

FICTION IN THE DILEMMA: A STUDY OF A. S. BYATT'S NOVEL *THE GAME* IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORIES

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THE COLLAPSING SYNTHESIS

To the vanguard exponents of post-modernism there seems to be something particularly disturbing about the English bias towards realism. Suggesting that “the compromise (or synthesis) [between empirical and fictional modes] was always more estabale in Europe than in America”¹, David Lodge concedes in his analysis of recent critical assessment:

There is a good deal of evidence that the English literary mind is peculiarly committed to realism, and resistant to non-realistic literary modes to an extent that might be described as prejudice. It is something of a commonplace of recent literary history, for instance, that the ‘modern’ experimental novel, represented diversely by Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, which threatened to break up the stable synthesis of the realistic novel, was repudiated by two subsequent generations of English novelists. And, reviewing the history of the English novel in the twentieth century it is difficult to avoid associating the restoration of traditional literary realism with a perceptible decline in artistic achievement.²

The reserve is not restrictedly American. John Fowles, for example, comments on the English novel:

I think the notion of an English ‘literary world’ exists only in the mind of people who run literary organizations. ... I do find a lot of contemporary English fiction abysmally parochial, and of no conceivable interest to anyone who is not English and middle-class.³

On the basis of a series of interviews H. Ziegler and C. Bigsby have ventured to attenuate this label by suggesting:

The truth is that the English novel ... occupies an interesting middle ground; that it does respond in some degree to a sense of a fundamental shift in our perception of the real but that it reflects above all a sense of disturbance, of cultural dislocation, which leaves it negotiating some kind of *rapprochement* between humanist commitments and an increasing sense of relativism.⁴

Focusing the English novel through a relativist lens is one way of redeeming it, justifying its realism, as ventured by Lodge, is another. His essay was triggered by Kellog and Scholes's professed rejection of traditional realism in favour of "fabulation"⁵. In *The Fabulators* Scholes posits:

Fabulation, then, means a return to a more verbal kind of fiction. It also means a return to a more fictional kind. By this I mean a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative: more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things.⁶

Holding that "Realism exalts Life and diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words"⁷, he advocates poesis whilst announcing the death of mimesis. Yet, even the most esemplastic inventions of the mind are not completely disengaged from reality, and Scholes, in his essay "The Fictional Criticism of the Future", conjectures:

... if we must acknowledge that reality inevitably eludes our human languages, we must admit as well that these languages can never conduct the human imagination to a point beyond this reality.⁸

Realism then, as Lodge suggests, represents the synthesizing element, and the process of disintegration is to be "associated with a radical undermining of realism as a literary mode"⁹. His stance is defensive when he holds:

[In]... a period of unprecedented cultural pluralism which allows, in all the arts, an astonishing variety of styles to flourish simultaneously, ... the critic ... must avoid the cardinal error of judging one style by criteria appropriate to another.¹⁰

Lodge's main aim is to palliate the unpropitious image he comes to infer from Scholes's *The Nature of Narrative* and from Rubin Rabinovitz's *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960* (1968) of "an incorrigibly insular England defending an obsolete realism against the life-giving invasions of fabulation"¹¹ by offering as an alternative to traditional realism not fabulation, for fabulation in itself, he argues, is no guarantee of value, but a more radical form of realism, which attempts to strip the novel of its fictiveness, to blow up the fictional bridges and shed what Henry James called "authority", thus exposing the author's vulnerability¹².

The Game is neither radically realistic nor experimental in form. Yet, being very much a novel about (writing) fiction, it largely thrives on the present debate and provides a suitable arena for the confrontation between divergent cultural tenets—a need for pure vision versus a hunger for facts, private meditation versus empiricism¹³— and weaves them into an intriguing web. Given this split allegiance, A. S. Byatt is very much a novelist of our own time.

Like all her novels, *The Game* emanates a consistently academic aura. The central consciousness is scholarly, the perspective preponderantly female. Byatt's own involvement in literary criticism is sufficiently evidenced in a multitude of references to the literary tradition (in particular to the Romantics) that coherently interlink with the narrative. Thus literature occupies a vital place in the lives of her heroines and foment the incessant brooding of their minds, for they are often champions of the mind and, consequently, more alert in the realm of fiction than in the physical world. If they repeatedly invoke the Brontë Sisters as their antecedents, there is a profound sense of doom in their emphasis on the imagination, for the protagonist's life is literally depleted in queries about the validity of such an approach. Byatt's women characters tend to give primacy to the mind over the body, and while her almost Pre-Raphaelite passion for visual detail suggests solidity, they often doubt or resent such solidity. This is mainly to suggest the "doubleness" of man's awareness and the "doubleness" of fiction. Sukenick's postulate, "... any art, after all the other things it may be about, is fundamentally about its medium"¹⁴, is therefore very true of Byatt's novel.

The Game provides the pivot upon which the restrained rivalry between the two sisters, Cassandra and Julia, hinges. Emerging out of the innocent flights of puerile imagination, this joint fabric of fantasy encroaches ever more on their lives and involves fatal consequences. Though on a large scale bred and invigorated through family bonds, the conflict is not domestic, but a battle between mimetic fiction and autotelic metaphor. The "binary fission" (p. 146) between the two sisters is suggestive of the ailing synthesis between realistic and fictional modes. Cassandra's Gothic imagination, for she would contrive grim endings to the genteel stories invented with Julia in childhood, is an outburst against Julia's moderate temper, against verisimilitude and against what she calls not creative but therapeutic writing. Cassandra rejects literary realism, which, incursively, depicts the individual experience of a common phenomenal world¹⁵. Julia's rationale on the other hand is imitation. Accordingly, her literary vein verges on exhibitionism and aspires to ultimate realism. Julia longs to "write a *real* book" (p. 133). But she weaves a noxious web, and her muse turns into a devouring spider. Thus, when her conclusive formulation of realism in "A Sense of Glory" is released to the public, it proves all too real, stripping bare not her own but her sister's weakness and precluding the reality it was meant to emulate.

Juxtaposing the properties of fable and realism, *The Game* purports mimesis while antithetically suggesting self-referentiality. The fictive dialogue between Ben and Ivan pinpoints our culture's divided pursuit of empirical art, largely favoured by its surroundings, 'overcompartmentalized' art (cf. p. 158) and art as a "vision, pure vision" (p. 160): "It seems... just as much a pathetic fallacy to pretend we can have an impersonal and neutral relationship with Nature —that it's *entirely* alien— as to pretend it simply reflects our passing moods. We're part of it" (p. 162). This conflict of aesthetic maxims involves both form and function.

As far as form and technique are concerned Byatt's novel is firmly rooted in the realistic tradition. Hers is a realism that knows it is cut off from 'empirical reality'

and instead of dismantling the fictiveness of the narrative asserts it and refuses to “claim innocence”¹⁶.

The third-person narrative serves Byatt as a powerful vehicle for self-irony. While she has her heroine’s academic life vitiated through Julia’s grotesque observations —the awkward eating scene at high table (cf. p. 108), Cassandra’s “thick black stockings ... those shoes affected by women dons” (p. 27) and the “smear of ink” on her face too readily betray her loyalties— she equally exposes Julia’s self-congratulatory mockery, so that the narrator’s half amused, half sardonic smile has a corrective and retributive function. The irony that governs the whole novel spares neither Cassandra nor Julia nor the reader, for the latter may very well ask himself whether *The Game* is in fact the fatal “tour de force” it deals with, and —as is clearly insinuated by the story— being the only “real” witness to Cassandra’s thoughts and downfall, must accept her implicit charge of being an intrusive spy, unless he takes the fictiveness of the novel for granted.

In depicting her characters, Byatt relies on conventional concepts. Julia’s domestic surroundings, her marital breakdowns and half-hearted affairs are as convincingly depicted as Cassandra’s monastic college life and self-imposed sternness. Afraid of the outer world’s infringement on her thoughts and heedful of the novelist’s merciless speculation, the latter has exiled herself and turned into a solitary academic, orthodoxly grey, cheerless and unassuming. A born observer of life through literature and naturally antagonistic to all forms of personal exhibition, Cassandra barely participates in life and, having renounced both marriage and close friendships, professes little interest in what she calls disparagingly, though occasionally with a smack of envy, “normal behaviour” (p. 62).

Like a snake shedding its slough she yields her past, the defunct bits of her life and brain, to those trailing in her wake and hungering after it, for Julia feeds on her sister’s world and Simon’s scientific comments are simplified, distorted borrowings from utterances previously made by Cassandra. Both Simon and Julia represent a generation of “lively Artists” and “Armchair Explorers”, favoured by the infiltration of mass media, which are conducive to man’s confused awareness of what *is* and what *seems to be*, and heralding the advance of self-complacency and noisy adulation, which silence the anguished protests of an ostracized group of genuine but self-effacing thinkers, represented by Cassandra, who is certainly less resilient than Simon and Julia.

Hailed as “... probably the best of that increasing number of women writers who explore in loving detail the lives of those trapped in comfort by washing machines and small children” (p. 47), Julia is one of a host of writers addressing themselves to mass audiences. Conversely, her sense of being is contingent on the assurance and approval of the public (“You always worried obsessively about what was natural, and normal”, p. 100; “The guiding light of your life is the need to be liked ...”, p. 144).

Both Julia’s and Simon’s minds operate on the basis of factual observation. His approach to nature involves “selection, perspective, emphasis, explication” (p. 161),

her mode of writing suggests that fiction is mimetic of fact: "All I do is turn my daily life into imaginary books (p. 102). Julia is hungry for life. "I want to see everything" (p. 107), she holds, but her hunger is such as to obviate other people's lives. She ruthlessly conjectures upon her father's death whether it will make a good story, forestalls Cassandra's feeble hold in the world and pries into her daughter's privacy. It is Deborah who, writhing under her mother's oppressive curiosity, eventually cries out in exacerbation: "You take everybody's life. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you" (p. 226). In this connection the idea of theft recurs repeatedly. The notion of the savage who lends his body to the photographer and his lifestyle to the scientist's "spiritual musings" is (p. 88) reverberated in Cassandra's final statement to the world, "We are food for thought" (p. 230).

The Game invites death. On the surface this seems to be the final conclusion to the Johnsonian concept of "the hunger of the imagination that preys incessantly on life" (cf. p. 225). However, the mimesis is reversible, the reasoning not linear. A puppet-player who weaves the stories of her rag-dolls, Julia is entangled in the web of her own ideas and fears. The question remains open: "Who had stolen whose action?" (p. 208) or, as Gass in "The Ontology of the Sentence" calls into question: "What are the forms of the facts, and what are the facts in the sentences we have been fabricating?"¹⁷.

Byatt's sustained concern with the nature of the real and the "truth-claims" of art is in tune with a perspective that has increasingly impregnated 20th-century conceptualizations in a variety of fields¹⁸. It is marked by a shift from the particle to the field, from linear sequences of causality to a multi-directionally interlocking paradigm. The implications of relativist theories for the ontological status of fiction, the pursuit of a chord to link the void with meaning—for "it is all too easy to mistake an anti-message (or a complex message) for a nonmessage", as Graff has suggested¹⁹— have boosted the literary debate for over the last couple of decades.

With its insistent web-metaphor *The Game* clearly points in this direction. It is evocative of

... a reality that has no detachable parts, indeed no enduring, unchanging parts at all. Composed not of particles but of 'events', it is in constant motion, rendered dynamic by interactions that are simultaneously affecting each other.²⁰

Analysing the potential effects of such a "network of strands coextensive with space"²¹, Hayles remarks that

meaning in a literary text was deemed to derive not from a mimetic relationship between the text and 'real life', but from the internal relations of literary codes.²²

Hence, literature may proceed in two directions—the one suggesting that fiction is "nonreferential and solipsistic", the other that "the nature of the reality

being represented is ... continuous with the text, interpenetrating the signifiers that re-present it”²³.

This distinction is helpful to an analysis of Byatt’s novel, which embraces both conceptions and proposes their constructive as well as destructive implications. Suggestive of the interconnectedness and self-referentiality as contained in Hayles’s concept of a cosmic web, *The Game* explores both autonomy and consequence. Groping for operative correspondences between experience and the conceptual schemes she infers from literature, Cassandra is ironically crushed by the interaction of fact and fiction. Therein lies the paradox that Ziegler and Bigsby perceive

... on the one hand, in an art which declares autonomy from the world in which it is made and to which it is nevertheless offered in a historically and culturally determined language, and, on the other hand, in an art which asserts its moral function while creating contingent events, elaborating falsehoods.²⁴

The assumption “that literature, like language, is an internal system that has no necessary reference to anything outside itself”²⁵ harbours a vast nihilist potential. John Gardner’s attack against an overrating of the “anti-mimetic, the autotelic artifact” along with his urgent plea for what he calls “relative absolute values”, for “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful”²⁶ is exemplary of the discomfort that may spring from such a conception. Byatt is sensitive not only to the question of the viability of literature (and art in general) in the light of an aesthetic “posture acknowledging its own futility”²⁷, but also to the disorientation of both writer and critic.

In constructivist models we may see a positive conclusion to post-modernist thought. Suggesting that meaning is but the product of an artifact, Graff yet conjectures: “But does it follow that because the pseudo-informational propositions in literary works make no truth-claims, there are no truth-claims in literature at all?”²⁸ Sukenick’s call for a “creative truth of ‘construction’” instead of a “passive truth of ‘correspondence’ ”²⁹ and his suggestion that “the world is real because it is imagined” and that “in fiction as in life, form arises as an idiosyncrasy”³⁰ press Graff’s question further ahead.

When the latter hints at this extreme notion, that “all our sense-making procedures are fictions”³¹, we are reminded of Cassandra’s outcry: “It seems sufficiently clear —to me— that you can both destroy and create reality with fictions” (p. 225) or of Julia’s eventual understanding: “Any power, any existence Cassandra had, she, Julia, in the imagination, lent her” (p. 235).

Basically, Cassandra agrees with the premise that fiction constitutes our sole knowable reality and that it is above all no static, fixed arrangement, as Sukenick proposes:

If reality exists, it doesn't do so *a priori*, but only to be put together. Thus one might say reality is an activity, of which literature is part, an important part, but one among many.³²

Even activities, however, presuppose being, and Cassandra firmly insists that beyond what we may know there is completeness. The emphasis rests on the Platonic position that "telling stories is telling lies", and Byatt envisages the web as sticky:

Fictions are lies, yes, but we don't ever know the truth. We see the truth in terms of fictions, our own, other people's. ... what can we have to say to each other? What can we ever say to each other now that won't be seen in terms of Julia's fiction? Our course is plotted for us in it, I understand (p. 225).

The Game advocates a holistic concept of reality, but Cassandra's insight "We create each other, separate" (p. 230) receives no life-affirming formulation, and the final message is annihilation.

The Game is marked by a profound sense of doom: man is trapped, his course plotted. "We are driven", says Simon, "Our area of choice is very limited" and "I seem to entangle myself in others' self-destruction" (p. 233). Cassandra holds, "some of us invite what we are afraid of" (p. 196), and her distrust of the printed word stems in fact from a sense of being entrapped in a network of contingencies that, as she insists, is a distortion of "reality":

If we *imagine* our experience we transmute it —rearrange it, meditate on it, light it differently, change it, relate it to the rest of the world. Stories in themselves have no necessary imaginative value. They may be simply therapeutic for the author. They may be positively dangerous —not a lighting up of facts but a refusal to face facts, a distortion. This always happens, not usually to a harmful degree. But the imagination can be violently dangerous. Not enough —mere recording— is valueless. Too much is an evasion of truth. I know this (p. 68).

In the underlying moral question the Oedipean myth prevails. Obsessed with metaphor (Cassandra), spurred on by escapism (Simon), driven by a need to be liked (Julia) or to proselytize (Thor), man, it seems, cannot eschew his fate. On the other hand, the plot is not clearly superhuman, for by being what he is, man participates. Although the "rents in the network" are not always foreseeable, man, in Cassandra's eyes, is liable to cause harm and morally responsible for his thoughts and deeds, and consequently for the "accidents" that govern life. Thus Simon, through his split liaison with the two sisters, has laid the basis for a train of events that culminates in death, even though the actual tragedy is triggered by a series of TV broadcasts, i.e. long before he re-enters their lives in the flesh and can have any active control of the situation. His attempts at holding the blame at bay

when he claims to have been “a missile in a battle” (p. 204) only meets with Cassandra’s reproachful judgement: “You are... an emotional meddler” (p. 224).

Julia, half remorsefully, expounds on the deadly web of her imagination:

We think, Julia thought, that we are releasing ourselves by plotting what traps us, by laying it all out to look at it —but in fact all we do is show the trap up for real. Iron bars make a cage all right, and the more you look at them or reproduce them the more you know it’s a real cage... Whether or not there was a primal guilt, whether or not she was at fault in being alive, all her own efforts had been directed towards making the guilt real, weighty, binding. Because if it was real, then she was responsible. And if she was responsible she had a choice —her acts were her own. ... She thought: I did it, he went there because I feared it, because I planned it, because I imagined it (p. 208).

At any rate, Julia’s motives are vulnerable to Cassandra’s criticism, and her final defence, “It wasn’t done *in order* to damage her” (p. 218) can hardly alleviate the doom in the light of Cassandra’s previous warnings:

One should never exercise one’s imagination on people one doesn’t know. It’s a kind of theft (p. 67).

I don’t like being talked about. I don’t like being thought about. I know it is not a human right, not to be talked about (p. 91).

I think that no one has any necessary right to publish what they know —however good it may be for them to write it. Or even if what they have written is very good. That a piece of writing is good doesn’t override other considerations —moral considerations— when it comes to damaging others. That’s an absurd overevaluation of the printed word (p. 68).

THE ABYSS AND THE MIRROR

Reality is the true concern of all of Byatt’s characters. At one stage or other in the story Cassandra, Julia, Thor and Simon are all prompted to raise the epistemological question of the truth contained in what they know, think, perceive and imagine. The question of a final truth shapes their various concerns and occupations. There are stages of reality, they acknowledge and at the same time suffer from a profound sense of alienation, although they have of course different notions of what the truth may consist in. Cassandra’s observation, “There are degrees of reality to be apprehended in all objects, at any given time, and degrees of capacity, in ourselves, to apprehend them” (p. 137) is strongly reminiscent of what Gass infers from his snowman analogy: “There are degrees and distances of ontological transformation”³³. “Real” then denotes no objective truth, and in fact it proves a vague term in the philosophical discourse underlying *The Game*. Appropriated by all characters it is charged with constructivist and kybernetic meanings, while equally pointing to metaphysical realism.

Unlike Morrel in *Candida*, Thor, the morally “perfect” (p. 60) but feeble and ineffectual prophet of charity breaks out of the Shavian triangle when sensing a “real need” (p. 59) to run a relief centre in the Congo. To Simon “real” is invariably linked with deprivation and suffering but triggers no feeling of responsibility. Reality, to him, is entirely hermetic, signifying complete experience, neutral communion with Nature. Father Rowell relates the term to the physical world when warning Julia that Cassandra has “only a very tenuous connection with reality” (p. 121), and Julia’s planned novel about “the dangers of imbalance between imagination and reality” (p. 122) testifies to a similar conception. Through Cassandra’s dual awareness the term accrues to purely subjective connotation. Sheer vision is what “real” means to her. Hence she can only be “completely and really uncertain” (p. 191). Cassandra pronounces what the others implicitly fear — the complete breakdown of the strongholds they resort to, the inanity in which Sukenick lodges the contemporary writer:

Reality doesn’t exist, time doesn’t exist, personality doesn’t exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there’s no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only chance. Reality is, simply, our experience, and objectivity is, of course, an illusion. Personality, after passing through a phase of awkward self-consciousness, has become, quite minimally, a mere locus for our experience. In view of these annihilations, it should be no surprise that literature, also, does not exist — how could it? There is only reading and writing, which are things we do, like eating and making love, to pass the time, ways of maintaining a considered boredom in face of the abyss.³⁴

All Byatt’s characters experience a profound malaise vis-à-vis their environment. Trying to carve out an area of their own and to secure a foothold in the world, they pursue art, science and religion. Simon’s restlessness seeks outlet in the jungle, Julia struggles for identity through fiction, Cassandra explores verbal and pictorial metaphor, and Thor’s humanitarian ideals are channelled into missionary action. In their various attempts at ascertaining the realness of their being, they acknowledge their sensibilities, and their efforts to find meaning betray their instinctive confidence in a knowable reality and in its inborn meaning: “... why shouldn’t the thing itself *really* ‘mean’ something?” (p. 161).

The faith in their approaches to life is constantly probed against the data of experience, and, relying on different strategies, they all doubt the suitability of their endeavours to a protean world, perturbed by the notion of man’s possible inadequacy to match reality.

In exploring man’s dire need to find meaning in a meaningless world, which offers no reliable messages, Byatt exposes man’s deep insecurity. The “absolutes have become absolutely problematic”³⁵, and the quest for meaning more often than not causes frustration. They are all faced with the dilemma that surrounds the

rise of post-modernism³⁶. In her youth an ardent supporter of religion, Cassandra feels betrayed in her quest for completeness. Before the final act she cries out in bitterness:

There was a time when I thought the Church had redeemed fiction —that the Church's metaphors were truths— but lately that's seemed meaningless. Dangerous even, like any other fiction (p. 225).

Having gone through a similar phase of religious fervour, Simon experiences the same crisis of authority: "I lost any faith. But I was afraid of —of meaninglessness. Shapelessness, formlessness" (p. 196). Neither the church nor literature can satisfy their claims for fullness. The downfall of religion goes hand in hand with a declining confidence in literary meaning, and Thor's moral principles prove too rigid, even diametrical to a naturally "fanatic" man (p. 188). Thus, by their efforts they learn that they are prone to error and that the truth is impenetrable. If, however, by his very thinking and feeling existence, man is incapable of consummate and undivided being, for his observation is impaired and he cannot look at the world with disinterest, if the final entities are concealed from his pre-possessed eyes and mind, he can only hope to evolve viable strategies. Order is what he may gain at best. Yet, to all characters the question remains whether this order has any significance outside its own texture, for order "does not assure sense"³⁷. Any order is fundamentally idiosyncratic. It is an artifact and as such, as Cassandra surmises, fallacious, warped and distortive. Thus man is abandoned in a vast void, upon which he can only impose vague schemes that are, in Gass's terminology, "non-committal about reality"³⁸.

Nothing is as we see it, as we imagine it. But we must go on seeing and imagining (p. 202).

Cassandra's philosophy has its analogy in evolutionary theory, according to which we can only hope to be among the "fittest". The term is ambiguous as von Glasersfeld has suggested³⁹, for survival in nature allows of no superlative. Similarly, survival is not adaptation in Cassandra's case. Selection operates in negative, not in positive terms. Believing in "accident", "in rents in the network" (p. 212), she proceeds to an understanding of the world as disclosing itself in negative effects —a notion which is confirmed by her suicide.

Looking for ways of living their lives as fully as possible, Julia, Thor and Simon equally experience the limitations of their existence. Survival, in the extreme, proves the validity of their respective patterns, death their inaptitude. Adjustment seems possible only to a limited extent. Cassandra's approach is not fit for survival. She ultimately relies on the order of symbolic meaning, so that her apprehension of the external world is thoroughly anchored in the literary imagination:

She had elaborated, and believed, a network of symbols which made the

outer world into a dazzling but comprehensible constellation of physical facts whose spiritual interrelations could be grasped and woven by the untiring intellect; suns, moons, stars, roses, cups, lances, lions and serpents, all had their place and also their meaning. This network was overlaid by another network interweaving other roots, footnotes, cross-references, bibliographical data, palaeographical quirks. Somewhere, under the network, the truth shone (p. 18).

Life, however, has taught Cassandra that this craving for completeness, so alluringly heralded in romance, not only fails the test of actual experience, but corners the blinded quester into a sacrosanct niche. Cloistered in her college cell she struggles in loneliness to read the truths that she believes her symbols emanate.

Cassandra is probably the one who, of all the characters in *The Game*, suffers most, for her suffering is not conditioned by circumstance. Hers is, in Joyce's terminology, "the pain of extension"⁴⁰, the torment of an enlarged awareness that insinuates ever more forcibly physical annihilation. "Suicide", Gass similarly writes, "is a crime of status... Suicide is a disease of singularity and selfhood, because as we are elevated in the social system, ... the burden of being is felt most fully by the self-determining self"⁴¹.

The tragedy of Cassandra's life lies in her understanding of man's double existence: "Our life is ... an image for something greater than its simple facts" (p. 140), and: "All facts, all solid facts and objects of our life are always themselves and more than themselves" (p. 141). Subsequently, she develops a view of life that excludes man from both pure vision and pure experience:

Most of the time we're double, we can stand outside and see an event—hope, fear, anticipate, judge. And then something happens where—where we have no room for thought or imagining— where what happens is real and all that is real. We talk a lot about living fully, but the last thing we want to do is live anything through. We think that sort of single-minded grief is insanity, but it's only an acknowledgement of a factual truth. An intolerable truth (p. 193).

The controlling image of the serpent serves to strengthen this sense of doubleness. Representing the animal world, it is full of those contradictions and paradoxes that lend themselves to divergent myths and stimulate the imagination. The freshly shed skin is dead while still warm and soft with life, and the eyes of the moulting and renewing snake are covered with a film, but not wholly blind. The thing itself is conducive to metaphor—religious, evolutionary, artistic. The serpent-shaped glass object which Cassandra receives as a present is even more ambivalent. It is fragile and hard, transparent and three-dimensional, realistic and artificial at the same time (cf. p. 112), and within the novel allows of yet further interpretations—a symbol of the Game, suggestive of the past, the germ of the conflict between the two sisters, a token of reconciliation or a harbinger of Simon's return.

Due to his expedition to the jungle Simon has proceeded to an equally split understanding of human nature:

There is a real sense in which you are *both* the suffering creature under the glass and the watching eye over the microscope. You can't escape, but you are free to act in the rest of your life. And you are responsible. Real suffering would be easier: one would have a right to give up and suffer with dignity. That's what we crave—in love, or death. The completeness. We want the watching creature to be given over, we want—as much as we fear— pure feeling, complete feeling. I suppose it's a myth, this complete experience (p. 199).

This insight is for both Cassandra and Simon destabilizing, but their responses are diametrical. To Simon wild life not only furnishes a matrix of references to our understanding but provides the key to man's "original" oneness with nature. Simon's expedition springs from his belief in a pristine paradise to be regained through detachment:

I—I do believe in— exploring an essential solitude. K-keeping oneself to oneself... if one were really able to be alone, not out of lack, or need—*then* one might be able to— to cultivate one's garden—one's *own* garden— Look, and from the garden, we could see everything with, with real indifference, no one thing, no one person more than any other. A—an infinitely extended curiosity. A neutral love. A—an innocent vision where everything and everyone was indiscriminately and haphazardly beautiful? (p. 211).

To Simon experience is man's supreme share in the world, for experience at its best is homomorphous, a return to undifferentiated being. Non-interpretible experience constitutes the gate to his Garden of Eden. By analogy to evolutionary theory he concludes: "If—if one was afraid that life was only accidental survival— then one had better become familiar with the processes" (p. 196), as

Familiarity doesn't make things less mysterious—it does make them less vague. You might say, we learn a *real* fear, instead of a mystical fear. Out here, you might say, one has a chance to begin again ... it's a real Garden of Eden, and we have to find our own bearings—map out for ourselves, not good and evil, but what life and death are really like, since we are not immortal. And what is *really* to be feared (p. 21).

Being an extremist, he believes in the need for disruption. The jungle offers enough challenge for him to disengage his inordinate fears, and by exposing himself to extreme peril, Simon hopes to proceed to a neutral acceptance of facts. Yet, even his confidence in the order of natural processes fails to restore in him such neutrality, for, although he longs to exorcise his fear of death through physical

deprivation, his mind revolts in nightmares against his cameraman's cruel death. Experience leaves its marks and sheer exposure does not cure man of his existential vagueness.

While to Simon the order of facts provides the only available truth, Cassandra places no reliance on solid facts and on Simon's conception of innocence: "I don't believe in innocence, except as something we invented, to desire" (p. 212). She is tormented by her mind struggling to bridge the abyss between fact and fiction, denied full residence in either realm.

Continually enriched by the children's cognitive development, the Game marks the rupture of a primal sense of union. The primitive myths are readily transformed and adjusted to suit Cassandra's and Julia's emotional needs:

So you and I created a world, we explored, in the imagination, things that were deficient in our experience. A normal procedure, I assume, only we carried it beyond the point where it was normal. There was a gulf between the life we created and the life we lived (p. 102).

The gulf widens as the myths become more private, and Cassandra plunges herself ever more deeply into the surrogate and consoling world of symbolical correlations, so that her profession proves the inevitable consequence of the Game: "She had cultivated her walled-garden skills at the expense of any others she might have had. We become what we are, she told herself, by a series of involuntary half-choices" (p. 18).

To Julia's and Cassandra's fictions Byatt contrasts the male world, which is governed by the principle of physical involvement. Action, however, i. e. adventure in the case of Simon Moffitt, charitable deeds in Thor's case, seems impossible in familiar surroundings. Both the dedicated explorer and the prospective evangelist seek fulfilment in the distance and if, for some time, they establish a link between the contemplative life and their own sturdy energies — Thor as a humanitarian and moral judge, Simon as a naturalist and restless traveller, whose soul is yet accessible to Cassandra's imaginative claims — they are nevertheless commuters between two mutually exclusive spheres.

Cassandra senses that the separation is beyond restoration and feels increasingly secluded by her visions and hallucinations. While she is intellectually aware of this gulf, she cannot discard her craving for completeness: "We need a sense of being undifferentiated" (p. 228). Aware of what Gass calls a "specific *angle of interaction*"⁴² as created by each metaphor, she can but pursue "... professionally, self-indulgently, any metaphor to the death, fanatical or truth-revealing" (p. 141) and confesses: "I keep chasing metaphors. Out of a desire for an impossible unity" (p. 228).

Here, Cassandra hints at the incompleteness of language, which in a field concept of reality is "part of the field being described"⁴³. Language, she seems to suggest, deprives her of the unity she thirsts after, for "to speak is to create, or

presuppose, the separation between subject and object that the reality would deny”⁴⁴.

Barred from pure vision and pure experience, Cassandra is a permanent wanderer and, knowing that she is in fact indivisible, fears madness.

I live in two worlds. One is hard, inimical, brutal, threatening, the tyranny of objects where all things are objects and thus tyrannical. The other is infinite: heaven, through the pane of glass, the Looking Glass world. One dreams of release into that world of pure vision and knows that what would be gained would be madness; a single world, and intolerable (p. 141).

Madness is also what Simon fears when unable to hold actual experience and imagined event apart (cf. p. 193), for the borderline between the two worlds is unstable. Cassandra’s split awareness hovers between first- and third-person observation. While reassuring herself of the solidity of her surroundings, she steps out of them and assumes the role of a mere observer:

She saw herself, for a moment, coldly from outside —a feeling she disliked, and had invented little rituals to avoid. She dropped the curtain again, now, closing herself in, and looked over her room and her work (p. 17).

The window-pane serves as a mirror that confirms her solidity. Yet, solidity means weight, which she resents, for all objects are basically “fixed and dead” (p. 138). Although objects emanate a sense of “reality”, Cassandra feels oppressed by their hostility. Interpreting her solid surroundings as mirrors, she infers that reality is within our imagination, and mirrors only furnish fragmentary evidence, they are “partial truths”, “they do not reflect the hollow in the skull” (p. 138).

The scene quoted above is illustrative of the prevailing idea that the world is elusive and that its solidity is treacherous. Byatt’s realistic handling of scenes and settings emphasizes this. The image of the mirror may therefore serve as a guideline to the reader. Her recent collection *Sugar and Other Stories* exceeds the purport and technique of her earlier novels, pinpointing more consciously through language the dualism that is so perturbing to her heroines. As if striving to encapsulate the physical world through a profusion of minutely observed details, Byatt paradoxically reminds us of its relativity. Cassandra’s effort to paint demonstrates this process. Her canvasses abound in truthfully drawn details from nature but yield only metaphorical messages. They are attempts at reinstating her in and securing her control over the physical world while paradoxically warding it off by consolidating their status as conscious artifacts.

Equally, by confirming the solidity of a setting through concrete images, Byatt antithetically leads the reader’s imagination out of it. The following graphic description from “Rose-Coloured Teacups” is exemplary of this method:

She could see the chairs very clearly, one with a pale green linen cover, fitted, and one with a creased chintz, covered with large, floppy roses. She could see the little fire, with its dusty coal scuttle and brass fire-irons. Sometimes she saw it burning brightly, but mostly it was dark, because it was summer outside, and through the window, between the rosy chintz curtains, there was the unchanging college garden with its rosebeds and packed herbaceous border, its sunken pool and smell of mown grass. There were leaves coiling into the picture round the outside of the window-frame — a climbing rose, a creeper, what was it?⁴⁵

The final question introduces an element of doubt which is concentrated towards the end of the story, when the solidity of this scene collapses and the view turns out to be a vision. Such descriptive passages, however evocative, never recede behind the worlds they build up, and if “to understand a sentence philosophically ... is to project its entire structure into an imaginary world”, “this ontological interpretation of the structure”⁴⁶ returns to its own fictiveness. The process is circular, and we never reach beyond a certain limit. The things invariably elude our grasp.

The three women sat in the little room, imagined not remembered. ... Veronica could see so much — ... She saw the little, blonde, pretty face in the window lit with pure pleasure, pure hope, almost content. She could never see any further: from there, it always began again, chairs, tablecloth, sunny window, rosy teacups, a safe place.⁴⁷

Byatt’s visual consciousness serves an antithetical purpose, for her minutely built-up settings evince, above all, a false sense of security and stability, and the richness of detail is disturbing rather than assuasive.

The discomfort Cassandra encounters vis-à-vis solid objects is aggravated by her dreams and visions. In her nightmares Cassandra in fact explores what Simon seeks in wild nature. They evoke a frenzy of life. Teeming with creatures and marked by a heightened awareness of physical detail, they are clearly compensatory, over-emphasizing what Cassandra is denied in waking life and freeing her from a world arrested in physical immobility into one that proceeds and changes at a conversely mad pace. The vision is truly Kafkaesque. The creatures proliferate, the speed of their run increases, life multiplies. The pleasing images of nature’s tiny, and therefore docile, creatures with their “tiny claws” and “fragile skin around golden eyes” (p. 103), soon escape her control, and the order of the vegetative world all of a sudden gives way to chaos, threatening and destructive.

... a whole file of grass was alive with elongated, hurrying creatures, a cross between rats and lizards, with black snouts and tiny blood-red hands... Leaves and bushes would begin to flutter wildly... She would notice a tree-trunk alive with scuttering mice or a section of a path boiling with innumerable insects, crawling over each other, hurrying, falling (p. 104).

The mood of life condensed, augmented and accelerated harbours an inborn need for undoing. Death and terror thus permeate the final apocalyptic images:

... a pile of those clammy, featherless baby birds, blind reptiles with gaunt triangular heads, that fall from trees. A dead mouse, with maggots lumping themselves shapelessly across the browning flesh. A flattened hedgehog, like a blood-fringed doormat. The cat, using its teeth sideways, crackling shears, on the ribcage of a rabbit, shaking its head to free a caught tooth, making, in its throat, a low rasping sound (p. 104)

What separates these raving nightmare visions from the “normal” familiar world is a pane of glass, and this pane equally secures her sanity:

All I know is that at all costs the pane of glass between the worlds must not be broken. It serves, maybe, the function of the lens over the snake’s eye. It seems, ideally, that the two worlds should run into each other; but practically, one knows this would be destructive. I must remain isolated (p. 141).

This balance, however, is ever more endangered, and when Simon returns, Cassandra has lost this discriminating power altogether:

She was completely and really uncertain whether she had called him up. Either way, she knew now what madness felt like. She remembered that she had not known whether her father was alive or dead (p. 191)

The “shining snailtrails of her thoughts about him” are no longer distinguishable from Simon’s “dark, invisible, real footprints” (p. 201). Cassandra anticipates the tragedy:

... we are afraid of the moment when what we imagine becomes inextricably involved in what is actual. What I could ceaselessly invent, because it was out of the realm of possibility, has become possible —limiting, actual, finally, after all, impossible. Nothing will be the same. When the prince kissed the princess, the forest of brambles shrivelled and vanished. Alternatively, when the lady looked out of the tower —seeing, simply, a lump of flesh and blood and a patch of sunshine— the mirror cracked and the web flew out (p. 201).

In the end Cassandra is denied the Bergsonian concept of “unconscious memory”, for she can no longer map her existence in relation to space and time. “Reality” no longer applies to actuality, but signifies unbridled subjectivity. The pane of glass is no longer reliable. “Everything I touch, everything I touch turns to ashes” (p. 151) marks the dissolution of the solid world. The mirror reflects only chaos and the world begins to dance and tumble.

She had, in church, a real sense that the building was falling open like a flower, and then closing, one half over the other, driving pews together, impelling pillars athwart each other. Or, in Hall, the mock mediaeval crossbeams of the roof edged slowly down... (p. 150).

Cassandra is crushed. The spatial claustrophobia manifested in both her nightmares and her vision of the nave unfolding only to bury her underneath is only the outward sign of a more tragical spiritual claustrophobia. Cassandra fails, but the tragedy is that she has failed long before her actual death, which is, in the sense that

even the Platonic pursuit of knowledge, involving as it does the separation of reason from passion and appetite, is suicidal ..: as are, of course, the search for ecstatic states, and longings for mystical union,⁴⁸

the logical, inevitable consequence of Cassandra's self-effacing awareness rather than a galvanic act. Her questions, whether the "ultimate" truth is knowable, whether we may proceed to a correlative understanding and whether our thoughts have any bearing on this world, unmask the precariousness of her mythical patterns,

For an order or pattern of meaning which must be invented by human consciousness out of its own inner substance or structure —whether it is thought to come from the private subjectivity of the individual or from some intersubjective *Geist* that is assumed to be common to all minds— is necessarily uncertain of its authority.⁴⁹

Faced with her father's death, betrayed by Simon and used by Julia's imagination, she experiences the inadequacy of literature to offer practical guidelines. The Brontës' isolation, Swift's sane questioning of his insanity, Tennyson's vision of the mirror and the web, Coleridge and Wordsworth's joint poetical enterprise, as well as Byron's impassioned vein, they all provide self-enclosed, "futile" truths she fails to root in life.

Cassandra's intellect has in vain striven to overcome the gulf, to set proportions right. The myth of Cassandra is illustrative of the "uselessness of rational thought"⁵⁰. Calling herself "a specialist in useless knowledge" (p. 141), she suggests the "disproportion in advanced society between the pervasiveness of intellectual analysis and the apparent ability of this analysis to answer questions of pressing human importance"⁵¹. Given this moral vacuum of art and reasoning, Apollo's priestess is a true symbol of the divorce of matter and meaning. The literary world attracts Cassandra's total allegiance, but it bears no fruit for Cassandra's muse is voiceless. Art is shrouded in silence. The intended epic of her youth never comes forth, and her wisdom, cultivated in segregation and locked in

her diary and papers that end up bumping in the back of Julia's car, is muted to eternal silence. The irony is bitter. If we consider the narrator to restore communication by initiating the reader, this is exactly what Cassandra would have most grossly despised.

If Cassandra's death marks the end of a cultural tradition that has laid claim to the "interpretive authority" of art and its "moral efficacy"⁵², it is on the other hand brought about by fiction usurping life. One world can be extended only at the expense of another. *The Game* provides against the marriage between matter and spirit. Thor's married life obviates true union as much as Cassandra and Simon's relationship fails to merge vision and observation. Accordingly, the Game denies the possibility of a satisfactory relationship. Julia's marriage is diseased long before Thor's subdued passions break vehemently loose, struggling for release from both oppressive moral discipline and domestic misery, and Cassandra, at the moment when the reader is prepared for the climactic fusion of fact and fiction, commits suicide.

The mimesis is thus fully reversed, and "the logic of criticism", as Graff suggests "has come full circle":

From the ancient view that literary fictions illustrate general truths, we moved to the view that literary fictions illustrate fictions. But having in the meantime discovered that reality itself is a fiction, we reassert that, in illustrating fictions, literary fictions reveal truth. In a paradoxical and fugitive way, mimetic theory remains alive. Literature holds the mirror up to unreality... its [literature's] conventions of reflexivity and antirealism are themselves mimetic of the kind of unreal reality that modern reality has become. But 'unreality' in this sense is not fiction but the element in which we live.⁵³

Notes

1. David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads". In *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1977, p. 86.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
3. Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists*, London, Junction, 1982, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5. Cf. Robert Scholes/Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 1966; rpt. London/Oxford/New York: OUP, 1971; Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators*, New York: OUP, 1967; Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Urbana/Chicago/London: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979.
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
8. In *Structural Fabulation*, Notre Dame/London: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975, p. 7.
9. Lodge, *Op. cit.*, p. 86.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
11. Lodge, *Op. cit.*, p. 90.
12. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 94.
13. Cf. A. S. Byatt, *The Game*, 1967; rpt. Penguin 1983, pp. 158-162. For all further references to this edition page numbers will be given in the text.
14. Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*, Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, p. 209.
15. Cf. Lodge, *Op. cit.*, p. 86.
16. Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, Chicago/London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 174.
17. William H. Gass, *The World within the Word*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1978, p. 336.
18. Cf. N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models & Literary Strategies in the 20th Century*, Ithaca/London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984, pp. 9-11.
19. Graff, *Op. cit.*, p. 164.
20. Hayles, *Op. cit.*, p. 15.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Ziegler/Bigsby, *Op. cit.*, p. 13.
25. Hayles, *Op. cit.*, p. 23.
26. John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, New York: Basic Books, 1978, p. 133.
27. Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough". In *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, p. 218.
28. Graff, *Literature against Itself*, p. 154.
29. Cf. Ziegler/Bigsby, *Op. cit.*, p. 7.
30. Ronald Sukenick, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, New York: The Dial Press, 1969, p. 47.
31. Graff's reference here is to Jonathan Culler. *Literature against Itself*, p. 171.
32. Sukenick, "The Death of the Novel", p. 47.
33. Gass, *Op. cit.*, p. 289.
34. Sukenick, "The Death of the Novel", p. 41.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Cf. Graff tracing the development of post-modernism. "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough", pp. 219-220.
37. Cf. Hayles, *Op. cit.*, p. 152.
38. Gass, *Op. cit.*, p. 338.
39. Cf. Ernst von Glasersfeld, "Einführung in den radikalen Konstruktivismus". In *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit: Wie wissen wir, was wir zu wissen glauben? Beiträge zum Konstruktivismus*, ed. Paul Watzlawick, München/Zürich: Piper, 1984, pp. 20-23.
40. Cf. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, London: Granada, 1977, p. 119.
41. Gass, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.
42. Gass, *Op. cit.*, p. 276.

43. Cf. Hayles, *Op. cit.*, p. 21.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Sugar and Other Stories*, (1987) rpt. Penguin 1988, p. 33.
46. Gass, *Op. cit.*, p. 337.
47. *Sugar and Other Stories*, p. 38.
48. Cf. Gass's reflections on suicide ("The Doomed in their Sinking"). *Op. cit.*, p. 8.
49. Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough", p. 222.
50. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 224.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Cf. Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough", p. 217.
53. Graff, *Literature against Itself*, pp. 179-180. In the latter part of this quotation Graff refers to Paul de Man.