Palimpsestic writing and crossing textual boundaries in selected novels by A.S. Byatt

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It all starts here ™

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Abstract

This dissertation examines three novels by the author and critic A.S. Byatt, namely *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), using a hermeneutic method of analysis. The investigation pays specific attention to the structure of the novels and how this compares to the structure of the ancient palimpsest. Theoretical information on the palimpsest as model is based on relevant writings by Thomas Carlyle (1830, 1833), Thomas De Quincey (1845) through to Josephine McDonagh (1987), Gérard Genette (1997) and Sarah Dillon (2007). The ensuing argument is that Byatt's use of postmodernist pseudo-intertextuality and intertextuality cause her novels to have a palimpsestic structure of various layers, with the effect that textual boundaries are transgressed. Ultimately Byatt's writing strategies result in ontological uncertainty for the reader.

Keywords

A.S. Byatt, writing, reading, the palimpsest, palimpsestuous, intertextuality, intratextuality, postmodernism, ontological uncertainty, transgressing (textual) boundaries, *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996), *The Biographer's Tale (2000*).

Opsomming

Die skripsie ondersoek drie romans deur die outeur en kritikus A.S. Byatt, naamlik *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) en *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) aan die hand van ‘n hermeneutiese metode van analise. Die ondersoek gee spesifiek aandag aan die struktuur van die romans en hoe dit vergelyk met die struktuur van die antieke palimpses. Die teoretiese inligting oor die palimpses as model is gebasseer op die relevante skryfwerk van Thomas Carlyle (1830, 1833), Thomas De Quincey (1845) regdeur tot by Josephine McDonagh (1987), Gérard Genette (1997) en Sarah Dillon (2007). Die argument wat hieruit vloei stel dat Byatt se gebruik van postmodernistiese pseudo-intertekstualiteit en intertekstualiteit tot gevolg het dat haar romans ‘n palimpsestiese struktuur met verskeie lae vertoon en die effek daarvan is dat tekstuele grense oortree word. Die uiteinde is dat Byatt se skryfstrategieë ontologiese onsekerheid by die leser wek.

Sleutelwoorde

A.S. Byatt, skryfwerk, lees, die palimpses, palimpses-agtig, intertekstualiteit, intratekstualiteit, postmodernisme, ontologiese onsekerheid, oortreding van (tekstuele) grense, *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996), *The Biographer's Tale (2000*).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Contextualisation

1. Contextualisation and Problem Statement

This dissertation argues that readers may experience ontological uncertainty as a result of the palimpsestic structure and the palimpsestuous relationality, created through intertextuality, evident in Byatt's novels. In an endeavour to prove this statement, this study offers a hermeneutical analysis of three of A.S. Byatt's novels, namely *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). As a first step in this direction, this chapter considers the context and problems related to this phenomenon.

The three novels mentioned above contain texts, subtexts or intertexts that are not inherently part of the narrative, but which inform the novels as a whole, and as such they become intertextual novels. For the purposes of this study, intertextuality is either the actual presence of one text within another or a reference within one text to another text. Genette (1997:1-2) offers the following definition of explicit intertextuality: "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts, that is to say...the actual presence of one text within another". Genette states that intertextuality in its explicit form may be either quoting or plagiarism (1997:2). With explicit intertextuality, the text that is actually contained, often in its entirety or in intertextual fragments and quotations, within the main text is termed the intertext – it can be written either by the author of the main text[1] (under the name of an illusory author) or it may be written by another actual author. Another definition holds that the concept of implicit intertextuality "includes literary echoes and allusions as one of the many ways in which any text is interwoven with other texts" (Abrams, 2005:10). Genette

[1] When the intertext is written by the same author of the main text at the same time that the main text was written, one may argue that it is in fact not an actual intertext, but rather a playful, postmodernist pseudo-intertext. This dissertation, however, refers to texts that are separate from the main text as intertexts, whether they are written by the author of the main text in which they are embedded or not.

(1997:2) describes the practice of allusion as “less explicit”, thus by implication it is implicit, since there is no actual presence of one text within another, there is only a reference in the one text to another text. This makes this kind of intertextuality more indirect. Consider Abrams’ (2005:325) definition of intertextuality:

> the multiple ways in which one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are ‘always already’ in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born.

One can clearly see the levels of abstraction which eventually almost seem to equate intertextuality with what Genette (1997:1, 9) terms transtextuality. According to Abrams (2005:325), Kristeva’s formulation of intertextuality refers to every text as “the site of an intersection of numberless other texts” and the text exists “only through its relations to other texts”. Kristeva herself also states that intertextuality “invites you to read a text as a crossing of texts” (1998:324). This formulation is basically the same as Genette’s (1997:1, 9) notion of transtextuality that stipulates that a text is a place where various texts connect to create meaning. This study considers intertextuality a type or subcategory of transtextuality. Michael Riffaterre’s definition of intertextuality is not relevant to this study because it is too broad. With implicit intertextuality, the text that is referred to or alluded to in the main text is termed the subtext. The text which contains the intertexts or subtexts is termed the main text. Note that these terms are arbitrary and that as it is difficult to define explicit and implicit intertextuality, it is nearly impossible to categorise any one intertextual text as only an intertext or subtext with absolute certainty.

What further complicates the use of these terms in this study is that they have been used before in different contexts and therefore have assumed various other meanings as well.

For example, Kristeva discusses the term intertext in relation to some of Riffaterre's ideas and states that the "missing part of a text [is] called the 'intertext'" (2002:12) and that the reader is driven to find this missing part while reading. This study does not imply that definition when the term intertext is used. The term intertext is used by other critics like Hutcheon (1996:478), who uses it to describe the inclusion of letters and canonic romantic works in a novel by Christa Wolf. Hutcheon (1990:126) uses the term in the same sense in another article on films. In post-structuralism, the term subtext may be used to describe the 'real meaning' of a text that is masked or hidden by its surface meanings (Abrams, 2005:251). Dillon (2007:64) refers to this meaning of the term subtext as she states that according to Albert Silverstein's argument "there is another text which lies hidden by this implausible and trivial narrative". The term subtext may also be used to describe the "text's unspoken, because repressed and unconscious, awareness of the ways it is determined not only by current ideology, but also by the long-term process of true 'History'" (Abrams, 2005:161), in other words, "the text's true, although covert or unmentioned, subject matter" (Abrams, 2005:194). The use of the term subtext in these contexts has clear similarities with the use of the term in this dissertation as stipulated above, but they are not entirely synonymous and should not be understood as such.

The abovementioned intertexts in the selected novels by Byatt may be poems, short stories, diary entries, letters, depositions from court cases, imbedded novels and even extracts from academic articles. Byatt's novels include recycled quotations from texts written by other authors like Lawrence, Forster, Mann and Kafka etc., too. Stewart (2009:505) points out that Byatt's fictional structure is one "in which heterogonous blocks of narrative are

interspersed with fragmentary intertexts or metafictional discussions of social and artistic issues".

Byatt makes ample and innovative use of the postmodern convention of intertextuality. In some cases intertextuality can occur if the same author wrote both the main and intertexts. The Victorian poetry in Byatt's *Possession* serves as intertexts and they are written by Byatt under the pseudonym of R.H. Ash. Similar examples can be found in the other selected novels for this study and these are discussed in due course. Take note that Byatt assumes a great number and variety of these so-called pseudonyms in her novels and in this study the term pseudonym does not refer to a name chosen by an author under which he or she publishes their writing, but rather to the characters that function as authors in the selected novels by Byatt.

The effect of this intertextuality is a palimpsestic layering in the structure of Byatt's novels as well as an expansion of the boundaries of her novels. The boundaries of the novels, both textual and interpretive, have to expand in order to accommodate and incorporate the intertexts. In her article "'Nous deux' or a (hi)story of intertextuality", Kristeva states the following: "my concept of intertextuality thus goes back to Bakhtin's dialogism and Barthes' text theory...I contributed by replacing Bakhtin's idea of several voices inside an utterance with the notion of several texts within a text" (2002:8). Kristeva's formulation of intertextuality links with the concept of the palimpsest because it refers to an intertwined structure of layers:

> intertextuality is a way of placing us, readers, not only in front of a more or less complicated and interwoven structure (the first meaning of 'texture'), but also within an on-going process of signifying that goes all its way back to the semiotic plurality, under several layers of the significant (2002:9).

Like with a palimpsest, the reader is confronted with a woven texture that consists of texts that he or she has to decipher in order to find the hidden meaning under the various layers of writing.

Schor (2000:237) addresses one reason for Byatt's use of so many varied intertexts by stating that Byatt probably thought "that the novel's form was at its heart to invoke everything else". Genette (1997:1) refers to this characteristic ability of literature to call on and resurrect other texts. He calls it the "textual transcendence of the text" or "transtextuality". Genette (1997:9) states that "there is no literary work that does not evoke (to some extent and according to how it is read) some other literary work". This transcendence implies that any one literary work is in actual fact not a singular text that stands on its own, it is rather a place where various texts connect to create meaning. For Genette (1997:1) transtextuality is "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts". So it is what allows a text to permeate its own boundaries and communicate or interact with other texts and in so doing it enriches and deepens its own meaning. Genette identifies (1997:1-5) various kinds of transtextuality namely, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, hypertextuality and intertextuality. These all aid the text in transcending its boundaries and Walsh (2000:185) identifies this notion in *Possession*: "*Possession* is not merely *inter*textual but *intra*textual (the novel is concerned with the network of relationships between its constituent texts) and *trans*textual (it surveys textuality and intertextuality in general)."

Transtextuality encompasses "genres such as pastiche, parody [and] travesty" (Genette, 1997:8). The terms pastiche and parody often seem to be used interchangeably and

Byatt's writing has been labelled as pastiche and/or parody by various critics like Becker (2001:20-21) Bernard (2003:15), Buxton (2001:91), Franken (2001:90), Keen (2001:32, 39), Schor (2000:239), Stewart (2009:508), Su (2004:701) and Todd (1994:107, 1996:45). None of these critics, however, offer a clear definition for either parody or pastiche, but Genette does. Parody is the "distortion of a text by means of minimal transformation" (Genette, 1997:24) and it usually has a comic effect (Genette, 1997:16). On the other hand, pastiche is "the imitation of a style without any satirical intent" (Genette, 1997:25), in fact a pastiche may even revere and pay tribute to a style (Genette, 1997:98). The greatest difference between the two is that "the parodist...gets hold of a text and transforms it" while "the pastiche writer gets hold of a style...and this style dictates the text" (Genette, 1997:82). In this dissertation Byatt's literary ventriloquism (i.e. her Victorian poetry in *Possession*, the imbedded novel in *Babel Tower*, and the historical accounts in *The Biographer's Tale*) is considered pastiche as defined and described by Genette, because she identifies and abstracts a style and practices it in another text. In the conclusion to his book, Genette (1997:399) states that "it has been aptly said that pastiche and parody 'designate literature as a palimpsest'". In an interview with Walker (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:329), it becomes clear that Byatt prefers the term ventriloquism to pastiche, but that the two terms essentially mean the same thing: "imitating historical literary forms...an imitation with something added, an imitation that is seeking to say something new". Byatt re-writes a historical literary form and while she says something new (or adds another layer), she still allows the essence of the literary form (the underlying layer) to show through so that it is identifiable for the reader. Pastiche is one of the techniques that Byatt uses in writing the

selected novels which results in their palimpsestic structure. Not only does Byatt's use of pastiche give the novels a layered structure, but the technique also makes it possible for the novels to transcend their textual boundaries and become transtextual.

Through the inclusion of numerous and varied intertexts, Byatt makes the invocation and eventual textual transcendence of her novels explicit. Schor (2000:247) notes the following: "for Byatt the image of resurrection runs deep: the possibility of endless return...informs most of her fiction". In essence then, Byatt wants to evoke as well as invoke, and in so doing she resurrects different types of texts from the past and the present. The result of this is that a novel is not only prose, but also poetry, literary criticism, court depositions and extracts from personal journals and letters. In that way, the transcendence of the text is made explicit and the boundaries of the novel's form and conventions become diffused. Byatt does this by using intertextuality to create a structure of "texts piled on texts piled on texts" (Schor, 2000:248). The ensuing structure of texts piled on texts takes on the structural form of the palimpsest.

Literary critics that have linked Byatt's writing to the concept of the palimpsest include Noble (2001) and Stewart (2009). Noble (2001:65) discusses the character Hugh Pink in *Babel Tower*, who "overwrites the images he *sees* with those he *remembers*, creating a palimpsest". This is a description of Hugh's mind as a palimpsest rather than a reading of the novel as a palimpsest. Noble (2001:64) does, however, identify certain "patterns of images that recur again and again in the novel" and this is in line with what a reading of the novel as a palimpsest aims to do. Stewart (2009:494) uses the related concepts of

"overpainting," "verbal lamination" (2009:505) and "overwriting" (2009:506) to describe ways of making palimpsests out of canvases and texts. These three concepts are similar to the concept of the palimpsest because the structure they convey is one of layers that have been 'erased' and revised. Stewart's idea of the canvas or text as palimpsest is thus very relevant to this study, especially with regard to the process of creation, be it making a palimpsest, overwriting, overpainting or verbal lamination. Stewart's (2009:506) argument on the main text and the intertexts' relationality is also relevant: "a remnant of an earlier work can speak through layers of paint on canvas [after the process of overpainting], just as earlier texts can speak through [and to] later [after the process of making a palimpsest]".

The concept of the palimpsest as defined by Dillon in her book *The palimpsest: literature, criticism, theory* (2007), will serve as the guiding principle for a close analysis of Byatt's novels; therefore, it is necessary to define the concept of the palimpsest and briefly discuss its structure, as well as the logic behind it.

In a recent article Fulford (2012) describes the word palimpsest as the "kind of word [that] raises curiosity and pries open the imagination, encouraging us to think about what we might otherwise ignore".

The term "palimpsest" comes from a Greek word which literally means "to scrape again" (McDonagh, 1987:210). The term refers to a piece of vellum or papyrus of which the surface was scraped or treated with substances in order to erase the writing on it so that it could be re-inscribed. Various reasons have been put forth as to why palimpsests were created. It may have been due to the scarcity and cost of writing materials like vellum, parchment and papyrus, it may also have been to deliberately wipe out certain texts in order to replace them

with others that were more relevant at the time (Dillon, 2007:15). Various methods were used to erase the original writing from the palimpsest, depending on the writing material, but the one thing all palimpsests have in common is that the original writing was not erased entirely and is therefore still legible after it was supposed to have been destroyed. Crang (1998:22) notes this characteristic by saying: "the earlier inscriptions were never fully erased so over time the result was a composite – a palimpsest representing the sum of all the erasures and over-writings".

The palimpsest is properly introduced as a figure by Thomas De Quincey in a short section of *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845), the section is entitled "The Palimpsest". De Quincey states that one's brain, and ultimately the human mind in general, may be seen as a palimpsest (Dillon, 2007:23-24). He is not, however, the only writer who uses the palimpsest as a figure as "it is used frequently in the nineteenth century as an historical and psychological model by many writers" (McDonagh, 1987:208). Fulford (2012) points out that "Coleridge, for one, had earlier used it in the same sense". Later on Freud also used a model similar to that of the palimpsest when he described the psyche in terms of the "Mystic Writing-Pad" which can be re-inscribed and which retains all inscriptions, but is unable to recollect the earlier inscriptions (McDonagh, 1987:209). It is specifically the recollection of earlier inscriptions that Dillon (2007:30) believes was the most important characteristic of the figure of the palimpsest for De Quincey. Although De Quincey was definitely not the only writer to use the concept of the palimpsest, he can be seen as an important influence on the abstraction of the figurative concept from the paleontological object (Dillon, 2007:23-44, McDonagh, 1987:208-222). De Quincey extended the word and made it available for wide employment

as a metaphor, so “under his patronage, it flowered” (Fulford, 2012). As a result of this abstraction, “the radical edge of the palimpsest cuts into a wide range of contemporary issues as it functions as a psychological, historical and social model” (McDonagh, 1987:210).

Due to the fact that ancient palimpsests embody “the mystery of the secret, the miracle of resurrection and the thrill of detective discovery” (Dillon, 2007:12), they have continued to fascinate people, both scholars and lay men alike. Eventually as the ancient palimpsest was abstracted it came to represent a contemporary concept which can be applied to various research fields and disciplines. Dillon (2007:2) states that “the palimpsest becomes a figure for interdisciplinarity”. Dillon (2007:4) explores the contemporary concept in her book and describes it as follows:

> The palimpsest is...an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other [and it has a] complex structure of (textual) relationality.

There is a specific connection between the different texts on the surface of the palimpsest. This connection can be described by a “neologistic adjective” derived from the contemporary concept of the palimpsest, namely “palimpsestuous” (Dillon, 2007:11). Dillon (2007:4) explicates: “palimpsestuous does not name something as, or as making, a palimpsest, but describes the type of relationality reified in the palimpsest”. This definition is based on Dillon’s notion of texts that inhabit the surface of the palimpsest and the consequent “relationality” between these texts, i.e. the interaction between the subtexts or

intertexts and the main text. Another neologism based on the adjective "palimpsestuous" is the noun "palimpsestuousness" (Dillon, 2007:3) which is the relation that exists between the texts of the palimpsest. This relation is paradoxical in nature because it comprehensively includes both the fact that the different texts are separate entities and that they are inevitably connected because they are literally bound together in one manuscript. Dillon (2007:6) mentions this as she writes about the "simultaneity of intimacy and separation [which] defines both the palimpsestuous and the metaphoric relationship". An archaeological palimpsest has an older, ancient underlying layer of text and a younger overlying layer of text that bear no obvious relation to each other. According to Dillon (2007:34), the difference between archaeological palimpsests and the contemporary use of the concept is that there is no clear relation or connection between the layers of text of archaeological palimpsests. The abstract layers of the concept of the palimpsest, however, do share some connection. Dillon (2007:3) explains this when she purports that the palimpsest creates a:

> simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation...preserving as it does the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence.

So the concept of the palimpsest both emphasises and erases the boundaries between its texts. Walsh (2000:187) also refers to this paradoxical relationality in his article on Byatt's Booker Prize winning novel, *Possession*: "The boundaries between discourse-types are blurred (though not obliterated), while their distinctive features are highlighted." Palimpsestuous relationality thus emphasises the boundaries between separate texts while simultaneously also emphasising the likelihood of these textual boundaries being transgressed. Gauthier (2006:69) identifies this notion in *Possession* by commenting that

"these two worlds occupy the same textual space while pointing to the incongruity of such a pairing".

Another term that is used to describe this kind of textual relationality is the adjective "involute," which basically means 'complicated' according to the COED (2008:748). The two adjectives "involute" and "palimpsestuous" are almost synonymous in terms of the relation that they describe, which exists due to or after the process of making a palimpsest. According to Dillon (2007:4), "the adjective 'involuted' describes the relationship between the texts that inhabit the palimpsest as a result of palimpsesting and subsequent textual reappearance" and that palimpsestuous can be "employed as a near synonym for involuted". The term involute was coined by De Quincey and both Dillon (2007:4) and Byatt (1991:292) refer to it. After including a considerable quote from De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) in one of her critical essays (1991:317-319), Byatt discusses the term involute as coined by De Quincey to describe "the way the human mind thinks and feels". The term refers to how the mind makes connections between things and according to De Quincey, as quoted by Byatt (1991:292), involute is a "perplexed combination of objects" or a "compound experience incapable of being disentangled".[2] The texts of the palimpsest form such a "combination" or "compound" which is "incapable of being disentangled" because the texts are combined together on a single, inextricable surface. Byatt (1991:292) describes her critical essay *Van Gogh, Death and Summer* as an "inextricable involute" because many

[2] A secondary quotation is used here in order to show that Byatt is familiar with De Quincey's writing and how he defines the concepts of involute and palimpsest. For the primary source see De Quincey (1985).

ideas and writings are brought together in the essay. Similarly, the texts on the surface of the palimpsest are involuted because they are brought together and inevitably stand in relation to each other.

The term palimpsestuous was not used by De Quincey in 1845. It was first introduced by Genette (1997:399) when he suggested that readers are invited "to engage in a relational reading" or a "*palimpsestuous* reading". Genette was the first to use the term in print, but did not coin the term himself, it was coined by Philippe Lejeune in an article that Genette had read, but which was only published after Genette's book *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree* (Dillon, 2007:4 and Genette, 1997:399).

In essence then, the texts or layers of the palimpsest, both the ancient object and its contemporary abstraction, have a relationship that can be described as involuted or palimpsestuous and so they can be read and interpreted in relation to each other. This is an important concept used to analyse the selected novels by Byatt. The different layers of texts in her novels are entwined and their meanings can only be truly deciphered by looking at them as separate texts, as well as texts that form a composite entirety. An example can be found in *Possession*. Todd (1997:39-470) devotes an entire chapter in his book on Byatt to what he terms Byatt's "wonder-tales" or fairytales[3]. Two of these tales are written under the pseudonym Christabel LaMotte and are included as intertexts in *Possession*, they are entitled *The Glass Coffin* and *Gode's Story*. Todd (1997:40) proposes that these two tales are "self-contained" as they have been reprinted word for word as separate, independent short stories in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), and yet he argues that they only become true wonder-tales when they are incorporated into *Possession*. Todd (1997:40)

[3] Todd first mentions this notion in an article he wrote about Byatt and the Booker Prize (1996:28).

says that the actual wonder of these short tales lies in "the ways in which they are incorporated into larger narratives, and what happens when one tries to unpack them from those narratives". In this way the palimpsestuous relationality in Byatt's novels is made clear: the various texts can often stand on their own and have integrity as separate texts in their own right, but they can also form part of a whole and add value as well as gain value through this incorporation into a larger narrative.

The novels selected display this palimpsestic structure and consequent relationality between involuted texts because they contain so many embedded texts or intertexts. *Possession*, for instance, contains Victorian poetry, short stories and letters supposedly written by R.H. Ash and C. LaMotte, a personal journal supposedly by E. Ash, extracts from a historical biography supposedly by M. Cropper and various extracts from academic articles supposedly written by contemporary literary critics. *Babel Tower* contains poetry by M. Impey, a work in progress by F. Potter called "Laminations" (which itself consists of various 'recycled' fragments, quotations and intertexts), as well as court depositions that follow the prosecution of J. Mason, the author of the unfinished embedded novel "Babbletower". *The Biographer's Tale* contains numerous (often transcribed) index cards and jumbled fragments of biographical accounts as well as illustrations and photographs.

The concept of the palimpsest is based on actual historical artefacts: ancient manuscripts with more than one layer of writing. This dissertation uses the structure of and the logic behind the concept of the palimpsest as explicated above as a heuristic tool to analyse Byatt's novels, especially the notion of layering. According to Dillon (2005:244):

> palimpsests were created by a process of layering whereby the existing text was erased, using various chemical methods, and the new text was written over the old one. Palimpsests are of such interest...because although the first

> writing...seemed to have been eradicated...it was often imperfectly erased [and] its ghostly traces then reappeared in the following centuries.

Just as with ancient palimpsests, the contemporary use of the concept implies that one text is written over another and that the authors' texts are thus layered one over the other. Furthermore, it also implies a structure of underlying texts (subtexts or intertexts) and overlying texts (the main text). It is useful to note that there are ancient palimpsests that have more than two layers of writing (Dillon, 2007:15), and accordingly the concept of the palimpsest, as it will be applied to Byatt's novels in this dissertation, is not limited to having only two layers. The concept of the palimpsest thus has multiple and differentiated, yet also entwined, layers. These layers are in constant interaction which ultimately results in "reciprocal elucidation" (Dillon, 2007:6).

Before one can apply the concept of the palimpsest to Byatt's novels it is necessary to consider the possible layers that the concept of the palimpsest may have. Within a literary context the palimpsest's layers are arguably much more complex than the straightforward underlying and overlying layers of the archaeological palimpsest. A few examples are: (1) illusory authors' texts are layered over the actual author's writing, (2) the present is layered over or superimposed on the past (be the past entirely fictional as in *Possession* or partially actual as in *Babel Tower* and *The Biographer's Tale*), (3) the process of reading and constructing meaning adds another layer to the text or novel and (4) critical responses form a new layer (of meaning) over fiction. In the abovementioned cases the layers are distinct and yet also interwoven, e.g. the illusory author R.H. Ash is not Byatt, and yet he is. Another example pertains to the layer of the present which is superimposed on the past. Holmes (1994:331) explains it as follows: "We can never leave the present behind by fully

reconstituting the past any more than we can live entirely in the present by effacing the traces and effects of the past upon it."

According to Jeffers (2002:136) "Byatt's text operates at two levels: the level of the Romance [and] the level of the text (or metatext that engages the critically aware reader)."

It is therefore necessary to analyze *Possession* and the other two novels on both levels, i.e. what happens in the novel and also its significance and meaning on the metatextual or metafictional level.

Layers one and two of the concept of the palimpsest, mentioned above, function on the level of the text (novel), while layers three and four function on the metatextual level of interpretation. It is important to keep a clear distinction between the layers of the concept of the palimpsest and the levels of the text and metatext.

The layers of the palimpsest, which function on different levels, influence and elucidate each other's meanings and that is what this dissertation considers as part of the logic behind the concept of the palimpsest. Stewart (2009:502) describes this palimpsestic logic as it features in Byatt's writing:

> Byatt's novelistic discourse is a heady matrix presenting multiple possibilities without authorizing single meanings; it is a force-field of intertextual and intergeneric discourses encountering each other tangentially or frictionally in dialogic interplay.

The concept of the subtext and the main text that are in dialogic interplay, are abstract and can assume various meanings: the subtext or intertext in layer one would be the embedded text (by an illusory author), while the main text is the prose of the novel. In layer two the past may be seen as the pre-text while the present functions as the main text. In layers

three and four the entire novel is the subtext and all the possible interpretations of it as well as all critical work available on it is the main text.

Various critics have read literary texts as palimpsests, for instance Peirce (1979), who read Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* as a palimpsest. Throughout his reading much emphasis is placed on layers as well as comparisons that establish connections between these layers. The reading identifies the true author's voice behind illusory authors, (Peirce, 1979:488) and it also draws a parallel between the present and the past (Peirce, 1979:486). This is similar to the technique that this dissertation aims to use. Other literary critics that have also read literary texts as palimpsests are Watkins (2006), Chalupsky (2010) and Dillon (2007).

The selected novels by Byatt have not yet been read collectively as palimpsests (i.e. having a palimpsestic structure and palimpsestuous relationality between texts). So, in attempting such a reading this study will, figuratively speaking, add another layer to the palimpsest of critical work on Byatt.

2. From the contextualisation above, the following research questions arise:

1. How are textual boundaries transgressed in *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale (2000*) and how does this influence the interpretation of the texts?
2. What are the functions of the subtexts or intertexts within the main text?
3. In which ways and why do the inclusion of intertexts (intertextuality) and the subsequent layered structure and textual relationality make palimpsests of those of Byatt's novels under discussion?

4. What does the concept of the palimpsest, when applied to Byatt's writing, express about postmodern writing, with specific reference to ontological uncertainty as well as the authorship (writing) and reading of texts?

3. Research Aims

1. To demonstrate how textual boundaries in and around *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale (2000*) are transgressed and how this influences the interpretation of the texts.
2. To explicate the functions of the subtexts or intertexts within the main text.
3. To explicate in which ways and why the layered structure of intertextuality, and the textual relationality between intertexts and main text, make palimpsests of those of Byatt's novels under discussion.
4. To indicate what the concept of the palimpsest, when applied to Byatt's writing, expresses about postmodern writing, with specific reference to ontological uncertainty and the authorship (writing) and reading of texts.

4. Thesis Statement

This dissertation argues that through her use of intertextuality, i.e. including various intertexts, Byatt creates a structure much like that of the ancient palimpsest in her novels. Her novels become strata of different kinds of texts that are in constant interaction. This influences the interpretation of her novels, because they can be seen as palimpsests consisting of different texts that elucidate and support each others' meanings. In other words, her novels are palimpsestuous (as defined by Dillon, 2007:4). This dissertation argues that the palimpsestuous approach is the most comprehensive one in describing

Byatt's writing as it encompasses all the possible relations that exist in and between her novels.

These relations, in turn, serve to make her novels (main texts and intertexts) boundless. Textual boundaries are transgressed through intertextuality and the consequent palimpsestuous relationality between texts and intertexts because the texts lose their distinctiveness. This then causes an expansion of the interpretive boundaries to include everything else (i.e. all other texts) which consequently leads to "transtextuality" (Genette, 1997:1) and the diffusion or permeation of the texts' boundaries.

Not only do the texts (written by Byatt) within the novels elucidate and invoke each other, but texts (of other types and written by other authors) outside the novels are also invoked and resurrected and in this way the texts' boundaries are transcended. Byatt illustrates that the novel's conventional form need not only be prose, but it can also be poetry, criticism and even legal formulations in court depositions. The novel (text) is therefore not bound by its traditional form and conventions anymore and becomes boundless. The transcendence of boundaries and the interpretative problems that this creates, throws the reader into ontological uncertainty, something that positions Byatt firmly within the tradition of postmodern fiction.

5. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions listed above, the study will make use of a hermeneutic approach which supports a close textual analysis coined by Dillon (2007:83) as palimpsestuous reading, i.e.

> Since the texts of the palimpsest [Byatt's novel] bear no necessary relation to each other, palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none.

Dillon (2007:67) calls this a “risky interpretative strategy” because it relies so strongly on invention, i.e. the identification and even the creation of relations between texts.

It is necessary to distinguish palimpsestuous reading from both palimpsest reading and intertextuality. Palimpsest reading, according to Dillon (2005:253) is only interested in resurrecting (or recovering) the underlying text, while the overlying text is ignored or overlooked. This is typically what archaeologists and historians do. In a chapter titled “Refiguring Intertextuality”, Dillon (2007:85) states that “the palimpsest...is not a synonym for intertextuality”, but that there can be a productive interplay between the concepts of intertextuality and that of the palimpsest. This dissertation considers the palimpsestic structure of, and the palimpsestuous relationality in Byatt’s novels a consequence of her use of intertextuality, and as such uses palimpsestuous reading rather than palimpsest reading.

The following chapter investigates the novel *Possession* and how resurrection as a theme manifests in it along with its palimpsestic structure.

CHAPTER 2

Possession

Possession can undoubtedly be described as the novel that catapulted Byatt into the field of literary prestige and success. She won the Booker Prize for the novel in 1990 and from there on her other novels and short stories have become widely read and revered in academic circles. Consensus among the majority of her readers and critics alike, however, is that none of her other works even come close to the brilliance of *Possession* and that she will most likely never produce a work that can surpass it. *Possession* is not only a romance as stipulated in the title *Possession*: *a romance*. This double love story, written in a style reminiscent of the Romantic realist novel, contains a vast collection of poems, short stories, letters, journal entries and extracts from academic articles, books and historical biographies. These embedded texts constitute intertexts that make the structure of Byatt's novel intricately intertextual. The intertexts also fulfil other functions, the most important of which is that the inclusion of the intertexts in *Possession* make the novel a palimpsest. In her essay named "Choices: the writing of *Possession"*, Byatt (1995:17) herself labelled *Possession* a "grey, cobwebby palimpsest". The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how and why *Possession* can be considered a palimpsest and it examines various embedded intertexts in terms of the structural and thematic functions they fulfil in the novel. The functions of the intertexts are explicated by means of examples from *Possession*. Structurally the inclusion of the intertexts makes *Possession* a layered novel, just like the palimpsest is layered. Additional functions discussed take account of the fact that the intertexts create textual boundaries in the novel that the reader has to transgress in order to make progress with his/her reading, and information necessary for the development of the plots, as well as information about the modern and Victorian contexts are provided by means of the intertexts. Lastly, the intertexts allow both the current-day scholars and the reader to re-visit and re-interpret past events. Thematically, the intertexts facilitate the theme of resurrection in *Possession.* The remainder of the chapter explores this thematic effect.

In a discussion on Salman Rushdie's "Palimpsest of History", Tim Gauthier (2006:140) states that a palimpsest, in the literary context, is "a structure that builds upon a pre-existing one, creating something new that includes vestiges of the past", and in his discussion of *Possession*, Gauthier (2006:56) states that the novel is "an overlaying of two plots". This is exactly the structure that Byatt creates in *Possession* as she builds or moulds the modern love story between Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey on the pre-existing Victorian love story of Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Structurally, therefore, the inclusion of the intertexts creates a kind of layering of plots or texts that is similar to that of a paleontological palimpsest. This is illustrated in the double plot of *Possession*: Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey are modern literary scholars studying the Victorian poets R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte respectively. Right at the beginning of *Possession*, Roland discovers a letter, an intertext, from Ash to a mysterious lady who later turns out to be LaMotte. As the two literary scholars learn more about the Victorian poets, who, it seems, were involved in a love affair, they grow closer to each other and eventually also fall in love. In this way the modern plot, or the present, is layered over the Victorian plot, or the past, and a structure like that of the palimpsest is established. Hilary Schor (2000:235-236) states that Byatt is not interested in "the ordinary business of novel writing", but in the "layering of fictional levels". Thus Byatt's writing in *Possession* is essentially similar to the ancient palimpsest.

The intertexts are most often written by Byatt herself under some kind of pseudonym, which is usually the name of a character in the novel, and is what this dissertation terms an illusory author. There are, however, also intertexts included that Byatt did not write herself, but collected from other sources. Byatt admits to these intertextual and extratextual references in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel (1993:77-78): "…my books are thick with the presence of other books [and] I feel that out there in the world there must be people who read as

passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and the world". Watchel (1993:78) continues by describing *Possession* as "a rich satisfying book that operates on a number of levels" and this is true, because the present-time plot is layered over the past-time plot creating a structure with numerous levels or layers. This is confirmed by Kathleen Coyne Kelly (1996:78) when she argues that

> Byatt shuttles her readers back and forth from the present-time narrative to the middle of the 19th century through a number of texts including, most crucially, the letters and poetry of Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte...the journal of Ash's wife Ellen; the journal of Blanche Glover...the standard biography of Ash; and a number of scholarly articles about the poets.

Through the inclusion of all the intertexts mentioned above, Byatt construes a layering of the present over the past plot and in this way "Byatt creates a strong plot thread linking the past to the present" (Gauthier, 2006:51). The thread linking the past to the present in *Possession* are the many intertexts of the past that surface in the present, so Byatt essentially interweaves the past with the present to create a textured palimpsest.

In Byatt's novel the modern scholars Roland and Maud resurrect the fictional past, i.e. the love affair between the Victorian poets Ash and LaMotte, by 'reading' its intertexts like the cache of love letters and Victorian poems. The Victorian plot of *Possession* can be considered the underlying layer of a palimpsest and the present can be considered the overlying layer, the modern characters can be regarded as palaeontologists or readers of the past through their discovery and interpretation of various intertexts. The intertexts act as the permeations of the underlying layer of the palimpsest into the overlying layer. Mark Hennelly (2003:445) says that Roland is Byatt's "primary reader" or "primary reader-identification character" through whom Byatt mimes the pleasures of reading in *Possession.*

Gauthier (2006:36) adds that "it is important to note that Roland's ability as a reader allows him both to understand the past and to recreate his present". In this sense the past becomes reduced and restricted to being, not reality, but merely a text to be read and "Ash and LaMotte can only be fictional figures for Roland and Maud since they can only 'know' them through text" (Gauthier, 2006:62). In an interview with Wachtel (1993:81), also quoted by Campbell (2004:113), Byatt states that the Victorian characters are best known through their texts as one encounters them "most nakedly" in their poems. Therefore it is appropriate that their secret affair is made known through texts or intertexts from the past.

Linda Hutcheon (1990:128) explains that there is a "postmodern realization that there is no directly and unproblematically *accessible* past 'real' for us today: we can only know the past through its traces, its texts". *Possession* can be considered a postmodern novel, the intertexts that provide access to past events are discovered and read by the contemporary scholars in the modern plot. In that way the Victorian past is only accessible through one reading its texts. Coyne Kelly (1996:95) supports this view with her statement that "rather than a description of reading, *Possession...*is an *enactment* of reading". The contemporary scholars in the novel enact the process of reading that the reader is also involved in on a metatextual level. In her argument that *Possession* is a postmodern text, Jackie Buxton (2001:93), states that "*Possession* is a detective story, but it is a detective story concerned with reading." The scholars, however, are not only reading, they are also discovering and in a sense resurrecting the past (underlying layer of the palimpsest) through engaging with the

intertexts. Roland and Maud are literary detectives in the novel who have to find the 'clues' left in the Victorian intertexts in order to reconstruct the past. Byatt confirms this perspective in an interview with Wachtel (1993:81), also quoted by Buxton (2001:93) and Gauthier (2006:50), when she states that the scholars were actually doing a kind of detection and that the intertexts "contain various clues to the detective-story plot". This form of reading is confirmed by Dillon (2007:64) who argues that there is a "metaphorical connection between palimpsest reading and detective reading and, by extension, between the plot of detective narratives and the structure of the palimpsest". In this way one can see the connection between what a palaeontologist does and what the modern scholars Roland and Maud do. Both attempt to 'read' the layers of the past by searching for and interpreting bits and pieces of old texts that resurface and remain legible after many years. The bits and pieces that the modern scholars decipher are the intertexts (e.g. the cache of love letters and the Victorian poetry) while a palaeontologist would literally sit and try to read the underlying layer of an ancient palimpsest. As a response to a question by Wachtel (1993:81) about literary critics like Roland and Maud as natural detectives, Byatt replies: "The two researchers *are* detectives: they are constantly searching for clues, and they get quite excited when they discover a line of poetry which gives them a clue to a whole set of ideas, or indeed of the entire behaviour of their hero." The contemporary scholars can therefore be seen as enacting a palaeographic palimpsest reading of the textual remains of the past and their objective is to reconstruct the underlying layer. "Since the past in *Possession* is made up entirely of textual traces, the most fundamental skill...is an ability to decipher and configure those traces into a narrative that yields meaning." (Gauthier, 2006:78)

Readers discover that reading and interpreting the intertexts they discover is one of the most important roles that Roland and Maud fulfil in *Possession*. This notion has also been expressed by Todd (1994:108): "it is the retrieval and reconstruction of the nineteenth century plot that form the subject of the twentieth century plot". For example in *Possession*, Maud says the following about Ash's "Ask to Embla" poem and LaMotte's "Melusine" poem (both intertexts): "it reads like a classic literary clue" and she emphasises that "literary critics make natural detectives" (Byatt, 1990:237). The intertexts that permeate the present and are then read by the contemporary scholars are like pieces of the palimpsest's underlying layer that are recovered or resurrected by a palaeontologist. What is picked up in Gauthier's (2006:44) analysis is that: "Roland's excitement [at discovering Ash's draft letters, thus intertexts] can be directly attributed to a sense of connecting with the past, bringing pages to light that have long been covered". This is exactly what palaeontologists do with ancient palimpsests.

Various boundaries are transgressed and blurred in the novel *Possession*. Christien Franken (2001:83) states that reviews "hailed *Possession* as a tour-de-force, showing 'the feel of a writer who has broken bounds'". There are boundaries within the novel that are transgressed and the boundary of the novel itself as separate text is also permeated or transgressed. Not only do the intertexts fulfil the function of creating a palimpsestic structure in *Possession*, but the intertexts also fulfil other functions like creating textual boundaries within the novel. In the context of this dissertation, textual boundaries refer to the boundaries between the main text, or novel, and the intertexts. When reading a novel like *Possession*, the reader needs to transgress these textual boundaries by, for example,

making the shift between prose in the main text to poetry or academic writing in the intertexts. In this way the reader is constantly crossing from one text to the next and from one genre to the next: the reader transgresses the boundaries between prose, letters, journals, poems, fairy tales, academic writing and back again to prose. The constant transgression of textual boundaries by the reader may create a feeling of discontinuity in the text. Jane Campbell (2004:139) confirms this with her view that "by crossing genre boundaries...Byatt's plot subverts the concept of unitary narrative". And yet Gauthier (2006:26) is of the opinion that "while these texts do disrupt any feeling of seamlessness in the plot, they also contribute to the creation of a series of correspondences and connections that actually serve to weave the story together". The intertexts do indeed interrupt the narrative, but because they fulfil important functions as discussed below, they do not cause endless fragmentation and ontological uncertainty for the reader. The force behind the romantic plot of *Possession* is strong enough to carry the reader over the textual boundaries.

The most obvious boundary that is crossed within the novel is that between the past and the present. According to Campbell (2004:111) "Byatt blurs the lines between past and present, both by moving constantly between them...and by making her twentieth-century characters repeat the experience of their predecessors."

"Literary allusions are crucial to the novel's larger meanings, embodying as well the permeability of the border between past and present, between fiction and reality, between legend and history." (Deneholz Morse, 2000:151) *Possession* is suffused with literary history and clever allusions to real historical figures and texts and in this way it evokes, and by extension even resurrects these figures and texts. Deborah Deneholz Morse (2000:155)

continues the argument by pointing to the fact that "Byatt imbues even small details with literary significance". Adding to this, Coyne Kelly (1996:87-89) provides a detailed list of names used in *Possession* and she speculates about the literary history sources for these names. Her discussion makes it clear that Byatt intended her novel to evoke significant literary historical figures. Byatt not only intended to evoke literary figures, but she also calls upon various historical literary texts. For example, the beginning of *Possession* echoes *The Ring and the Book* by Browning (Todd, 1997:25 and Campbell, 2004:24). Browning's text thus serves as a subtext to *Possession* and the boundary between *Possession* as text and *The Ring and the Book* as text is transgressed. This is a classic example of transtextuality as defined by Genette (1997:1). The novel transcends or permeates its own boundaries as it stands in a relationship with another text. The two examples mentioned above are but a drop in the ocean compared to all the literary and historical allusions and references in *Possession*. It is just necessary to note how Byatt transgresses textual boundaries through both explicit and implicit intertextuality. Coyne Kelly (1996:116) expresses this fact clearly by stating that Byatt creates a "vast intertextual web that includes everything that she reads and thinks and sees".

One last example of textual boundaries that are transgressed is that Byatt infuses many of her novels and their intertexts with numerous and various myths. In her essay on Van Gogh, Byatt (1991:312) explains: "We all make meanings by using the myths and fictions of our ancestors as a way of making sense, or excitement, out of our experience on earth." She uses myths, especially, to make meaning (writing) in her novels and according to Richard Todd (1997:25): "Byatt has repeatedly spoken of the attractive power that the Persephone myth exerts on her imagination." This statement becomes apparent when one

realises how often it resurfaces in her writing. In a letter to Ash, LaMotte likens the mythical creature in her epic poem, Melusine, to the myth of Persephone (Campbell, 2004:135). Ash's famous poem is called *The Garden of Proserpina* and is based on the Persephone myth, amongst others. Ash also recites a few lines of a poem about Proserpine (Persephone) to his daughter when he meets her in the Postscript of *Possession* (Byatt, 1990:510). The myth, however, does not only permeate the end of *Possession*, it also permeates one of the beginnings of *Babel Tower*: "He [Hugh Pink] thinks of Persephone and is moved by the automatic power of the myth." (Byatt, 1996:4) In this way, Byatt establishes transtextuality between her own texts as well. *Babel Tower* will be analysed in the next chapter.

Additional functions that the intertexts fulfil range from the more abstract to the more concrete, and include specifically providing information about the critical climate or context of the modern era, i.e. feminism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, etc. For example Leonora Stern's academic article on a poem by LaMotte (Byatt, 1990:243-246) is so overtly feminist and sexually laden that after reading only a few pages, "Roland laid aside Leonora Stern with a small sigh...he did not like this vision." (Byatt, 1990:246) "Leonora Stern discourses on feminine landscapes as erotic terrain and emphasises the relation between watery scenes and orgasmic pleasures." (Hulbert, 1993:58) When Roland discusses it with Maud the following day Maud reacts in the same way: "Leonora Stern makes the whole earth read as the female body – and language – all language. And all vegetation is pubic hair." (Byatt, 1990:253) The intertexts also provide information about the historical or Victorian context. For example, historical information is conveyed through a biography

entitled *The Great Ventriloquist* (Byatt, 1990:246) by an Ash scholar from America, named Mortimer Cropper. Extracts from it are included in *Possession* as an intertext. Cropper's biography describes the pastimes of scholarly men in the Victorian era (Byatt, 1990:246-247), one such pastime in particular was the collection of specimens from nature in order to study them. Mortimer writes about "the tragically misguided naturalist, Philip Gosse, whose *Manual of Marine Zoology* was a *sine qua non* on such collecting expeditions" as Ash would often undertake along the sea at the Brigg (Byatt, 1990:247). When Maud reads this biography her reaction is much like Roland's towards Lenora's overtly feminist-critical stance. She ponders it and decides that Cropper had "the desire to cut his subject [Ash] down to size" (Byatt, 1990:250). Both Roland and Maud realize that their training in (post)modern theory like post-structuralism and specifically Freud's psychoanalysis influences them immensely, and Maud makes it clear when she says that they "live in the truth of what Freud discovered" so they "aren't really free to suppose – to imagine" (Byatt, 1990:254). The academic-style intertexts by Stern and Cropper foreground this critical climate in which Roland and Maud function.

Another key function of the intertexts, specifically the cache of love letters between Ash and LaMotte, is that they provide necessary information for the development of the plot. For example, if the last letter of LaMotte to Ash (Byatt, 1990:499-503) was not included in the novel, Maud's ancestral history would not have been revealed, and if the first draft of Ash's letter (Byatt, 1990:5-6) was not included, and read, there would be no plot. Jennifer Jeffers (2002:141) holds the same opinion: "Maud, as we discover at the end of the novel, is

literally the product of Christabel and Randolph's desire; still, without the letters and Roland's discovery of Randolph's fragments in the poet's dusty copy of *Vico*, there would be no text." In this sense, the information in the love letters form the narrative drive of the novel, especially for the modern plot, because these intertexts seem to instigate and generate both the Victorian and the modern plots. The intertexts or fragments included in the novel keep the reader curious as they play on the inherently human instinct to find out the "end of the story", as Maud puts it (Byatt, 1990:498). Maud also voices this inherent curiosity in humans, and especially readers, earlier in the novel when she says: "I want to *know* what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out." (Byatt, 1990:238) Gauthier (2006:49-50) supports this notion by stating that narrative "plots play on our need to make sense of things" and "this thirst for knowledge is often linked directly to the act of reading".

Both Roland and Maud's investigation into the underlying layer or past is aptly instigated by an intertext. Roland's search begins when he discovers the two draft letters written by Ash, these two draft letters are both included as intertexts in the novel (Byatt, 1990:5-6). In the same way Maud's interest in Christabel LaMotte is sparked by a poem. When Roland asks Maud: "Did you start work on her because of the family connection?" Maud replies: "Possibly. I think not. I knew one little poem by her, when I was very small, and it became a kind of touchstone." (Byatt, 1990:53) The poem Maud refers to is about the Cumaean Sibyl and it is also included in the novel as an intertext (Byatt, 1990:54). These are examples of explicit intertextuality as the entire intertext is included in the novel.

What is a quite appropriate is that another intertext, a short, simple poem by Christabel LaMotte, is what provides the clues about where to find the valuable cache of love letters. Coyne Kelly (1996:78) states that the modern scholars are "following a trail of clues that often entails unravelling obscure allusions in the poets' works" and Louis Chevalier (2001:111) states that "Poems...whose language is essentially a language of clues, are especially rich with dormant conclusions, waiting for someone to perceive them, decode them, and set them free to disclose their secrets." The poem by LaMotte is not titled, but is referred to as "Dolly keeps a secret". Just before discovering the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, Maud recites the poem in LaMotte's old bedroom while Roland is almost frantic in his search for something, some kind of document or text that would prove his suspicions about Ash and LaMotte to be true[4]. Two stanzas of the poem in particular provide quite obvious clues (Byatt, 1990:82-83):

Could Dolly tell of us?

Her wax lips are sealed.

Much has she meditated

Much – ah – concealed.

Dolly ever sleepless

Watches above

The shreds and relics

[4] Keen (2001:46-47) adds that "a collection of documents", in romances of the archive (of which *Possession* is a shining example) must "be located somewhere" and that the location of the cache of letters is a "spectacular find, worthy of the best literary discoveries".

Of our lost love

Which her small fingers

Never may move.

Following the clues in the poem, Maud searches through the doll's cot and finds the letters. This instance creates a sort of interaction between the intertexts in *Possession* as the information in the one intertext, i.e. the short poem, leads to the discovery of further intertexts, i.e. the letters. Keen (2001:47) aptly states that:

> ...one of Byatt's accomplishments in *Possession* is to make available for general readers a version of the exciting discoveries that archivists, historians, collectors, and even some members of English Departments find thrilling enough to motivate long careers in scholarship.

From here onwards Roland and Maud act as reader-figures in the novel and they discover information in the intertexts that aid the development of both the Victorian and modern plots. The intertexts also serve the purpose of providing alternative versions of the truth of events, e.g. the events of the past are revisited, reinterpreted and then altered. "One can think of any number of historical permutations that would alter the present interpretations of the scholars." (Gauthier, 2006:67) When Roland and Maud discover the cache of letters that were exchanged between R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte, Roland remarks "We thought there might have been a correspondence...it makes a great difference to our research work, to both our projects. It wasn't known they knew each other." (Byatt, 1990:84) Just as these letters shed light on the past affair between the two Victorian poets, the underlying layer of a paleontological palimpsest "bring[s] to light the lost texts of the past which change the very way in which we interpret and know that past" (Dillon, 2007:12). The discovery of the cache of letters does indeed change the way in which the contemporary scholars interpret the past

because they have found out about the love affair between the two Victorian poets, as well as of the child that was born out of wedlock.

Whether or not the modern scholars would have picked up the literary clues about the Victorian poets' affair in the poetry by Ash and LaMotte is debatable, but the discovery and reading of the cache of letters definitely made them return to the Victorian poems with renewed interest at re-interpretation: "I thought of going through the poems – his and hers – written about then – with the idea that they might reveal something. We've already found one correlation no one could have thought of who wasn't *looking* for a connection." (Byatt, 1990:236) Elisabeth Bronfen (1996:122) states that the textual discoveries made by the modern scholars bring with it the need to revise the biographies as well as the critical interpretations of the poems by Ash and LaMotte. "Their poems can't look the same once that secret has been glimpsed." (Hulbert, 1993:58) So essentially the letters elucidate some of the hidden meanings of the poems and this is what Dillon (2007:6) terms "reciprocal elucidation", which occurs when one reads the underlying layer of a paleontological palimpsest in relation to the overlying layer. In his chapter on Rushdie's literary palimpsest, Gauthier (2006:142) also notes that reading the palimpsest "reframes" the supposed significance of past events, or texts in this case. In other words, the Victorian poems are reframed by a new historical context, that of the love affair by Ash and LaMotte. The reading of the underlying layer sheds light on the meaning of the overlying layer and in *Possession* the discovery of the letters and the consequent re-interpretation of the two Victorian poets' poetry leads to a better understanding of the Victorian texts as well as the present as Maud finally learns that she is actually a direct descendent of Christabel LaMotte. In this way the

intertexts, the letters and the poetry, facilitate not only the permeation of the past into the present, but also create a connection between them.

An important example of the past permeating the present through intertexts in the novel is that two of the Victorian poets' most popular poems, namely "Melusine" and "Ask to Embla" contain clues about the weekend they spent together in Yorkshire:

> Roland had been reading *Melusina* in bed and was now convinced that Christabel had been in Yorkshire. 'It *has* to be here...it's full of local words from here, gills and riggs and ling. The air is from here. Like in his [Ash's] letter. She talks about the air like summer colts playing on the moors. That's a Yorkshire saying' and Maud replies: 'I will say...*Melusina* is very like some of Ash's poems – The rest of her work isn't at all. But *Melusina* sounds often as though he wrote it.' (Byatt, 1990:264-265)

The two poems actually repeat the exact same line: "...and shall those founts / Which freely flow to meet our thirsts, be sealed?" (Byatt, 1990:237) The scholars only realise the presence of these clues in the poems when they themselves are in Yorkshire as part of their investigation. This realisation comes at a time when they are fairly convinced of the Victorian poets' rendezvous already. In this way, the past reappears and becomes known or read as the modern scholars identify the clues in the intertexts.

Possession illustrates the "transhistorical power of palimpsests and the ghostly persistence of the underlying texts" (Dillon, 2007:19) very well. This ghostly persistence can be seen in the way that the Victorian plot permeates the modern plot of Roland and Maud through intertexts.

The intertexts in *Possession* are the only way we as readers and the modern characters in the novel have access to the past, i.e. they are the so-called textual remains of the past

which permeate the present and create a link between the past and the present in the novel. Franken (2001:104) supports this notion by stating that the intertexts by Ash and LaMotte form a "textual bridge from the nineteenth- to the twentieth century story". Gauthier (2006:44) also hints at this specific function of the intertexts in *Possession* because he says that when the modern scholars read or engage with the intertexts from the past, they may feel that "the gap separating them from the past has been bridged". Gauthier (2006:69) goes on to explicate that "the two worlds occupy the same textual space while pointing to the incongruity of such a pairing". This state created in *Possession* is very similar to the ancient paleontological palimpsest, both Dillon (2007:3) and McDonagh (1987:211) clearly express the fact that the two texts of the palimpsest merge because they are joined together on the same surface, but they also still retain their distinctiveness. This is the paradoxical phenomenon that occurs on the surface of the paleontological palimpsest. As *Possession* progresses, the modern plot seems to resurrect and consequently repeat the Victorian plot, as a result the two plots seem to merge into a single love story between intellectuals, be it poets or literary critics. Because these two plots occupy the same textual space, i.e. the novel *Possession*, one may easily overlook the fact that these are two entirely different and separate stories involving different people in different times. So even though the plots are intertwined and occupy the same textual space, they are still distinct.

Dillon (2007:3) describes this phenomenon as palimpsestuousness: "a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation...preserving as it does the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence". The underlying layer of the palimpsest is separate and yet also interwoven with the overlying layer because both layers are on the same surface. Similarly, the Victorian plot is interwoven and yet still stays separate from the modern plot in *Possession*. Thus there is a

palimpsestuous relationship between the present and the past in *Possession* and that is the result of the palimpsestic structure initially created by the layering of the modern plot over the Victorian plot. This palimpsestuous relationship serves to ultimately facilitate the connection between the present and the past, which is inherently also a transcendence of boundaries. Carlyle (1833:181), one of the very first writers to use the concept of the palimpsest as an analogy for the past or history and the present, states the following about the connection: "History is the Letter of Instructions…it is the only articulate communication…which the Past can have with the Present, the Distant with what is Here." McDonagh (1987:211) also refers to this as she states that Carlyle "figures history as the buried writing of a palimpsest, prophetically illuminating the present and the future".

The inclusion of the intertexts in *Possession* has a thematic function in addition to their structural functions. The permeation of the past into the present and the transcendence or blurring of the boundaries of time reminds strongly of the act of resurrection. Thematically, the intertexts fulfil the function of resurrection in *Possession* and this is a powerful notion associated with reading the underlying layers of ancient palimpsests. Dillon (2007:12) argues that palimpsests embody "the miracle of resurrection". Correspondingly, in her book *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt (2000:45) states that *Possession* is about "the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits" of the past. So, as is the case with an ancient palimpsest, *Possession* has two layers and the underlying layer (the Victorian past) reappears, or is resurrected, through the overlying layer (the modern present) by means of intertexts that serve to connect them. *Possession* is discussed at length in a chapter by Keen in her book entitled *Romances of the Archive* (2001:28-58). Keen specifically pronounces *Possession* to be "the most well-known romance of the archive"

(2001:32) and one reason for this is that "*Possession* uses the past for the pleasure of evoking [resurrecting] a vanished world and time" (2001:34).

Thinking in terms of the present and the past one is tempted to think of the palimpsest as a temporal process and according to Mike Crang (1998:23) "a great deal of argument has gone on over how to look at such a palimpsest – as a series of layers or as a temporal process". Ultimately, a palimpsest is both a number of historical layers and a temporal process. Thomas Carlyle, who was quite possibly the very first writer to use the concept of the palimpsest figuratively, makes the temporal aspect of it very clear when he compares the past to a "Manuscript, covered over with formless inextricably-entangled unknown characters…a Palimpsest…still dimly legible" (1830:173). The past can thus be equated to the underlying layer of the palimpsest and the present to the overlying layer. The underlying layer(s) will always be older than the overlying layer(s), so these layers represent some kind of temporal process or progression. This temporal process, however, is distorted: "all texts [old and new] are joined together on the surface of the palimpsest, their temporal distance slipping away in an eternal present that is somehow completed in the presence of the original ancient text" (McDonagh, 1987:211).

Due to the fact that ancient palimpsests embody "the mystery of the secret, the miracle of resurrection and the thrill of detective discovery" (Dillon, 2007:12), they have continued to fascinate people, both scholars and lay men alike. The theme of resurrection is prominent in *Possession* and is evident from the very outset of the novel, "indeed the very beginning of

the narrative of *Possession* itself alludes to that of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*" (Todd, 1997:24). According to Byatt (2006:324) in an interview with Jonathan Walker, *The Ring and the Book* "is a long poem spoken in twelve books, through eleven distinct voices, which describes a murder that took place in seventeenth-century Florence. Browning felt he had somehow brought to life the people involved in this murder by telling it successively" from different points of view. Franken (2001:87) purports that "Byatt admires the ventriloquist nature of Browning's poetry" and Todd (1997:25) adds that Browning constructs a palimpsest through his "virtuoso ventriloquy". Once again the theme of resurrection and its relation to the palimpsest is evident. Byatt directs one's attention to this again in an interview with Wachtel (1993:79) as she says:

> The poet Robert Browning, who is one of the people I most admire and love, wrote poems about many, many periods with many, many voices, all of which...he felt were somehow speaking quite distinctively through him...Browning's poems [illustrate] a way in which the voices of the dead speak through the living.

In *Possession*, Byatt does the same as she alludes to Browning's writing in her novel and as he seems to be one of the poetic inspirations for the character R.H. Ash (Todd, 1997:24), she not only resurrects Browning's writing, but also Browning the person. In this way the dead, i.e. Browning, speaks through the living, i.e. R.H. Ash in Byatt's novel. In *Possession* Byatt also evokes other writers when describing the London Library through Roland as narrator (1996:2): "Here Carlyle[5] had come, here George Eliot had progressed through the

[5] Interestingly, Byatt mentions the man who was the first to introduce the palimpsest as something that can be used as a theoretical model.

bookshelves. Roland saw her black silk skirts, her velvet trains, sweeping compressed between the Fathers of the Church, and heard her firm foot ring on metal among the German poets."

For Byatt, and for Browning, writing is an act of resurrection. A text like *Possession*, overtly or covertly, intentionally or unintentionally, somehow re-writes, responds to or extends some earlier written work. Byatt (2000:46) raises this point in her critical writing *On Histories and Stories*: "As a writer I know very well that a text is all the words that are in it, and not only those words, but the other words that precede it, haunt it, and are echoed in it." As far back as 1979 Byatt was already aware that "to be realistic about this world is to encounter pervasive and powerful images of it, in itself, in novels, in readers, which make the imaginative process thinner, more second-hand, more difficult" (Byatt, 1979:25). Byatt makes it clear that her novels evoke, or resurrect, other texts that preceded it. Catherine Bernard (2003:13) supports this notion by stating that "writing is caught in an echo-chamber of its own making", however faint the echoes may be. The majority of recent, and especially postmodern, writing is consequently based on or related to some earlier, seemingly more original, text. The attentive reader experiences this as Coyne Kelly (1996:95) explicates that the pleasure of reading consists of recovering the texts that underpin the text that is before the reader and that "the reader who begins with a particular text in hand...may also experience more than one writer's reading" because each writer's own reading tends to resurface in his/her writing. "Byatt makes the point, and in the most celebratory way, that poems arise out of poems, and books out of books." (Coyne Kelly, 1996:95) In this sense, writing is nothing more than re-writing that which already exists or writing over that which

already exists. As a result the already existing texts permeate into the new writing like Browning's poem *The Ring and the Book* permeates Byatt's later writing *Possession*. This is even more so when the new writing is "concerned with literary predecessors" like Byatt's, because "the author's gesture of having recourse to these narratives of the past always also illustrate the burden of a writing that produces a second-hand text" (Bronfen, 1996:120). In essence, the very act of writing is like making a palimpsest because every new text is like a layer written over existing texts and there is a consequent permeation of the older text into the new. This is what Genette (1997:400) calls hypertextuality and he states that "the specific merit of hypertextuality is that it constantly launches ancient works into new circuits of meaning". It occurs mainly because the parts of the older texts that permeate the new texts are placed in a new context and then need to be re-evaluated in relation to that new context, i.e. the newer text. This notion is explicated further by Hutcheon (1996:487) who states that "postmodern intertextuality [as it occurs in *Possession*] is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present for the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context". In her essay *Old tales new forms*, Byatt (2000:131) explains that part of the pleasure of writing *Possession* was a sense that she was "partaking in the continuity of the tales by retelling them in a new context in a way old and new". In this way the older text or tale (as Byatt calls it) is resurrected.

With regard to *Possession*, Byatt (2000:45) also writes that the novel

> ...is about all these things, ventriloquism, love for the dead, the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits. I have always been haunted by Browning's images of his own historical poems as acts of

> resurrection – he compared himself, in *The Ring and the Book*, both to Faust and to Elisha, who breathed life into a dead corpse.

In her essay "Robert Browning: fact, fiction, lies, incarnation and art", contained in her book entitled *Passions of the Mind* (1991), Byatt (1991:47) quotes Browning's poem *The Ring and the Book* in which Browning compares himself to Elisha, i.e. the prophet who resurrected a child by laying his body over the dead corpse (Bible, 1984). Bernard (2003:21) argues that in this discussion of Browning, Byatt "turns the miracle of Elisha (2 Kings:4.34) into an allegory of writing". Campbell (2004:109) sums it up neatly: "In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning showed his fascination with the Biblical story of Elijah's[6] resuscitation of a corpse. Ash, too, wonders whether his projection of life into his characters is comparable to Elijah's act." In one of his letters to LaMotte, which is accompanied by a poem he wrote on Lazarus[7] (who was resurrected by Christ, John 11), Ash ponders: "I do not lay claim to bestow Life as He did – on Lazarus – but maybe as Elisha did – who lay on the dead body – and breathed life into it." Ash says that his poem *Ragnarök* was meant to create a reassertion of the "hope of Resurrection" through writing. This links to the concept of the palimpsest and the process of writing, because just as Elisha lay himself over the dead corpse in order to resuscitate it, new layers of text lain over older texts resurrect the old texts. The overlying layer of writing thus resurrects the underlying layer of writing because without such layering there would be no connections made and thus no attempts at recollection of the older, underlying text from

[6] This is a mistake by Campbell, it was in fact Elisha and not Elijah who resurrected the boy. See 2 Kings:4.32 (Bible, 1984), Bernard (2003:21), Byatt's essay *Robert Browning: Incarnation and Art* (1991:47) and *Possession* (Byatt, 1996:168).

[7] Interestingly, LaMotte and Blanche Glover's house is named Bethany and this is the location where Lazarus was resurrected, as recounted in John 11, Bible NIV (Campbell, 2004:121, 142).

the past. If there is no overlying layer there would be less interest in the underlying layer, even if a text has no importance in itself, as soon as it is palimpsested it sparks a person's curiosity and the person tries to read it, or retrieve it. "Indeed it could be claimed that the sole *raison d'être* of *Possession*'s 20th century counterparts is the very retrieval of the 19th century originals." (Todd, 1996:45) As a case in point, resurrection of the older text means that the older text is either read by or simply evoked in the mind of the reader through allusion and in that way it regains its 'life'. Byatt admits in an interview that her "mind is possessed by very long quotations, which sing about" when she sits in taxis and that in every novel she writes so that "in some curious way the rhythms of [her] early exposure to those poems come out" (Wachtel, 1993:81, 82). So at times quite unintentionally and yet inherently Byatt's writing evokes or resurrects earlier texts or writers.

Gauthier (2006:72) expands on the idea of resurrection in literature by stating that "the theme of literature as resurrection is one that runs through much of Byatt's neo-Victorian fiction" like *Possession* and the two novellas *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel*. Byatt (2001:177) herself implicitly refers to the connection she shares with her predecessors: "my sense of my own identity is bound up with the past, with what I read and with what my ancestors, genetic and literary, read, in the worlds in which they lived". The nature of the said connection is explored below in terms of the theme of resurrection "because for Byatt, the image of resurrection runs deep" (Schor, 2000:247).

Numerous critics have identified, and some even explored, the symbol of resurrection in Byatt's writing, especially in *Possession*. The following critics all mention the notion of resurrection in connection with *Possession*: Hennelly (2003:453-454), Holmes (1994:329), Schor (2000:237, 240, 246, 247), Shiller (1997:550) and Gauthier (2006:154) who speak of "evocation", Deneholz Morse (2000:161, 163) who calls it "reincarnating" and "re-living", Coyne Kelly (1996:89) and Becker (2001:25) who refer to "repetition", Bronfen (1996:122-124), and Gitzen (1995:90) who terms it "recapitulate". Gauthier (2006:33, 68-78) devotes an entire section to the subject in his chapter on Byatt, entitled "Ventriloquism, Literary Spiritualism and Resurrection", while Todd (1994:100-114) wrote an article entitled "The Retrieval of unheard voices – A.S. Byatt and Marina Warner", as well as another section in the same vein in another book (Todd, 1996:45-51). What makes the analysis contained in this dissertation particular, however, is that here the theme of resurrection in *Possession* is likened to the ancient palimpsest. If one considers the palimpsest, a process of a unique kind of resurrection is discernible: unintended resurrection through an attempt at suppression. For if the bottom text had not been partly obscured by the younger text over it, it would probably not be considered as important or as interesting to read. It would have been valuable as a paleontological text in its own right, but much less energy and time would have been spent to decipher it, and in that sense it would have been a little less valuable, so to speak. In *Possession* Byatt employs this characteristic of resurrection that the ancient palimpsest has, she does not present the reader with the Victorian plot in a straight-forward manner, but she seemingly obscures it by the modern plot which conveniently recounts, and through this resurrects, the original love story between Ash and LaMotte.

In her book dedicated to the concept of the palimpsest and how it manifests in various texts Sarah Dillon makes it clear that a sense of resurrection forms part of reading the underlying

layer of any palimpsest: "…the resurrective activity of palimpsest editors always involves bringing the dead back to life" (Dillon, 2007:26). Dillon makes this statement with strong reference to De Quincey's section entitled "The Palimpsest of the Brain" (1845) contained in his writing *Suspiria De Profundis,* which forms part of *The Autobiography and Confessions of Thomas De Quincey*. Here De Quincey (1845:702) speaks of the deeper phenomenon that occurs on the surface of the palimpsest, namely "resurrection itself, and the possibility of resurrection for what had so long slept in the dust". He adds (1845:702): "But really it is a problem not harder than to bid a generation kill, so that a subsequent generation may call back into life; bury, so that posterity may command to rise again." The notion of resurrection is therefore a prominent property of the palimpsest and the action of reading its underlying layer. More generally one can consider all reading then an act of resurrection.

One can, however, also argue that not only reading, but also writing (in specific forms) is an act of resurrection. Byatt (2000:45) states "I have always been haunted by Browning's images of his own historical poems as acts of *resurrection*." When considering only Byatt's Victorian poetry, included in *Possession* as intertexts, one can identify such a specific form of writing, a device if you will. Genette (1997:82) refers to this specific form of writing as pastiche: "The pastiche writer gets hold of a style…and this style dictates the text…the pastiche, here, imitates not a text but a style." Byatt can be considered as using the pastiche writing style in *Possession* as she imitates the style of Victorian poetry, amongst others. Byatt makes use of a very unique type of pastiche as explicated by Genette (1997:129-131), this type of pastiche imitates a "collective entity" like a genre or period which, in Byatt's case, is the Victorian period.

> Things get even more complicated when the pastiche of a group is, in addition, attributed to a single fictituous author who is supposed to synthesize the individuals who constitute the group or, if you prefer, to embody the group's spirit (Genette, 1997:130).

In *Possession* the two characters who "embody the spirit" of the Victorians are the "fictituous authors" R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte. This is evident from the Victorian poetry they supposedly wrote, which covers a vast part of the novel. Genette (1997:210) develops the idea of the imitation of the style (pastiche) of a group even further by arguing that "the phenomenon is even more obvious when, at several centuries' distance, an author decides to revive a long forgotten or deserted genre". This is what Byatt does: she revives the Victorian genre, which is fairly far removed from the modern era, by imitating its style and writing poetry under the names of fictitious or illusory authors. Genette (1997:210) terms this "generic reactivation" and this can be considered as synonymous with resurrection. So by writing in the style of the Victorians Byatt resurrects the genre and by extension the Victorian writers themselves in a sense. The model or style of Victorian writing consequently seems to reappear through Byatt's postmodern writing, just like the underlying layer of the palimpsest reappears through its overlaying layer. In *Possession* specifically, the Victorian poetry of the past reappears through the modern plot of the scholars Roland and Maud.

The idea that is of importance here is that one quite possibly resurrects a text as well as its author when reading that text, i.e. the modern scholars resurrect the Victorian poets by reading their poetry. Franken (2001:104) states: "LaMotte does live on in her work and can be known through it. The reader learns most about her through her letters to Ash and her poems." In *Possession* this sense of resurrection is illustrated quite clearly when Roland opens Ash's preserved copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova* to look for any connections

that may exist between the Vico and Ash's poem "The Garden of Proserpina". Roland feels that "the dead leaves [of the book] continued a kind of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release" (Byatt, 1990:3). Mortimer Cropper, an American Ash scholar, also echoes this sentiment when he engages with actual tangible texts written by Ash: "these small letters...bring the whole man just that little bit more back to life" (Byatt, 1990:96-97). It is almost as if the modern scholars believe that some part of the long dead poet is contained within these lifeless texts and that by reading and interpreting the texts from the past they can resurrect Ash. This hermeneutic task appears to underpin the entire plot structure of *Possession* (Bronfen, 1996:122).

Interestingly it is not Ash's Victorian poems that provide the most information about his relationship with LaMotte, but LaMotte's poetry, in particular "The Fairy Melusine" or "Melusina". The beginning of LaMotte's epic poem "Melusina" is shown to Roland by Maud: "Look at the beginning of *Melusina*." (Byatt, 1990:266). The poem is included as an intertext in chapter fourteen of *Possession*. In this chapter Roland and Maud are in Yorkshire as part of their investigation into a possible affair between the two Victorian poets. They are looking for proof that Ash and LaMotte met with each other there. One morning the two modern scholars decide to go to the "Thomason Foss" (Byatt, 1990:265), which is a kind of pool with a waterfall and a cavern behind it. When Roland sees how the light plays on the water and how it is reflected on the cavern's walls he mentions it to Maud, who immediately links it to a description at the beginning of the poem "Melusina" by LaMotte. Maud says: "She saw this. I'm sure she saw this. Look at the beginning of *Melusina*." (Byatt, 1990:266) Maud then

shows the poem to Roland and they both realise that LaMotte's depiction of a cavern in the poem is a perfect description of the Thomason Foss. Maud says "She [LaMotte] came here with him [Ash]" and Roland replies: "Even this isn't proof. And if the sun hadn't struck out when it did I wouldn't have seen it. But it is proof, to me." (Byatt, 1990:266) In this way the events of the past permeate into the present because it is through the intertext (LaMotte's poem) that Roland and Maud, the two literary detectives reading the underlying layer of the palimpsest, find out what actually happened in Yorkshire while they themselves follow in the footsteps of the Victorian poets.

Franken (2001:93-94) provides a brief summary of the Melusine myth on which LaMotte's poem is based: Melusine is a "serpent woman" who was cursed by her fairy mother to be "part woman, part snake". In order for Melusine to live a normal life and have the appearance of a normal woman, she needs to marry a mortal man. She finds a man named Raymond and they marry, but she makes him promise not to visit her on Saturdays as she turns into a snake from the waist down on Saturdays. If Raymond were to see her like that she would lose her mortal female appearance and be confined to a life of pain. At first all is well in the marriage and Melusine gives birth to ten boys. Raymond, however, lends his ears to evil rumours that cause him to peer through the keyhole one Saturday while Melusine takes a bath. He discovers her secret and denounces her publicly, in effect confining her to an eternal life as a serpent that can only circle the castle where her children live, without ever being part of their lives.

At the end of her life, LaMotte makes the connection between herself and the Melusine myth very clear (Franken, 2001:96). In her very last letter to Ash she writes: "I have been

Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to feed and comfort my child, who knew me not." (Byatt, 1990:501) In the first three stanzas of LaMotte's "The Fairy Melusine: Proem" she describes how the serpent-woman circles the castle with "a cry of pain and loss" and how she would secretly enter into the castle to feed her children: "And in the dead of night a slender hand / Would part the hangings, and lift sleepy forms / To curl and suck the mother's milky breasts / ...and all the while / Warm tears in silence mingled with the milk." (Byatt, 1990:289) This notion is also expressed by Franken (2001:97): "*Possession*...presents the story of Melusine as a tragic portrait of motherhood." LaMotte is in effect describing her own pain and the sense of loss she feels at having to let her sister Sophie raise the child (Maia) she bore after her short romance with Ash in Yorkshire (Byatt, 1990:500). Through reading this intertext, information of the past permeates the present plot in *Possession* and as a consequence that past is resurrected.

The similarities between LaMotte's life and the Melusine myth are striking: both the fairy and Christabel required their lovers, Raymond and R.H. Ash respectively, to allow them time on their own. Melusine needed solitude because she transformed into a snake every Saturday and could not risk being seen like that, while LaMotte required solitude because it was the life she had chosen for herself in order to be a female creative writer in the Victorian era. "LaMotte has a feminist desire for artistic autonomy which Ash threatens when he becomes more insistent" according to Franken (2001:103). In her first letter to Ash, LaMotte writes the following: "I live circumscribed and self-communing – 'tis best so..." and then she goes on to compare herself to a spider spinning a web which, she implies, is a process very similar to

that of writing. She then states “I am a creature of my Pen, Mr. Ash, my Pen is the best of me.” (Byatt, 1990:87) In a later letter, LaMotte pleads with Ash: “Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude.” She goes on to say that she is free and can imagine (be creative) in her solitude and that “Solitude is my Treasure, the best thing I have. I hesitate to go out.” (Byatt, 1990:137) LaMotte makes her point very clear when she writes the following of her and Blanche Glover: “But we were to renounce the outside World – and the usual female Hopes (and with them the usual Female Fears) in exchange for – dare I say Art – a daily duty of crafting...the Epic of Melusina. It was a sealed Pact...it was a chosen way of life.” (Byatt, 1990:187)

At first Ash respects this as he writes “I know you go out in company very little” (Byatt, 1990:7) but it is not long before he asks to meet with LaMotte in person by insinuating that they will communicate better if their correspondence was, instead of letters, “a true dialogue” (Byatt, 1990:177). Ash is tireless in his quest to see LaMotte and he writes the following: “...you know, all prohibitions are made only to be broken, must be broken – as is indeed instanced in your own *Melusina* with striking ill-luck to the disobedient knight” (Byatt, 1990:181). In his letter Ash makes it clear that there are striking similarities between LaMotte and Melusine. The myth used as the basis for LaMotte’s epic poem thus serves to tell her own story to the modern scholars as well as to the readers of *Possession*. The moment that LaMotte agrees to see Ash in person in Richmond Park (Byatt, 1990:190) can be likened to the moment in the myth that Raymond peers through the keyhole and

discovers that Melusine is part-snake, because both LaMotte and Melusine lose their solitude and autonomy in that moment.

The meeting between Ash and LaMotte in Richmond Park is described in LaMotte's "The fairy Melusine: Book I" (Byatt, 1990:293-298). Ironically, Ash's wife had read the poem and even quotes it in her personal journal as an intertext within an intertext (Byatt, 1990:120-121), seemingly unaware of its true import. The poem echoes many details contained in the letters exchanged between the two Victorian poets and therefore it can be said that the poem tells the story not only of the fairy Melusine and Raymond (Raimondin in the poem), but also of Christabel LaMotte and R.H. Ash. For example, in a letter from Ash to LaMotte, he describes an experience he had in Richmond Park: "Now, as all good knights in all good tales do – I was riding along, a little apart, and musing to myself. I was making my way along a grassy ride." (Byatt, 1990:181) The knight Raimondin in LaMotte's Melusine poem does the same thing: "A draggled knight came riding o'er the moor" (Byatt, 1990:293). Both Ash and the knight in the poem reach some kind of pool: "In the distance there appeared to be a Pool" writes Ash (Byatt, 1990:182) and in the poem the knight reaches "A kind of hollow chamber in the hill / [which] Sheltered a still and secret pool" (Byatt, 1990:295). Both men also see a creature in the pool, Ash sees a "small hound, milky-white in colour" (Byatt, 1990:183) and Raimondin sees a lady singing to herself and the lady is described, like the hound, as white: "As milky roses at the end of day / In some deserted bower still seem alight / With their own luminous pallor, so she cast / A softened brightness and a pearly light / ...She wore a shift of whitest silk" (Byatt, 1990:296).

The poem then goes on to describe the actual meeting between the two poets in Richmond Park, which occurred after LaMotte wrote to Ash that she is willing see him: "I shall be *there*. I shall step out with Dog Tray." (Byatt, 1990:190) This meeting is described in the poem as the moment just after the singing lady becomes aware of the knight watching her: "And as he met her eyes, she ceased her song / And made a silence, and it seemed to him / That in this silence all the murmuring ceased" (Byatt, 1990:297). In his letter about his ride in Richmond Park, Ash also describes such a silence: "And no birds sang, or I heard none, no woodpecker tapped, no thrush whistled or hopped. And I listened to the increasing Quiet." (Byatt, 1990:182) Another literary clue that points to the fact that the poem is in actual fact describing the Victorian poets' meeting is that in both the poem and in a letter (written by Ash after the meeting), reference is made to a large, grey dog that accompanies the lady Melusine / Lamotte. In the poem: "A movement in the shadows made him ware / Of a gaunt hound that stood like a dark cloud / Rough-curled and smoky grey... / Alert and motionless behind his dame" (Byatt, 1990:297). In his letter Ash describes Dog Tray in the same way: "...a huge gaunt grey creature" (Byatt, 1990:190). The parallels are unmistakable, the epic poem describes the first meeting between Ash and LaMotte and the Melusine myth, on which the poem is based, tells the rest of LaMotte's life story. Just like Melusine, LaMotte is doomed to a life of pain and longing for her child after a man impinged on her sacred solitude. After their first meeting, the Victorian poets have a short time together in Yorkshire during which LaMotte becomes pregnant. Because Ash is married to Ellen and LaMotte does not want to become known as a fallen woman, the child is raised by LaMotte's sister

and never knows that her aunt is actually her real mother. All this is related in LaMotte's last letter, which Ash never gets to read. However, for true literary detectives such as Roland and Maud, the story is already related in an intertext named "The Fairy Melusine." Simply by reading that intertext, the literary detectives resurrect past events and the characters from the past.

The act of resurrection performed by the modern scholars, however, reaches farther than simply recalling the Victorian poets through reading their poetry. The modern scholars, in their quest to find out more about the affair between the Victorian poets, actually quite literally follow in the footsteps of the Victorians. For Bronfen (1996:124) the "hermeneutic and romance quest become mutually enmeshed" as

> …the extramarital relation between the two Victorian poets is resurrected in the forbidden passion that the two postmodern scholars discover for each other…the scholars not only resuscitate the dead poet by virtue of their scholarly quest, poets who were themselves interested in reanimating past historical persons to boot…by virtue of their scholarship, a transgressive love affair of the past is resurrected as well…this love affair can only really be consumed belatedly, at another site, with the second generation ventriloquising the passion of the first (Bronfen, 1996:124).

Roland and Maud seem to embody the spirits of Ash and LaMotte. Buxton (2001:96) states that in *Possession* "the gulf between the past and the present rapidly diminishes with the novel's progression". The past basically seems to be reincarnated in the present. Roland considers this issue:

> Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others (Byatt, 1990:421).

What is revealing is that “as Roland and Maud move through their romance and, simultaneously, uncover more of the love story of their subjects, they are aware, often uncomfortably, of the parallels between their relationship and that of the Victorians” (Campbell, 2004:133). There are numerous parallels between the Victorian romance of Ash and LaMotte and the modern romance between Roland and Maud. Gauthier (2006:41) says that “it is between the budding relationship of Roland and Maud and the affair of Ash and LaMotte that the strongest connections are made”. Both couples meet and get to know each other as a result of the first letter written by Ash to LaMotte. Ash and LaMotte meet because Ash incites her in his letter to meet him and due to the consequent correspondence between the Victorian poets, Roland and Maud meet, Roland being a scholar on Ash and Maud a scholar on LaMotte. As more and more information concerning the Victorian poets’ correspondence and their secret affair comes to light, Roland and Maud learn more and more about each other, and consequently grow closer. Bronfen (1996:124) also notes this: “For every new discovery that sheds light on the relationship between Ash and LaMotte, Roland and Maud find themselves more and more closely bound to each other.”

The modern scholars seem bound to each other through the quest to discover more about the past. For example, when they learn that the Victorian poets may have spent a weekend in Yorkshire, they also go to Yorkshire in search of some proof of the liaison. Ironically, Roland says the following when it looks as if spending a weekend together in Yorkshire might be a difficult undertaking: “People who are going off on real naughty weekends manage to find excuses...put up smoke-screens. It happens all the time, I’m told.” (Byatt, 1990:238) Roland describes exactly what happened between Ash and LaMotte in Yorkshire

without realising it. Both Campbell (2004:133) and Deneholz Morse (2000:161) make mention of the fact that the modern scholars visit the same places as the Victorian poets.

When the two modern scholars eventually get to Yorkshire, they do visit the same places that the two Victorian poets did. Randolph Ash "remembered most, when it was over, when time had run out, a day they had spent in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word" (Byatt, 1990:286). Ash and LaMotte visited the Boggle Hole and so did Roland and Maud, ironically on a day that they decided to get away from pursuing the history of Ash and LaMotte:

> Roland said, 'There's a place on the map called the Boggle Hole. It's a nice word – I wondered – perhaps we could take a day off from *them*, get out of their story, go and look at something for ourselves. There's no Boggle Hole in Cropper or the Ash Letters – just not to be caught up in anything? (Byatt, 1990:268)

The modern characters have nearly the same experiences as the Victorian characters. Ash and LaMotte: "walked by the sea. They both walked very quickly. 'We walk well together,' he told her. Our paces suit'" (Byatt, 1990:280). And then Roland and Maud echo this: "They walked out, in these footsteps...they paced well together, though they did not notice that; both were energetic striders" (Byatt, 1990:251). Note the repetition of the words "pace" and "well together", and the fact that both couples were people who walk fairly fast, i.e. "walked very quickly" and "energetic striders." Campbell (2004:133) also makes mention of this example.

The following quotation quite overtly illustrates how the modern plot resurrects the Victorian plot by repeating it:

> ...they [Roland and Maud] drove out to Flamborough, in the little green car, following their certain predecessor and guide Mortimer Cropper in his black Mercedes, his predecessor, Randolph Ash, and the hypothetical ghost, Christabel LaMotte (Byatt, 1990:251).

Gauthier (2006:41) explains: "The text communicates a sense of history repeating itself, particularly through the contemporary characters mirroring the actions and personalities of their Victorian counterparts." Some examples of such counterparts are Blanche Glover and Val, Ellen Ash and Beatrice Nest, R.H. Ash and Roland.

Not only does the Victorian plot resonate in the modern plot, but there are also characters who have a fair amount in common, especially Maud and Christabel. Bronfen (1996:132) states that "LaMotte...exerts a spectral influence on her descendent Maud." It would make sense for them to be very similar as Maud is a direct descendent of Christabel, but the reader is unaware of this fact at first. There are various clues as to their similarity (and relation) in the novel and "this...becomes less uncanny, and in an oblique sense even logical, in view of the later discovery that Maud is a direct descendent of Christabel LaMotte" (Boccardi, 2004:199).

Both the modern character Maud and the Victorian character Christabel strongly assert their right to self-possession. In her last letter to Ash, LaMotte writes the following: "Do you remember how I wrote to you of the riddle of the egg? As an *eidolon* of my solitude and *self-possession* which you threatened whether you would or no?" (Byatt, 1990:502) Maud, in the twentieth century, echoes Christabel's words: "people treat you as a kind of a possession" and "I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy." (Byatt, 1990:506) Campbell (2004:127) makes this connection too: "Like the

poet she discovers to be her ancestor, Maud lives in tension between her need for solitude to do her work and a half-admitted longing for relationship." What is not picked up by Campbell is that this is also an echo of the fairy Melusine's desire for solitude and it serves to illustrate how the layers of the palimpsest permeate and how each new layer resurrects or calls upon the previous one.

Maud and LaMotte's physical appearance is described as very similar and, again, this relates to the fairy Melusine. The fairy's skin is described as very pale: "Her blue-veined feet played in the watery space / Slant in its prism-vision like white fish / Darting together..." (Byatt, 1990:296) and later she made "...no move / Of lip or eye or brow or eyelid pale" (Byatt, 1990:297). Her face "...was a face / Queenly and calm, a carved face and strong" (Byatt, 1990:296). "Her hair was brighter than chill gold" (Byatt, 1990:296) so she had fair hair. The fairy Melusine also wore "...a girdle green / As emerald or wettest meadow grass" (Byatt, 1990:296). Another important characteristic to note is that Melusine is principally associated with water and fluidity. In her book *Motif and matrix in the poems of LaMotte*, the character Leonora Stern states that "Melusine is in her primary and beneficent state a watery being," she is a "water-serpent" (Byatt, 1990:245) and that "The heroines of LaMotte's texts are typically watery beings." (Byatt, 1990:244)

Similarly, LaMotte is described as "very fair, pale-skinned, with eyes...of a strange green colour" (Byatt, 1990:274). And "the face not kind...[it was] quick and sharp" and "strong-

boned" rather than fine (Byatt, 1990:277). LaMotte's hair is described by Ash as "sleek silver-gold" and it seemed to "have in it a tinge, a hint of greenness" (Byatt, 1990:277). During her sexual encounter with Ash: "[her] neck and shoulders...catching a hint, there it was, of green again" and he calls her "'My selkie, my white lady, Christabel'" (Byatt, 1990:283). Ash also feels as if "it was like holding Proteus...as though she was liquid moving through his grasping fingers, as though she was the waves of the sea rising all round him" (Byatt, 1990:283). LaMotte, like the fairy Melusine, is associated with water and the colour green. LaMotte wears a "gleaming pair of boots in emerald green leather" (Byatt, 1990:274) on the train.

The very first time Roland sees Maud, he struggles to find a way of "describing her green and white length" (Byatt, 1990:38). Maud is described as "poised pointed and sharp (Byatt, 1990:219) with "a clean, milky skin, unpainted lips, [and] clearcut features" (Byatt, 1990:38-39). While Maud and Roland work on the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, he observes "the green silk of her scarf" and "her pale skin" (Byatt, 1990:133). She wears her hair tied up under a scarf and Roland can only see "the fringes of the pale hair" (Byatt, 1990:147), until one day when he convinces her to loosen her hair from under her scarf of "green and white squares" (Byatt, 1990:270). As she shakes it, one can see "a moving sea of gold lines" (Byatt, 1990:272). Maud drives a "glossy green Beetle" (Byatt, 1990:39) and, like LaMotte, wears "long shining green shoes" (Byatt, 1990:38).

Both the women and the mythical fairy Melusine have very pale skin, light blonde hair streaked with gold, sharp, strong faces and they are all constantly associated with the colour green. Coyne Kelly (1996:83) says that "Byatt gives the colour green a good deal of play in *Possession*" and that "a major structuring device in *Possession* is the repetition of scene, action, phrase, object, colour, and even personae" (1996:89).

Because Maud is descendent from LaMotte one could expect that she should look like LaMotte and these small textual clues are placed there to hint at the truth of their relation that is only revealed at the end of the novel. However, there is more to it than simply hinting at the fact that Maud is LaMotte's descendent, the resemblance is a physical manifestation of how the past merges with the present. Gauthier (2006:41) notes that "Byatt has created so many connections between the past and the present that at times the reader is likely to feel overwhelmed. The novel's cross-references serve to blur the boundaries between the past and the present."

When considering events and characters of the past as entities contained in textual remains, it is very important to note that the past remains only partially accessible in the present. Carlyle, in his first discussion "On History" makes this very clear. He states (1830:172) that there is a "fatal discrepancy between our manner of observing these [events and characters], and their manner of occurring" and "well may we say that of our History the more important part is lost without recovery" (1830:171). In his second discussion entitled "On History Again", Carlyle (1833:182) develops his argument by looking at history, as

something “gone silent” and which “comes to us in the saddest state; falsified, blotted out, torn, lost and but a shred of it in existence; this too so difficult to read or spell”. So the part of the past which does still exist, in the form of textual remains, is just as difficult to grasp as it is to read or spell the underlying text of the palimpsest. This can be linked with Dillon’s (2007:67) statement that reading and reconstructing the underlying layer of an ancient palimpsest manuscript is a “risky interpretative strategy” because the existence of many texts recovered from the underlying layers of palimpsests depends on the palaeontologist’s “ability to guess various obscured portions of the hidden script in order to reconstruct the whole”.

It is important to note that, in *Possession*, the modern scholars can never be completely certain that their interpretations and reconstructions, based on the intertexts, of past events and characters are accurate (Buxton, 2001:93, 97; Gauthier, 2006:33, 56-57; Shiller, 1997:547-548; Walsh, 2000:192-193,). An excellent example of how the modern scholars misinterpret the past due to obscured facts is expounded in the Postscript of *Possession*. Here the reader learns that the plaited lock of pale hair that was buried in the box in Ash’s grave was in actual fact Maia’s hair, Ash and Christabel’s illegitimate child, (Byatt, 1990:509-510) and not Christabel’s as the scholars thought (Byatt, 1990:504).

Because one can only access the past through texts or other objects like artworks that seem to have some authority of the past vested in them, the past is only partially accessible. Gauthier (2006:57-58) refers to a principle example in *Possession*, namely Blanche Glover. Very little remains of her and therefore she is an obscure and oblique, or an inaccessible character. Her relationship with Christabel also remains a mystery, as the question remains:

Were they truly creative females making a living on their own, or where they lesbian lovers? Similarly, certain parts of the original texts of ancient palimpsests will never be recovered in order to be deciphered and one can only guess at the meaning they hold. Campbell (2004:141) states that "although we come to know much about Byatt's characters and their texts, opacity is preserved and the mysteries run deep".

On this topic the omniscient narrator of the Postscript to *Possession* (Byatt, 1990:508) remarks: "There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are never spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been." So even though there are facts that are inaccessible either because they were never recorded or because they are obscured, it does not mean that these facts do not exist or do not have some significance. What it does mean is that a complete and accurate reconstruction of past events or the underlying layer of the palimpsest is basically an impossibility.

Ironically when Roland, and later Maud, first uncover segments of the past through reading the intertexts they both have a strong sense to cover up their discovery. The overlying layer of the palimpsest 'lets the underlying layer through' on the one hand, but paradoxically also 'covers it up' on the other. Dillon (2007:12) refers to this paradox as the "preservatory power of an originally destructive procedure". The process of creating a palimpsest that was supposed to eradicate the original writing ironically preserves it for posterity.

In *Possession* there are various examples of how the texts from the past (underlying layer) are 'let through'. Examples include the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, their Victorian poetry and short stories, as well as the personal journals of Ellen Ash, Ash's

devoted wife, and Sabine de Kercoz, “a relation, through her paternal grandmother, of Christabel LaMotte” (Byatt, 1990:313). From Ash’s wife’s journal the reader learns much about their marriage and the characters of Ellen and Ash, and through the journal of Sabine Lucrece Charlotte de Kercoz the reader learns about LaMotte and LaMotte’s actions after her meeting with Ash in Yorkshire. There are numerous examples of the contradictory process of ‘covering up’ and even ‘re-covering up.’ The first example of ‘covering up,’ which is very similar to the process of making a palimpsest, is Ellen Ash’s attempts to get rid of the love letters between Ash and LaMotte. This is also the process that results in obscured portions of the past as discussed above. The love story of Ash and LaMotte was seemingly eradicated by Ellen’s destructive acts and attempts at secrecy, but as time goes by, instead of disappearing it reappears when Roland finds the draft letters written by Ash. There are indeed attempts to eradicate the facts of the love affair between the two Victorian poets and those attempts are comparable to the various chemical methods used to erase the original writing on ancient palimpsests. For example, Ash asks Ellen to “burn what they should not see” (Byatt, 1990:442) and she does, she also buries (literally covers up) the letters that she doesn’t feel she has the right to burn (Byatt, 1990:443) in a box in Ash’s grave. With this act Ellen illustrates the paradox mentioned above, she meant to conceal the letters and the story they tell, but in fact she preserves them. Leonora Stern, an American feminist critic in the modern plot, notes this too: “Why did she leave it to be found, if she didn’t entertain the thought of it? Why wasn’t it clasped to *her* bosom?” (Byatt, 1990:498, emphasis added) Ellen’s personal journal is another example. The journal is meant to offer a subjective, but

true, recording of past events, but is described as written with the intent "to baffle" according to Dr Beatrice Nest (Byatt, 1990:220). Gauthier (2006:64) states that Ellen produced only a "one-sided representation" because she carefully selected what information to include and what not. Therefore her journal may be considered "false to the extent that it is not *entirely true*". The journal is an attempt to cover up the truth of events by only offering censored and consequently vague and incomplete glimpses of past events. Ellen intentionally obscures the facts or the meaning of the underlying layer, but "like the preserved letters, her journal will undoubtedly have a 'sort of duration'" according to Shiffman (2001:102). This duration ensures that the truth is ultimately revealed.

Furthermore, Christabel LaMotte also attempts to erase the evidence of her love affair with R.H. Ash by constructing what she calls "a lie more appropriate to a Romance" (Byatt, 1990:500). In her last letter to Ash she admits: "Our daughter was born in Brittany, in the Convent, and carried to England, where Sophie [LaMotte's sister] took her and brought her up as her *own*, as we had agreed." (Byatt, 1990:500)

Another example of an attempt to 'cover up' the underlying layer of the past is Roland's attempt at 're-covering up'. When he discovers the first draft letters written by Ash to LaMotte, he is very careful to keep the knowledge of the letters to himself. He even goes so far as to steal the letters from the London Library in order to 're-cover up' what he had just uncovered. Roland "was reluctant to tell Blackadder. He enjoyed possessing his knowledge

on his own." (Byatt, 1990:4-5) Roland is thus very vague about his intentions when he questions James Blackadder, his supervisor (Byatt, 1990:30-31), and Fergus Wolff, a colleague of sorts (Byatt, 1990:32-34), for information about Ash and a possible connection to LaMotte. Roland is like a palaeontologist who is the first to discover the underlying layer of an ancient palimpsest, but who does not want to share his discovery with others.

Only when Roland realises that he is going to have to find a scholar on Christabel LaMotte to help him with his investigation, does he reluctantly admit to what he might have uncovered. He tells Dr. Maud Bailey that he is "working on Randolph Henry Ash" and that it just came to his attention that Ash may have corresponded with LaMotte (Byatt, 1990:40). Together they launch their own clandestine investigation into a possible correspondence or even relationship between the two Victorian poets. Before long Maud also starts to feel that she likes having sole possession of the information that they have uncovered. She tells Roland:

> I feel taken over by this...I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive. (Byatt, 1990:238)

As they progress with their investigation they go to Seal Court, the Bailey family estate, and by chance they are allowed to enter the home of Sir George and Joan Bailey, the custodians of the estate. Sir George tells them "we had a sort of poet in this house" (Byatt, 1990:78). After some persuasion, Joan convinces Sir George to show the two scholars LaMotte's old bedroom: "I think you should show these young people Christabel's room. If they want to see." (Byatt, 1990:80) Roland and Maud make an incredibly valuable discovery in LaMotte's old bedroom, they discover the nearly complete correspondence between Ash and LaMotte. What is strange is their reaction when they discover the letters in an old doll's cot. One may

expect them to be elated at the discovery, but instead they act with “cunning reserve” and Roland holds back his exclamations about how terribly important the letters are, or how the discovery could change the face of scholarship (Byatt, 1990:84). When Sir George asks what may be hidden in the cot, Roland responds: “almost anything” and Maud’s calculated answer is: “keepsakes” (Byatt, 1990:83) and later “probably dolls’ clothes” (Byatt, 1990:84). The two scholars respond in this subdued way so as to not let Sir George realise what they have just discovered, or rather *uncovered,* because it is the first true glimpses at the underlying layer of the palimpsest that they were hoping for. It is the intertexts that allow them to read the past as a text.

This chapter examined how the intertexts included in Byatt’s novel *Possession* fulfil certain functions that contribute to making the novel similar to a palimpsest. Structurally the inclusion of the intertexts creates a layering like that of the palimpsest. Gauthier (2006:41) notes that “Byatt has created so many connections between the past and the present that at times the reader is likely to feel overwhelmed. The novel’s cross-references serve to blur the boundaries between the past and the present.” Consequently the second function the intertexts fulfil is that of creating what Gauthier refers to as “cross-references” that transgress textual boundaries in the novel. The third function of the various and numerous intertexts is to provide information, especially information which develops the plot and which allows one to re-visit the past and re-interpret the past. Re-visiting the past ultimately evolves to some kind of resurrection of the past. This revisitation is the main theme in *Possession,* and it is also a prominent characteristic of the palimpsest (Dillon, 2007:26). It was shown that Byatt believes that one can resurrect through writing as the dead seems to speak through the living, and in particular in *Possession*, the dead Victorian poets seem to

even subsist their love affair in the modern scholars Roland and Maud. Lastly, it is necessary to note that one may be able to resurrect the past through engaging with textual remains, but that these are only a small part of the past that seep through into the present, just like only bits and pieces of the underlying layer of an ancient palimpsest reappear in the overlying layer and are legible by someone in the present. Consequently those who attempt to resurrect the past by engaging with its texts or characters may very easily make errors in their interpretation of past events.

Ultimately the novel *Possession* can be seen as very similar to a palimpsest both in the sense of structure and theme and this is accomplished through the inclusion of various intertexts. This chapter mainly considered the Victorian poetry and some of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence in its analysis, but there are many many more intertexts, like short stories and academic articles and journals, which fulfil similar functions and add to the complexity of Byatt's multilayered novel.

Byatt's palimpsestic writing techniques, employed so successfully in *Possession,* are complex and can therefore be studied from different angles. This chapter paid attention to intertexts as palimpsestic tools. The next chapter takes an even deeper look by investigating how Byatt uses a technique similar to weaving to integrate intertexts.

CHAPTER 3

Babel Tower

Babel Tower is the third instalment of a quartet by A.S. Byatt that follows the life and artistic development of the fiery female protagonist Frederica Potter. *Babel Tower* (1996) was published after *Possession* (1990) and marks a different style of writing for the quartet when compared to its previous two instalments, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985). *Babel Tower* is similar to *Possession* in terms of the writing techniques and narrative structure that Byatt employed and Hadley (2008:93) supports the notion that there is a shift in Byatt's approach to writing between *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*. *Babel Tower* incorporates much "more overtly postmodern techniques" (Hadley, 2008:114) and takes the experimentation with palimpsestic writing, i.e. layering authors, intertextuality, subtle narrative connections between parallel plots and the transgression of textual boundaries, which was used successfully in *Possession,* to another level. Byatt uses a writing strategy similar to weaving in *Babel Tower* and Todd (1997:64) hints at this by stating that the "braiding together of *Babel Tower*'s three main plaited strands marks a new development in Byatt's writing". Byatt uses the palimpsestic writing techniques progressively in *Babel Tower* and the result is a novel with a large variety and great number of intertexts. *Possession* marks the beginning of Byatt's experimentation with palimpsestic writing, while *Babel Tower* illustrates "the experimentation with form and the widening of intellectual horizons after *Still Life* [that] come into play when Byatt picks up the story of the Potter family in the third and fourth volumes of the quartet". In *Babel Tower*, "Byatt found a way to create and fully integrate intertexts whose counterparts are only described in *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life.*" (Campbell 2004:232)

Any text may be seen as a figurative palimpsest because the very act of writing is similar to that of creating a palimpsest. The word "*text* comes from *texere*, to weave. Writing lays fabric on fabric in a hymeneal stitching, joining, or breaking, transgressing a line or frontier, tracing on the woven pattern [of the paper] another pattern, course or fine" according to Joseph Miller (1992:8). In this sense, any text forms a palimpsest where the lines of words are like threads that are interwoven with the filaments of the paper on which it is written. Miller (1992:6) also refers to the palimpsest without explicitly naming it: "In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when paper was precious, letters were 'crossed,' that is, written both ways on the paper, one script superimposed at right angles to the other." In this way the lines of words of the texts were interwoven at right angles like threads of a fabric. In her discussion of Roland Barthes's *Theory of the text* (1973), Dillon (2007:82) also refers to a form of literary criticism in which "the text is perceived as a palimpsest in the most conservative sense, simply as a layered phenomenon containing a hidden meaning". There was, however, a perceptual shift and eventually a text came to be regarded not only as a layered phenomenon, but also as "a tissue" or "something woven" (Dillon, 2007:82). So "the perception of the text as 'something woven' corresponds to the figuration of the palimpsest as a surface phenomenon in which two or more texts are inextricably entangled and intertwined" (Dillon, 2007:82-83). The palimpsest goes beyond simply constituting texts layered over one another. It becomes a surface of woven texts and because these texts are not only layered but also interwoven, they are in a palimpsestuous relationship with each other. Gitzen (1995:83) identifies this woven structure in Byatt's writing as "an interwoven

texture of letters, journal entries, poems, and straight narrative". Bronfen (1996:118) also states that Byatt's writing is "a skilfully constructed patchwork that weaves together quotations and pastiche". Coyne Kelly (1996:78) echoes this sentiment by arguing that Byatt's writing is "a virtuoso postmodernist exercise that weaves together many strands". On a more abstract level, Buxton (2001:96) adds that "Byatt weaves the contemporary and the historical into one immediate textual present." Byatt (1993:6) refers to herself as "someone who weaves careful structures out of truths, lies, slanted comment, several originals, and [someone who] wants her texts to be read *as texts*". Byatt interweaves various different layers in her writing to form a palimpsest with her text. In *Possession* (Byatt, 1990:472), Roland experiences this phenomenon: "He heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader."

In his article "Ekphrasis and Lamination in Byatt's *Babel Tower*", Jack Stewart (2009:506) emphasises the characteristic of "verbal echoes, fragments or phrases, or memory images emerging in a writer's mind" and how Byatt's "overwriting is an intertextual practice that gives a new critical slant to borrowed fragments by placing them in altered contexts".

The intertexts Byatt includes in *Babel Tower* are more varied and more random compared to those in *Possession*. Examples of intertexts included in *Babel Tower* are a novel-within-a-novel entitled *Babbletower* and a children's tale entitled *Flight North*, both by illusory authors. Byatt herself is the actual author of these intertexts, but she uses the pseudonyms of Jude Mason and Agatha Mond, respectively, to disguise this fact. Other intertexts include

fragments of poetry by distinguished authors like Blake, Donne and Shakespeare, to name a few. She also incorporates fragments from novels by authors like Tolkien, Lawrence and E.M. Forster, as well as sections from various academic texts and even newspapers. The resulting structure of the novel *Babel Tower* is one of layered texts by a variety of authors. In the first instance Byatt makes use of illusory authors, or pseudonyms, in order to write a variety of intertexts, and in the second instance she layers her own writing over the writings of other actual authors by assimilating fragments of their texts into her own.

The consequence of layering texts by different authors is that the texts permeate each other, as is the case with the underlying layer of the palimpsest which becomes legible through the overlying layer. Consequently, a relationship is established between the different layers. Dillon (2007:4) terms this relation or connection between the texts "palimpsestuous relationality". This chapter investigates how Byatt layers texts in *Babel Tower,* as well as the palimpsestuous relationality between the texts that results from this structure. The argument proposed in this chapter is that by layering authors' writings and thereby establishing palimpsestuous relations between texts, Byatt creates a sense of unity in the novel and this aids the reader in making sense of *Babel Tower*, if he or she is able to identify the palimpsestuous relations.

The intertexts in *Babel Tower* are not as much a part of the plot as the intertexts in *Possession,* which actively contribute to the unfolding of the plot. In *Babel Tower* the connections the intertexts bear to the plot or main text are less lucid and the reader has to work much harder in order to make sense of the novel. In *Babel Tower* it becomes difficult for the reader to identify the connections that ought to create unity in the novel. Therefore this chapter examines the question of how the inclusion of intertexts in *Babel Tower* creates a palimpsestic structure and a palimpsestuous relationality in the novel. It also briefly explores the fact that Byatt is not only a novelist but also a critic, even in her novel.

The first way in which Byatt creates a palimpsestic structure of layered texts in her novels is by layering illusory authors over her own writing as actual author. She does this with the intertexts included in both *Babel Tower* and *Possession*.

In *Possession*, Byatt layers the writings of R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte over her own writing as author in order to write seemingly authentic Victorian poetry and love letters dating from the nineteenth century. Byatt does it so convincingly that at first glance the two Victorian poets appear to be real historical figures to the reader. She also layers modern academic articles by the illusory feminist critic Leonora Stern over her prose by including an academic article supposedly by Stern as an intertext in *Possession* (Byatt, 1990:244-246). Byatt does this in order to express extreme feminist views and opinions without having to be held personally accountable for them. The result is that she can simultaneously express as well as criticize and ridicule such one-sided interpretations. In an interview with Wachtel (1993:82), Byatt remarks that Leonora Stern's obsession with modern literary theory and sex is "part of the whole joke of the novel". Byatt is both the author and the judge of her own text. Layering an illusory author's text over her own writing thus allows Byatt to simultaneously play the role of author as well as that of critic. In reality, that is the role that Byatt fulfils as she is both an accomplished author of novels and a respected critic. Hadley (2008:2) refers to this as Byatt's "dual role as critic and novelist".

This dual role is illustrated most clearly in *Babel Tower*'s most prominent intertext entitled *Babbletower*. Byatt writes this embedded novel under the name of Jude Mason, so that she effectively layers the writing of the fictional author Jude Mason[8] over her own writing as actual author of the novel. This layering creates a buffer between Byatt as author and the reader. When reading *Babbletower*, the reader may be shocked and disgusted and then

[8] This is a pun on Thomas Hardy's hero Jude the Obscure (Byatt, 1006:573).

readers are presented with Jude Mason as its author. Jude is a dirty, smelly, seemingly homeless man who exposes himself indiscriminately, and consequently the reader's aversion is directed at him and not Byatt. *Babbletower,* the embedded novel, describes a group of people who escaped from tyrannical rule and oppressive hostilities and who attempt to establish their own community based on total freedom. Lead by the charming and idealistic Culvert, they settle in a sequestered area called La Tour Bruyarde which "could be reached only across a narrow wooden bridge between two lines of peaks, across a dark and lifeless chasm" (Byatt, 1996:12). Once settled, Culvert sets about "designing a community of entire freedom" (Byatt, 1996:15) and to do so he draws up a "Memorandum" which stipulates, first and foremost, that "The community must strive towards complete freedom for each and every member to live and express himself – or herself – to the utmost." (Byatt, 1996:65) The ideal is a noble one, but before long it is exploited and some members of the community employ it to justify acts of perversion, lust, self-indulgence and even sadism.

Byatt, as author, maintains a distance from what is expressed in *Babbletower*. In this way she fulfils the role of the author and the critic. In *Babel Tower*, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), on the advice of Dr. Hermia Cross, decides to bring a "prosecution against the publishers and author of *Babbletower* under Section 3 of the 1959 Act" (Byatt, 1996:425). Once again, as in *Possession*, Byatt uses an aspect of the ancient palimpsest, i.e. layered texts by different authors, to simultaneously fulfil the roles of author and critic.

During the obscenity trial, the defence for *Babbletower* calls many witnesses who are supposed to provide proof of the embedded novel's literary merit. Readers may become

convinced by the defence witnesses to see the novel's literary merit. The defence witnesses are experts in the field of literature and Byatt even includes a real historical figure and novelist, Anthony Burgess, as a character to defend *Babbletower*. During the obscenity trial, Burgess describes *Babbletower* as a "deeply moral, almost too moral, book" which is "didactic" (Byatt, 1996:540). Incorporating the testimony of a real-life figure like Burgess is an attempt by Byatt to strengthen the case of the defence. It also serves to blur the boundaries between actual history and fiction.

The reader also feels a sense of loyalty towards the defence team of *Babbletower* because it consists of characters with whom the reader is familiar and thus tends to side with. For example, the protagonist of the quartet, Frederica, is the one who suggested to the publisher, Rupert Parrot of Bowers and Eden, that *Babbletower* should be published (Byatt, 1996:304) after Jude gave it to her to read (Byatt, 1996:286). During the prosecution, Frederica forms part of "The Council of the Wise": "Frederica finds herself, almost by accident, at a meeting in the offices of Bowers and Eden in Elderflower Court to discuss the defence of *Babbletower.*" (Byatt, 1996:470) Another character that is also an important figure in the quartet, Alexander Wedderburn, is asked to, and does, provide a testimony on behalf of the defence for *Babbletower* (Byatt, 1996:474, 534-538). The overwhelming defence for the morality and the literary merit of the embedded novel serve to show the reader that *Babbletower* does indeed serve a purpose within *Babel Tower*. Campbell (2004:240) states that Byatt "takes the risk of inserting the text of *Babbletower* for her readers to experience [the novel] for themselves".

Ultimately, Byatt enables the readers to act as the jury and decide for themselves "whether this book [*Babbletower*] is obscene, and, if it is, whether its merits outweigh this obscenity

sufficiently for the publication of the book to be in the public interest" (Byatt, 1996:594). Campbell (2004:246) notes that "Byatt's position on censorship...is a balanced, thoughtful one." This is evident from the fact that Byatt presents the cases of both the prosecution and the defence objectively to the reader during the trial. By layering an illusory author's novel over her own, Byatt was able to write a controversial novel and she was also able to critique the novel herself by putting it on trial. She thus fulfilled both the roles of author and critic.

Layering the writings of other authors over her own writing, however, does not only provide Byatt with a platform from which she can fulfil the dual role of author and critic. It also allows her to create texts vastly different from the prose in her novel and to insert these texts into her novel (the main text) as intertexts. Byatt successfully integrates intertexts into *Babel Tower* compared to only describing such texts in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985). Once Byatt started making use of palimpsestic writing by layering other authors' texts over hers in *Possession* (1990), she was able to succeed in including and integrating various intertexts into her novels. "In *Possession*, the problem of inventing intertexts is brilliantly solved, and from this point on...passages of actual and invented poetry, fiction, travel accounts, scientific writing, and biography occupy central positions" in Byatt's novels (Campbell, 2004:232). The success of the integration of the intertexts into the main text relies heavily on creating some kind of thread that links all the fragments of texts and creates a sense of unity in the novel despite its seemingly fragmented structure.

Joseph Hillis Miller refers to this strategy of using narrative thread in his book *Ariadne's Thread*[9] when he states that the reader has to follow this thread or line to make sense of the novel and arrive at the meaning of the text: "What line should the critic follow in explicating, unfolding, or unknotting these passages?" (1992:4) As an analogy, the reader must be able to find his way out of the puzzling labyrinth of the text using the thread or line. This narrative line, which supposedly runs from the beginning to the end of a novel, can sometimes be broken: "This linearity is broken...only by the engravings that juxtapose 'illustrations' in another medium to the continuous flow of printed words, or by anything in the words on the page which in one way or another says, see page so and so." (Miller, 1992:5) The linearity of the narrative line or the thread that the reader has to follow is thus broken by illustrations in other mediums or by references. But it is also possible for this narrative line to be broken or interrupted by intertextuality as it is used in *Babel Tower,* because it creates boundaries between different texts in the novel.

When an intertext, which differs in style and language, is inserted into the main text, it immediately creates a boundary between the main text and the intertexts because they differ in form. A change in form thus creates a boundary in the narrative of the novel. For example, in the middle of Frederica searching frantically for her son Leo in the main text, the

[9] Miller uses a myth from Greek mythology as an analogy for reading and grasping the meaning of a text. The myth involves Theseus, the national hero and later king of Athens, and his adventure into the Labyrinth to kill the Minotaur (the result of the union between King Minos's wife and a bull). The Labyrinth was built by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete and it is said to have been "a complicated building or maze...from which no one could escape" (Howatson, 1997:312). It was constructed to hide the Minotaur. King Minos laid siege to Athens and for the city to be delivered they had to sacrifice seven young men and women to the Minotaur. Theseus volunteered to be one of the youths and he succeeded in killing the Minotaur (Howatson, 1997:367). His success was greatly aided by Ariadne, one of Minos's daughters, who fell in love with Theseus and "gave him the thread by which he found his way out of the Labyrinth after killing the Minotaur" (Howatson, 1997:54). Miller equates the reading of a text with venturing into the Labyrinth and the reader needs Ariadne's thread (or a narrative line) in order to find the way out (or the meaning) of the Labyrinth (or text).

reader is unexpectedly confronted with a fantastical children's story written by Agatha Mond, another character functioning as an illusory author whose work is layered over that of Byatt (Byatt, 1996:315). Frederica finds Leo with Agatha and her daughter, Saskia, in their apartment. They are listening to Agatha reading her children's story *Flight North*. Frederica is persuaded to sit down and listen to the story with Leo. Consequently the reader has to transcend a boundary, created by the sudden and significant change in genre, and read the children's story included as an intertext. A critic, Michael Noble (2001:73), identifies the problem in *Babel Tower*: "*Babel Tower* is built from these various layerings, and over the course of the novel, the layers are not integrated." The layers or texts certainly do not become integrated into a single plot and Byatt has to find a way to draw all the fragments of texts, including the intertexts by other authors and the intertexts written by her under the names of the illusory authors, together using something like a golden thread that will help the reader find his way through the text like Ariadne's thread helped Theseus find his way out of the Labyrinth.

The intertexts, in *Babel Tower*, do not form part of the main plot of the novel and so their inclusion obstructs the linearity of the narrative as the reader constantly has to shift from one plot to another. Again, Agatha's children's story *Flight North* serves as an example. The story relates the travels of a strange collection of characters. There is the prince of a deserted kingdom named Artegall, who had been locked in a tower, but is rescued by a cook's maid named Dol Throstle, a palace guard named Claus and a whipping-boy named Mark. The story relates their adventures while they search for Artegall's uncle Ragna (Byatt, 1996:318). There is thus a boundary implied between the main text and the intertexts because they differ in content in that they have entirely different and separate plots. The

reader has to cross these boundaries (of form and content) in order to continue with the novel and in this way the boundaries created by intertextuality serve to cause temporary breaks or interruptions in the narrative line of the novel. David Lodge (2002:263) identifies this as a characteristic of postmodern writing in general when he states that for the reader "...it is only in the actual reading experience, in the disorientation produced by the abrupt and unpredictable shifts of register from one section to another, that the effects of bafflement, anguish [and] contradiction are felt".

This may create a problem for some of Byatt's readers because it is rather easy to lose the narrative thread that is supposed to guide one through to the end, and hopefully to some considerable understanding of the meaning of the novel. In order not to lose the reader, Byatt lets the narrative line return on itself by means of repetition. Miller (1992:6) describes repetition as "true disturbances of the line that make it curve back on itself, recross itself, tie itself in knots". He also asserts that

> The image of the line, it is easy to see, cannot be detached from the problem of repetition. Repetition might be defined as anything that happens to the line to trouble its straightforward linearity: returning, knotting, recrossings, crinklings to and fro, suspensions, interruptions (Miller, 1992:17).

In a way, repetition breaks straightforward narrative linearity (Miller, 1992:6), but because there is a recurrence it also creates connections and these permeate the different texts in the narrative. In this way the main text and the many intertexts are linked by means of recurring motifs. Byatt presents the reader with a textured woven structure of intertwined lines or threads rather than a single, straightforward narrative line. In an interview with Eleanor Watchel for the 35th season of *Authors at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto*, Byatt was asked about her "talismanic phrase" as a writer to which she replied:

> Making things, I think...I see a piece of writing, not in terms of whether it will change the world, nor whether it expresses me in any way, but making a construction like a pot, something that wasn't there and now is. So I suppose my other metaphor is weaving. I do see a work as a tapestry or something done on a loom, because of the sort of continuity, all the threads continuing to go through and in and out of each other. So these are my talismanic phrases. (Byatt, 2009)

Her protagonist in *Babel Tower*, Frederica, explains it as follows to her class of art students at the Samuel Palmer School of Art and Craft:

> A novel, *Women in Love*, for instance, she says, is made of a long thread of language, like knitting, thicker and thinner in patches. It is made in the head and has to be remade by whoever reads it, who will always remake it differently...a novel is also made of *ideas* [motifs] that connect...another layer of interwoven knitting (Byatt, 1996:214).

An artwork by the character Desmond Bull, an artist in *Babel Tower*, also resembles this woven structure:

> One work is made up of hundreds of electric wires, stripped, coiled, layers thick like thick impasto, and all colours, woven red and black fat wires, heavy-duty blue plastic wires, orange, brown, green, acid yellow, like nests, like tangles, like barbed-wire fences, like cartoon roses (Byatt, 1996:231).

Stewart (2009:505) classifies Bull's art as "overpainting" in an article on *Babel Tower*. His article considers the devices of ephkrasis and lamination in the novel and he hints at the fact that these writing strategies, which Stewart shows to be derived from painting or visual art, create palimpsests. He, however, does not classify the novel as a palimpsest per se. So he provides the impetus for the argument in this chapter, namely that *Babel Tower* is a novel with an intricately layered structure like that of the palimpsest. The reason that Stewart identifies Bull's art as "overpainting" or layered is clear when one considers the following quotation from *Babel Tower*:

> Bull had become interested in *collage*...he is making a large picture of layers of faces, from past and present, newspapers and paintings, with Robespierre's eyes in Marilyn Monroe's face above Bronzino's Fraud's scaly tail, or with Roosevelt's seated figure cut into Titan's seated Pope. This work is at a chaotic stage, and varies from the banal to the suddenly witty and shocking. (Byatt, 1996:378)

Byatt's novel can be considered to be such a collage of fragments of different texts from diverse genres, ranging from the past through to the present, just like Bull's artwork. "In *Babel Tower*, Byatt implicitly questions Bull's overpainting *and* Frederica's verbal laminations." (Stewart, 2009:504) The same technique of taking pieces from different sources and putting them together in order to form something new is evident in Frederica's writing. She starts off by writing a kind of journal, but it soon becomes a collage of texts from various books, as well as letters that she receives from her attorney regarding Leo's custody and her divorce from her abusive husband Nigel. This technique, which Frederica (illusory author) uses more crudely in her text *Laminations,* is described as follows:

> Cut-ups are part of it. It is a form that is made partly by cutting up, breaking up, rearranging things that already exist. 'All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words overheard.' These sentences of Burroughs's sent a spiky thrill of recognition through her brain. *The point of words is that they have to have already been used, they have not to be new, they have to be only re-arrangements, in order to have meaning* (Byatt, 1996:385).

"Frederica emulates her friend Desmond Bull's experiments with collage." (Campbell, 2004:236) This, too, is Byatt's *modus operandi* in writing the three novels selected for this study. Stewart (2009:505) states that "overpainting is analogous to verbal lamination or intertextual layering" because "overpainting is a layering of pigments, in which a painter subsumes another's or his own work without removing traces of it from the canvas – or at least from memory." Similarly Byatt subsumes other actual authors' writing by including fragments of their texts, or her own writing under illusory authors, in her novels. This may be called verbal lamination *or* intertextual layering *or* overwriting. Therefore "Bull's

'overpainting' is analogous to Byatt's 'overwriting' [which] makes texts palimpsests" (Stewart, 2009:506). Byatt makes use of cut-ups from other texts by other authors in order to create a collage of overwriting, which includes words that have already been used or have been overheard, as explicated in the quotation of Burroughs (by Frederica) above. Consequently these passages can be considered as ways in which the other authors permeate into Byatt's novels like the underlying layer of the ancient palimpsest permeates the overlying layer and like the remnants of the overpainted works show through the layers of new paint on a canvas. "Byatt demonstrates that the palimpsest of brushstrokes and erasures that constitute overpainting parallels the lamination, cutting, and juxtaposition that constitute overwriting." (Stewart, 2009:510)

As mentioned before, this layered structure or collage creates the possibility that the reader can lose the linearity of the narrative thread that is supposed to lead him or her through and ultimately out of the novel. Frederica, when writing her own piece, reflects on this potential problem for the reader as she tries to find a way to create unity in her collage of cut-up texts:

> She is trying to turn the jottings of her own *Laminations* into a coherently incoherent work. She has had the idea...that it might be possible to construct a kind of plait of voices, with different rhythms and vocabularies. But it will not work (Byatt, 1996:463-464).

As a solution to the said problem, Byatt approaches her writing as "a process like trawling, or knitting, [in which] recurring themes and patterns began to make themselves" (Byatt, 2001:187). Byatt thus creates a golden thread to lead the reader out of the labyrinth by using repetition, i.e. recurring motifs in *Babel Tower*. Campbell (2004:235, 237, 238) states that a pattern of fruitful and progressive repetition is built into the quartet's narrative and that it provides a kind of order in the text of *Babel Tower*, although its principle is difficult to discern. The recurring or repeating motifs in the novel function like a golden thread that

weaves all the texts together because it permeates the main text and the intertexts in *Babel Tower*.

The repetition of motifs in *Babel Tower* can be seen as a direct result of Byatt's structural device of layering authors. The main text and many of the intertexts are in fact all written by Byatt herself, even though she presents some of the intertexts as being written by someone else like Agatha Mond or Jude Mason. It is to be expected then that certain themes, or motifs, or images will recur in the different texts. This was also picked up by Todd (1997:71): "The experienced reader will also register that, because the extracts from *Babbletower* are embedded in *Babel Tower*, connections might be expected, and indeed cannot be avoided." It is this recurring reappearance of certain motifs in the different texts that create the golden narrative thread that connects the different texts in the novel. And because these texts are all connected, there is a palimpsestuous relation between the texts. The relation between the main and intertexts in *Babel Tower* can be considered a palimpsestuous relationship because, as is the case with the palimpsest, the texts in *Babel Tower* are layered. Just like bits and pieces of the underlying layer of the ancient palimpsest reappear through the overlying layer, the motifs of the main text in *Babel Tower* reappear in the intertexts.

There are numerous permeations of motifs, such as the thrush, snails and festivals, in *Babel Tower* and these motifs are introduced at the beginning of the novel. The novel has various beginnings as identified by Todd (1997:63), who states that "these alternative beginnings are of organic importance to both the book's form and content, for they initiate an interwoven, braided structure". The numerous beginnings thus immediately create the idea that the novel is multivalent and it serves to introduce the novel's layered or woven structure. Not

only Todd points this out, but Campbell (2004:234) and Noble (2001:73) also refer to the four possible beginnings, which signal multiplicity and form the "various layerings" from which *Babel Tower* is built. Byatt emphasises the many beginnings metafictionally by starting each one with a phrase to draw the reader's attention to the fact that what follows is one of the many possible beginnings for the novel. On the first page she writes: "It might begin..." (1996:3) and a few pages later she writes: "Or it might begin..." (1996:4, 6, 12). With each beginning, Byatt introduces different motifs that recur throughout the text. In his article, Todd (1997:63) identifies "three postulated beginnings", namely "Daniel Orton", "Frederica Potter" and "Babbletower". He adds to this the beginning that describes the thrush and he identifies a "continuo" concerning Marcus Potter. While, as an extension, Noble (2001:71) adds another beginning which he terms "the fifth door" and with it he incorporates the prologue from *Still Life,* which describes 1968, whereas *Babel Tower* ends in 1967. The beginnings as identified by Todd (1997) and Noble (2001) will serve to direct the discussion of the recurring motifs as the different beginnings introduce each of the motifs. The focus of this discussion is the recurring motifs in *Babel Tower* that permeate the many different texts and serves to establish a palimpsestuous relation between the texts, which in turn creates a sense of unity in the novel.

When considering the first beginning of Babel *Tower*, Campbell (2004:232) asserts that the "first opening into the book provides no narrative thread; instead, it introduces a cluster of motifs". One such motif is a thrush that is described in the first beginning of *Babel Tower* and Noble (2001:64) sums it up neatly: "The image of the thrush constructs symmetrical patterns of aural and visual images that will recur, in different and ever more elaborate

incarnations, again and again over the course of the novel." The first beginning of the novel is a description of a thrush: "The thrush has his anvil or altar on one fallen stone in a heap" and he finds "his secret prey in the grass" and then "he carries the shell with its soft centre to his stone. He lifts the shell, he cracks it down." (Byatt, 1996:3) The "secret prey" of the thrush is a snail and "round the stones are the broken shells [of snails], helical whorls like empty ears" (Byatt, 1996:3). Many of the recurring motifs discussed below are introduced in this beginning. For a detailed description of all the motifs or images, see the article by Noble (2001) entitled "A Tower of tongues: Babel Tower and the Art of Memory". In the article, he links the image of the thrush on the anvil to a poem by George Herbert, *The Altar* (Noble, 2001:3), and explicates how literature can be seen as mnemonic. He then describes how Byatt, through the repetition of images, creates an Elizabethan memory theatre[10] in her novel. Byatt uses this beginning as a platform upon which to temper the many motifs of her novel according to Noble (2001:63). The two most obvious motifs introduced in this beginning are that of the thrush and the motif of snails. Sorensen (2003/2004:186) supports this notion as she states that "possibly the most frequently used analogy in her recent books is the snail".

Moreover, Campbell (2004:233) identifies the thrush motif that "moves through the book...both as name and as image". It is an illustration of Byatt's strategy of repeating motifs, which constructs the golden thread that ties the many texts together and that guides the reader though and eventually out of the labyrinth. The thrush first breaks the shell of its

[10] A Building with rooms and doors of different colours which serves as a place where memories can be stored.

prey, a snail. This action is described and then "He repeats. He repeats." (Byatt, 1996:3) After eating the snail, the thrush starts to sing: "his song is liquid syllables, short cries, serial trills" and "He repeats. He repeats." (Byatt, 1996:3) By reiterating the phrase "He repeats", Byatt points out what she is going to do in the rest of the novel, she is going to repeat motifs. The thrush and his anvil surrounded by snail shells recurs in chapter thirteen of the novel when Frederica and her lover, John Ottokar, decide to go to Yorkshire for a weekend.[11] They go for a stroll: "They set out to walk across the moors to the Falling Foss" (Byatt, 1996:355). On their walk they come across Jacqueline Winwar and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, two scientists studying the "population dynamics" and the genetic codes of snails (Byatt, 1996:357). Luk says: "We come here because there is a thrush's anvil here where we collect the broken shells" (Byatt, 1996:357) and Jacqueline adds: "the thrushes we study here are still here and still singing and still breaking snails on the anvil" (Byatt, 1996:358). This is almost an exact repetition of the description of the thrush in the first beginning of *Babel Tower*.

The singing of the thrush in the descriptive beginning of *Babel Tower* can be linked to John Ottokar too, because when he and Frederica have sex, "Frederica hears his voice in a drowse, a series of soft meaningless syllables...and then a final strange whistling, like the sharp thin cry of a bird." (Byatt, 1996:347) These are two examples of how the motif of the thrush recurs in the main text of *Babel Tower*. The thrush on the heap of stones is a motif that recurs in the novel and it serves to create a sense of unity in the novel.

[11] This is an echo of Ash and Christabel's (and Roland and Maud's) weekend in Yorkshire described in *Possession* and it serves to illustrate the intratextuality between Byatt's novels.

The novel ends with a similar image: "...it looked like a chance heap of rocks, sprouting green here and there, with what might be shells or pebbles clustered palely at its foot" (Byatt, 1996:619). Noble (2001:73) explains that "the heap of bones returns the reader to the fallen stones presented in the opening (also originary) mnemonic of the novel". In this way Byatt ensures a sense of unity in her novel because she "brings the imagery of the thrush and the snail full circle" and thus ties the opening and the ending of the novel together (Campbell, 2004:233).

The motif of the thrush pervades the intertexts in *Babel Tower* too, thereby creating connections and making it easier for the reader to navigate between the different texts as a sense of unity is created. The permeation of the thrush motif into one of the intertexts of *Babel Tower* occurs by means of the name of one of the characters in the intertext *Flight North*. The character is a cook and her name is Dol Throstle (Campbell, 2004:233). The word "throstle" is a British old-fashioned term for song thrush (COED, 2008:1502). There is another character in *Flight North* namely "an ancient, draggled Thrush, who speaks when he chooses" (Byatt, 1996:395) who joins the company as they progress with their journey.

The thrush motif is also recognizable in the intertext *Babbletower* as the character Turdus Cantor's name, according to Campbell (2004:233), is the "Latin name of the song thrush". The image of the thrush singing is also evident in the description of a woman called Lady Mavis, the mother of Felicitas, who commits suicide after she finds out that her child was tortured in the children's dormitories. Lady Mavis commits suicide by jumping from the top of one of the towers at La Tour Bruyarde. Before Lady Mavis jumps, Felicitas runs to her

mother who picks her up and “stood for a moment high and free on the wall [of the tower] itself, crooning to her child in her arms...they could not hear if she was still singing to the child” (Byatt, 1996:276). Lady Mavis sings like the thrush while standing on a structure which is higher than the surroundings, like the heap of stones. Then she jumps and “Lady Mavis came down like a great bird, swaying in her skirts amongst the child’s raucous cries and her own singing...her head hit a sharp rock, like a snail dropped by a thrush, and burst apart...” (Byatt, 1996:277) In this passage, Lady Mavis is likened to both the motif of the thrush as well as that of the snail.

Before the tragic suicide of Lady Mavis, her daughter Felicitas is tortured by other children in the dormitories. After being bullied, “the little thing took up her nightdress and crept away to a cot in a corner where she often lay curled like a desperate snail in its shell” (Byatt, 1996:270). Here Felicitas is likened to a snail, the other important motif introduced by the first beginning of *Babel Tower*. The motif of the snail recurs in this passage of the intertext *Babbletower* and it recurs again in another intertext titled *Laminations*, written by Frederica. She includes an article on snails, written by Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, in her written work of fragments: “Frederica copies part of an article lent by Luk Lysgaard-Peacock into her *Laminations*, partly because she likes the idea of the snails.” (Byatt, 1996:465) The motif of the snail recurs in the main text of *Babel Tower* as well. In the description of the thrush on his heap of stones, the shells of snails scattered at the foot of the heap are described as “helical whorls” with “lips [that] are pure white (*Helix hortensis*) and shining black (*Helix nemoralis*)” (Byatt, 1996:3). Later in the novel when Frederica speaks to Luk, he explains:

"*Helix hortensis*, he tells her, has a white lip...whilst *Helix nemoralis* can be distinguished by a jet-black lip." (Byatt, 1996:358) Again, the description of the snails' shells is repeated almost exactly.

The motif of the snail features very prominently in the intertext *Babbletower*. Not only because the Lady Mavis and Felicitas are described in terms of snails, but also because snails have an important symbolic meaning for the community as they are said to have "spirit-life" (Byatt, 1996:262). Culvert often takes to exploring the towers at La Tour Bruyarde and on one such occasion he finds "a row of little lights" and "when Culvert considered them closely, could be seen to be helical snail shells full of oil with burning wicks in the oil" (Byatt, 1996:259). He then comes across a haggard old woman who tells him that she used to be his nursemaid. She also tells him of the significance of snails: "They go between, you see, my dear boy, they go between earth and sky, they go between fire and water" and "They are neither fish nor flesh nor fowl, and so magical, as things undecided are magical, because they are not fixed." (Byatt, 1996:263) The importance of snails is thus that they are able to "go between" or in other words, transcend boundaries. The implication is that the snails are able to connect the different worlds which they "go between" because they are "wanderers between this world and the next" (Byatt, 1996:263). This is an illustration of the structural function of the snail as motif in *Babel Tower*: The snail as motif goes between in that it permeates the many texts in the novel and in that way connects them through repetition. Noble (2001:65) states that "In *Babel Tower*, a beautiful model of the organic snail shell repeats itself in hundreds of artful, minutely detailed transformations."

Snails also play a very important part in the rituals and festivals of the community at La Tour Bruyarde. There is a specific festival, called "the Carnival" (Byatt, 1996:261) for which a "Great Pie" is made of snails and during the festival "they lit the fire in the hearth...and they roasted more snails on its crest in great iron pails, dropping the hot oil into the shells so you could hear the creatures wince and sigh and screech as best they could" (Byatt, 1996:262). Campbell (2004:232) states that "the snail as sacrificial victim is to reappear...in the snails that are believed to be magical spirits and must, according to custom, be roasted alive in the New Year celebrations of Misrule". Both the Lady Mavis and Felicitas can also be considered such sacrificial victims of the cruelty at La Tour Bruyarde.

The festival, like the one at La Tour Bruyarde, is another recurring motif, both in *Babel Tower* as well as in the intertext *Flight North.* In the main text, Frederica's story, the festival is a "Guy Fawkes bonfire on the earthy tip in the middle of Hamelin Square" where Frederica lives with Agatha Mond (Byatt, 1996:392). In the intertext *Flight North* there is a kind of festival during which the villagers light the "Bale Fire" and "if it burns very bright, it is a sign that there will be Spring" (Byatt, 1996:397). The illusory author of *Flight North* is Agatha Mond and she thinks: "The story does not usually have anything to do with the daily lives of its narrator or listeners, but in this case the Bale Fire has been growing *pari passu* with the bonfire in the mud in the centre of Hamelin Square." (Byatt, 1996:396) Because the festival is a motif that suffuses the different texts in the novel *Babel Tower*, there are a few similarities. All the festivals have a fire, as mentioned above, the festival in Hamelin Square is a bonfire and for the festival in *Flight North* they light the Bale Fire. Similarly the Carnival

festival in *Babbletower* also involves a fire: "And the Yule Log came in – which had been smouldering away for a whole year under the hearth...they lit the fire in the hearth from the old log, and put in the new, and danced in the light of the flames." (Byatt, 1996:266) All the festivals also involve dancing. At the Carnival festival in *Babbletower* people dance in long lines: "up and down the staircases and along the corridors they danced, in great human eels" (Byatt, 1996:262). "All night they danced" around the Bale Fire (Byatt, 1996:400) in the intertext *Flight North* and during the Bonfire Night in Hamelin Square there is a "swaying line of residents" dancing around the bonfire (Byatt, 1996:407). Another similarity between the festivals is that there is some kind of sacrifice. The sacrifice for the Hamelin Square festival, in the main text, is a Guy:

> the body of the Guy is made from an old stained, tea-leaf coloured pillow...it has a limp pair of pink rubber gloves pinned to its 'shoulders', and a pair of diminutive infant's plimsolls, cracked and holed, propped at the base of its lolling trunk. It has a paper-mask face... (Byatt, 1996:394-395)

Agatha tells Frederica "she hates the whole business of Guys...the whole idea of celebrating the burning of a minor conspirator" (Byatt, 1996:395). Finally, when "the Guy has been built into the pyre in a rotting wicker chair", Agatha remarks that it looks like a "Druid sacrifice" (Byatt, 1996:406). During the Bale Fire festival in the intertext *Flight North* the villagers and the travellers leap over the flames of the fire until "two of the young men appeared, when everyone had jumped, half-leading, half-dragging, half-carrying the fragile fawn body of Fraxinius" (Byatt, 1996:400). Fraxiniux is a creature that resembles a broom or a clothes pole (Byatt, 1996:396) and he is as "dry as tinder" and would be consumed by the flames if

he has to leap over the fire (Byatt, 1996:400). But he is made to leap by the villagers, he is the sacrificial victim. He jumps and lands in the middle of the fire and is set ablaze immediately, but "as he blazed, he changed beneath their eyes, drawing energy and form from the flames" (Byatt, 1996:401). Ultimately his self-sacrifice saves him and helps the travellers find their way. The sacrifices made during the Carnival festival in the intertext *Babbletower* entail a ritual in which "the peasants...roast a tower of live cats over the great fire" (Byatt, 1996:262) as well as the traditional roasting of the snails mentioned above. Both the Bale Fire festival in *Flight North* and the Carnival in *Babbletower* take place on the Longest Night (Byatt, 1996:262, 397). The motif of festivals thus pervades the main text and at least two intertexts in *Babel Tower* and as a result establishes a palimpsestuous relationship between the texts.

The second beginning of *Babel Tower* identified by Noble (2001:63) introduces a poet named Hugh Pink as he walks and composes a poem about a pomegranate (Byatt, 1996:4). To write a poem, Hugh must employ language. Language is another motif that keeps recurring in *Babel Tower*. Campbell (2004:239) says that "it is language that draws the threads of *Babel Tower* into a complicated whole". Language is thus a significant motif introduced by the second beginning of the novel. One clue as to the significance of language as a motif is the title of the novel *Babel Tower,* as it immediately reminds the reader of the tale of the Tower of Babel in the Bible, Genesis 11. Three of the expert witnesses called at the obscenity trial of the embedded novel *Babbletower* also make this connection to the Biblical tale: Professor Smith (Byatt, 1996:545), Elvet Gander (Byatt, 1996:548) and Professor Efraim Ziz (Byatt, 1996:588). According to the Biblical tale all people on earth initially spoke the same language. When some the people arrive in Babylonia (or Shinar), they decide to build a city with a tower that could reach heaven. God

sees this and is displeased with their audacity so He decides to make them speak different languages so that they can not communicate with each other and they have to cease the building of the tower. They become scattered across the world after their language had been confused and the place where the confusion occurred is named Babel. Babel means "a confused noise made by a number of voices"[12] (COED, 2008:94). In this tale, God makes language incomprehensible and it loses its referential power. In other words, God changed the singular and thus meaningful language to babble, which is to "talk rapidly and continuously in a foolish, excited, or incomprehensible way" (COED, 2008:94). The sixth chapter of *Babel Tower* is entirely devoted to a description of a character, Gerard Wijnnobel, who "sits in his official car and thinks about language" (Byatt, 1996:191). He thinks

> ...of the Ur-language, the original speech of God, spoken by Adam in Eden, and indeed by God, the Word Himself, when He called the universe into being out of chaos, simply by naming it. In the days before Babel, before God punished the human race for its presumption in raising its winding structure towards Heaven by dividing its tongues, by setting confusion amongst its speech – in the days before Babel, the occult tradition went, words had been things and things had been words, they had been *one*...afterwards, after the fall of the tower, language and the world had not coincided, and the languages of men had become opaque, secret, enfolded in an incomprehensible and unpierceable skin of idiosyncrasies (Byatt, 1996:191-192).

From this passage it is clear that language has lost its referential power, because words and things are no longer one and as a result we are caught in a language system full of signifiers that are in an endless process of referral because they are no longer linked to specific signifieds or referents. One of the intertexts included in Frederica's *Laminations*, which in turn is an intertext in *Babel Tower*, is the draft of the Introduction to the Report of the Steerforth Committee of Enquiry on the Teaching of English Language, and it states: "There

[12] This has the connotation of cacophony and hints at the multiple discordant 'voices' of the intertexts in the novel.

is a growing belief in some schools of thought that 'language is divorced from the world', that it is perhaps simply a partial system which best describes only its own interrelations and structure." (Byatt, 1996:480) Stewart (2009:501) supports this: "Words no longer point to things, but to other words, other texts, other images." This is a prominent theme that is addressed in postmodern writing. The Steerforth Committee, assigned to investigate the teaching of language, find that it is difficult to use language to compile their Report. Alexander, a member of the Committee, remarks to Frederica:

> ...you find that the words are like sand slipping through your fingers, you feel you're staring through a microscope at a lot of life-forms that suddenly look like great thick snakes curling round and *biting* each other. We're writing about teaching language and the language we write about teaching language won't stick to the thing we're writing about. Won't describe it. (Byatt, 1996:477)

Alexander creates the perfect analogy for language when he describes it as a system only capable of describing its own inner workings and not things, or the world and its reality.

The Biblical tale of the Tower of Babel forms an important underlying layer or subtext[13] for the entire novel of *Babel Tower* as it reappears in slightly altered ways in the main as well as in the intertexts. Both the motif of language and the motif of the tower (discussed below) originate from the subtext that is the Biblical tale. Other subtexts do inform the novel, but the focus of this dissertation is specifically on intertexts.

In *Babel Tower*, the inadequacy of language to describe or convey reality is a very prominent motif and it permeates both main and intertexts alike. Campbell (2004:245) states that "fractured language pervades the world of *Babel Tower*" and that Byatt is

[13]Subtexts differ from intertexts in that they are not included in the novel as intertextual fragments or quotations, but are referred or alluded to in the novel. Such subtexts are also well-known enough to be easily identified by an avid reader.

concerned with the "root question of how minds learn and respond to language" (2004:244). In his book, in the chapter "Language our Straitjacket", Todd (1997:64) speaks of "the various disfiguring roles language itself plays within the working out of the plot of *Babel Tower*" and that there is a "gap between reality and the words we use to describe it". In the main text, Frederica experiences this most directly during her divorce trial. When she is asked to write an account of her marriage to Nigel she struggles to find the right words and crosses out every sentence she writes, she thinks:

> ...the document is nauseating because it is a lie. It recounts true facts, for a valid purpose – to get Frederica out of a marriage that has become a trap – but it recounts these things one-sidedly, in inappropriate (inappropriate? lying? inadequate?) language (Byatt, 1996:309).

After having a meeting with her solicitor:

> Frederica sees herself as a caged or netted beast. She sees something limp and snarling in a barred cage on wheels, in a hunter's net suspended from a bough. The net is not made by Nigel, who ran after her, panting, in hot blood; and hurled an axe at her, letting her own blood out of her haunch. The net is made by words which do not describe what she feels is happening (Byatt, 1996:326).

Language in *Babel Tower* is not an instrument, but rather an impediment. During the divorce trial Frederica thinks: "the things she says are not descriptions of what she thinks was and is what happened or is happening" (Byatt, 1996:518). She feels that the story of her life is changed by the language in which it is described and she feels she "is entangled as in a fine, voluminous net" (Byatt, 1996:521). When she looks at Nigel she sees that "he too is involved in this linguistic net laid over bare limbs on a bed, over the axe, over the little boy sleeping, over what can't be named or defined or understood" (Byatt, 1996:521). The language used in the divorce trial does not convey the essence of the reality it attempts to

describe, on the contrary, it seems to obscure the truth. Frederica's divorce trial runs concurrently with the obscenity trial of the intertext *Babbletower*. So correspondingly, "the account of the *Babbletower* trial is a marvellously controlled instance of the way in which legal language both obfuscates and renders down the particularity of a narrative" (Todd, 1997:70). During the obscenity trial Alexander Wedderburn testifies for the literary merit of *Babbletower* and he experiences his testimony as if he is

> ...struggling through a suffocating cloud of wool, trying to find air, trying to find light, trying to make a precise sentence and being told again and again that his vocabulary – his expert vocabulary - is inadmissible in this place [court], must be rephrased" (Byatt, 1996:535).

In both trials the legal language used fails to fully describe reality because it obscures the truth and it is restrictive. Language is restrictive because it is linked so closely to societal systems with prejudices on which judgements are based. Frederica feels that "she and Jude have been made to recite travesties of their life stories, in language they would never have chosen for themselves. They have been judged and found wanting." (Byatt, 1996:597) Ultimately, their freedom of speech is taken away by the legal language they are required to use during their respective trials. Campbell (2004:246) states that "in each case, the evidence [presented in language] -...about divorce, and about obscenity – falsifies the subject". Consequently they are unable to convey the truth of the matter to the court and therefore the court's findings are against them.

The motif of language pervades the intertext *Babbletower* itself too as Culvert recognises the restrictive quality inherent in the use of language. Especially in terms of how societal and political authorities use language to enforce ideologies and institute oppression, the very

things he and the community have run away from. Therefore he believes that in the end, language may need to be "reforged and re-invented" in the community at La Tour Bruyarde (Byatt, 1996:66). During one of his passionate speeches, he says:

> ...we shall forge a new, true language, a language of love and playfulness and truth without innuendo or inadequacy or lameness, a language like a sword, a language as immediate as the triumphal song of the seed from the cock, a language before shame and beyond shuffling embarrassment – a new universal speech (Byatt, 1996:206).

But his ideal to forge a new language, like his ideal to create a community based on absolute freedom, is doomed. The fate of the community, and especially the fate of Culvert's new language, is foretold in the name of their abode. La Tour Bruyarde means "the noisy, or shouting, or howling tower" according to Professor Smith, who is a witness at the obscenity trial (Byatt, 1996:545). She says that "the word 'bruyard' suggests the noise made by hound dogs" (Byatt, 1996:545). Indeed, Culvert and the community unable to forge a new language and all that is left is noise or babble like in the Biblical tale. The motif of language losing its meaning is evident in the title of the embedded novel too, i.e. *Babbletower*.

The only character not affected as much by language and its limitations is John Ottokar, he says: "I've never used language. I grew up without it." (Byatt, 1996:291) He admits that he thinks in shapes and feelings and used to communicate with his twin brother in signs and gestures. But inevitably, he realises that he "needed badly to learn language" (Byatt, 1996:291-292) and that is why he joins Frederica's extra-mural English class. Later in the novel he says "Frederica, this really is a thing words can't deal with." (Byatt, 1996:454) So

although he does not need language to think, he does need it to communicate with others and, once again, language falls short.

According to Campbell (2004:246) the title Byatt chose for her novel "encompasses more fully her view that in the sixties the splitting and collapse of language was accelerated to a crisis point". The motif of language thus pervades the entire novel and permeates the main text that relates Frederica's story as well as the intertexts *Laminations* and *Babbletower*. In this way it forms a kind of continuity between the fragments, it forms that golden thread that the reader can use to navigate between the different texts in *Babel Tower*.

The third beginning of the novel as identified by Noble (2001:69) is set in the basement of St. Simeon's Church and it describes Frederica's brother-in-law, Daniel Orton. Daniel is part of an organisation called the Listeners and they provide support and advice to people over the telephone, so they are like a crisis line. "St. Simeon's is not in use as a parish church. It stands in a grimy courtyard, and has a heavy, square medieval tower." (Byatt, 1996:8) St. Simeon's basement is a crypt under the church tower (Byatt, 1996:27) and in a sense it is a babble-tower because the Listeners are "listening to the telephone's babble" (Byatt, 1996:303). The third beginning of the novel introduces the motif of the tower, which is a significant motif in the Biblical Tower of Babel tale as well. As such the Biblical tale filters into the novel. During the Second World War, the church in which Daniel works was bombed and its stained glass windows depicting Biblical tales were shattered. Then

> ...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...he thought it should all be bright and cheerful, and added modern glass here and there. (Byatt, 1996:9)

Now “the new windows frame a confused composite of the old Bible stories” (Noble, 2001:69). This is what *Babel Tower* is, a composite of old and new stories, not only from the Bible, but also of other texts. Stewart links this mosaic made by the glazier to the deterioration of language in the postmodern era, because “this makeshift artwork has no transcendent signified; the breakdown of unified structures allows an infinite play in signs and a sheer delight in multiplicity”.

The motif of the tower is one that suffuses the main and most of the intertexts. Campbell (2004:234) states that the “tower image is the object interrogated here [in the novel], and it is a tower of language that is fragile because of its fragmentation”. The motif of the tower is inextricably linked to the motif of language, or at least to the deteriorating state of language. The link between the motif of the tower and language is established in the Biblical Tower of Babel tale in which the loss of language coincides with the abandonment of the tower. This discussion of the motif of the tower identifies towers in the novel and links them to the state of language.

The tower motif is repeated again and again throughout the novel. Like at La Tour Bruyarde, in *Babel Tower* there is “not one but many towers, and of all shapes and sizes...startling in their variety” (Byatt, 1996:27). The most obvious tower is that of La Tour Bruyarde as described in the intertext *Babbletower*:

> The tower was above them, alternately in deep shadow, and bathed in brilliant golden light. It was not a shapely building, seen in this aspect. Its decaying ledges and terraces ran into one another, so that certain aspects appeared like a heap of rubble, or a rocky chaos, or an accidental heap (Byatt, 1996:138).

The tower is a symbol which represents language so this description can be seen as an analogy for the deteriorating state of language: it is “rubble” (which sounds like babble),

"chaos" and "accidental." It is also reminiscent of what the actual Biblical Tower of Babel may look like as that tower was never completed and may also appear to be nothing more than an "accidental heap" or a "rocky chaos". Like language, the tower at La Tour Bruyarde cannot be utilised easily because "Culvert was defeated by his own Tower, whose corridors deceived and delayed" (Byatt, 1996:277). Language also has the propensity to deceive, as seen in the discussion above, and consequently delay understanding.

The motif of the tower appears in the main text of the *Babel Tower* as well. John Ottokar delivers a paper on Kafka's *Castle* (a subtext) during one of the extra-mural English classes taught by Frederica. He notes that there is a tower, "a mad tower" where "words don't hang together" (Byatt, 1996:288). Campbell (2004:234) identifies this image of the tower, as well as the towers of books that John's twin brother, Paul, burns as a new form of art called skoob: "The books are somehow fused together, and fall together, a falling tower, spitting sparks." (Byatt, 1996:456-457) In both these instances the towers are not stable structures, they collapse, taking the system of language with them. Paul's skoob (books spelt backwards) towers are in actual fact made up of language because books are filled with meaning specifically because they are filled with words or language. Compared to these collapsing towers, readers are presented with the towers of the North Yorkshire University built on Long Royston, the estate of Matthew Crowe. He says to Frederica:

> Look out of my window. See the towers encroaching on my Elizabethan paradise. The Language Tower. The Evolution Tower. The Mathematics Tower. The Social Studies or Social Sciences Tower – they are quarrelling about the name – which isn't finished. They haven't built all the layers of connecting walkways yet (Byatt, 1996:249).

These towers seem to provide a reassuring and stable picture because they form an institution for learning and using language. Yet there is a problem with naming one of the towers so, once again, language becomes an impediment rather than an instrument and the initial positive picture becomes tainted and loses some of its assurance.

The last instance where the motif of the tower features in the main text of the novel is when Daniel and Frederica go in search of Jude, who disappears after he is found guilty in the obscenity trial of *Babbletower*. They learn that he "talked about living at the top of a tower" and that a child fell from that tower (Byatt, 1996:608). Using that information they search for places where children have fallen from towers and they find more such places than they expected. Eventually they find the right place, called Wastwater Towers, and "its concrete towers are uncompromising and erect" (Byatt, 1996:609). They find Jude in a dirty, smelly apartment and "in one corner is a very neat heap of books, arranged in several flat towers, by size" (Byatt, 1996:610). The fact that Jude lives in a tower of flats and that a child has fallen from one of the towers, just like little Felicitas fell from the top of the tower with her mother Lady Mavis in *Babbletower,* serves to illustrate how the motifs repeat and form connections between the main text and the intertexts in *Babel Tower*.

Two more intertexts in which the motif of the tower appears are *Flight North* by Agatha and *Laminations* by Frederica. In the children's story by Agatha the protagonist Artegall "has spent his whole life in a tower" until he is rescued by a number of people. In *Laminations*, Frederica includes a passage about a tower from Tolkien's book *The Two Towers,* which is part of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.

Lastly, the motif of the tower does not only symbolize the deterioration of language, but it also provides clues about the structure of Byatt's novel. When Frederica thinks of creating her work *Laminations*

> ...she has the first vague premonition of an art-form of fragments, juxtaposed, not interwoven, not 'organically' spiralling up like a tree or a shell, but constructed brick by brick, layer by layer, like the Post Office Tower (Byatt, 1996:360).

Byatt's novel *Babel Tower* is similar to this conception of Frederica's because it consists of fragments of texts that are often juxtaposed and it is constructed layer by layer (layered texts) like a palimpsest. But there is one big difference: it *is* interwoven because there *are* connections that pervade the different fragments in it. These connections are formed by the recurring motifs which reappear in the main text as well as the intertexts.

The last and fourth beginning of *Babel Tower* is "the beginning of the book that was to cause so much trouble" (Byatt, 1996:12), namely *Babbletower*. The motifs which this beginning introduces are only briefly discussed below.

The first recurring motif introduced in the intertext *Babbletower* is theatres. There are various theatres at La Tour Bruyarde: the Theatre of Tongues or Speech, the Theatre of Mime, the Theatre of Sacrifice and the Theatre of Cruelty (Byatt, 1996:64). Culvert believes that desires can be acted out on the stages of the theatres and "he proposed also that the whole community should take part in theatrical performances from time to time, and on a regular schedule to be mutually agreed" (Byatt, 1996:67). The motif of theatres resurfaces in the main text of *Babel Tower* when Alexander thinks of "his one great success, the 1953 verse-drama, *Astrea*" (Byatt, 1996:169). But Alexander realizes that theatre has changed

and that “the new theatre is based on Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty...it is a theatre of blood, of screams, of bodily extremity” (Byatt, 1996:169). Both Artaud and Culvert have a Theatre of Cruelty and so the motifs of theatres and that of cruelty recur in the main text and the intertext *Babbletower*.

Cruelty is thus a motif that keeps resurfacing in the novel. “The sadism and ritual violence of Jude’s *Babbletower* overlap with the abusive sexual violence Frederica suffers from her Bluebeard-spouse Nigel Reiver.” (Stewart, 2009:498) Various accounts of cruelty in the intertext *Babbletower* resurface when Frederica visits a solicitor where she learns that it is possible that she is in “a position to petition for divorce on grounds of cruelty” (Byatt, 1996:279) and she recounts Nigel’s attacks on her. According to Todd (1997:71-72):

> La Tour Bruyarde becomes a fantastic version of Bran House, each in its own way impregnable; the psychopomp Culvert becomes a fantastic version of the dominant Nigel Reiver; and Lady Roseace’s tiring of the *Babbletower* Utopia and attempting to escape figures Frederica’s ill-fated attempts to rid herself of Nigel.

Various parallels or repetitions can be identified between the two tales and these serve to connect the intertext to the main text.

According to Campbell (2004:241-242) “There are obvious parallels between her [Frederica’s] story and that of *Babbletower*, in which a man holds sway over a community...and in which, again, women are the chief sufferers.” Another motif that recurs is that of cults. Culvert establishes a sort of cult at La Tour Bruyarde in the intertext *Babbletower* and in the main text of *Babel Tower*, Gideon Farrar does something similar with his group called the Children of Joy. The poster promoting Gideon’s religious group has “a

large photograph of a barefooted circle of people of all ages hugging each other and smiling ecstatically" (Byatt, 1996:301). But in truth, "the whole thing is entirely distasteful...he makes a kind of horrible fantasy of sacrifice and communion and really it's just lust..." (Byatt, 1996:462) Gideon, like Culvert, has an inclination towards rituals:

> Gideon conducts weekend retreats in seaside barns and country houses, where the Children dance, sing, shout and encounter each other's bodies in loving exploration, acting out infant joys and terrors, anger and tenderness, birth and death. (Byatt, 1996:366)

Culvert too advocated a ritual "in which the men and women would set themselves to learn by imitation from babes and sucklings, in which all would be innocently naked on the stage together, and innocently explore all flesh, mature and nubile and milky-new" (Byatt, 1996:206). So Gideon's group is very similar to Culvert's cult and they perform the same kind of rituals.

To a much lesser degree, Nigel also creates an isolated community similar to a cult at Bran House and Frederica is not allowed to work (Byatt, 1996:90) or receive phone calls (Byatt, 1996:118). Campbell (2004:242) equates Gideon, Culvert and Nigel in this sense.

Another repetition in *Babel Tower* which cannot truly be identified as a motif is the epigraph to E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End*. Frederica teaches this novel to her extra-mural class, but it is the epigraph and its multiple meanings[14] that keep recurring. The epigraph reads "Only Connect..." and, for Frederica, it refers to connecting prose and passion. Frederica often contemplates the epigraph and she thinks "it can't be done and isn't worth doing"

[14] Other meanings include connecting language to reality or words to things, "the Romantic desire for everything to be One" (Byatt, 1996:361), collective awareness in a community or society, and connecting to a spiritual or religious power.

(Byatt, 1996:36). Even though Frederica dismisses the epigraph and its message to connect, the words are repeated many times over in *Babel Tower* (Byatt, 1996:20, 35, 43, 76, 111, 308, 311, 312, 315, 360-361). The more Frederica thinks of these words, the more she realises that "there are complicated connections between literature and life" (Byatt, 1996:312). She recognises the desire for "Oneness" and unity in the epigraph, which was also the desire of the community who decided to build the Biblical Tower of Babel. But Frederica decides that she prefers things separate or "laminated". That "things were best cool, and clear, and fragmented...juxtaposed but divided, not yearning for fusion" (Byatt, 1996:315). This is then how she approaches her writing of the intertext *Laminations*. Byatt, on the other hand, has a different approach as she does create connections in her novel. It can be argued that Byatt repeats the epigraph so often throughout the text as a clue to the reader. The reader has to connect the recurring motifs in the many fragments of texts to find the golden thread which connects these texts and puts them in a palimpsestuous relationality. By following the connections between the main and the intertexts, the reader will find Ariadne's thread, which will lead him through and eventually out of the labyrinth of texts constructed by Byatt in *Babel Tower*.

The connections or palimpsestuous relations occur not only between the main text and the intertexts written by Byatt, but also between the main text and the intertexts written by *other actual* authors that are also included in the novel. Stewart (2009:501) refers to it as "Byatt's recycling of Forster and Lawrence", amongst others. Byatt layers her writing over these other actual authors' writing and thus creates a structure of layered texts like that of the palimpsest. Some of the intertexts by other authors have references, but some are included without any references as to who the real author of the text is. For example, Frederica (an

illusory author) includes a passage from Tolkien's second instalment in the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in her fragmented and intertextual work *Laminations* (Byatt, 1996:466). There is no indication or reference as to where the passage comes from or who the author is.[15] The passage is taken from Tolkien's book entitled *The Two Towers*, Book III Chapter 8: The Road to Isengard.[16] This passage (intertext) is copied from the Tolkien novel, leaving out a word or a part of a sentence here and there so Byatt, under the pseudonym Frederica, took a passage from Tolkien (1999:192) and put it into her novel as an intertext. Byatt copied the passage from Tolkien, tweaking it here and there in order to make it a 're-writing' rather than a pure copy of the original. In this way Byatt is layering over Tolkien's original text. This makes Tolkien's text similar to the underlying layer of the ancient palimpsest which reappears through the overlying layer, which is Byatt's text. Tolkien's text thus permeates Byatt's text because Byatt has layered her writing over that of Tolkien. However, there are more than two layers at play here because Byatt uses the pseudonym or illusory author Federica to create the intertext *Laminations* into which this passage is incorporated. The fundamental layer is thus the novel *The Two Towers* of which Tolkien is the author, over which *Babel Tower* is layered with Byatt as author and over all this is layered the illusory author Frederica' s intertext *Laminations*. So there are ultimately three layers of authors and a structure similar to that of a palimpsest is created. A palimpsestuous relation is

[15] The reader is left to go and find the source or origin of the passage for himself. If the reader is not well-read and does not have a vast general knowledge, he would not realise where the intertexts without references, like this passage from Tolkien, comes from and many of the transtextual relations between Byatt's writing and other texts will be overlooked by the reader.

[16] The passage is about the Orthanc, which is a great Númenórean tower in the Circle of Isengard (Tolkien, 1998:594). The tower was the abode of Saruman after he was given the keys to it by Beren (Tolkien, 1998:484) and it is where he imprisoned Gandalf (Tolkien, 1998:447). The tower is one of the recurring motifs in the novel *Babel Tower*.

established between the texts because they are connected by the recurring motif of the tower, which permeates both the Tolkien text and the main text in *Babel Tower*. In this way a seemingly random and independent text written by another author is assimilated into the novel by Byatt.

There are more intertexts, like the Tolkien passage above, that have no references and the reader is left to find out for himself who the author is, for example: a poem by Thomas Lovell Beddoes (Byatt, 1996:352-353), another poem which was the result of a few poets collaborating at the Royal Albert Hall in June 1965, it is titled *Wholly Communion* (Byatt, 1996:387), an extract from a poem by Blake titled *The Secrets of the Earth* (Byatt, 1996:449-450) and an unnamed song (Byatt, 1996:445-446), as well as another passage by Tolkien (Byatt, 1996:450). There is also a poem about the Virgin Queen in *Babel Tower* (Byatt, 1996:447), which Byatt quotes in her book *On Histories and Stories* (2000:158) too, but in neither does she provide references and the author remains unknown to the reader. Byatt (2000:158) states that a "figure who fascinated me and found her way into my work was Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen". In this way an actual historical figure permeates into Byatt's work, both fictional and critical. This permeation establishes an intratextual connection between her fictional and critical works.

These are only a few examples of the many intertexts by other actual authors that Byatt includes in *Babel Tower*. She successfully integrates these intertexts because they all contain the recurring motifs which form the golden thread that she uses to weave the different fragments of her novel into a layered and textured, yet coherent whole. Another example of an intertext produced by an actual author is that of Rilke: *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Byatt, 1996:117 and 459). There are also intertexts by Blake (Byatt, 1996:162, 180, 299-300, 388, 479), Lawrence (Byatt, 1996: 216, 311-312), E.M. Forster (Byatt, 1996:310-311), Donne (Byatt, 1996:43), Shakespeare (Byatt, 1996:93), R.D. Laing's *Divided Self* (Byatt,

1996:386, 483), Nietzsche (Byatt, 386-387, 568-569, 576), Samuel Beckett (Byatt, 1996:387-388), Elizabeth I (Byatt, 1996:447), T. Leary (Byatt, 1996:466-467), Norman O. Brown (Byatt, 1996:480-481), T.S Eliot (Byatt, 1996:481-482), Wordsworth (Byatt, 1996:482-483), W.H. Auden (Byatt, 1996:483), Bosie (Byatt, 1996:574), marquis de Sade (Byatt, 1996:589), and G. Herbert (Byatt, 1996:607). Byatt also includes the instructions for the use of the Pill (Byatt, 1996:446). There are court depositions of the Moors Murders trial (Byatt, 1996:448) and an article on the trial written by M. Richardson, published in 1996 in the *Observer* (Byatt, 1996:450-452).

Byatt even includes a review of *Babbletower* supposedly written by the actual author Anthony Burgess, but it was in fact written by Byatt herself (Byatt, 1996:422-423). Because Burgess is an actual novelist and critic, Byatt exploits the authorial power behind Burgess's name by including the review. Here she does not layer her own writing over that of Burgess, but she assumes his authorial influence and uses him as a puppet to express an opinion. For the reader this opinion immediately carries more weight because Burgess is an actual and established author, rather than an illusory author. Lastly, fairy tales, or re-writings of well-known fairy tales are included as intertexts in *Babel Tower* too: Cinderella (Byatt, 1996:446-447) and Hansel and Gretel (Byatt, 1996:481).

Well-known fairy tales can be considered as similar to myths and these form a kind of subtext to *Babel Tower.* A significant example is the Persephone myth[17] that reappears in most of Byatt's novels and serves to link her novels via intratextuality, which is intertextuality between Byatt's own novels. Campbell (2004:233) states that through the Persephone

[17] In Greek mythology, Persephone (in Latin: Proserpina) is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, who is snatched away by Hades to be the queen of the underworld. Demeter searches endlessly for her daughter and begs Zeus to help her. Eventually he concedes, but "Persephone could not be entirely released from the underworld because she has eaten some pomegranate seeds" (Howatson, 1997:422) offered to her by Hades. It is therefore arranged that she would spend 6-8 months of the year with her mother and the rest with Hades in the underworld. Every time that Persephone returns to the earth, Demeter rejoices and Spring starts. Persephone represents the seed that must descend into the earth so that plants can germinate (Howatson, 1997:177).

myth, “the thread of Frederica’s story is retrieved from *Still Life* (where Stephanie was the Persephone figure)”. The myth, however, does not only pervade the novels that constitute the quartet.

Possession ends with R.H. Ash reciting a few lines of a poem about Proserpine (Persephone) to his daughter, Maia, when he meets her in the Postscript (Byatt, 1990:510). *Babel Tower’s* second beginning, as identified by Noble (2001:65) describes a character, Hugh Pink, who wants to write a poem about a pomegranate and as he ponders this “he thinks of Persephone and is moved by the automatic power of the myth” (Byatt, 1996:4). In a letter to Frederica (included in *Babel Tower* as an intertext) Hugh, again, refers to Persephone and Demeter and the fact that they “have been Powers” (Byatt, 1996:77-78). That may very well be why Byatt uses the Persephone myth in her novels as a kind of subtext, or the underlying layer. Byatt allows the myth to permeate her novels *Possession* and *Babel Tower*. Her novels are thus layered over the Persephone myth and stand in a palimpsestuous relationship with the myth. This is evident in the way that the myth connects with the events and characters in the novels. In *Possession*, Christabel LaMotte can be compared to Demeter, Persephone’s mother, who lost her daughter to Pluto / Hades. Christabel, in a sense, lost her daughter, Maia, because Maia is raised by Christabel’s sister. Maia refers to May and the season Spring and this is comparable to the myth because when Persephone is allowed to return from the Underworld, her mother rejoices and it this brings about a change in the seasons. Maia is thus equivalent to Persephone because they both represent the season Spring.

The Persephone myth is prevalent in *Babel Tower* too. "Frederica's marriage quickly becomes connected to the myth of Persephone" as "the image of Frederica on the other side of the stile [at Bran House] becomes an image of Persephone at the limits of the Underworld" and "Persephone and Pluto [Hades] finally merge with Frederica and her husband Nigel...in Hugh's poem" (Noble, 2001:66). Hugh's poem is included in the novel as an intertext (Byatt, 1996:78-79), it is written by Byatt herself, so Hugh is just an illusory author that forms a layer over Byatt's writing. The connections between the mythical Pluto / Hades and Nigel are evident as Frederica clearly equates the two. In the poem by Hugh there is a description of Hades: "His velvet-dark pupils / Stare, take her in and in / Do not reflect her. Such dark eyes / Are not seen elsewhere." (Byatt, 1996:78) When Frederica receives the letter with the poem from Hugh during breakfast, Nigel grabs it and reads it aloud, mocking the poem and its author. Afterwards

> Frederica folds the violated letter, and watches Nigel eat his mushrooms. He stares down at his plate, black, black eyes under long black lashes. Such dark eyes / Are not seen elsewhere. I hate you, Frederica's head says, I hate you, I hate you, I should never have come here, I cannot live here, I have been a fool, a fool, a fool (Byatt, 1996:82).

Frederica immediately thinks of Nigel in terms of Hades and how Hugh describes him in the poem. Her reaction is similar to what Persephone's probably would have been after she had eaten the pomegranate seeds because, like Persephone is held captive by Hades in the underworld, Frederica is held captive by Nigel at Bran house. And like Persephone who is bound to return to the Hades in the Underworld because she ate the pomegranate seeds, Frederica is bound to Nigel through Leo, their son. This bond between Frederica and Nigel, like the bond between Persephone and Hades, is regulated by the seasons too: "The

summer holidays return. Leo will go stay at Bran house; it is as though there were a regular pattern of life." (Byatt, 1996: 452) In this manner Greek mythology functions as a subtext and it permeates Byatt's writing.

Byatt's use of mythology and intertexts from other authors serve to ultimately make her novels transtextual because her novels evoke and, as a result, stand in relation to other texts. This is the ultimate boundary that Byatt transgresses with her palimpsestic writing: her novel does not remain within its own boundaries, but transgresses them through engaging with other texts and in essence it becomes boundless. Because Byatt is layering her writing over other, older texts and her novel evokes those texts, she resurrects them in the process (as discussed in chapter two). Hugh Pink, a friend of Frederica's from her university days, considers this: "I wonder sometimes if it is still possible to write poems about Greek myths – are they not dead, should we not be thinking about quite other things now?" (Byatt, 1996:77) and then he says "they don't *feel dead* though" (Byatt, 1996:78). The fact of the matter is that the Greek myths don't feel dead because every time an author writes about them and they form the subtext or underlying layer of the author's text, the author resurrects the myth, just like reading the underlying layer of the ancient palimpsest is a form of resurrection (Dillon, 2007:12, 26). Byatt thus also resurrects, through evocation, the Biblical tale of the Tower of Babel (discussed above) in this way as it forms a significant subtext to the novel *Babel Tower*.

There is also a palimpsestuous kind of relationship of permeation between history and fiction in *Babel Tower* because actual historical events permeate and ultimately affect the fictional events in the novel. The novel has "A Note for American Readers" (Byatt, 1996:ix-x) which

provides the necessary historical background concerning the 1963 “Profumo Affair”. It was a sexual scandal involving a government official, John Profumo, and his use of prostitutes as well as his sadomasochistic tendencies. This historical event clearly acts as the underlying layer of the palimpsest which reappears in the intertext *Babbletower* (the overlying layer), because in *Babbletower*, sexual and sadomasochistic practices are described in detail. Sadomasochism also resurfaces in the main text of *Babel Tower* during the divorce trial of Frederica: Nigel, her abusive husband, is accused of adultery and of visiting bars with strippers and prostitutes where his “tastes are well-known, slap more than tickle, so to speak” (Byatt, 1996:490). Frederica discovers pornography in Nigel’s cupboard: “The human erotic imagination appears to have strictly limited matter to work on. Padlocks, chains, thongs, spikes, cages, boots – nothing much has changed since the medieval torture-chamber was furnished.” (Byatt, 1996:103) She describes it to the court as “sado-masochistic...there were women being tortured and made filthy. Chains and leather and knives. And lots of flesh.” (Byatt, 1996:489) Here history functions as the underlying layer of the palimpsest which resurfaces in the overlying layer, which is Byatt’s fiction.

The “Note for American Readers” also provides information on the Moors Murders (1966): Ian Brady and Myra Hindley were found guilty of murdering young children seemingly for “the pleasure of murdering” (Byatt, 1996:x). This historical event also reappears like the underlying layer of the palimpsest in the main text (overlying layer) of *Babel Tower*. One of the characters in the novel, Tony Watson, reports on the trial: “Tony has heard the home-made tapes of the little girl crying out to be released, to go home to her mother, saying that she is frightened, being told to shut up and keep still.” (Byatt, 1996:427) The event of the

Moors Murders also permeates into the intertext *Babbletower* as Felicitas, a little girl, is tortured in the children's dormitories: "during the night, Felicitas could be heard sobbing and wailing" (Byatt, 1996:270), just like the little girl on the home-made tape.

It is ultimately "the unfortunate coincidence of the Moors Murders trial [that] brings about a change of heart in the DPP", which then announces that it intends to bring a prosecution against *Babbletower* (Byatt, 1996:425). Not only does the historical event of the Moors Murders reappear in the main text as well as in one of the intertexts in *Babel Tower*, it also seems to have an effect on what happens in the novel. Todd (1997:70) identifies this relation and states that by setting the *Babbletower* obscenity trial in 1965, Byatt "allows it to impact on the Ian Brady and Myra Hindley 'Moors Murders' hearings". In the Note, Byatt (1996:x) mentions that Ian Brady had the works of the Marquis de Sade in his library. Jude Mason, the author of *Babbletower*, probably did too. In his address to the jury during the obscenity trial for *Babbletower*, Sir Augustine Weighall (prosecution), states: "The works of the Marquis de Sade are certainly in Mr. Jude Mason's library. His *Babbletower*, his isolated 'Tour Bruyarde', is plagiarised from the terrible Marquis's Chateau de Silling." (Byatt, 1996:530) A witness for the defence, Professor Marie-France Smith, also supports this idea (Byatt, 1996:543-545) in her testimony, as well as in her review of the novel (Byatt, 1996:416). During the obscenity trial it is alleged that Jude Mason's *Babbletower* is strongly based on de Sade as well as other thinkers, like Charles Fourier's writing (Todd, 1997:71). It is as if Jude Mason (Byatt) layered his writing over these other texts because de Sade and Fourier's writing resurface like the underlying layer of the palimpsest. De Sade and Fourier's

writing thus form a subtext to Byatt's writing, which is presented as Jude's writing. Once again the structure of layered texts is evident. According to the prosecution, because there are these strong connections or similarities to texts like de Sade's, the novel *Babbletower* can be considered as having a "tendency to deprave and corrupt" (Byatt, 1996:591). Sir Augustine, part of the prosecution, addresses the jury and concludes: "I think you are better judges of what Ian Brady and Myra Hindley might make of *Babbletower* – and not only them, but smaller sadists, ready to do smaller hurts that are nevertheless hurts." (Byatt, 1996:590-591) Ultimately, due to Sir Augustine's reference to the Moors Murders and his insinuation that literature might tempt people to act on their immoral tendencies, *Babbletower* is found to be obscene. As a result both the fictional author, Jude Mason, and the publishers, Bowers and Eden, are sentenced to pay a fine and the judge "orders all the copies of the book to be seized" (Byatt, 1996:595). In this way real historical events permeate into and affect the fictional events in *Babel Tower*.

Quite an important historical event that is evoked in *Babel Tower*, especially during the obscenity trial of *Babbletower*, is the prosecution of the publishers of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* which took place in 1960. Preston (2003:41) states that "the trial of this book [*Babbletower*]...inevitably carries echoes of the 1960 English trial of *Lady Chatterley*". No information on this historical event is included in the Note at the beginning of the novel, probably because Byatt assumed that her readers are all familiar with the history of the trial. Byatt expects her readers to be well-read and have a vast general knowledge. Wachtel (1993:77) states that the first time she interviewed Byatt was in 1988 and then Byatt had

remarked: "...out there in the world there must be other people who read as passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and the world". In effect, Byatt assumes that her readers know the other books and the historical events that interweave themselves with or permeate into her novels.

D.H. Lawrence, author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* and many of his works form a subtext for Byatt's fiction as it keeps resurfacing in her novels. Preston (2003:38) supports this notion: "A.S. Byatt has published eight full-length works of fiction, and Lawrence plays a significant part in all but three of them." And of the first three novels of the quartet, thus including *Babel Tower*, he says:

> Frederica's engagement with Lawrence, as reader, student, teacher, and author affects her relationships with her father, her friends, her lovers, and her husband, and plays a crucial role in defining the scope of action open to her as an educated woman. (Preston, 2003:38-39)

This example serves to illustrate how real historical events as well as real historical texts and their authors resurface in Byatt's writing. History permeates Byatt's description of what happened in the Spring of 1967 in *Babel Tower* too (Byatt, 1996:601-603).

Another simple example of a historical event permeating the novel is an intertext in the form of a newspaper report included in the novel as part of Frederica's fragmented work *Laminations* (Byatt, 1996:483). The report is included without a heading and without any clear indication as to the date of the event. The author and the source are also not acknowledged. The report describes the Aberfan disaster of 1966 in which a landslide destroyed a school and killed quite a few children and adults. If the reader does not have the necessary knowledge of British history to realize that the intertext is a news report on an *actual* historical event, it would make absolutely no sense and it may cause quite a bit of

ontological uncertainty for the reader, especially if the reader is not as well-read or knowledgeable as Byatt assumes he or she is. Once again, the reader may lose the narrative thread of the novel as this untitled intertext has no clear connection to the rest of the texts in *Babel Tower* and it also does not seem to contain any of the recurring motifs which create a sense of unity in the novel.

This chapter aimed to show the effects of layering texts in the novel *Babel Tower*. It has been shown that Byatt, through layering illusory authors' writing over her own writing, can fulfil a dual role of an author and a critic of a text.

The chapter described Byatt's writing in terms of weaving many threads (or texts) together by means of recurring motifs. It argued that because Byatt is the author of many of the intertexts included in *Babel Tower*, repetitions of motifs and themes inevitably occur in the main text and the intertexts written by illusory authors. Many of the intertexts by other actual authors included in the novel also contain the same motifs. Because the motifs permeate the main text and the many intertexts, there is a textual relation between the many texts, in other words a palimpsestuous relationality. The recurring motifs serve to create a sense of unity in the novel by knitting the fragmented texts together and they therefore form the golden thread that the reader can follow to navigate through the text.

The permeation of subtexts like the Persephone myth and the Biblical tale of the Tower of Babel into the novel were discussed to show how these subtexts function like the underlying layer of the palimpsest which permeates the overlying layer. The way history and actual events permeate, and affect, the novel's events was also briefly discussed.

The layering of texts thus occurs in the text itself when Byatt layers illusory authors' writing over her own writing to create intertexts, as well as outside of the text of *Babel Tower* when Byatt layers her writing over that of other actual authors. Byatt does this in two ways, she

either includes (sometimes slightly altered) fragments of their texts as intertexts in her novel or she uses their texts as subtexts by only alluding to them in her novel.

Byatt makes the boundaries both within and around her novel permeable because she establishes textual relations between the texts in her novels and other texts outside her novels. This kind of textual relationality is what Genette (1997:1) terms transtextuality as he suggests that all written works are connected in some way and therefore the boundaries between these works are transcended and the works become boundless.

Such boundlessness in texts creates ontological uncertainty for the reader as no text is a single, defined and separate work anymore. It becomes a composite of different genres, like *Babel Tower* and *Possession*. This is a distinctly postmodern characteristic as "borders between literary genres have become fluid" in postmodern writing according to Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988:9). Hutcheon adds that "the most radical boundaries crossed, however, have been those between fiction and non-fiction". Byatt, as shown above, does blur the boundary between actual historical events and fiction as she allows history to permeate her fiction. This palimpsestuous relation between history and fiction is investigated in more detail in the next chapter, which offers an analysis of Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*.

CHAPTER 4

The Biographer's Tale

The Biographer's Tale (2000) seems to deviate from the norm of Byatt's oeuvre as it is a fairly short novel compared to her other novels, and it is written in the first person even though Byatt admits that she "began as a writer with a deep mistrust of the first person" and that her "instinct as a writer of fiction has been to explore and defend the unfashionable Victorian third-person narrator" (Byatt, 2001:183). The novel, however, addresses many of the same issues that her other (earlier and later) novels address. Because *The Biographer's Tale* deals with the same questions or themes, many critics feel that is has become hackneyed and that the novel "reads like a tired rehash of *Possession*" (Franklin, 2001:39). So despite the deviation from a third person narrator, *The Biographer's Tale* continues to question the relation of language to things (as in *Babel Tower*), our relation to the past as well as our ability to truly know that past (as in *Possession*). The biggest difference, however, between *The Biographer's Tale* and her other novels is how Byatt employs palimpsestic writing strategies. As mentioned before, these strategies include layering texts by various authors, intertextuality, subtle narrative connections or repetitions in related storylines, and the transgression of textual boundaries. In *The Biographer's Tale* Byatt's use of these palimpsestic writing strategies is much more overt and the seams between the many different texts are more visible. This consequently creates problems for the reader as the reader is more aware of the boundaries that he needs to transcend in order to continue with the novel. This makes *The Biographer's Tale* an infinitely more difficult novel to, not only read, but also enjoy.

Whereas in the previous novel, *Babel Tower*, Byatt presents the reader with a seemingly disparate structure woven and held together by repeating motifs, in *The Biographer's Tale* Byatt "has provided us with a story after all, a thread as well as a mosaic" (Campbell, 2004:221). What is revealing is that the notion of the mosaic is introduced early in the novel as a clue about the novel's narrative structure. As Phineas reads Destry-Scholes's biography of Sir Elmer Bole in preparation to write his own biography of Destry-Scholes, he "like Destry-Scholes...was most drawn to Bole's monographs of Byzantine mosaics and Turkish ceramic tiles...whose secret had been lost" (Byatt, 2000:17). Phineas continues to emphasise the brilliance, and therefore the implied importance, of Bole's description of the mosaics:

> One of the most beautiful things I have ever read is Bole's account of the creation of light in the mosaics of Hadrian's Villa, Ravenna and Sancta Sophia, the rippling fields of splendour created by the loose setting of blue glass tesserae at various angles to catch the light, the introduction into these fields of light of metallic tesserae (first gold, then silver), the effect of candlelight and polished marble to make soft, fluid, liquid light... (Byatt, 2000:17-18)

After reading more of Destry-Scholes's writing, Phineas realises that Destry-Scholes is a "master tile-maker and tile-raider" and that Destry-Scholes's work on Bole and his three unfinished biographies on Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen "are filled with both lifted and invented passages" (Campbell, 2004:220). Consequently Campbell raises the question of whether these works, presented as intertexts in the novel, were intended to become (textual) mosaics.

She answers her own query when she asserts that "the narrative structure of *The Biographer's tale* is best described in Phineas's metaphor of the mosaic" (Campbell, 2004:220). After discovering various quotations in Destry-Scholes's writing, Phineas writes:

> Postmodernist ideas about intertextuality and quotation of quotation have complicated the simplistic ideas about plagiarism which were in force in Destry-Scholes's day. I myself think that these lifted sentences, in their new contexts, are almost the purest and most beautiful parts of the transmission of scholarship. I began a collection of them, intending, when my time came, to redeploy them with a difference, catching different light at a different angle. The metaphor is from mosaic-making. One of the things I learned in these weeks of research was that the great makers constantly raided previous works...for tesserae which they rewrought into new images...they also recycled ancient mosaic cubes (Byatt, 2000:36-37).

The metaphor does indeed aptly describe what Byatt does with quotations from other authors in her novel. She seems to have raided the works of Pearson (Galton's biographer), Linnaeus, Galton himself, Ibsen and other actual historical writers and then she lifted sentences from their writing and redeployed them in her own writing. She basically recycled the older texts by other authors in her text *The Biographer's Tale*. Byatt does indeed create a structure that is highly decorated, a structure very similar to that of a mosaic and Kaiser (2002:145) sums it up neatly: "by proliferating plot lines, and layering narrative upon narrative, Byatt assembles a highly ornate surface". Just as an ancient palimpsest is a collection of different pieces of text all intermingled, so a mosaic is a collection and also an ordering of different pieces of tile, stone and mirror in order to form a whole. Ordering and specifically mosaic-making are important metaphors in *The Biographer's Tale* (Maack, 2003/2004:281) and thus "just like old stones which can be put together to form new mosaics, quotations assume new meaning in new contexts". This is what Byatt does: she

gathers quotations and orders them together in a new context and as the light catches the broken pieces of tile and glass arranged in a mosaic, so do these quotations seem to have a new light shed on them and they assume new meaning and significance. Campbell (2004:220-222), Kaiser (2002:145) and Maack (2003/2004:281) are not the only ones to point out the significance of the mosaic structure in *The Biographer's Tale*, Scurr (2000) also refers to it by asserting that the novel offers "rich pickings from at least four centuries of Western civilization [which] are piled up in a teetering fictional edifice".

In the acknowledgements of *The Biographer's Tale*, Byatt (2000:304) describes the novel as a "patchwork, echoing book" and that is exactly what it is. The novel is a collage of texts, some by Byatt and some by other authors, it also includes sketches and even photographs. This is Byatt's only true "mixed media" work (Campbell, 2004:219). It may very well also be her most layered work and consequently her novel that most resembles the structure of an ancient palimpsest. In terms of structure, the important aspects that *The Biographer's Tale* and the palimpsest have in common are their layers and the palimpsestuous permeations that result from the various layerings. Using a metaphor from *Peer Gynt*, a drama by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, Byatt (2001) says "This novel of mine is in a sense an onion; there is layer upon layer of description of all sorts of people."

There are indeed various instances of palimpsestic layering present in *The Biographer's Tale.* The most prominent ones are layered texts by various authors; layered characters, especially biographers; and the layering of fiction over reality. These different layerings are discussed below as the aim of this chapter is to explore the different examples of layering in the novel. The argument is that Byatt not only creates a palimpsestic structure by layering

texts, but that the ultimate result of her writing strategies in *The Biographer's Tale* is that it creates a mosaic of texts or a patchwork, which is characteristic of postmodern writing.

Many reviews have levelled what Hadley (2008:87) calls "the charge of intellectualism" against *The Biographer's Tale* and the majority of the criticism is aimed at the three seemingly biographical, yet fragmented, documents about Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen that are included as intertexts in the novel. In this regard Franklin (2001:39) argues that "Byatt allows the three mysterious manuscripts to occupy nearly seventy pages smack in the middle of the novel, and they are slow going, not least because it is virtually impossible to make head or tail of them." Another review states that "readers will find themselves bogged down by Destry-Scholes's elaborate ruminations about Linnaeus, Francis Galton...and the playwright Henrik Ibsen" (Pinsker, 2003:190-191).

Byatt, however, is not oblivious to the reader's frustrations as she has, once again, built a 'reader character' or fictional reader into her novel. In this case it is Phineas Gilbert Nanson who fulfils the role of the reader, just as Roland Mitchell did in *Possession*. Scurr (2000) states that "the imaginative emphasis of the novel [*The Biographer's Tale*] is on the consumption as opposed to the production of prose" and Phineas simulates this consumption or reading process. Phineas is a postgraduate student who, on a whim, decides to give up studying poststructuralist theory when he realizes that he needs a life filled with "things" or "facts" (Byatt, 2000:7). Phineas therefore decides to undertake a project which would involve "the art of things, of facts, of arranged facts" (Byatt, 2000:7) and

he starts writing a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes because "only a biography seemed an appropriate form for the great biographer" (Byatt, 2000:26). In his search for facts about Destry-Scholes and his life, Phineas comes across three fragmented documents supposedly written by his subject. At first the documents are unidentified and the reader (Phineas) is in the dark about who the documents describe, we are only given provisional titles like "L," "G" and "I" and the meaning of these are only explained later in the novel. Because Phineas enacts the reading process in *The Biographer's Tale,* he too becomes frustrated with the three fragments supposedly written by the great biographer Destry-Scholes:

> I wasn't sure what to make of these three odd pieces of writing. I found them both intriguing and irritating. The irritating aspect – well, the *most* irritating there were others – was the air of perfunctory secrecy or deception about the whole enterprise. What was the point of withholding the identification of the protagonists (if that was what they were) for so long? (Byatt, 2000:113)

On the verge of giving up on his project to write Destry-Scholes's biography, Phineas is contacted by Vera Alphage who is Destry-Scholes's niece. She gives him access to a suitcase filled with some of Destry-Scholes's things, including a set of index cards and a photograph archive. Phineas is excited at the prospect of finally engaging with "authentic *things*" (Byatt, 2000:153). When Vera shows him the index cards and the photographs, Phineas immediately sets about sorting them, because "neither showed any signs of order" (Byatt, 2000:162). But soon Phineas admits that "it seemed impossible to reconstitute such an arbitrary system" (Byatt, 2000:201). The reader of *The Biographer's Tale* may

experience basically the same sense of hopelessness while reading the novel and while trying to make sense of it.

The Biographer's Tale is indeed slow going (Franklin, 2001:39) because the intertexts do not drive the plot as in *Possession* and the repetitions or connections which weave the many texts together are not as easily identifiable as in *Babel Tower*. The novel also has so many layers that it is hard at times to keep track of where you are as reader, so much so that the novel may create significant ontological uncertainty for the reader. Phineas aptly describes it when he states that "the threads ran out all the time" (Byatt, 2000:194). What complicates the reading experience even more is the fact that, unlike in the novels *Possession* and *Babel Tower*, the intertexts in *The Biographer's Tale* are not clearly indicated as such. The various quotations from other authors that Byatt includes in her novel do not have references and are not even in another format. Therefore the reader may miss the fact that what he or she is reading was not actually written by Byatt, or one of the illusory authors, but was in reality written by a real historical person, for example the quotations from Karl Pearson and Francis Galton discussed above. A review of *The Biographer's Tale* by Franklin (2001:39) notes that "the font of the documents [intertexts] is almost indiscernibly different from that of the main text...no one has bothered with creative typesetting at all". The result is that the reader is ignorant of the fact that he or she is reading a quotation by another actual author and this often causes uncertainty in terms of who the author of a specific piece of writing is. Even when Byatt does provide the name of a source and a quote from the source follows, the quotation is only indicated by inverted commas and no further references are given. For example, extracts from Galton's *Art of Travel,* which is an actual historical text, are included as quotations in the fragmentary document "G" (Byatt, 2000:74). According to Clauser

(2007:441), Galton was an explorer in Africa and "when he returned from Africa, he wrote a manual for travellers". This manual is entitled *Art of Travel* (1883) and it offers advice on various diverse topics and Byatt includes a quote from it on the traveller's outfit in *The Biographer's Tale*. This quotation is included as an intertext within the intertext that the illusory author Destry-Scholes supposedly wrote on Galton. If a reader has not read Galton's manual or does not at least already know about the manual, it causes uncertainty about the author and the authenticity of the quotation due to the lack of references.

The character simulating the reading process, Phineas, experiences the same kind of ontological uncertainty as the reader regarding the author of a section of writing. Phineas describes his experience as follows:

> I rapidly discovered that the words I had taken to be those of Scholes Destry-Scholes were in fact the measures tones of Karl Pearson, Galton's first biographer (Byatt, 2000:190) [and] Destry-Scholes had as usual not bothered to annotate this, and in my mind I wrongly for some time associated it with the citations from Ibsen amongst which I have now placed it. It is in fact from a paper in *Mind* (Vol. IX, pp. 406-13, 1884) on "Free-Will, Observations and Inferences," by Galton. (Byatt, 2000:267)

The haphazard structure of *The Biographer's Tale* thus creates a challenge for the reader, especially in terms of determining if the author is an actual historical figure, an illusory author or Byatt. Consider the following:

> It is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the novel that requires readers to reevaluate the nature of facts and what they think they know about facts, to consider the limits of primary source materials and of scholarship, and to wonder to what extent it is ever possible to construct a definitive whole from fragmentary parts. (Marshall, 2001:407)

It may be that the reader does become aware of the fact that some parts of the fragmentary documents were actually written by other authors. However, the reader may just as easily remain unaware about who the author is, especially if he has not yet read the primary source

of the quotation frequently enough to recognize where the quotation comes from and who the actual author is. This adds to the reader's ontological uncertainty. What happens is that the reader realizes that the sections in inverted commas in the intertext are written by other authors, but he or she does not know who these authors are or from which primary sources Byatt lifted the passages to redeploy in her novel. Consider Genette's (1997:283) description of this phenomenon in his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*:

> The curious (and ever frustrated) readers find themselves in the position of a palaeographer who already knows that his text conceals another but does not yet know which one. This is the most irritating palimpsest of all, which reduces me to hunches and questionings.

The palimpsestic writing techniques that Byatt employs and the consequent intricately layered structure of her novel can thus create quite a bit of ontological uncertainty for the reader.

The first example of the said layering in the *The Biographer's Tale* is Byatt's layering of different authors' writing. Once again this layering of texts is established through intertextuality in her novel. Just as in *Babel Tower*, she layers her own writing over other actual, often historical, texts and then she also layers texts by illusory authors over her own writing. To layer her writing over that of other actual authors, Byatt, for example, literally took a passage from the four volume biography that Karl Pearson wrote on Francis Galton and inserted it as an intertext in her novel (Byatt, 2000:193). Pearson wrote the monumental biography on Galton in 1911 after Galton's death (Clauser, 2007:441). Pearson was heavily influenced by Galton and Galton's research, and they were close friends (Clauser, 2007:440 and Byatt, 2000:193-194). The passage by Pearson that Byatt includes in *The Biographer's Tale* is a footnote (IIIA, 435) from Galton's biography and it describes Pearson's reaction to

Galton's burial. There are various examples of such 'borrowing' from other texts because Byatt includes quotations from the works of the three historical figures (Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen) too. In an interview with Philip Hensher for *The Paris Review* (2001), Byatt says: "One of the things I quote in this book is an extraordinary description of [Galton] coming up and realising that he had been drowning" while reading underwater. This description is included as an intertext in the novel in the form of one of Destry-Scholes's index cards, no. 26 (Byatt, 2000:174-175). Byatt provides no references or any kind of indication of the fact that the description was actually written by Galton himself and not by her. In this example Byatt layers her text over Galton's so that his writing permeates the novel just like the underlying layer of the palimpsest permeates the overlying layer. This description of Galton reading underwater is peculiar and bears no clear connection to the plot of Phineas's life. That illustrates the very point that this chapter makes, the intertexts are so varied and diverse that it is sometimes difficult to see how they add meaning to the novel.

The most prominent, and probably the longest intertexts Byatt has ever used, are three fragmented documents about Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. In an interview Byatt (2001) explains:

> I decided to juxtapose bits from the lives of three people I happened to want to find out about at the time: Linnaeus, the taxonomer who invented the Latin names we now have for the plant world and the animal world. Sir Francis Galton, who was Darwin's cousin and is infamous for inventing eugenics but also who invented the deviation from the statistical mean and weather balloons and couldn't stop inventing things from one minute to the next... My third character is Henrik Ibsen, who invented what strikes me as the most amazing image of the person who hasn't got a center, hasn't got an identity, which is Peer Gynt.

These fragmented documents are supposedly written by an illusory author, the great biographer called Scholes Destry-Scholes. Destry-Scholes becomes famous as a biographer when he writes the biography on the fictional Victorian polymath Sir Elmer Bole.

Phineas, on his quest for biographical information on Destry-Scholes, is given these fragmented documents after he contacts the archivist at the University of Lincoln where Destry-Scholes's archive is kept. The archivist, Betty Middleton, writes to Phineas saying that there is a packet lying loose under the hanging folders of a cabinet and "it appeared to contain a bundle of sheets" which were written on the same typewriter as Destry-Scholes's (Byatt, 2000:42-43). This packet is photocopied and sent to Phineas and it contains the three seemingly biographical documents on Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. Byatt also includes other written intertexts in the form of Destry-Scholes's set of index cards which are scattered throughout Phineas's narrative. In this way Byatt creates a structure that is similar to that of a mosaic, with bits and pieces from texts put together.

Byatt's novel not only includes intertexts written by other actual authors like Pearson and the three historical personages. It also includes various scholarly echoes and allusions to historical characters and historical texts. These echoes and allusions are classified as implicit intertextuality and their primary sources represent the underlying layer of the palimpsest that resurfaces in Byatt's text. Some examples of implicit intertextuality in *The Biographer's Tale* are: Scurr (2000) points out that Destry-Scholes's fictional biography contains an echo of the scholar Lytton Strachey's term for bad biographers, i.e. "the journeyman of letters". Furthermore, O'Connor (2002:380-381) adds that the whole of *The Biographer's* Tale "shadows A.J.A. Symons's *The Quest for Corvo* (1934)" and the imaginary biography by Destry-Scholes on Bole "evokes Richard Ellmann and Leon Edel". Ellmann

and Edel are the actual biographers of W.B. Yeats and Henry James respectively. O'Connor (2002:381) very aptly describes *The Biographer's Tale* as

> ...a novel haunted by the references to the history of biography – references only available to a reader already in possession of that history – *The Biographer's Tale* might be said to possess a 'biographical unconscious', one whose contents are perhaps all the more meaningful for their being largely unavailable, (repressed).

O'Connor also notes, as mentioned above, that the reader already needs to know where the references come from in order to realise that they are references and not Byatt's own writing. He too describes something similar to an underlying layer to the novel when he mentions the unconscious that is repressed. Pinsker (2003:190) comments that "there are, of course, other scholarly echoes – all making it very clear that Byatt knows her way around Oxbridge libraries". According to Pinsker (2003:189) the fictional Sir Elmer Bole is a mould of Sir Richard Burton and the novel also evokes Foucault. Phineas, on the other hand, may easily be mistaken for the long dead "Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen" (Campbell, 2004:218). These are only a few select examples of implicit intertextuality in Byatt's novel and they serve to illustrate that other texts by other authors permeate Byatt's text through allusions and references. The effect of this is the undermining of novelistic structures and meaning, which is a distinctly postmodern characteristic.

The second instance of layering that occurs in *The Biographer's Tale* is the layering of biographers or biographical projects. According to Hibbard (2006:19), in a biographical project

> ...the job of the writer – the biographer or the historian – is to present a story that will be judged on its degree of conformity to expectations as well as on its faithful representation of its object, grounded in reliable sources and documents.

Each biographer acts like a palaeontologist and treats his subject like the underlying layer of a palimpsest that he tries to reconstruct or 'read' in a sense. In an interview Byatt describes biography, at some basic level, as "just reading" (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:334). Part of the act of reading and reconstructing the biographee is

> ...the actual journeys and activities the biographer undertakes in the retracing of steps and collecting of material – visiting places the subject lived or stayed, conducting interviews, poring through archives, receiving communications containing titbits or leads (Hibbard, 2006:20).

Phineas completes all these activities during the execution of his biographical project on Destry-Scholes. People like biographers and historians who try to reconstruct historical figures and events often walk in the footsteps of the historical figures and this results in a layering of sorts. For example, in *The Biographer's Tale*, Destry-Scholes followed Bole: "it is true that the force, the energy, the first fierce gaze of desire, the first triumphant uncovering or acquisition were Bole's. Destry-Scholes followed in his footsteps" (Byatt, 2000:24). And then Phineas wants to "walk in Destry-Scholes's traces" (Byatt, 2000:34). In other words, Phineas is following in Destry-Scholes's textual footsteps. Byatt says the following in an interview when asked about her inspiration for writing *The Biographer's Tale*: "My idea was that a biographer has a secondhand life because a biographer spends all his time or her time in a library looking into somebody else's life" (Byatt, 2001). In relation to this, consider Scurr's statement (2000):

> Byatt's drift seems to be that biography, like fiction, like language itself, is a kind of net repeatedly, perhaps compulsively, thrown out over a regressing reality. Most of what is really important will always elude the net, and the biographer would do well to remember that where she stands, other have stood before.

Just as biography can be described as a net thrown over reality, one can describe the biographer's writing as the overlying layer of the palimpsest that is superimposed on the underlying layer (the biographee). The biographee represents reality, while the biography tries to accurately record that reality, but is ultimately unable to do so. Therefore the writing, the biography, is a layer that does not capture the essence of the biographee, but which is simply spread over reality in an attempt to represent that reality. In this sense, the person and his or her reality is like the underlying layer of the palimpsest and the biography is simply an inadequate superimposition on the original, still allowing some of it to show through.

It is necessary to note that the underlying layer or biographee is never wholly reconstructed or uncovered in a biography, as Hibbard (2006:32) explains: "he or she is not simply there, or given, we might conclude. There is no ur-character to be recovered or revealed". The biography is rather like a text layered over the subject. This biographical text does indeed contain some actual parts or truths about the biographee, just as the overlying layer of the palimpsest allows parts of the underlying layer to show through unaltered, but the text essentially also contains parts of its author who inevitably adds something to it, just as the author of the overlying layer of text adds to the palimpsest. "Any responsible biographer tries to let the facts speak for themselves, but in arranging these facts to create a narrative, he imposes on them his unique sensibility" according to Gelderman (1996:333). Thus "of course the biographer necessarily *is* present in the work in a variety of ways, even if that presence is elided or effaced" (Hibbard, 2006:21). Byatt is critical of this characteristic of

biography as she states: "The thing that bothers me...is the way a lot of biographers feel they can use the sense of their own being to illuminate and open, or even become, the person they're writing about." (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:333)

In *The Biographer's Tale* each biographee can be considered the underlying layer that the biographer tries to reconstruct or read and each biographical text can be seen as a layer superimposed on the biographee. The biographer thus acts as a palaeographer trying to read the biographee, who is only accessible by means of texts which ironically obfuscate the true or real underlying person. Ultimately the biographer also adds yet another layer of text over the actual biographee by writing a biography. It is thus a dual process of both uncovering and re-covering the underlying layer that represents the biographee. In effect this is what creates the palimpsestic structure of layering in the novel. What complicates the matter is that, in the novel, there is not only one biographer investigating a single subject, there are several biographical projects, one layered over the other. After deciding to write a biography on Destry-Scholes, Phineas states:

> It occurred to me that it was a delicious, delicate tact, being, so to speak, the third in line, organising my own attention to the attention of a man intent on discovering the whole truth about yet a third man (Byatt, 2000:30) [and] it took me longer than it should have done...to realise that I was acquiring only second- or third-hand facts. (Byatt, 2000:37)

Wallhead (2003:304) explains that "in Byatt's writing, a biographer is habitually seen as parasitical upon his or her subject or host" and "the added complication here is that the hero [Phineas] is a parasite upon another parasite, and this threefold relationship gives structure to the story". It is argued here that the ensuing structure is palimpsestic due to the layering of biographical projects. The names of the characters provide a clue as to the relationship they bear to each other, especially in terms of the parasitical nature of the said relationship.

In an interview, when asked about how the name Phineas G. Nanson came about, Byatt replied:

> He is called after an insect. The biographer is called Scholes Destry-Scholes and that is because he wrote a biography of the great Victorian Sir Elmer Bole. The beetle that caused elm disease and killed the elm trees is called *scolytus destructor* and I wrote to my entomologist Chris O'Toole and I asked, What preys on the beetle that preys on the elm tree? He said, There is a parasitic wasp called *phaeogenes nanus*. So I sat and thought for about five days - my hero has obviously got to be called something that calls up *phaeogenes nanus* – and I finally called him Phineas G. Nanson. (Byatt, 2001)

Sir Elmer Bole represents the Dutch Elm tree to which the parasitic beetle, *scolytus destructor* or Destry-Scholes, attaches itself and on which the parasitic wasp *phaeogenes nanus*, i.e. Phineas Nanson, feeds. In this way the biographer latches onto the biographee. "In order to carry on with his project, the biographer must feed on previous textual 'corpses', that is, *construct his own text upon existing ones."* (Rodríguez Gonzáles, 2008:458 emphasis added) The phrase in italics is the definition of a palimpsest. Therefore it can be argued that the biographer creates a palimpsest by writing a biography, which is like layering a text over the actual subject (person).

The biographical project in *The Biographer's Tale* "evolves from Evliya Chelebi to Bole, Linnaeus, Galton, Ibsen, Destry-Scholes and Phineas" (Rodríguez González, 2008:458). In *The Biographer's Tale* the layers of biographical projects are thus constructed as follows: a fictional Victorian scientist and explorer, Sir Elmer Bole, translated the "travels of the seventeenth-century Turkish traveller, Evliya Chelebi" (Byatt, 2000:13). Apparently the translation entitled *Journey through Seven Climates* recounts Evliya's travels through Europe. The translation is similar to a biography as it recounts facts about a historical figure and his European travels, "but the problem was that no [original] manuscript existed, and

experts...had come to believe that [Evliya] never wrote the European volume" (Byatt, 2000:15). Bole, however, claimed that he had found the manuscript and translated it, but it was never recovered and many believed that the translation, if it was a translation "was an historical novel, a pastiche, by Bole himself" (Byatt, 2000:15). This is the first example of how a biographer, or translator in this case, takes a historical figure and superimposes a text over him in order to expand the character and the events of his life. Bole thus layered a text, the fictional translation, over the subject and his life, i.e. Evliya and his European travels. This forms a palimpsest. The underlying layer of Evliya's life and writing does show through because "Bole's Evliya, like the earlier Evliya, is precise, enumerative, recording buildings, customs, climates with scrupulous (and occasionally tedious) exactness" (Byatt, 2000:15). Yet the original manuscript that Bole supposedly translated was never found so Bole seemingly added his own information to the text and in this way added a layer to, and expanded, Evliya the subject or biographee.

Yet another layer of biographical projects is added when the great, yet fictional, biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes writes a biography about Sir Elmer Bole. At first Phineas, the reader of these texts, says: "No, Destry-Scholes recounts Elmer Bole's personal life exactly as far as it can be known, and no further" (Byatt, 2000:21) and "as Destry-Scholes rightly says, decorum forbids any account of an event of which there is absolutely no record" (Byatt, 2000:23). But later Phineas says that Destry-Scholes had tracked down Bole's sources and fixed Bole's errors and "not only that, Scholes Destry-Scholes was able to satisfy the reader's (that is, *my*) curiosity in that he knew more of Bole's subjects than Bole did, or

could" (Byatt, 2000:24). So inevitably Destry-Scholes adds something more to the biography of Bole, something that was not originally part of the concept of who Bole was, what he did and what he knew. This is how a biographer adds a layer of text over the original layer, i.e. the gist of the biographee, and the result is a palimpsestic layering.

Destry-Scholes not only wrote a biographical account of the fictional Sir Elmer Bole, but he also wrote three biographical documents about three real historical figures. These three documents are the fragments on Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen that Phineas finds during his research on Destry-Scholes. In these three fragmented documents Destry-Scholes breaks his own rule, namely that "a biographer must never claim knowledge of that which he does not know" (Byatt, 2000:33). In these documents Destry-Scholes does indeed claim that certain things occurred, while it is common knowledge that they did not. For example, Destry-Scholes describes a journey to Torneå in Norway which Linnaeus supposedly undertook in order to go to the Maelstrøm, but Linnaeus's own record of his journey North does not describe such an expedition. Phineas only finds this out once he has read the biographical documents, taking them to be true, and tries to get more information from the Linnean Society in Burlington House. He is told by a Swedish bee taxonomist, Fulla Biefeld, that Linnaeus only *said* he went to the Maelstrøm, and that it was "Linnaeus's little untruth" (Byatt, 2000:131). Phineas then reflects on Destry-Scholes, "who, it was beginning to appear, had romanced further what Linnaeus had already romanced" (Byatt, 2000:131). Once again, Destry-Scholes adds something which is not originally part of who Linnaeus was or what he did. Destry-Scholes thus adds a layer over Linnaeus to form a palimpsest. Near the end of the novel, Phineas casually remarks: "did I say that Destry-

Scholes's fabrication of Linnaeus's fabrication of his visit to the Maelstrøm was a pastiche of Edgar Allan Poe?" (Byatt, 2000:296). The palimpsestic layers created by both the layering of authors' writing as well as by biography are quite evident from the quotation. Byatt's pastiche of Poe shows how she raids older works and redeploys parts of them, or the style that they were written in, in her own writing, making a complex mosaic of her novel *The Biographer's Tale*.

Another example of how Destry-Scholes adds to the original layer, or his subject, is a description by Destry-Scholes of Galton at Lake Ngami, "but Galton never claimed to have reached Lake Ngami, and even denied – to his companions' annoyance – that his intention had been to reach Lake Ngami" (Byatt, 2000:192). Destry-Scholes also adds to Ibsen's biography by describing a meeting between Ibsen and his illegitimate son, Hans Jacob Hendriksen, which never happened. Campbell (2004:220) states that in his reconstruction of Ibsen, "Destry-Scholes abandons narrative altogether, breaking into dramatic format to represent an imagined meeting." Fulla provides a very apt explanation of what Destry-Scholes did in these partially fictive fragments on real historical figures when she says: "There are inauthentic fabrics suspended here from authentic hooks." (Byatt, 2000:139) The inauthentic fabrics are the layers that the biographer Destry-Scholes added to his authentic characters to form a metaphorical palimpsest.

The third layer of biographical projects is added when Phineas decides that he wants to do a biographical project on the biographer Destry-Scholes. Phineas layers his text, the biography which inevitably contains parts of himself, over Destry-Scholes who in turn, layered his writing over his own subjects, i.e. Bole, Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. After

reading Destry-Scholes's partly biographical, partly fictional accounts of his subjects Phineas decides to try and find out who Destry-Scholes was in order to write a biography on him. This means that Phineas, the fictional reader, not only reads the intertexts, but also tries to read Destry-Scholes like the text on the underlying layer of the palimpsest, as discussed above. Phineas says that he could do a "semiotic analysis" of Destry-Scholes's texts in order to "reconstruct the man who invented them" (Byatt, 2000:114). He also states: "I had the idea that the three personages [Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen] were like stripes or bars behind which lurked the figure of Destry-Scholes" (Byatt, 2000:116) and "I wanted to find a whiff, a trace, a smudged fingerprint, so to speak, that would indicate the presence – in the past – of Destry-Scholes" (Byatt, 2000:128). Phineas hopes that some trace of the real, the tangible Destry-Scholes would surface in his texts, just like the underlying layer reappears through the overlying layer of the palimpsest. Just like a palaeontologist pieces together the text of the underlying layer, Phineas plans to take these permeations of Destry-Scholes that surface in his texts and piece them together in order to reconstruct the person Destry-Scholes. Phineas says that he is "mapping the mind of Scholes Destry-Scholes" (Byatt, 2000:203). Wallhead (2003:303) states that "the work of the biographer consists of paring away layers" and that "a biographer can only reconstruct, with truths and untruths, versions of selves, and try to connect them". This is similar to what Dillon (2007:67) says a palimpsest reader does: "In both detective and palimpsest reading, once these clues have been detected, the reconstruction of the underlying text depends upon a certain amount of 'conjecture' or 'invention.'"

Writing a biography thus entails not only reading the biographee like the underlying layer of the palimpsest, but also constructing a layer of truths and untruths over the subject in order to try and represent that subject as an independent whole. So the biographer fulfils two roles simultaneously, he tries to uncover the underlying layer, which is the biographee, while he also superimposes a text over the biographee. The biographer tries to metaphorically read the underlying layer of the palimpsest like a palaeontologist while simultaneously adding another layer to the same palimpsest which, ironically, obscures the actual underlying layer even further for future readers.

Biography, however, is not only about the biographee, it is also about the biographer himself. Hibbard (2006:19) explains that "the enterprise of writing biography necessarily involves two distinct, yet related, narrative strands: the story of the subject and the story of the biographer". Phineas realises this when he writes that

> ...the compulsion to invent was in some way related to my own sense that in constructing this narrative I have had to insert facts about myself, and not only dry facts, but my feelings, and now my interpretations (Byatt, 2000:273).

As mentioned before, when writing a biography, the biographer inexorably adds more to the subject than what was originally there. Often times the extra information includes inferences, opinions, interpretations and expressions that are the biographer's own. These often relate more to the biographer's persona than the biographee's. Phineas ponders this:

> I now wonder – after the last few pages I have written about the birds and the bees (and the stag beetles) and Fulla B – whether *all* writing has a tendency to flow like a river towards the writer's body and the writer's own experience? (Byatt, 2000:248)

Phineas thus inserts parts of himself and his own life into a work that is meant to reconstruct and capture Destry-Scholes. Hibbard (2006:21) terms this "authorial intrusion". There is a tendency for the writer of a biography to not only search for and construct the biographee,

but also to look at himself and through the process of writing the biography construct himself. Wallhead (2003:294) states:

> In *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas and Destry-Scholes discover that it is through writing that one searches for identity, whether it be that of the object of study or the true identity of the subject or writer, for writing can change, develop or confer identity.

When one considers this in relation to reading a palimpsest, an interesting analogy can be drawn. As mentioned before, the biographee is the underlying layer or text that the biographer attempts to read, but it is obscured by overlying layers, one of which is the biographer's own text, the biography. When a palaeontologist attempts to read the underlying layer of an ancient palimpsest, he constantly faces the overlying layer and is tempted to read that as it is more accessible and closer at hand. Similarly, as the biographer tries to read the biographee's self, he is constantly confronted by his own self, that is included in the metaphorical overlying layer, and thus he cannot help but to read it. In this way, through writing a biography, a study of another person's self, the biographer is confronted with and eventually also reads and constructs his own self. The trick for the biographer is not to focus too much on his own self because it will obfuscate the biographee entirely and then the work may become nothing more than an autobiography, as in *The Biographer's Tale*. In the case of Phineas, he "has to learn that instead of mapping the mind of Destry-Scholes, he is working on his own life story" (Maack, 2003/2004:284).

Phineas runs into various dead ends during his research on Destry-Scholes. Campbell (2004:222) goes as far as to say that "Destry-Scholes is undiscoverable". Wallhead (2003:293) also adds that

> ...the empty house of Scholes Destry-Scholes's childhood years and the photograph of the empty boat after his disappearance in the Maelstrøm are also

> of metaphorical significance, relating to the difficulties biographers encounter in trying to 'recuperate' their subjects.

It seems that Destry-Scholes, the underlying text, is simply too concealed from Phineas to be legible. The result is that, once again, Phineas the reader becomes frustrated. In this case Phineas the writer is also frustrated, particularly with the absence of his biographee in his text. Unintentionally his writing becomes more and more focused on himself than on Destry-Scholes. Consider the following:

> I appear to have failed to find Destry-Scholes himself. I have to respect him for his scrupulous *absence* from my tale, my work. It will be clear that I too have wished to be *absent*. I have resisted and evaded the idea that because of Destry-Scholes's *absence* my narrative must become an account of my own presence, *id est*, an autobiography...it will be clear to almost any attentive reader, I think, that as I have gone along in this writing (we are now at page 161, ms) I have become more and more involved in the act of writing itself, more and more inclined to shift my attention from Destry-Scholes's absence to my own style, and thus, my own *presence* (Byatt, 2000:248).

In this way, due to Destry-Scholes' absence, Phineas is forced to add more of himself to the text. "As he becomes more and more conscious of Destry-Scholes's 'absence', Phineas reluctantly perceives his own necessary presence in his work." (Campbell, 2004:225) The result is an autobiography and consequently Phineas goes from being a reader of texts as well as of Destry-Scholes, to being a writer of himself. Phineas says "I have been *made* to write my own story, to write in very different ways" (Byatt, 2000:273). He also says that "in terms of writing, this looks like a *writer's story*" (Byatt, 2000:290). In her review, Scurr (2000) states that one needs to "substitute 'reading' and 'reader' for 'writing' and 'writer'" as Phineas's roles change from trying to uncover and reconstruct Destry-Scholes through reading to constructing himself through writing. This is closely linked to the dual role of the biographer, mentioned earlier, being both a reader as well as a writer. Near the end of the

novel, Phineas becomes a writer as he gives up on the biographical project of Destry-Scholes:

> I said I thought I would give it all up. I said I had come to the conclusion that literary scholarship was pointless, and so had embarked on biography, which was a form of history, and now thought that was pointless too (Byatt, 2000:276).

He states that "a farewell to Literature doesn't, all at one blow, get rid of a new found addiction to writing" (Byatt, 2000:295). Eventually, however, he does stop writing and that is where the novel ends: "I must stop writing and put away this notebook." (Byatt, 2000:301)

Phineas thus develops from being a poststructuralist student to being a biographer to being an autobiographer: "PGN was a mere Critick, steps centre-stage, assumes his life, Finds his Voice, is a Writer." (Byatt, 2000:290) Through this metamorphosis of Phineas, Byatt illustrates how he frees himself from a second hand life as observer to a life where he is an active participant. He moves from literary criticism and biography, which are both secondary practices, to writing an autobiography, which is more first hand, to eventually living without observing and recording. He ends his tale quite bluntly and it leaves the reader none the wiser about Destry-Scholes, the original subject of interest, from there the title *The Biographer's Tale*, i.e. Phineas's tale.

The third example of layering in the novel is layered characters as a result of the fact that there is a layering of biographical projects. As discussed earlier, each biographer latches on to his subject and the following biographer latches onto them and so forth. This creates a structure of multiple layers, and Celia Wallhead (2003:305) argues that "this complex image of a threesome is the major structure-endowing mechanism of the novel". In an interview, Byatt describes biography as a "double process of identification – which is a word I loathe,

so let's say 'becoming' – of becoming the person you are studying and then stepping back and looking at the difference" (Byatt, Norfolk and Walker, 2006:334). The biographer projects himself onto his subject in order to reconstruct the subject. Phineas states: "I was finding it increasingly difficult to disentangle his [Destry-Scholes's] ideas about his three Personages...from my own quest for a way to look at the world." (Byatt, 2000:194) In a sense Phineas feels that he is merging with his subject, as well as his subject's subjects. This may be because, as a biographer, it was necessary for him to 'become' his subject as Byatt describes above. "The biographer identifies more and more with the subject as the research and writing progress [and] in turn, the biographer constructs the subject." (Hibbard, 2006:32) In terms of the palimpsest analogy, Phineas's tale would be the overlying layer spread over the underlying layers comprised of Chelebi to Bole straight through the real historical personages to Destry-Scholes. The sense of merging that Phineas experiences is comparable to the palimpsestuous relation between the layers of the palimpsest. Just as the underlying layer permeates the overlying layer of the palimpsest, certain elements, attributes and experiences of the underlying characters permeate into Phineas's life. There is a palimpsestuous relationship established between Phineas and the rest of the characters and this is a result of the fact that there is a layering of biographical projects.

There are a few examples of where the underlying characters resurface in the overlying character. Firstly, Phineas decides to go to Destry-Scholes's place of birth as part of his research on the great biographer (Byatt, 2000:37). When he reaches the place in Pontefract, Phineas says:

> The house resembles, quite a lot, the square red brick box in which I was born in a suburb in Nottingham [and] I went on looking at the red box, trying to think what to think. I felt a feeling I used to have going to our own red box (Byatt, 2000:39).

In this way, elements of Destry-Scholes's life permeate Phineas's life.

The second example of a palimpsestuous permeation between the characters in *The Biographer's Tale* is when the deeply buried layer of Elmer Bole suffuses with Phineas's life. Elmer Bole lead a double life with two wives: "Destry-Scholes established that Bole had married both [women], in the same year, and had in the same year established two households." (Byatt, 2000:22) Similarly Phineas leads a double life with two lovers. According to Wallhead (2003:303) Phineas duplicates Bole's double life by choosing a "daytime lover, the golden sunny Fulla, and a night-time one, the silver, moon-like Vera." Phineas says that he is "now leading two lives" (Byatt, 2000:177) and that he has "two splendidly dovetailed lives as tourist manager and parataxonomist" (Byatt, 2000:297).

Another example of such a permeation which establishes a palimpsestuous relation between the many characters in the novel is the fact that Phineas, while helping Fulla Biefeld with stag beetle experiments, gives the beetles "literary names of horned gods" (Byatt, 2000:292). Similarly the underlying character Carl Linnaeus also named plants after mythical creatures: "early in his journey he had named a pretty plant, *Andromeda polifolia* (bog rosemary), for the chained princess" (Byatt, 2000:65). Phineas states that Linnaeus's "description of the relations between mythic woman and flower was both far-fetched and in a way sexy" (Byatt, 2000:132). Even though initially Phineas thinks such naming to be far-

fetched, he does it too later on as he names the male stag beetles “Hern and Moses, Horus and Actaeon” and the females he names “Moira, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos” (Byatt, 2000:292). In this way the actions of the underlying character, Linnaeus, permeate the overlying character’s, i.e. Phineas’s, actions. Campbell (2004:223) asserts that Phineas could not “resist the pleasure if emulating Linnaeus by giving the insects names from myth, naming the males for horned gods, the females for the Fates”.

The fourth example of one character permeating another is when Phineas has a dream that is very similar to a dream that Galton had in reality. In an interview, Byatt explains:

> There are two quite frightening dreams in *The Biographer’s Tale*, which I invented. Francis Galton has one of them, which is based on a dream that Galton really did have, but I re-imagined this particular dream and made it a lot worse (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:340).

In the novel there is a description of Galton’s dream:

> I should see in bold relief a muscular bloodstained crucified figure nailed against the wall of my bedroom opposite my bed...a prisoner freshly mauled and nailed up by a brutal Roman soldier (Byatt, 2000:83).

Later in the novel the reader finds out that “Galton’s vision of the hanging body of the wretch crucified by Roman soldiery – can be found in his autobiographical memoirs, or his *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*” (Byatt, 2000:192). This dream resurfaces later when Phineas has a similar dream:

> ...once I saw the crucified man Galton had seen – that is I saw his vision...and the phrase came into my mind ‘butchered like a Roman holiday’. As it did into his. It was, of course, *my* mind, the mind of Phineas G. Nanson (Byatt, 2000:233).

Phineas once again has trouble disentangling himself from the subject of a biographical project. The same vision, and even the same phrase, that Galton had now permeates Phineas's mind and a palimpsestuous relation between the two characters is established.

The function of these permeations between the underlying characters and Phineas is simply to establish some sense of unity or continuity in the otherwise fragmented, and quite random, novel. It serves to weave the many layers of characters in the novel into a textured whole. Pinsker (2003:191) says that "Byatt weaves the seemingly disparate stories of Galton, Linnaeus, and Ibsen into the (nearly) unified tale that Nanson nearly tells."

The fourth and last prominent instance of layering in *The Biographer's Tale* is the layering of fiction over history, or actuality. In this regard, Rodríguez González (2008:455) states that "in the complex structure of *The Biographer's Tale* the lives of fictional characters intermingle with those of real ones to conform an intricate text". The layering of fiction over reality or actuality or the 'real' relates very much to the debate of whether history is in fact nothing more than fiction. On this subject, Byatt (2001:180) observes the following in a critical essay: "recent years have seen much discussion of the idea that history is fiction, and the understanding (not as new as it is sometimes said to be) that all narratives are partial and biased". The debate also addresses how a writer can, or cannot, represent reality. In the postmodern context, there is a real concern about the inability of language to adequately represent reality. According to Hutcheon (1989:34)

> ...many postmodern strategies are openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or between word and world.

Thus fiction or history is not a mirror that reflects reality, but language is rather a (often self-conscious and self-reflexive) layer spread over reality. In this case, reality can be seen as the underlying, the original, text and all fiction (even historical and biographical accounts) can be seen as the overlying layer grafted on the 'real'.

The abovementioned example of Galton's dream is an example of fiction layered over reality because Byatt took an actual event in an actual historical figure's life and fictionalized it by 're-imagining' it and placing it in her novel. This is also an example that links Byatt's writing strategies to those of mosaic-making. She raids historical texts (or historical figures and their lives), she lifts certain facts from these historical works and then she redeploys them in her own work. Similarly, the masters of mosaic raid old works for tesserae which they take and re-use in their own new work.

In this instance, reality or history can be seen as the underlying layer of the palimpsest that permeates the overlying layer, which is fiction. Therefore one can say that Byatt creates a palimpsestic layering over Galton's dream by re-writing it and making it worse or adding to it. This is in effect what the great biographer Destry-Scholes also did with his subjects.

In her book *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt (2000:10) writes:

> My own short novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, is about these riddling links between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies)...it is a study of the aesthetics of inventing, or re-inventing, or combining real and imaginary human beings.

Byatt explains that she is interested in "the point where the imagination has the right to take over from the fact, but also the pleasure in the fact from which the imagination has no right to take over. It's double." (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:322)

Not only does Byatt often layer fiction over history, but she also extends history by adding to it through fiction, like Destry-Scholes. In *On Histories and Stories* Byatt (2000:62) quotes an epigraph from Fitzgerald: "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history" and she says that she was confronted by the problem of "how far one can change 'truth' in fiction" (Byatt, 2000:105). Phineas, and most probably Byatt too, believe that fiction extends reality: "Reading and writing extend – not infinitely, not violently, but giddily – the variations we can perceive on the truths we thus discover." (Byatt, 2000:274) Campbell (2004:224) identifies this trend in *The Biographer's Tale* because each biographer "had needs of his own that he filled by inventing what he did not find in the lives of his subjects". Byatt does this when writing too. In an essay entitled *True Stories and the Facts in Fiction*, she describes her writing of two novellas (*Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel*) published together in 1992 under the title *Angels and Insects*. *The Conjugial Angel*, specifically, is strongly based on historical events and it tells the untold story of Emily Tennyson who was engaged to Arthur Hallam, Lord Alfred Tennyson's close friend who had passed away (Byatt, 2000:104-105). Byatt describes her research for writing the novella and then she makes a clear distinction between biography, which is expected to be more factual, and fiction, which is allowed to invent. She writes:

> If I had been writing a biography or literary history I should have ransacked the papers at the Tennyson centre in Lincoln – whereas as a writer of fiction, I felt a strong inclination to stop with the information I had...I had the facts my imagination wanted to fantasise about." (Byatt, 2000:105)

In a later interview Byatt emphasises the point again, she says that she didn't want to know any more in case the real Emily Tennyson was not the person she wanted to write about (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:332). Byatt thus creates a palimpsestic film over reality by

taking what she needs in terms of facts and then inventing whatever else she feels is needed through fiction, which she then layers over the original facts. Like with *The Conjugial Angel*, Byatt took only the facts she required about the three historical figures (Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen) in *The Biographer's Tale* and then she invented the rest. So like Destry-Scholes, she had "quite deliberately woven [her] own lies and inventions into the dense texture of collected facts" (Byatt, 2000:273).

However, Byatt does not do this without any regard for the actual historical figure. She believes that if a novelist puts somebody real into a novel, that novelist owes the historical figure some respect and that it is better to invent a character than to compel a historical figure to do something out of his or her character (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:328). She also says that "the good historical characters in novels tend to lurk at the periphery" (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:328). This is exactly what the three historical characters in *The Biographer's Tale* do. The actual Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen are far from being protagonists in the novel, they are simply spectres haunting the fragmented, partially fictitious, biographical documents. They form the underlying historical layer only partly legible under the layer of fiction that Byatt superimposed over them. According to Franklin (2001:37) Byatt's fictional "texts are pinned to the history beneath them, rather like the ancient bees in the cabinets of the Linnean society".

Campbell (2004:215) states that "the novel asks questions about the accessibility of the past and our ability to 'know' historical characters". A notion closely linked to this is the temporal aspect of the palimpsest and the recoverability of the past. History, like the underlying layer of the palimpsest is older, part of the past and difficult to recover. It would, therefore, seem

that pure factual biography is an honourable ideal, but simultaneously it is an impossibility because the underlying layer of the palimpsest can never be wholly and truly uncovered and reconstructed, it will always remain partly obfuscated. Similarly, actual factual history is obfuscated by the narratives about it, which are also, ironically, the only way to access the historical past. On the subject of accessing history, Campbell (2004:221) remarks:

> The facts that Phineas longed for [as reader] are there, but they are embedded in a baffling mosaic where fact cannot be separated from fiction. Destry-Scholes's texts enclose writings by his subjects; Byatt's text illustrates the same principle of eclectic mixing and inventing.

Byatt's novel indeed does follow the same principle and the effect on the reader is similar to the frustration and confusion that Phineas experiences. The reader is never quite sure who the author of the text is and at times the reader cannot even connect one piece of text to the next. This unresolved fragmentation not only disrupts the reading process, but it also leaves the reader with doubts about the ontological status of the texts.

Other examples of less prominent palimpsestic layerings are: Galton's composite photographs, Phineas's photocopies and transcribing, Vera's occupation as radiographer, and the character of The Strange Customer.

The Biographer's Tale is Byatt's first novel to include photographs on top of various intertexts. Phineas discovers the photographs in a suitcase filled with Destry-Scholes belongings that Vera owns. Phineas says that the photographs were "clearly also snipped from books" (Byatt, 2000:211). This is another example of Destry-Scholes's, and Byatt's, writing style. They both snip passages or images from other works and paste it into their own. The novel specifically includes a photograph of Henrik Ibsen on his death bed, May 1906, and a photograph of Francis Galton that was taken just after he died, January 1911

(Byatt, 2000:210). The novel also has a page dedicated to Galton's composite photographs in which he layered various portraits of convicted criminals in order to establish the general facial features that a criminal may be expected to have. He also layered portraits of different family members over one another. Galton describes the creation of his composite photographs in an intertext as follows: "It was obviously possible to photograph superimposed images on a screen by the simultaneous use of two or more lanthorns." (Byatt, 2000:204) The composite images highlight the resemblances and hide the differences between the family members, they are thus "better proportioned than their component images" (Byatt, 2000:212). Interestingly Galton had made such a "composite family image" of "Linnaeus's wife, Sara Lisa, and his daughters" (Byatt, 2000:212). This fact establishes a link between Galton and Linnaeus.

Phineas refers to these photographs as "superimpositions" because Galton superimposed one portrait over another (Byatt, 2000:211). The similarities that these composite photographs bear to the palimpsest are obvious: they are layered in structure and the underlying layers are visible through the overlying layers and the effect is a new image encompassing all the layers. Phineas makes an interesting remark about the composite photographs that is also applicable to the palimpsest when he says: "Something had been taken away by being added." (Byatt, 2000:212) This is very true, something is indeed added, another layer of text in the case of the palimpsest and another image in the case of a composite photograph. And yet, something has also been taken away. As mentioned above, in the composite photographs "the resemblances are striking, the differences subtle" (Byatt, 2000:212). So the uniqueness, the individuality is hidden by the additional layer. It is

true for the palimpsest also, especially in terms of information. Due to the fact that an additional layer of text is added over the original layer, the underlying layer's text is partially hidden and its writing becomes obscured and in effect information is lost. In this sense, something gets lost when something else is added.

The inclusion of photographs and sketches in the novel serves to make the novel not only transtextual, but it also transcends boundaries between different media like text and image. It makes the textual, and in fact the actual, boundaries of the novel even less apparent and it presents the visual metaphor of mosaic-making to the reader.

Another instance of layering occurs when Phineas includes a "photocopy of a copy" of a drawing (which is in essence also a copy) by Linnaeus (Byatt, 2000:131-132). Phineas also decides to transcribe the partly biographical fragments on Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. This is linked to the notion of layering texts by different authors because Phineas is re-writing, supposedly without altering, the fragmented documents written by Destry-Scholes. He says: "I shall transcribe the narratives as I found them" and "I give them baldly, out of their original crumpled chaos" (Byatt, 2000:44). Phineas also transcribes the index cards that he found in Destry-Scholes's suitcase:

> I formed the project of buying several packs of index cards identical in size to those Destry-Scholes had used. Photocopying was out of the question. I should have to rewrite his writings in my writing on my own cards (Byatt, 2000:166).

Phineas adds too that "it is possible, of course that he [Destry-Scholes] copied the originals, as I copied his copies" (Byatt, 2000:174). Phineas, however, does not only re-write the index cards, he adds information. He states that the "threads of connection" between the index cards are his own as he is "*organising* the quarry of secondary materials into an ur-

shape, a preliminary form" (Byatt, 2000:264). At this stage Phineas adds the references to primary sources that Destry-Scholes left out. Later on, Phineas adds even more information to the collection of index cards. He says

> And I add myself, because presumably Destry-Scholes saw no need to copy out a passage so famous, Peer Gynt and the onion (Byatt, 2000:270) [and] I added a quotation from Linnaeus's Nemesis about ghosts (Byatt, 2000:271).

The onion forms an important image in the novel because it too has multiple layers. Wallhead (2003:303) states that "throughout the novel there are combinations of multiples, one examples being the onion and its many layers". Phineas adds the passage about the onion to the collection of index cards and in that way he adds yet another layer as he layers his own writing over that of Destry-Scholes. Ultimately the fragmented documents and the collection of index cards the reader is presented with are not the actual writings of Destry-Scholes. They are texts mediated by and superimposed upon by Phineas. As readers, we are thus, once again, even further removed from the ever-elusive character named Scholes Destry-Scholes. He represents the obscured and hidden underlying layer of the metaphorical palimpsest that is inaccessible to the reader.

A simpler example of trying to read the underlying layer or, in this case, the underlying structure is Vera Alphage's occupation as radiographer. She takes x-rays in order to examine people's bone structures, their so-called underlying structure. She, however, also makes photographs that she keeps in her bedroom as they are "not to everybody's taste" (Byatt, 2000:215). Phineas describes them as follows:

> The walls were covered with largish photographs framed in steel. They were essentially black and white photographs, but the grounds were blues and greens, submarine, ultra-violet. They were photographs of bones. With a haze of other organs hanging between them, curtains of translucent tissue. (Byatt, 2000:216)

The curtains of translucent tissue are comparable to the overlying layer of the palimpsest through which one can see the underlying layer, i.e. the bones and organs. In a sense then, Vera is also a palimpsest reader, deciphering the underlying layer.

One may argue that Phineas's text, his autobiography, is layered over all the other texts of the other characters. One such example is the drama *Peer Gynt,* written by the dramatist Ibsen. In it is a character called the Strange Passenger and he reappears like the underlying layer of the palimpsest in other texts. Phineas takes a part-time job at an eccentric travel agency called Puck's Girdle that sells "odd holidays...literary holidays" (Byatt, 2000:125). He takes the job for financial reasons and before long he is left alone to care for the business as the owners go on one of their holidays. During that time a strange man with even stranger requests comes to the agency. Phineas does not realise it at first, but the man is looking for a trip to various snuff performances (Campbell, 2004:222). His name is Maurice Bossey and he suggests a few websites for Phineas to look at and Phineas's reaction to these is "a string of little, cold, categorising words. Pederasty. Paedophilia. Sado-masochism. Sadism" (Byatt, 2000:198). Phineas describes Maurice as follows:

> I called him the Strange Customer, to myself, from the beginning I think, after Destry-Scholes's rendering of Henrik Ibsen's doppelgänger son. Who had been named for the Strange Passenger, in Peer Gynt's last voyage (Byatt, 2000:149).

The Strange Passenger / Customer thus keeps resurfacing in various texts, i.e. in Destry-Scholes's fictional depiction of Ibsen and his illegitimate son and in Phineas's autobiography.

On the metatextual level, there is also an instance of layering. *The Biographer's Tale* is one of only three fictive works by Byatt that is written in the first-person (Byatt, 2001:183, 198).

Campbell (2004:218) states that “as a character, Phineas represents a first for Byatt”. In a written account of an interview with Chevalier (1999:18) Byatt says:

> I am writing a first person singular story at the moment called *The Biographer's Tale* written by a character who absolutely refuses to be an autobiographer – but what else is he writing since he is writing in the first person? – and this is rattling him.

In effect the novel is in a sense autobiographical for Byatt too as she is the actual author writing it in the first person. In another interview she says: “the whole novel is a description of my hero, Phineas G. Nanson, and of the biographer he’s chasing, whom he never finds, and of course of myself” (Byatt, 2001). The result is that Byatt herself (or her ideas) more easily permeates the text through Phineas’s consciousness. According to a review of the novel by Simon (2001): “it is impossible...to keep from conflating the I of Phineas with the I of Byatt” and this is another example of the palimpsestuousness of the novel because Byatt is the actual author who permeates the illusory author Phineas. Campbell (2004:219) lists various similarities between Byatt and Phineas and she states that “Phineas makes explicit Byatt’s own reflections on contemporary issues.”

Another similarity between Byatt the author and Phineas the illusory author is that in the novel Phineas states that “Literature is threaded in my brain along with my daily language.” (Byatt, 2000:299) In an interview with Denis Scheck, Byatt admits:

> I am sort of haunted by voices, in fact it’s very painful, lines from things run into your head and you can’t remember what they are and you walk through the streets and you can only get half the line and you feel dreadful and you don’t know what person is attached to this wandering voice. (Byatt, 2012)

Both Byatt and Phineas feel that literature keeps permeating their lives and their thoughts and this links to the notion that all writing, in effect all thinking, is creating a palimpsest (discussed in chapter two) as one is constantly re-writing or re-thinking what someone else has written or thought before. Phineas describes it well: "the story has funnelled itself into a not unusual shape, run into a channel cut in the earth for it by previous stories" (Byatt, 2000:290). Thus those other voices permeate one's mind and writing like the layers of the palimpsest permeate each other.

Both Byatt and Phineas hold the belief expressed in a line from Wallace Stevens's poem that Byatt quotes as saying "to find, not to impose". Phineas refers to this poem in *The Biographer's Tale* and he makes it clear that he does not want to impose a specific reading on any text (Byatt, 2000:169). In a critical essay, Byatt, similarly, refers to Stevens's *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction* and she quotes (Byatt, 2001:197): "to find / Not to impose.../ It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible." These are just two examples of how Byatt and Phineas are similar.

Many of the issues addressed in *The Biographer's Tale* are issues that Byatt feels very strongly about, but "it is Phineas, however, who embarks on a quest dear to Byatt's heart, and it is his voice that records the discoveries made along the way" (Campbell, 2004:229).

Lastly, due to the palimpsestic structure of Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*, various boundaries are transgressed. As with *Possession* and *Babel Tower*, the most obvious textual boundary transgressed is that between the main text and the intertext. Due to the

lack of references to the primary source and author of the intertexts, the reader may experience ontological uncertainty when transgressing these textual boundaries. Another boundary often transgressed by Byatt is the boundary between different genres. The most obvious transgression of this sort in *The Biographer's Tale* is between fiction and history or biography as discussed earlier. Byatt transcends the boundary between fiction and criticism too. O'Connor (2002:384) describes *The Biographer's Tale* as a "literary critique of literary criticism" while Rodríguez González (2008:447) uses the term "ficticism" to describe Byatt's writing.

Another boundary transcended is the boundary of the text as such, i.e. the boundary between the textual level and the metatextual level. *The Biographer's Tale* has many metafictional asides by Phineas about his writing strategies as well as the text that he is writing. The metafiction in this novel is the most pronounced of all Byatt's novels as Phineas often addresses the reader directly. A few examples: "I have been driven insane enough by Destry-Scholes's lack of references to find myself unable to omit this one, even for *no possible reader*" (Byatt, 2000:262); "I am not the sort of writer, and this is not the sort of writing, to make the most of the undoubtedly fantastic elements of my situation" (Byatt, 2000:220); "I am getting better at my lyricism, but am not sure that last sentence works. Let it stand. Who will ever read all this stuff, anyway. *And* it's true" (Byatt, 2000:250) and "I have nearly reached the end of the story" (2000:288). These metafictional comments immediately shift the reader's attention away from the textual level to the metatextual level and a boundary is transgressed.

The greatest consequence of continually forcing one's reader to transcend boundaries is that the reader will eventually experience ontological uncertainty. In *The Biographer's Tale*, a novel obsessed with taxonomies and categorising (Franklin, 2001:37), the fictional reader Phineas, who is actively trying to organise and make sense of all the fragments of texts, experiences ontological uncertainty. He too fails in making sense of it all, for example, Phineas numbers the index cards to try and create some sense of order, but this does not work as he has two different cards with different intertexts on them and both are numbered 79. The first card numbered 79 is an extract from *Peer Gynt* by Ibsen (Byatt, 2000:206-207) and the second index card numbered 79 is a review of Hedda Gabler by Henrik Jaeger in the *Dagbladet* (Byatt, 2000:264). This apparently innocent mistake of Phineas's adds rather than detracts from the reader's ontological uncertainty. The reader's ontological uncertainty is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The main argument of this dissertation is that Byatt's writing is palimpsestic and that it therefore transcends textual boundaries both within and outside of, or around, the selected novels. The first research question was: how are textual boundaries transgressed in *Possession* (1990), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *The Biographer's Tale (2000*) and how does this influence the interpretation of the texts? The following answer can be gleaned from the analysis in this dissertation: within the novels textual boundaries are transgressed between genres and styles as well as plots as the reader moves between the main texts and various intertexts. Textual boundaries outside of the novels are transgressed because the novels often contain either snippets of other texts or strong allusions to literary history, theory and texts. Consequently the textual boundaries of the selected novels seem porous as other texts permeate Byatt's writing. Barry (2002:91) describes the "intertextual elements" of pastiche and allusion, both of which Byatt uses frequently, as elements in which "there is a major degree of reference between one text and another" and in this way the boundaries between the texts become less clear-cut and are ultimately transcended. This crossing of textual boundaries in turn leads to ontological uncertainty and this leads one to question whether or not the numerous intertexts in Byatt's novels contribute to the text as a whole. Implied in this question is a sub-question, which raises the issue of whether Byatt unnecessarily complicates her writing with these ontological shifts that occur in her novels through intertextuality. The initial research question was formulated as follows: What does the concept of the palimpsest, when applied to Byatt's writing, express about postmodern writing, with specific reference to ontological uncertainty as well as the authorship (writing) and reading of texts? This chapter will address these questions and present the hypothesis that Byatt's writing is at times very intellectual and that makes the selected novels intricately

wrought. Coyne Kelly (1996:80) asserts clearly that "too many intellectual layers distance readers from her books". Ultimately, this is exactly what one can expect from a postmodern writer such as Byatt.

To read Byatt with a fair degree of understanding one needs to have a vast general knowledge of various fields. Without it, a reader may feel that he or she is missing many of the 'hidden' meanings, allusions and finer nuances in her work. Hadley (2008), together with a score of other critics, justifiably charge Byatt with the fact that her novels are "too intellectual" and consequently not accessible to all readers.

The third research question concerned the ways in which and the reasons behind why the inclusion of intertexts (intertextuality) and the subsequent layered structure and textual relationality make palimpsests of the three Byatt novels under discussion. The finding is that Byatt's frequent and abundant use of intertextuality creates a layered structure in her novels (as seen in chapter two) or facilitates the layering of one author's work over another's (chapter three), and creates the opportunity for texts of various origins to permeate other texts superimposed upon them (chapter four). Her prolific use of intertextuality also creates a classic postmodern dilemma, one that affects the reader most directly. Due to the fact that Byatt's texts are so intertextual and layered that they seem to transgress their own boundaries so much so that they become transtextual, as Genette (1997:1,9) describes, the reader may sometimes experience a nearly overwhelming sense of ontological uncertainty.[18] When a reader reads a novel that consists of various fragments of texts and layers, the reader is constantly forced to shift from one text or layer to the next. What complicates the

[18] Please note that ontological uncertainty is what any reader would expect from a postmodern text and that it is precisely what makes postmodern texts exciting and challenging to read.

matter even further is that “it is not just (serious or popular) literature and history” that provide intertexts for postmodern intertextual novels like Byatt’s, but “everything from comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspapers provide...significant intertexts” (Hutcheon, 1988:133). Byatt, through intertextuality, presents the reader with jolts in the process of reading as she mixes “ontological worlds in an epistemological quest” in her novels (Buxton, 2001:91). Holmes (1994:320) supports this argument when he purports that Byatt’s depictions in her novels raise “ontological doubts”. He continues to argue that matters are “further complicated ontologically” by the fact that the majority of her supposed historical characters are fictional (Holmes, 1994:321). A shining example can be found in *Possession* where R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte are portrayed as actual historical Victorian poets, while in reality they are nothing more than figments of Byatt’s imagination and their supposed Victorian poetry is actually Byatt’s pastiche, or her excellent imitation, of Victorian poetry. Of course the reverse is also true. Byatt uses actual historical figures in *The Biographer’s Tale* to play fictional roles so that what may seem fictional may quite possibly be actual historical fact. In an early critical article Byatt (1979:34) notes that Julian Mitchell’s novel *The Undiscovered Country* (1968) “plays games with truth, lies, and the reader, teasing him with the knowledge that he cannot tell where veracity ends and games begin” and that “it is the game all novelists play anyway”. Byatt definitely also plays such a game with her writing.

The novels studied in this dissertation all display features that are distinctly postmodern. In the criticism there is a debate as to whether Byatt’s writing is indeed postmodern (Hadley,

2008:5, 29, 138 and Buxton, 2001:90) but it is not the aim of this dissertation to enter into that debate. For the purposes of this argument is it accepted that the three novels do in fact have fairly strong postmodern traits, some of which include the mixing of literary genres, using intertextual elements or "aleatory writing" and fragmentation (Barry, 2002:83, 91) as well as pastiche (Hutcheon, 2005:323). According to Holmes (1994:321) such "hybrid miscellany is now a typical feature of postmodernist novels". These traits all contribute to the reader's experience of ontological uncertainty while reading the novels.

One can only create a world for the reader that is complementary or contrary to the real world which is always and inevitably a reader's frame of reference. "Of course, 'truth' and 'origins' are, like 'knowledge', contradictory to postmodern thinking." (Becker, 2001:23) And because Byatt's writing techniques are overtly postmodern, her novels question truth, origins and knowledge. She does this in an intricately layered and intertextual structure as Campbell (2004) explains: "by crossing genre lines – between epistolary novel, romance, fairy tale, detective story, academic satire, and...narrative of community – Byatt's plot subverts the concept of unitary narrative". The effect of this is that the reader may become ontologically disorientated.

In the most simple and basic sense, ontology is concerned with the nature of being. Janik (1995:163) describes the "modernist emphasis on epistemology – modes of knowing – and...the postmodernist fascination with ontology – modes of being". Ontological uncertainty is a characteristic of postmodern fiction as stipulated in McHale's (1988:19) table of

"contrasting characteristics of modernism and postmodernism". The postmodernist writer is preoccupied with ontology (McHale, 1988:16) and this raises questions concerning authorship: "the use of parody and pastiche, finally, is clearly related to the abandonment of the divine pretentions of authorship implicit in the omniscient narratorial stance" (Barry, 2002:83). Because postmodernist writers make such abundant use of parody and pastiche, like Byatt, the question of originality in writing becomes a point of concern, is the written work the author's own or only a rehash of what has been written before? Ontological uncertainty does not only affect the notion of authorship, but also the role of the reader in making meaning of a text, as Hutcheon (1988:126) points out:

> ...intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text, one that situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself. A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance.

So authorship is no longer a lone, original enterprise and reading is not limited to making meaning from a single text anymore. The author's writing is permeated with the influence of literary and historical texts and Hutcheon (1988:127) refers to this as postmodernism's "acceptance of the inevitable infiltration of prior discursive practices". In an interview with Chevalier (1999:20) Byatt describes the role of being an author as follows: "Really it is a sense of a whole string of connections coming through you, and it is almost your duty to add to them, to complicate them, to put your little bit in and send them on their way." This is exactly how the process of creating an ancient palimpsest works. Each new author, at first a reader, receives an already inscribed piece of vellum and as he reads it passes through him, he then adds his bit, or layer, and he sends the vellum on to someone else.

Simultaneously, the reader is confronted with more than one text, or rather with layers of texts with permeable boundaries and it "demands of the reader...the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past" (Hutcheon, 1988:127). The effect here is that if a reader of a postmodern text is not familiar with the said literary and historical texts, much of the meaning of the text in hand may be lost. Byatt addresses the issue of a reader's background knowledge of the literary and historical past and the role it plays in making meaning while reading a text in her interview with Chevalier. They discuss the Marsyas myth and how it, along with fountains, feature in several of Byatt's works and the fact that their meaning "does depend, of course, which is the very terrifying thing, on having readers who know other Fountains and other Marsyases" (Chevalier, 1999:20). In another interview with Walker (Byatt, Norfolk & Walker, 2006:329), Byatt says: "I get very troubled when fact and fiction slither and slide in this way...because I think there will be people who don't know the difference." It is indeed a terrifying thought to consider no written work as original and any text as near meaningless for a reader without a vast general knowledge.

These notions can further be explored and hopefully explicated if one uses the analogy of the palimpsest to aid the description of particularly, but not limited to, postmodern texts. The reader of the ancient palimpsest is confronted with the same challenge as the reader of a postmodern text because he or she is also confronted with layers of texts permeating one another.

The contemporary concept of the palimpsest has a complex ontological status (Dillon, 2007:6), which is similar to postmodern texts. Due to the fact that the palimpsest has multiple layers it is almost as of it has multiple modes of being: multiple authors, various texts and by extension complicated meanings. Like the postmodern texts discussed above,

the palimpsest is transtextual because it does not have clearly defined textual boundaries. A literal example is the Archimedes palimpsest, described by Dillon (2007:11), which is a combination of various different vellums from previous texts or codices. These vellums or older pages from other codices are literally different sizes and cannot be bound into the familiar rectangular shape that we have come to associate with a book. So literally the boundaries of this ancient palimpsest are irregular, which invokes the figurative idea of blurry or porous boundaries. An abstract example of such a so-called boundless text is Saint-Jean's 12th volume, described by Walter Pater (Miller, 1992:3-4), in *Ariadne's Thread* by J. Hillis Miller (1992:6), as a book or "a solecism" that could "never be bound". The implication of the boundlessness of the palimpsest is that, because it is made up of different texts, it represents, ultimate intertextuality.[19] Consequently, the intertextual structure of the ancient palimpsest seems to be the precursor of the three novels by Byatt. As the ancient palimpsest is an amalgamation of various, seemingly unrelated texts with blurry boundaries, the selected novels by Byatt display strikingly similar structures as they too seem, at the first glance, like books which are incongruent patchworks of disparate texts and plots. The disparateness of the selected novels points the reader in all directions, particularly away from the text in hand, as intertexts and allusions force the reader to transcend the figurative textual boundaries of the novel and move into the greater discourse of literature, history and even theory. In essence then the reader transcends textual boundaries both within and outside the novel and in this way the novel, which then has a similar structure to the early palimpsest, is transtextual.

Throughout this dissertation attention has been paid to which boundaries are transgressed in Byatt's novels as well as how these boundaries are transgressed. Chapter two of the

[19] As described by Kristeva (1986:37): "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another".

dissertation focused on Byatt's novel *Possession* (1990) and it considered how Byatt mimics the permutation of the past into the present with her use of intertextuality in the novel. This was shown to be similar to how the past and the present interact on the surface of an actual ancient palimpsest where the text that was inscribed in the past is visible and at times legible through the text that was later superimposed upon it. The theme of resurrection is also a prominent theme in literature, referring directly to the relation between the past and present and was used as a point of discussion in the chapter on *Possession*.

Examples of how the reader is compelled to transcend textual boundaries in and around the three novels are numerous. In *Possession* it is most clear that the reader not only needs to cross the boundaries of different genres like prose and poetry but the reader crosses a temporal boundary too. The novel constantly oscillates between the past, Victorian plot, and the present, modern plot. So ontologically it may be unsettling for the reader. Fortunately *Possession* has an intriguing plot describing the romantic relations between the Victorian poets and the modern scholars; in other words, the story of the main text is compelling and the reader may enjoy the book if he or she only reads the uppermost layer of the novel. There is a certain force in the plot that constantly catalyzes the reading process and thus crossing the textual boundaries does not hinder the reader's progress. In this case the layered structure and various intertexts do not detract from the pleasure of reading the novel. So in *Possession* the "top" layer, or romantic plot, is successful as it enthrals the reader and he or she keeps on reading. In the case of *Possession* the intertextuality adds a sense of authenticity and originality to the novel. The intertexts thus contribute positively to the novel.

Chapter three examined *Babel Tower* (1996), the third instalment in Byatt's great quartet about Frederica Potter. This chapter specifically investigated how texts can be layered and consequently how one writer's work is layered over another's. Layering various texts and

intertextuality can create fragmentation in a work that is supposed to form a unit, like a novel, and therefore Byatt needed to find a way to create a sense of unity in *Babel Tower*. She does this through using various motifs that repeat throughout the novel, its imbedded novel, and other intertexts. These various motifs are discussed in the chapter and Byatt's technique is likened to weaving a web with each motif being a thread that binds the fragments to each other to form a whole.

In *Babel Tower* the textual boundaries between the main text and intertexts are transgressed often, like in *Possession,* so is the genre boundary as the reader moves from one text to the next. *Babel Tower* contains a significant number of intertexts written by other actual authors. Much more so than *Possession.* Consequently the reader has to transcend the actual boundary of the novel and enter other texts, a classic example of transtextuality. A good example of this is a snippet taken from Tolkien's book *The Two Towers* which is part of the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings.* The reader finds himself or herself both in Byatt's text as well as Tolkien's text and in this way the textual boundaries of the two texts become blurry and ultimately are transcended. The reader, however, needs to be well-read and aware of literary works outside Byatt's novel in order to identify this intertext as she provides no references for where the snippet comes from. A reader who is not familiar with Tolkien's trilogy will not realise where the intertext originated and will most probably be unsettled by it. Another example is a newspaper report which describes the Aberfan disaster of 1966 in which a landslide destroyed a school and a few children were killed. The report is simply jutted into the novel without a heading or a reference. When confronted with this intertext as a reader I was confused as to why it is included in the novel and it is only by chance that I recognised the event because I had seen a documentary about it on the History channel on TV some time before I read the book. Many readers may not make the connection and the

inclusion of the newspaper report may seem random and of no value. Indeed the report may even cause such an ontological jolt for the reader that he may experience a break in the continuity of the reading process. In *Babel Tower* the links (recurring motifs) between the main text and the assorted intertexts are not very explicit and it complicates the reading experience to such an extent that the reader may feel obliged to not only read the book, but also analyse it.

Chapter four examined a less successful novel of Byatt entitled *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). The main point of focus of this chapter was how Byatt employs layering, similar to the layering in an ancient palimpsest, in her writing. A prominent instance of layering in Byatt's work is the layering of fiction over reality or factuality. She writes her novel using some true and some invented facts of three real historical figures, i.e. Carl Linnaeus, Sir Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. In this way she layers fiction over reality, once again through intertextuality. The metaphor of mosaic-making is used to structure the argument of the chapter.

In *The Biographer's Tale*, once again, the boundary between main text and intertexts is transgressed as well as the boundary between various genres. The most prominent boundary transgressed, which consequently results in the novel's complexity, is the boundary that supposedly separates fiction from history. This boundary is arbitrary and often the subject of much debate. Since history, like fiction, is a result of subjective writing or recording by an author, "it is the very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in the theory and art of what we seem to want to label postmodernism" (Hutcheon, 1996:474). History and fiction are furthermore described as "notoriously porous genres" with "elastic boundaries" by Hutcheon (1996:475-476). This is

evident in *The Biographer's Tale* as it is never quite clear whether what is presented is historical factuality or Byatt's fiction. The effect of this is that fictional and historical writing are juxtaposed and what is revealed is that history is not unlike fiction and vice versa. The consequence of this may be a realisation by the reader that one cannot take the facts of history at face value as the truth because it is, like fiction, a narrative constructed. The reader's, and Phineas's, quest to find out the truth of the past is thus thwarted. *The Biographer's Tale* is intricately wrought and the reader may find himself or herself consulting other sources for information.

The various intertexts in the three novels discussed above often times leave the reader with a sense that he or she needs to find the origin of the intertext, to find where it comes from, and then a deeper and wider comprehension of Byatt's novels can be attained. It is like trying to uncover the deepest underlying layer of the palimpsest, or what one may call the fundamental layer, the very first layer of text. Byatt explains this sense from the author's perspective as follows: "I think I have a natural desire to trace things back...to see where anything came from. Part of my problem as a writer indeed is that I think slightly too quickly why I am doing anything or where an idea came from." (Chevalier, 1999:10) So while writing, Byatt seems to be constantly thinking about what she is doing, and more importantly, where her ideas come from. She is like a palaeontologist who tries to get to the origin, the very first layer of the palimpsest that is now reappearing in her own writing. She carries on to say that "of course you don't ever really see the source if you trace it back. All you find is another mystery. So I am quite happy now to go tracing things back, because you simply stumble over another surprise. You never reach..." (Chevalier, 1999:10) Indeed one never

seems to reach the true origin or source of an idea or piece of writing. This occurs especially in postmodern writing and therefore Hutcheon (1988:129) aptly argues in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that "no one ever manages to be the first to narrate anything, to be the origin of even his/her own narrative". As an effect this puts into "question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality" (Hutcheon, 1988:129). Here Hutcheon basically describes what Genette (1997:1, 9) terms transtextuality. This seemingly leaves the reader on an open plane of texts from the past and the present that seem to lose their boundaries and consequently their separateness. There is no clear origin to find and the reader may become overwhelmed by the vastness of such a situation.

This brings one back to the question posed earlier in this chapter: whether the inclusion of all the intertexts contributes to the selected novels by Byatt or not, i.e. what is the price of admission of these intertexts? A simple answer would be that intertextuality creates texts in which "margins and edges gain new value" (Hutcheon, 1988:130), texts in which textual boundaries are dynamic and permeable. The use of intertextuality definitely adds a sense of complication and facilitates a structure similar to that of ancient palimpsests in the three novels discussed above. There is no easy answer to the abovementioned question, some intertexts indeed do add value and meaning to Byatt's novels, for example the Victorian poetry and love letters in *Possession*. Other intertexts may not explicitly add anything to the novel, for example the newspaper report on the Aberfan disaster in *Babel Tower*. Furthermore, some intertexts like those in *The Biographer's Tale* may not only seem to add nothing valuable to the novel, but may simply complicate the text. In *The Biographer's Tale*

Byatt's use of palimpsestic writing strategies is most evident because the entire novel is an exercise in layering. The more pronounced Byatt's use of these palimpsestic writing strategies become, the more intricately wrought her novels become. In *Possession*, she used palimpsestic writing strategies more sparingly and in a much subtler way, in *Babel Tower* her use of these strategies becomes bolder and ultimately in *The Biographer's Tale*, she seems to throw caution to the wind and complicate the novel with not only intertexts and layers, but also other media.

Further possibilities for future research could focus on Byatt's recently published novel entitled *Ragnarök* (2011). Ragnarök signifies the end of the world as well as its immediate rebirth according to Norse mythology (McCoy, 2012-2013). One could examine the novel in relation to the Norse myths which serve as subtexts in order to gain a deeper understanding of Byatt's use of mythology in her writing. Another possibility for research is Byatt's numerous short stories, especially in relation to her novels in order to draw a comparison between how she approaches the two genres. One last vast research project on Byatt could be to analyze her critical works alongside her literary works to examine how her criticism informs her fiction and vice versa.

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