patch of yellow wall are no longer the ones we see. But it is still there” (418). The Proustian debt had already been evident in Wijnnobel’s inaugural speech as Vice-Chancellor in *Still Life*: “What Kepler discovered about optics Vermeer applied and exemplified in the light and colour of the ‘View of Delft’. And from that painting Marcel
Proust picked out the patch of yellow wall and associated it for all time – or all imaginable time – with an exact, irreducible vision of truth, order and likeness” (335). When Frederica interviews Alexander in *A Whistling Woman*, he speaks of what the painting “had meant to writers – to Proust – something that endured – great art which lasted longer than life” (418). Thus, Byatt’s ruminations on the painting stretch over three of the novels of the quartet, ultimately becoming part of Frederica’s metaphorical visual collage, a mental representation of her life, when she thinks “that somewhere – in the science which had made Vermeer’s painted spherical waterdrops, in the humming looms of neurones which connected to make metaphors, all this was one” (421). This mosaic-like image calls to mind Frederica’s ‘laminations’, which will be discussed in the following chapter of this study as having formed a similarly unifying motif throughout the quartet.

Returning to Byatt’s and Proust’s respective portrayals of food, in *In Search of Lost Time* Marcel’s life, according to Collin, “can be seen as a progression through society, as he attends receptions, dinners, lunches, goes to restaurants or on picnics, consumes asparagus, ortolans, *éclairs au café*, orangeade and champagne: food brings people together in ‘social communion’” (244). Indeed, in the novel, “a total of 225 different items of food or drink are mentioned, among the most frequent being the drinks coffee, tea, wine (in particular champagne) and orangeade; among the foods, apart from the madeleine, there are quite numerous references to cake and *petits fours*” (Collin 244). Proust engenders many of his descriptions of meals with enough sensual detail to allow the reader to experience them vicariously. Even though critics such as Wallace Fowlie term Proust a symbolist rather than a realist, the current study maintains that when Proust engages in descriptions of food his writing displays a realist style, a trait shared with many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes. In addition, both Proust and Byatt at times use sensual description in order to convey the sheer visual delight of a scene. Indeed, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes refers to Proust as a
“writer of pleasure” (31), and his novel as “a great work of pleasure” (23), drawing out the
writer’s joy in describing the sights, tastes and smells associated with food and art.

In an essay on the French painter Chardin in Contre Sainte-Beuve, written prior to his
magnum opus, Proust describes a scene in a very similar way to one which he later included
in In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower (originally A l’ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs,
also translated as Within a Budding Grove), the second volume of In Search of Lost Time.
This description also bears a striking resemblance to some of Byatt’s from the quartet. In
what may be regarded as Proust’s Ruskinian exploration on the theme of beauty and ugliness,
he describes a young man of aesthetic sensibilities who sits at a table where the remains of
his meal have not been cleared away. He “eyes with discomfort and boredom, with a
sensation approaching nausea, feelings akin to black despair, the pushed-back tablecloth
dangling on the floor and a knife still lying beside the remains of an oozing unappetising
cutlet” (On Art and Literature 323). He goes on to think “enviously of artistically-minded
plutocrats who never stir foot except among objects of beauty, in rooms where everything
from the tongs to the doorknob is a work of art” (323). A solution to the young man’s malaise
is recommended: if he cannot travel at once to The Hague or Italy, he must go to the Louvre
to see the Chardins. In these, the young man will see rooms similar to those he has just left,
but will see them anew as objects of beauty, one example being “a kitchen where a live cat
walks across a heap of oysters while a dead skate hangs against a wall, a half-cleared
sideboard with knives still lying about on the cloth” (324).
This is a reference to a still life by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin – *The Skate* [Fig. 2], also known as *The Ray* or *Kitchen Interior* — whose central figure of the ray, or skate, is a sea-creature regarded by many as ugly. However, in the context of the art gallery, these scenes are reconfigured with an exceptional beauty. Proust continues his argument: “If all this now strikes you as beautiful to the eye, it is because Chardin found it beautiful to paint because he thought it beautiful to the eye” (325). Here, Proust describes the scene as if the reader is inside the still life, a technique which Byatt also uses in her short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”, as will be discussed in detail later in this study.

In this essay, Proust states of Chardin’s paintings, “Still life will become eminently alive . . . and when you have understood the life of his painting you will have possessed yourself of the beauty of life” (326). As J. Theodore Johnson, Jr. has stated in “Proust and Painting”,

Fig. 2. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Skate*, Louvre Museum, Paris
[the] general thrust of the article on Chardin is that thanks to the painter’s lessons we can fully appreciate the beauties of a banal, bourgeois apartment or something as seemingly repulsive as a ray or as dull as a kitchen . . . Proust sees Chardin in terms of a light that floods into the world and quickens objects that had faded into eternal night. Thus a “still life” (the French is even more somber, nature morte or “dead life”) becomes living, like itself (la nature vivante). (165-66)

Proust’s essay refers to “the knife lying askew and jutting out by the length of its blade” (326), a wine glass which has “half tipped over, tilted like the bell of a withered flower” (327) and “[o]yster shells, light as cups of mother-of-pearl, cool as the sea-water they offer us, [which] lie about on the cloth like charming fragile symbols on the altar of gluttony” (327). Bal makes an explicit connection between the essay and Proust’s novel, between Chardin’s painting and that painted by the fictional Elstir: “It is, of course, impossible to miss the allusion to The Skate in the ‘broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another’” (49). The scene from Proust’s In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower is of such relevance to the current study that it is quoted in full:

Since seeing such things in the watercolours of Elstir, I enjoyed noticing them in reality, glimpses of poetry as they seemed: knives lying askew in halted gestures; the tent of a used napkin, within which the sun has secreted its yellow velvet; the half-emptied glass showing better the noble widening of its lines, the undrunk wine darkening it, but glinting with lights, inside the translucent glaze seemingly made from condensed daylight; volumes displaced, and liquids transmuted, by angles of illumination; the deterioration of the plums, green to blue, blue to gold, in the fruit dish already half plundered; the wandering of the old-fashioned chairs, which twice a day take
their places again around the cloth draping the table as though it is an altar for the celebration of the sanctity of appetite, with a few drops of lustral water left in oyster shells like little stone fonts; I tried to find beauty where I had never thought it might be found, in the most ordinary things, in the profound of “still life.” (448-49)

So important is this passage to Byatt’s aesthetic vision that she uses it as one of the epigraphs to *Still Life*. The opening sentence highlights one of the basic arguments of both Byatt’s and Proust’s novels, that is, that exposure to visual art can produce a heightened awareness of the aesthetic qualities of one’s surroundings. This is seen in *Still Life*, for example, when Alexander keeps reproductions of Van Gogh paintings in his flat as his inspiration, while the meals he consumes read like works of art. In addition, Byatt’s verbal still lifes strive for the intensity of Proust’s poetic and descriptive language, particularly in his rendering of light and colour.

James P. Gilroy also writes on Proust’s description, stating that the novel’s protagonist, Marcel “tries to find in the real table and food spread before him the same pictorial qualities he had enjoyed in some still-life paintings by Elstir. He is thereby putting into practice the lesson of Impressionism learned from his contemplation of that artist’s works, namely that one must recognize poetry in the most banal subjects, where one least expects to find it . . .” (99). Byatt likewise describes a verbal still life of a meal in *Still Life* in a manner which may be termed ‘Proustian’. The scene is of a breakfast shared by Alexander and his friends Thomas and Elinor Poole:

> Breakfast was muesli with fresh fruit, fresh coffee in a dark green French filter pot, gold-rimmed, croissants, unsalted butter, home-made jam. The fruit changed with the seasons: dark burgundy cherries, gold-green greengages, wax-gold spotted pears, plums misted on purple-black. He watched Elinor
arrange the fruits and then watched the fruits. Elinor grew her yoghurt in a white bowl with a beaded muslin cover . . . Alexander thought about it being a culture. It grew in the white bowl, differently white, curded, sharp-tasting, glistening mass. It was alive – more alive than the not yet dead plums, with their breathing skins, were alive, though there was the germ waiting inside the stone. The breakfast table was a still life, with the easy life of vegetables and culture. Thomas offered Elinor pale yellow butter: Elinor lifted the coffee pot: Alexander slid yoghurt into the dusty seeds and flakes of his muesli. There were two lemons against the plums, to intensify the colour. (198)

There are several similarities between the passages by Byatt and Proust. In both cases, the fruit is rendered in rich detail, with particular emphasis on the colour. Both authors describe the plums as overripe; for Proust it is the “deterioration of the plums”, while for Byatt they are “not yet dead”. Both authors self-reflexively draw the reader’s attention to the table settings as works of art: for Proust it is “the profound of still life”, while for Byatt, “the breakfast table was a still life”.

Proust’s protagonist Marcel begins his passage with a reference to Elstir, signalling his intention to describe the laid table with an artist’s eye. Byatt similarly discusses the artistic qualities of her scene, with Alexander literally perceiving the table as an artwork when he thinks that the lemons against the plums “intensify the colour” (198). When Alexander reasons that “[b]oth metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language” (200), it is clear that his observations on the colour of plums have developed into a meditation on the relationship between painting and writing as modes of signification. Each author reaches a different conclusion at the end of his or her respective verbal still life. Marcel relishes the fact that he sees “glimpses of poetry in the everyday”, thanks to Elstir’s art. However, as Sorensen points out “Alexander eventually realizes that he
is in danger of elevating things too highly” (Verbal and Visual Language 194) due to his meditations on art. Through the intensely aesthetic language in this description, Byatt is indicating that Alexander’s obsession with art has rendered him somewhat lacking in emotion in his human relationships.

In another scene from Still Life, Byatt describes food in a way that is reminiscent of Proust’s own. When Frederica spends time in France as an au pair, she experiences the country through its cuisine. One aspect of this occurs when she “learned to cut asparagus daily, in the wide, ridged, humped beds outside the garden walls, spying out newly poking purple heads, slicing, with a gritty sharp knife, just under the soil” (67). One cannot help but be struck by the similarity to Proust’s kitchen scene from Swann’s Way (originally known as Du côté de chez Swann): “... what fascinated me would be the asparagus, tinged with ultramarine and rosy pink which ran from their heads, finely stippled in mauve and azure, through a series of imperceptible changes to their white feet, still stained a little by the soil of their garden-bed: a rainbow-loveliness that was not of this world” (142). There is much critical debate regarding Proust’s inspiration for this scene. Cocking believes that this impressionistic description has as its source a painting by Édouard Manet entitled Asparagus, which had belonged to Proust’s friend, Charles Ephrussi (136). Rathbone and Shackelford state that the inspiration came from another of Manet’s paintings entitled Bunch of Asparagus [Fig. 3], “truly the asparagus described so vividly by Marcel Proust in Swann’s Way” (114).

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11 A man of great wealth and refinement in Manet’s social orbit, Ephrussi had agreed to pay eight hundred francs for A Bunch of Asparagus, but upon receipt of the work he was so pleased that he instead gave the artist one thousand francs. Manet, flattered by the overpayment, painted a very small picture ($6\frac{1}{2}$ by $8\frac{1}{2}$ in) of a single stalk of white asparagus on a marble table (Asparagus, 1880, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) and sent it to Ephrussi with the witty note, “Your bunch was one short.” (Rathbone and Shackelford Impressionist Still Life 114)
Gilroy states that Marcel sees the asparagus as transcending their banal form: “Their stalks appear like celestial sylphs or disguised goddesses because of their brilliant colors (‘iridescences which are not of this world’)” (98). The anthropomorphic qualities of the asparagus alluded to by Gilroy have also been discussed by Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, who quotes Max Liebermann’s reference to the asparagus’s “lovely female form” (294) in the painting *Bunch of Asparagus*. Similarities between the two passages lie in the fact that both Byatt and Proust hint at personifying the asparagus through the description of their forms running from their “heads”, and that both employ similar colour imagery – “purple” for Byatt and “mauve” for Proust.
Another notable similarity between the writing of Proust and Byatt lies in the fact that both authors portray several artists in their fiction. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Byatt’s examples include Blanche Glover, Sheba Brown, Robin Dennison and Daisy Whimpe. Proust’s novel may be said to contain several artists of different types, including Elstir the painter, Bergotte the writer, La Berma the actress and Vinteuil the musician. Some critics also add to this list Marcel, the protagonist, who creates the novel *In Search of Lost Time* itself. Significantly, others have extended the list of Proustian artist-figures to include Françoise, the cook. Gilroy has pointed out that the “dishes she produces at Combray are described as ‘culinary masterpieces’” (102). Collin asks: “Is it too fanciful to regret that Françoise’s *boeuf à la gelée* does not appear among Michel Butor’s ‘Oeuvres d’art imaginaires chez Proust’, alongside Elstir’s ‘Port de Carquethuit’ and Vinteuil’s ‘Sonata’?” (245). Further, Françoise, in her role as the cook for Tante Léonie and later for the narrator and his parents, has the right to take her place beside the great artists of Proust’s novel – Bergotte, Elstire [sic], Vinteuil, and La Berma. Her creations in the culinary domain become, like theirs, a symbol of the novel which the narrator decides to write. Like them, she is a delegate of the author. She creates something beautiful out of the materials of her medium, that is, edible foodstuffs. She makes them objects of delight which can be shared with other people, thus bringing about a communion of spirits which is one of the principal purposes of art, according to Proust. (Gilroy 102)

In the second volume of the novel, Françoise prepares a meal for Monsieur de Norpois. This dinner “(which consists of a York ham, jellied *boeuf à la mode*, a pineapple and truffle salad, and Nesselrode pudding) is a work of art like Elstir’s landscapes and Vinteuil’s sonata” (Gilroy 103-04). Further, “Françoise’s *boeuf à la mode* is again mentioned, much later in the
work, in the course of the narrator’s long meditations on art in *Le Temps retrouvé*.
Françoise’s memorable dish is among his models for the novel he plans to write” (105).
While Byatt does not portray any cooks of the artistic equivalent to Françoise her
descriptions of meals, like Proust’s, elevate domesticity through their gradual unfolding of
pleasure.

Yet, while Collin has stated that in *In Search of Lost Time*, “food has an artistic value;
cooking is an art comparable to music, painting, architecture or literature” (244), there has
been much debate as to whether food may truly be considered to be art. Elizabeth Telfer,
writing about the philosophy of food, states that, if it is to be regarded in that way at all, it
must be as a minor art because “works of art in food, whether creative or interpretative,
cannot gain the same stature as those of greater permanence” (59). On the other hand, Glenn
Kuehn, in a collection of essays on the aesthetics of everyday life, claims that an “emphasis
on food as involved in aesthetic experiences can lead to labelling it ‘art,’ but more
importantly it demonstrates how the so-called ordinary aspects of everyday life are as
valuable as the refined” (210). The current study demonstrates that many of the descriptions
of meals and market stalls in Byatt’s fiction, as in Proust’s, show food being elevated to the
status of works of art.

While at times Proust utilises still life descriptions of food to convey the sensory
pleasures associated with its consumption, at times he uses food metaphors to stand for
objects or landscapes or, as Dunlop suggests, even a description of the sea: “On the horizon
there is ‘a band of red sky over the sea, compact and clear-cut as a layer of aspic over meat,
then, a little later, over a sea already cold and blue like a grey mullet, a sky of the same pink
we should presently be ordering at Riverbelle’” (106). Gilroy states that “Proust often has
recourse to the world of cuisine to find one of the terms of comparison for his metaphors.
Food products, as well as their tastes and aromas, can bring to mind a person, a place, a work
of art, a play, a flower, and vice versa” (106). Referring to the same passage as Gilroy, Marion Halligan argues that “Proust often describes food. Its beauty entrances him, enamours him, and gives him images: the sky is the same colour as a salmon he will soon be eating in a restaurant” (Eat My Words 85). This adds a new dimension to the idea of food as art, as seen through the fiction of Byatt and Proust. Not only is food literally art in the visual still lifes, and becoming art through verbal still lifes, its artistic value is also, for both writers, in metaphor. This is particularly evident, as I will discuss in a later chapter, in Byatt’s use of food metaphors in relation to sexuality.

It is apparent that light is a very important element of the still life descriptions of food in the texts under discussion. Lloyd has suggested that impressionism, with its emphasis on the importance of light, brought with it “a new vision of literature” (76) for writers such as Mallarmé: “The way in which objects can be made to yield up their power of suggestion depends on many aspects, but central to them is the nature of the light that makes them visible, light that can suggest particular moments of the day or year, particular emotions or desires” (78). Proust, in describing the dinner table in the still life quoted earlier, refers to the glasses as “glinting with lights, inside the translucent glaze seemingly made from condensed daylight; volumes displaced, and liquids transmuted, by angles of illumination . . .” (449). Terms associated with light here include “glinting”, “translucent”, “daylight” and “illumination”. Light also plays an important part in a still life description of a Christmas scene from Still Life in which “the line of light glittered on the carved glassy flowers forming a bright hazy enveloping pattern with the triangles of round mandarins, the criss-cross of orange peel, Marcus’s fine polyhedrons in the tree, the changing firelight itself” (53). Like Proust’s, Byatt’s language moves away from merely naming objects, to become more lyrical and metaphorical. Firelight also plays an important part in another scene from the novel where it represents the renewal of a relationship, the warmth echoed in the humble domestic
setting. Winifred “had made a coal fire again, where once she and Bill had sat in cold silence
with one bar of the electric fire. Its light played on polished spoons and warm if battered
wood. There were flowers on the table, extravagant spheres, composed of rising flame-like
segments of ruddy and gold chrysanthemums . . .” (427). The relatively humble surroundings
are made more beautiful by the light from the coal fire, emphasised by the adjectives
“polished”, “warm”, “ruddy” and “extravagant”. In these scenes Byatt, like Proust, evokes
the inherently magical qualities of light.

Both Proust and Byatt describe meals as still lifes in sufficient detail for the reader to
almost be able to taste them. While visual still lifes are unable to convey olfactory or
gustatory sensations, according to Emily Brady it is possible for the literary equivalent to do
so. She states:

[t]he prejudice against smells and tastes has also found its way into the art
world. Combined with the fact that sight is our dominant sense, smells and
tastes have had no role to speak of in the history of art. Still life [italics in
original] is one genre of visual art in which the other senses are played on, but
it is still obviously visual even if some paintings make one’s mouth water. It is
possible to find olfactory descriptions in literature and many writers regularly
use smell and taste descriptions – Proust and Joyce are prime examples. (180)

There has been much critical analysis of the famous ‘madeleine’ scene in In Search of Lost
Time, in which the taste of the cake evokes childhood memories for Marcel. Suzanne
Nalbantian directs our attention to several other “memory events” in the final volume, stating
of these that, “[f]or Proust, the senses of smell (‘l’odeur’) and taste (‘la saveur’) are the most
stimulating, for they bear unremittingly ‘l’édifice immense du souvenir’” (60). She also
acknowledges that the ‘madeleine’ scene is pivotal to an understanding of Proust’s evocation
of the senses.
On this subject, Roger Shattuck notes that “[a]t the close of the madeleine sequence ‘the whole of Combray’ takes shape out of Marcel’s teacup” (75). Gilroy also focuses on this episode, stating that the “taste of the morsels of cake soaking in the spoonful of tea awakens memories lying deep within his subconscious and brings his entire childhood in Combray back to life” (100). Further, he asserts that “it is our most delicate and seemingly fragile senses, those of taste and smell, which are the most persevering and zealous keepers of our past experiences” (101). From this taste springs the memory of a room, a house, a garden, a square, a town – in effect a whole world:

And once again I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like the scenery of a theatre to attach itself to the little pavilion, opening onto the garden, which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated panel which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house, the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I was sent before luncheon, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine. (Proust Swann’s Way 58-9)

In this episode, when Marcel says that the “sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it” (58), he testifies to the primacy of taste over sight in conjuring his past. Smell is also important in Proust’s novel. Marcel distinguishes between the “drier smells of the cupboard, the chest-of-drawers, and the patterned wallpaper” as opposed to the “nondescript, resinous, dull, indigestible, and fruity smell of the flowered quilt” (62), thereby depicting the two rooms of his aunt’s house entirely through various smells.
Byatt, too, makes use of the sense of smell in many of her verbal still lifes. For example, in “The Story of the Eldest Princess”, “the Princess almost fainted for the wonderful smell of baking bread that came out, mingled with other delicious smells, baked apples with cinnamon, strawberry tart, just-burned sugar” (63), while in “Raw Material” Byatt describes “that best of all smells, baking yeast dough, or the only slightly less delightful smell of the crust of a hot cake, toasted sugar, milk and egg” (199-200). For Byatt, like Proust, intensity of sensual experience such as smell is not only able to be directly evoked in writing but, furthermore, is able to conjure a strong sense of place. Bettina Knapp has commented on the importance of place in Proust’s novel, in that “[t]he city and country homes, the ancient cathedrals and towers” in the novel “reflect complex inner predispositions” of the characters (Archetype, Architecture and the Writer xv). As Georges Poulet states, “Proustian persons never let themselves be evoked without their being accompanied by the image of sites that they have successively occupied” (26-7). Ellen Eve Frank is of the opinion that at the beginning of Proust’s novel, Marcel establishes a relationship “with architecture, not yet the church at Combray, but the bedroom, its structure and the placement or displacement of furniture” (135). As will be shown later in this study, the concepts of space and place are also important to certain characters in Byatt’s fiction, as markers of class and also as visual indicators of the characters’ own aesthetics.

Another clear resonance between Byatt and Proust, although more obliquely concerned with the still life genre, may be observed in both authors’ keen appreciation of the aesthetics of British writer John Ruskin. As J. Theodore Johnson, Jr. claims, Proust took an interest in Ruskin from 1897 on. In 1899 he was busy with a little study on Ruskin and certain cathedrals; in a letter to Marie Nordlinger in February 1900, Proust said that he knew by heart The Seven Lamps of Architecture, The Bible of Amiens, Val d’Arno, Lectures on Architecture and
Paintings and Praeterita and that he was looking for texts on Chartres, Abbeville, Rheims, Rouen etc. (“Marcel Proust and Architecture” 134)

Proust also translated into French two of Ruskin’s works, Sesame and Lilies and The Bible of Amiens. As Bales notes, “with the fillip provided by the discovery of Ruskin’s ideas, Proust finds a new expansiveness, a quality particularly useful in laying forth and analysing questions of an aesthetic nature” (186). Proust also referenced Ruskin in his own writing, notably in an essay on Rembrandt in which the author imagines he sees an elderly John Ruskin, who has come to a gallery with his housekeeper to see the Rembrandts he had loved in his twenties. Ruskin is likened to an artwork, “[b]lackened like a Rembrandt by the shadow of nightfall, by the patina of time, by the obliterating years, he was still led on by the same endeavour to understand beauty” (On Art and Literature 342). So passionate was Proust about Ruskin, that, as Johnson states, he literally followed in Ruskin’s footsteps on an artistic pilgrimage: “In the days just after Ruskin’s death on January 21, 1900, Proust travels with the young sculptress Madeleine Yeatman and her husband Leon to Rouen to view the little figure carved on the portal of the booksellers, and during May of the same year, he sojourns in Italy in order to see Venice and the Giotto frescoes at Padua” (“Proust and Painting” 167-68). These were all sites written about by Ruskin, Proust obviously experiencing a strong affinity with the British writer to visit them so soon after his death. Joan Abse in her celebrated biography of Ruskin includes a graphic representation of “Ruskin’s copy, executed in 1874, of Botticelli’s ‘Zipporah’, the daughter of Jethro” (n. pag), an artwork much admired by Ruskin and on which Proust famously modelled the description of his character Odette.

There are several examples in Byatt’s fiction where she, too, reflects on the aesthetics of Ruskin, for whom, according to Quentin Bell, life was “a battle between beauty and ugliness” (17). In the short story “Medusa’s Ankles”, Byatt contrasts what may be regarded as a rather superficial view of beauty with a more Ruskinian approach, grounded in the
aesthetics of classicism. Lucian, the hairdresser, represents the former view when he says to his customer Susannah, the academic, “Beauty, I want beauty. I must have beauty. I want to sail on a yacht among the Greek isles, with beautiful people” (10). When he remembers to whom he is speaking, he appends this with “[a]nd those temples and those sculptures” (10), adding more august forms of beauty for her benefit. Byatt refers more overtly to Ruskinian aesthetics in “Morpho Eugenia”, one of the novellas which make up *Angels and Insects*. In this story the naturalist William Adamson compares aspects of a quintessentially English ball to the jungle he has just left in South America: “I was thinking of the beauty of everything here – the architecture, and the young ladies in their gauzes and laces. I was looking at this very fine Gothic fan vaulting, which Mr Ruskin says is like the ancient imagination of trees in a forest, overarching, and I was thinking of the palms towering in the jungle . . .” (7). Here Adamson refers, and assents to, Ruskin’s aesthetic preference for architecture modelled on the forms of beauty to be found in nature.

Byatt also references Ruskin in another short story set in Victorian times, “Precipice-Encurled”. While ostensibly about the poet Robert Browning, the story’s principal protagonist is the artist Joshua Riddell, who is following in Ruskin’s footsteps, both literally in the Apennine mountains of Italy, and figuratively as they are both artists of different kinds. Of the mountains, he thinks “[Ruskin] had seen them clearly, as no one else, it seemed, had ever seen them, and had declared that this clarity of vision was the essence of truth, virtue, and good art, which were, in this, one” (205). Joshua compares his own search for perfection in art with the striving of both Ruskin and Monet. His own way of painting has changed due to his reaction to a painting by Monet, *Vetheuil in the Fog*, in which Monet “had found a solution to the problem posed by Ruskin, of how to paint light, with the small range of colours available: he had trapped light in his surface, light itself was his subject” (210). However, Joshua is unable to use this knowledge to improve his own art as he accidentally
falls to his death, “still thinking of Ruskin and Monet” (211). Thus, Ruskinian aesthetics inform the writing of Byatt and Proust through both authors’ evocations of visual and aesthetic pleasure.

The Pre-Raphaelite Influence

An integral part of this Ruskinian influence on Byatt’s fiction is the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This group was formed by William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1850s England, the name originating from their desire to paint in the manner of European artists prior to Raphael. Their overriding philosophy was a reaction against the Industrial Revolution and a return to high standards of craftsmanship, one of their influences being Ruskinian ideals of beauty. Morris formed workshops to manufacture domestic goods such as furniture, fabrics and wallpapers, taking as his inspiration forms predominantly found in nature, as favoured by medieval and oriental artisans as well as by Ruskin. As Rosner has noted, the movement criticised “the heaviness and excessive eclecticism of the Victorian interior and promoted more unified designs with less ornament and more emphasis on craftsmanship” (7). According to feminist art critics Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock the craft movement, generally associated with women, found a champion in Morris, for whom “the complete divorce of ‘high art’ and craft was a cause of considerable concern . . . He also warned of the immediate dangers, to all forms of art, from this hierarchy” (50). Over a period of more than half a century, group members such as Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais, Ford Madox Brown, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others produced many works with biblical or classical themes, or else derived from medieval subjects such as the legend of
King Arthur. Their models, such as Jane Morris and Elizabeth Siddall, possessed a highly distinctive and striking look, with pale skin and their now-legendary long, wavy auburn hair.

Byatt employs Pre-Raphaelite imagery through examples of both ‘notional’ and ‘actual’ *ekphrasis*. While no specific painting is mentioned, in *The Game* the Corbett sisters looked “as though Burne-Jones or Rossetti could have used them as models for a painting of a mediaeval lady and her page” (45). In *Possession*, Mortimer Cropper’s account of Ash refers to a scene “which could well have been painted by Millais or Holman Hunt” (109), and to Dante’s Beatrice and Fiametta (109), both of whom formed the subjects of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. In *The Game* when the family gathers in the hall of the Corbett home as the sisters’ father lies dying, there is “a huge Burne-Jones painting of knights, ladies, hounds and horses” (34), a generic description of Pre-Raphaelite subject matter. At times, examples of ‘actual’ *ekphrasis* of Pre-Raphaelite artworks are included in the peritexts of Byatt’s fiction. She includes two black-and-white illustrations in the novella “The Conjugial Angel”, the first comprising two drawings by Edward Burne-Jones from *The Days of Creation* (253), while the second is *Study for The Blessed Damozel* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (290). Sorensen notes that *Possession* “effectively uses an image by Burne-Jones on the American Vintage paperback cover” (*A. S. Byatt* 175-76). This is *The Beguiling of Merlin (Merlin and Vivien)* [Fig. 4]:
The subject matter of the painting is referred to in the novel when the father of Christabel’s cousin Sabine tells “the tale of Merlin and Vivien” (353). In addition, Blanche, writing in her diary, wonders “whether to attempt, in oils, a subject from Malory, the imprisoning of Merlin” (45), later referring in her suicide note to her painting “Merlin and Vivien” (308). Byatt’s ekphrastic descriptions of real and fictional Pre-Raphaelite artworks are woven throughout the text of Possession to create an aesthetic backdrop in the novel which is both historically and thematically appropriate.

As explored in the previous section, Byatt’s Victorian-set fiction contains direct allusions to Ruskin and his theory of beauty. Her associated use of Pre-Raphaelite imagery, however, is more wide-ranging and may be loosely divided into three purposes to which it is
put. Firstly, in a move that reflexively reanimates both the Pre-Raphaelites’ nostalgia and their social critique, such images form part of Byatt’s exploration of the themes of industrialisation and romanticism, expressed at a domestic level through verbal still life descriptions embedded in her fiction. I wish to suggest that Byatt foregrounds images of Pre-Raphaelite art in order to lament the disappearance of a simpler, kinder, less technological world in favour of an uglier, mass-produced, gadget-laden one. Many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes describe rooms and table settings which evoke the Arts and Crafts movement through food items as well as tableware and furnishings. Indeed, at times, Byatt makes overt references to the movement such as William Morris fabric and wallpaper patterns. The second use to which Byatt puts Pre-Raphaelite art is in her descriptions of female characters such as the sisters Cassandra Corbett and Julia Eskelund from The Game, and Maud Bailey and her nineteenth-century ancestor Christabel LaMotte in Possession. The third use to which this imagery is put is in discussions by characters about aesthetics and female beauty. Overall, Byatt’s utilisation of Pre-Raphaelite imagery reveals both her evocation and criticism of aesthetic pleasure.

Byatt begins the debate between romanticism and industrialisation in The Shadow of the Sun, when two male characters are discussing the merits (or lack thereof) of plastic containers, presumably Tupperware.¹² Henry Severell finds the plastic “slightly repulsive” and like “dead skin, or a false skin” (115). When his guest Oliver Canning defends the containers as “an improvement” and “very pretty”, Henry states, “I suppose I must confess now to the expected hankering for old things – pewter and horn spoons, and earthenware – solid things that wear down gradually” (115). Henry follows the philosophy of Ruskin, taken up by Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, which emphasised the use of organic, ‘natural’ forms and a return to pre-industrial production methods. Oliver draws attention to this, referring

¹² Plastic household containers developed in the US in 1946 by Earl Silas Tupper (1907-83) for the purpose of keeping food airtight.
deprecatingly to Henry’s “William Morris crankiness, the golden age, beautiful mediaevalism, the appeal to nature, whatever nature is” (115). So in this first novel, published in 1964, Henry at least is firmly on the side of a Ruskinian, Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. The fact that this conversation is carried out between two males, and that Byatt focuses on the objects’ aesthetic qualities rather than their domestic associations, is indicative of the separation of the ‘feminine’ from the domestic in her verbal still lifes.

By *A Whistling Woman*, written almost thirty years later, Tupperware is viewed a little more kindly for the convenient lifestyle it symbolises. The second episode in Frederica’s television program *Through the Looking Glass* is a case of art imitating life, echoing as it does Frederica’s own domestic situation. This episode is entitled *Free Women*, Frederica taking “this title from the sections of the *Golden Notebook* about Molly and Anna, the women living alone, or with children. Without men” (139). One of the guests on the program, Penny Komuves, is an academic who researches old recipes in her spare time and each week compiles menus for “a five-course dinner. Everything, the bread, the petits fours, the soups, salads and terrines, were hand-chosen in markets and delicatessens, home-brewed, home-baked, home-made” (140). Byatt is here applying the title *Free Women* rather ironically, as the recipes connote a more traditional role for women, which may be interpreted as a form of domestic enslavement.

The object for discussion on the program is a Tupperware bowl, which stands out in all its modernity from the other rather old-fashioned kitchen implements such as “precise silver instruments (mostly tarnished) for performing arcane operations – marrow-scoops, button-hooks, sugar-tongs, toast-racks, tea-strainers, forked cheese-knives along with impregnated dusters and pots of jewellers’ rouge” (141). Byatt’s negative attitude towards these implements is reflected in her statement that they suggest “a gynaecological theatre as much as a *batterie de cuisine*” (141). The program is referred to as “a knowing parody, a
send-up of a *kaffee-klatsch*” (142). The Tupperware bowl stimulates discussion by the panel of an ideal life for women, providing a modern alternative to the complicated kitchen gadgets. One panellist suggests that “[w]e might live as Mary Wollstonecraft wanted us to, in separate establishments, lovingly visiting chosen males, in charge of our own space, our own time” (146). To a certain extent this arrangement describes Frederica’s life, in that she lives with her son, separate from Nigel, in a house run by women. This lifestyle is posited by Byatt as ideal for Frederica, supporting the view that domesticity does not have to mean lack of fulfilment, but rather can be celebrated.

The list of domestic objects on the television program is a parody of other lists throughout the quartet which foreground the negative side of domesticity, one which has connotations of female enslavement and is often associated with marriage. One such verbal still life portrays objects on a table laid by Winifred in *Still Life*:

> She considered daily the butter dish which exactly held a standard half-pound of butter, the little butter-knife with its blunt blade, the teapot stand in faded green pink and gold, the cheese dish, its wedge-shaped lid ornamented with brown floppy flowers, its handle a twisted pottery rope, the egg cosies in red felt, the pickle fork, a miniature trident, the small silver things, egg cups, toast-rack, sugar-tongs, brush and pan for removing crumbs from the tablecloth.

(177)

The list is a backdrop to Winifred’s highly negative meditations on motherhood. She conflates the objects with the vision of her menopausal self approaching late middle age: “These cheese dish and egg cosies seemed swollen and grotesque. She thought of them as thick and saw their places on the tablecloth darkly and hotly, absurdly, outlined. She herself seemed to herself swollen and grotesque” (178). In *The Virgin in the Garden*, another still life
of a lunch prepared by Winifred for Daniel becomes a meditation on her negative attitude to domesticity:

She made a cheese soufflé, roasted a chicken, put together a fresh fruit salad and splashed in a miniature bottle of Cointreau. She enjoyed the soufflé-making, with a limited nostalgia for pre-war plenty. It was her daughters, children of austerity, who would later go in for authentic, gluttonous cookery with butter and wine and roasted spices. Winifred believed in convenience foods as she believed in labour-saving devices. She remembered baking days in the past, raised pies and kneading dough, as she remembered galvanised wash-tubs, copper ponches and monstrously strutting hand-wringers, chores you were glad to be shot-of. (212)

In this verbal still life, the old-fashioned domestic objects symbolise for Winifred her entrapment in an unfulfilling marriage to Bill which fortunately later improves.

The second use to which Byatt puts Pre-Raphaelite imagery is to enshrine female characters in colouring and situations that possess Pre-Raphaelite associations. With regard to The Game, Sorensen has pointed out that the novel’s Pre-Raphaelite art is “suggestive of the jewel-coloured, mythic world of the doomed protagonist, Cassandra Corbett” (Verbal and Visual Language 175). Building on this, I would like to suggest that Byatt’s references to the Pre-Raphaelites also encompass the world of Cassandra’s sister Julia. Both sisters are portrayed in the novel as physically resembling Pre-Raphaelite models, with Julia “knotting her red hair with her fingers” (14), while Cassandra’s head is “covered with a crop of rust-coloured dry curls” and her skin is “very white” (19). However, the sisters’ similar appearance belies the differences in their lifestyles. Julia is surrounded by the trappings of suburban married life with her husband, Thor, and their teenaged daughter Deborah who,
incidentally also has a “springing mass of gingery, wiry curls” (35). Cassandra, on the other hand, is an unmarried academic who lives alone.

This novel also utilises imagery associated with the Lady of Shalott, which is the subject of both the nineteenth-century poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson and a painting by William Holman Hunt, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Franken points out that “as a young girl [Byatt] knew the poem by heart” (A. S. Byatt 51). Her repeated appropriation of imagery associated with the lady is significant due to the fact that the latter can be seen as an artist who weaves a tapestry. Campbell states that in *The Game*, “the dominant myth is the story of the Lady of Shalott . . . Like the lady, Cassandra has woven a web of reflected images that has become her world” (53). As Sorensen explains further, Cassandra “is frequently compared to the Lady of Shalott and associated with weaving motifs (141, 225, 230)” (*Verbal and Visual Language* 175). Consequently, the novel is littered with references to Tennyson, Sir Lancelot, the web and the mirror, all of which have strong associations with the poem.

Franken gives many examples of Byatt’s use of the imagery associated with the poem, in particular the references to glass and mirrors: “There are many instances in Byatt’s work where art and the making of art are compared to ‘glass’ in ways which emphasize its negative or vulnerable side. Both in *The Shadow of the Sun* and Byatt’s second novel *The Game*, men violently destroy glasses and make-up bottles owned by creative women” (A. S. Byatt 51). In *Possession*, Maud’s name evokes a poem by Tennyson, and she is also associated with the Lady of Shalott, one way being through the imagery of glass. Her apartment has “a collection of spotlit glass, bottles, flasks, paperweights” (51). The novel also contains references to mirrors, such as when Maud is in her bathroom considering “her perfectly regular features in the mirror” (57). When Roland and Maud visit the Baileys at Seal Court, there are “a stained-glass window” and “gilt mirror” in the bathroom (148). In an overt reference that ties
together William Morris and stained glass, the two sit in the house’s library reading the Ash-LaMotte correspondence amidst Gothic windows of “Kelmscott glass, depicting, in central medallions, the building of a golden keep on a green hill, fortified and bedizened with banners, entered, in the central medallion, by a procession of knights and ladies on horseback” (128). The stained glass “worked to defamiliarise [Maud]” (133), indicating the extent to which the Morris patterns intrude into the narrative itself.

Maud works in Tennyson Tower (39) just as the Lady in the poem sits in her tower waiting for Sir Lancelot. Like the Lady, Maud does not have the trappings of marriage and family life, and the palette of her living-room comprises jewel-like colours with Pre-Raphaelite associations such as “peacock, crimson, sunflower, deep rose, nothing pale or pastel” (51). When Roland and Maud picnic at Boggle Hole, they discover an abundance of English flora, “late modern survivors of thickets seen by Shakespeare or painted by Morris” (268). According to Sorensen, Maud shaking out her long hair at this picnic is reminiscent of “William Holman Hunt’s painting The Lady of Shalott, in which the Lady’s hair swirls madly about her head as she stands, partly in shadow, partly in light, trapped within the frame of the tapestry she is weaving” (Verbal and Visual Language 176). Indeed, Byatt quotes three lines of the poem in order to suggest the wolds of Lincolnshire as an influence on Tennyson’s version of Camelot (68). Maud’s ancestor Christabel is also associated with the Lady of Shalott. She is a poet who similarly follows the life of art rather than that of marriage and family. She urges the poet Ash to “Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott . . . who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web – to ply an industrious shuttle . . .” (187), to which Ash replies, “Could the Lady of Shalott have written Melusina in her barred and moated Tower?” (italics in original 188). Indeed, Byatt herself has stated, “Cassandra [in The Game] and Christabel are very close to each other. They’re the woman closed in the

13 Kelmscott was one of William Morris’s homes and the name of his famous press.
tower who has given her soul for her writing but is also somehow destroyed. They’re all the Lady of Shalott” (Tredell 66). In opposition to this Christabel’s partner, Blanche, keeps a home journal in which she states “[a] home is a great thing” (45), her dabbling in art secondary to the pleasure she finds in domesticity.

Thirdly, Byatt also uses Pre-Raphaelite art to explore characters’ opinions regarding the nature of female beauty. Maud and her fellow academic Leonora Stern discuss what Blanche’s undiscovered paintings might possibly look like: “I imagine them all pale and tense, don’t you, voluptuous and pale, lovely willowy creatures with heaving breasts and great masses of Pre-Raphaelite hair” (312). Maud herself is a beautiful woman who possesses “excessive elegance” (48) with long hair which she wears in a turban, having once shaved it off so feminists would take her seriously. She bears a resemblance to the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of beauty with her pale skin and long hair. Through the proliferation of these images in her fiction, Byatt is subtly drawing attention to criticism of Pre-Raphaelite artists by Marxist-feminist critics. For example, in Vision and Difference Griselda Pollock performs feminist readings of representations of women by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, before narrowing this to a reading of his model Elizabeth Siddall. She analyses “the reciprocal position of masculine creator and passive feminine” (11), stating that “[t]he Rossetti drawings signify woman as visibly different, and the sign woman is equated with a beautiful object to-be-looked-at” (201). She articulates further that art by Rossetti shows how “masculine sexuality and sexual positionality was problematically negotiated by the mid-nineteenth century bourgeoisie” (13), while Siddall is studied as part of “the social conditions of working women in London as milliners, models, in educational establishments etc” (12). Thus, through this imagery, Byatt foregrounds the issue of female representation and critiques the objectification of artists’ models by Pre-Raphaelite artists.
Finally, the use to which Byatt puts Pre-Raphaelite imagery is similar to her utilisation of Ruskinian references, that is, as an inherent part of her evocation of aesthetic pleasure. She combines art and domesticity in her inclusion of Morris artworks, wallpaper and fabric patterns in houses throughout her fiction. In *Possession*, Roland and Maud sit side by side on the edge of a four-poster bed, hung about with “William Morris golden lilies” (504), literally enclosed by the Morris fabric pattern. In referring to such a ubiquitous English design, Byatt does not need to describe the pattern any further, relying on an assumed knowledge by the reader. In contrast, in the novella “The Conjugial Angel”, Byatt depicts a Morris fabric to different effect, in that she deliberately teases out the *ekphrastic* depiction of the design in order to convey Emily’s pleasure and conjure her childhood memories associated with it:

The sofa on which Emily Jesse sat with Mrs Hearnshaw was high-backed and ample, covered with a printed linen designed by William Morris, which showed a trellis of dark boughs, at once randomly crossing and geometrically repeating, on a mysterious deep green ground, the colour, Emily thought, with the inveterate romanticism of her family, of deep forests, of holly thickets, of evergreen glades. The boughs were studded with little star-like white flowers, and between them loomed pomegranates, crimson and gold, and small crested birds in blue and rose, with creamy speckled breasts and crossed bills, a kind of impossible hybrid of exotic Amazonian parakeets and the English mistle thrush. Emily . . . took pleasure in the sofa, in Mr Morris’s weaving of a kind of formal, solid series of magical objects which recalled to her childhood days in the white rectory in Somersby, when the eleven of them had played at the Arabian Nights and the Court of Camelot . . . (178)
Here, Byatt uses exquisitely detailed, painterly imagery in order to depict the pattern of the fabric on a sofa. This almost photographic realism characterises many of the verbal still life descriptions of rooms and table settings in her fiction which keep art alive through the evocation of pleasure. But Byatt does not just present Morris patterns in their original Victorian context. In the short story “Art Work”, one of the elements which make up Sheba Brown’s sculptures is her inclusion of “William Morris birds” (78), which have been updated to the late twentieth century and resituated squarely within a postmodern context.

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The Bourgeois Interior

Byatt, then, may be said to evoke aesthetic pleasure through her inclusion of Pre-Raphaelite artworks, wallpaper and fabric patterns in her fictional middle-class dwellings. She also utilises still lifes by European canonical artists such as Matisse and Van Gogh as decorative elements within characters’ houses. However, the pleasure and comfort conveyed by her interiors is often contradicted by the fact that middle-class life holds little attraction for her characters. At times Byatt adopts a ‘tongue in cheek’ approach to this, as in the comment from her short story “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” that “[a]ll English stories get bogged down in whether or not the furniture is socially and aesthetically acceptable” (239). However, she sometimes employs a more serious tone, albeit a negative one, towards lower-middle-class life. In *The Biographer’s Tale*, when Phineas observes the home of the subject of his biography, Scholes Destry-Scholes, he is disappointed to find that “the house resembles, quite a lot, the square red brick box in which I was born in a suburb of Nottingham” (31). He feels “that such boxes are the only real homes real people live in – everything else is just images and fantasies” (32). The protagonist of “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” finds that the childhood home of her friend Susannah “was much like
mine, small, like a box, in a row of similar houses” (238), her disappointment tangible. This study espouses the view that houses are able to be ‘read’ and that they have a significant effect on their inhabitants. These qualities of boxiness and sameness, then, are a palpable influence on the lives of the homes’ inhabitants. Such negativity towards a petit bourgeois lifestyle permeates certain still life descriptions of interiors and meals in Byatt’s fiction.

In the largely autobiographical short story “Sugar”, we would expect to find an accurate reflection of Byatt’s views on bourgeois life. She quotes her dying father as stating that “I suppose we were lower-middle-class really”, although he “would have wished it otherwise” (238). As a metaphor for her upbringing, Byatt describes her memories of the Van Gogh reproductions on the sitting-room wall of her childhood. She remembers the prints as comprising: “one of the bridges at Arles”; “the boats on the beach at Les Saintes-Maries de la Mer”; “a young man in a hat and yellow jacket”; and “a Zouave” (234-35). Focusing on one of these she states that “[t]here were the boats on the beach at Les Saintes-Maries de La Mer, which I recognized with shock when I went there eight years later” (234) [Fig. 5].

Fig. 5. Vincent Van Gogh, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saints-Maries*, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
In *Still Life*, Byatt again foregrounds the painting, this time as the scene of a beach party attended by Frederica, Alexander and their friends: “In those days also the boats were unchanged since Vincent Van Gogh had spent one week there in June 1888 and had painted them” (89). This description is important to Byatt’s use of *ekphrasis* in that, rather than describing the artwork itself, Frederica uses the names of the boats instead of mental pictures of them in order to lock the scene into her memory: “By these words she would remember form and colour. Words were primary” (89). This scene demonstrates Byatt’s insistence on the importance of language as a means of evoking visual images in the reader’s mind.

In “Sugar”, Byatt perceives these childhood paintings as integral to verbal still life depictions of rooms. She recalls the change in her parents’ home on her grandfather’s death, when “various large and dignified pieces of furniture had come to be fitted in, and there was money to spend on wallpapers and curtains. I remember one very domestic one, a kind of blush pink with regular cream dots on it, a sugar-sweet paper . . .” (235). The Van Gogh prints were experienced amidst this bourgeois domestic setting, Byatt stating that “my earliest acquaintance with the paintings was as pleasantly light decoration round a three-piece suite. This was part of what he meant his work to be, sensuous pleasure for everyone” (235-36). However, it is apparent that Byatt’s childhood perception of Van Gogh’s art as “pleasantly light decoration” matured into a later appreciation of the artworks’ wider implications. In the essay “Van Gogh, Death and Summer” she refers to the artist’s statement in a letter to his brother that he “wished to say something comforting as music is comforting” (302). Meyer Schapiro concurs, stating that “[w]hen Van Gogh paints something exciting or melancholy, a picture of high emotion, he feels relieved. He experiences in the end peace, calmness, health” (“Van Gogh” 92). “Sugar” tells how Byatt’s adult perception of Van Gogh expanded beyond this view of comfort to incorporate the “dying cornfields” and “dead father’s bible” (247) of the darker side of his art.
This issue of whether art should be ‘pleasurable’ or ‘comfortable’ is examined in *Still Life*, in which visual still lifes by Van Gogh become bourgeois decoration. When Alexander moves to the Pooles’ Bloomsbury flat, he works on his script for a play based on Van Gogh entitled *The Yellow Chair*. His bedroom pays homage to Van Gogh through a verbal still life which describes “a Provençal bedspread, a geometric floral print on a dark yolk-yellow ground, and . . . plain yellow curtains, a near-enough match” (194). Byatt is critiquing this domestication of Van Gogh’s art, Alexander taking on the persona of an obsessed fan when he “looked at his place, his papers and pictures, and thought of Vincent Van Gogh . . .” (205).

Van Gogh’s art also becomes domesticated in a depiction of Frederica’s bedroom walls in Provence, which are of a “bright dark blue – a colour which reminded her of a postcard of Van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night’” (65). These descriptions are highly attentive to material detail in that they nominate particular colours and prints, and keep Van Gogh’s art alive through their sensual unfolding. The novel’s narrator states that the subject matter of Van Gogh’s still lifes is the “unproblematic” things he sees about him, and that “the flowers and roads and field, his shoes, his chair and hat and pipe, the utensils on his table, are his personal objects, which come forward and address him” (97-8). In other words, they are things which bring him comfort and pleasure in his own life. The material objects in the majority of Byatt’s verbal still lifes of food and meals may also be regarded as ‘comfortable’ or ‘comforting’, reinforcing this study’s view of her evocation of creature comfort throughout her fiction.

Turning from Van Gogh to Matisse, Byatt also problematises the ‘comfortable’ side of Matisse’s art, in particular his association with what Fishwick has termed the “richly decorated bourgeois interior” (54). Although not a still life, the painting which perhaps most epitomises Matisse’s association with comfort and pleasure is his 1904 work *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* [Fig. 6]. The art critic Lawrence Gowing wrote of this artwork that “[t]he couplet from Baudelaire’s ‘L’Invitation au Voyage’, from which he took his title, was like a motto:
... The pictorial means themselves held qualities of tranquil profusion and delight. They offered an escape” (49). In his monograph on the artist, Jeans Selz has stated that the painting’s title possesses “[e]picurean overtones which Matisse was to develop further in later years when he depicted a peaceful and happy world” (22). The terms “delight”, “epicurean”, “peaceful” and “happy” emphasise the work’s evocation of pleasure. Art critic Robert Hughes says of Matisse’s paintings that they

are the equivalent to that ideal place, sealed away from the assaults and erosions of history, that Baudelaire imagined in his poem *L’Invitation au Voyage*: Furniture gleaming with the sheen of years would grace our bedroom; the rarest flowers, mingling their odours with vague whiffs of amber, the painted ceilings, the fathomless mirrors, the splendour of the East . . . [ . . .]

There, everything is order and beauty, luxury, calm and pleasure. (134)
The painting illustrates a pleasurable beachside scene on the French Riviera, evoking both visual and aesthetic pleasure through its use of colour and form.

This view of art as pleasurable is one which is experienced by Byatt’s characters such as Bernard in “A Lamia in the Cévennes” for whom “swimming was volupté – he used the French word, because of Matisse” (72). As discussed in the Introduction to this study, for Barthes there are two aspects comprising textual pleasure: comfort and bliss. Matisse embodies both of these facets of pleasure for Byatt. For Perry Diss in the short story “The Chinese Lobster”, it is the latter that is represented by Matisse in “the red of the Red Studio” and “the terrible blue of the sky” (italics in original 123). During his lunch with Dr Gerda Himmelblau (whose name significantly means ‘blue sky’ or ‘heaven’), he expresses an almost religious fervour towards Matisse’s art, stating that “[p]leasure is life, Dr Himmelblau, and most of us don’t have it, or not much, or mess it up, and when we see it in those blues, those roses, those oranges, that vermilion, we should fall down and worship – for it is the
thing itself” (italics in original 123-24). Here, Byatt’s writing both marks the limits of Matisse’s art and keeps it alive for the reader when she states that Perry’s pleasure in paintings is tangible “like sound apples to bite into, like fair flesh, like sunlight” (98). Byatt’s use of simile reinforces the idea of both art and food as objects to be consumed slowly and with pleasure. The two academics have met to discuss a young art student, Peggi Nollett, who has attacked Matisse in her dissertation The Female Body and Matisse, and smeared posters of his artworks in her studio with what appears to be faecal matter. According to Gerda, Peggi has done this because Matisse “paints silent bliss. Luxe, calme et volupté. How can Peggi Nollett bear luxe, calme et volupté?” (121). In “Art Work”, furthermore, Robin Dennison also associates Matisse with rapture, aligning the words luxe, calme et volupté with his “vision of colour” (56). In the early days of his relationship with his wife Debbie, he had “talked to her agitatedly at night about Matisse, about the paradoxical way in which the pure sensuousness of Luxe, calme et volupté could be a religious experience of the nature of things. Not softness, he said to Debbie, power, calm power” (italics in original 56).

Ironically, however, Robin’s own paintings do not express power; rather, they are criticised as being about the “littleness of our life” (italics in original 72). Despite these epiphanic responses of Perry and Robin to Matisse’s art, they themselves are unable to attain this bliss or pleasure.

The other facet of Barthes’s pleasure – comfort – is also applied to Matisse’s art by Perry when he states that Matisse “knew the most shocking thing he could tell people about the purpose of his art was that it was designed to please and to be comfortable” (italics in original 122). Matisse explored the comfortable side of artistic pleasure in 1908 in “Notes of a Painter”, in which he wrote of his dream of “an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be . . . a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation
from physical fatigue” (38). In the context of Matisse’s statement the armchair, itself often the subject of many still life paintings, represents an image of art which is comfortable rather than confronting. Interestingly, however, in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” Byatt employs an image that is clearly reminiscent of the armchair, that of the “three-piece suite in moquette” (238), as a negative symbol of English bourgeois life. The protagonist, Gillian, narrates a story from her youth to the djinn she has conjured. She tells of when, as bridesmaid to her friend, she sees this lounge suite in the friend’s home. The problem with the suite, as she explains to the djinn, is that “it weighs everything down” (238). The lounge calls to mind the “three-piece suite” (235) from the aforementioned description of Byatt’s childhood home in “Sugar”. In the context of Byatt’s own upbringing, the suite appears to provide a critique of bourgeois ‘comfortableness’ and inertia yet, at the same time, it represents a positive view of comfort similar to Matisse’s armchair.

This ambivalence toward comfortable pleasure is seen further in many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes, which highlight the pros and cons of bourgeois life in her fiction. Just as many characters experience tension due to the fact that domesticity can be either celebratory or enslaving, some also feel both abhorrence and fascination with middle-class trappings, at times considering them to be stifling or lacking in taste. The narrator of “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” disparages the “pallid kilims in that year’s timid Habitat colours, pale 1930s eau-de-nil and bois-de-rose with a sad null grey” (179) which the protagonist sees in an Asian bazaar. This is a reference to Sir Terence Conran’s iconic London store, Habitat, the source of inspiration for much middle-class interior design in the late twentieth century. This critique of the Habitat lifestyle ties in with Byatt’s adoption of a Morris-esque aesthetic, as Habitat mass-markets textiles modelled on Morris’s patterns to middle-class Britain. In providing these products for the masses, it divorces the aesthetic from the culture of the handmade.
In this story, the negative aspects of bourgeois life are further reinforced when Gillian’s friend’s father brings Gillian a breakfast tray containing “[a] boiled egg in a woolly cosy, a little silver-plated pot of tea, in a cosy knitted to look like a cottage, toast in a toast-rack, butter in a butter-dish, all on a tray with unfolding legs, like the trays old ladies have in Homes” (242). He proceeds to fondle her breasts before placing the tray on her lap. In this verbal still life listing of objects, Byatt ties together “snuffling and sweat and three-piece suites and artificial silk and teacosies —” (emphasis added 243). On the other hand, in Byatt’s earliest novel The Shadow of the Sun, the seductive nature of certain aspects of the bourgeois lifestyle is described by Margaret Canning. Despite the fact that she knows “quite a bit about good china and antique furniture” it is the “super-ordinary chairs that turn [her] inside over” (123). The chairs in question are examples of “good, comfortable, modern furniture – what [her husband] Oliver calls bourgeois” (123). She is attracted to an idyllic vision of middle-class sixties life, as seen in advertisements: “And there’s a man in a chair with a paper and a woman knitting, and children piling bricks, and it’s all closed away and cared for – with a thick carpet and lots of warm light” (123). Even though she and Oliver, a literary critic, move among spaces characterised by good taste, Oliver is “working class, he’s out of a world where my sort of super-ordinary room is just what you want, and half of him wanted that” (123). Once again, Byatt uses that staple of bourgeois interior painting, the chair, in order to evoke her ambivalence towards bourgeois comfort and how women are positioned in relation to it. For Margaret, it holds a similar kind of pleasure to that expressed in the art of Matisse and Van Gogh, while for Gillian bourgeois objects possess a somewhat negative connotation.

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The Life of Art

While not specifically pertaining to the still life, Byatt’s use of artist-figures and discussions of aesthetics is important to this study as it is a means by which she teases out her views on the relative pleasures afforded by art and writing. Her stories are populated not only by ‘real’ artists, but by many fictional characters who, to varying degrees, experience ‘the life of art’, whether it be epistemologically or ontologically. In other words, they operate according to a world-view in which they live by art or, at the very least, claim to understand it. For some, this involves being engaged in its practice and production as artists, while others are art critics or gallery owners. The trope of the artist as one who experiences aesthetic problems which are solved over the course of the story is a means by which Byatt narrativises the difficulties she encounters in her own writing. She is herself an artist who has constructed texts which may be considered sites at which she problematises aspects of the creative process; indeed, she has stated that “[a]ll my books are about the woman artist” (Tredell 66). In this sense, her inclusion of these artist-figures may be considered part of her employment of metafictional techniques. In the introduction to her second novel, The Game, she states: “My subsequent novels all think about the problem of female vision, female art and thought” (xiv). Reflecting this broad definition, some of Byatt’s artist-characters are writers like herself. The principal protagonist of the quartet, Frederica, is a student and television presenter who in her spare time constructs texts termed “laminations”, which are eventually published. Mrs Smith, the protagonist of “On the Day that E. M. Forster Died”, is also a writer. Then there are several visual artists, working in widely differing media. In the short story, “Body Art”, Byatt depicts the art student, Daisy Whimple, whose artform of choice is the installation. “Art Work” portrays Debbie Dennison who once worked in woodcuts, and her cleaning lady, Sheba Brown, who becomes an artist in her own right with her fabric sculptures.
Byatt’s fiction portrays virtually as many male artists and writers as it does females. She has stated in the introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* that the writer from that novel, Henry Severell, is “partly simply my secret self, someone . . . who saw everything too bright, too fierce, too much . . . This vision of too much makes the visionary want to write – in my case – or paint, or compose, or dance, or sing” (x). In *Still Life*, Alexander is termed “an artist of a kind” (1). Even though he starts out as a teacher at Blesford Ride School, he becomes a playwright, authoring plays on Elizabeth I in *The Virgin in the Garden* and Van Gogh in *Still Life*. Julia Corbett, the novelist in *The Game*, is regarded by another character as an “artist of sorts” (56). Jack Smollett, the protagonist of “Raw Material”, is another writer who has become a teacher of creative writing after a successful first novel. “A Stone Woman” depicts the Icelander, Thorsteinn, who is a stonecutter (152). Bernard Lycett-Kean in “A Lamia in the Cévennes” has exchanged his London flat for a country house in France, and subsequently become a successful painter. One of the characters in “Precipice-Encurled” is the poet Robert Browning, whose father “had with consummate idealism freed him for art” (190). Also in this story, Joshua Riddell is a student at Oxford who “meant to be a great painter” (196), but has his life cut tragically short in a fall from a cliff. Robin Dennison, from “Art Work”, is a watercolourist. Clearly, Byatt’s identification of herself as an artist and her interest in the explication of aesthetic problems has influenced the large numbers of artist-figures of various kinds who populate her texts.

In much of her fiction, Byatt sets up pairs of characters, contrasting those who understand art and its relationship to life with those who do not. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, she centres this debate on a painting of Marsyas and Apollo, a myth which, as Daniela Carpi points out, was “lovingly reworked by [Iris] Murdoch in *The Black Prince* (1973)” (“Twentieth Century Revision of Myth” 11). Given Murdoch is considered to be one of Byatt’s mentors, this may have influenced the evocation of the legend by Byatt. Matthew
Crowe in Byatt’s novel wants the young Frederica to understand a painting he owns, which depicts a confronting topic — the flaying of Marsyas. According to legend, Marsyas the satyr played the pipe very well, and foolishly challenged Apollo to a contest of musical ability. When Apollo, playing his lyre, won the contest, he had Marsyas flayed alive. Edith Wyss’s interpretation of this legend suggests that it “ends on a conciliatory note, in that Marsyas, after an almost scientific process of transformation, reaches a beneficial, purified state of immortality as a life-sustaining river” (24). There have been a number of versions of the Marsyas legend depicted in sculpture, painting and drawing. Not all of these, however, show the flayed body, preferring to depict Marsyas either during the competition or just prior to his flaying. The novel states that Crowe’s drawing is by Jacopo, and is said to be “like Ovid’s Marsyas an image of pain on the point of disintegration, the body after flaying, but still, for a brief moment, holding its terrible shape” (143). It is Crowe’s description rather than a mental picture of the painting itself that the reader experiences.

Crowe regards the painting as “painful” and “lovely” and “the moment of the birth of the new consciousness” (143), based on Ovid’s idea of the metamorphosis. Frederica declares: “I don’t want art if it has to be so nasty” (144). This discussion highlights the idea of textual pleasure, in that it is centred on an artwork whose subject matter invites debate on the very nature of aesthetics. For Crowe, the experience of art is what is important, regardless of whether it offends. He replies, “I only want you to remember in ten years how you saw such things – my line drawings, my bleeding Marsyas, my ripe Hyacinth” (293). Several years later, in Babel Tower, when Frederica and some of her family “are invited to drinks that

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14 When a search of a number of visual representations of Marsyas proved fruitless, I e-mailed A. S. Byatt asking to which version she had referred. In fact it is an example of notional *ekphrasis*, as Byatt “thought I had invented Jacopo – and later discovered he or someone with that name existed – but the description of the flayed Marsyas is from Ovid’s poem” (A. S. Byatt, e-mail to author, 26th August 2007).
evening in Crowe’s wing of the house . . . Crowe serves champagne in his panelled study, under his painting of the flayed Marsyas” (247). Several characters engage in a conversation about the artwork, Frederica experiencing “a perverse desire to defend the picture, which has always given her a frisson of terror, disgust, then pleasure of some kind. . . . ‘It is about art. And pain—’” (emphasis added 250). Her comment indicates that she has matured from a young girl who let her emotions circumscribe her reaction to art, to a woman who takes pleasure in its depiction of even the most negative of subjects.

One of the most widely-known visual interpretations of the legend is Titian’s Flaying of Marsyas, which shows Marsyas hanging upside down, still alive, while being flayed. There have been several suggestions as to the painting’s underlying meaning, such as Filippo Pedrocco’s opinion that

the presence of Titian himself, in the guise of King Midas, has favoured a reading of the painting as the painter’s meditation on his own life and on his illusion that he could “transform material into precious painted images, an illusion extinguished by his final realization that artistic accomplishments are nothing in the face of the misfortunes of history”. (72)

Malcolm Bowie concurs that the painting offers no consolation, adding that “all those who attend upon Marsyas behave either cruelly towards him or with active indifference to his plight” (22). Sorensen suggests that Byatt’s texts, despite their promotion of art’s profundity, foreground this idea of the inadequacy of art to provide answers to life’s difficulties, particularly in the aftermath of the tragic deaths of Stephanie in Still Life and Joshua in “Precipice-Encurled”. As her article notes:

Byatt’s intense admiration of painters does not prevent her from concluding, in “Precipice-Encurled,” as in Still Life and The Matisse Stories, that visual art cannot provide answers to the big questions of existence. Art does provide
insight and moral and sensual sustenance of a sort. But ultimately her characters are left, more or less, as they began. (n. pag. “Something of the Eternal” sic)

Byatt’s inclusion of the Marsyas painting in the quartet also illuminates this question of the overarching purpose of art. Ultimately the reader must ask, as Frederica does, whether the point of art is to convey pleasure and, if not, why an artwork should be so confronting in its depiction of pain. Furthermore, as an example of ‘notional’ *ekphrasis*, the painting is experienced by the reader solely through Byatt’s verbal description. Its inclusion is yet another example of the author teasing out, as in all her fiction, the fact that writing keeps art alive.

Byatt includes another pair of characters in the short story “A Lamia in the Cévennes”, consisting of the painter Bernard Lycett-Kean and Raymond Potter, “a dreadful Englishman of the fee-fi-fo-fum sort” (87) who is depicted as something of a philistine. He does not understand Bernard’s painting, pronouncing “it rather sinister, very striking, a bit weird, not quite usual, funny-coloured, a bit over the top” (88). Once again, the reader only experiences Bernard’s art through Byatt’s *ekphrasis*. Bernard is obsessed with art, particularly colour. He searches for the perfect blue, which he tries to find in the colour of his swimming pool: “It was a recalcitrant blue, a blue that asked to be painted by David Hockney and only by David Hockney. He felt something else could and must be done with that blue. It was a blue he needed to know and fight” (71). A large part of the story is spent in Bernard’s analysis of this colour: “He swam more and more, trying to understand the blue” (71). Byatt loads her description with many terms for the colour blue, in an attempt to create the right shade for the reader to picture: “that rich blue, that cobalt, deep-washed blue of the South, which fought all the blues of the pool, all the green-tinged, duck-egg-tinged blues of the shifting water” (73). These repeated attempts to provide a fuller description of the colour for
the reader underscore Byatt’s view that *ekphrasis* can offer a more total and pleasurable experience than viewing a painting. When he asks himself, “Why bother. Why does this matter so much. *What difference does it make to anything if I solve this blue* and just start again” (74), Bernard’s thoughts echo those of Debbie in “Art Work”, who asks “why bother, why make representations of anything at all?” (51). In the course of the search, Bernard lets a Lamia into his pool, a half-snake, half-human figure, recalling Keats’s use of the mythical figure in his poem by that name. Ironically, the Lamia metamorphoses into Melanie, a beautiful woman, after she manages to kiss the philistine Raymond rather than the reluctant Bernard. As Melanie and Raymond drive off, Bernard reflects that he “didn’t want a woman. He wanted another visual idea” (94). Ultimately, Bernard the artist chooses art over life and “is happy” (95) while Raymond, whose life is firmly grounded in the flesh, goes the way of material pleasures. Byatt is here advocating a balanced pursuit of two types of pleasure which inform all her texts: the aesthetic and the material.

The short story triptych *The Matisse Stories* is underpinned by the contrast between pairs of characters whose ‘ways of seeing’ are in conflict. Taking the stories in order, in “Medusa’s Ankles”, Susannah chooses Lucian, her hairdresser, because she finds pleasure in the artwork she sees in his salon – Matisse’s *Rosy Nude*, also known as *Le Nu Rose*. [Fig. 7]
However, when she refers to the print by this title to Lucien, he looks “blank” (4), and then states that he chose the painting because “I thought it went exactly with the colour-scheme I was planning” (4), rather than for its more comprehensive qualities. Susannah alone sees the colour scheme in the salon through Matisse’s eyes: “a kind of sky blue, a dark sky blue, the colour of the couch or bed on which the rosy nude spread herself” (5). But Lucian is at least conscious that he lacks artistic knowledge: “I’d like to know about art. You know about art. You know about that pink nude, don’t you? How do I find out?” (8). She recommends that he “read Lawrence Gowing” (9), the Matisse critic. However, the next time she attends the salon, there is “no evidence that he had gone to the galleries or read the books” (8), and he has turned to architecture instead. Later, he completely redecorates the salon and replaces the Matisse, having made no attempt to understand it.

In “Art Work”, Robin and Sheba have opposing ways of using colour in their artworks. Kathleen Coyne Kelly has stated that Matisse “is Byatt’s favourite painter; she aspires to write in the same way that he painted” (54), and that both Byatt and Matisse “use color in much the same way. In each story, colors often serve as objective correlatives to both
theme and character” (5). Fishwick agrees that The Matisse Stories, “like Matisse’s artwork, make ample use of colour symbolism” (53). In the story, Byatt shows how colour is able to transcend the boundaries of the shapes it delineates. Robin tries to restrict colour within the parameters of his vibrantly-coloured fetishes, arranged in his study to provide inspiration. They comprise “a cobalt-blue candlestick”, a “green apple”, a yellow sauceboat, a “round bowl of violets” and a “red, heart-shaped pincushion” (63-5). In contrast, Sheba’s soft sculptures express her “apparently inexhaustible and profligate energy of colourful invention” (79). There are similarities between her art and that of Matisse, whose colours also may be said to overflow the traditional domestic surfaces of his still lifes. Art critic Jack Flam (1978) states that in the painting Harmonie Rouge (1908-09), “[b]y colour Matisse unites almost the entire painting on a single plane . . . the table cloth is at once in front of, and on the same plane as the table and the wall” (12-13). Both Byatt and Sheba share Matisse’s knowledge that colour cannot be contained neatly and primly as Robin tries to do.15 As Sorensen states, in “The Matisse Stories, colours are allowed to just be in ways they formerly were not” (Verbal and Visual Language 158). Matisse’s essay “Notes of a Painter” details his view that his “choice of colours does not rest on any scientific theory: it is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experience” (38) and that “[c]omposition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter’s command to express his feelings” (36). This Matissean concept of “felt experience” is echoed in Sheba’s assertion that “making things is a natural enough way of showing your excitement” (82). Unlike Robin, Matisse and Sheba advocate artistic expression as both a product of and creative of Barthesian bliss or rapture.

In “Raw Material” Jack Smollett is a teacher of writing who expresses Byatt’s own great pleasure in writing, caring about it “more than anything, sex, food, beer, fresh air, even

15 For a detailed discussion of this, see Carpi’s excellent analysis of the contrasting views of Robin Dennison and Sheba Brown in “Art Work” in Carpi, “In the Footsteps of Matisse” 185-89.
warmth” (189). His writing class offer stories to him “like raw oysters on pristine plates” (188), but Jack is unable to “turn the raw bleeding chunks into a savoury dish” (189). The food metaphors here tie in with the domestic subject matter of the stories written by two of his students. When an elderly student named Cicely Fox writes a story entitled “How We Used to Black-lead Stoves”, Jack recognises her talent. Despite her humble subject matter, Cicely’s writing is sensual and well-crafted. Coincidentally, fellow-student Tamsin Secrett also depicts food through descriptions such as “[t]ender succulent al-dente pasta fragrant with spicy herbs redolent of the South of France with tangy melt-in-the-mouth Parmesan, rich smooth virgin olive oil, delicately perfumed with truffle, mouth-wateringly full of savour . . .” (209). Ironically, Tamsin’s story is a form of food memoir resembling Elizabeth David’s, but rather more histrionic in tone. When Jack reads Tamsin’s story aloud, the class likes it yet reacts negatively to Cicely’s. Despite this, Jack feels he has found a kindred spirit in Cicely, particularly when she declares, “I like words” (211). Here, Cicely is clearly of a similar mind to Sheba and Perry in their sheer pleasure in experiencing and creating art.

This chapter has drawn together several aspects of the pleasure Byatt takes in the temporal unfolding of realist description by demonstrating that many of her verbal still lifes resemble those of Proust, while others employ Pre-Raphaelite imagery in discussions of aesthetics. It has also shown that many of these descriptions evoke the bourgeois comfort of Matisse’s visual interiors. Furthermore, it has explained how Byatt’s _ekphrastic_ depictions of artworks both express her own pleasure in realist description and emphasise the limitations experienced by the viewer when looking at art. Her celebration of the act of reading is revealed through such examples as a character searching for the most apt colour-word or another articulating the meaning of a painting by describing it.
CHAPTER 2 POSTMODERN PLEASURE

Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds ‘framing’ as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. The first problem it poses, of course, is: what is a ‘frame’?

(Waugh, P. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* 28)

The frame of the mirror, then, does to some extent turn the reflected scene from one that belongs to our actual life into one that belongs rather to the imaginative life. The frame of the mirror makes its surface into a very rudimentary work of art, since it helps us to attain to the artistic vision.

(Fry, R. “An Essay in Aesthetics” 25)

Byatt’s pleasure in realist description, as well as being seen in her *ekphrastic* depictions of still lifes and other artworks, is further demonstrated by her incorporation of narrative framing as a textual device which draws attention to works of art, including her own texts, as constructed objects. In a sense, this is what the above epigraph by acclaimed Bloomsbury critic Roger Fry refers to — the fact that the act of framing emphasises the artifice of a scene or object, a concept which has become an important element of postmodern literary and art theory. This chapter begins with an overview of Byatt’s position on postmodernism, as presented both by various critical analyses and by Byatt herself. The first of the chapter’s two sections then takes the idea of the frame around an artwork literally, discussing in detail three of the most important visual still lifes described *ekphrastically* by Byatt in her fiction. These are: *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* by Diego Velásquez, *Still Life with Blue Enamel Coffee Pot, Earthenware and Fruit* by Vincent Van Gogh and *Le Silence Habité des Maisons* by Henri Matisse.

The second section demonstrates that Byatt’s pleasure in the realist canon has an awareness of its limitations which prompts her use of metafiction through such techniques as narrative play and irony. It is through these that her exploration of the relationship between...
the visual and verbal is teased out, many of her references to puzzles, puns and anagrams being used to highlight this association. In addition, many of Byatt’s uses of narrative framing devices such as boxes-within-boxes, stories-within-stories or alternative beginnings and endings involve the use of verbal still life descriptions. Finally, in many cases, her employment of the still life genre may be regarded as a metafictional device, one example of this shown in the use of the title, *ekphrastic* descriptions and verbal still lifes in the novel *Still Life*.

There has been much previous discussion of the place of postmodernism and poststructuralism in Byatt’s work, most critics agreeing that she adopts a rather ambivalent position in relation to these concepts. In the introduction to *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (2004), Campbell has stated that “Byatt’s position with respect to the tradition-versus-postmodernism debate – with tradition represented especially by her undergraduate teacher F. R. Leavis – is, like her relationship to feminism, one of both/and, not either/or” (5). Franken agrees, stating that Byatt’s “position is one of sustained ambivalence towards these theories” (*A. S. Byatt*, 16). Campbell lists such postmodern influences on Byatt as Foucault, Ricoeur, Derrida, Bakhtin, Barthes, Lacan and feminist theory, qualifying this with the caveat that “her independent spirit and her eclectic way of thinking prevent her from affiliating herself with any critical school. She believes that ideology imposes readings on a text and thus imprisons and distorts it” (15). Byatt has consistently proclaimed her style as realist, yet her awareness of realism’s limitations colours her writing. Indeed, Kelly has acknowledged that Byatt’s work is characterised by the fact that “she writes realist fiction and, while doing so, questions its ability to imitate life” (*A. S. Byatt* ix). Consequently, Byatt’s fiction displays a certain postmodern self-reflexivity.
Possession is arguably the work which best illustrates this coexistence of realism and postmodernism in Byatt’s fiction. While the novel is written in the classical realist style, Alfer and Noble suggest that:

A. S. Byatt’s ironic mimicry of contemporary criticism, her precise and gleefully assertive reinventions of Victorian poetry, the unashamedly constructed parallels between Victorian and contemporary story-lines – in short, the deft yet eclectic mixture of genres, forms and styles that make up the multilayered narrative of Possession certainly suggest strong – almost suspiciously blatant – allegiances which we have become accustomed to categorise as distinctly postmodern. (3)

Walsh describes two ways in which the novel may be categorised as postmodern. Firstly, “it is a curious blend of discourse kinds, involving pastiche, parody, and bricolage. . . . Secondly, Possession can be understood as a postmodernist novel in terms of its self-conscious reappraisal of an earlier period of history, as a piece of ‘historiographic metafiction’” (186-87). Byatt herself acknowledges that “Possession is a postmodernist, poststructuralist novel” (Tredell 62), yet sees most postmodern literature as not allowing “the reader any pleasure, except in the cleverness of the person constructing the postmodernist fiction. I think that’s boring. I think you can have all the other pleasures as well” (62). By this she presumably means the pleasure provided by narrative closure. Although Byatt looks back primarily to nineteenth-century realist writers such as George Eliot, much of her fiction can be termed metafiction in that she not only incorporates overt elements of postmodern and poststructuralist theory into her texts, but also uses self-reflexive narrative devices such as epigraphs, the manipulation of time through prologues, extra-textual authorial commentary, the self-reflexive artist figure, narrative framing, alternative beginnings and endings. She also has many of her characters engage directly with postmodern theory, particularly in
Possession and The Biographer’s Tale. An integral part of Byatt’s use of postmodern techniques is her employment of the frame. Patricia Waugh has stated that “[m]odernism and post-modernism begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through . . . frames. Both recognize further that the distinction between ‘framed’ and ‘unframed’ cannot in the end be made. Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels” (Metafiction 28). Byatt’s use of framing is integral to her use of the still life as it is the frame that delineates the boundary between cold passionless artworks and the fleeting pleasure of life. The frame causes the viewer to experience the painting at a distance, highlighting both its limitations and, indeed, those of art in general.

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Framing the Artworks

The frame of a painting, then, denotes it as a constructed object, exposing the limits of it and all artworks. The distinction between the parergon (frame) and ergon (work of art) was explored by Jacques Derrida, the French poststructuralist, in The Truth in Painting. He noted that “[p]arerga have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the ergon, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung . . .” (60-1). As feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz states, Derrida questioned “the border between the inside and outside of text” (144).

Providing some background, Paul Duro explains that the term parergon means “by-work”, and points out that the “question of frame as limit” was in fact “first mooted some twenty-five years ago by Meyer Schapiro” (2). At times in Byatt’s fiction, the frame or boundary between written text and embedded artwork is blurred. One example occurs in the scene at the conclusion of Still Life, in which Alexander pours coffee “from a blue enamelled Polish
pot, into a golden Vallauris pottery breakfast cup” (434), the objects resembling those in the Van Gogh still life, referred to as the “Breakfast Table” (432) on his nearby desk.

Integral to Roger Fry’s argument that framing a scene causes it to take on the characteristics of art is the fact that the frame also calls attention to the artwork as representation. Genevieve Sanchez Morgan makes these two related but distinct points in her analysis of The Cook and the Cat, the trompe l’oeil painted at Biddens House by Bloomsbury artist Dora Carrington in 1928. Here Sanchez Morgan discusses the role played by the “simulated window lattice that frames the cook” (116). She states that, “[a]s Roger Fry was fond of pointing out, a frame works to transform a common scene, which would have been otherwise overlooked, into art. The use of a window as a framing device only reinforces the painting’s artifice” (116). Byatt is an ardent admirer of Willa Cather, and wrote of the importance of the frame to the American writer, whose novel The Professor’s House was inspired by “the domestic stillness of Dutch and Flemish paintings of interiors”, many of which depicted a window. Cather believed that “‘[t]he feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable’” (“American Pastoral” 2006) in that the scene through the window transcended the ordinary domestic setting. The window motif is also integral to Byatt’s own fictional works. One example is in her depiction, in The Virgin in the Garden, of Allenbury’s butcher shop window, which was, “in its way, a work of art” (92), the frame giving the scene the quality of a still life.

In the short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”, named after the painting by Velázquez, Byatt metaphorically removes the frame in order to remind the reader of the artifice inherent in both Velázquez’s painting and her own fictional work inspired by the painting. The story recreates the still life entitled Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of
Martha and Mary\textsuperscript{16} [Fig. 8] from the inside out, as it were, from the viewpoint of one of the subjects depicted in the painting.

![Image of Diego Velázquez's painting](image)

**Fig. 8.** Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, National Gallery, London

Byatt takes this painting as her inspiration, describing the stages from its germination in the artist’s mind to the finished artwork. At the story’s outset, Dolores the cook prepares a dish of elvers and *aioli* for Velázquez, who calls her a “true artist” (190) because of her cooking skills. This scene is rather Proustian in that it parallels Marcel’s view of Françoise the cook as an artist. Dolores retorts that, on the contrary, he himself is the “true artist, he could reveal light and beauty in eggs and fishes that no one had seen, and which they would then always see” (190), referring to a still life he has painted. He then relates the biblical story of Martha and Mary, pointing out the importance of Dolores’s understanding of “the nature of garlic and onions, butter and oil, eggs and fish, peppers, aubergines, pumpkins and corn. The cook,

\textsuperscript{16} As Bergstrom notes, this “biblical motif, so suitable for a specialist in kitchen-pieces” (19) was used by many still life artists of the seventeenth century.
as much as the painter, looks into the essence of the creation, not, as I do, in light and on surfaces, but with all the other senses, with taste, and smell, and touch” (192). Here, the artist echoes Byatt’s view that painting primarily involves the sense of sight while cooking engages several senses, as does the act of reading.

The story operates on three levels. Firstly, a window-like opening in the painting reveals a visual representation of the three figures in the biblical story of Martha and Mary: “the small scene at the top right-hand corner of the painting – was it through a window, or over a sill, or was it an image of an image on a wall” (Byatt “Martha and Mary” 195). The presence of this biblical subject within the painting is representative of artworks in which “foods and other humble objects do not draw attention to themselves as such, but lend their meanings to a more important story that inspires the mind and the moral understanding of the viewer” (Korsmeyer 156). Surrounding this scene is the still life depiction of the two female servants together with various food items such as eggs and fish. Kenneth Bendiner has commented on this juxtaposition of the two spatial planes, saying that by “enlarging the genre scene, Velázquez makes his biblical tale more ‘real’, more relevant to everyday life in seventeenth-century Spain” (81). Finally, the third level of framing is the short story itself which offers a more comprehensive experience for the reader than viewing the painting. The artwork is an example of a ‘painting-within-a-painting’ which is further framed by the story in which it is embedded. This use of a framing effect is common to many still lifes. Indeed, as Eliza E. Rathbone’s discussion of Manet suggests, still lifes by that artist “are often paintings, within paintings about paintings” (12). The framing technique draws attention to the ‘artifice’ of the painting, highlighting its limitations through Byatt’s sensuous depictions of the food: “the silvery fish, so recently dead that they were still bright-eyed, the solid white gleam of the eggs, emitting light, the heads of garlic, half-peeled and life-like” (195-96). Pleasure is also seen in the fact that the characters’ “laughter was infectious . . . They sat down and ate
together” (196). Overall, this story highlights pleasure in consumption, in that the reader enjoys the sensual experience of the story in which the characters also express joy in consuming a meal.

Thus, the first way in which the frame is used in Byatt’s fiction is as a way of containing (or not containing) the embedded artworks. Because these works both participate in and comment on the interrelationships between texts, they are considered to be examples of intertextuality. Indeed, Walsh has stated that Possession “is not merely intertextual but intratextual (the novel is concerned with the network of relationships between its constituent texts) and transtextual (it surveys textuality and intertextuality in general)” (185). Catherine Belsey prefers to use the term “citationality” (17), borrowing from Jacques Derrida to describe this intertextual relationship. She states that Possession takes citationality “a stage further [than Derrida’s original definition] by inventing the texts it cites” (84). This is true of many of the novels and short stories in this study, as Byatt at times embeds fictional artworks, or examples of ‘notional’ ekphrasis, in her fiction. One such painting is The Windbreak, the fictional painting in “Crocodile Tears”, described by Worton as “a type of work, a generic collage seascape of the 1960s and 1970s” (20). According to Worton the painting’s fictionality makes it “resistant to any attempt to check the accuracy or completeness of Byatt’s description against a real work in canvas, oils and plastic. Like Byatt, one sees the painting in one’s mind’s eye” (20). Yet, the fact that the painting is not real makes it no less vital an element of the narrative, becoming the subject of a discussion between married couple Patricia and Tony Nimmo. The couple’s disagreement about the painting forms their last conversation before Tony’s sudden and untimely death, causing Patricia much subsequent guilt. In a sense, then, the frame is metaphorically removed and the painting takes on a symbolic importance far beyond its status as art by exerting a strong
influence on the narrative, prompting Patricia’s sudden flight to Nîmes and the events which follow.

Interestingly, while there are many examples of ‘notional’ *ekphrasis* in Byatt’s texts, very few are still lifes, most of these painted by Robin Dennison in “Art Work”. The paintings are portrayed in a negative light, as the reader is later told that the gallery owner, Shona McRury, is unimpressed by them. Byatt provides tantalisingly short descriptions, yet offers sufficient detail to enable the reader to understand Shona’s lack of enthusiasm. Robin’s subjects include a “blue and yellow plate” (51), “a glass ball, a lustre vase, a bouquet of bone china flowers (never anything alive), a heap of feathers” (52). The inclusion of the parenthetical phrase is rather telling. As Byatt and her readers are aware, the point of all still life is that its subject matter is not alive. Yet the phrase possesses a subtler meaning in this case, in that it is critical of Robin’s inability to make his paintings anything other than “ordinary” or “[u]nprivileged” (53). Byatt provides slightly more detail in descriptions of two of Robin’s paintings that depict “a hexagonal Chinese yellow box on a grey blanket, a paperweight on a kitchen table” (53), sufficient to allow the reader to agree with Shona McRury’s verdict. Once again, these artworks take on an import beyond their role as mere framed objects. They exert their influence on the story as providers of information about Robin’s talent and his relationship with his wife Debbie.

Apart from Robin’s still lifes, Byatt takes pleasure in representing *ekphrastic* descriptions of a wide range of art and craft works of various genres, including tapestry, crochet, glassworks, rugs, drawings, paintings and sculpture, underscoring the importance of material objects to her writing. In “The Djinn and the Nightingale’s Eye”, Byatt depicts fictional glass paperweights as objects of beauty: “millefiori, lattice work, crowns, canes, containing roses and violets, lizards and butterflies” (274). One paperweight has its own title – “The Dance of the Elements” (272). She also invents a glass bottle – called a cesm-I bul bul
bottle, which is described as “blue, threaded with opaque white canes, cobalt-blue” (190). In “Dragons Breath” she describes another fictional type of craftwork – hand-loomed rugs made by villagers with “a few traditional designs, which hardly varied: a branching tree, with fruit like pomegranates, and roosting birds, somewhat like pheasants, or a more abstract geometrical design, with discs of one colour threaded on a crisscrossing web of another on the ground of a third” (76). In “The Story of the Eldest Princess”, an old lady is crocheting “a complicated shawl” from “a rainbow-coloured basket of scraps of wool” (64). In “Cold”, Princess Fiammarosa weaves tapestries “with silver threads and ice-blue threads, with night violets and cool primroses, which mixed the geometric forms of the snow-crystals with the delicate forms of the moss and rosettes of petals” (134). These examples of *ekphrasis* convey Byatt’s pleasure in description through colour and form.

In “Art Work”, Byatt provides an *ekphrastic* description of the still life painting at the centre of the story, Matisse’s *Le Silence Habité des Maisons* [Fig. 9]: “Two people sit at the corner of the table. The mother, it may be, has a reflective chin propped on a hand propped on the table. The child, it may be, turns the page of a huge white book, whose arch of paper makes an integral curve with his/her lower arm. In front, a vase of flowers” (31).
Mary Bergstein has stated that Byatt recalls “a painting which may or may not exist somehow, somewhere, complete, coherent, virile, and gorgeous in its own aura” (4), implying that it nonetheless possesses the limitations of a static object. Both Bergstein’s description and Byatt’s inclusion of graphic reproductions in the peritext call to mind Walter Benjamin’s reference to the ‘aura’ in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, which may be summarised as “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art . . . by making reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (223). Graham Allen states not only that “the technological world shatters and disseminates the ‘aura’ of the work” (181), but that “our experience of modern art . . . increasingly comes to us in forms of reproduction” (182). Benjamin’s essay, although written in 1930s Germany, is a key text for understanding postmodernism. When Bergstein notes that this “surrogate image asks us questions, provides
us with ‘clues,’ and stirs the imagination” (4), she could well be referring to Byatt’s *ekphrastic* description.

There are several purposes for Byatt’s verbal description of the painting. Firstly, it introduces the Matissean theme, Byatt’s text employing colour and imagery in the manner of Matisse’s paintings. For example, the Dennisons’ daughter Natasha “has the empty beatific intelligence of some of Matisse’s supine women”, while her “bedspread is jazzy black forms of ferns or seaweeds, on a scarlet ground, forms the textile designer would never have seen, without Matisse” (34). The painting, as Bigliazzi notes, “by appearing on the cover, and by being referred to in the *incipit* of the second story, becomes a visual element of her chromatic strategy which substitutes the more traditional technique of detailed descriptions and explanations” (193). Thus the painting as described by Byatt sets the palette and visual style of the story’s setting. Secondly, even though the Gowing reproduction Byatt references is in black and white (32), she layers the shades as if onto a palette, taking the reader into a realm of variants on the colour grey and engaging all the senses. In her statement that “[w]e may imagine it flaming, in carmine or vermilion, or waying in indigo darkness, or perhaps — outdoors — gold and green”. We may imagine it” (32), she highlights the fact that viewing a work of art does not involve the imagination to the same extent as a verbal description of it.

Thirdly, Byatt’s use of *ekphrasis* may be regarded as a *mise en abyme*, defined by Wenche Ommundson as a textual element which is “an embedded self-representation or mirror image of the text within the text” (10). In other words, the description of the painting encapsulates certain aspects of the narrative, characters or themes of the story. Fernandes states that the book depicted in the artwork “reinforces the act of reading”, and results in “a wonderful display of verbal and narrative virtuosity” by Byatt (203). The mother and child figures may be said to represent Debbie Dennison and her children, Natasha and Jamie. Another similarity pointed out by Fernandes is the fact that Robin is Matisse-like in that he
“is selfishly obsessed by his work” (207) and that Sheba Brown is “a travestied version of Matisse” (209). Byatt’s *ekphrastic* description goes beyond the limitations of the painting as artwork to suggest that the latter conveys the “inhabited silence in 49 Alma Road, in the sense that there are no voices” (32). When Byatt asks, “[w]ho is the watching totem under the ceiling?” (32), her writing prompts an engagement of the reader’s imagination which might not necessarily have resulted solely from viewing the painting itself.

In *Still Life*, too, Byatt uses a painting as a motif — Van Gogh’s *Still Life with Blue Enamel Coffeepot, Earthenware and Fruit*. [Fig. 10]

![Fig. 10. Vincent Van Gogh, *Still Life with Blue Enamel Coffee Pot, Earthenware and Fruit*, Collection Basil P. and Elise Goulandris, Lausanne, Switzerland](image)

As Pereira notes in relation to this novel, “in Van Gogh’s paintings there are more meanings than may be apparent at first sight, meanings that transcend the sheer materiality of form and colour” (219), emphasising the fact that a single viewing of a painting constitutes a limited
experience for the viewer. Byatt, however, teases out the painting’s various meanings through her *ekphrastic* descriptions, the first of which may be termed an impressionistic description, which conveys the essence of the painting: “Alexander . . . became obsessed with a small painting of a breakfast table, on which Van Gogh painted the household things he bought for his artist’s house, a clean, bright paradox, still and very much alive, held together by the contrast and coherence of blue and yellow” (202). The second may be regarded as a realist version, in which Byatt quotes from Van Gogh’s description of the painting to his brother Theo:

> A coffee pot in blue enamel, a cup (on the left) royal blue and gold, a milk jug checkered light blue and white, a cup (on the right) white with blue and orange patterns on a plate of earthenware yellow-grey, a pot of barbotine or majolica blue with red, green, brown patterns, finally two oranges and three lemons; the table is covered with a blue cloth, the background yellow-green, thus six different blues and four or five yellows and oranges. (202)

Later in the novel, Alexander discusses the painting with his friend Gerald Wijnnobel, the academic, who says of it:

> I have a friend – an excitable friend – who could make a psychic drama of your picture, Mr Wedderburn. He sees the erect male in every lone bottle and the receptive female in every round pot. What shall we make of the coffee-pot? A blue French *cafetière* in two parts. My excitable friend would say that the upper male portion is fitted into the globular female and the lemons nestle at its foot, like the eggs Van Gogh painted in youth. A complex fertility symbol? … In Freud’s vision things secretly resent the calling to life of light: they wish to return to the state in which they were – instincts are conservative,
“every organism wishes to die only after its own fashion”. Maybe we could see our fascination for still life – or nature morte – in these terms? (216-17)

Here, Byatt presents the same still life from three perspectives: that of the artlover, the artist, and the academic. The first description is not so much literal as evocative, and captures the lightness and brightness of the painting, perhaps the qualities which appeal most to Alexander. It is pared down to only two colours, conflating the many varied objects within as “household things”. It is devoid of descriptive language, yet conveys the essence of the painting with an economy of language. In contrast, in the second extract the number and position of the fruit and other objects, as well as the exact colour hues, build up an almost photographic replica of the artwork. The third interpretation is a classic Freudian one, rather frivolous and meant to be humorous, lampooning the specious intellectual ‘framing’ of artworks by academics who look to contain these paintings and draw their meanings away from the visual plane. These three ekphrastic descriptions support Byatt’s view that the act of reading keeps art alive by enriching the reader’s experience.

One aspect of Byatt’s fiction of relevance to the current study is the fact that certain editions provide either black-and-white or colour reproductions of the artworks. As Sarah Fishwick has noted, The Matisse Stories feature[s]

reproductions of works by Matisse in [its] ‘peritextual’ field. Chatto & Windus’s 1993 hardback edition of Byatt’s The Matisse Stories displays a reproduction of Le Silence habité des maisons (1947) on the front of its dustjacket, while the artist’s Le Nu rose (1935) and La Porte noire (1942) appear on the back. In addition, each of Byatt’s three stories is prefaced by a line drawing by Matisse. (52)

Fishwick’s definition of ‘peritext’ is shared by Chris Koenig-Woodyard, according to whom it includes “elements ‘inside’ the confines of a bound volume—everything between and on
the covers, as it were”. Fishwick notes that it “combines with the ‘epitext’ (interviews, letters, and critical reviews) to make up what Genette refers to as the ‘paratext’ or, according to Graham Allen, ‘those elements which lie on the threshold of the text and which help to direct and control the reception of a text by its readers’” (52). This reproduction of artworks creates a space which permits and indeed encourages a comparison between Byatt’s *ekphrastic* descriptions and the visual representations they describe.

In a departure from this practice the short story “Body Art” contains an *ekphrastic* description of a fictional artwork by Daisy which is signed “with a flower-shape, a daisy, composed of a circle of the exquisite tiny ivory women round what, on inspection, could be seen to be a yellow contraceptive sponge” (104). On the back cover of the anthology is a photograph of an artwork which bears a considerable resemblance to the one described in the story. In her “Acknowledgements”, Byatt states of this that “I am particularly grateful to Danielle Olsen who made real my imagined work of art (which is on the cover of this book)” (278). Unusually for Byatt, this artwork is constructed after and informed by the *ekphrastic* description rather than the other way around.

Byatt’s fiction contains several examples of artworks in the peritext which, while not direct representations of the works described *ekphrastically*, refer to them indirectly. As previously mentioned, a Burne-Jones painting of Vivien and Merlin, while not actually described in *Possession*, is depicted on a hardcover edition of that book. Similarly, in the anthology *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, the preceding pages for each of the five stories depict artworks in some way related to the stories’ subject matter. In the case of “Crocodile Tears”, it is a drawing from *Le Crocodile de Nîmes*; for “A Lamia in the Cévennes”, a Matisse drawing entitled *Sirene*; for “Cold”, a photograph of a seventeenth century *Façon de Venise* goblet; an Asian-inspired work entitled *Composition* for “Bag Lady”; a drawing of *Jael and Sisera* from the School of Rembrandt for “Jael”. In these cases, rather than
providing a direct comparison between visual and verbal descriptions, these illustrations possess a decorative function.

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Framing the Narrative

Another dimension to Byatt’s evocation of textual pleasure lies in her employment of narrative framing. Waugh (1984) has stated that one way in which literary texts employ frames is that they “often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries” (29). This technique is evident in *Babel Tower*, in which Byatt offers four alternative beginnings, a narrative device used by many postmodern authors such as British author John Fowles who provides a choice of endings in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. As Michael J. Noble has stated, “[i]n *Babel Tower*, there is no prologue set in the future, only the multiple beginnings of the thrush hammering the snail shells, of Hugh Pink walking through Laidley Woods, of Daniel [Orton] in the crypt at St Simeon’s, and of the opening chapter of *Babbletower*” (73). In the third of these, Byatt provides a verbal still life description of a space which may be regarded as a box-in-a-box: the crypt of St Simeon’s Church, which is divided into “plywood cubicles soundproofed with the honeycomb of egg-boxes” (6). This space may be regarded as a still life because it describes objects arranged within a room as depicted in many still life paintings. Noble believes that “the honeycomb in the crypt, much like the crypt itself, denotes containment and storage” (69), this idea of containment suggesting a box-like space. There are in fact four levels to this box-in-a-box: the innermost is the honeycomb, then the cubicle (or cube), next the crypt, then finally the church.
This elaborate series of boxes-in-boxes houses an artistic space which Byatt uses in order to tease out the relationship between vision and language. This space is occupied by Daniel Orton who, after the death of his wife, Stephanie, works as a telephone counsellor in the crypt. It is a space in which verbal communication is seen as unreliable, as counsellor and counselled often fail to connect. This failure is underscored by the text above Daniel’s desk: “Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me” (7). It is a space that is at once both dilapidated and visually beautiful:

It had once had gaudy nineteenth-century stained glass, of no particular merit, depicting Noah’s Ark and the story of the Flood on one side, and the stories of the raising of Lazarus, the appearance of the risen Christ at Emmaus and the tongues of fire descending at Whitsuntide, on the other. All these windows were sucked in by bomb blasts, leaving heaps of brilliant blackened fragments strewn in the aisles. A devout glazier in the congregation undertook to rebuild the windows, after the war, using the broken lights, but he was not able, or even willing, to reconstitute the narratives as they had been. What he made was a coloured mosaic of purple and gold constellations, of rivers of grass green and blood red, of hummocks of burned amber and clouded, smoke-stained, once-clear glass. (9)

Despite the fact that the text of the stained glass is no longer linear, it now offers a new kind of textual and aesthetic pleasure. The space is a chaotic vision of colour and beauty, as shown in a description of a floral still life: “There is a small blue-and-white jug of anemones in Daniel’s cubicle. Two are open, a white and dark crimson with a centre full of soft black spikes and black powder. There are unopened blue and red ones, bright inside colours hidden under fur, steel-blue and soft pink-grey, above the ruffs of leaves” (7). The idea of framing is
reinforced both through the window frames and in the fact that each leadlight pane is also separately framed. Even though the broken stained glass window is reconstructed in no logical sequence, the act of reading reconstitutes it and reorders this chaos.

Noble makes a connection between the broken narrative of the crypt and Frederica’s Laminations, a text which may similarly be regarded as an example of Byatt’s veneration of writing. He links the open and closed blossoms in Daniel’s jug to Frederica’s composition, stating that medieval scholars “would use a ‘florilegium,’ an early version of the commonplace book, to ‘record the contents of their memory’ . . . In this same tradition, Frederica compiles her Laminations, which is ‘like any student’s commonplace book and which contains her favourite passages from literary works such as Waiting for Godot, Howard’s End, and ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’” (70). The concept of ‘laminations’ first comes to light in The Virgin in the Garden, after the seventeen-year-old Frederica is involved in an unpleasant sexual encounter with a travelling doll salesman on the Goathland moors:

Her day had been bitty, but full of things: Stephanie, Calverley Minster, Racine, the moorland, Ed, Alexander. Taken together, as they undoubtedly could be, these things had alarming aspects. . . . But, if you kept them separate, in many ways you saw them more truly. . . . She sensed that the idea of lamination could provide both a model of conduct and an aesthetic that might suit herself and prove fruitful. (209-210)

Frederica decides to use a mental strategy in order to keep the positive and negative aspects of her life separate, terming the various layers of thought “laminations”. When asked about this concept, Byatt stated that she herself used this strategy when young, as part of her “desire to connect everything I see to everything else I see” (Tredell 69). Franken states that Byatt

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17 For an excellent discussion of Frederica’s Laminations, see Lobb’s thesis.
“describes ‘lamination’ as a ‘strategy for survival’ which goes a long way to explain how
difficult it must have been for her to reconcile her identity as a woman with her intellectual
aspirations in the 1950s” (A. S. Byatt 28). The “laminations” represent the coming together of
seemingly unrelated scraps of information, yet they also, paradoxically, show these texts
remaining separate from each other. This is borne out by Frederica recalling in Babel Tower
the long-ago day at Goathland when she “had had a vision of being able to be all the things
she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously
separate, laminated, like geological strata” (314). This simultaneous separateness and
connectedness is also a quality of intertextuality and pastiche, techniques Byatt employs
throughout her fiction, most notably in Possession.

These mental “laminations” acquire a physical dimension in Babel Tower, when
Frederica dismantles then reassembles a letter from the solicitor concerning her divorce case,
thereby creating a collage with “less beauty than a cut-up of some richer text might have, but
it does approximate to a satisfactory representation of her confusion, of her distress” (380).
Thus, Frederica-as-artist utilises the “laminations” as a space for solving aesthetic problems
of composition, as well as matters affecting her life. The “laminations”, then, may be seen as
a further example of Byatt’s veneration of reading by deconstructing written text and
reassembling it as a fresh narrative form: “Cutting and re-arranging a page of written words
introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic
variation” (380). In A Whistling Woman, Frederica finds that she “had had the word,
Laminations, before the object. It referred to her attempts to live her life in separated strata,
which did not run into each other. Sex, literature, the kitchen, teaching, the newspaper, objets
trouvés” (39). Eventually, Frederica shows her “laminations” to Hugh Pink and they are
published, confirming her transformation into an artist-figure.
Byatt’s concept of laminations-as-art resembles the visual technique of collage\textsuperscript{18}. Frederica is prompted to transform her “laminations” from imaginary to real by an episode in *Babel Tower* in which she receives an envelope “covered with small ‘Victorian scraps’ – angels’ heads and bullfinches, a lily and a rose” (375-76). It is an invitation from Desmond Bull the artist, who “is making a large picture of layers of faces, from past and present, newspapers and paintings, with Robespierre’s eyes in Marilyn Monroe’s above Bronzino’s Fraud’s scaly tail, or with Roosevelt’s seated figure cut into Titian’s seated pope” (378). In addition, three visual images Byatt also uses which are similar to the collage are the kaleidoscope, the jigsaw, and the mosaic. In *A Whistling Woman* Frederica recalls how when learning to read as a child, “the words had seemed to dance into meaning as the elements in a kaleidoscope danced into geometric forms” (51). Byatt again uses the trope of the kaleidoscope in the short story “The Next Room” whose protagonist, Joanna, composes mental pictures of her mother from her childhood forming what she terms a “jigsaw”: “Joanna turned the finished jigsaw in her mind like a kaleidoscope” (61-2). Byatt describes this as “a set of images, strip-cartoon pictures, patches of colour, she seemed to snip out with mental scissors and fit together awkwardly and with overlaps or gaps” (61). Even though these images are visual, they are nevertheless made complete when they are assembled to form a ‘narrative’, demonstrating Byatt’s veneration of the verbal.

Byatt also at times uses the jigsaw as a metaphor for narrative as in the short story “Jael” when the protagonist’s mother quotes a fragment from the Bible, which “was a piece fitting into a cultural jigsaw” (204). A similar unification of the verbal into a comprehensible whole occurs in “On The Day That E. M. Forster Died” when Mrs Smith, the author, decides that “all her beginnings were considerably more interesting if they were part of the same work than if they were seen separately” (131), and contemplates writing a book which

\textsuperscript{18} See Lobb (106-08) for a discussion of Sheba Brown’s collage in “Art Work”, and the use of this trope in Byatt’s other fiction.
combines all the beginnings of stories she has been formulating in her imagination. Byatt also at times uses the trope of the mosaic, which resembles the jigsaw, such as in the earlier description of the stained glass in the crypt. In *The Biographer’s Tale* Phineas says of his lifting of sentences written by Scholes Destry-Scholes that “[t]hat metaphor is from mosaic-making” (29). Campbell has cleverly applied this metaphor of the mosaic to the narrative structure of the novel itself.¹⁹

While they may appear to indicate Byatt’s veneration of the visual over the verbal, these images of collage, jigsaw, kaleidoscope and mosaic can nevertheless be seen as part of her project to foreground the limitations of art in that they construct narratives from their disparate visual elements, consequently displaying textual cohesion. Two other metafictional narrative devices which do this are referred to by Waugh — “stories within stories” and “Chinese-box structures” (1984 30). The former is exemplified through Agatha’s tale *Flight North* and the banned book *Babbletower* in the quartet, as well as various tales in *Possession*. Byatt uses the latter, the box-within-a-box image in *The Biographer’s Tale*, when Phineas visits Vera Alphage who offers him tea in her “small box of a room” (132). He sees his own childhood home as possessing “boxy stairs and busily divided-up little windows. Or like beehives, repeating similar cells” (32). This image of the honeycomb is also present in the short story “Cold”, in which Princess Fiammarosa receives a gift in the form of a glass “beehive, a transparent, shining form constructed of layers of hexagonal cells, full of white glass grubs, and amber-colored glass honey” (144). When she eventually travels to the palace of her future husband it, too, is “a little like a beehive” (160). This box-like image of the hive, with its extended metaphor linking insects and humans, also extensively informs the novella “Morpho Eugenia”. Taken together, these examples show disparate visual shapes fitting

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the mosaic metaphor in *The Biographer’s Tale*, see Campbell (220-21)
together to form a cohesive narrative, once again illustrating Byatt’s pleasure in the creation of verbal texts.

This is seen further in the use of verbal still lifes as part of the Chinese box motif throughout the quartet, specifically as a central image in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the television program which Frederica hosts in *A Whistling Woman*. The program is described in the novel as “a rapid and elaborate joke about the boxness of the Box” (134). It depicts Frederica sitting in a box-within-a-box while, each week, three things are discussed – “an object, an idea, and a person, living or dead” (135). Lloyd discusses this scene in relation to a “long tradition in still life paintings: that of the representation of the box of wonders, the *Wunderkammer*” (151). She states that Byatt has incorporated “boxes into her novel, and done so, furthermore, by an amusing pun on the word ‘box’, here given its colloquial meaning of television” (155). Further, she articulates how certain “elements, explored elsewhere in Byatt’s novel, are encapsulated here in a wonderfully postmodern version of the still life box” (156). One of these elements is domesticity, Byatt employing a variation of the box-in-a-box (a house-within-a-house) as a means of emphasising the unsuitability of Frederica to married domesticity. When Frederica visits Agatha’s home in *A Whistling Woman*, the kitchen contains not one, but two, houses. The first “is a playhouse, solidly built of wood and beautifully painted with crimson and white climbing roses and blue columbine” (296). Agatha has also made a cake “containing translucent vermilion glace cherries, shaped into a Hansel and Gretel gingerbread house, thatched with chocolate icing, with blue-curtained windows in yellow brick walls, up which grow climbing flowers on spiralling green stems, surrounding an arched green door. It has barley-sugar twisted chimney-pots, quite Elizabethan, and two doves sitting on the roof” (299). While both these houses are simulacra of the perfect fairytale cottage, ironically they also represent for Frederica the type of ‘stay-at-home’ domesticity which she feels could potentially stifle her creativity. These two
houses-within-houses are examples of ‘texts-within-texts’, in which Byatt’s fiction foregrounds the constructedness of art through imagery associated with the *parergon*.

Several of Byatt’s short stories open with a frame enclosing a space which is primarily concerned with visuality. “Crocodile Tears” begins in “the Narrow House Gallery, which specialised in minor English art, drawings, prints of flowers, birds, angels, handscreen landscapes and pop art posters” (3-4). Here, the framed artworks are in turn framed within the larger box-like structure of the gallery. Yet, this artistic space proves chaotic for Patricia Nimmo when her husband dies of a heart attack, order only gradually being restored to her life through the unfolding of the ensuing narrative. “Medusa’s Ankles” opens with a framed painting which is in turn framed by the window of a hairdressing salon, Susannah seeing Matisse’s “Rosy Nude through the plate glass” (3) of the window. Yet this artistic space, too, becomes fragmented when the painting is taken down and Susannah subsequently destroys the salon, likened by its owner to a “great glass cage” (28). “The Chinese Lobster” is set in the “Orient Lotus”, a restaurant chosen by Gerda because it is framed within the context of “all her regular stopping-places, the National Gallery, the Royal Academy, the British Museum” (93). Byatt points explicitly to her employment of the *parergon* in that the restaurant’s “window had been framed in struggling cheese-plants as long as she [Gerda] could remember” (93). The box-in-a-box motif extends to the fact that the window has previously contained “a tank of coloured fish”, yet now frames containers which in turn hold other substances: “bottles of soy sauce”, “glass containers which dispense toothpicks” and “chrome-plated boxes full of paper napkins” (90). The restaurant also houses a new aquarium which “resembles cases in museums, in which you might see miniatures, or jewels, or ceramic objects” (95). However, the tank’s “unbreathable element” (95) eventually marks the boundary between life and death for the crustaceans within it, signalling their transformation into a still life.
The jewellery case metaphor is also employed in “On the Day That E. M. Forster Died” in which Byatt links the literal and metaphorical meanings of framing through a description of a jewellery store with “bright tiny boxes of windows – lined with scarlet kid, crimson silk, vermilion velvet. . . . Windows, frames, Mrs Smith thought, making metaphors of everything . . . . The windows order it” (137). However, this story is a departure for Byatt in that it begins in a space which privileges the verbal rather than the visual, signalling that “[t]his is a story about writing” (129). Mrs Smith is “writing in the London Library”, which she sees as “a closed space where books were what mattered most” (131). Thus the library frames the books which in turn contain the language between their covers. Mrs Smith had “been brought up on art about art which saw art also as a salvation” (129), yet she “did not believe that life aspired to the condition of art, or that art could save the world” (129). Nevertheless at the end of the story, while she waits for an operation Mrs Smith tries to think “of compressed, rapid forms of writing, in case there was not much time” (146), indicating the vital importance of writing to her and, by implication, to Byatt.

The prologues of the first two books of the quartet both take place in art galleries.20 These beginnings may be regarded as boxes-in-boxes, framing artworks which are in turn framed. However, on closer inspection these spaces point out the limitations of art in favour of language. The beginning of Still Life appears to be more about the verbal than the visual, being told from the point of view of Alexander, whose play The Yellow Chair attempted to render Van Gogh’s art into words. The novel’s opening line depicts him signing “the Friends’ Book in his elegant handwriting” (1), followed by his reflections on the fact that “[h]e had had trouble finding an appropriate language for the painter’s obsession with the illuminated material world” (2). The prologue ends with Frederica’s thoughts on the “postcards, or

20 The prologue to The Virgin in the Garden, set in the National Portrait Gallery in 1968, is separated from the rest of the novel by sixteen years; in Still Life, the prologue takes place in the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1980, twenty-seven years after the novel begins.
exercise book scrawls sent to her by her nephew Will” (12), and Daniel’s admission that he is “not in the mood” (13) to see the “pictures” (emphasis in original 13). Even thought these characters are surrounded by paintings, they devote considerable attention to the act of writing. The same is true of the Prologue to The Virgin in the Garden in which Alexander considers “those words, once powerful, at present defunct, national and portrait” (9). He muses on how well he knows “a verse-form or a vocabulary” (11). The characters are in the National Portrait Gallery to see a dramatic performance of Flora Robson acting as Queen Elizabeth rather than to look at the paintings. Even the character of the “dumpy woman in a raincoat” (12), who presumably represents Byatt herself, is described as having sympathies “presumably elsewhere” (12) rather than with the Darnley portrait she is observing. Despite being gathered in an art gallery, language dominates the group of characters in this prologue too.

A similar type of metafictional device to Byatt’s use of prologues and alternative beginnings is the frame story. As Sorensen points out, Byatt models her short story “The July Ghost” on Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw”, in both its structure and its subject matter: “Like ‘The Turn of the Screw’, ‘The July Ghost’ features a frame tale with a beginning and no end” (Verbal and Visual Language 257). This ‘beginning’ takes place at a party, at which the protagonist meets a woman to whom he relates the main events of the narrative. In a variation on this technique, Byatt provides a false ending in The Biographer’s Tale, signalled by the narrator’s statement that he is “going to stop writing this story” (250), followed by the real ending written a year later. Once again, in both these examples, Byatt elevates the verbal by drawing attention to the narrative through framing.

Another type of verbal pattern which highlights Byatt’s evocation of verbal pleasure is seen in the use of puns, particularly the extended pun on twinning involving the Ottokars in the quartet. These are two identical twin brothers, John and Paul, who at times impersonate
each other. Paul is a member of a band, Zag and the Ziggy-Ziggy Zy-Goats. In *A Whistling Woman*, an episode of Frederica’s television program *Through the Looking Glass* also has several metaphorical associations with puzzles due to its plays on mirrors, and the theme of *Alice in Wonderland*, written by Lewis Carroll, “who was Dodgson, who invented word-games and Doublets and Syzygies” (137). Even though *Possession* is associated with the mirror in Jackie Buxton’s statement that its plot “resembles a corridor of mirrors” (200), nevertheless the mirror is a part of the narrative play, underscored by the novel’s own reference to a “self-referring, self-reflexive, inturned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil” (421). In “Morpho Eugenia” Byatt employs a verbal puzzle, the anagram, a Victorian parlour game resembling Scrabble: “The game consisted of making words out of alphabet cards, prettily decorated with pictures of harlequins, monkeys, columbines and devils with forks. Everyone had nine letters, and could give any complete word they could make secretly to anyone else . . .” (152). Byatt uses this game as a pivotal point in the novella when the servant Matty Crompton changes the spelling of the innocent term ‘INSECT’ to the meaning-charged ‘INCEST’. This is significant given the secrecy surrounding the incestuous behaviour within the Alabaster family, for whom Matty works. Byatt’s employment of these games and puzzles exemplifies her veneration of the art of writing.

Byatt’s second novel *The Game*, as its name indicates, is also concerned with games, mirrors and puzzles, as Cassandra and Julia find themselves revisiting an elaborate childhood game, known only as “the Game”. Even before they lift it from the window seat in which it has rested for many years, the concept of puzzles is introduced: “When they were children, there were rules which governed Julia’s going into Cassandra’s room – passwords, which changed with bewildering frequency, and all sorts of locked drawers, and locked boxes” (45). The components of the Game are briefly described as “an enormous roll of oilskin, several shoe boxes of clay figures, more boxes of little cards . . .” (46). Byatt links the notion of
games with the visual trope of the looking-glass in the novel when Cassandra regards her childhood friend Simon as “in many ways just another piece in the Looking-Glass chess game whose moves and maps had been laid out long before his arrival” (103). However, the verbal is nevertheless present in the cards and passwords which are integral to the game. It is in this novel, also, that Byatt hints at an idea which she later explores in the quartet – just as artworks and narratives are ‘framed’, so, too, is the version of reality contained within a television screen: “The television screen was like the Looking Glass, beyond which was a different space, where certain laws did not obtain” (97). Indeed, in The Game Byatt explicitly conflates art and television, calling the latter “an art form” (153). She unites the two images of the television and looking glass when Cassandra muses on the characteristics of mirrors, saying that “[m]irrors are partial truths, like certain putative works of art. Like almost all works of art. The television screen is a form of mirror. Mirror of our desires, of our ways of seeing” (138). In this novel, this metaphorical chain created by the image of the looking glass is linked to the image of the Lady of Shalott: “The web, the mirror, the knight with the sun on him, reflected in the mirror and woven into the web” (141). However, these visual images are nonetheless ordered by the narrative.

The Biographer’s Tale also deals in games and puzzles, specifically those related to language. The novel is described by Campbell as “both Byatt’s most postmodern and her most traditional novel to date. It is postmodern in its self-reflexive meditation on the nature of language, in its representation of the fragmentation and unknowability of self and Other, in its multiplicity of discourses and voices, and in its use of pastiche and mixed media” (219). Its protagonist, Phineas, who, at the novel’s outset is “a postmodern literary theorist” (3), likes “runes because I have always liked codes and secret languages, and more simply, because I grew up on Tolkien” (2). However, as he admits, “I am not very good at codes in real life” (188). Phineas also loves lists, stating that “[n]aming is a difficult art” (53). This
love leads to his study of Linnaeus’s taxonomies (114). In addition, he states that he prides himself on his “way with catalogues and bibliographies” (129). He also discovers, among Destry-Scholes’s possessions, a collection of marbles which are all named, with their details written on index cards (138). This calls to mind the figures used by the sisters in The Game, yet is more complex as it is based on a complicated taxonomy. Despite the fact that The Biographer’s Tale is one of the few examples of Byatt’s fiction to include art in the peritext, it is highly concerned with aspects of the verbal rather than the visual. Another example of a character who loves words occurs in the short story “A Stone Woman”, in which the protagonist works “as a part-time researcher for a major etymological dictionary” (134). In another story from the same anthology, “Raw Material”, the writer Jack Smollett, when thinking of his creative writing students, reflects that “[h]e liked the lists of their names. He liked words, he was a writer. Sometimes he talked about how much Nabokov had got out of the list of names of Lolita’s classmates, how much America, how strong an image from how few words” (190-91). Here Byatt is strongly emphasising the power of language.

This elevation of the verbal is also shown when, unbeknown to the reader, she depicts a novel in the act of being created within The Game. As Campbell has noted, this “device is one that attracted her in [Iris] Murdoch’s work” (58). The reader is given clues throughout, but it is only with the publication of Julia’s novel at the end of The Game that we become aware of the existence of this novel-within-a-novel. An early clue is given by way of a verbal still life description when Julia dines at Cambridge with her sister Cassandra: “The main course was dried lamb chops, dried mashed potatoes, and drying tinned spaghetti in tomato sauce. Cassandra, leaning across to address someone, entangled her dangling crucifix in the spaghetti . . . [Julia] thought she remembered disproportionately, absurd facts of this kind; they made her books” (108). Later in The Game, we find that Julia does in fact include this scene in her novel, a reviewer noting “the distressing juxtaposition of a dangling crucifix and
tinned college spaghetti and tomato sauce” (219). As Cassandra, mortified by Julia’s book, contemplates suicide, she thinks, “[l]et Julia store and catalogue the limp relicts of what had been Cassandra” (222). Ironically, while Julia says that Cassandra should be able to see that she has written the book “with love” (145), Cassandra ultimately kills herself as a consequence of its publication, *The Game* becoming a cautionary tale which demonstrates that not only is writing accompanied by great power but that this assumes a certain responsibility by the writer.

Even though the use of postmodernism in Byatt’s work has previously been discussed by several critics, it has not heretofore been integrated into a study of the still life genre in her fiction. This chapter has firstly taken the idea of framing literally, showing the ways in which Byatt’s fiction frames the artworks, as either visual representations in the peritext or as *ekphrastic* descriptions through which she highlights the limits of art. She also foregrounds these limitations through her use of narrative framing techniques whose aim is to privilege the verbal over the visual. Overall, Byatt’s postmodern word-play is integral to the pleasure she experiences and provides through language.
PART 2  THE ART OF LIVING

I think of it as an art of living.

(Byatt, A. S. *The Shadow of the Sun* 46)
CHAPTER 3  DOMESTIC PLEASURE

The feminist I admire the most is Betty Friedan, because *The Feminine Mystique* was written for my generation, who had been brainwashed into thinking that a woman’s place, whatever her training and talents, was back in the home bringing up children.

(Dusinberre, J. “Interview with A. S. Byatt” 189)

The sex of the artist matters.

(Parker, R. and Pollock, G. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* 50)

In the first sense representation of trees, persons, places is understood to be ordered according to the conventions and codes of practices of representation, painting, photography, literature and so forth. In the second sense, which involves the first inevitably, representation articulates – puts into words, visualizes, puts together – social practices and forces which are not, like trees, there to be seen but which we theoretically know condition our existence.

(Pollock, G. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* 6)

While it is Byatt’s view, as expressed in the first epigraph to this chapter, that she does not wish to be “back in the home bringing up children” (189), nevertheless the sensuous detail of her verbal still lifes indicates her considerable pleasure in certain aspects of domesticity such as the preparation and consumption of food. Further, as discussed earlier in this study, despite the subject matter of the still life being grounded in the domestic and the feminine, it is from the canon of male European artists that Byatt derives the majority of the visual still lifes in her fiction. This chapter demonstrates that her relationship to the canon encompasses an awareness of its limitations. It also explores the tension in the fact that while Byatt celebrates the domesticity of the still life through her descriptions of food, she also depicts several female characters who are unhappy in a domestic setting, generally within an unfulfilling marriage. It discusses Byatt’s complex relationship with British writer Virginia Woolf, focusing on the fact that, while Woolf has been taken up by many feminists, Byatt prefers to distance herself from the modernist. However, many hitherto unacknowledged
links between Woolf and Byatt are postulated, particularly the similarities in both writers’ aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes to materiality.

In order to contextualise Byatt’s attitude to feminism, it is necessary to consider both her own views and relevant academic opinion. In a 1983 interview with Juliet Dusinberre, Byatt stated that “[a]lthough as an artist I don’t want to be part of the women’s movement, I am a back-to-the-wall feminist on things like tax, divorce laws, equal pay, married women’s property, even abortion” (189). She later stated in a 1994 interview that Possession is “a very, very feminist book” (Tredell 60) and that all her books are “terribly feminist” (66). However, while professing these sympathies in certain interviews, Byatt paradoxically distances herself from feminism to some extent. As Franken indicates, “[t]he few feminist critics Byatt approves of – Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers and Gillian Beer – are exempt from her criticism because they explain comprehensively the quality and interest of writing by women” (A. S. Byatt 29). Further, “feminist theorists who emphasize the importance of ‘gender’ to theories of art and concepts of creative identity typically come in for heavy condemnation in Byatt’s criticism” (Franken “The Turtle and Its Adversaries” 212). However, it must be said that, while Byatt attempts to play down her gender and its feminist implications in her early fiction, in her later short stories such as “Art Work” and “Body Art” she is more overt in foregrounding discussions of female representation.

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The Woolfian Heritage

Byatt has made clear the desire to distance her writing technique from that of Virginia Woolf, evidenced by the fact that in her introduction to The Shadow of the Sun she states that, when she was looking for inspiration for that novel, “the available models, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster, Woolf, were all too suffused with ‘sensibility’” (xi). Indeed, in
The Biographer’s Tale, Byatt appears to mock Woolf when Phineas refers to lady readers who “liked to feel they had an intimate acquaintance with the Woolfs and with Bloomsbury, from daring talk of semen on skirts to sordid sexual interference with nervous girls” (5). This refers both to the occasion at Gordon Square at which Lytton Strachey famously asked Vanessa Bell whether the stain on her dress was semen, and to Woolf’s admission that she was molested as a girl by her half-brothers George and Gerald Duckworth at Hyde Park Gate. Despite this apparent dismissal of significant events in Woolf’s life, however, Byatt does share certain qualities with the British writer, perhaps the most important being that she adopts Woolf’s theory of the writer as androgynous. She states in an interview with Dusinberre that “Virginia Woolf said that all artists were androgynous” (192), Byatt interpreting this androgyny as “the refusal to be bound by sexual identity releases creative energy” (193). There are also several other similarities between Byatt and Woolf which are revealed through their respective visual and verbal still life descriptions.

The first of these is that, even though they have at various times expressed the intention not to focus on physical detail in their fiction, both writers do provide substantial examples of this. As Woolf states in A Room of One’s Own, first published in 1929, it is “part of the novelist’s convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine” (12), indicating her differentiation from this convention in her keenness to offer considerable material description. It is also clear from the large body of verbal still lifes in Byatt’s fiction that she, too, takes pleasure in describing objects. Secondly, domesticity figures prominently in the work of both writers through their depictions of houses and rooms. Thirdly, art has been of central importance to the lives of Byatt and Woolf

21 See also Karpay, J. This Fountain and Spray of Life
and, possibly as an extension of this, both employ ekphrasis widely. Finally, Byatt’s previously-discussed passion for Proust is also shared by Woolf.

The first similarity between the narratological styles of Woolf and Byatt, and one which may not be immediately apparent, is that both writers take pleasure in listing objects and conveying the solidity and materiality of ‘things’. One of the reasons for the popularity of verbal still lifes, as noted by Lloyd, is the sheer, almost child-like joy of listing such objects:

Many still lifes, painted and written, reflect the inspirational power of objects, and many also convey the delight felt in listing objects, creating catalogues that may reflect on the social status or personal inclinations of those who possess them, or may simply take pleasure in effects of accumulation or contrast or parallelism. (28)

This study has previously quoted Byatt on her extensive use of ‘naming’ in Still Life, and her insistence when writing that novel, that “words denote things”. Many of her still life listings may be regarded “as commentaries on the collectors themselves” (Lloyd 43). Lloyd refers to the list of objects in the home of Miss Wells, the spinster in The Virgin in the Garden, whose room contains “a bitty collection of objects” (109) which Byatt lists in detail. Byatt explores this fascination with objects most fully in The Biographer’s Tale. Indeed, Campbell says of the novel, that it “presents us with shining colours and the details of intricately made objects, both artificial and natural” (217). Phineas, the protagonist, realises “I must have things” (2), and makes a living by formulating “taxonomical holiday cooperations” (242), tours in which the participants observe ‘things’. One such tour is of “The Four Last Things”, and is based on the idea that “[o]nce people travelled to see the artefacts in the galleries. Now the galleries themselves – Stuttgart, Nîmes, Houston, St Ives – were the ends of journeys, spiritual centres of contemplation” (125-26). The novel contains a verbal still life listing of food for a picnic
in Richmond Park enjoyed by Phineas and his female friend, Fulla Bifield. They go to Fortnum & Mason’s, “where she bought wholemeal baps, and sheeps’ cheese, and endives, and tomatoes, and large crisp apples, and yoghurt, and honey, and bitter chocolate, and bottles of water” (207). Even though this is a mere listing of edible objects with no descriptive detail, it acts as a signifier of Fulla’s character, revealing her attitude to diet and health. It also functions as a verbal still life in that the list evokes the picnic ‘spread’ in the reader’s mind’s eye.

Woolf’s stated scepticism about the power of the material world is obvious in her essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, which conveys her disapproval of realist authors’ attention to physical detail. At the expense of describing the characters of their novels, she says, these writers “have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things” (207). Mao states that “in ‘Modern Fiction’ Woolf complained about the ‘materialist’ bent of Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells, choosing her own generation’s recording of the ‘incessant shower of innumerable atoms’ over the other’s catalogues of décor and comestibles” (37). Nevertheless Woolf does display an interest in naming and cataloguing ‘things’, which is seen most notably in “Solid Objects”, first published posthumously in 1944. This short story tells of a man falling under the spell of the objects he collects and arranges on his mantelpiece: “the meteorite stood upon the same ledge with the lump of glass and the star-shaped china” (Woolf “Solid Objects” 100). Rather than a sign of his control over the world, his collecting becomes an obsession which takes over his life. Woolf includes some quite comprehensive descriptions of objects in this story, such as a piece of broken china “as nearly resembling a starfish as anything – shaped, or broken accidentally, into five irregular but unmistakable points. The colouring was mainly blue, but green stripes or spots of some kind overlaid the blue, and lines of crimson gave it a richness and lustre of the most attractive kind” (98). This is a rather detailed image for a writer who claims to eschew materiality.
Further to this, it may be said that the objects in Woolf’s writing transcend their mere functionality and take on a higher importance. Elizabeth Foley O’Connor states that objects in two of Woolf’s novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, “are used to comment on, unify, represent and also stand in opposition to specific characters”. One instance of this in the latter novel is a scene in which Woolf describes a room from the rather pessimistic viewpoint of Mrs Ramsay, one of the protagonists. The room comprises “[m]ats, camp beds, crazy ghosts of chairs and tables whose London life of service was done” (Woolf *To the Lighthouse* 24-5). This listing of objects which have been sent into exile from the principal residence in town conveys a general shabbiness and tiredness, both in the objects themselves and in Mrs Ramsay’s outlook. In this novel, objects receive a detailed, vivid description in what is commonly known as the Boeuf en Daube scene, which describes a meal Mrs Ramsay serves to her family and other guests. The table’s centrepiece, tablecloth and indeed the beef dish itself are depicted through rich visual imagery. Further, Hermione Lee has pointed out that in the novel, “[t]he infusion of the commonplace with an enriching significance extends from words to things” (125), such as the bill for the greenhouse roof being a synechdoche for Mr. Ramsay’s failure as a philosopher. This shared pleasure in depicting objects may to some extent be tied to both authors’ admiration of the Arts and Crafts tradition, which emphasised the material through its production of domestic consumables. Byatt’s enthusiasm for the Pre-Raphaelites has been detailed in Chapter 1 of this study, while Woolf embraced “the promotion of the handcrafted associated with Ruskin and Morris” (Mao 19), along with fellow members of the literary and artistic coterie to which she belonged, commonly known as the Bloomsbury Group.

The second similarity between the writing of Woolf and Byatt is that domesticity is a dominant subject of their work. The centrality of the domestic to Byatt’s texts will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter. For Woolf, domesticity figured
highly in her fiction for several reasons. Firstly, in looking at the writers of the modernist period, we see that large numbers were increasingly concerned with portraying images of the home in their texts. For example, the titles of two of E. M. Forster’s works – *Howard’s End* and *A Room with a View* – indicate the foregrounding of the representation of domestic spaces in his fiction. Two authors in particular, Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, used Garsington, the home of Bloomsbury patroness Lady Ottoline Morrell, as the model for the houses which formed a central place in their novels. As Rosner notes, “[s]o many of the writers who now make up the canon of British literary modernism were connected with groups of artists and designers who were seeking to reimagine the British home” (10). Moreover, the Bloomsbury Group members placed a strong emphasis on the home through their art, writing and way of living. Such was the importance of this in their lives that the homes they occupied such as Charleston, Monk’s House, Tidmarsh Mill and Ham Spray have almost taken on personalities of their own, and have been as thoroughly researched as the lives of those who occupied them.

Christopher Reed, who enacts his analyses of modernism from within an artistic and architectural framework, has stated that “[a]lienation from the conventional home and the determination to imagine new forms of domesticity are recurrent themes in Bloomsbury’s letters, memoirs, and fiction” (“A Room of One’s Own” 147). On this subject, Rosner has noted the great number of interiors painted by Bloomsbury artists such as Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell and her lover Duncan Grant. She states that the Bloomsbury Group “saw the home not as a static backdrop but as testing grounds for a way of living that valued spontaneity, creative work, self-expression, free love, and the affection of friends. It was a site for rebellion against middle-class conventions such as monogamy, heterosexuality, sexism and social propriety” (128). In 1904 Vanessa, Adrian, Thoby and Virginia Stephen moved from the family home at Hyde Park Gate, Kensington to Gordon Square, Bloomsbury.
As Reed writes, “[n]o known visual documents remain from this period, but letters and memoirs emphasize the new house’s contrast with the dark woodwork and heavy red velvet interiors of the Kensington home” (“A Room of One’s Own” 148). Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti have commented on the contrast between “the intricate patterns of Morris wallpaper and the red plush and black paint of the paternal home with the washes of plain distemper and white and green chintzes in the new house in Gordon Square” (839). For Vanessa, Bloomsbury represented not only a fresh start after the sadness brought about by the deaths of her parents Leslie and Julia Stephen and step-sister Stella Duckworth, but also an opportunity to exercise her artistic talents. As Rosner states, “Bell tried to create a domestic interior that broke with the world of Hyde Park Gate. . . . She draped the walls and the furniture with Indian shawls in an effort to introduce light and color into what must have seemed a stark interior” (133). The move to Bloomsbury resulted in an exposure to artistic and literary influences for Woolf and her siblings and contributed to the importance of a sense of place to her writing.

Throughout her fiction Woolf captures many aspects of the homes she occupied during her life. Although she wrote from within an upper-middle-class context, she voiced the struggles of the marginalised, particularly women. As Pollock states, in *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf “historically clothes a contemporary anxiety, her own struggle from within a particular English, bourgeois family” (*Differencing the Canon* 131). A comprehensive study of the ways in which Woolf does so is outside the parameters of this thesis. Rather, I will focus on one novel, *To the Lighthouse*, because of its overt associations with art and its Proustian connections with the themes of time and death. The setting of the novel is a holiday house on the Isle of Skye, loosely based on Woolf’s beloved Talland House at St Ives in Cornwall. As Katherine Hill-Miller has stated in her comprehensive study of the houses
associated with Woolf, “St Ives and Talland House shape Woolf’s earliest memories: the sound of the sea reverberates through nearly all her novels” (12). Woolf’s father had been . . . charmed by Talland House, with its great windows opening onto the sea and its terraced front garden. He took Talland House on a long lease from the Great Western Railway; the family came for its first summer in 1882, when Virginia was six months old. They made the pilgrimage to St Ives every summer for the next twelve years, until Julia Stephen died in 1895. (12)

The Ramsays’ residence in the Hebrides, modelled on this summer house rather than on Hyde Park Gate, seems to reflect the free and easy lifestyle of Bloomsbury, and represents a break from the Victorian stuffiness of Woolf’s childhood.

The descriptions of material objects in the Ramsays’ summer home may also be said to signify the rejection, or at least demotion, of the bourgeois interior by Woolf. As Rosner states, the house “is hardly the scene of the strict decorum and heavy furniture and oils Woolf recalled from her London childhood” (163). In the novel the past is exemplified by the wallpaper, whose associations of drawing rooms and parlours are countered by the fact that it is now “flapping. You couldn’t tell any more that those were roses on it” (25). The wallpaper is juxtaposed with the image of Mrs Ramsay “flinging a green Cashmere shawl over the edge of a picture frame” (25), as Vanessa had draped Indian shawls in Gordon Square to indicate a new start for the family. This paradox may be said to be echoed in Lily’s painting, whose subject “is traditional – a mother and child – but her method is modern” (Rosner 163). The conflict between the past and the present against the backdrop of specific places is evident in much of Woolf’s writing.

Byatt’s fiction foregrounds a similarly keen sense of place and strong contrast between past and present. For example, the opening pages of The Virgin in the Garden describe the locations encountered by Alexander while on his walk through the grounds of
Blesford Ride School in Yorkshire: the far field, the Master’s Garden and the Biology (Bilge) Pond. Later in the novel, after Stephanie and Daniel’s wedding reception, Alexander compares the Masters Garden negatively with others he has known such as “an Oxford garden, a terrace at Grasse, Dorset chalk heights, the Bois de Boulogne” (275). In the quartet, Frederica moves from the stifling, lower-middle-class family home to a refreshingly modern flat in London. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt conveys the patriarchal, repressive regime of the early Potter home on Masters Row through descriptions such as the fact that it “contained too much furniture” and the carpet is “shabby” (29). The table setting itself is characterised by a plastic cloth of imitation gingham and damask, and “plastic mats imitating woven rushes” (29), overall conveying a space which is overcrowded and somewhat worn.

In *Babel Tower*, Byatt contrasts the Potter house with the flat of Thomas and Elinor Poole, who live in “a large, Edwardian mansion flat in Bloomsbury, on the sixth floor” (140). The Pooles, too, have fled the north, Byatt depicting their new residence through a verbal still life which is a simple list of household objects, in order to convey the negativity associated with the bourgeois lifestyle they have escaped: “They had left almost everything behind – the three-piece suite, the Wilton carpets, the glass-fronted bookcases, the family silver” (194). In contrast, the verbal still life description of their Bloomsbury residence in *Still Life* depicts a space characterised by light and art, and conveys a sense of pleasure: “They furnished it with fitted cord carpets in silver and greys, with white paint, geometrically patterned curtains. Carpenters fitted streamlined shelves and cupboards. The children had bright Finnish blankets, scarlet, blue, yellow. They put up a Ben Nicholson print, a Matisse poster” (195). Likewise, the house Frederica later shares with Agatha in *Babel Tower* is indicative of her break with the past, and the still life descriptions reflect Agatha’s sense of beauty and order: The curtains and sofa are rich, dark and bright with William Morris’s Golden Lily; the walls are white and studded with prints and paintings, some abstract,
some nineteenth-century, some Doré Dante illustrations, some of John
Martin’s images of Paradise, Chaos and Pandemonium with swarms of small
bright angels like light-emitting bees. In the kitchen Matisse’s Jazz prints sit
also on a white wall, amongst earthenware jugs and bowls, Sabatier knives, a
mixture of old blue-and-white plates on a dresser. (296)

Ironically, Morris prints which represent the Victorian stuffiness of Woolf’s childhood here
co-exist with white-washed walls and modern art in Agatha’s light-filled flat.

Returning to Woolf, the centrality of a sense of place to her work is shown by the
proliferation of building names in her titles, such as A Room of One’s Own, Jacob’s Room
and To the Lighthouse. Further, the places depicted by Woolf are, in the main, domestic.
Feminist critic Janet Wolff has pointed out an exception to this with the short story, “Mrs
Dalloway in Bond Street”, which is “an account of a middle-class woman walking through
London” (60). Even though the novel Mrs Dalloway also depicts journeys through London
Streets, much of the storyline is centred on the family home in Westminster. It begins with
the planning of a house party, the opening sentence referring to one of the most common
elements of a still life – floral arrangements: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers
herself” (3). In this novel, Woolf paints verbal still lifes which convey her view of
domicity as beautiful. Mrs Dalloway’s party represents beauty for one of the attendees,
Peter Walsh; this beauty is conveyed by Woolf through listings of “windows lit up, a piano, a
gramophone sounding” and “stockings drying on top ledges, a parrot, a few plants” (179).
According to Rosner, Woolf’s fiction privileges domestic interiors because “she felt that the
spaces of private life had a determining effect on their occupants and that, inversely,
individuals could create new ways of living by making changes to those spaces” (15).
Further, Hill-Miller believes that, for Woolf, “place is the element that anchors memory” (3),
providing space for both creativity and connection. Kelsall provides two examples of such
creative spaces from Woolf’s fiction. In Between the Acts, Poyntz Hall unifies the people with the built environment, and forms a vital part of village history, while in what he terms her “idealisation of the country house” (177), Woolf appropriates her friend Vita Sackville-West’s estate, Knole, as the central motif for Orlando.

In Woolf’s texts, as in Byatt’s, this pleasure in depiction of place is shown through her extensive use of verbal still lifes. For example, in A Room of One’s Own Woolf describes two meals – one experienced at a male college at “Oxbridge”, and the other, at a women’s college at which “[e]verything was different” (13). Previous feminist critical analysis of this text has tended to foreground, rather than the meals, more palpably feminist elements such as the encounter with the beadle or the character of Judith Shakespeare. For example, in Differencing the Canon Pollock states that Woolf “imagined a sister for Shakespeare and dramatised the problem of sexuality, gender and creativity in a patriarchal culture” (129). I wish to suggest that the meals form an integral part of this project, in that Woolf harnessed domestic imagery as part of her feminist argument. The first meal, in the male college, is presented as a verbal still life which conveys pleasure in both description and eventual consumption, through colour imagery and similes. It is recorded as follows:

\[
\ldots\text{the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown dots like the spots on the flank of a doe. After that came the partridges, but if this suggests a couple of bald, brown birds on a plate you are mistaken. The partridges, many and various, came with all their retinue of sauces and salads, the sharp and the sweet, each in its order; their potatoes, thin as coins but not so hard; their sprouts foliated as rosebuds but more succulent. And no sooner had the roast and its retinue been done with than the silent serving-man, the Beadle himself perhaps in a} \]

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milder manifestation, set before us, wreathed in napkins, a confection which rose all sugar from the waves. To call it pudding and so relate it to rice and tapioca would be an insult. Meanwhile, the wineglasses had been flushed yellow and flushed crimson; had been emptied; had been filled. (12-13)

The presence of servants in this description highlights the fact that many visual still lifes incorporate people, yet this does not disrupt the quality of ‘stillness’. The following description of the meal in the women’s college does not contain poetic imagery, yet still qualifies as a verbal still life as it offers sense of the food and its accoutrements:

Here was the soup. It was plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that. One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern that there might have been on the plate itself. But there was no pattern. The plate was plain. Next came the beef with its attendant greens and potatoes – a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market, and sprouts curled and yellow at the edge . . . Prunes and custard followed . . . Biscuits and cheese came next, and here the water jug was liberally passed around, for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry and these biscuits were to the core. That was all. The meal was over. (19)

Here, Woolf’s powerful argument regarding gender inequality is encapsulated in the contrast between the degrees of pleasure conveyed by the two verbal still life descriptions. In their rich detail, the meals also contradict Woolf’s image as a non-realist writer.

In her 1989 “Foreword” to A Room of One’s Own, Mary Gordon notes that Woolf’s “joy in sensual description is magnificently expressed in her description of the lunch at the Oxbridge men’s college; it is one of the immortal meals in literature” (ix). Byatt cleverly incorporates a homage to both meals into Still Life when Alexander and Wijn nobel attend a formal BBC luncheon, in which “[t]he lunch was laid with white napery, cut glass, heavy
silver and posies of flowers, incongruously set down like those feasts that appear in deserts as illusionary temptations for saints or travellers. . . . They ate crab pâté, tournedos Rossini and poire Belle Hélène. The claret and the Stilton were excellent. The steaks were hard to chew” (214). A jarring note is evident in the final sentence, an ironic reminder of Woolf’s women’s college meal. Byatt provides further clues that she is referencing Woolf, describing one of the other diners, Juliana Belper, through the words “a shade of Bloomsbury” (214). This Woolfian figure, with her “long and fine and distracted” (214) face, repeats Woolf’s own phrase, that “[w]e receive random impressions” (215) and is criticised by Wijnnobel who represents Byatt’s own view, opposing Juliana’s theory that “[e]verything is relative” (215). Wijnnobel is uncompromising in his argument that “[g]ood art cannot come from” (216) such a vague concept, a sentiment shared by Byatt.

In addition to the verbal still lifes in A Room of One’s Own, Woolf also includes several examples in To the Lighthouse. One of these is a description of a kitchen table which Lily associates with Mr Ramsay’s work. The table, perhaps the most elementary of all objects to be included in a still life, is “one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in the air” (21). Rosner notes that the table represents Woolf’s location of “modernism’s origins squarely in the spaces of private life” (4). This union of modernity and domesticity is also present in Woolf’s description of visual representations of objects associated with the home. In the novel’s opening scene, the young James Ramsay is “sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores” (3) while Mrs Ramsay is “watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator” (3). It has been suggested by Jane Goldman that the catalogue connotes imperialism and colonialism (171); however its associations are also domestic as it contains pictorial representations of household commodities.
For both Woolf and Byatt the domestic figures prominently in their fiction and evokes the pleasure to be experienced through food. Arguably the most famous verbal still life in Woolf’s body of work is the Boeuf en Daube dinner scene. Anne Romines points to the conflict between art and domesticity which is played out in this scene, terming its heroine Lily Briscoe an “undomestic painter” and arguing that it “takes the ancient acts and mythology of housekeeping, as manipulated by a compelling, dangerous Angel in the House, and refracts them through the consciousness of a contemporary woman artist” (212-13).

Here, it is important that the Angel is represented by a married woman, Mrs. Ramsay. I would argue that it is not domesticity per se which Woolf is against; rather, like Byatt, she is critical of the potential of marriage to stifle women. Karpay has drawn parallels between the married couples, the Severells in *The Shadow of the Sun* and the Ramsays in *To the Lighthouse*, while Franken also notes similarities between Henry and Mr Ramsay (*A. S. Byatt* 46). Karpay separates marriage and domesticity, stating that the Boeuf en Daube scene provides “evidence of domestic artistry” but Mrs. Ramsay “does not stop to articulate her accomplishment”, while Byatt, on the other hand, “recognizes the artistry of women like Mrs. Ramsey [sic]” (102). As feminist critic Susan Gubar has noted, Woolf depicts positive domestic images which celebrate the joy and sensuousness of meals, yet criticises marriage. As Gubar states,

if these Victorian paragons [Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. McNab] represent the perpetuation of real butter and clean milk, of the red-hot pokers and Waverley novels and tea sets that grace domestic life, then Prue, who dies in “some illness associated with childbirth” . . . , and Minta Doyle, who is sacrificed on the altar of Mrs Ramsay’s passion for marriage, are representatives of the generation that uncovers the coercion and cost of the mother’s script. (46)
While Woolf and Byatt evoke pleasure in domesticity through their verbal still lifes of meals and interiors, for both writers marriage encompasses the potential to stifle women.

A third link between Byatt and Woolf lies in the centrality of art to their lives, as both women consider themselves to be artists, write about the woman artist, and are fascinated by aesthetic elements such as form and colour. Byatt’s quartet represents the Künstlerroman of Frederica Potter, whose creativity is manifested through her Laminations. Similarly, To the Lighthouse, regarded by some as Woolf’s most obvious articulation of the same genre\(^2\), describes the creative journey of the visual artist Lily Briscoe. Woolf’s acute visual sense was a result of her exposure to the art world, particularly the vivid and colourful works of the Post-Impressionists, which she viewed in London in the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912, and at the homes of friends. This exposure was largely through artists such as Vanessa and Duncan, as well as the art critic Roger Fry and her brother-in-law Clive Bell, also a critic. As Goldman points out, “[t]he theory most often applied to Woolf is the theory of significant form, actually formulated first by Clive Bell, but close to Fry’s theory of pure form” (116). This theory was first outlined by Bell in the following terms:

> What quality is common to Sta. Sophia [sic] and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible – significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. (17)

In his famous essay “Art and Life”, Fry articulates the argument that once it became no longer mandatory to faithfully replicate life in artworks, Post-Impressionism signalled the “re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to

\(^2\) Goldman (166) discusses the novel in these terms, while Gubar (20) also sees Orlando as representative of the genre.
appearance” (19). Artists began to look to primitive art for inspiration rather than faithfully imitating life.

Woolf understood, as Fry did, that formalism could apply to literature as well as to visual art. In her biography of Fry, she writes that “many of his theories held good for both arts. Design, rhythm, texture – there they were again – in Flaubert as in Cézanne” (240). In 1910 Woolf attended the exhibition entitled “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” at the Grafton Gallery, which included works by artists such as Cézanne, Matisse, Gauguin, Manet and Van Gogh. Caws and Wright refer to Woolf’s famous statement that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” as being partly about “the upheaval in the art world caused by the exhibition” (150). Goldman bases her own study of Woolfian aesthetics in part on Woolf’s reactions to this exhibition, drawing on the connections “between the shocking colours and depiction of women in the paintings, and the shocking colours of the women’s suffrage movement” (110). In addition, Pamela Reid Broughton’s essay states that the short stories Woolf wrote between 1917 and 1921 show her “deliberately experimenting to see if she could achieve in words what the Post-Impressionist painters were accomplishing in print” (37). Reed notes that “To the Lighthouse is Woolf’s most eloquent investigation of the connections between formalism and feminism” (“Through Formalism” 24). Thus, there is much critical agreement that the visual arts played a key role in Woolf’s development as a writer.

More than the mere fact of their respective exposure to the art of the Post-Impressionists, the fiction of Woolf and Byatt bears a resemblance in that both writers describe interiors in what may be regarded as a Matissean manner. Byatt’s adoption of Matisse’s colour palette and ekphrastic descriptions of his paintings is discussed throughout this study. Caws and Wright point out that Fry in 1911 “had written [to] the French painter Simon Bussy that he had become ‘completely Matisistine’; the same could have been said of
Bell and Grant” (248). Matisse’s influence overflowed into domestic decoration by Grant so that “[e]ntering a room furnished by the Omega [workshops established by Roger Fry] was like stepping into a modernist painting. . . . The workshops’ signature red chairs, bright abstract rugs, exuberant paper flowers, and knick-knacks painted with nudes and goldfish seemed to realize the interiors Matisse’s paintings depicted” (Reed “A Room of One’s Own” 154). Another factor that the Bloomsbury artists had in common with Matisse was the fact that both drew inspiration from the Art Nouveau movement. As Rosner states, the Omega workshops followed “the example of the Arts and Crafts, as well as Art Nouveau” (10). Similarly, Matisse depicted Art Nouveau-like interiors in many of his paintings. Frank Anderson Trapp has analysed examples of Matisse’s work within the framework of the Art Nouveau movement, noticing similarities between his painting Bonheur de Vivre and Horta’s Art Nouveau interior at Rue de Turin, Brussels (6), and between Harmonie Rouge and an interior at the Hirschwald Gallery, Berlin, 1899 (7).

As a consequence of her close association with the art of French and British Post-Impressionists, I wish to argue that Woolf, similarly to Byatt many years later, was influenced by both the style and often bourgeois subject matter of Matisse, particularly in her writing of To the Lighthouse. Matisse painted the still life Harmonie Rouge [Fig. 11] in 1909, Trapp stating that it shows “a woman arranging a table set with still life objects, including a compote of fruit topped with a vase of flowers” (7). As Gowing writes, “[t]he decorative cloth on which well-chosen properties were placed would be drawn up with shameless artifice behind them so that the pattern filled the whole picture” (108). In addition, the scene outside the window was to take on equal importance to the interior of the room, reflecting Matisse’s aim to “bring the presence of the red-blue pattern and the distance of the emerald-green view outside into a balance of a new kind, active and vibrating” (109-110).
In my view, Matisse’s achievement in this painting invites comparisons to that of Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*. He represents the domestic and the outside world side by side, on a single plane. Woolf, too, creates the view outside the window with similar emphasis to that which she gives the laid table of the Boeuf en Daube meal. In the novel, as in the painting, the interior and exterior of the house are juxtaposed, the window providing the link between them: “Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, the frill of the chair inside, the puppy tumbling on the terrace, the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round the centre of complete emptiness” (Woolf *To the Lighthouse* 170). The “curves and arabesques” oscillate like waves, calling to mind Matisse’s wallpaper patterns. Domesticity passes between the interior and exterior as “[Mr. Ramsay] would whizz his plate through the window” (189), representing the breakdown of domestic order. The trope of the window is one which is shared by Woolf and Matisse. Indeed, Woolf
named one section of To the Lighthouse “The Window”, while Hughes has termed the window “a favourite Matissean motif” (135). Deepak Ananth states that in another of his paintings, Interior with Aubergines (1911), “Matisse juxtaposed within the space of a single picture the three prototypical modes of visualization available to the Western representational regime: window, mirror, and painted surface” (158). Woolf’s novel, too, foregrounds the interplay between frames, mirrors and windows, one instance being the window ‘framing’ Lily’s portrait of Mrs Ramsay and James.

The art of Cézanne was also to be an influence on Woolf’s fictional style, the French Post-Impressionist’s work having been shown at the 1910 exhibition. Waugh bases Cézanne’s impact on Woolf both on the fact that Roger Fry was her adviser on artistic matters and that he wrote a biography of Cézanne in 1927, the same year Woolf published To the Lighthouse (“Think of a Table” 36). A still life by Cézanne prompted what is arguably Woolf’s most vivid description of the profound effect of a work of art upon her, recorded in her diary entry for Thursday 18th April 1918. This incident occurred when Vanessa and Roger were unpacking Cézanne’s Still-Life with Apples [Fig. 12] at Gordon Square, the painting which Maynard Keynes had purchased23: “There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples not be? I began to wonder. Theres [sic] the relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity” (140).24

23 The important collection of paintings and drawings by his contemporaries made by Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was auctioned at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris on 26 and 27 March 1918. Maynard Keynes was instrumental in procuring an Exchequer grant of 20,000 pounds to spend on behalf of the National Gallery, and he and the Director attended the sale. The poor military situation depressed prices, and Keynes was able to buy for himself two drawings, and two paintings – Delacroix’s Cheval au Paturage and Cézanne’s Pommes; they are now on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Bell Diary 140).

24 I e-mailed Woolf scholar Patricia Laurence regarding the discrepancy between the number of apples in the painting and the diary entry. She replied that she also “came across this discrepancy in the number of apples in working on an article on Keynes and the arts. I counted seven . . . in the Fitzwilliam collection painting . . . The painting in the Fitzwilliam collection is the one that Woolf saw . . .” (E-mail to the author 18 February 2009)
Woolf’s description of this painting reveals, in addition to her appreciation of its artistic qualities, her awareness of its materiality. In this diary entry she demonstrates that she has learnt much about art since 1910. The entry observes that “[t]o Roger and Nessa, moreover, it was a far more intricate question than this. It was a question of pure paint or mixed; if pure which colour: emerald or veridian; & then the laying on of the paint; & the time he’d spent, & how he’d altered it. & why, & when he’d painted it” (140), demonstrating her thorough grasp of the artistic process.

In what may be regarded as an extension of the prominence of art in their lives, both Woolf and Byatt use *ekphrasis* extensively in their fictional works. Wall has stated that Woolf possesses an “*ekphrastic* aesthetics” (13), creating scenes in which:

... a visual image freezes a moment in time, yet frequently acknowledges the mortality of the original. Nowhere is this tension clearer than in the English term “still life” and the French expression, nature morte, the English term capturing the stasis that presumably keeps something alive by immortalizing
Robert Kiely is of the opinion that in *Jacob’s Room* the portrait of Jacob “resembles a still life, a painstakingly careful arrangement of objects within a frame” (147). Further, “like the painter whose subject is fruit or flowers, emblems of perishable beauty, she exposes the tension created by imposing an appearance of permanence on that which cannot be preserved” (150). Jacob has been killed in the Great War yet, as Lodge states, “his death is not referred to directly”, but rather through his “empty room and empty shoes” (184). Thus Woolf makes explicit the connection between the impermanence of both human life and still life, through descriptions of material objects, just as Byatt does in her verbal still lifes.

This tension between mortality and immortality is further explored by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, regarded by many as an elegy for her mother. Fisher has noted that “Woolf recognized the centrality of death in *To the Lighthouse* when writing it; she considered renaming the genre in which she wrote” (100) to that of the elegy. Further, the “elegiac nature of the novel finds its fulfilment in the philosophical question of how meaning can achieve permanence, a question it repeatedly raises in its presentation of the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue and Andrew” (100). The novel’s mid section, entitled “Time Passes”, covers a period of several years during which certain characters die and in which the house is overtaken by neglect. Hillis Miller states that in this section it “is as if personality vanishes from the sleeping inhabitants of the house . . . only to be displaced by the inhuman entities that remain, in this case the gentle breaths of sea air which circulate through the house” (181). He points out that Woolf employs prosopoeia, a form of personification “whereby we speak of the absent, the dead, or the inanimate as if they were alive” (181). This tension between mortality and immortality is also evoked in the Boeuf en Daube scene, which attempts to preserve the characters and setting in the moment, much as a still life painting
The table’s centrepiece is “a bowl of fruit that draws their attention like a work of art, a still life painting that catches and holds for a moment the fragile life of ripe fruit” (Korsmeyer 215). However, the illusion of perfection is shattered when Augustus “plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive” (Woolf To the Lighthouse 90). Later in the meal, the fruit bowl is further degraded when “a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing” (101). Inherent in this description is the knowledge that such perfection is short-lived, exemplifying Woolf’s engagement with the subject matter of the still life – the perishable and ephemeral.

The final link between the two writers lies in the fact that Woolf shares Byatt’s pleasure in Proust’s writing, even though it does not manifest itself in the same ways in the works of each author. Reading Proust had a dramatic effect on both women. In her diary entry of Thursday 18th April 1918, Woolf describes her visit to Roger Fry, during which “[o]ccasionally he read a quotation from a book by Proust; (whose name I’ve forgotten)” (140). In a letter dated 2nd November 1919, Woolf asks Fry to bring her some of Proust’s books back from France (396). In a 1927 letter to Vanessa, Woolf wrote “he is far the greatest modern novelist” (365), and recorded in her diary for 18th November, 1924, that he “makes it seem easy to write well” (322). Caws and Wright point out that it was inevitable “that Proust would have an enduring impact on the work, reading, and lives of many members of Bloomsbury” (11), largely because of his focus on the sense of the moment. Elizabeth M. Shore summarises this concept as “the perception of reality in a ‘moment of privilege’ or ‘moment of vision’ and the importance of art in recreating that perception” (232). However, Shore suggests that this alignment between Woolf and Proust is probably due to “a coincidental similarity of temperament, or to the prevailing climate of European thought in the early twentieth century” (232). This commonality of vision is termed “late nineteenth-century aestheticism” by Bennett and Royle and “is concerned with the experience
and expression of the intense pleasure of the present” (263). There are many instances in Woolf’s diaries, essays and letters in which she indicates that she subscribes to the concept of pleasure in the moment, or “moments of being”.

Woolf’s debt to Proust is particularly evident in her writing of *To the Lighthouse*, through her treatment of the twin concepts of time and art. In 1922, on the day after she began reading Volume Two of *In Search of Lost Time*, Woolf wrote to Fry that “Proust so titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly sit out the sentence” (525). Then, on Tuesday April 8th 1925, three months before beginning her novel she wrote in her diary that Proust “searches out those butterfly shades to the last grain. He is as tough as catgut and as evanescent as a butterfly’s bloom” (L. Woolf 71). This description utilises terms that echo those she later used for Lily’s artwork in the novel: “[b]eautiful and bright it should be on the surface, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron” (163). In her diary entry for Monday 20th July 1925, Woolf refers to “the flight of time and the consequent break of unity in my design. That passage (I conceive the book in 3 parts 1. at the drawing room window; 2. seven years passed; 3. the voyage) interests me very much”. Later in the same entry, she writes: “Proust I should like to finish” (36-7). Just as Proust’s novel may itself be regarded as the artwork that Marcel produces, Lily’s words at the end of *To the Lighthouse* that it “was done; it was finished” (198) signify the completion of the novel as much as they do the final brushstroke on Lily’s canvas. Indeed, Ommundsen terms Lily’s painting a *mise en abyme* in that it “may be read as representing the novel in which it figures” (10). Thus, it can be observed that Woolf’s admiration for Proust and his influence on her work are just as palpable as Byatt’s own relationship with the French writer.

Overall, even though Byatt rejects Woolfian modernism in favour of realism, her fiction is strongly influenced by Woolf’s life and writing. Despite the fact that her only direct
admission of admiration for Woolf lies in her desire, like Woolf’s, for the gender of a writer not to matter, the two writers’ shared aesthetic vision prevails. This vision is based on a materiality which is shown through their pleasure in the portrayal of domestic objects and *objets d’art*, influenced by the art of Matisse and the writing of Proust.

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**Female Representation**

It has been established that Byatt’s pleasure in the consumption of food is evoked through her *ekphrastic* descriptions of the still life, a genre which has strong associations with ‘femininity’ and one in which many female artists have painted. Yet, not only does Byatt’s fiction not include any still life paintings by women, neither does it overtly engage with feminist discussions about women’s art. Pollock refers to female modernist artists Bertha Morisot and Mary Cassatt, who may be said to form part of a feminist canon, as women who painted many “examples of private areas or domestic space” (*Vision and Difference* 56). Further, Lloyd’s study of the still life references such artworks by women as Morisot’s *Sous la Veranda* (33), Grace Cossington-Smith’s *Things on an Iron Tray on the Floor* (31), Paula Modersohn-Becker’s *Still Life with Blue and White Porcelain*, Margaret Preston’s *Implement Blue* (129) and *Still Life with Teapot and Daisies* (95), to name but a few. Certain feminist writers have directly or even critically engaged with works by artists such as Matisse as part of the exploration of female subjectivity. For example, feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz quotes Kristeva’s appropriation of Matisse’s views on colour as part of her view “that colour in painting, like rhythm in music, is the site where both the semiotic and the symbolic interact most directly” (149). Even though Byatt does not mount a strong feminist argument, she nevertheless presents Matisse’s art from the female point of view. While her admiration of the artist is undeniable, she makes “her feminine art speak out and (like Sheba Brown’s) tell
the stories about women that his paintings of them had left out” (210) as Fernandes states. This is just one of the ways in which Byatt points out the limitations of the male artistic canon.

Byatt’s still life examples of ‘actual’ *ekphrasis* may be regarded as representing ‘High Culture’. As Pollock points out “[r]epresenting creativity as masculine and Woman as the beautiful image for the desiring masculine gaze, High Culture systematically denies knowledge of women as producers of culture and meanings” (*Differencing the Canon* 17). Yet the fact that she embeds paintings by male artists does not necessarily mean that Byatt subscribes to what may be regarded as a hegemonic or phallocentric view of art, summed up by Pollock as “[t]he notion of a beautiful object or fine book expressing the genius of the author/artist and through him (sic) the highest aspirations of human culture” (*Vision and Difference* 6). Rather, as in her relationship with realism, Byatt foregrounds the inherent problems of the male artistic canon through her references to female representation.

Within the parameters of this discussion, female representation may be said to have two meanings. Firstly, it encompasses how females are represented through and in artworks by artists of both genders. This meaning has been highlighted in the first chapter of this study in references to feminist discussion of the objectification of female Pre-Raphaelite models by male artists. Byatt also acknowledges this aspect of representation in “Body Art”, in which Daisy Whimple’s body forms a canvas displaying “a ring pierced into her navel, little breasts with rings in the left nipple” (99). Byatt again depicts how women are represented, in the short story “A Stone Woman” when the anaesthetist uses the term “work of art” (132) for the botched navel reconstruction of Ines, the protagonist. Byatt’s attitude towards this aspect of female representation is also seen in *Still Life*, through Gauguin’s *Still-Life, Fête Gloanec 1888* [Fig. 13], in which “various inanimate objects, two ripe pears, a dense bunch of flowers, swam across a bright red table-top rimmed with a black ellipse” (7).
This still life is viewed by Frederica, Alexander and Daniel in the novel’s Prologue during a visit to the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Byatt describes the painting further:

The picture was signed ‘Madeleine Bernard’, and Alexander told Frederica that Gauguin had flirted seriously with that young woman, had characterised her, as was fashionable at the time, as having the desirable, unattainable androgynous perfection, complete sensuality combined with unattainable self-sufficiency. Frederica informed him from the catalogue that the vegetation was supposed to be a jocular portrait by Gauguin of Madeleine, the pears her breasts, the dense flowers her hair. (7)

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25 Bernard’s name was added to the painting because Mme Gloanec, to whom it was given by Gauguin, would not accept it at first. “Only when Gauguin signed it as ‘Madeleine B’ . . . , passing off the work as that by an amateur, would Mme Gloanec accept the work” (Rathbone and Shackelford 232).
Thus Madeleine Bernard, sister of the artist Emile Bernard, is depicted in the painting as an object of desire for males, albeit an ‘androgynous’ one. However, in Alexander’s jocular comment that the pears could just as easily be read as “partly male” (7) Byatt draws attention to the limits of visual art in that the ways in which paintings are interpreted can be somewhat ambiguous.

There is another instance in Byatt’s fiction in which she acknowledges the issue of representation of women within artworks. On the page prior to “Art Work” in The Matisse Stories, Byatt includes a reproduction of Matisse’s drawing L’artiste et le modele refletes dans le miroir, in which the model is naked while the artist wears a tie and jacket. This drawing highlights the idea of female representation in the sense of the objectification of women through the male gaze. A major area of scholarship has grown up around the gaze since the 1970s, a concept which was written about most famously by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, written in 1973 and published in 1975 in the influential British film theory journal Screen. Mulvey’s essay is based on psychoanalytic theory, and has as its premise the idea that in “a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (436). The gaze is also central to the discussion of female representation by Parker and Pollock in which they state that the artist in another Matisse artwork entitled The Painter and His Model is “the maker; the female figure both the object of his gaze and the focus of his contemplation” (124). While “Art Work” does not directly engage with the theory of the gaze, Byatt’s inclusion of Matisse’s drawing in the peritext nevertheless signals the issue of gender imbalance in the marriage between Robin and Debbie Dennison.

Secondly, female representation is concerned with the ways in which women artists visually represent their world, and the extent to which they are limited by the processes of
production. While Byatt includes many examples of notional *ekphrasis* in her fiction, only three are by women – the sculptures by Sheba in “Art Work”, the installations by Daisy in “Body Art”, and the Pre-Raphaelite paintings by Blanche in *Possession*. These would, furthermore, be regarded as examples of the ‘lower orders’ of artistic expression, that is, craftwork and genre paintings. The art by Sheba and Daisy may be seen largely as the product of “crafty women”, to adopt the phrase used by Parker and Pollock.  

As these critics have asserted, in the hierarchy of the arts, “painting and sculpture enjoy an elevated status while other arts that adorn people, homes or utensils are relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terms as ‘applied’, ‘decorative’ or ‘lesser’ arts” (50). Further, Curtin and Heldke state that traditionally “[q]uilts were considered crafts rather than fine arts; women’s writing was considered introspective and recreational; work was defined in a way that excluded reproductive labor and unpaid activities in the home. The case has been similar for food and cooking” (xiii). In the cases of two of her fictional female artists, Byatt portrays a rather negative picture of their art. Daisy’s installations for the hospital ward are described as “a rainbow of coloured strips of plastic, and strips of Indian-looking cloth spangled with mirror-glass. There were also brass bells and clusters of those sharp-eyed beads that ward off the Evil Eye” (56). She “had scrounged most of it . . . they’re rejects, a bit torn” (75). In *Possession*, Blanche asks “[w]hat draws us to make pretty what should express Brute Power?” and “I paint so thinly” (45), referring rather disparagingly to her artistic efforts in her journal. Through these examples of *ekphrasis* Byatt highlights the problem of the exclusion of women from the canon. “Art Work” however, ultimately offers a positive portrayal of the plight of female artists by Byatt. While at first Debbie has relinquished her own needs and career for those of her husband, later she becomes a successful book illustrator with her wood engravings (85). Sheba, who “gets her materials from everywhere

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26 Parker and Pollock refer to art critic John McEwan who, in his 1978 review of a London exhibition, “identified women not with art, but domestic craft”. (7)
— skips, jumble sales, cast-offs . . .” (83), eventually holds an exhibition, which is critically acclaimed despite the domestic nature of her medium. Through her portrayal of these latter two women working in so-called ‘minor’ branches of the visual arts, Byatt acknowledges the difficulties experienced by female artists, and signals a degree of optimism through their success.

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The Art of Living

Although the still life genre in Byatt’s fiction celebrates the feminine through the sensuousness of food and domestic objects, it also foregrounds the inherent tension in the relationship between women and domesticity. She dedicates much time and attention to evoking the pleasure to be experienced through preparing and serving food, yet often portrays elaborate meals as representing entrapment for women. This tension is present in much women’s writing; indeed, as Gubar’s gynocritical analysis of the works of Katherine Mansfield states, one way in which feminist-modernists reshaped the Künstlerroman was in the fact that “domestic disease or sickness of home is imaginatively reconstructed as sickness for home in what amounts to a revisionist domestic mythology” (39). While most of Byatt’s verbal still lifes undeniably evoke a pleasurable view of food, at the time in which her fiction is set domesticity was not always a positive experience for women within marriage, often representing entrapment. The quartet contains numerous examples of Stephanie and Frederica questioning marriage as a form of domestic imprisonment. Stephanie, a Cambridge graduate, gives up her career as a teacher to become a wife and mother. While she does find happiness in her marriage, her sudden violent death caused by a faulty kitchen appliance – a refrigerator – may be read as Byatt’s ironic portrayal of the ultimate negative domestic experience. As Kelly states of this incident, “[t]he kitchen, so often a symbol of complacent domesticity,
contains within it the seeds of despair and grief” (*A. S. Byatt* 72). Frederica becomes trapped in a violent marriage to Nigel that ultimately ends in divorce. Overall, while the majority of Byatt’s portrayals of domestic imagery are pleasurable, at times she depicts domesticity as stifling or indeed, as in the example of Stephanie, associates it with death.

In her 1991 introduction to her republished first novel *The Shadow of the Sun*, written almost thirty years after its original publication, Byatt refers to the “desiderata of the feminine mystique, the lover, the house, the nursery, the kitchen” (xiii) as constituting women’s lives in the 1950s, and it may be said that these elements were to form a thread running through much of her future fiction. Her use of the iconography of the house has a two-fold purpose in that it may be said to celebrate the trappings of domesticity while condemning domestic entrapment. As Kelly states, in *The Shadow of the Sun* “Byatt attempts to capture the trajectory of so many educated young women of her generation who were unable to escape domesticity and the oppressive influence of parents and propriety” (*A. S. Byatt* 15). For Byatt herself, “[l]iterature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female” (Dusinberre 186). In order to explore the tension inherent in domesticity, some of Byatt’s verbal still lifes portray female entrapment, while others free women through alternative models such as meals taken outside the home or prepared by males.

A principal purpose of Byatt’s still lifes depicting Frederica is to highlight the latter’s reluctance to embrace marriage, particularly in *The Virgin in the Garden*. Stephanie tells Frederica of her impending wedding to Daniel while they are having “coffee in the Chattery in Calverley’s big department store, Wallish and Jones” (186-87). Frederica conflates her negative view of marriage with domesticity: “If Stephanie, having tasted freedom, could settle for domestic bliss with a fat curate, defeat was horribly possible. Anybody at any moment could become enslaved by a cooker, a set of Pyrex dishes with snowflake crystals...
stamped black on negligee pink, or a personal teapot” (189). Here, Byatt endows these passive domestic objects with negative force. When Frederica wants to buy Stephanie “an appropriate wooden spoon or rolling pin” (190), the kitchenware department in the store stifles her: “Among the gadgets she had hoped to find something cheap and real and ingenious, a tool with an elegant functional shape, or an exotic appliance – a garlic press, a well-shaped spatula, a corkscrew” but “she developed claustrophobia, and made again for the upper air” (192). On the one hand, Byatt portrays these objects as “elegant” and “exotic”, yet Frederica’s claustrophobia captures the anxiety towards marriage felt by some women in Byatt’s fiction.

This tension inherent in domesticity bears similarities to Freud’s use of the German term *heimlich*, meaning ‘homely’ and its opposite *unheimlich* to mean unfamiliar or uncanny. Mezei and Briganti elaborate on this relationship, referring to “his discovery of the coincidence of homely and unhomely, his elaboration of the sinister transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar, and the return of the repressed through the unhomely, the uncanny” (841). Byatt indicates her awareness of this expression in an epistolary exchange embedded in her novel *Possession*, between the two poets Ash and LaMotte. Randolph Ash writes of feeling “at home” with Christabel: “I say ‘at home’ – what extraordinary folly – when you take pleasure in making me feel most unheimlich, as the Germans have it, least of all at home … But poets don’t want homes, - do they? - they are not creatures of hearths and firedogs, but of heaths and raging hounds” (italics in original 131). Byatt also uses the English translation of *heimlich* in her story “The Next Room”. When Joanna, the protagonist, has a real estate agent look at her house with a view to selling it, he tells her, “[a]nyone could see it had been lived in very happily: it was homely, it had good vibrations” (italics in original 75). Like Byatt’s definition of the domestic, the term ‘homely’ also carries within it both positive and negative associations.
The connection between domesticity and the notion of ‘home’ in Byatt’s fiction is seen in the many verbal still lifes of buildings, from crumbling manor houses and country estates to dingy urban flats, hotel rooms and comfortable middle class dwellings. However, this use of the iconography of the home provides more than a mere backdrop to characters’ lives. Gaston Bachelard, in his iconic text *The Poetics of Space* has stated that it “makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we ‘write a room,’ ‘read a room,’ or ‘read a house.’” (14) Following the philosophical stance of Carl Jung, Kelsall agrees that “houses too may be ‘read’” (7). As Mezei and Briganti have observed, “the exterior façade and style along with the interior decoration, furniture, style, and layout of houses compose a semiotic system that signals status, class, and public display and creates meanings that observers, visitors, and the public may interpret and read” (840). Indeed, Byatt depicts characters themselves in the act of ‘reading’ houses and rooms. In *Possession*, for example, Roland and Maud visit Bethany, once the home of Christabel and Blanche, a century later. They read the clinically-restored “bland or blind face” of the cottage as a “simulacrum” (211). Also in *Possession*, Byatt embeds a poem by Christabel as the epigraph to Chapter 12, which expresses the idea that buildings reflect the individuals who reside within them:

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What is a House? So strong – so square
Making a Warmth inside the Winds
We walk with lowered eyelids there
And silent go – behind the blinds

Yet hearts may tap like loaded bombs
Yet brains may shrill in carpet-hush
And windows fly from silent rooms
And walls break outwards – with a rush (210)
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This poem foretells the events of the novel, in which the domestic harmony of the household of Christabel and Blanche is ultimately destroyed by the former’s relationship with Ash the poet.
Just as it sometimes portrays domesticity as stifling, Byatt’s fiction also offers a pleasurable view of domesticity as an “art of living” in the many examples of imagery conflating food and art. One of these which occurs in Possession in the correspondence between the Victorian poets, is the extended metaphor linking poetry with that traditional British teatime staple, the cucumber sandwich. Christabel writes in a letter to Ash, “Now would you not rather have a Poem, however imperfect, than a plate of cucumber sandwiches, however even, however delicately salted, however exquisitely fine-cut?” (italics in original 87), to which he replies:

And you send a poem, and observe wisely that poems are worth all the cucumber-sandwiches in the world. So they are indeed – and yours most particularly – but you may imagine the perversity of the poetic imagination and its desire to feed on imagined cucumber-sandwiches, which, since they are positively not to be had, it pictures itself as a form of English manna – oh the perfect green circles – oh the delicate hint of salt – oh the fresh pale butter – oh, above all, the soft white crumbs and golden crust of the new bread – and thus, as in all aspects of life, the indefatigable fancy idealises what could be snapped up and swallowed in a moment’s greed, in sober fact. (italics in original 157)

This is partly an allusion to Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. Byatt is parodying his use of the sexual metaphor of the cucumber sandwich in order to express the poets’ underlying sexual attraction.

Byatt also uses the egg as another food metaphor. Sarah Sceats’s full-length study on food in fiction states that the egg is rich with possibilities for symbolism in literature as it “represents rebirth, new life, the containment of future possibilities” (127). In one of her few descriptions of food in The Shadow of the Sun, Byatt artfully describes the separation of eggs:
“Caroline began to separate eggs, cracking them into unbelievable even halves, sliding the gold, round and elastic, from shell to shell, whilst the white hung, heavy, translucent, in thick sheets, and blobbed suddenly into her basin . . . Then she transferred the whites of the eggs to a rosebudded meat dish and slapped at them tidily, with a palette knife” (47). This description may be read at both a textual and a thematic level. Firstly, the fact that the implement used is a “palette knife” is significant given Byatt’s predilection in her fiction for tying together food and art. Secondly, narratologically the scene occurs at a point in the novel where Caroline’s daughter Anna is about to experience a ‘rebirth’ in her career and relationship with Oliver Canning. Byatt also uses the image of the egg in her short story “The Next Room” in which Joanna, a fifty-nine year old woman, is about to embark on a new life upon the death of her mother. Here the egg is very directly associated with the concept of rebirth: “I shall sell the house, she said to herself, tapping her egg” (61). The egg reappears in Possession, but as a symbol of containment and isolation as well as signifying a new relationship. Christabel asks Ash a riddle, the answer to which is an egg. She sees the unbroken egg as “a perfect O, a living Stone, doorless and windowless, whose life may slumber on till she be waked” (italics in original 137). Christabel simultaneously desires and fears being ‘broken’ by Ash, both physically and emotionally. Thus, the paradoxical image of the egg, as representing both freedom and enslavement, parallels Byatt’s attitude to domesticity as simultaneously pleasurable yet potentially confining.

Byatt’s view of married domesticity may be observed as early as her first novel The Shadow of the Sun, the Bildungsroman of the young Anna Severell who is being tutored for her Cambridge entrance examinations by the Leavis-like Oliver Canning. Throughout this largely autobiographical novel, the conflict for women between the artistic life and marriage is played out, echoing Byatt’s own struggle as a Cambridge graduate as well as a wife and mother. In this novel, Byatt is only just beginning to explore the use of still lifes to elucidate
her views on marriage; consequently, it contains few examples of such descriptions. It does, however, contain elements of the literary genre which would later be termed the ‘Aga-saga’, such as domestic settings, marriage and, indeed, the presence of an Aga: “it was not worth lighting the Aga for Oliver’s weekends” (224-25). The novel may even be said to resemble a ‘kitchen sink’ melodrama with, as Campbell notes, “the cliché of the kitchen sink” (39) forming a recurring motif which represents Oliver’s view of Anna’s possible future. However, Byatt’s writing renders this novel, as it does all her fiction, much more than a collection of domestic stereotypes. At times, verbal still life descriptions are used to highlight a lack of domestic harmony, such as to question the suitability of certain characters to the bourgeois, married lifestyle in which they find themselves, as in the case of Oliver’s wife Margaret who feels stifled by her surroundings.

In contrast, Caroline finds domesticity a pleasurable experience, as shown by a still life description as she prepares for a visit from the Cannings:

In the hall, inside, Caroline Severell stood over a white bowl of flowers, and pushed delicately at the blue spike of the tallest delphinium. Her mind ran wordlessly over her preparations; the little tablets of soap, the clean towels, the lavender bags in the drawers, the carafe, the bowl of roses in the spare room followed each other, rapid little pictures across her inner eye. (4)

Even in this early and rather brief verbal still life embedded within the narrative, Byatt conveys two elements which were later to become characteristic of her use of such descriptions: a sense of the importance of the visual in the reference to “rapid little pictures across her inner eye”, and the use of such descriptions to convey domestic harmony (or its opposite), as seen in the litany of accomplished tasks. Throughout the novel, Caroline’s

27 Mezei and Briganti refer to The Oxford Dictionary of New Words whose definition of aga saga is a “saga of family life set against a comfortable background typified by possession of a kitchen with an Aga stove, notionally an emblem of middle-class life, and representing a sustained cosiness”. This analysis also mentions a similar term, kitchen sink drama. (838)
purposeful and rewarding life is contrasted with that of Margaret. In a conversation between the two women, Margaret describes her London life as one in which she goes “about doing this or that, pushing a carpet sweeper, arranging cushions, and it all seems so trivial” (46), a view which is in stark contrast to Caroline’s retort, “I think of it as an art of living” (46). As if to illustrate Caroline’s philosophy, Byatt describes the lunch prepared by Caroline as aesthetically pleasing: “So they cut radishes into roses, and tomatoes into water lilies, and arranged them carefully on ice” (49). For Margaret, however, marriage is stifling and disabling, particularly as she is having problems with her husband Oliver. Byatt underscores the connotations of lifelessness by placing “a print of a Matisse still life over the hearth” (184) in Margaret’s living room. The painting takes on a symbolic role in that, firstly, Margaret’s life within this room is indeed stifled and ‘still’, more closely resembling the French translation of ‘still life’ as ‘nature morte’. In addition, Byatt’s choice of Matisse as the artist foreshadows her later signalling of gender imbalance through the depiction of canonical male art. When Henry visits Margaret, as a male artist he is able to escape the room’s prison-like atmosphere “and burst open the bright prison as he had seen it done on the stage” (185). However, Margaret remains trapped in what she perceives as the living death of marriage.

*The Shadow of the Sun* is just one example within Byatt’s fiction in which she explores the tension between academic aspirations and the pull of marriage in the life of a teenaged girl. While this theme is also treated in *The Virgin in the Garden*, there are two short stories from her anthology *Sugar and Other Stories* which also appear to reflect Byatt’s own struggles in this area. The first, “Racine and the Tablecloth” tells of a brilliant young student, Emily Bray, who attends a girls’ boarding school as Byatt did. In this story, the domestic is represented by a series of still life descriptions of floral arrangements, which may be said to symbolise an alternative life for women to that of the mind. The story’s other protagonist is one of Emily’s teachers, Martha Crichton-Walker. When the latter spies Emily
in the wrong place during a class walk, she calls her to her study, “[b]etween their faces was a silver rose bowl, full of spring flowers” (8). Later, when Miss Crichton-Walker addresses the school Byatt evokes the same image, as in “front of her was a plain silver bowl of flowers – pink roses, blue irises, something white and lacy and delicate surrounding them” (21). In this scene, the teacher appears to direct her speech comparing the relative merits of academic and domestic life towards Emily, in that there was “as much lasting value, as much pleasure for others, in a well-made tablecloth as in a well-written book” (21), a view to which Byatt does not subscribe.

Emily feels that through this speech the teacher is attempting to undermine her intellectual aspirations, and tries “to think of the virtue of tablecloths” (22), leading to an extended meditation on her Auntie Florrie who put family before education and whose beautiful embroidery encompassed “bouquets and arabesques and trellises of flowers in jewelled colours on white linen, or in white silk on white pillowcases, or in rainbow colours and patterns from every century, Renaissance, Classical, Victorian, Art Nouveau, on satin cushion covers” (23). Byatt cleverly sustains this juxtaposition of the intellectual world and the life of the home throughout the story, in the contrast between Racine’s poetry and embroidery. The lines of verse are a “tapestry”, the “alexandrine somehow visually mapped by the patterning of Aunt Florrie’s exquisite drawn-thread work, little cornsheaves of threads interspersed by cut openings, tied by minute stitches, a lattice, a trellis” (27). Even Emily’s father is defined by domestic imagery, as “a foreman in charge of a kiln which fired a curious mixture of teacups thick with lilies of the valley, dinner plates edged severely with gold dagger-shapes, and virulently green pottery dogs with gaping mouths to hold toothbrushes or rubber bands” (11). Thus the pots he makes, domestic objects like the embroidery, also form part of Byatt’s argument regarding the conflict for women at that time between married domesticity and a creative, fulfilling life.
While writing essays on Racine, Emily sees “Aunt Florrie, grey and faded and resigned” (29), a fate which she does not wish to experience. However, although she achieves the highest marks in the school’s history, she is sent home after a breakdown and, significantly, is “provided by her mother with a piece of petit-point to do through the long summer, a Victorian pattern of blown roses and blue columbine . . .” (30) which she rather messily executes. Emily is unable to escape the fate of marriage and, when her daughter Sarah’s education is the subject of a similar argument to Miss Crichton-Walker’s by the school deputy, she backs down. In the story’s last sentence, Byatt says of Sarah that the reader “can believe, I hope, you can afford to believe, that she made her way into its light” (32), highlighting her view that women should be granted the chance to realise their potential.

The second story in this anthology, “Rose-Coloured Teacups” also employs verbal still life descriptions of domestic objects in order to discuss this theme. Indeed, the last line of the story is a veritable litany of such items: “chairs, tablecloth, sunny window, rosy teacups, a safe place” (38). The protagonist Veronica recalls how, while she was an undergraduate in the 1950s, her mother, now deceased, had berated her for causing the breakage of some rose lustre teacups by packing them poorly. She “had not liked the teacups. She did not like pink, and the floral shape of the saucers was most unfashionable. She and her friends drank Nescafe from stone mugs or plain cylinders in primary colours” (36). As Campbell has noted, in this story, “[t]he teacups represent the irretrievable past, the fragility of loved objects, and the barriers between the generations” (85). In lieu of mourning her mother, Veronica regularly pictures in her mind an imaginary tea party, set in the 1920s, the broken tea set forming the centrepiece:

She could always see the low table, set for tea. There was a little kettle, on a trivet, and a capacious sprigged teapot, a walnut cake, on a plate, slices of malt loaf, six pink lustre teacups, rosily iridescent, with petal-shaped saucers. The
lustre glaze streaked the strong pink with cobwebs of blue-grey and white-gold. And little butter knives with blunt ends and ivory handles would be, there were, and a little cut glass dish of butter. And one of jam, yes, with a special flat jam spoon. . . . She could see the tablecloth, white linen with a drawn threadwork border, and thick embroidered flowers spilling in swags round its edges, done in that embroidery silk that is dyed in deepening and paler shades of the same colour. She mostly saw the flowers as roses, though many of them, looked at more closely, were hybrid or imaginary creations.

She was overdoing the pink. (34)

Here, Byatt conveys material pleasure through her description of the beautiful objects. The imaginary tea party depicts her mother as a student, just before the man who would become Veronica’s father enters the room. It represents Veronica’s mourning for both the shattered cups and for her mother, the memory of the “force of her mother’s rage against the house and housewifery that trapped her and, by extension, against her clever daughters, who had all partly evaded that trap” (36). This memory leads to Veronica’s resolve not to similarly berate her own daughter, Jane, for breaking an old sewing machine. The story ends with Veronica conjuring up the image of the tea party once again, Byatt pointing out that “[t]wo of these cups and one saucer, what was salvaged, stood now on Veronica’s dresser, useless and, Veronica thought, exquisitely pretty” (38). The remaining cups no longer serve their original purpose, and instead represent art rather than domesticity. This signifies the fact that, unlike her mother, Veronica has broken the link between marriage and domestic life.

Another story from the anthology, “The Changeling”, conveys textual pleasure through Byatt’s extensive use of food and domestic metaphors. It tells of Josephine Piper, a writer, and is set almost entirely in her “large Victorian house in South London” (148). The story opens at a garden party at a boys’ school, the description cleverly interspersing
references to real and metaphorical foodstuffs. The headmaster wears a blazer of “crushed-strawberry pink”, and some of the women have donned “leg o’mutton sleeves” while others dispense “sausage rolls, miniature pizzas, devils-on-horseback” (147). Josephine and the boy she takes under her wing, Henry Smee, are depicted within the domestic space of the house, the food they consume described in precise textual detail. Through the description of “the sound his teeth made, driving through the crackling apple-flesh” (154) Byatt demonstrates her belief in the power of words to evoke sensuous detail. Byatt also uses food metaphors in another story from this anthology, “In the Air”. When Eleanor has tea at the home of a blind woman, Miss Tillotson, the sinister presence of Barry, an unemployed man, underlies the civility of the occasion: “The teapot was ample and silver; the cups were very pretty, Crown Derby . . . and not entirely free of interior stains of stubborn tannin. Also, the tray, a black Chinese lacquer, had been wiped in great visible streaks and smears” (180). This verbal still life is marred, imperfect, a reflection of the danger posed by Barry to the domestic circle of the two women.

The final story, “Sugar”, continues with Byatt’s theme that marriage may be unfufilling for some women. The story is predominantly about the death of Byatt’s father. However, in its depiction of the writer’s early influences, the reader may see the germ of several themes which were later to appear in her fiction. It tells of her mother’s negative attitude to what Byatt refers to as “the ‘normal’, the respectable, the quotidian domesticity which my mother claimed to be happiness, suffered with savage resentment, and exacted payment for, from those she cared for” (223). She tells of how, during World War II, her mother “kept house miserably whilst my father was away”, blossoming when she “talked to me about subjects and predicates, Tennyson and Browning, the Lady of Shalott, and not about household dirt and failures of attentiveness” (227). In these literary topics of her mother’s may be seen the subjects which Byatt was to later utilise in her fiction. In this story,
too, art plays a prominent role, especially that of Vermeer and Van Gogh. The prints on the
calls of her childhood home, in particular, sparked Byatt’s interest in the combination of art
and domesticity: “I associated the secret inwardness of the houses [in the prints], de Hooch’s
houses even more than Vermeer’s, with my mother’s domestic myth, necessary tasks carried
out in clear light, in their own confined but meaningful spaces” (235). Here, the art becomes
a way of elevating domesticity. In this story, too, Byatt embeds verbal still lifes, such as
“smoked fish, fruits, chocolates”, “some freesias and some dahlias” (236), and a description
of grapes which appeals to several senses, delineating “the different pleasures of the greenish
flesh inside the purple bloom of the skin, the subtle taste, the surprise of the texture and the
way the juice ran” (246). Finally, the story ends with a listing of objects: “the teapot, the
horse trough, real apples and plums, a white ankle, the coalscuttle, two dolls in cellophane, a
gas oven, a black and white dog, gold-winged buttons, the melded and twisting hanks of
brown and white sugar” (248), markers of her father’s life and her own childhood. This list is
rather Woolfian in its impressionistic style, highlighting Byatt’s preoccupation with the
material pleasure conveyed by ‘things’ in her fiction.

While domesticity for some of Byatt’s characters is portrayed as a pleasurable
experience, the short story “The Pink Ribbon” portrays a relentless lack of pleasure through
domestic chaos. It tells of an elderly man, James, who is the primary carer for his wife,
Madeleine or Mado, who is suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease. The disintegration of
Mado’s mental state is signified by her associations with food. The lunch which Mado is fed,
consisting of “spooned soup, fingers of toast, a supermarket custard in a plastic cup” is
reminiscent of a meal given to a child. James’s previous efforts to leave “little meals in the
fridge” (242) for Mado had ended after she put together a meal for herself, consisting of “a
conical heap of ground coffee and a puddle of damp flour, which she was attempting to spoon
up with a dry avocado stone” (242). Mado’s increasing deterioration is signalled through
negative domestic imagery. She drops “their silver cutlery, inherited from his parents in a
plush-lined black case – piece by piece out of the window”, while “the carpet was covered
with milk and honey, with baby cream and salad dressing. And with whisky” (264). Further,
the devastation wreaked by the enemy during wartime is also recalled by James through food
images. Friends became “mangled meat under brick and timber” (262), while the bombs
resulted in “churches burst open like smashed fruit” (270). Thus verbal still lifes depict not
only domestic tragedies but also catastrophies experienced on a wider scale.

In some of Byatt’s positive portrayals of domesticity she endows it with the qualities
of art, such as when she inverts artistic and domestic imagery in public and private spaces in
“Body Art”. The story is largely set in a hospital which was once the “Spice Merchants’
Lying-in Hospital” (64). As a result, its walls are “decorated with panels of encaustic tiles,
depicting chillies and peppercorns, vanilla pods and tea-leaves, nutmegs and cloves” (64),
images of food which would appear to be more suited to kitchen tiles. Conversely, one of the
protagonists, Dr Damian Becket, has several examples of modern art in his home: “several of
Patrick Heron’s 1970s silkscreens, some of Noel Forster’s intricately interlaced ribbons of
colour, resembling rose windows, a Hockney print of cylinders, cones and cubes, a framed
poster of Matisse’s Snail” (69), artworks which would not look out of place in a gallery.
Similarly, in the story “Jael”, the narrator makes advertisements such as “the blown-up-and-
up shot we used in the Spanaranja commercial, all those glistening exploding sacs lying
together in a segment of a blood orange” (200), separating food from the domestic by taking
it into the public arena and converting it to an artform.

In her second novel, The Game, Byatt uses the combination of art and domesticity as
a backdrop to her contrasting portrayals of the lives of the Corbett sisters. For Julia, marriage
signifies the opposite of pleasure, with her house being overrun by a family for whom her
husband is providing assistance. The life she shares with her husband and daughter Deborah
stands on shaky foundations and eventually collapses. She tells her childhood friend Simon Moffatt, “We just behave like a normal family. We know a – a hell of a lot about it, but we’ve no time left to spend being it” (85). Julia is told that she captures in her novels the problem of “intelligent women, who are suddenly plunged into being at home all day. The – the real boredom” (115). To signal this detailing of domesticity, the novel’s opening scene contains a verbal still life description of the aftermath of a dinner party at Julia’s home: “There were earthy-brown coffee-mugs squat on a low table, two stainless-steel bowls of fruit, a scarlet glass tray with liqueur glasses” (7). Her sympathetic friend and lover Ivan says “you can write a domestic novel to end all domestic novels, amongst the suds and nappies” (132). This comment may be regarded as somewhat self-reflexive of Byatt’s own decision to write.

At first glance, Possession appears to be a departure from Byatt’s largely autobiographical Bildungsromane and Künstlerromane. The most obvious difference is that, rather than a single female protagonist, the novel depicts two academics, Roland and Maud. This text has not previously been analysed in depth in terms of the still lifes it describes, nor have its domestic settings been examined; but on closer inspection, it may be said to combine the artistic and the domestic as Byatt’s other fiction does. Even though it is largely a ‘romance of the archive’, combining elements of the detective and romance genres, as well as containing a large number of embedded texts of various literary forms, the novel contains many references to food and domesticity. Roland first meets Val at “a Freshers tea party”, Byatt using domestic imagery to describe her “holding a teacup in front of her” (11). The search for details of the secret romance between Ash and Christabel is prompted by the draft of a letter penned after the two poets meet at a “breakfast party” (7), at which Crabb Robinson entertained “poets and undergraduates and mathematical professors and political thinkers … without too much delaying the advent of buttered toast” (7). The novel contains
many examples of Byatt conveying aesthetic pleasure through food. One embedded text, a fairytale by Christabel entitled “The Glass Coffin”, tells of a tailor who made a meat pie “and decorated its top with beautifully formed pastry leaves and flowers, for he was a craftsman” (59). Byatt describes an apple which Maud divides into “paper-thin wafers with a sharp knife, each with a half-moon of bright green rind, its paper-white crisp flesh, its shining dark seeds” (270). Here, the tailor and Maud become artists who transform the domestic into the artistic.

In Possession, as well as these positive depictions of domesticity as an artform, Byatt also includes negative portrayals of domesticity such as in the ‘marriage’ between Blanche and Christabel. Ostensibly the two share a harmonious home life at “Bethany”, named after the biblical home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, whose story Byatt also references in “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”. In a letter to Ash, Christabel touches on her own experience in that “Bethany is the Place where the master called his dead friend to resurrection” (italics in original 186). For Christabel and Blanche, the house represents a chance to live a life of “dare I say Art – a daily duty of crafting – from exquisite curtains to Mystical Paintings, from biscuits with sugar roses to the Epic of Melusina” (italics in original 187). As to be expected in Victorian times, domesticity figures highly in the lives of the two women. Christabel’s poetry is said to foreground the theme of “domestic mysticism” (37), one of her poems containing lines such as “I like things clean about me” and “The house is ready spotless/ Waiting for the guest/ Who will see our white linen/” (37). Blanche’s journal juxtaposes domesticity and art, such as “a new way to stew rhubarb” with “a painting of the infant Hermes and his mother” (44). Indeed, Blanche writes that “[o]ur days weave together the simple pleasures of daily life . . . and the higher pleasures of Art and Thought . . .” (45). Yet this harmony is destroyed by Christabel’s relationship with Ash, and Blanche ultimately kills herself. This undercurrent of domestic negativity is echoed by the view of Maud’s friend, the academic Leonora Stern that “I’m paranoid about home-making, I can’t bear the
feeling of sinking into cushions and sticking there” (312), evoking images of stagnation and inertia. This negativity is reinforced by Byatt’s use of the still life in that the genre exhibits a ‘stillness’ that implies death.

Like Byatt’s other fiction, the quartet contains verbal still lifes which portray domesticity as unfulfilling in that it represents the antithesis of the life of art. One example occurs in Still Life when Frederica attends a tea party to which the writer E. M. Forster has been invited: “Whoever inhabited the rooms had spread a tablecloth and there were scones, home-made jam, cucumber sandwiches, China tea, china tea cups” (146). The episode is important because it causes Frederica to think about the differences between the lives of creative males and house-bound females: “How to live? She asked herself this, often. She thought of [D. H.] Lawrence rootlessly quarrelling with women in New Mexico. She thought of Stephanie in Blesford” (147). Throughout the quartet, Frederica is depicted as resisting what was seen in the 1950s as the inevitable — becoming a housewife. In Babel Tower, when she contemplates moving into Agatha’s house, she “stares around at the bare white walls, the sparkling white tiles. She has no home-making talents: she has never needed any” (297). When she says to Agatha “I must work or I’ll die” (italics in original 297), she refers to the fate that that she would rather work outside the home than have her creativity stifled in marriage.

In the quartet Byatt does provide a rare example of domestic harmony being achieved in marriage, albeit after a long struggle. As has been discussed, in the early years Winifred is often pictured as dissatisfied with the accoutrements of domestic life. However, in Babel Tower when she and her husband Bill move from their house on Masters Row to the village of Freyasgarth, Winifred begins to experience the ‘art of living’ through a rekindling of both her marriage and domestic pleasure. In her “graceful” new home “the kitchen had an Aga and a stone larder, there was an outhouse with an ancient pump. Winifred had a vision of living –
as Bill so suddenly had said – with beautiful things. With subtle colours and changing lights, and old wood, and yellow and white roses” (51). But more than just a beautiful space, this house is signified by a positive change in Bill and Winifred’s marriage: “She and Bill took to travelling to country auctions, buying chairs, tables, chests, a dresser – it became a shared passion; they talked to each other as in some ways they had never done” (51). More importantly, “Bill does not roar in this house, he does not crowd, he is neither bored nor sulky . . .” (52). For Winifred, unlike her daughters, domesticity eventually proves to be a positive experience because it is shared with her husband.

The two novellas which comprise *Angels and Insects*, while set in Victorian England, celebrate the material pleasures to be experienced through food, yet at times provides a critique of domesticity as stifling for women. Byatt punctuates both novellas with Victorian kitchen scenes which paradoxically romanticise the English lifestyle while foregrounding the claustrophobic nature of women’s lives. In “Morpho Eugenia”, the first novella, Byatt employs references to food throughout, such as when William states that, while away in the Amazon he had dreamt of “mild English sunshine, of simple and wonderful things such as bread, and butter, instead of endless cassava” (92). This is an allegorical tale, in which members of the Alabaster family are like butterflies or moths, while the drone-like servants bear similarities to worker ants. At the Midsummer Day strawberry picnic, the Wood Ants “dropped out of the sky into the cucumber sandwiches and the silver cream jugs” (81). This image of the insects’ entrapment provides hints of the stiflingly interdependent and incestuous nature of the family.

In contrast, the novella’s pleasurable domestic insights such as “the kitchens began to smell delightfully of the baking of batches of cakes and jellies and puddings” (61) indicate that the tasks in the house are examples of productive paid work by servants rather than enslavement within marriage. Also in this story, Byatt describes how the lady of the house,
Lady Alabaster, takes great pleasure in consuming food without the burden of preparing it. Indeed, she is defined by still life descriptions of what she eats and drinks, seeming “to spend most of her day drinking – tea, lemonade, ratafia, chocolate milk, barley water, herbal infusions, which were endlessly moving along the corridors, borne by parlourmaids, on silver trays. She also consumed large quantities of sweet biscuits, macaroons, butterfly cakes, little jellies and dariole moulds . . .” (26). As in Possession, Byatt embeds texts within these novellas, one of which is the tale “Things Are Not What They Seem”, in which food is described as a temptation: “tasty pies and pastries, fine jellies and blancmanges, heaps of fruit with the bloom on it, and vessels full of sparkling wine” (120). In this, as in her other fiction, Byatt describes fruit laid out artistically “in a fan, like a flower, shavings of melon, circles of glistening orange, fragrant black grapes and crisp white apples, and slices of crimson pomegranates studded with ebony seeds” (121). These pleasurable images of food indicate the positive side of domesticity, when it does not signify enslavement for women.

The second novella in Angels and Insects, “The Conjugial Angel”, tells of Emily, now Mrs Jesse, the sister of English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In her younger days she had been engaged to Arthur Hallam, who died tragically young. Indeed, Hallam had famously been a great friend of Tennyson’s and was immortalised in his elegiac masterpiece “In Memoriam”. Emily is a precursor to Byatt’s twentieth-century heroines such as Frederica, in that she is able to separate marriage from domesticity and to pursue artistic and intellectual interests: “Emily was not houseproud – she believed there were higher things in life than crockery and Sunday roasts” (178). Also in this novella, Byatt separates the accoutrements of a tea service from their domestic associations, using them to argue that her characters do indeed “live in a material time . . .” (167), as part of a treatise on Victorian materialism:

She poured tea. The oil-lamps cast a warm light on the teatray. The teapot was china, with little roses painted all over it, crimson and blush-pink and celestial
blue, and the cups were garlanded with the same flowers. There were sugared biscuits, each with a flower made out of piped icing, creamy, violet, snow-white. Sophy Sheekhy watched the stream of topaz-coloured liquid fall from the spout, steaming and aromatic. This too was a miracle, that gold-skinned persons in China and bronze-skinned persons in India should gather leaves which should come across the seas safely in white-winged ships, encased in lead, encased in wood, surviving storms and whirlwinds, sailing on under hot sun and cold moon, and come here, and be poured from bone-china, made from fine clay, moulded by clever fingers, in the Pottery Towns, baked in kilns, glazed with slippery shiny clay, baked again, painted with rosebuds by artist-hands holding fine, fine brushes, delicately turning the potter’s wheel and implanting, with a kiss of sable-hairs, floating buds on an azure ground, or a dead white ground, and that sugar should be fetched from where black men and women slaved and died terribly to make these delicate flowers that melted on the tongue like the scrolls in the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah, that flour should be milled, and milk shaken into butter, and both worked together into these momentary delights, baked in Mrs Jesse’s oven and piled elegantly onto a plate . . . (287)

By tracing the provenance of the pot of tea, Byatt highlights the processes involved in its production, thereby removing it from its domestic context and taking it into the realm of art.

Another way in which Byatt separates food from domesticity is by setting many verbal still lifes outside the home, thereby freeing women from the gender restrictions of the kitchen. One example is a picnic enjoyed by Roland and Maud when they visit Boggle Hole: “Fresh brown bread, white Wensleydale cheese, crimson radishes, yellow butter, scarlet tomatoes, round bright green Granny Smiths and a bottle of mineral water” (268). The strong
sense of colour in the foodstuffs comprising the picnic illustrates Byatt’s assertion that the visual images she saw when writing the novel had “something to do with a lot of different-coloured flowers on grass” (Tredell 65). In *The Shadow of the Sun*, a picnic prepared by Caroline is also displayed as an aesthetically-pleasing work of art:

> Caroline’s picnics were always splendid and successful; never too much and never too little. They were packed and served, chilled and protected, in plastic boxes and plates of all shapes and sizes and clear colours, without depth; Caroline spread a cloth on her rock, and arranged everything, glowing palely on it. She was pleased with it, she even twitched the leaves of the lettuce and arranged a curl of endive round a sculpted tomato as though she was creating a flower arrangement. (114)

As well as showing ‘art’ being created, these picnics demonstrate the removal of food from the domestic context, thereby providing a pleasurable view of women who are not imprisoned by what had often been regarded as their biological and cultural destiny.

Byatt also achieves this separation by portraying verbal still lifes in which domesticity is freed from gender. According to Sceats, in depictions of food preparation in literature “[g]ender is clearly a factor” (*Food, Consumption and the Body* 125), with females generally fulfilling the role of cook. However, Byatt’s verbal still lifes also depict males performing tasks such as shopping, food preparation and cooking, reflecting Byatt’s belief that domesticity should be separate from the feminine. In *Still Life*, even though Elinor takes on the traditional role of cooking, Alexander takes pleasure in engaging with her in many rituals centred on food, such as choosing recipes and shopping for ingredients: “He shopped for her, emptying from his briefcase in the kitchen a packet of fresh ravioli, a bag of soft parmesan, a vanilla pod. Every day there was something new: mackerel with fennel, a stew of small squids, fresh-risen pizza” (195). In *Babel Tower*, when Thomas lives with his four children in
Bloomsbury after Elinor has left him, he prepares meals such as “gammon and spinach and béchamel” (156) for his family and Frederica, who has left Nigel, taking her five-year-old son Leo with her. Alexander’s bedroom has now become the living room, in which Thomas, Alexander and Frederica gather to have tea and chocolate torte while discussing the latter’s future living arrangements. This is the first of several scenes in this novel which depict characters who do not form a conventional nuclear family taking pleasure in the performance of domestic tasks such as childrearing and cooking. Frederica works at home, reviewing manuscripts and sharing the domestic role with Thomas and Waltraut, the au pair. Byatt separates gender from domesticity when she states that Frederica “cooks supper with Thomas Poole, and she, Lizzie, Leo and Simon eat stuffed pancakes and fruit salad” (151).

Alexander’s new flat, too, is described in Still Life as pleasurable, bearing similarities to the Pooles’ in terms of its lightness and airiness: “The flat was pale and peaceful, straw and gold and blond wood: a lot of light came through high, fine-framed Georgian windows” (432). The fact that Alexander prepares a meal for Daniel shows his freedom from pre-conceived notions of domestic roles.

As part of this separation of domesticity and the feminine, Byatt sets up a distinction between the type of meals which once contributed to the disempowerment of women, and her preferred alternative – a no less elegant, but simple dinner party, augmented by food prepared by professionals outside the home. In Babel Tower, this type of no-fuss yet pleasurable meal is exemplified through Agatha’s preference for modernity over tradition:

These are the great days of the marathon home-cooked meal, the five-course delicious gourmandising, pâtés and prawns in cream, delicate soups and imaginative hors d’oeuvres, followed by estouffades and boeuf en croûte, by gigot and ducklings in cider, by stuffed carp and paupiettes of sole, followed by delicious salads of endive and oranges, watercress and cucumber, followed
by home-made tarts and soufflés, followed by a rich cheese board and possibly
devils on horseback. Agatha serves, always, an avocado salad, a roast chicken
with garlic, a tart from a French patisserie. (319)

For Byatt, the first type of meal, a product of the 1960s, is both labour-intensive and a
signifier of entrapment for women, while the second represents the freeing of domesticity
from gender. Byatt’s fiction includes many examples of the latter, cooked or partaken of
outside the kitchen or prepared by characters of both genders.

This chapter has shown that the feminine associations of the still life provide a vehicle
for Byatt’s exploration of domesticity. Also, by giving the genre such a strong presence in her
fiction, she makes a subtle argument on behalf of women artists. While her *ekphrastic*
descriptions of male canonical art reflect her own aesthetic tastes, she highlights the canon’s
limitations by including art by Matisse in which the male gaze may be said to objectify the
female subject. Regarding the issue of how women represent the world as makers of art,
Byatt’s ‘notional’ artworks by females are considered inferior to those of males because of
either their tendency toward ‘craftwork’ or their lack of ‘strength’. However, through the
success achieved by some of these women she highlights the gender inequities of the male
canon. Finally, Byatt teases out the complicated relationship between women and the
domestic, given that her writing covers the period when a desire to revalue domesticity has
accompanied the rise of feminism. She does this by celebrating the sensual and artistic
aspects of food, while nonetheless warning the reader that domesticity could prove to be a
form of enslavement, particularly within marriage.
CHAPTER 4  MORTAL PLEASURE

There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk.

(Fisher, M. F. K. *The Gastronomical Me* 353)

Like a narrative, eating is an extended event: it takes time to accomplish. Its effects and enjoyments happen not all at once but sequentially.

(Korsmeyer, C. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* 186)

As the second epigraph to this chapter states, eating “takes time to accomplish” (186), reinforcing the idea that “enjoyment” in the consumption of a meal is an extended experience for participants. The fact that this pleasure is slow to unfold makes eating an appropriate metaphor for reading, as it takes considerably longer to read a description of a painting than it does to look at the artwork itself. The metaphor is doubly apt in that eating and reading may likewise be regarded as forms of consumption. This chapter discusses how Byatt as a writer deliberately chooses realist description in order to tease out the association between time and the various pleasures to be experienced through both meals and *ekphrastic* descriptions.

Firstly, it explores the ways in which her verbal still lifes provide opportunities for her characters to interact with each other through pleasurable meals, noting that there are exceptions to these occasions in which sharing food may be an unpleasant experience. The chapter then extends the idea of pleasure to encompass the associations between food and sexuality and the ways these are shown in Byatt’s fiction. Finally, it returns to the idea that every still life may be regarded as a *vanitas* due to its depiction of the transience and impermanence of life. This is evident in Byatt’s many verbal still lifes that associate food and death, in that they evoke the concept of mortality for characters and readers alike.

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In his Clark Lectures of 1926, E. M. Forster analysed the function of food in the novel, stating rather humorously that “(f)ood in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, *seldom enjoy it*, and never digest it unless specifically asked to do so” (emphasis added 37). However pleasure is integral to most of Byatt’s verbal still lifes which portray characters engaged in domestic rituals, defined by Romines as “rituals performed in a house, a constructed shelter, which derive meaning from the protection and confinement a house can provide” (12). As Mezei and Briganti state, “[d]omestic space implies the everyday, the rituals of domesticity in their cyclical, repetitive ordinariness” (842). In many of these rituals, the meal is metonymic of the occasion itself, Meyers stating that “the food at these events offers far more than nourishment” (28). The majority of verbal still lifes in Byatt’s fiction illustrate Halligan’s association of food “with hospitality, the giving of pleasure to friends” (*Eat My Words* 13). These meals may also be looked at in the light of Richard Gill’s statement that “tea parties, cocktail parties, dinner parties, weekend parties, travelling parties” occur in novels “not simply to bring people together as plot demands but to suggest some kind of attempted community, whether frustrated or attained” (12). Pleasurable eating rituals do not have to involve an elaborate meal, such as when Penny and Primrose, the two frightened little girls in “The Thing in the Forest”, temporarily alleviate their fears through sharing “another square of chocolate” (6). However, at times they are long and drawn out affairs, the characters themselves being ‘consumed’ by the sheer pleasure of consumption.

Often Byatt renders laid tables as artworks, such gatherings taking on the status of ‘meal-as-spectacle’. The settings may be pleasurable elaborate constructions enjoyed at restaurants or at home on special occasions such as Christmas. In visual still lifes these meals stand in opposition to the *vanitas* and are known as “*pronkstilleven*” or “banquet-pieces”,
displaying “the sort of privileged pastoral return available only to the very rich. In the Dutch national diet (fish, cheese, bread, hutespot) fruit is a luxury” (Bryson 123-24), emphasising the great value of fruit such as oranges and lemons. One example of such a painting is William Kalf’s Still Life with a Nautilus Cup [Fig. 14], Bryson listing the valuable objects it depicts as “a Ming sugar-bowl, a complex-patterned Persian rug, façon de Venise glass” and “nautilus cup” (124).

Fig. 14. Willem Kalf, *Still Life with a Nautilus Cup*, Museo-Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
However, Sterling has said of this painting that “[t]he vases, goldsmith’s work, Ming porcelain and Oriental rugs which later accompanied the food were only intended to create an atmosphere of opulence and well-being; an orange or lemon, sugar and wine, sufficed to indicate a rich man’s table” (71). This still life represents textual and material pleasure both through its almost tactile and mimetic qualities as an oil painting and the colour and form of the objects it portrays, all of which signify a life conducted amid beauty and plenty.

While there are many examples of rich and extravagant meals in Byatt’s fiction, at times she conveys a more toned-down material pleasure, such as in a verbal still life depicting worn and simple objects in Still Life. In this vignette, Winifred and Bill Potter have become estranged and are reunited through their grandchildren after the tragic death of Stephanie and the subsequent inability of Daniel to cope with the children:

The large brown teapot shone mildly on a blue-checked tablecloth. Toast was in the toast rack and bread-and-butter cut in overlapping slices on a willow-patterned plate. Winifred had brought out again Marcus’s old heavy-rimmed dish inside which a faded Christopher Robin watched the Changing of the Guard with Alice. Mary had the dish, and Will had Frederica’s Peter Rabbit cup, plate and egg-cup. Winifred made toast soldiers for Will to dip in his boiled egg. There were spicy gingerbread men. She had held Mary at the table to press currant eyes into the spreadeagled figures Will had rolled and cut. They smiled candied peel smiles. (427)

Here the worn, utilitarian china and basic, home-made food items are described in such detail as to convey a certain rustic pleasure. The sharing and love within the family is echoed in the smiles of the gingerbread men. This illustrates the point of renowned American food writer M. F. K. Fisher that “our three basic needs, for food, security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others” (353). In
Possession, Roland and Maud’s first meal together is also simple, a cheap hotel meal of “home-made vegetable soup, plaice with shrimps, and profiteroles” (243). However, Byatt elaborates on this, with “the soup a thick casserole of roots and legumes, the fish an immense white sandwich of two plate-sized fillets containing a good half-pound of prawns between their solid flaps, the profiteroles the size of large tennis-balls, covered with a lake of bitter chocolate sauce” (243). The underlying romantic tension between the couple results in them being “nervous of real conversation” (243), so they find pleasure and relief in the comfort provided by the vast quantities of simple food.

At the opposite end of the pleasure spectrum, Byatt includes a description of luxury food items in The Biographer’s Tale:

We ate a salad of smoked halibut and marinated mushrooms, a juggled hare with chestnuts and spiced cabbage, a lemon syllabub and feathery biscuits. I mention this food – I hate food in ordinary novels, though I would forgo none of Proust’s or Tolstoy’s, or Balzac’s – because I saw I was horribly hungry . . . and . . . it made me feel spoiled and soft and unreal. And because they had gone to some trouble . . . (243)

Firstly, even though it is a mere listing of foods, this still life nevertheless relays the type of pleasure to be experienced in a meal in which one feels “spoiled” and “soft”. Secondly, it reveals Byatt’s awareness that she follows in the tradition of the European realist writers such as Proust, Tolstoy and Balzac. Finally, it bears witness to the fact that food in literature is a marker of class and social background. This quintessentially English meal from The Biographer’s Tale is prepared by Erik and Christophe, partners in life and owners of Puck’s Girdle, the travel bookshop in the novel. Its rare ingredients indicate an awareness of history and culture by the couple, whose flat is “a mixture of exaggerated Regency and Victorian Gothic, with carved silver thrones, peacock-feathered china, thick shimmering velvet curtains
and hosts of small lamps . . .” (243). The meal reflects the grandeur and luxury of the room itself and acts as a metonym for their opulent lifestyle. An article by Sceats quotes Brillat-Savarin’s words, “Dis-moi ce que tu manges [et] je te dirai ce que tu es . . .”, or “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are” (“Flesh and Bones” 139), and this idea is indeed evident in Byatt’s fiction. Her descriptions of food support the view that in “British culture some foods are inextricably bound up with class: the exclusivity of grouse, lobster or venison, the middle-class nicety of cucumber sandwiches and the sustaining comfort of Lancashire hotpot bear only partially the cost of ingredients” (Sceats Food, Consumption and the Body 126). For Byatt, food denotes the socio-cultural background of the characters involved in its preparation and consumption.

This close relationship between food and class in Byatt’s fiction reflects the observation by Counihan and Van Esterik that “(f)ood marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions” (1), supporting Barthes’s definition of food as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (“Toward a Psychosociology” 21). One example of Byatt’s still lifes functioning as indicators of class differences is seen in the contrast between the Severells and Oliver Canning in The Shadow of the Sun. As Campbell states, “Oliver, whose inverted snobbery, derived from his working-class roots, leads him to eat canned luncheon meat and beans is, Anna thinks, using this food ‘as a way of keeping her in her place as a Severell, and of emphasizing Oliver’s natural place’” (39). In The Game, Byatt once again comments on the class distinctions between her characters through verbal still life descriptions. A scene is depicted in which the upper-middle-class Julia, Simon and Deborah are eating a pleasurable meal cooked by Julia who “put veal and peas together into the oven to warm and brought out the avocado cocktails” (180). In contrast, in the same kitchen Mrs Terry, from the disadvantaged family staying in the household, is concocting a meal consisting of “a plate piled high with smoke-smelling
fritters” and “Julia’s Finnish tureen full of disintegrating cauliflower’” (181). Here, the negative connotations of “smoke-smelling” and “disintegrating” reinforce the class barrier between the two families.

In Possession, Byatt uses one sentence as shorthand for this concept of food as a social signifier in her description of the “house by the stables” (416) where Roland’s ex-girlfriend Val stays with the solicitor Euan MacIntyre after his horse wins at Newmarket: “It was the sort of house where breakfast was kidneys, bacon, mushrooms, or kedgeree in silver dishes” (416). The house and Euan represent for Val the beginning of a life of pleasure for she has, until now, been “no good at being happy” (417). Conversely, this kind of upper-class house is also represented rather negatively by Bran House, the home of Frederica’s husband Nigel. Breakfast at Bran House signifies an upper-class, patriarchal world in which Frederica is powerless in the face of Nigel’s sisters Olive and Rosalind and the housekeeper Pippy Mammott:

They are all round the breakfast table, looking out over the lawn to the moat and the fields and the woods. Leo is eating a boiled egg with toast soldiers, Olive and Rosalind are eating bacon and egg and fresh mushrooms, which they are praising as they eat. Nigel is helping himself to more mushrooms from the hotplate on the sideboard when Pippy Mammott comes in with the post. (79)

Against the background of this verbal still life, an episode takes place in which Nigel snatches the letter and poem sent to Frederica by her friend Hugh Pink. To deprive Frederica of poetry is to deprive her of her liberty, this scene the catalyst for her escape from Nigel and Bran House. Given Byatt’s other uses of the metaphor of the egg as a symbol of both containment and rebirth, perhaps the proliferation of eggs consumed at this breakfast signify both Frederica’s current imprisonment and future new life.
In *Possession*, too, verbal still lifes of meals are at times used to depict class differences between the twentieth-century characters, particularly Roland and Maud. When Euan invites them to dinner at the White Hart, the still life description of the meal is underpinned by much social anxiety on Roland’s part. Although he is in love with Maud, he is worried because “in some dark and outdated English social system of class, which he did not believe in, but felt obscurely working and gripping him, Maud was County, and he was urban lower-middle-class” (425). Roland’s insecurities are reflected in the tight formality of the food and setting, as well as the relationships between those gathered at the table:

They sat at a corner table with a pink cloth and stiff pink napkins, in a large dining-room, with glittering crystal chandeliers and panelled walls. There was an autumn posy on the table: dusty pink asters, mauve chrysanthemums, a few freesias. Euan ordered champagne and they settled down to smoked salmon, pheasant with trimmings, Stilton and lemon soufflé. Roland found his pheasant tough. The bread sauce reminded him of his mother’s Christmas cooking. . . . Maud and Toby Byng turned out to have childhood friends in common. Euan and Maud talked about hunting. Roland felt peripheral, a watcher. (433-34)

The formal table-setting and expensive food underscore Roland’s powerlessness, illustrating Sceats’s point that “[c]ommunicative or social eating can . . . be problematic in a number of ways. Power relations of all kinds operate in and around the kitchen, and, as Foucault might suggest, acts (or discourses) of apparent communion mask the exercise of power” (“Flesh and Bones” 142). In Byatt’s description, the food acts as a signifier of the power of those in control at the table, namely the upper-class Euan, Maud and Toby Byng.

However, Byatt’s still life descriptions indicate her awareness that at times, economic circumstances are not necessarily an indicator of class or good breeding. In *Possession*, this is
particularly obvious in the case of Sir George and Lady Joan Bailey, whose economic situation has reduced them to living in abject conditions on the ground floor of the crumbling family estate, Seal Court. When Roland and Maud visit them as part of their search for literary clues, “Maud, inured to poor heating and the threadbare, was still a little disturbed by the degree of discomfort represented by the sad lighting” (77). In keeping with this, Roland and Maud share a rather humble meal with them, dining “by the kitchen fire on pieces of frozen cod and chips and a rather good jam rolypoly pudding” (145). However, the Baileys still perform the class rituals which years of tradition have entrenched in them, serving tea “in an exquisite Spode tea service, with a silver sugarbowl and a plateful of hot buttered toast with Gentleman’s Relish or honey” (145). For Byatt, the innate breeding of the Baileys is captured in the elegance and aesthetic pleasure inherent in the material objects, and somewhat mitigates their straitened circumstances.

Despite the pleasurable aspects of this afternoon tea ceremony, Byatt is here describing a ritual which is “potentially the most awkward eating occasion, especially in English culture, and one which writers have frequently exploited for maximum social unease” (Sceats Food, Consumption and the Body 148). To illustrate her point, Sceats offers the example of the teatime battle in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest, stating that the “combination of female space, ritualised intercourse and the (literary) association of teatime with battle almost prescribe certain kinds of exchange” (149). This is exemplified by certain afternoon tea scenes in the quartet. When Nigel goes away on frequent business trips, Frederica must stay at Bran House with her son Leo, Nigel’s sisters and Pippy. On one occasion in Babel Tower, her friend Hugh comes to tea, a stiflingly formal occasion which does not permit intimacy: “The tea is brought on a trolley, and handed about by Pippy Mammott. Olive and Rosalind sit side by side on a sofa covered with pink and silver-green blowsy blooms printed on linen. . . . Pippy Mammott hands out scones, slices of cake, tea,
more tea” (21). The rigid social routine within the house is reflected in the formality of the women and Nigel’s “patriarchal language and behaviour” (Campbell 24) which he uses to control Frederica. An earlier tea at Bran House in Still Life describes a “... Georgian silver teapot, reflecting firelight and misty outside light, delicate Spode cups, a platter of fine sandwiches, a crumbled half chocolate cake, on a lightly starched damask cloth on a large dark tray. There was a silver creamer, and a saucer of sliced half-rounds of lemon, glistening and acrid” (430). Here, despite the beautiful material objects, the word “acrid” is rather telling, as it foreshadows Frederica’s future unhappiness in the house.

When Frederica goes to Spessendborough in Babel Tower with Olive, Rosalind, Pippy and Leo, “[t]hey like to have cream tea in the Spinning Wheel, scones and raspberry jam and Cornish clotted cream. The teapots have knitted teacosies with fluted panels and woolly bows on top” (104). Frederica escapes from this stifling parody of the tea ceremonies at Bran House to a telephone box to ring her Cambridge friend, Alan Melville, the box’s claustrophobic space ironically symbolising her freedom. Afternoon tea also features in the short story “The Thing in the Forest”, almost as a symbolic gesture by the two women, Penny and Primrose, who reunite after some forty years. When they accidentally meet in the mansion where they had last seen each other, “[b]eing English, the recourse they thought of was tea. There was a tea-room near the great house, in a converted stable at the back. There they stood silently side by side, clutching floral plastic trays spread with briar roses, and purchased scones, superior raspberry jam in tiny jam jars, little plastic tubs of clotted cream” (25-6). This rather down-market verbal still life is another parody of the custom of afternoon tea, and emphasises the awkwardness of the situation.

In the first two parts of the quartet, Byatt uses the tea-time ritual as a circular narrative device which both unites the beginnings and endings of each story and provides a parallel between the two books. At the end of the prologue to The Virgin in the Garden, when
Frederica invites Daniel to “[s]tay and have tea” (16) with her and Alexander at Fortnum’s after the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, Daniel declines. Yet at the novel’s end Daniel gives “Frederica a cup of tea” (428) while they sit watching Stephanie comfort Marcus after he has been mistreated by Lucas Simmonds. Daniel again declines Frederica’s invitation after the visit to the Royal Academy in the prologue to Still Life, this time to have “coffee in Fortnum and Mason’s” (13). However, at the novel’s end Daniel comes to Alexander’s flat after Stephanie’s death and is comforted by a meal and, significantly, a cup of coffee.

Byatt also uses verbal still lifes of meals in order to delineate the personalities of her characters. One example occurs in Possession when Mortimer Cropper, James Blackadder and Leonora Stern, three scholars also on the trail of Ash and LaMotte, meet to have dinner. The verbal still life description of the food they consume says much about the characters of each:

[Cropper] ordered lavishly, a huge platter of *fruits de mer* to start with, a mound of shells and whiskers and stony carapaces, surrounded by seaweed on a metal pedestal, followed by a huge boiled sea-spider or araignée, a hot angry scarlet, crusted with bumps and armoured crestings, waving a multiplication of feelers. He was provided with an armoury of implements for this feast, like a mediaeval torture chamber, pincers and grippers, prods and corkscrew skewers.

Blackadder ate hake abstemiously. Leonora ate lobster . . . (428)

Cropper’s name implies the Grim Reaper, a reference to his fascination with the dead writers whose artefacts he covets. The food he eats is menacing, as are the implements he uses, reflecting his aggressive stance and determination to find out the truth about the poets. During the meal, he “wielded a claw-cracker and a serpent-tongued pick” (428).
Blackadder’s meal is illustrative of his “gloomy temperament and Scottish dryness” (303), while Leonora’s lobster exemplifies her preference for the finer things in life. Also in this novel, Mortimer Cropper breakfasts at the home of Mrs Daisy Wapshott whom he hopes to swindle out of the letter from Ash which she possesses:

[She] waited on him, despite his protestations, with a huge plate of ham and eggs, mushrooms and tomatoes, sausages and baked beans. He ate triangular toasts, and marmalade from a cut-glass dish with a swinging lid and a scallop shell spoon. He drank strong tea from a silver pot under a teacosy embroidered to resemble a nesting hen. He abominated tea. (96)

This still life conveys a lack of elegance and refinement, the objects reflecting their petit-bourgeois owner, “a comfortable bosomy lady in a crepe-de-chine dress and a pink angora cardigan” (96), whose suburban strip of lawn has “plastic fencing separating it from identical strips on each side” (96) and whose house possesses a tasteless, fussy pink and purple bathroom.

On another occasion, Cropper lunches at a restaurant called L’Escargot with Ash’s descendant, Hildebrand Ash, dining on a meal which conveys considerable gastronomic pleasure, of “magret de canard, turbot and earthy new little turnips” (304). When he and Hildebrand stay at the Rowan Tree Inn on their way to rob Ash’s grave, they enjoy another pleasurable meal when they “ate by candlelight, salmon mousse in lobster sauce, pheasant with all the trimmings, Stilton, sorbet cassis maison” (490). Ironically, the candlelight sets the conspiratorial tone of the meal. Byatt uses a similar technique in the short story “On The Day That E. M. Forster Died”, in which a meal tells much about the characters who participate. The writer Mrs Smith has lunch with Conrad, an old acquaintance from university days: “The lunch had been expensive – mussels, turbot, zabaglione, wine. Mrs Smith had scrutinized Conrad, who ate and drank with passion. He ate all her new potatoes and all his,
glistening with Hollandaise sauce, and left an empty sauceboat. He wiped his lips with a
damask napkin: his face also glistened with exertion and butter” (140). Conrad’s inelegant
consumption of the meal conspicuously reveals his attitude to life as one of greed and
passion, thus exemplifying Byatt’s use of food as a marker of character.

In The Biographer’s Tale, a regular customer of Puck’s Girdle where Phineas works,
“instituted a curious habit of consuming very small meals” while in the shop, producing

. . . from a small leather satchel a metal plate or dish (possibly silver, even)
and an unfolding three-pronged silvery fork, not unlike the trident of a
retiarius. There was also a kind of gentleman’s flick-knife, with a fine, wicked
blade. He would dissect a small quail, or cut paper-thin slices from a strip of
bloody meat. He would have a fresh roll and a little pat of butter, and this
would be followed by fruit. He called me over once, to watch him dissect a
ripe peach. I watched him insert his blade in the crease between the two
rounds of the fruit, and then make a circle of overlapping half-moons round
the kernel with fragments of pink flesh still adhering to it. He offered me a
slice. I backed away. I did not want his fruit-flesh on a silver dish. On another
occasion he called me over to watch him use yet another instrument – a long,
fine corkscrew, a lacquered tube – to extract the cork from a half-bottle of
Château Lacoste. He pushed it in with rhythmic screwing motions, and a smile
on the corner of his mouth. (142-43)

These menacing domestic implement later become metaphors for the sexual predilections of
the customer, Maurice Bossey. When Phineas is browsing websites which Bossey has
provided, he finds that they are “of a pornographic nature. . . . I suddenly saw the point, so to
speak, of the semiotic thrust of all Maurice Bossey’s little implements, his knife, his screw,
his pierce-and-cutter” (170). This verbal still life illustrates Byatt’s use of food and objects
associated with its consumption as semiotic markers of character. It is also an example of a meal which conveys the opposite of aesthetic and material pleasure.

Byatt includes several verbal still lifes which are geographically appropriate to the settings of her novels, resembling other writers such as James Joyce who, Brady argues, “creates rich images of urban places like Dublin through sensory descriptions in his various novels” (180). In her verbal still lifes of food, Byatt draws predominantly from the cultural traditions of Britain and France. In Possession, she evokes a pleasurable experience through Roland’s “first French meal in France”, in which “he was overcome with precise sensuality, with sea food, with fresh bread, with sauces whose subtlety required and defied analysis” (334). On another occasion, also in France, Roland and Maud “sat over buckwheat pancakes in Pont-Aven, and drank cider from cool earthenware pitchers” (422). In another description from Possession Byatt, like Proust, writes of the ability of food to trigger memory. While Roland is in France,

he had become addicted to a pale, chilled, slightly sweet pudding called Îles Flottantes, which consisted of a white island of foam floating in a creamy yellow pool of vanilla custard, haunted by the ghost, no more, of sweetness. As he and Maud packed hurriedly, and he turned the car towards the Channel, he thought how much he would regret this, how the taste would fade and diminish in his memory. (425)

Like Proust’s, this description conveys sensual pleasure, the dessert possessing the potential to be Roland’s ‘madeleine’, although he recognises that it will probably not be so.

Roland’s obvious enjoyment of French food and culture is in stark contrast to that of many English travellers to Europe, such as those undertaking the “Grand Tour” in the nineteenth century who, as Reay Tannahill has observed, “ended up in Rome, where they admired the architecture and antiquities of the Classical world and complained bitterly about
the food” (Food in History 277). In the quartet, Frederica’s youthful experience as an au pair in France is portrayed as being in stark contrast to Roland’s enjoyable trip there. Her experiences have no literary referent, so many of them are not pleasurable for her. As has been demonstrated, both the consumption of food and descriptions of meals by writers such as Proust or Elizabeth David take time and pleasure in the unfolding, and the memory of one enhances the other. She was taken “to the covered fish market at dawn to buy fish for bouillabaisse, which held no romance for her for she had not then read [Ford Madox] Ford’s description of the great bouillabaisse in the Calanques” (68). However, back in England several years later, Frederica goes to the French restaurant Chez Victor on her first date with John Ottokar in Babel Tower. Now a convert to French food, Frederica recalls her earlier experiences in France. The restaurant food “reminds her, amongst dark green paint and etched glass, of the heat of Provence, . . . wine and garlic. . . . They have pâte, soupe de poissons, skate in black butter, an entrecôte sauce béarnaise, pommes dauphinoises, an excellent salad, a perfect tarte au citron” (453). The contrast between the degrees of pleasure inherent in these two verbal still lifes highlights Frederica’s progress on her journey as woman and artist through the quartet.

Many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes are indicative of what may be termed continental cosmopolitanism. The plethora of references to Elizabeth David in the quartet indicate that many of Byatt’s characters, such as Alexander, the Pooles, Frederica and Agatha, possess a rather sophisticated view of food, enjoying meals with European influences whether in England or France. As has been noted in the Introduction to the present study, Byatt’s verbal still lifes of such meals bear a remarkable similarity to David’s food writing in their employment of sensuous imagery. In Still Life, for example, Byatt describes a French lunch in a similar manner to David:
Lunch was good: little herb omelettes, raw smoked ham, huge pumpkin-indented scarlet tomatoes, black olives with garlic and pepper, glistening, wrinkled and hot. There was a lot of red wine, Côtes du Ventoux, and a lot of good crusty bread. There was sharp, fresh goat cheese and rose-orange Cavaillon melons, green-gold like legendary serpents outside, into whose fluted pink hollows Crowe ceremoniously poured pink, sweet Beaumes-de-Venise wine. (95-6)

David’s descriptions of a meal in France employs a similar level of textual detail which allows her readers to picture and, indeed, to enjoy it:

Lunch is going to be a feast. Our red peppers are to be impaled on the electric spit and roasted . . . Over them we strew chopped parsley and garlic and leave them to mature in their dressing. We shall eat them after we have had our bowls of hot raviolis, cooked one minute, according to instructions, in a good chicken broth . . . With fresh brown bread – it always has a good crackly crust – our sarriette-strewn magnane and a nice creamy little St Marcellin, plus a hunk of that excellent tourteau with our coffee . . . (250)

Both writers convey and provoke a high degree of textual pleasure through these verbal still lifes, regardless of the fact that the reader may be unfamiliar with the food being described.

In contrast to her generally Anglo- and Eurocentric depictions of food, in some of her short stories, Byatt draws from the cuisine of Asia for her verbal still lifes. In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, she describes meals consumed in Turkey during a conference: “They ate stuffed peppers and vineleaves, kebabs and smoky aubergines in little restaurants; they made excursions and ate roasted fishes at a trestle table set by a tiny harbour” (152). In the Grand bazaar, the protagonist Gillian is brought “cups of Turkish coffee, tulip-shaped glasses
of rose tea” (179). Also in this story is a still life description of a room service meal, in a Turkish hotel, of “charred vegetable salad, smoked turkey, melons and passion fruit sorbet; . . . a bowl of fresh figs and pomegranates and some intensely rose-perfumed loukoum” (207). However, the reader experiences a certain sense of familiarity in these exotic ingredients. As Lloyd writes:

Written still lifes, however, at least in my experience, tend not to offer that strong sense of place that painted still lifes convey. In part this may be because their function seems to be above all to emphasize universality through objects we interpret as part of our own experience. Even when, for instance, Byatt names specific shells or Woolf specifies particular flowers, the effect on the reader seeing them with the eye of the imagination is that of familiarity; even when books in a written still life are named, we see them less as markers of place than as indicators of character, class or gender. And globalization has so extended our awareness of the world’s bounty that we do not necessarily associate passion fruit or potatoes, rhododendrons or camellias with their country of origin. (147-48)

The lack of strangeness in these written descriptions may be because the act of reading can give us time to compare the new information to what we know, whereas viewing an image usually takes much less time, making it difficult to locate points of reference in our past experience.

This familiar quality of many of Byatt’s verbal still lifes may be seen in such examples as the previously discussed examples of the meal in a Chinese restaurant in Bloomsbury in “The Chinese Lobster”, or the London market stalls selling foods originating in Europe and Asia in Still Life. While Byatt sets the story “Baglady” in a generically Asian city, the only cultural markers are references to the “Good Fortune Shopping Mall” and the “Precious Jade Hotel”. The verbal still life of a breakfast table, which is “beautifully laid with
peach-coloured damask, bronze cutlery, and little floating gardens in lacquered dishes of waxy flowers that emit gusts of perfume” (185) could be located almost anywhere, the only indication of the vaguely ‘Asian’ flavour of the setting conveyed by the lacquered dishes. In “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, the djinn conjures a room-service meal with what can only be described as a distinctly ‘international’ feel, “adding dates, sherbet, quails, marrons glacés and two slices of tarte aux pommes to the feast spread before them” (208) which, though exotic, at the same time feels familiar.

The majority of the food depicted by Byatt, however, is readily identified with the Anglo-Celtic tradition. Many of these meals which may be regarded as typically ‘English’ are examples of ‘comfort food’, the very name conjuring pleasurable associations. Heldke defines “comfort foods” as “those familiar foods that we turn to, in order to soothe ourselves after a hard day, or to treat ourselves on a Sunday morning” (11). In recent years, comfort foods have migrated from the home to the restaurant, Elspeth Probyn noting that “[t]he 1980s notion of comfort food (the expensive bowls of mashed potatoes and melted cheese, and bread-and-butter pudding) was a celebration of nursery food” (24). Halligan terms this genre “granny food” (Taste of Memory 93). Regardless of how they are termed, these dishes possess connotations of being pleasantly soothing though somewhat bland, like puddings and custards, in many ways the opposite of much of the European-influenced food portrayed. In Possession, some examples of these foods do provide pleasure, but at times they signal discomfort, such as the supper in Babel Tower of “shepherd’s pie and baked apples with honey and raisins” (37) which Pippy has made for Frederica and Nigel because the latter likes it. The meal foreshadows an episode of bullying by Nigel over Hugh’s visit. Comfort food also has a negative role in “The Thing in the Forest”, when Penny and Primrose have “the kind of conversation children have about things they really disliked, things that upset, or frightened them. Semolina pudding with its grainy texture, mushy peas, fat on roast meat”
Later in this story, the children’s fear is associated with the negative connotations of the food which is served to them: “Irish stew and rice pudding with a dollop of blood-red jam” (8-9). As an adult, Primrose “remembered the semolina and the rather nasty blackberry jam, the taste and the texture, to this day” (38). In this case, food may be said to represent discomfort rather than comfort. The many verbal still lifes involving comfort food are illustrative of Byatt’s investment of food with qualities beyond its status as inanimate object, endowing it with the power to heal or to harm.

In Byatt’s fairytales, foodstuffs take on a symbolic role in a slightly different way to that which has been considered so far. In the short story “Cold”, for example the protagonist Fiammarosa is a princess who is pale-skinned and golden-haired, and “milky . . . like white rose petals” (117), the food she eats rich with pleasurable associations. Because she is pronounced “delicate” (117), she is to be fed comfort foods such as “concentrated soups, full of meat juices and rich with vegetables, she must have creams and zabagliones, fresh fruits and nourishing custards” (118). As her name would suggest, she is associated with the colour rose, and has a “taste for water-ices, flavoured with blackberry and raspberry, and for chilled slices of water-melon” (119). Also in keeping with her colour associations of pink and white, she eats the ultimate comfort food “white bread and jam” (123). When the Princess’s father invites suitors to court her, Prince Sasan responds. He sends gifts which represent his land, which is typified by heat and glass. One of the gifts is a glass tree, on which hangs glass fruit: “oranges and lemons, silver pears and golden apples, rich plums and damsons, ruddy pomegranates and clustered translucent crimson berries and grapes with the bloom on them” (146). When Prince Sasan arrives, he shares a meal with Fiammarosa, consisting of “sliced peaches, in red wine, on a nest of crushed ice” (152). When the two travel to Sasan’s Palace, there is “fruit on glass dishes” and “wonderful white jugs of latticino work, with frivolous frilled lips, containing pomegranate juices or lemonade, or swaying dark wine” (160-61).
Ironically, Fiammarosa, because of the food she is consuming, begins to return to the way she was as a girl – “milky, limp and listless” (170) and she “felt she had become a milk-jelly, a blancmange, a Form of a woman, tasteless and unappetising” (170). This story may be said to take literally the adage “You are what you eat”.

As well as its numerous examples of characters enjoying the pleasures of food, Byatt’s fiction also explores its opposite – the trope of ‘not eating’. This is at times, though not always, associated with anorexia in female characters, as in “The Chinese Lobster”. The story uses verbal still lifes to contrast the two academics, Gerda and Perry, who love Matisse, with the student, Peggi, who allegedly does not. The academics’ conversation is interspersed with still life descriptions of Asian dishes such as “steamed oysters with ginger and spring onions” (107). This is an extended still life which unfolds over several pages, conveying aesthetic and sensual pleasure as the two “chat agreeably, composing a meal with elegant variations, a little hot flame of chilli here, a ghostly fragrant sweetness of lychee there, the slaty tang of black beans, the elemental earthy crispness of beansprouts” (108). However, the negativity generated by Peggi intrudes on the meal when Gerda produces a letter of complaint by the student “during the first course, which is glistening viridian seaweed and sesame toasts” (109). Ironically, Peggi is described as suffering from anorexia nervosa, and this knowledge is juxtaposed to the intricate and mouth-watering descriptions of food. The meal is described as an artwork-in-progress, whereas Peggi’s artistic efforts are regarded by Perry as a desecration of Matisse’s art.

In this meal even a bowl of plain rice is held up as a feast for the senses. Perry states that “[w]hen I was in China, I learned to end a meal with pure rice, quite plain, and to taste every grain. It is one of the most beautiful tastes in the world, freshly-boiled rice” (113). Food is also conflated with art in a description of oranges, which “are bright, they are glistening with juice, they are packed with little teardrop sacs full of sweetness” (130). This
leads Perry to contemplate the fact that “Matisse was the first to understand orange” (130). In contrast, Peggi is described also in terms of food, although negatively: “Her skin is like a potato and her body is like a decaying potato” (115). Her hair is also described using a domestic image as “like a carefully preserved old frying pan, grease undisturbed by water” (115). After the meal, Gerda concludes that whatever the outcome of Peggi’s letter, the “bright forms” of Matisse’s art – “golden oranges, rosy limbs, a voluptuously curved dark violin-case, in a black room” – will “go on shining in the dark” (133). Byatt presents the pleasurable and ‘civilised’ meal as an ironic counterpoint to the academics’ disregard for Peggi’s condition. Their love of Matisse and their gourmanderie is exposed as a self-interested, even selfish, love of pleasure, and a symptom of their inhumanity.

Another example of Byatt’s fiction which portrays the act of not eating, while it is not anorexia, is “Racine and the Tablecloth”. In this story, misbehaviour in church by schoolgirls is punished by their teacher, Miss Crichton-Walker, who states: “I shall stand here, without food, during all today’s meals. I shall eat nothing. You can watch me while you eat, and think about what you have done” (19). The narrator refers to this as “an extraordinary act of vicarious penance” (19) in which “[t]hrough all three meals of the day they ate in silence, forks clattering vigorously on plates, iron spoons scraping metal trays, amongst the smell of browned shepherd’s pie and institutional custard, whilst that little figure stood, doll-like, absurd and compelling . . .” (19). The extremely negative still life description of the shepherd’s pie and custard, which are, ironically, generally regarded as comfort food, makes the teacher’s choice appear the more appetising alternative.
Food and Sexuality

Byatt’s writing is informed by the fact that both the act of eating and the technique of *ekphrasis* are similar in the considerable amount of time taken for pleasure to unfold. This concept of temporality is also integral to her representations of sexual pleasure, with many of her verbal still lifes taking considerable time in describing both the sexual experience and the meal it follows. This relationship between food and sex has long been the focus of literary, Freudian, Jungian and other theories. As Probyn states, “[p]ractices of preparing and eating food are, of course, highly sensual and sometimes sexual. Think about stuffing zucchini flowers: with batons of cheese, rub alongside the full, bursting stamen, and enfold the flower’s organ, cheese with petals twisted” (59). Sceats has analysed the relationship between food and sexuality in women’s fiction within a psychoanalytical framework. She states that “fiction – like life – is filled with occasions on which courting, seduction or even the simple affirmation of love are accompanied by food or drink in one way or another” (*Food, Consumption and the Body* 21), offering many examples from novels by Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and others. Marion Halligan agrees, stating that “[f]ood in novels is never simply itself, however thoroughly and successfully it is that . . . it’s about sex” (*Eat My Words* 85). However, while Sceats offers several examples of food forming an integral part of literary sex play, such as in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and the Japanese film *Tampopo* (23), Byatt’s fiction does not portray as close a relationship between the sexual and the gastronomic.

The strong link between food and sexuality is conveyed through the vocabulary that unites the two. As Korsmeyer suggests, a “common denominator in all the associations of female bodies and edibles is the ambiguous meaning of ‘appetite,’ which connotes both sexual and gustatory craving for satisfaction” (168). Sceats refers to a review by British writer Angela Carter that uses the term “gastroporn”, which “itself suggests a confusion of
appetites” (*Food, Consumption and the Body* 25). Probyn also references this term, stating that “British celebrity food writer/chef, Nigella Lawson, tells us that ‘we are all now gastropornographers’. [Lawson] argues that ‘it makes perfect sense that in our puritanical age the last allowable excess should be gastroporn’” (59). Sceats herself uses the terms “eating-as-foreplay” and “seduction meals” (59). Byatt’s fiction unites food and sexuality in several verbal still lifes of pre- or post-coital meals. The quartet depicts verbal still lifes as a backdrop to seduction scenes, generally involving Frederica, but also Daniel and Stephanie, Thomas Poole, Alexander and Jacqueline Winwar. As Sorensen has stated, “Frederica dallies with four men in *Virgin* and with eight more in *Still Life*. In *Babel Tower* she limits her lovers to three” (*Verbal and Visual Language* 86). Her study was completed prior to the publication of *A Whistling Woman*, in which Frederica has a romantic liaison with Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, falling pregnant to him. Byatt also depicts another set of lovers in this novel — Agatha and Wijnnobel — whose secret relationship is revealed in the final pages.

Byatt has publicly commented on the potential difficulties of finding the correct language to describe sexual activity between characters. A videotaped interview between Byatt and Iris Murdoch which took place at around the time of the release of *Still Life* addresses this issue:

*Iris Murdoch:* You’re very good at describing sexual intercourse. . . . Your descriptions of sex are extraordinarily somehow strong . . . and absolutely unlike a lot of the more kind of vulgar or emotionally sort of stirring in a superficial sense descriptions of this business.

*Antonia Byatt:* It’s terribly difficult to choose words particularly for describing that kind of thing. . . . One does have to think endlessly about the connotations and denotations of words for describing sexual intercourse and some of them you can’t have and you can become either too clinical or too pornographic.
Iris Murdoch: It’s absolutely non-pornographic, I mean, it’s a model to show it can be done . . . . (“A. S. Byatt with Iris Murdoch” n. pag.)

Also in this interview, Byatt believes that describing sexuality is part of her philosophy that it “is possible to be truthful, if you look tidily enough and fully enough at something you can describe it in an accurate manner” (n. pag.). Kenyon concurs, stating that “Byatt gives practical insights into female reactions to lovemaking which show how much Mary McCarthy’s The Group (1963) encouraged the imparting of useful detailed knowledge” (73).

This accurate and detailed language is nevertheless able to convey the pleasure experienced in most of these encounters.

As well as employing factual detail, Byatt uses metaphorical language to link food and sexuality. One example is through an extended metaphor spanning the last two books of the quartet, in which a cake decoration is removed from its domestic context to become a metonym of sexuality. When Luk and Jacqueline visit the Potter home in Babel Tower there is a Christmas cake, of which Mary says “we put the Fylingdales Early Warning System in the middle” (236). This structure foreshadows the eventual sexual relationship between Luk and Frederica, reappearing at the end of the quartet. When Frederica searches for Luk to tell him of her pregnancy, she and Leo find him on the moors. The three stand contemplating their future together, while in “[t]he distance, the man-made Early Warning System, three perfect, pale, immense spheres, like visitors from another world, angelic or demonic, stood against the golds and greens and blues” (421). In this final scene from A Whistling Woman these structures, which represent the trio, are no longer confined within a domestic space but have been elevated to an artistic plane, taking on the metaphorical aspects of sculpture.

28 RAF Fylingdales, a British Royal Air Force station in the North York Moors, England, is a radar base and forms part of the United States-controlled Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS).
An important aspect of the link between food and sexuality in Byatt’s fiction is its connection to power. Emma Parker’s essay on the politics of eating in Margaret Atwood’s novels observes that “[w]omen are rarely depicted eating in literature because . . . consumption embodies coded expressions of power” (349). Further, she states that, for Atwood, “eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men” (349). While in some fiction, the imbalance of power between genders may be expressed in sexual perversions such as sado-masochism, this does not occur in Byatt’s work, although Frederica’s marriage to Nigel is characterised by his physical violence towards her. He does not appreciate art or language, both of which are extremely important to Frederica, and is loud, aggressive and controlling.

The first time she is seduced by him is in his room in a “flat full of young stockbrokers” (389), the scene depicted in Still Life in terms of a rather sketchy verbal still life description. Nigel “cut doorstops of bread and slices of crumbly white cheese. . . . [h]e pulled out two old dining chairs and a leaf of the table, and they sat side by side and chewed the sandwiches, with glasses of a red wine which Nigel produced from inside the wardrobe” (390). This makeshift meal, a somewhat unpleasant experience, is an ironic prelude to an intensely pleasurable sexual relationship for Frederica, her desire described in gastronomic terms as “her greed” (392). In Babel Tower, she acknowledges that she never loved Nigel, but that he “taught me desire” (314). The failure of her marriage indicates that Frederica requires a relationship which is founded in the ideal world of reading and art.

Byatt demonstrates this in Babel Tower when Frederica reflects that “[b]efore Nigel, the men I loved were Alexander and Raphael. . . . they were beautiful and untouchable . . . They were what I loved, as paintings are shining” (314). However, her relationship with her teacher Raphael Faber is doomed perhaps because of his elevation to the artistic plane. As Frederica tells Thomas Poole, she was in love “with the idea of Raphael Faber. The
unattainable, you know, the teacher, the tabu, the monastic” (161). Byatt conveys the hopelessness of this unrequited love through a series of still life descriptions in which food underscores its negativity. When Frederica visits Raphael in his rooms in *Still Life*, he “was serving white wine from a chilled tall glass jug. On his desk was a plain silver tray, with green-stemmed glasses. The lighting – mainly from high ceiling fittings – was sad and harsh, there was an incongruous perfumed smell which Frederica traced to three white china plates of circular cakes, covered with cracking white, glace icing” (266-67). The words “chilled”, “sad”, “harsh” and “cracking” convey the hopelessness of Frederica’s cause. When finally Raphael kisses her, the kiss confirms the fact that they will not embark on a relationship: “Frederica was not Marcel Proust dissipating Albertine’s kiss in pages of cross-referencing psychology, aesthetics, self-analysis, comparisons with other kisses. . . . The kiss she characterised as ‘thin’ – it was nervously given and drawn back bird-like immediately” (329). Here, Byatt unfavourably compares Frederica’s short kiss with Proust’s considerably longer unfolding of pleasure, showing the importance of time to both the act of reading and sexuality.

Like Frederica, Alexander links the pleasure he experiences through sexuality and art. He is a school teacher in his late thirties when seventeen-year-old Frederica gains the title role of Elizabeth I in the production of his play *Astraea*. Yet he is attracted to her because he associates her with Elizabeth’s androgyny, a concept which excites him. Byatt stages the seduction scene between the characters in the chapter aptly entitled “The Virgin in the Garden” in the novel of that name, in the Potter home where the virginal Frederica is alone after her parents have gone to be with Marcus. Frederica declares that “[l]ove isn’t a matter of aesthetics. *This is just a place*” (410). However, for Alexander “whose nature was profoundly aesthetic” (410), love is indeed a matter of aesthetics, as is everything to him. The rather unpleasant lunch that he and Frederica share is an inauspicious prelude to the act which they
are about to embark upon, comprising “spam, and tinned carrots, and old bread, and some
vinegary beetroot out of a jar, and tea. Frederica observed that this was a very nasty meal,
and Alexander agreed” (410). When Wilkie hears about the failed seduction attempt, he
declares “[t]he classic supper and wine and candles and conversation and bed for two. God,
you are a loon, Frederica Potter. . . . I told you he was in a flight from suburbs and teacups.
And here are you, all domestic and not, if I may say so, any good at it, preparing him a
bourgeois seduction” (413-14). Ultimately, the relationship between Frederica and Alexander
remains unconsummated, due to Alexander’s abhorrence of the “bad taste” (411) of his
surroundings.

Another relationship which is based on an unattainable ideal occurs in A Whistling
Woman in which an extended still life forms the backdrop to Luk’s failed seduction of
Jacqueline, with whom he has been in love for years. Jacqueline, however, has been
experiencing unrequited love for Marcus but, after being seduced by her supervisor, Lyon
Bowman, decides to attempt a relationship with Luk. He invites her to his house for a
weekend, but the affair is doomed, despite the considerable effort Luk makes. Byatt’s
description of the dinner is anything but pleasurable, containing negative references to
entrapment:

The table was laid with woven Finnish mats, blue and green, and new
tumblers, in seagreen glass full of bubbles. There were candles in dishes, and a
bottle of claret. His apron was a butcher’s apron, blue and white striped. He
brandished prongs, spikes and ladles – the baked potatoes were impaled on
metal tripods, the leg of lamb was hissing and spitting in its dish. He lifted it
onto its warm serving-plate. Gravy ran in crimson runnels down the sweating
fat, where his fork had pierced. He poured off the rest, and busied himself
scrapping the burned fragments into a whirl of wine, boiling, stirring. There
was a warm, powerful smell of cooked meat, laced with garlic and rosemary. He strained his Brussels sprouts – cooked to perfection – and put his dishes on the table with a flourish. Jacqueline, closed in by the arms of her throne, saw a neat-bearded Viking, red-gold and bristling, wearing a garment somewhere between housewife and slaughterhouse, brandishing slicing knife and steel.

(173-74)

Terms such as “prongs”, “spikes” and “impaled” possess explicit sexual connotations. The terms “slaughterhouse”, “hissing” and “spitting” convey negativity, Jacqueline’s enclosure by her chair indicating her lack of power.

When they finally attempt to consummate their relationship, it is predictably unsuccessful. Luk “knew that rhythms needed to be learned, and he was not sure Jacqueline was going to give either of them any more time to learn them in” (178). Jacqueline has been unable to avoid equating Bowman’s patronising “Good girl”, when she performs to his satisfaction in bed, with Luk’s “My lady is served” (174). When, some months later, Frederica goes with Luk to his house, the visit is in many ways the pleasurable reverse of his dinner with Jacqueline, both in the fact that this time he has not prepared a lavish meal, and in the couple’s sexual compatibility. Once again, Byatt stages the seduction against the backdrop of a verbal still life: “He found plastic packs of pumpernickel, a tin of pressed ham, a jar of olives, a tin of black cherries. He found several bottles of wine, and busied himself with cork-screws and tin-openers” (379). The sexual connotations of corkscrews and tin-openers require no explanation.

Another relationship characterised by an imbalance of power is that between Dr. Damian Becket and Daisy in “Body Art”. As if to foreshadow the eventual fate of their sexual relationship, Byatt depicts verbal still lifes of a meal they share in the hospital cafeteria. Damian “came back with an English breakfast for himself and a vegetarian pasta
dish for her, with a tomato side-salad” (60-1), the food metonymic of the gulf between them. When he discovers Daisy camping out in the hospital, Damian takes her to his own home, but once again their relationship is on an unequal footing. Damian “put food on the table, and kept the conversation going by asking her questions. He was uneasily aware that . . . she was answering him because she owed him for the food, the shelter” (97). Thus, in this relationship, sex is Daisy’s method of payment for the food he provides for her, and it ultimately ends negatively.

While Byatt’s fictional texts portray sexual encounters which encompass differing degrees of success, relatively few of these end in love. As Sorensen points out, Byatt’s “depiction of fulfilled romantic love is confined, in over 30 years of fiction, to two couples: Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash in Possession and Stephanie Potter and Daniel Orton in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life” (Verbal and Visual Language 86). To this I would add Roland and Maud, although Belsey notes that at the end of the novel, this relationship “needs to be ‘worked out’, since it has to be reconciled with Maud’s ‘self-possession’” (86). In Possession, verbal still lifes are used metonymically to show relationships as either pleasurable or unpleasurable. For example, Byatt describes the ultimately unsuccessful sexual relationship between Maud and Fergus Wolff, who meet and begin an affair at a conference. Maud has a recurring image of “a huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled up into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white” (56). The reference to egg here no doubt echoes Christabel’s previously-discussed association of the unbroken egg with her autonomy. For Roland and Val, food preparation is seen as a barometer of the current status of their relationship:

When he got home that evening he could smell that Val was in a mood. The basement was full of the sharp warmth of frying onions, which meant she was cooking something complicated. When she was not in a mood, when she was
apathetic, she opened tins or boiled eggs, or at most dressed an avocado.

When she was either very cheerful or very angry, she cooked. She stood at the
sink chopping courgettes and aubergines, when he came in, and did not look
up, so he surmised that the mood was bad. (15)

Here, food preparation and sexuality are linked in a negative manner. In “Raw Material”,
food is seen as a substitute for sex, as the women who attend Jack’s writing classes feel
“more desire to cook apple pies and Cornish pasties for him, than to make violent love to
him” (188). Byatt’s verbal still lifes which unite food and sexuality cover a range of
relationships which depict varying degrees of pleasure or unhappiness.

In Possession, when Ash and Christabel go to Yorkshire with the understanding that
they will consummate their relationship, their first meal at the hotel together is a detailed list.
However, in this case it does not represent foreplay or seduction, but rather expresses a
distinct lack of pleasure through the trepidation felt by the couple, particularly Christabel:

They had their own dining-room, where Mrs Cammish served a huge meal
that should have fed twelve, on plates rimmed with cobalt blue and spattered
with fat pink rosebuds. There was a tureen of buttery soup, there was boiled
hake and potatoes, there were cutlets and peas, there were arrowroot moulds
and treacle tart. Christabel LaMotte pushed her food across her plate with her
fork. (279)

In the meal’s large servings are echoes of the one shared by Roland and Maud, described
earlier in this chapter. In addition to sexual nervousness, part of the reason for Christabel’s
discomfort is that she is not used to such food as she and Blanche “eat like two small birds, in
our house” (279). The type of food typically shared by Christabel and Blanche such as “a late
luncheon, cold fowl and a salad” and an evening “dish of warm milk and white bread,
sprinkled with sugar” (45) provides a substantial contrast to the meal served by Mrs Cammish to the poets.

The food which Ash and Christabel eat is also vastly different to the modern seduction meal in *The Virgin in the Garden*, when Frederica and Wilkie travel to a hotel in Scarborough with the same aim in mind, to a “high-ceilinged room with crimson and gold brocade curtains, a lace counterpane, a kidney-shaped dressing-table and a soft, silent, carpet. There was also a large bed, with lamps on little tables and bell-pushes” (417). In the restaurant, they eat a lavish and pleasurable meal of “consommé julienne, lobster thermidor, and a pudding which was constructed of meringues and cream and sugar and ice cream and nuts to look like a swan sailing with furled wings. They drank a lot of white burgundy” (417). The verbal still life descriptions of both the room and the meal are exaggerated, indicating that it parodies such scenes. When Frederica, like Christabel, subsequently loses her virginity, experiencing severe hymeneal bleeding as a result, the reader is told that “[s]he was pleased that the simple landmark of the bleeding was, however messily, past’ (426). She has no romantic feelings for Wilkie, and feels that she is now in a transitional state, free to move on to the next phase of her life. Frederica’s reaction is contrasted with Christabel’s a century earlier, in that the episode between the latter and Ash is seen from the male point of view. While the reader is told that in “the morning, washing, he found traces of blood on his thighs” (284), Christabel’s reactions are not revealed, apart from the fact that “[s]he must have bundled away the tell-tale white nightdress, too, in her luggage, for he never saw it again” (285). The contrast between these two seduction meals experienced a century apart is shown by the vast difference in attitude of the characters involved. Frederica has a casual attitude to losing her virginity as she is not in love with Wilkie whereas, a century earlier, Christabel and Randolph’s encounter signals an illicit but meaningful love affair resulting in the birth of their daughter, Maia.
Stephanie and Daniel are one of the few couples in Byatt’s oeuvre depicted as a love-match, despite the fact that their relationship spans only the first two books of the quartet, as Stephanie dies near the end of *Still Life*. Even though they are in love, their life together does not have an auspicious beginning as they marry against the wishes of Stephanie’s father, Bill. The verbal still life of the couple’s wedding reception in the Masters Garden is depicted in *The Virgin in the Garden*: “Today trestle-tables, hung with much-laundered school damask, were balanced on the paving stones. On those were a cold buffet, two worn urns of coffee and tea, and a two-tiered, Doric-pillared, blue-white cake” (270). The space is described as negative and cold, reinforced by the terms “much-laundered”, “cold” and “worn”. However, Alexander sees it in terms of the pleasurable setting it should have been. He “would have planted lavenders and lings, thymes and rosemarys, espalier peaches and pears. There should have been clematis and briar rose tumbling over the gate” (270). The reason for Stephanie’s negativity is that, even though she loves Daniel, she is aware that marriage signifies the end of her freedom.

When they are driven to their honeymoon destination, Stephanie’s misgivings at losing herself in marriage are echoed in the somewhat unappetising description of the cold supper that has been prepared for them, comprising “a chicken, a salad in a cut-glass bowl under a plate and a damp tea-towel, a fruit salad in another covered bowl, a bottle of hock. There were some bridge rolls and a new crusty cob, a tin of Lyons coffee, a packet of tea, two bottles of milk, a Camembert and a piece of Edam” (276). There is also “a large bunch of flame-coloured gladioli” (276) from Daniel but Stephanie does not appreciate these either because, as it is subsequently revealed, “red wasn’t a colour she cared for” (280). While this meal has been thoughtfully prepared, the couple take no pleasure in it as they are not ready for the finality of being alone together in the matrimonial home. Stephanie feels closed in by the trappings of domesticity in the flat which “with its small, heavily-netted windows, was
dim and close” (276). She must come to terms with her new role as wife, one which she is apprehensive about, the kitchen utensils symbolising her entrapment. She “had gone away from him and was aimlessly turning things over on the kitchen dresser, new canisters, scissors, lemon-squeezer” (277). Although she loves Daniel, Stephanie at first resists the consummation of their marriage, as it symbolises her loss of identity and her surrender to a life of domesticity. She had been regarded as more intelligent than Frederica, having gained a first at Cambridge, but this was 1954, when women such as Stephanie knew that marriage curtailed any career prospects. As Byatt herself stated, “I was basically saying that marriage kills the imagination and separateness . . .” (Tredell 71). When they finally consummate their relationship, Stephanie’s thoughts change from words to images which unfold “over a long time” (281). This parallels the experience for the reader during ekphrasis and underscores the idea that sexuality, like ekphrasis, involves the unfolding of pleasure over time.

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Food and Death — the Vanitas

Byatt’s use of the still life encapsulates the concept, also expressed by Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, of pleasure-as-fleeting. This is because, apart from such ‘things’ as kitchen implements, books or furniture, the material objects in still life paintings are largely ephemeral, such as fruit, flowers and foodstuffs including cheese and game. Indeed, Schapiro states that “[a]ny painted still life is ipso facto also a vanitas” (“Apples Of Cézanne” 104), as still lifes portray objects which were once alive. The vanitas, as Korsmeyer points out, is “named after the opening lines of Ecclesiastes: Vanitas vanitatis, et omnia vanitas, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’” (162). The objects in these paintings show signs of decay, reminding the viewer of the imminence of death. Sterling describes its origin:
The earliest known example of a *Vanitas* in easel painting is the picture of a skull placed beside a chipped brick, painted by Roger van der Weyden about 1450 on a panel of the famous Braque Triptych (Louvre). Charged with symbolic meaning, these objects stand in the full glare of bright light, against a black, impenetrable background. A *trompe-l’oeil* effect thus reinforces the moral import of *memento mori*, in which the skull and a worn or broken object evoke the precariousness of man’s existence and time’s inexorable sway over life and matter. (47)

Bryson refers to the “persistence in Dutch flower paintings of the Renaissance mode which sees in such things as butterflies and dragonflies emblems of human ephemerality – or sees in the common housefly, . . . a reminder of the corruption that mortal flesh is heir to” (107). Schneider observes that many still lifes portrayed “the luxury goods which reflected the new consumer standards”, accompanied “by the ominous presence of a skull to remind the viewer of the transience of all things” (79). The iconography of the *vanitas* is rich and varied, comprising objects which have their origin in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, such as skulls, dead birds and animals, rotting or worm-eaten fruit, flowers past their first bloom, flies and other insects. Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu points out that “[s]nuffed-out candles and books are traditional death and *vanitas* motifs” (84). Other images associated with this sub-genre are, of course, the biblical analogies of ashes and dust, as well as the concept that “all flesh is grass”. 29 However, the inherent paradox is that despite the fact that they depict the finality of death, *vanitas* paintings themselves endure, ironically representing the triumph of art in the face of death.

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29 For a detailed list of *Vanitas* iconography, sincluding those mentioned above, but with the addition of objects such as books, purses, jewellery, crowns, pipes, musical instruments, soap-bubbles, and ears of corn, plus a list of biblical quotations from which the terms derive, see Chapter IV in Bergstrom.
Byatt often refers to the impermanence of material pleasures through the iconography of the *vanitas*, at times foregrounding this intention by her use of terms such as ‘still life’, ‘*vanitas*’, ‘*nature morte*’ and ‘*memento mori*’ within the narrative. For example, in an essay on Van Gogh in *Passions of the Mind*, she describes “the huge still lifes painted in seventeenth-century Holland as mementoes mori” (“Van Gogh” 296). The ways in which Byatt unites food and death in her fiction vary, one example from *The Game* being a verbal still life description of a funeral meal in which the deceased’s family and friends “ate tomato soup, roast lamb with mint sauce, apple pie” (55), the favourite meal of the deceased Jonathan Corbett. Byatt’s fiction is littered with the iconography of *vanitas* still lifes, such as skulls and other bones, fruit and flowers past their prime, aspic, and insects buzzing around half-finished meals. A still life description of a meal in *The Shadow of the Sun* begins to deteriorate when one of the participants does not return: “Henry did not come back to lunch, and the roses were eaten, except for the stalks, and the ice melted over lunch in the garden into a puddle slightly pink with tomato juice” (49). In “Medusa’s Ankles” the hairdresser, Lucian, redecorates his salon in line with his new interests in “[b]ones in the ground and gold coins in a hoard, all that. . . . There’s a religion, all that bull’s blood, dark and light, fascinating” (9). This is reflected in the salon’s new colour scheme: “battleship grey and maroon. Dried blood and instruments of slaughter, Susannah thought on her return” (15). These images of death are linked to Susannah’s own “greying skin, these flakes, these fragile stretches with no elasticity” (19), signifying her preoccupation with ageing and mortality.

The unnamed persona in “Sugar” intersperses her hospital visits to her dying father in Amsterdam with experiences in which she takes “pleasure, despite everything, in mastering the train system, in reading words in a new language, in making friends with the Humanist” (239). However, these pleasurable occasions are juxtaposed to her “one moment of desolation during those weeks in the middle of the Rijksmuseum, among all the darkly ingenious still
lifes, the heaps of dead books, *mementoes mori*” (239). This reference contains one of Byatt’s strongest suggestions that life’s pleasures are fleeting, that the sensual experiences to be had through such activities as buying dahlias at the flower market or eating “a huge bowl of mussels with a glass of good white wine” (239) are transient, the still life paintings reminders of mortality in the midst of life. Byatt also suggests this idea of death amidst life in a scene from “The Conjugial Angel”. Here, flowers symbolise death whereas at other times her verbal still lifes use flowers to convey life through domestic artistry and harmony. In the story she describes the setting of a séance, with “a large, pallid bouquet of hothouse roses, which the maid had arranged in a silver rose-bowl in the centre of the table” (276). In the midst of the séance, one character utters the line, “Gone the way of all flesh”, and as the séance progresses, ominously, “[a] petal fell” (281). Here the flowers take on the dual role of representing life at its fullest and also the concept of earthly pleasures abruptly ended.

In “The Chinese Lobster” we find one of the strongest examples in Byatt’s fiction of her juxtaposition of food’s potential to provide great pleasure with a reminder of its ephemeral nature. She describes an extended still life of a meal which gradually deteriorates until it takes on the qualities of a *vanitas*, the description underscored by the discussion of suicide by the protagonists during the meal. As Kelly notes, the lunch “serves as a kind of visual and sensual counterpoint to their conversation. The two share an aesthetic, highly stylised visual and gastronomic experience as they proceed slowly from course to course” (*A. S. Byatt* 61). At first, the various items of food are described like works of art, such as a pot of green tea “with the little transparent rice-grain flowers in the blue and white porcelain, delicate and elegant” (98). When the conversation turns to suicide, Gerda theorises that Peggi attacks Matisse’s art because it represents pleasure, of which she has none in her own life: “How can she see that, when she mostly wants to die?” (124). Both Gerda and Perry reflect on their own suicidal tendencies. For Gerda, the daughter of her friend Kay hanged herself
and Kay, as a result, also tried to commit suicide several times: “‘I just step out now and close my eyes,’ she told Gerda” (128). Gerda herself now flirts with suicide, which she sees as being represented by an absence of colour: “The colour goes from the world, so that the only stain on it is her watching mind. Which it would be easy to wipe away. And then there would be no more pain” (129). Perry has also attempted suicide: “she sees the old scars, well-made efficient scars, on his wrists” (130). When “[t]he old Chinese woman clears the meal, the plates veiled with syrupy black-bean sauce, the unwanted cold rice-grains, the uneaten mange-touts” (128) the food which had earlier resembled a still life has now lost its pleasurable qualities. Also, a tank at the entrance to the restaurant contains a lobster, two crabs and several scallops in various stages of dying, their state summed up as “painful life” (96). By the end of the meal, the crustaceans have deteriorated noticeably, yet while Gerda and Perry find this appalling, they are uncaring. As Sorensen notes, they “identify with the dying lobsters and crabs in the Chinese restaurant tank, but they can also see them purely as objects. Somehow this double vision provides them with insight which they can turn either toward life or death” (Verbal and Visual Language 76). Thus, vanitas iconography is present in this story in two ways. The food itself visibly begins to deteriorate into a vanitas, while the dying crustaceans provide further evidence of the ephemerality of life.

Byatt also reminds us that the still life represents passion frozen into works of art in “Crocodile Tears”, when Patricia flees to Nîmes after Tony’s death. The story utilises recurring metaphors of aspic and ice as means of preservation, as the town has a street named the Rue de l’Aspic (15), its fountain “like a moving cube of glass or ice” (16). Food is conflated with death in a still life description of Patricia’s meal: “quails’ eggs in aspic, pale little spheres in translucent coffin-shapes of jelly” (32). She visits the tombs of the gladiators in the ethnological museum with is burial stones, skulls (35) and stuffed bodies of bulls (38). In a pun on the word ‘aspic’, there are also asps in jars – vipera aspic (39). In the art gallery
she finds an exhibition by Sigmar Polke, containing memorabilia of the French Revolution, such as a guillotine and severed head (43). Both Patricia and Nils, the man she meets in Nîmes, are, in a sense, the walking dead and need to be brought back to life. The bullfights are also a grim reminder of death. When Patricia visits one of the arenas, she juxtaposes the pleasure of life with death, thinking of how “[o]ver all those centuries, people had come there to sit together, festive, and watch death” (56). This quotation captures the essence of the vanitas with its evocation of death amidst life.

In “A Stone Woman”, Byatt touches on the still life’s juxtaposition of death with the pleasure to be enjoyed in life through food and materiality. Ines, the protagonist, is so grief-stricken upon the death of her elderly mother that she slowly and inexorably turns to stone. After her mother’s cremation, she recalls the image of “[t]he efficient rage of the consuming fire, the handfuls of fawn ash” (130). Ines’s grief becomes debilitating to the extent that even though she “had made delicious little meals for her mother and herself, light pea soups, sole with mushrooms, vanilla soufflés”, now “she could make neither cooking nor eating last long enough to be interesting” (133). Byatt uses a pathetic fallacy to convey Ines’s grief: “[t]he life had gone out of the furnishings and objects” (133). When Ines begins to turn to stone, she finds a graveyard in which to rest (148-50), and realises that “[t]o become stone is a figure, however fantastic, for death” (156), eventually travelling to Iceland to wait for the inevitable. In “Raw Material” when Jack asks his student, Cicely Fox, what she reads, she replies that she likes George Herbert’s poem “Church Monuments” because he uses the word ‘dust’ appropriately, as in “Flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust” (213). This image of death proves prophetic when Cicely is later found dead in her home.

The short story “The Next Room” also combines food and death in verbal still lifes which evoke the vanitas. Joanna, the protagonist, is sent away on a business trip to County Durham in order to escape the voices of her dead parents coming from the next room. Even
though she is attempting to escape the dead, she finds herself surrounded by reminders of death, such as the cathedral which “houses the bones of St Cuthbert and the black slab under which rests the Venerable Bede” (79). She finds that she “noticed the dead . . . Legionaries from Scythia and Mesopotamia and the sunlit Provincia Romana lay under that heather. Undernourished girls and boys haunted the mills and the old workings” (80). Even though she is housed in a “splendid” (80) hotel, it is “quite possibly haunted by a wrongfully-hanged highwayman and a distraught Jacobite widow” (80). These stories of ghosts are juxtaposed with a description of the pleasurable meal which Joanna eats in the dining-room, of “brandy flambé, crisp hot pastry, garlic-simmered sauces, a long and splendid way away from poached eggs and Benger’s food. Her terror of presences in her own house, she thought, over apple pie and crumbly Wensleydale and fresh cream, was not a gut terror such as that evoked by highwayman and mourning lady” (80). While ghosts are not part of the iconography of the vanitas, they are nevertheless representative of Byatt’s prolific use of death imagery in her fiction, a counterpoint and complement to her depictions of pleasure in the consumption of food.

In “Art Work”, Byatt directly references the term vanitas, with the gallery owner Shona McRury terming Robin’s artworks “modern vanitases” (72) due to their smallness of vision. She spells out the symbolic association between death and the absence of art: “It’s a bit frightening, a bit depressing, all that empty space, isn’t it, it reminds you of coffins and bare kitchen tables with no food, no sustenance, all those bare boards, don’t they?” (70). Shona sees these paintings as lacking vitality of expression, which contrasts with Robin’s view of them as “a series of problems, really, inexhaustible problems, of light and colour” (70). Even though he has experienced Matisse’s expressions of pleasure and bliss on canvas, Robin is unable to express this articulately in his own work.
Byatt also employs the *vanitas* theme through evocations of art and death in “Body Art”, particularly in an extended description of a Dutch painting of an anatomy lesson, in which “[t]here, oddly, was a small boy, aged perhaps ten, also black-robed, holding up the skeleton of a child of roughly the same size as the peaceful corpse under dissection. The skull smiled; skulls always do” (79). Martha Sharpin, the hospital’s art historian, whose PhD subject had been “the *Vanitas* in seventeenth-century painting” (80) discusses the picture with Damian, saying that “it was historically interesting as to whether the skeletal child was a religious *memento mori* or simply an anatomical demonstration” (79). Damian himself “had a horror . . . of the musty world of relics and bits of skin and bone” (80). This painting is part of the hospital’s Pettifer collection, which also contains “a series of nineteenth-century glass ornamental domes – or maybe museum exhibits – in which foetal skeletons were at play with wreaths and dried flowers, wax grapes, skeleton leaves and branches of dead coral” (86).

When Daisy’s artwork is revealed at the story’s conclusion, it appears to have been influenced by the miscarriage she suffered previously, as it combines elements of birth and death: “It was a representation of the goddess Kali’ seated on ‘a seventeenth-century birthing chair’, her head ‘a waxwork *Vanitas*, half smiling lady, half grinning skull” (103). Even discussions of food have overtones of death: “She was still forking over the fusilli. He remarked that they were nasty colours, unappetising really, fleshy and mouldy. . . . You’re right, she told him, it’s meant to look appetising, tomato juice, spinach. It looks a bit disgusting. Dead, maybe. Lots of colours are sort of deathly” (63). The many examples of *vanitas* imagery in this story convey Byatt’s ongoing theme of the still life’s inherent tension between the brevity of life and the cold stasis of a work of art.

While not an example of *vanitas* imagery, it is pertinent at this time to explore Byatt’s employment of Keats’s own example of *ekphrasis*, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, through which she evokes this tension. Indeed, Byatt has stated in her essay “*Still Life/ Nature morte*” that
the ruling metaphor of *The Virgin in the Garden* is “[h]uman passion frozen into works of art – there is a chapter on the marble men and maids of the Grecian Urn” (10). Keats’s poem gives its name to a chapter in the novel in which Stephanie teaches the poem, her favourite, to a class. When Byatt states that the group mentally pictures “nine urns, half realised” (78), she points to the difficulty of readers of the poem in conjuring a single accurate image of the urn. In contrast, she implies, realist description does permit a more faithful and rewarding representation of art in the reader’s mind.

Byatt extends her contemplation of Keats’s poem across two productions in the quartet which are staged at Long Royston. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Alexander sits through a rehearsal of his play, *Astraea*, listening to “unseen melodies” (314), disappointed that his production has fallen short of his vision. He “had the sense that he had meant to state his passion for the past, to provide pipes, timbrels, wild ecstasy, Tempe, and the vale of Arcady. What they had made was not immortals stalking under Hesperidean boughs but sex in sundresses, sandwiches in gilded papier-mâché helmets” (316). This theme continues in *A Whistling Woman* when a production of *The Winter’s Tale* is also held at Long Royston. The stage is “the space under the minstrel’s gallery, under the plaster frieze of marble men and maidens under blanched forest boughs” (393). Byatt also weaves the trope of the frieze into *Still Life*. When Frederica contracts German measles and becomes feverish, she sees “young men round the bare walls of her small room, like the cut-out friezes of dancing figures, hands and ankles joined, that she had made as a child, or, more palely, like a satyr-dance on a Greek vase” (322). These references to the poem highlight the paradox inherent in the idea that a work of art can never adequately express living passion and conversely, unlike art, life is not eternal. Like the still life, the urn depicts life frozen in time, in other words, ‘still’ or ‘dead’ life. Perhaps this is why Byatt makes the poem the favourite of Stephanie, whose sudden death in *Still Life* makes the novel’s title all the more poignant.
In the interview with Iris Murdoch, Byatt states that the accidental and sudden death of Stephanie is in fact foreshadowed by clues, if the reader is astute enough to observe them (“A. S. Byatt with Iris Murdoch”). These textual clues are embedded in the epigraph, the title and the body of the novel. As has previously been discussed, Stephanie’s favourite poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, is about still life, or dead life. Similarly, Byatt has stated in “Still Life/ Nature morte that the “ruling” metaphor of The Virgin in the Garden “was a metaphor of metamorphosis – of flesh into stone, or of flesh into grass” (10). This theme is foregrounded in the episode in which Marcus and Winifred visit Allenbury’s butcher shop, in which she observes that if “all flesh is grass, all flesh at some other extreme is indeed geometry” (93). Schneider states that still lifes of butcher’s shops were allusions to “the way of all flesh” (35). Lloyd believes that Byatt’s description bears similarities to a still life painting, Fishmarket by Cornelis de Vos and Frans Snyder, “in which the huge fish sprawled across the bench points unmistakeably down to the wide-eyed seal, still alive but doomed” (72-3). She maintains that both the shop and the painting suggest the concept of the memento mori or vanitas, the idea that life must inevitably end in death and decay.

The epigraph to Still Life is a quotation from Bede which foreshadows Stephanie’s shocking and untimely death, and touches on the fleeting nature of life:

‘Such,’ he said, ‘O King, seems to me the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which to us is uncertain, as if when on a winter’s night you sit feasting with your ealdormen and thegns – a single sparrow should fly swiftly into the hall, and coming in at one door, fly out through another. Soon, from winter going back into winter, it is lost to your eyes.’

(n. pag.)

Flora Alexander notes in her essay on Still Life that “Byatt sets Stephanie’s death in a tradition of thinking about mortality, . . . by using as an epigraph the passage from Bede’s
Latin *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in which the brevity of human life is illustrated by a sparrow flying into a lighted hall by one door and flying out the other” (39). Ironically, it is a sparrow which inadvertently causes Stephanie’s death, when she tries to rescue it from behind the refrigerator and is electrocuted. As the novel states, in the aftermath of the tragedy “a sudden sparrow plunged into the night” (404). Richard Todd has also noted that Stephanie’s death takes the reader back “to the beginning of *The Virgin in the Garden*.

Our first glimpse of Stephanie, the Cambridge graduate, has been of her in her parents’ house attempting to rescue the remaining half of a litter of kittens whose mother has been panicked into death at the Vicarage” (53). Byatt embeds another passage early in *Still Life* which also foreshadows the novel’s theme of *nature morte*. While in France, Frederica prepares a picnic whose perfection is spoilt, as “[s]and got into things . . . and three or four wasps buzzed, straddled and chewed, could be seen chewing, the meat and the fruit” (96). Here, Byatt deliberately evokes the iconography of the *vanitas* in describing the deterioration of the meal, in order to underscore Frederica’s fleeting youth.

It is difficult to discuss Byatt’s treatment of death in *Still Life* without raising the issue of the possible influence of the death of Byatt’s son Charles, who was tragically killed in 1972 at the age of eleven, and to whom *The Virgin in the Garden* is dedicated. Byatt has stated in an interview with Jenny Newman and James Friel that “I had planned to kill Stephanie before my son had died. I thought almost every day that I wouldn’t go on with that, because it was too much. Nevertheless, it was unfinished business, so I did it” (n. pag.). She concludes *Still Life* by reflecting on the theme of death. Daniel, who has come back from the brink of suicide after Stephanie’s death, visits Alexander who has moved from the Pooles’ flat to one in Great Ormond Street. Byatt stages a verbal still life description in which Alexander cooks and serves Daniel breakfast “of gammon and eggs, brown bread and mushrooms, tomatoes” (433) and coffee to “put some life into” him (434). Byatt also makes a
still life painting a textual element within a verbal still life when the reader is told that Alexander “had put a vase of irises on his desk, next to his little image of the ‘Breakfast Table’” (433). Daniel’s words “But it’s time I came back to life” (433) are a pun on the term ‘still life’ and reassure the reader that Daniel is ready to start living again. Sorensen has stated of this scene: “Here is ‘still life’ (or ‘life still’). Daniel must will himself to survive Stephanie’s death. He and Alexander must transcend a painting that cannot, after all, show any of the characters how to live” (“Something of the Eternal” n. pag.). Sorensen, then, sees this scene and indeed the novel as revealing the failure of Van Gogh’s painting to provide more than “insight and moral sustenance” in the face of death. In addition, the pleasures of food endure in the still life, even though the food is consumed utterly.

Joshua Riddell in “Precipice-Encurled” is another character whose death is foreshadowed through imagery pertaining to the vanitas. The transformation of life into art is demonstrated literally as Joshua is in the process of sketching his friend Juliana. On a nearby fountain a head has been carved which is “exactly the same as the heads on the covers of the hominiform Etruscan funerary urns” (197), contrasting with Juliana’s living head. When the two travel from Florence to Vallombrosa, Joshua shows Juliana how “the leaves, being deciduous, will strew the brooks, thickly, like the dead souls in Virgil and Milton’s fallen angels” (199). When they arrive at the Villa Colomba, once again, vanitas imagery intrudes with the figure of “an immense hour glass” (199). When Joshua sets out on his journey with a guide and a mule, the stones of the road “were upended, like rows of jagged teeth” (205), evoking the image of a skull. Later, as he is sketching in the Apennines, he is overtaken by a sudden storm:

When it came, it came in one fierce onslaught, a blast in his face, an impenetrable white darkness. He staggered a little, under the blows of the ice-bullets, put up an arm, took a false step, still thinking of Ruskin and Monet,
and fell. And it was all over. Except for one or two unimaginable moments, a clutch at life, a gasp of useless air, a rush of adrenalin, a shattering of bone and brain, the vanishing between instants of all that warmth and intelligence and aspiration. (211)

Like Stephanie’s, this death is also described from the point of view of the dying person, and conveys the sense of waste inherent in such an untimely event.

In the period leading up to his death, Joshua thinks about Ruskin’s own experience of these mountains, in which he had compared them with bones. Of Ruskin Byatt writes, “[m]ountains are the bones of the earth, he had written. ‘But there is this difference between the action of the earth, and that of a living creature; that while the exerted limb marks its bones and tendons through the flesh, the excited flesh casts off the flesh altogether, and its bones come out from beneath’” (205). This causes Joshua to look at the “working knobs of bone at the base of the mule-neck” (205), and then to think about Juliana, the girl he has fallen in love with, and her “bone under the round cheek” (205). These images call to mind that of Webster’s “skull beneath the skin”, another reminder of life’s brevity. As Joshua continues his journey, he thinks more about Ruskin, who had found the mountains’ dull, monotonous limestone “melancholy” (207), and had stated that their colouring was that which “Dante gave to his Evil-pits in the Inferno, malignant grey, he gleefully recorded, akin to the robes of the purgatorial angel which were of the colour of ashes, or earth dug dry” (208). This then leads to a meditation on different types of ashes. When Joshua finds the right sketching position, he refers to the scene around him as a “blanched, bony world” (209).

Byatt also includes a verbal still life description of Joshua’s last meal – “oily but agreeable packages of bread, meat, eggs, cheese” (209). This food conforms to the ‘all flesh is grass’ image, in that it is quickly transformed by Joshua into “chicken bones and eggshells” (209), as Ruskin had previously referred to the waste left behind by human beings. Portentously,
Joshua has chosen a spot to eat which contains “the bleached remains of some other creature’s meal; skeletal pinions and claws, a triangular pointed skull, a few snail shells, wrecked and pierced” (209). Juliana does not share Joshua’s artistic vision. Although she has been taught ‘artistic’ pursuits such as languages, needlework and drawing, they seem “useless” because they are “not life” (199). At the end of the story, she is left with the half-finished sketch, which she keeps restrained, locked away “pressed in the family Bible” (214). It is “a curious portrait of a young girl, who looked out of one live eye and one blank, unseeing one, oval like those of angels on monumental sculpture” (214), metaphorically indicating Juliana’s lack of vision.

Joshua’s death forms a small section of a story which has more to do with the poet Robert Browning, whose projected visit to the villa in which Joshua is also a guest is understandably called off as a result of the tragedy. As Byatt has stated in “True Stories and the Facts in Fiction”, the story is based on a foot-note “in a book about Browning’s hypothetical last love for Mrs Bronson in Venice. The author of the book recorded that Browning did not go to Ischia because a young house-guest of his prospective host had died after a fall from a cliff while sketching” (102). Byatt states further that she decided “to describe the fall, the sudden death, in a fully imagined third-person narrative, involving the reader as fiction does” (103). In Byatt’s version, when Browning hears of the young man’s death, he imagines him “reaching after the unattainable, up there” (212). This causes him to ponder on the failure of life and inevitability of death, for “height went with reaching, even if defeated, as we all are, or must be” (212). He “thought of other deaths” (212), such as finding the body, five years previously, of his wife Elizabeth. Browning’s own body is compared to a “porcelain-fine arched shell” (193), a popular subject of the vanitas. A slight pain becomes “a tugging and raking in what he now feared, prophetically it turned out, was his liver” (193).
and Browning says “I should not be averse to dying in Venice” (196), prefiguring his own death.

In a reference which links sartorial pleasure to death, Byatt uses the recurring image of the fashionable hat of Browning’s visitor, Mrs Miller, as a *memento mori*. Browning’s sister, Sarianna, first describes the hat as “an aviary on her head” (194), as it is decorated with “a circle of wings; the poet admired it, and asked detailed questions about its composition, owls, hawks, jays, swallows, encircling an entire dove” (195). This hat links back to a previous reference to the fashion of that year, “where clothes are festooned with dead humming birds and more startling creatures, mice, moths, beetles and lizards” (186). The poet is merely being polite in his reaction to the hat: in his head he composes a poem to “the murdered innocents”, in which one line is “clothed with murder” (213). The death of Joshua is linked by Browning to those of Miss Teena Rochfort, who “set fire to her skirts with a spark in her sewing-basket” (213), his son and his wife. Byatt also includes a reference which literally ties the imagery of the still life to the world of human beings: “Joshua’s bedroom had a fearful and appalling painting of fruits and flowers so arranged as to form a kind of human form, bristling with pineapple spines, curvaceous with melons, staring through passion-flower eyes” (200). This painting is a literal *memento mori*, to which Joshua pays no heed. Juliana, who does not understand art, likens it to death rather than life. She rejects the arts, “not because they were uninteresting but because they were like feathers stitched on to a hat, dead decorations, not life” (199). This insight into Juliana’s personality is underscored as mentioned earlier, by her unseeing eye in Joshua’s portrait of her.

In “Precipice-Encurled”, Byatt refers to the act of writing as a preoccupation with the dead, when Browning muses that “the life I have lived most intensely, has been the fitting, the infiltrating, the inventing the self of another man or woman, explored and sleekly filled out, as fingers swell a glove” (191). Here the poet touches on her own awareness that as a
writer she inhabits the lives of those of whom she writes, authors engaging to some extent in
the art of ‘still life’ by immortalising their subjects in their texts. Further, it may be argued
that in re-creating and re-presenting the pleasure inherent in meals and ‘things’ Byatt also
endows ephemeral material objects with immortality. This is reinforced by the Browning
quotation used as an epigraph to Possession which refers to the writer as a “scribe you pay
and praise for putting life in stones” (emphasis added n. pag.). In other words, Byatt as a
writer breathes life into art through her language, as seen by her use of ekphrasis in her
fiction.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that, as a writer, A. S. Byatt regards the act of reading as both keeping art alive and marking its limitations. This is because paintings are viewed at a distance whereas the fact that reading takes time signifies consumption and the temporal unfolding of pleasure. Byatt’s use of *ekphrasis* resonates with this idea of ‘consuming’ in that she sees the sensuality of language as resembling the pleasures of eating. The still life is a highly appropriate vehicle for Byatt’s explorations of pleasure as it evokes the tension between living passion and a static artwork. Byatt’s verbal still lifes both express the material pleasures associated with eating and underscore the current desire of feminism to revalue the domestic. Consequently, this study links Byatt’s veneration of writing to Barthes’s concept of “the pleasure of the text”.

In both the time they take to unfold and their sensual language, Byatt’s verbal still lifes resemble those of Marcel Proust. While previous studies have touched on Proust’s influence on Byatt, particularly her narrative style, the current thesis shifts its focus to both writers’ pleasure in descriptions of laid tables and market stalls. It also highlights their strong affiliation with what may be termed ‘Ruskinian’ aestheticism, showing how this is revealed through Byatt’s use of Pre-Raphaelite art and imagery, particularly in *The Game* and *Possession*. The current study builds on earlier work in this area, showing that Byatt harks back to these images as part of an ongoing aesthetic argument concerning pleasure in the handcrafted, reflecting her enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts movement. It has also shown that many of her verbal still lifes represent bourgeois comfort, resembling certain of Matisse’s paintings. Byatt also highlights art’s limitations through characters’ *ekphrastic* discussions about paintings or techniques.
Further, this study has shown that Byatt uses postmodern techniques both to highlight the limits of art and to evoke pleasure by revealing that she uses framing (or removal of frames) in two ways. The first is in the literal sense, either as borders containing (or not containing) the artworks in her fiction or *ekphrastic* descriptions through which she privileges the verbal over the visual. Secondly, Byatt uses narrative framing through postmodern narrative devices such as the Chinese box which initially appear to venerate visual art. Yet these techniques and her use of images such as the mosaic actually point out the limits of visual art because they construct their own verbal narratives from disparate visual elements. Overall, Byatt’s use of word-play and puzzles is integral to the pleasure she experiences and provides through language.

The feminine associations of the still life deem it an ideal basis for a discussion of female representation. This study has found that Byatt has stated in interviews and through her fiction that domesticity may not be suitable for all women and that meaningful work can be a more fulfilling option. It has shown that the majority of examples of ‘actual’ *ekphrasis* in Byatt’s fiction are oil paintings by canonical European male artists, thereby subtly pointing out the canon’s exclusion of female artists. The examples of ‘notional’ *ekphrasis* by Byatt’s female characters represent the lowest level in the hierarchy of the arts, performed by those who are marginalised in terms of gender, class, race and economic status. To address this issue of gender imbalance, Byatt depicts certain verbal still lifes which demonstrate the pleasure to be found in the freeing of food from domesticity and traditional gender roles, with certain meals taken in non-domestic settings. Further, this study has challenged previous findings that Byatt rejects the writing of British modernist Virginia Woolf in favour of the realism of nineteenth-century authors, by revealing commonalities of style and a shared pleasure in the works of Matisse and Proust.
It has also shown that Byatt’s veneration of writing is accompanied by a belief that reading, like eating, involves consumption. The fact that this pleasure is slow to unfold makes eating an appropriate metaphor for reading. Many of Byatt’s meals reveal the use of food as a marker of class, to capture a sense of place, or to foreground the trope of ‘not-eating’. Part of this study’s critique of pleasure in Byatt’s fiction has been an examination of the relationship between food and sexual pleasure, a hitherto largely ignored aspect of her work. Further, although Byatt’s treatment of death has been previously examined, the current thesis is the first to link it to the idea that still lifes represent the cessation of earthly pleasure, and to focus on her use of the vanitas.

Overall the study has found that as a writer Byatt highlights the limits of visual art through ekphrasis, which involves the reader more intimately and constitutes a more direct act of consumption than looking at paintings. It has demonstrated that the quartet’s motif of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is pivotal to her use of the still life in that it also depicts the contrast between a “cold” artwork and breathing passion. Tellingly, the poem is an example of ekphrasis rather than of visual art, the reader taking time to decipher its meaning and experience pleasure through its language. In its examination of Byatt’s use of ekphrasis, this thesis has drawn together postmodernist, feminist, Ruskinian, Woolfian, Matissean and Proustian aesthetics. Its establishment of the nexus formed between reading, pleasure, ekphrasis and time in Byatt’s fiction will hopefully prompt further examination of her evocation of material pleasure, particularly that to be experienced in visual art, in narrative, in preparing and eating a meal, in sexuality and in looking in general and at art in particular.


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