

Ariadne's Thread:
Women and Labyrinths
in the Fiction of
A.S. Byatt and Iris Murdoch

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Elizabeth Mary Tomazic

1.3.05

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Date

For Joe,

*my very best friend
and trusted companion
on the journey through life's
labyrinth..*

*You have lit up my way, picked me up when I stumbled,
and encouraged me always
to keep seeking the true path.*

*You have removed obstacles, stretched boundaries,
and created passageways for me.*

*This is especially for you, my love,
in heartfelt gratitude for all your sacrifices
as you helped me fulfil my dreams.*

*

*Moj ljubi Joško,
iz vsega srca -
najlepša ti hvala.*

*

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the journeys towards a sense of identity or selfhood, achieved through honest and accurate appreciation of the lives of others, made by several female characters in the fiction of A.S. Byatt and the late Iris Murdoch. I believe that because Byatt and Murdoch value literature as a serious business that teaches as well as entertains, their writing can play a significant role in illuminating the lives of women by means of its portrayal of the resolution of women's struggles. Women's lives, despite the rise of feminism, are still not equitable. While many women strive to attain a balance of independence and intimacy – what Thelma Shinn calls a “meronymic” relationship – and connection within community, many do not succeed in this endeavour. The numerous challenges they face are difficult and confronting, and the stories of their efforts resemble journeys through a labyrinth or maze.

Byatt acknowledges Murdoch as her literary mother, frequently citing Murdoch's belief in the ability of literature to improve human life. While Byatt and Murdoch are interested in what characters learn about their relations to others and the world, they make it clear that characters are constructs, not real people. Yet their fiction is an ongoing exploration of the nature of reality and the nature of selfhood, particularly that of women. According to feminist theories, women are more constrained than men, and are therefore the focus of this study, but their experience of constraint is a more complex matter than experience of mere undifferentiated oppression, and is better represented by the structure of the labyrinth than that of the simple, linear journey.

I agree with Byatt's and Murdoch's view of the importance of fiction as a means of commenting on human relationships, particularly with the notion of the need for connection within community. The labyrinth, together with the Bildungsroman, provides a paradigm for the complex experiences of Byatt's and Murdoch's female characters. All the characters in this study struggle to flee from restraint, seek purpose and agency in the world through

interaction with others, and escape a feminised Plato's Cave by learning to see more accurately, and all but one emerge from the maze into an autonomous and independent existence in community with others.

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Abbreviations

<i>Babel</i>	<i>Babel Tower</i>
“CT”	“Crocodile Tears”
“The Djinn”	“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”
<i>Virgin</i>	<i>The Virgin in the Garden</i>

INTRODUCTION

*“... journeys become signs and symbols
of the deliberate and constant self-blindness
and of that avoiding of awkward questions of which Pascal spoke.
One is therefore forced to conclude that the only worthwhile journey
is the one which the individual undertakes within ...
themselves.”*

– Chevalier and Gheerbrant¹

This thesis investigates the journeys towards a sense of identity or selfhood made by several female characters in the fiction of A.S. Byatt and the late Iris Murdoch. As a woman, I am particularly interested in how images of women’s lives are portrayed in literature, especially the literature written by female authors. Women’s lives, despite the rise of feminism, are often still not equitable. For example, the attainment of a balance of independence and intimacy in one’s personal life, a meronymic² existence, is fraught with difficulties for many. Because Byatt and Murdoch value literature as a serious business that teaches as well as entertains, I believe that their writing can play a significant role in its portrayal of the resolution of women’s struggles. Their fiction, spanning fifty years, depicts a broad range of female characters’ endeavours to find autonomy and connection within community. These women’s challenges are invariably difficult and confronting. Their efforts, requiring resilience, determination, and the capacity to learn from mistakes, resemble journeys through a labyrinth or maze in pursuit of an Ariadne’s thread leading them towards an exit into a fulfilling and self-determined life. Their traversal of many paths and passages resembles a female Bildungsroman³ in which a character experiences profound self-growth through “attention.”

Byatt’s and Murdoch’s belief in the basic human need of the self to relate to others in order to become a whole individual is portrayed by protagonists who endure separation and

journey alone, seeking and finally forming meaningful interpersonal connections. An individual's journey towards an increased self awareness must inevitably be enmeshed in the lives of others. Murdoch's fiction, concerned with the portrayal of characters developing a consciousness of others, or mirroring of self with the other, is summarised by Heusel as texts that "insist that in order to look outside oneself to see the self looking, one must first see the self in the other" (89). This sentiment is also echoed by Garzilli, who proposes that such awareness is of necessity a labyrinthine experience:

In looking into himself man wonders where his real self is. He may seek to reassure himself that his real self is his consciousness, implicit in so many definitions of man. He may also wonder what function his roles in society and other people have to play concerning self, in terms of a personality that seems so inconstant. Sometimes, he may even seem to himself lost in a maze of possibilities, struggling to discern reality from unreality, dream from consciousness. (5-6)

My examination of Byatt's and Murdoch's works pursues a thread that links their fiction with their ideas on what literature is and does. Although the primary purpose of this analysis is not to engage in a direct comparison of the authors and their techniques, it is inevitable that certain resemblances and differences will be noted, and that analysis will involve comparison and comment. To some extent, it is unavoidable that both writers be considered alongside one another in light of their literary relationship. Malcolm Bradbury noted in a review of Byatt's *The Game*, that

A female writer whose books are novels of sensibility reaching towards metaphysics and abstraction, and who has written a ... study of Iris Murdoch, is bound to come in for an obvious comparison; and in fact to set Mrs Byatt and Miss Murdoch side by side is a profitable way of raising a question of real interest, the fortunes of the novel of sensibility in our time. ("On from Murdoch" 72)

The frequency and convergence in their fiction of similar themes, particularly the restraint of women and imagery and symbolism associated with this and related concepts,

reveal their shared “trust in words to express complex ideas of truth” (Byatt, “Her Philosophical Essays” 28). Their work is dominated by themes of freedom, morality, the meaning of goodness, and what forms this goodness might take in a society that has seemingly cast off the imperatives of religion, or religious faith. Both writers believe that modern fiction should be concerned with the “hard idea of truth, rather than facile sincerity,” with a need to “return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth” (Murdoch, “Against Dryness” 293). Byatt acknowledges that Murdoch’s novels depict “people to whom serious thought matters, and who are changed by it” (“Her Philosophical Essays” 27), and complements this view with her own conviction that “the novel ... is the best form of conversation about ourselves we have ever devised” (Jacobson 30).

While Murdoch concedes that one of literature’s functions is to entertain or to provide pleasure, she also believes that words can help structure us as human beings. She believes that the natural human ability for telling stories is an essential “way of thinking ... a fundamental mode of consciousness” (“Art is the Imitation” 252) that not only helps us to make sense of our world but also helps us to find an individual place and sense of self within that world. As a result of striving to use language to the best of our ability, we are enabled to advance the causes of “civilization and justice and freedom ... clarity and truth” (“Salvation by Words” 241). Indeed, Murdoch considers literature to be of utmost importance to a culture’s “survival and salvation” (241).

In published interviews, Byatt admits that Murdoch’s early work appealed to her because of “Murdoch’s moral and aesthetic conviction that the novel represents a battleground between ‘real people and images’ ” (Todd, *A.S. Byatt* 5). As a young undergraduate, Byatt read Murdoch’s fiction and was “puzzled and entranced by a sense that there was *more there*, formally and conceptually, than [she] could account for” (“Her Philosophical Essays” 27). Her *Degrees of Freedom*, “written out of a passionate curiosity about how Iris Murdoch’s novels *worked*” (27), also led her to discover Murdoch’s

philosophical writings. Michael Levenson, tracing a literary heritage linking George Eliot to Murdoch,⁴ whom he names as “Byatt’s literary mother” (“The Religion of Fiction” 338), notes that Byatt refers frequently to Murdoch’s “Against Dryness” by “citing her favourite phrases as if to remind herself of what she believes” (338). Byatt admits repeatedly that her life and her writing were changed following her discovery of Murdoch’s philosophy. Byatt responded to publication of the collection of essays entitled *Existentialists and Mystics* by saying that her reading of this collection caused a sincere change in her own behaviour and outlook upon the world (Rowe 22). In correspondence to me, Byatt admitted that of the many things Murdoch had written that struck her, the most important was her expression of a need for the “hard idea of truth.”⁵ Murdoch’s respect for exactness and absolute truthfulness even in small things, she said, led her to believe that even though as a child she felt a white lie could be as virtuous as truthfulness, as an adult she found it “impossible to see it from that point of view.”⁶

Byatt’s intensely personal encounter with Murdoch’s fiction and philosophy reverberates throughout her own writing, which was influenced greatly by Murdoch’s disdain for contemporary fiction’s “far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality” (“Against Dryness” 287). As a result, Byatt’s fiction seeks to portray “whole human beings ... [who] have passions” and who “do stupid things, and ... have children, and ... really do think quite hard about things,” and who are eventually “changed by what they think” (Tonkin 22). Further, Heusel describes Murdoch’s fiction as contributing “images of minds thinking – reflecting inner as well as outer experience” (1). Byatt’s depiction of thinking fictional human beings, who are “people to whom serious thought matters” (“Her Philosophical Essays” 27), echoes Murdoch’s belief and faith in the ability of literature to improve human life. Both writers’ belief that “fiction is generous, tolerant ... patient ... unjudging” (Todd, *A.S. Byatt* 5) is evident in their desire to portray “individuals ... [who] are free, independent of their author” (Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” 271).

Byatt and Murdoch, separated in age by seventeen years – not quite a full generation – and both outspoken on women’s issues – have been described as feminists. This is a label that both resist strenuously. Murdoch, annoyed at the idea of a separatist movement for women, requires her female protagonists to be in the midst of a human community where all are equal to one another, and states that as

women are more than fifty percent of the population ... they ought to stay right there in the middle of it rather than occupying some place which is going to be easy to call the sidelines ... I think there is a danger that sisterhood could be the enemy of objective truth ... one is so busy supporting and being supported by other women that one becomes cocooned against unpalatable realities and criticisms which might create growth. (Dusinberre, *Women Writers Talking* 187)

Murdoch’s views, forthright with regard to women’s education, were less supportive of other aspects of the feminist movement. She believed, as did many women of her generation, that there was not much difference between men and women, regarding them as equal in rights (Bellamy 129-40). Although she maintained that she did not seek to highlight the issue of gender in her work, many of her novels illustrate the political status of women and the marginal positions in which women are controlled, enslaved or imprisoned by males. Her protagonists are women who, in seeking to better themselves, must often escape stifling situations and end up seeking better educational or employment prospects. These women vividly bring to life Murdoch’s sentiment that, while not interested in women’s problems as such, she was “a great supporter of women’s liberation – particularly education for women” as a means “of getting women to join the human race” (Dooley 9). Also recoiling from a strident feminism, Byatt adopts a humanist approach by which males and females can work together to achieve a balance of power so that “both male and female characters learn to function together, without marginalizing, excluding or suppressing one another” (*Degrees* 297). Her writing portrays a world in which intelligent women are capable of studying, working, writing, maintaining relationships *and* looking after babies and keeping house, if

that is their wish, while a proportion of male characters are equally able and willing to balance the same tasks.

Iris Murdoch, long considered one of the twentieth-century's most influential modern writers, died on 8th February 1999, aged seventy-nine. Born in Dublin in 1919, she was an only child to Irish parents Hughes Murdoch and Irene Richardson, with whom she had an extremely happy childhood. Brought up in England, she graduated from Oxford (1942) before studying philosophy at Cambridge (1947-48). A long teaching career (1948-63) ensued at St Anne's College, Oxford University, where she lectured in Philosophy. Throughout her forty-five years of writing fiction, she was credited as being an heir to both Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare. She frequently cited George Eliot, Jane Austen, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Homer, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Shakespeare – whom she regarded as the greatest writer of all time – as influences on her writing. She wrote novels, philosophy, plays, an opera libretto, and poetry. She received honorary doctorates from major universities, was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1974, the Whitbread Award in the same year, and the Booker Prize in 1978. She was declared a Dame of the British Empire in 1987.

Her wartime experiences influenced her outlook dramatically. She joined the Communist Party in 1939, but soon disappointed with its ideology, she resigned. Initially employed as a civil servant at the British Treasury in London during the years 1944-1946, she worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in Austria and Belgium, helping refugees to survive the aftermath of the war. Murdoch met Sartre in the 1940s and became interested in existentialism, and her first published work in 1953 was the critical study, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*. Shortly after the war, she began studying philosophy at Cambridge under Ludwig Wittgenstein. Her first novel, *Under the Net*, was published in 1954. By the time of her death, Murdoch had published twenty-six novels which encompassed a broad range of philosophical, religious, Freudian, social, political, and literary issues.

Antonia Susan Byatt was born in 1936 in Sheffield and brought up in an intellectual family in which both parents were avid readers, their house full of books, and in which poetry was often recited over Sunday lunch. Byatt was aware at the age of five that her parents planned that she should attend Cambridge. Her mother, herself a Cambridge English graduate, bitterly resented giving up her teaching career in order to raise a family. While Byatt recalls trying to avoid “approaching her perpetual rage, depression and frustration” (Lawley, n. pag.), she also glimpsed her mother’s occasional warmth and, after her death, mourned “the woman who was not allowed to exist” (Lawley, n. pag.). Debilitating childhood asthma necessitated extensive bed rest during which Byatt read voraciously; Dickens, Scott, Austen, and Bronte nurtured her. She readily recited Tennyson’s “Morte d’Arthur,” “The Lady of Shalott,” “Hiawatha,” the works of Beatrix Potter, and parts of Jane Austen, and when not reading or inhabiting others’ fictional realms, she occupied her own “endless narrative in an endless other world in some unspecified past heroic time” (*Finding a Voice*, n. pag.). She frequently describes that other world as an escape from the tedium of everyday real life. In response to her pleasurable reading experiences, she created her own fictional worlds, describing her need to write as being born of the fear “that if the story ran out one would have to make do with this world” (*Finding a Voice*, n. pag.). Byatt is novelist Margaret Drabble’s sister.

Byatt married in 1959 and taught at London University from 1962-1971. Her first novel, *Shadow of a Sun*, was published in 1964. During the following six years, she published critical studies on Murdoch, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and another novel, *The Game*. She juggled teaching, family life, and writing until 1983, when she retired from academic life to write full-time. To date, Byatt has published eight novels, five collections of short stories, and five critical works, and was awarded the Booker Prize in 1990 for *Possession: A Romance*. She maintains a prominent public profile.

Byatt’s attitude towards writing is motivated by a belief that writing and reading are points on a circle: the two are inseparable, and essential to both is the pleasure principle.

Byatt maintains that there is little difference in terms of pleasure between a story being heard or one being told. Born with a need for sensual gratification, we journey on narrative quests in pursuit of discovery, understanding, and surprising conclusions, driven by curiosity and expectation of satisfaction. She describes her ideal vision of the process thus:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. (“The Reader as Writer” 6)

Similarly, Byatt notes that Wordsworth also believed that for the reader, “knowledge is pleasure; and when he has no pleasure, he has no knowledge” (“The Reader as Writer” 7).

Byatt makes it very clear that she believes reading is a pointless activity unless it stimulates an imaginative response and / or evokes emotions. Her multi-layered fiction demands no less than a preparedness to negotiate various strands of parody, irony, and satire, an array of critical theory, and the complex narrative threads of a mixture of genres. She believes that

[t]he nice thing about a novel is that everything can go into it, because if you’ve got the skill between sentence and sentence, you can change genre, you can change focus, you can change the way the reader reads. And yet you can keep up this sort of quiet momentum of narration. It is a wonderful form. You can do anything.

(Shulman, “Ant Heaps” 1)

Consequently, readers of Byatt’s fiction are assumed to be not only competent and intelligent, but also to be much more than just serene receivers of messages. They must be prepared for a literary work-out. Byatt invites readers into a literary labyrinth composed of a multiplicity of paths, and in which she provides helpful clues that readers must decipher for themselves. Her fiction does not, however, abandon readers to struggle on their own to find the path out, but rather offers them a variety of ways – some of which are more challenging than others – to reach the exit.

Byatt's poetic style, often heavily imbued with images and symbolism, is partly a reaction to her Puritan-influenced childhood during which language was required to be used precisely and plainly. Her Quaker school discouraged individual talent and giftedness, and maintained a typically Puritan distrust of the creative arts. Moral earnestness in all things was aspired to and encouraged. A similar climate prevailed during Byatt's Leavisite training at Cambridge, which insisted on "plainness, directness, the concrete, the morally clear and hard and tough" (Shulman 1), directly at odds with her growing need to write lengthy and elaborately literary prose narrative. Byatt, who chafed under such severe restrictions, agreed with Lionel Trilling's description of critics F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow as "Puritans who saw literature as a moral weapon" ("The Reader as Writer" 7). As a result of such strictures, Byatt was wary of the concept of literary pleasure until enlightened by Wordsworth's ideas in his 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Murdoch and Byatt are interested in what characters learn about their relations to others and the world. Their own life experiences, together with their attitudes towards what writing is and does, have led them to pursue through their fiction an ongoing exploration of the nature of reality and the nature of selfhood. Characters, selves in novels, are not real people but are constructs. Murdoch and Byatt are aware of this, as I am. While they know very well that the novel is not about "reality," the developments in literary theory from Murdoch's time to Byatt's reveal a progression in how each of them depicts reality. Byatt, in particular, is very much aware of those developments and uses them. Murdoch's and Byatt's novels are also interested in the lives of women. Both writers portray a "messy phenomenal" world (Murdoch, "The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited" 273) inhabited by individuals who, unlike the isolated Romantic self, are complex, valuable, and connected beings. I agree with Murdoch's and Byatt's view of the importance of fiction as a means of commenting on human relationships. Selfhood is achieved by becoming connected to others through "attention" (Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection" 327) – accurate vision – and implies moral obligation. Connection within community, in contrast to separation and preoccupation with

self, leads to degrees of freedom. According to feminist theories, women, the central characters of Byatt's and Murdoch's fiction, are more constrained than men, and are therefore the focus of this study. The labyrinth, together with the Bildungsroman, provides a paradigm for their experiences. They struggle to flee from restraint, seek purpose and agency in the world through interaction with others, escape a feminised Plato's Cave by learning to see more accurately, and emerge from the maze into an autonomous and independent existence in communities with others.

Byatt and Murdoch provide alternative models for female selfhood. Patricia Waugh, who has written at length on subjectivity as it is constructed within a modernist / postmodernist environment, notes that contemporary women find it difficult to identify with many twentieth-century female writers' impersonal "unitary concept of self ... the achieving, rational, autonomous, transcendent, successful 'self'" ("Postmodernism and Feminism" 30). The defining feature of contemporary selfhood is fear of relationship and communication, with postmodern individuals portrayed as autonomous and self-defined in a de-centred world that is fragmented and dispersed.⁷ Murdoch deplored this image of "a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world" ("Against Dryness" 290), insisting that fiction peopled with such unremarkable characters was "crystalline" (292).

In the post post-postmodern era it seems more appropriate than ever to examine once again and contemplate more deeply Murdoch's opinion of "the far too shallow and flimsy idea of the human personality" ("Against Dryness" 287). Her disparagement of this concept centres on the false premise that personal freedom is composed of the individual's right to seek pleasure selfishly and pursue indulgence irrespective of the need to consider the rights of others. Murdoch's preferred model of the individual, Levenson states, is "not the isolated self but a community of selves, 'a plurality of persons, who are quite separate and different individuals and who have got to get along together'" ("The Religion of Fiction" 573). Waugh argues that women's experience, instead of encouraging solipsistic attributes, has supported the development of the human qualities of co-operation, negotiation, nurturance, and an

awareness of self in relation to others, essential in fostering relationships. Waugh elaborates on the subsequent development of the subject as an individual capable of acting upon the world as a “partially autonomous” agent (“Postmodernism and Feminism”¹⁴) as follows:

contemporary feminist fictional writing ... has accommodated humanist beliefs in individual agency and the necessity and possibility of self-reflection and historical continuity as the basis of personal identity. It has modified the traditional forms of such beliefs, however, in order to emphasise the provisionality and positionality of identity, the historical and social construction of gender, and the discursive production of knowledge and power. What many of these texts suggest is that it is possible to experience oneself as a strong and coherent agent in the world, *at the same time* as understanding the extent to which identity and gender are socially constructed and represented. (13)

Waugh’s observation reveals, in fact, that a different vision of human possibility is evident in the fiction of many mainstream women writers. This vision promotes construction of the individual within a wide social network where intimacy, nurturance, merging, and connection are experienced and encouraged. Such a conception of self relies neither upon the individual’s maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other, but upon “a sense of identity which consists of accepting *both* connection *and* separation, so that neither is experienced as a threat” (emphasis added) (86). Waugh’s model requires movement towards a relational “both / and” situation in which an individual can simultaneously merge with and be independent of others. This type of association is described by Thelma J. Shinn as a “meronymic” relationship in which “two become one” yet “neither original is diminished” and “in which the three concepts both interact and continue to exist independently” (xiii).

A comparison of protagonists in Byatt’s and Murdoch’s fictions reveals progressive development and complexity where interpersonal relations are concerned. Murdoch’s fiction, for example, written in the four decades between the mid 1950s and early 1990s, proposes

that individuals ought to be less selfish and become more attuned to others, while Byatt's work, spanning forty years from 1964 to the present time, proposes that men and women can not only be more attuned to each other, but they can also be equals despite gender differences. Both writers' work portrays worlds inhabited by characters who gradually begin to understand that "Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 215), and who come to know themselves better through a realisation of the importance of others. Byatt's characters, though, have progressed from being individuals who are more aware of the needs of others and of themselves to become those who can balance their own needs with those of others, simultaneously maintaining their own autonomy and bolstering that of others. They actively pursue meronymic relationships.

Each of the protagonists discussed in this study has become an isolated self – held captive in some way, or prevented from pursuing an individual path of self definition or connection to others. Containment is either physical (restraint within a house, tower, castle or community), or psychological (restraint within a relationship such as the expectation of behaving according to others' rules, including social and cultural norms, allowing memories of the past to dominate, or reacting to the negative actions of others), with either method of restraint inhibiting a character's ability to step out, move on, change, and enjoy the freedom of choice and accompanying sense of independence. Aware of the restrictions that prevent her enjoyment of a full and satisfying life, each protagonist attempts to loosen the bonds placed upon her in order that she may seek connection with others in a different place and time. Connections forged with others are instrumental to sense of self. Byatt observes that peoples' lives, in their resemblance to a system of knots, can be either constraints or supports:

I see individuals now as knots in, say, the piece of lace that one of Vermeer's Lacemakers is making. Things go through us – the genetic code, the history of our nation, the language or languages we speak, the food we eat (whether it's adequate or inadequate), the constraints that are put upon us, the people who are around us. And

if we are an individual, it's because these threads are knotted together in this particular time and this particular place, and they hold ... and I see this knot as vulnerable ... We are connected, and we are also a connection which is a separate and unrepeated object. ("Identity and the Writer" 26)

The knot is an apt image for the women discussed in this study, providing an analogy for their relationships within community. Of vital importance to a woman's own development as an individual and to the lives of those she touches, a sense of connectedness with others is personally and communally empowering. Conversely, segregation or isolation from others creates a lack of personal interaction with other human beings, and steadily erodes an individual's sense of self identity and can unravel the knot.

While Byatt and Murdoch propose particular models of selfhood for their female protagonists, it is important to acknowledge that formation of identity transcends a rigid gender boundary. Felski and Friedman, who argue that gender is only one constituent of identity, suggest that it is timely that discussions of female identity incorporate more practical evaluations of equality and difference. Identity is observed to be fluid and relational, shifting from setting to setting and responding to different axes of power and powerlessness (Friedman 23). A "geography of identity" (19) allows for the complexity of an identity which is never fixed or stable but in a constant state of flux. The mingling of individuals as espoused by Shinn's meronymics is reflected in Friedman's description of "hybrid interfusions of self and other" (19) in which individuals, aware of their differences, affirm their commonality. This breaking down of boundaries is regarded by Felski as "a difference within sameness and a sameness within difference" (19) and bears remarkable similarity to Byatt's advocacy of a "both / and" subject position that imagines both independence and intimacy. Although Murdoch's fiction portrays women whose identity is circumscribed by social, economic, and personal restraints, Byatt's protagonists enjoy narrative possibilities and individual freedoms that were unavailable when Murdoch was writing. The analysis of Byatt's and Murdoch's characters' relationships and identities from a locational feminist perspective rather than by

simple foregrounding of gender allows for the charting of their progressive development and complexity.

Byatt's and Murdoch's women, held fast by their circumstances, are preoccupied with thoughts of departure or escape. A sense of alienation in marital, familial, social, or professional relationships acts as catalyst for a desire for flight. As protagonists contemplate journeys that they hope will bring personal independence, autonomy, and achievement of selfhood, they are faced with perplexing decisions. Journeys resemble labyrinths as travellers are faced with multiple paths, abrupt twists or changes of direction, poor visibility, disorientation, and fear.

Most characters experience extreme anxiety when faced with the choice of whether to maintain their status or embark on the journey. Others realise that stepping beyond their present boundaries requires a leap of imagination and immense courage. For some, the personal price is considered too great and is accompanied by a realisation that breaking free is impossible. Others, however, eagerly begin their arduous quests, bravely meet demands for personal growth and change, and occasionally glance backwards. Flight from one type of existence to another rapidly evolves into a journey of becoming during which the destination is not as important as what happens on the way. In effect, the journey – a search for self – is just part of a bigger journey during which the protagonist, in a constant state of flux or motion, never arrives at a given end point. The destination *per se* is not final. Andrew Gasiorek observes that “Knowledge is gained ... by undertaking the pilgrimage, not by reaching the destination” (“A Crisis of Metanarratives” 290).

Byatt and Murdoch reveal their interest in the formation of self within community by portraying characters' personal growth through increased awareness of others during the journey. Protagonists seek out and respond to opportunities to interact co-operatively with other individuals. The notion of particularity of individuals and the relationship of self to others is elaborated in detail by Waugh, who, like Felski and Friedman, argues that subjectivity occurs in the context of understanding one's situatedness in time and place, and

states that: “In order to function effectively as selves, we need to discover our histories (a sense of continuity in time), a sense of agency (how we can act upon the world) and to be able to reflect self-consciously upon what we take ourselves to be” (Harré 42). Waugh echoes Friedman’s contention that the self is no longer “an unchanging ahistorical essence or an isolated ego struggling aggressively and competitively to define itself as unique, different, separate” (14), and that subjectivity occurs in relationship with others.

Murdoch’s suspicion of ego led her to write her influential essay, “Against Dryness,” in which she criticised the modern novel’s obsession with the solitary figure and its attendant “brave, lonely ego” (Levenson, “The Religion of Fiction” 338). She pleaded for a return to depiction of a self that is not preoccupied with notions of “authenticity, sincerity [and] self-assertion” (338) and is located in community with others. Murdoch deplored the promotion of the concept that individuals are free and responsible beings. She argued that the substitution of “a facile idea of sincerity” for “the hard idea of truth,” would lead to the dangerous notion that the self was perceived as “solitary, adventurous and free” (“Against Dryness” 293), promoting the pursuit of selfish interests while ignoring the existence of the other.

Murdoch’s narratives examine the dangers of failing “to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own” (“The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited” 216). The retreat into individual fantasy, lack of acknowledgement of reality, and lack of adequate recognition of others, Murdoch argues, is dangerous and latently evil because inability to acknowledge others denies their existence as equally real and valuable individuals. Byatt’s fiction also depicts characters who, unable to see others properly, allow their fantasies to govern their behaviour. This delusory “falsifying veil” (Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good” 369) dulls protagonists’ vision, preventing genuine progress within the labyrinth. While Byatt and Murdoch allow their characters opportunities to confront their illusions in order to validate others and self, the choices they make are often foolishly selfish and shallow.

For instance, although Marian, in *The Unicorn* (1963), arrives at Gaze Castle eager to achieve something worthwhile on her own merits, she allows her imagination and idealistic outlook to colour reality. In deciding to save Hannah, Marian narrows her perspective, focusing only on her own desire, and not considering the opinions of other people or, indeed, the existence of other people. As Marian stumbles from one misguided action to another, convinced that her own perspective is the correct one, she becomes tangled up in a process of “blindness, furore, deceit, violence, inextricability” (Doob 233), gradually coming to realise that in escaping a false path in the maze, she inevitably sets herself blundering along another. Murdoch’s repeated portrayal of characters’ self-obsessed and exclusionary behaviour supports Gasiorok’s contention that her fiction is peopled with intelligent and well-meaning individuals who are nevertheless “ensnared in the nets of private fantasy” (243). The subjective falsifying veils through which characters regard the world prevent them from paying attention to others. In “Something Special” (1957), Yvonne’s persistence in daydreaming of a better life, and refusal to imagine a positive future with Sam prevent her from seeing the real life available to her. Yet in *The Bell* (1958) Dora’s veil of fantasy begins to lift when she visits her favourite Gainsborough painting in the National Gallery. On contemplation of the painting she loves and knows so well, she suddenly experiences an awakening of sorts during which she realises that other people, with all their individuality and differences from her, exist. The awareness that each person, whether likeable or not, is worthy of respect compels her to face the members of the community she disdains. Realising that she must return to Gloucestershire to confront the real lives of Imber’s inhabitants, she clarifies her vision when she contemplates the figures on the old abbey bell. Similarly, in *Possession* (1990), Roland and Maud, facing their false perceptions of each other, develop an empathy that grows into love and helps them find a path out of the traps or enclosures in which they have placed themselves and others.

While Murdoch argues for a sense of personal responsibility in a very particular way, Byatt observes the contemporary trend towards removal of individual autonomy and personal

responsibility. Byatt points out that a diminished sense of individual responsibility, a relinquishing of one's liability, is the result of arguments positing various agents of the times rather than the "autonomous mind" ("Identity and the Writer" 24) as being responsible for events of human history. She believes that "our epoch ... [is] in love with 'explanations that lower the status of the human being' ... [and that] tend to reduce the demands an individual is encouraged to make upon the spiritual or moral conduct of his life" (24). Byatt remarks that this situation is also evident in the field of art where "we like explanations that diminish the control of the artist over her or his work. And that diminish the kind of human personality that can be explored in fiction" (24). She laments the fact that contemporary understanding of self reflects a shallow image of human personality:

the character has gone, the personality has gone; what we are recording are disconnected series of gestures, tropisms ... depicting men as a series of gestures without thoughts, without this sense of coherent building of selves, without considered or constructed, or analysed histories – just a series of gestures on a kind of cultural carpet. ("Identity" 25)

Byatt's sentiments echo words uttered by Murdoch twenty-five years earlier in "Against Dryness":

We need to turn our attention away from the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism ... the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism ... Against the consolations of form ... we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character. (294)

While Murdoch proposes that the individual self can be seen as readily able to affect things, Byatt suggests that the individual self consequently be seen as unable to affect things. Both writers imply that either extreme is unhelpful. Instead, the impenetrable and unpredictable

self needs to replace the self that is easily explained or the self that is discounted as helpless and a series of gestures rather than a coherent, “built” individuality.

Byatt recounts her earliest memory of a conscious awareness of her self – what she calls “self-sufficiency ... one’s isolation ... a sense of being *balanced* in one’s relation to things” – and, echoing Wordsworth’s verse, explains it as a sensation of “calm existence” (“Identity”²⁴) that is lacking nowadays. She details her present dilemma of having to “think out” her own self in relation to the consciousness of others. While empathising with T.S. Eliot’s concept of the impersonality of the artist, she fears that if one has “no self, there are certain things you simply cannot say” (25). Byatt proposes that during the course of intellectual history, and in the twentieth-century in particular, there is a “sense that something has got driven out and has slowly got eroded or lost” (25). She deplores the changes in perception of the human individual that have led from a belief in the human being as an immortal soul “who had to deny himself in order that others should fill his horizons, and ... in the end, that God should,” to the “romantic vision of man as God,” through to a contemporary understanding of the individual as a “disconnected series of gestures, tropisms” (25). The loss, she states, is a communal one and believes the solution lies in Murdoch’s imperative that it is “our moral duty to imagine other human beings as separate, and having complex selves” (25).

Byatt and Murdoch value literature as a serious business that teaches as well as entertains. Murdoch maintained that “attention” to others was a moral imperative and vital to an individual’s achievement of degrees of freedom. Both authors’ fiction plays a significant role in enabling us to engage in dialogue with others through increasing our vision and expanding our awareness of individuals other than ourselves. The use of literature as a means of picturing and understanding human situations, Murdoch claimed, was “the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture” (“The Idea of Perfection” 326).

That the telling and hearing of stories is an essential aspect of human culture connecting us here and now irrevocably to the past and future is also supported by Byatt, who admits that after several decades of reflection, she is convinced that

far from being escapist, stories are as necessary to human beings as water and food and exercise. Stories ... bear a particular relation to our sense of time, of the span of our own lives, and of the time of our ancestors and descendants, stretching before and after us ... Stories are not an idiotic form of imposing ourselves on ‘chaos’ or the ‘random’ – they are a way of understanding and representing time and knowledge. (“The Reader as Writer” 13)

She argues further that, “You actually learn a lot about life from books. You learn a lot about love before you ever get there. You learn at least as much about love from books as you do from watching your parents” (Miller 2). Literature, Byatt implies, enables connections through exploration of feelings, thoughts, ideas, hopes, and dreams. Consequently, readers become pilgrims on imaginary journeys. Byatt’s and Murdoch’s literary labyrinths, challenging readers into confrontation with their innermost fears and desires, provide the means for emphasising a belief in the need for attention and a sense of connection to others, irrespective of time, place, or individual circumstance. The writers’ complex literary strategies, characters, and perplexing events, require readers’ active and sustained engagement so that a successful negotiation of the textual labyrinth can take place.

While literature does not spell out answers, it can help bring to life truths that are “paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual interpretation,” providing “sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give” (Levenson, “Iris Murdoch” 577). That contemporary parables and stories are woven throughout fiction and call for an active response in the real world is argued by Doreen Maitre, who believes that “We learn about reality and adjust our perceptions of it by reading fiction, which discloses that ‘the actual world is not completely intelligible, that it is constantly and incessantly open to revision and that all certainties are ephemeral’ ” (17). Murdoch also declared it was

worthwhile to acknowledge “the importance of parables and stories as moral guides” (“Vision and Choice” 90). Similarly, Daniel Taylor reflects that literature “whether fictional, mythic, historical, or autobiographical” (*The Healing Power of Stories* 99) allows readers to imagine how certain ways of living might work in their own lives. Whether or not similarity exists between characters and their readers is irrelevant. “For stories to work,” states Taylor, “it is enough that I am human – and willing to listen” (99).

Byatt’s and Murdoch’s protagonists find that their pursuit of selfhood – “the most individualised of identities” – is “absolutely social” (Jenkins 50). Several characters’ risky journeys lead them to communities in which a particular type of social conformity is required and in which they learn painful lessons about paying attention to others. Their experiences help them to clarify conflicting attitudes they hold towards self and others. As part of this process, protagonists become psychologically engaged in a series of movements that borrow from Plato’s myth of the Cave, “including the centrifugal motion up toward the light and the centripetal motion down toward the dark of the psyche” (Heusel 239). As a result, protagonists usually experience revelation of some moral truth, or heightened personal consciousness that instigates personal behavioural change. Inevitably, degrees of freedom, rather than the absolute freedom, of the isolated, Romantic self, are attained through the compromise and negotiation required as personal needs and newfound freedoms are balanced with community and neighbourhood responsibilities.

Current sociological theories concur with the notion that selfhood is the product of interaction with others in a wide social environment. Jenkins, writing on an individual’s sense of self, types of relationships, and the effects on society of both, argues that selfhood cannot occur in isolation. His observations about the interaction of self with others and how this impinges on formation of a person’s sense of identity echo Byatt’s and Murdoch’s ideas:

Individual identity – embodied in selfhood – is not meaningful in isolation from the social world of other people ... selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed ... ‘self’

[is] an ongoing ... synthesis of [internal] self-definition and the [external] definitions of oneself offered by others. (20)

Jenkins' argument that "[p]aying attention to others is at the heart of the self from the earliest age" (49) supports the personal interactions portrayed in Byatt's and Murdoch's fictional worlds. He expresses succinctly the views on attention held by Simone Weil which were admired so greatly by Murdoch and helped to shape her philosophy about moral obligation towards others. Byatt observes that:

"Attention" is a word used by Simone Weil to describe the constantly renewed attempt to see things, objects, people, moral situations, truly as they are, uncoloured by our own personal fantasies or needs for consolation. Attention is in this sense a willed, thoughtful, selfless contemplation ... It is an actual experience of freedom ... the realisation that although swayed by passions we are also capable of rational conduct. It is such attention which causes Miss Murdoch ... to be able to write 'Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action'. (*Degrees of Freedom* 298)

Byatt interprets Murdoch's adaptation of Weil's imperative as an opportunity to act according to an accurate vision of the other rather than emotion. Consequently, Byatt and Murdoch portray their protagonists participating in communities that help develop their ability to see others clearly. Conversely, they learn more about self in the midst of other human beings where "the conversation of gestures" (43) not only provides information and knowledge about others but also reveals the self.

Byatt's and Murdoch's characters seek Ariadne's thread through their respective labyrinths. As women trying to become more independent and autonomous, they are not always immediately likeable, but often irritatingly selfish and egocentric. Yet despite their faults, each is involved in ongoing struggles with the moral dilemmas of daily life to which they seek answers. They seek the opportunity to escape oppression or despair, and they desire

to live fulfilling lives in relationship with others. The women come from various stages of life and from diverse backgrounds. While critics frequently observe that a common feature of Byatt's and Murdoch's narratives is the "resourceful but strangely oppressed young women" (Taylor, "Farewell to the Virgin" n.pag.), I hasten to add that the novels and short stories contain equally resourceful and oppressed, no-longer-quite-so-young women as well. Prior to beginning their journeys, which are physical as well as metaphoric, each woman considers the path, if any, she intends to follow.

A contributing factor to this study is my own status and roles as a woman in the twenty-first century, following the paths of daughter, sister, mother, wife, friend, teacher, and student. Balancing several roles at once is a skill all women must learn in order to survive in today's world – a skill usually learned by necessity rather than choice. A woman's survival in constricting domestic and professional worlds ought to be balanced by time and space for herself. Yet this is a labyrinthine task. Frequently, the needs of others compromise personal needs. Maintaining a firm grasp of a guiding thread is fraught with difficulties. The thread can tangle, split, and may sometimes be involuntarily relinquished during a woman's meanderings in the maze of life. The experiences of Byatt's and Murdoch's characters as they pursue Ariadne's thread mimic real life. Mindful of Murdoch's conviction that "art is about the world, it exists for us standing out against a background of our ordinary knowledge" ("Literature and Philosophy" 12), I am interested in Byatt's and Murdoch's portrayal of protagonists who occupy a messy phenomenal world that has startling similarities to the world I occupy. Consequently, my study charts the progress of characters learning to become part of a community of selves while juggling a number of contradictory positions and maintaining their own integrity and sense of self.

The restraint of women is a common feature in Byatt's and Murdoch's fiction. Their narratives contain frequent references to a range of enclosed spaces in which women experience emotional and / or physical pain and prevention from pursuing their own choices or decisions. Male characters, as the custodians of keys, designate whether particular areas

are to be entered or not. The necessity for lock-and-key is not broached by any of the characters, and this confers further unspoken power upon patriarchal figures. Female protagonists are shown rebelling, often covertly, against situations in which others are seemingly content, but despite such censure they continue to plan their escape. Flight from enclosure leads into a labyrinth of trials and challenges that, despite its many false paths, contains a promise of freedom.

The ambiguity created by the labyrinth's complex spatial construction – internal and external – suggests it can be simultaneously a place of knowledge and enlightenment, or a prison. Greek myths contain an account of the creation of the labyrinth at Crete, describing how King Minos' wife, Pasiphae, fell in love with the King's prized white bull. Minos was shamed by the product of his wife's illicit passion, the Minotaur, ordering Daedalus to build a complex set of tunnels and corridors under the palace in which to conceal the Minotaur. When Theseus arrived to fight the monstrous and dangerous Minotaur, Minos' daughter Ariadne fell in love with him. In order to ensure he survived the quest, she gave him a ball of thread to help him retrace his steps and exit the labyrinth.

Myths help explain the world, making its phenomena intelligible. Byatt believes that individuals adopt the myths and fictions of their ancestors to help make sense of their own experiences or to make them more exciting. In a universe full of uncertainties and mysteries, myths contain human elements that help us feel we can understand its perplexities. Throughout the ages, the myth of the labyrinth has conveyed a number of different meanings or images, for example, Penelope Doob's contention that "labyrinth" may be derived from the common medieval etymology "labor intus," "difficulty going in" (80), that suggests labyrinthine impenetrability or inextricability. Similarly, medieval belief held that the narrow labyrinthine path was the one path to God and that those who strayed from it would be overtaken by darkness. Contemporary understanding interprets the labyrinthine pattern as symbolic of interior journeys and this analogy is adopted in a range of fictional texts.⁸

Byatt's and Murdoch's characters move tentatively into the labyrinth. Characters embark on an essentially solitary journey to escape from constraining circumstances for a better future. The Murdochian world, observes Deborah Johnson, is an insecure world where individuals feel they have little or no control and are vulnerable. While Heusel observes that the characters' lives in Murdoch's universe can be "circular and empty" (107) in "her usual moral labyrinth" (285), Christine Wick Sizemore argues that Murdoch "employs the labyrinth in more positive ways than most modernist and contemporary male novelists do" (107). Although it is "a world where the old stable social and ethical systems no longer provide security," Johnson believes that Murdoch's fiction "offers a surprisingly fresh and radical vision of the human [and ... in many ways, specifically female] struggle both for self-definition and for connection with others" (112). Entry into the labyrinth is a "voluntary disorientation," and as Faris points out, "one chooses to enter ... but once inside, one is no longer entirely in control. The ambiguity ... is between choice and chance, control and bewilderment" (*Labyrinths* 6). Once the protagonists choose to enter, they are impelled to continue negotiating their path out: there is no possibility of turning back.

Byatt's and Murdoch's characters engage in a struggle to overcome illusory obsessions and reach reality. Most manage to achieve, at the very least, moments of insight on their pilgrimages through changes in perspective, "juxtaposition of incidents" (Heusel 156), and attention to others. Gasiorek, however, notes that some of Murdoch's characters do not progress at all on the pilgrimage from appearance to reality – either failing to start on their journey or losing their way before travelling very far. He believes that Murdoch's work is characterised by a tension between "her wish to portray perceptive, self-aware individuals and her fear that the majority of people are ensnared in the nets of private fantasy and / or cultural shibboleths" (243). This tension is manifested in characters' confusion and bewilderment, common among those searching for the right path in a maze of possibilities.

The labyrinth is a dangerous place and its imagery is often negative. There may or may not be a dangerous centre. It is a paradox that the labyrinth is simultaneously an

enclosure and a space of freedom in which the traveller is at once potentially a victim and a victor. Protagonists often seem to regress and wander in circles, achieving little more than minor degrees of progress. Enrico Garzilli, identifying labyrinth wanderers as pilgrims, explains their predicament as follows:

Not only does the pilgrim find that his path becomes labyrinthine because of the maze outside, but also because the maze is within him. Many times the path seems to become circular as it unfolds before him. The journey and the pilgrim, the dream and the dreamer become one as man explores a circle whose circumference seems to be everywhere and whose center seems to be nowhere. This circle is himself; it finds its many surfaces in consciousness, in other people, in his language, his personae, and his dreams. Enclosed in two interlocking circles, a symbol for the labyrinth as well as for infinity, man learns that his real self is not simply discovered but created. He remains forever in the act of creating himself, in dialogue with others, moving on from stage to stage of self.⁹

Characters attempting to trace Ariadne's thread may become lost as they negotiate meandering paths, obstructions, dead ends, wrong turns, and enclosures. Thwarted, their struggles inside the maze may often seem no more than aimless wanderings as they retrace steps and deal with the fear of attempting to move onward. Faris likens the wanderer's plight to that of Dante who endures all sorts of difficulties and tests to progress from darkness to light – a theme reminiscent of Murdoch's use of Plato's cave allegory.

The cave, related to the labyrinth as part of the underground system of tunnels and enclosures, is an essentially labyrinthine space harbouring a potential confrontation – enclosure, and ultimately, enlightenment – freedom. Byatt and Murdoch incorporate a feminised allegory of the cave in two ways.¹⁰ An adaptation of Plato's myth – which describes seeing the true shapes of things free from the toils of earth – reflects women's experiences in particular, as they struggle to discern reality from their fantasies or obsessions. The imagery of the mirror and reflections necessitates that protagonists must confront

themselves as others see them, and through contemplation, develop attention towards others. This attention to others in turn enables characters to become aware of themselves and to move forward in the maze.

Protagonists' decisions to undertake the labyrinthine journey indicate a desire to live out of the shadows of fantasy, to be involved in a "real" and fulfilling life. Yet this can only take place when characters confront the minotaur of self-centredness. Such a confrontation causes pain and confusion as the women's eyes are opened to reality and they understand that their personal fantasies and illusions are mere shadows. Attention to others leads to involvement in dialogue and community. A subsequent awareness that self-development only occurs through connection with others ensues. Interaction with others, also a requirement of the Bildungsroman, is an arduous quest and process of self-growth. True progress is not made unless the protagonist engages in an ongoing co-operation with others, negotiating personal freedoms with responsibilities.

Physical environments and geographical landscapes provide more than just mere background for action in Byatt's and Murdoch's fictions. The labyrinth is everywhere – physical and psychological / moral – and towers as places of imprisonment are common. These settings can carry symbolic relevance or incorporate extensive mythical allusions. They are inextricably linked to characters' actions or thoughts, frequently influencing profound spiritual or emotional experiences leading to self-realisation. Female characters flee from their enclosures to find their own way in new surroundings. Movement from enclosure to possible freedom occurs everywhere, yet the city takes on extraordinary importance for most female characters, providing diverse opportunities for positive growth and degrees of freedom. Traditionally, male British writers portray the city negatively, observes Sizemore, noting that women writers generally present it in a more favourable light (25). There is a progression between Murdoch's and Byatt's portrayal of cities. Murdoch's female characters may find the city a place of confusing relationships, but despite this they can experience connection or enlightenment there, and many freely return to the city following their

labyrinthine ordeals elsewhere. Byatt's depiction of the city, while it makes confronting and demanding emotional requirements on protagonists, also provides extremely complex networks of connection with rich and varied means of self-development not available elsewhere.

The notion that it is possible for an urban network to consist of harmonious communities is not a new one. Historically, cities, communities, and civilization are inextricably linked. The word "city," denoting a large town, evolved from the Latin "civis" meaning a citizen. Being a citizen implied responsibility, power and privilege. "Civis" was in turn derived from "civitas," which meant community, and was so applied to the tribes of Gaul. The definition of "civilization" was "the creation of human culture by clustering together" in the city (Leslie Fiedler, "Mythicising the City" 113). In pre-modern times when the city was often seen as woman, goddesses were their appointed protectors from the wildness of nature. As a consequence, cities were seen as places of protection and community. Augustine of Hippo discusses the idea that communities ought to be social and harmonious entities. He draws on classical philosophy and Christianity in order to arrive at an ideological model for a site of achievable human happiness, defining such a place as one where people with common interests and values co-exist harmoniously. Augustine emphasizes the belief that a "happy life is social, and ... society is essential to happiness" (Baker, xxiii, xxv). Feminist theories also propose that an ideal society can come about through community interaction and negotiation. That individuals bear responsibility to the group is articulated in Augustine's belief that the self is obliged to establish an "ordered concord" (Augustine 695) with one's neighbours so that all can live in peace. One's first neighbours, he points out, are one's family. If there is no peace within the family unit, he argues, it will be difficult to compensate for this elsewhere. Augustine's proviso for community equilibrium is explicit: "the house ought to be the beginning or element of the city," therefore, "domestic peace has a relation to civic peace" (695).

Murdoch uses a community and a labyrinthine building in a rural setting in *The Bell* and *The Unicorn*, but the city remains a place of real life. The labyrinth in “Something Special” is a city. While the image of the labyrinth is particularly apt in its association with cities – Garzilli observes that “the connections between the labyrinth, the city, and the self are certain, but mysterious” (117) – it can be applied just as effectively to rural surroundings. Murdoch’s fictional city has been described by Sizemore as a labyrinth that, although it contains the possibility of redemption, frequently lacks a “sense of connectedness” (7, 108). My study includes two protagonists who escape from a disappointing or difficult personal situation in the city where “some form of loss or discontent” may have jarred them “away from the home or family setting” (Hader n. pag.) to a rural location where they hope to find freedom in idyllic surroundings, away from the city’s distractions. Although my study makes reference to certain aspects of those city theories elaborated by Christine Wick Sizemore, Diana Festa-McCormick, and Susan Merrill Squier, certain aspects of these theories apply equally to the relational lives being led by characters in rural, rather than urban, surroundings. For example, Murdoch’s characters Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* and Marian Taylor in *The Unicorn*, located in religious and extended family communities respectively, find themselves negotiating uniquely challenging sets of physical and psychological spaces. The isolated communities, rambling buildings, enclosed spaces, and open areas beyond communal walls to which they venture demand as much resilience and fortitude as the navigation of an urban labyrinth.

Dora is a city dweller who finds Imber Court’s physical surroundings and community alienating at first. Despite the allusion in her name to the countryside – “Green field” – and her affinity with elements of nature, Dora is unable to enter the landscape until she proves she is able to face its challenges and can move about in it freely. Flight from the city into Gloucestershire’s rural landscape is intended as a last-ditch effort to revive her estranged marriage to Paul. With time, Dora’s ambivalence towards the community changes into profound respect for their attempts at goodness. During her temporary stay, she comes to

terms with her own perceived inability to exercise agency in the world. She rescues a young girl from drowning, learns to swim, and subsequently makes choices to avoid her own metaphorical drowning in a constricting and suffocating relationship. The outdoors represents freedom from restraint by others as she learns to enjoy wandering about the gardens, venturing along country lanes into town, and observing the lake's tranquil surface. Her time at Imber prepares her for a fresh start in life, a figurative rebirth, allowing her to grasp the thread that enables an exit from her labyrinthine existence with Paul into a new life elsewhere.

It is relatively unimportant whether a woman is in an urban or rural environment, so long as attention to others occurs. Byatt's and Murdoch's female protagonists do not experience domestic peace or harmony with their families, their friends, or society. Dora does not get on well with her mother, and is estranged from her husband, who dominates her. Marian, unable to find her niche in life, feels alienated from her peers. Yvonne feels restless and is encouraged by her uncle to leave her mother's home. Gillian, deserted by her husband, also feels betrayed by her ageing body. Patricia is bereft on her husband's sudden death. Christabel locks herself away in a tower, and Maud takes to her shiny box in another tower. Frederica feels completely misplaced in the Reivers' rural world and shares neither their interests nor their values. Her relationship with her immediate family is also damaged. While Frederica moves out beyond her husband and his family into a community in which values are shared, other characters leave their domestic situations and discover through interaction and attention to others that peace and harmony co-exist.¹¹

Byatt uses the city as a place of freedom in *Babel Tower* (1996), "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" (1994), and "Crocodile Tears" (1998), in contrast to the country. Characters move to the city in the hope of living a less restrictive life, to reconnect with others, to establish a more meaningful life through work, to start new relationships, or resurrect old friendships or ties. They look forward to better opportunities for creativity and personal fulfilment yet sometimes such optimistic beginnings do not end in happier

circumstances for the characters involved. In spite of this, the protagonists' journeys from one place to another resemble spiritual quests, or a search for that which is elusive – personal freedom, autonomy, happiness, fulfilment or increased self-knowledge – but frequently attained in unexpectedly painful, yet profound, ways.

The city can be a place of new beginnings for women. It takes on extraordinary importance as a place for the possibility of positive growth and achievement. It is seen almost constantly as a place of self-discovery despite the concepts of rootlessness and displacement apparent at its heart. Although Sizemore writes of Murdoch's portrayal of the city as a labyrinth, observing that it is frequently confusing and hostile (119), Festa-McCormick sees it "as a protagonist in fiction, projecting visions and moulding visions" and providing "ever-renascent hopes" (15). Certainly, many Bildungsromans "seem to insist on the autonomous status of female experience" (Heron 3) by portraying female characters' ventures into the city specifically as release from patriarchal constraint. Women arrive in the hope of finding employment, accommodation, and new relationships in a space in which they are free to wander and find their own way, despite potential dangers or disappointments. Susan Merrill Squier concedes that "whether city experience is pleasurable or painful" for female characters "depends, in large part, on whether it allows them access to creativity and autonomy" (4). Martz observes that Murdoch, whose portrayal of the city comprises human relationships rather than just physical features, values "a recognition that our surroundings consist primarily of other individual[s] ... in all their vulnerable and frequently pitiful weaknesses" and that "through the quality of human affection ... human nature finds a way of vindication and possible redemption" (57).

As female protagonists stumble into situations that demand co-operation, negotiation, and understanding, they are led towards opportunities that they may not have chosen of their own accord. New paths and channels become available to them. Sizemore contends that the feminine city is a network in which the "success of city life ... depends upon human interrelationship," and shares with psychologists Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and

Jessica Benjamin (25) the view that the city can encourage qualities of nurturance, responsibility for others, flexible ego boundaries, and interconnectedness. She observes that the female spatial concepts of matrix, web, and labyrinth occur frequently in the writing of female British authors describing women's experiences in the city.¹² By comparison, the inherited male imagery of cities is rigid and "leaves little room for people" (11). As Frederica finds, a network of connections opens to her after she comes to London and her friends band together to help her find work and a suitable place to live. Eventually, she balances several jobs, finds a new home, and becomes part of an enriching and diverse economic, social, and racial community. Heron's comment that "the city transforms the individual self into the social self through a sense of urban empathy – a kinship" (5-6) with others, whether similar to oneself or not, is borne out in Frederica's experiences.

Both Byatt and Murdoch are aware of the problems of referentiality. Byatt admits that the problems of the real in fiction and the ability of language to describe it adequately are matters that have occupied her as a writer for more than twenty years. Because both women believe that the notion of how reality is portrayed takes precedence over what exactly that reality is, the precise use of language is a matter of great importance to them. Words must, after all, name reality, and for Murdoch and Byatt, the art of literature holds a grave moral responsibility based on perception of objective truth. Murdoch has often spoken about her belief that artists hold responsibility for conveying the truth through their creations. While it ought not to slavishly imitate or copy, Murdoch argued, it should hold " 'the mirror up to nature' " ("Literature and Philosophy" 12) in order to invite recognition of a reality beyond our own, raising our awareness of others and how they live. This was also a major concern for George Eliot, from whom both writers claim to draw inspiration. Byatt's and Murdoch's fictions, which reveal the legacy of nineteenth-century realists such as Eliot and Austen, also incorporate aspects of postmodernism and metafiction. Both Murdoch and Byatt imply the constructedness of their fiction by making extensive use of symbol and allusion, reference to genres such as the gothic, narrative self-awareness on the part of the protagonist, the idea of

being caught in a plot, and the use of names. A marked progression is evident from Murdoch to Byatt in the use of increasingly metafictional techniques.

Murdoch regards art as one of the goods that can encourage a positive moral development throughout a person's lifetime, deeming the novel as the form "most linked to moral and spiritual experience" (Nicol 6) and best enabling the realisation of a reality outside ourselves. While Plato, whose *Republic* shaped her ideas, argued that art was false representation and denounced artists as purveyors of lies, Murdoch concedes that although some art is a self-consoling fantasy, even a shallow experience can have beneficial moral effects on the spectator as it invites selfless observation. Dora's "awakening" to the reality of others in the National Gallery is an example of the beginning of a process of such moral development. Murdoch argues that an individual's contemplation of something beautiful temporarily removes sense of self from one's consciousness. Contemplation of aesthetic beauty, because it decreases introspection, is a source of the Good. Great art, believes Murdoch, encourages an increased awareness of the existence of others, in turn fostering a love of and increased attention towards them.

For Murdoch and Byatt, literature's purpose is to invite recognition of a reality beyond our own – to raise our awareness of others. In a discussion of philosophy's generally poor regard for art, Murdoch draws attention to the disagreement between the views held by Plato and Schopenhauer. While she points out that Schopenhauer's view of art tends to elevate it to a rather "lofty" intellectual and moral perspective, she concurs with his opinion that it is engaged in "an attempt to overcome the self and see the world."¹³ Above all, Murdoch argues, "art is about the world, it exists for us standing out against a background of our ordinary knowledge" ("Literature and Philosophy" 12).

Byatt and Murdoch, whose fiction portrays complex and painful moral issues being played out in characters' lives, draw inspiration from nineteenth-century fiction, and in particular from writers such as George Eliot, "who produced thick social fictions that never forgot 'that other people exist' " (Levenson, "The Religion of Fiction" 338), and Jane

Austen.¹⁴ Murdoch's views on the importance of the writer's art, in fact, closely resemble those of George Eliot, frequently expressed in the 1850s and 1860s. Eliot's review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters, Vol. III*, published in 1856, for example, was a reflection of her own ambitions for an unerring honesty in art:

The truth of infinite value that he teaches is 'realism' – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. (Byatt and Warren xvii)

Austen wrote penetrating observations of the behaviour of the gentry and middle class that, although marked by romanticism, allowed her to transmit moral judgements through her characters' conduct. Despite Byatt's and Murdoch's vocal admiration for the classic novels written between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, neither writer attempts to duplicate and revive the original form, preferring to "learn from [its] tradition" (Byatt, *Passions* 166). They attempt, instead, to retain those features they deem most valuable and appropriate to their own historical moment. An example is both writers' portrayal of flawed and contradictory characters undercut by a serious irony that reveals characters' hypocrisies and delusions. Yet Murdoch insists on the vital need to retain sympathy and respect for all characters – the "real, impenetrable human person" (Byatt, *Degrees* 5) – the rendering of whom ought to be the novel's chief concern.

Both writers' fiction is allied to the family of realism¹⁵ and demonstrates its inheritance of the realist tradition of Eliot and Austen while incorporating an acute awareness of contemporary life. Gasiorek, like Byatt and Murdoch, believes that fictional representation of the real world is vitally important, and notes that the problem of representation now included as part of fiction's subject matter is considered to be "one of postmodernism's key characteristics" (*Post-War British Fiction* 13). The metafictionality or self-reflexivity of many post-war texts simultaneously depicts an external world while simultaneously looking inward at how this depiction is achieved. The incorporation of literary theory and criticism

into fictional narratives also creates self-referential and recursive texts, with several characters frequently and self-consciously pondering the narratives, comparing their own fictive natures to the nature of the real world. An example in Byatt's and Murdoch's fiction is the characters' sense of being in a plot, believing they cannot control it. For instance, Marian, Yvonne, Roland, Patricia, and Gillian all reflect on the disconcerting notion that they are fictional constructs whose fate has already been written. The move from imitation of reality towards an implicit fictional act of construction, argues Gasiorek, is a necessary contemporary development in realism.

While Murdoch is recognised as Byatt's literary mother, Byatt herself has come to accept this relationship, having recently being described as Murdoch's "self-appointed heir" (Craig 20). The acknowledgement of such a literary relationship makes it possible to trace a progression in complexity and development between the two writers. While Murdoch sustains an interest in philosophy, identity, and morality, Byatt is interested in those, too, and also in literary theory and other theories. Byatt's technique allows her to produce more complex layering than Murdoch can through a multiplicity of genres, parallel texts (such as *Babbletower*) and texts about the explication and understanding of texts (*Possession*). Byatt consciously developed her technique; for example, *Possession* is a technical preparation for *Babel Tower*.

One of the ways in which the progression between Murdoch and Byatt is evident is in their attitudes towards readers' involvement in bringing meaning to a work of fiction. Both writers maintain that readers and writers cooperate in that process. Yet, while Murdoch acknowledges that readers can be co-creators if their participation falls within certain moral parameters, Byatt, who prefers to literalise the reader's input, maintains a far more open-ended and egalitarian attitude toward reader involvement. Both writers require, however, that readers be open-minded and prepared to accommodate perspectives and attitudes distinctly different from their own if they are to negotiate a successful path through the literary maze. New information must be collected and added to existing beliefs and new skills developed so

that paths not previously explored can be traversed. As readers undertake these new and demanding journeys, they experience self-growth and connection with others.

Murdoch asserts that all individuals, as natural story-tellers, are “literary artists” (“Art is the Imitation” 252). Storytelling is an essential human activity practised in order to evaluate “the world that surrounds us” and to give us “a sense of our own identity, our own separateness, our own self-being” (253). Yet while the imagination that comes into play when reading is “a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and express the truth” (255), the dangers of self-delusion are also ever-present and can allow consolations of fantasy – “an emotional substitute for reality” (246). Murdoch’s wariness of literature’s tendency towards “wish-fulfilment” leads her to warn against the “collusion” and “ready fantasy of the writer and the reader” (251). Although Murdoch maintains that writers are creators, she concedes that readers of fiction “are offered the choice of following or not following the emotional paths traced out by the author” (254). Her stress on the reader’s choice of how to read points to her conviction that while literature “tells us things and teaches us things” (257), it is up to the reader to discern correctly the “moral pleasures” (257) contained therein. Although acknowledging the necessity for readers to complete the creative act of novel writing, she cautions that an appropriate balance of imaginative engagement and detachment is necessary:

The work of art, depending as it does upon the reader or spectator for its existence, is an appeal, a demand. The reader must too be the creator of the novel; his continuing to read it ‘properly’ ... involves him in a sustained act of faith. The imagination must be enchanted, but ... not too enchanted ... An excessive detachment or suspicion will fail to create the work at all. (*Sartre* 69)

Murdoch makes it clear that while readers ought not to become too self-conscious, with a freedom to perceive a work of art in the manner they choose, they also have a duty to exercise correct moral judgement. Yet, irrespective of readers’ abilities, Murdoch implicitly upholds the writer’s obligation to portray the fictional world with “objectivity, impartiality, truth, justice” (“Art is the Imitation” 254).

Byatt maintains, however, that readers and writers alike share mutual responsibility for the construction of meaning within a text. Like Murdoch, Byatt believes that “stories are related to our perceptions” and “bear a particular relation to ... the span of our own lives” (“The Reader as Writer” 13). Although she maintains that writing is a means of “discovering the world” (“Identity and the Writer” 23), she also adds that “the pleasure of reading is narrative discovery” (“Choices” n. pag.). Clearly, it is the reader’s imagination on reading fiction that ultimately brings the reader’s constructed “second world to life” (“The Reader as Writer” 17). Byatt argues that as a storyteller, she can only put into action what readers must complete for themselves, because “The tale is always stronger than the teller” while “the imaginations of readers ... [help to] create and recreate worlds, old and known in part, new and unknown in part ... All great storytelling must retell old and shared stories” (Pearce 2). There are two points here. The first is that readers construct narratives as they read, so that each reader’s tale is an individual construction. The second is that readers use what they already know to construct their story, often stories that they bring to the act of reading. These are sometimes extremely widespread narratives, like the story of Cinderella, and Byatt leads us to expect such a story by adding “A Romance” to the title of *Possession*.

For Byatt, “reading and writing ... [are] points on a circle” (*Passions* 1, 2) connecting the pleasures of narrative. She explains that her own need to live in a brighter “other world” (“The Reader as Writer” 5, 6) in which real life could be made more tolerable is only met by writing in response to her reading. Byatt contends that while people “need to imagine persons and worlds that do not exist” in order to answer philosophical questions about life (“The Reader as Writer” 5), the importance of “reading for pleasure” remains of “central importance” (9). Her conviction of the need for readers to participate actively in construction of imaginary worlds leads her to comment that “Both language and narrative ... invite the reader to join them, to add to them, to make other arrangements and patterns” (6). While Byatt notes the rise in literary criticism as a means of discussing literature, she deplores what she recognises as a corresponding loss of enjoyment by readers “in the work and the

puzzling” (9). Clearly, she believes that neither the author’s sovereign authority nor the death of the author provides a satisfying alternative for readers. A vital link between the writer and the reader has been broken, and she argues her conviction of a third way – not simply either reader or writer but both reader and writer – in which both parties share the creative act. What is important to Byatt, in contrast to Murdoch’s need for moral judgement, is that readers bring their own experiences and understandings to a narrative and help construct a unique imagined world.

Byatt’s assertion that the text is an object that cannot take on its own reality until it is being read by a receptive reader is also maintained by Wolfgang Iser, who states that “what brings a literary work into existence is the convergence of text and [real] reader” (275).

Byatt’s preference for writers and readers working together to achieve narrative coherence is echoed in Iser’s Reception Theory, which posits that the acts of writing and reading are parts of the process of mutual construction and empowerment. The reading process is a dynamic form of successful communication between text and reader in which constant feedback of information occurs. An on-going system of modification of signifieds takes place as the reader, acquiring new information from the text, self-corrects and fits it into a continuously evolving overall picture.

As well as the physical and social labyrinth in the novels and short stories, the attitudes of Murdoch and Byatt to the reader, and Iser’s theory as an elaboration of it, provide yet another labyrinth: the reader’s self-correcting journey through a text that cannot be perceived all at once. Readers, resembling Thesean explorers, emulate characters’ journeys through various twists and turns towards the labyrinth’s centre in which either treasure or Minotaur will be found. The process of textual meaning-making is very like the wanderer’s gradual and incremental attempt to discern the true path: new passageways and their ends must not only be incorporated into the schema of paths that have already been explored but also remembered for future use. Iser believes that as readers develop certain expectations of a text, and that as they read positive or negative responses occur, and new expectations are

aroused. This process is explained as “a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories” (Selden, *The Theory of Criticism* 217). Iser asserts that this is not an action of the text, but rather something that readers do themselves. This gradual and incremental meaning-making process is reader-driven, and regarded by Iser as a valuable process because it enables a constant restructuring of an aesthetic object. It resembles a wanderer’s progress through the maze. The experience of each reader will be different, but is potentially very rich, especially with Byatt. Changes in the position of women also make Byatt’s expectations of her readers different from those of Murdoch.

Progression from Murdoch to Byatt is also evident in Byatt’s complex layering of genres, parallel texts, and texts about the explication and understanding of texts that call for a literalization of the reader’s input. Byatt’s narrative themes, echoing Murdoch’s interest in philosophy, identity, and morality, are also extended by incorporation of literary theory and other theories. *Possession*, for example, is a demanding interactive text that requires readers to read more deeply, reflecting on allusions and making connections between past and present. The postmodern maze of interwoven texts creates a consistent blurring of fiction and criticism while the array of texts-within-a-text conveys a compelling sense of urgency and authenticity that a more straightforward narrative lacks. Byatt requires readers to decipher various poems, riddles, and other literary fragments as well as unravelling the narrative’s spatial movement – a demanding task that she concedes calls for readers to “work for” (“Reader as Writer” 10) some sort of narrative conclusion. Her call for active readers is echoed in Ommundsen’s and Waugh’s beliefs that particular postmodern narratives such as *Possession*, “metafictions,”¹⁶ frequently play with the idea of literalising the reader’s input. This concept is complemented by Iser’s related theory that readers fill the gaps inevitably created by narratives. At Baylor University in 1993, Byatt attempted to describe the pleasures of “active and busy” reading by comparing it with experimental art, saying that

[It] is like ... the art historian, Ernst Gombrich, making Boucher’s blatantly delicious nudes *interesting* to modern eyes by interposing a thick pane of dappled lavatory

glass between them and the viewer, so that *work* had to be done to see what they were ... the pleasure is in the work and the puzzling. ("The Reader as Writer" 9)

Byatt's call for the active involvement of readers reveals a progression from Murdoch's requirement that individuals respond to each other with "a willed, thoughtful, selfless contemplation" (*Degrees* 298). Byatt's analogy about going beyond the simple, passive acts of unreflective looking or reading relates as much to a passionate involvement in living as it does to reading and looking at art. Iser agrees with her, saying that readers must actively search for the world of meaning by bringing their own life's experiences and knowledge to their reading in order to step beyond it: "Fiction's place [is] as a potential stimulus for looking more closely at one's own life" (228). Consequently, deep contemplation, or attention, enriches readers who assimilate fiction's complexities and learn from them. Byatt's characters go further than Murdoch's insofar as self-awareness, consciousness of actions, and of the reasons for such actions are concerned. Such knowledge is exemplified in several characters' reactions and behaviours. For example, Patricia Nimmo, in "Crocodile Tears," initially finding it difficult to really engage with artwork admired by her late husband, berates his liking for a colourful collage as "banal" ("CT" 6). Although she intuitively understands that "Tony and the unknown artist shared an emotion, shared a response" (7), it is temporarily beyond her own capacity to become more personally involved by trying to understand Tony's feelings about the significance of the object. Patricia eventually learns to engage consciously with people and objects by relating her own experiences and emotions to the situations of others, especially those of Nils and the gladiators. As a result she gains knowledge of herself by truly seeing and learning from others. Maud and Roland also learn to see themselves in their postmodernity by recognising the Victorians' confidence and self-assurance as well as by discovering each other. The passage of events in *Possession* indicates characters' greater knowledge and awareness of their own states of mind, and the reasons for them, than anything in Murdoch.

Murdoch and Byatt draw, in their explorations of the power of imagination and its hold on our notions of fact and fiction, on a variety of discourses. While Murdoch, necessarily more limited than Byatt, starts from moral philosophy and the idea of identity derived from Weil, Byatt has the developments of literary theory to draw upon. Byatt plays with several literary theories and theoretical positions in her ironical character constructs and eventually gets carried away with the technique in *A Whistling Woman*.

Both writers create intertextual and interdisciplinary fiction that reveals influences of science, education, philosophy and language, and resists one definitive critical label. Critical responses to their “habitable imagined worlds” (Byatt, *Passions* 181) continue to span an ever-increasing breadth of academic interest, with many journal articles now found not only in the literary but also in other academic fields. Murdoch’s fiction, although it is concerned with problems of “the real, the nature of selfhood” (Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* 431), as is Byatt’s, does so in a relatively conservative and straightforward manner. Byatt, however, in common with authors such as David Lodge,¹⁷ deploys a deliberate and obvious use of literary theory in fiction, blurring distinctions dividing fiction and criticism¹⁸ to provide an ironic pastiche of real people or events. Byatt continues a conscious practice of her predecessors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wordsworth’s poetry embodies philosophical and literary ideas, and his theorizing in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* affected Byatt herself, and Austen’s work shows acute awareness of literary developments such as the gothic, especially in the writing of Radcliffe. Byatt’s preoccupation with storytelling’s necessity for being truthful and its ability to shape lives contributes to her desire to examine “the problem of the relations between truth, lies and fiction” (*Passions* 21) in a far more self-conscious manner than Murdoch did. As a result of trying to probe as fully as possible the nature of identity, Byatt’s writing frequently crosses or blends genres to reveal aspects of self in a more complex manner appropriate for contemporary readers.

Although the nature of Murdoch’s and Byatt’s protagonists’ identity and experience in the labyrinth is uniquely female, both writers share Julia Kristeva’s view that feminine and

masculine attributes are fluid and not possessed by one sex alone. Despite their interest in human rather than gendered experience, Murdoch and Byatt both regard political action as a way of improving women's status. Byatt's understanding of feminist positions and of women's experience is, however, much more nuanced than Murdoch's. Consequently, Byatt's female protagonists, who reveal similarities to Murdoch's Dora and Marian, are more self-conscious and aware as they deal with the same female issues in a more complicated and open way than their predecessors.

Murdoch's fiction portrays the "opaque individual" (Kenyon, *Women Novelists* 51) rather than a gendered subject. Yet while she reveals that her preference for first-person male narrators is a comment on the unliberated position of women (Johnson xii), her female protagonists in this study encounter and deal with specifically female situations. In common with Byatt's characters, they seek approval of males, they endure financial and economic dependence, and while they dream of autonomy and agency in the wider world, they entertain the female expectations to which society has conditioned them. Despite these gender-specific ordeals, Murdoch's protagonists occupy an androgynous position with regard to actions and deeds. Murdoch makes it explicit that her fiction does not differentiate between genders with regard to propensity towards virtuous or evil behaviour: behaviour is attributed to humans in general and neither men nor women are inherently good or bad, but spend their lives constantly moving between the two extremes. She explains a rationale for portraying characters whose personalities often display both admirable and despicable elements as follows:

Plato established the notion that human life is about the battle between good and evil ... [To me] it [is] very clear that human beings live on a line between good and evil, and every moment of one's life is involved in movement upon this line, in one's thoughts, as well as in the things one does. (Murdoch qtd. in Hartill 84)

Byatt inherits Murdoch's refusal to contain her characters' behaviour within rigid gender boundaries and concurs with Coleridge's and Woolf's notions of the benefits of androgyny.¹⁹

Byatt's conviction that a release of creativity is possible when one refuses to be bound by sexual identity is demonstrated in *Possession* and *Babel Tower* in which her portrayal of characters provides overt examples of subversion of traditional gender roles and disruption of binary oppositions. Byatt's attempt to portray the complexity of women's lives is summed up in Kenyon's assertion that her fiction continues the "nineteenth-century search for fictional heroines who combine strength and intelligence with 'feminine' qualities" (*Women Novelists* 71). Characters such as Maud and Frederica show that it is possible for women and men to transcend the limits of gender, enjoying a mutual gender-neutral life of the mind while also acknowledging the value of gender-specific physical or emotional relations.

Murdoch and Byatt, despite their eloquent depictions of the female perspective, resist being spokeswomen for feminism and regard political action as a preferred means of improving women's lives. While Murdoch maintains that a male standpoint generally represents ordinary human experience (Alexander 13) and Byatt adopts a more egalitarian position, both writers express impatience with what they perceive to be the women's movement. Byatt's wariness of attempts to redress an imbalance in gender relations springs from a concern that they could lead to a "ghettoisation" of women instead. She advocates instead that writing remain a neutral field, preferring to be seen as a writer who is a woman writing fiction of interest to everyone, not that simply confined to women's issues.

Women's writing can help to redress the imbalance of power relations inherent in the binary oppositions of a patriarchal system. The idea that literature can assist in dismantling the either / or paradigm of thought – either writer or reader, either self or other – to establish a more equitable alliance in which all parties gain through mutual efforts is advanced by Jane Magrath ("The Resurrection of the Author" i). Magrath, who argues that self is constructed with rather than against others, sees the act of writing as a cooperative act of constructing a self into being through others: the characters in the text, the content of the text, and the reader.

Acknowledging the possibility of moving from a concept of separation to that of connection ought to be seen not as an action that threatens the identities of either writer or reader, but as an act of communication that simultaneously empowers both selves. The exchange that occurs between writer and reader, exemplified in Byatt's invitation to readers to become co-creators of her narratives, is likened to a reconceptualisation of divisive power, which in turn leads to mutual empowerment. In reading, one receives others and modifies one's self in relationship to those others. It takes courage and willingness to open self to other, giving one's self to the text and giving one's self through the text.

The texts in this thesis have been chosen for their female protagonists who, I argue, are all engaged in very individual and particular labyrinthine life journeys. While Murdoch and Byatt frequently depict male protagonists, I am especially intrigued by the ways in which each writer represents women as protagonists, their feminine struggles and the resolutions they find. Murdoch's female protagonists struggle with the same issues that Byatt's confront thirty years later – a search for autonomy and connection. Because Byatt is able to do more than Murdoch owing to changes in society, her characters eventually achieve the meronymic existence that Murdoch's could not.

While Murdoch commenced writing in the 1950s, Byatt started her literary career a decade later. The language and techniques evident in their work reflect their respective times and social values. The embedding into both writers' fictions of the cultural differences of their particular eras also enables a sequential mapping of the changes in women's lives and opportunities. Because Murdoch is acknowledged as Byatt's literary mother, I am eager to explore the ways in which this relationship can be revealed through examination of their narrative strategies. Byatt's admiration for and acknowledgement of Murdoch's influence on her writing and thought is well documented, although, to date, few studies (if any) have compared one writer's work with the other.

Texts have been arranged approximately in order of publication, allowing for demonstration of the progression between Murdoch and Byatt. A variety of protagonists

whose ages, level of education, and life circumstances represent a broad range of female experience has deliberately been chosen. Short stories are considered alongside novels. While Byatt is well known for her collections of short stories about which much has been written, Murdoch has published only one – “Something Special” – about which only one journal article has been written. Consequently, it is a valuable and timely exercise to compare Byatt’s protagonists’ endeavours for independence with those of their literary predecessor, Yvonne Geary.

Each of the female protagonists considered in this thesis ponders profound changes in her life. Each text depicts the female protagonist as imprisoned or constrained in some way. This imprisonment is a function of gender in Byatt’s and Murdoch’s work and provides a starting point for entry into the labyrinth. Each text deals with a female journey of self-discovery, a Bildungsroman, that resembles a labyrinthine ordeal. Each protagonist’s journey through the labyrinth involves false paths and recursions. Each text depicts the development of the female protagonist in a feminised Plato’s cave in which she undergoes a similar set of experiences and comes to an understanding of self in community with others. Each protagonist learns about herself through attending to others, and finds awareness of her individual identity in community. The techniques Byatt and Murdoch use offer readers a richly ambiguous set of meanings, so that if readers are aware of the paradigm of the labyrinth they may themselves trace a labyrinth of possible meanings, as Iser argues. In both writers, this richness is attained through the use of symbol and allusion and reference to a range of genres, and narrative self-awareness on the part of the protagonist. Murdoch’s fiction is comparatively straightforward, while Byatt’s postmodernist approach allows a complex layering of meaning. To sum up, the increasingly overt intertextual and theoretical reference in Byatt offers greater power to the reader, and movement toward an ideal of meronym in the relations of males and females.

The texts selected for this study not only allow observation of the progression of character development, subject matter, and narrative technique from one text to another, but

also show the influence of Murdoch's writing and beliefs on Byatt's work. Murdoch's philosophical and literary values influenced Byatt profoundly and, while Heusel's contention quoted below refers specifically to Murdoch's work, I believe that it applies equally to Byatt's fiction in its portrayal of a "moral labyrinth" (107). Heusel argues that Murdoch's fiction attempts "to show that life is both a series of accidents and a contriving of individual dramas ... Life in this accidental world can be circular and empty" while "her large patterns – her interconnecting schemes of caves, networks, labyrinths, and cycles – lay the foundation for the characters' daily rat-runs of obsession" (156).

Characters must search for an Ariadne's thread, represented by attention to others, in order to exit the labyrinth. Their paths out are fraught with many dead ends, wrong turns, and obstacles. While patience, perseverance, and ingenuity are needed for a skilful negotiation of the journey out of the maze it is still, after all, "the journey, not the arrival, that matters" (Faris 198). The women's journeys, confronting and frightening, jolt them out of complacency and carry them from stifling enclosures into landscapes of endless horizons. The journey commences with a fairly conventional move from the predictable routine of life in the city to an isolated community in which the ideas of the novel are explored, and ends with a postmodernist text that is technically complex and demanding for readers, and is set in a bustling city at a time of rapid social change.

The opening chapter of this study is concerned with the immature and solipsistic Dora Greenfield's fraught search for identity and autonomy. Dora, an impetuous and immature young woman, chooses to attempt a reconciliation with her estranged husband Paul at the Gloucestershire property, Imber Court. The lay community at Imber shares property with the enclosed order of nuns in Imber Abbey. Dora, like the Imberites, is depicted as out of harmony with the surroundings. While the community attempts to cultivate land to make it productive, Dora attempts to impose her own values and attitudes on the community members, judging them as hostile and unkind towards her. Her inability to see through her veil of inattention prevents a true vision of either herself or others.

Murdoch's portrayal of the hapless Dora focuses on her moral development from a solipsistic pleasure-seeker to a woman aware of the feelings and experiences of others and the effects on them of her own actions. Detours and distractions caused by errors of judgement function as obvious wrong moves, and provide a stark contrast to the moral choices Dora feels compelled to make. Her progress, although harrowing and stumbling due to her frequent retracing of steps, follows a fairly predictable trajectory from a state of confusion and regret to determination and vision for her future. The narrative plot of Murdoch's fourth novel published in 1958 is structured in conventional third-person retelling mode, its events occurring over a period of several weeks one summer. While Murdoch makes some mythical or literary allusions in *The Bell*, religious imagery and discourse is prominent. References to visual arts, in particular those of painting, medieval carving and manuscripts, and music, occur frequently and in detail throughout the narrative. Dora's labyrinthine path proceeds from an uninspiring past into a frustrating present towards an exit into an optimistic future.

In my second chapter, Marian is an English schoolteacher protagonist in search of a new and more exciting life. She leaves London for a period of employment in Ireland as a governess. On her arrival at Gaze Castle on Ireland's west coast, Marian becomes highly conscious of her outsider status. Although she is preoccupied with her own dissatisfying place in the world, she ignores others' rights to live as they do, deciding she has been sent to improve their lives. Highly critical of the actions of the locals, the opportunity to rescue Hannah Crean-Smith, Gaze's "embowered maiden," proves too compelling and Marian acts to liberate her employer. While Marian desires to achieve something worthwhile on her own merits, she allows her imagination and idealistic outlook to colour reality. In deciding to save Hannah, Marian narrows her perspective, focusing on her own desire and excluding consideration of others' opinions or, indeed, their very existence.

In *The Unicorn*, Murdoch examines the dangers of failing "to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own" ("The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited" 216). Such lack of adequate recognition of others, lack of

acknowledgement of reality and retreat into individual fantasy, Murdoch's text argues, is dangerous and latently evil because it is cultivated by the needs of individuals to control others. As Marian stumbles from one misguided action to another, she becomes tangled up in a process of "blindness, furore, deceit, violence, inextricability" (Doob 233), and gradually realises that in escaping one maze, she inevitably finds herself in another. As Marian prepares to return to London, she reflects on her own actions and recognises that nobody has a right to imprison another person. Consequently, a gradual comprehension of the relationship between self and others takes place. Murdoch comments that the need for mutual recognition of the individuality of all persons requires that "We should hold a view of the individual which treats him as worthy of respect ... someone who needs freedom He is to be respected and must respect others" (Sagare 711).

The Unicorn demonstrates a richer and more overtly contrived narrative structure than *The Bell*. Murdoch appropriates a highly patterned and symmetrical structure in order to emphasise the artificiality of appearances. Her setting, with its strangely Gothic atmosphere, ironises the deception in which the characters are willing participants. The narrative, unlike that of *The Bell*, is imbued with extensive and sustained literary, philosophical and mythical allusions and references so that readers must work at unravelling a labyrinth of interwoven texts. Murdoch's arrangement of the novel's contents also appears to be a gleeful appropriation of symmetry and pattern that points up the constructedness of fiction. The circular plot, which is divided very obviously into beginning, middle and end, mimicking the circumstances of Marian's arrival in Ireland, her stay at Gaze, and her departure for England, is nevertheless similar to Dora's conventional move from the city to an isolated community. Byatt emulates these narrative strategies forty years later in the romance, *Possession*.

Chapter Three is devoted to three short stories, two written by Byatt and published during the 1990s, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" and "Crocodile Tears." The remaining narrative, "Something Special," Murdoch's only published short story, was written in the mid 1950s at about the same time *Under the Net* was published. The most deeply

resonant images in all three stories are those of escape or exile and the protagonists' accompanying traumas of guilt or regret, followed eventually by a sense of sanctuary found amongst others, and finally some sort of resolution or redemption.

Yvonne Geary, a single twenty-four-year old woman living at home with her mother in Dublin, dreams of catching the mail boat to England in "Something Special." The journey to England does not take place during the narrative, and the story concludes with her misery at her decision to stay in Dublin. Nevertheless, she experiences a self-revelation of sorts during the course of her experiences. Murdoch creates an elaborate landscape of maze-like urban streets, city structures, and environment which contains numerous allusions to Greek myths, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and his short story, "The Dead." Extensive metaphors and sets of opposed pairs exaggerate the symbolic function of Stephen's Green, symbolising the Garden of Eden, and emulated by Byatt in *The Virgin in the Garden*.

Byatt's Gillian Perholt, a narratologist in her fifties, has grown up children. At the start of "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," her husband abandons her for a younger woman. Her imagined life of redundancy is transformed by a genie during her attendance at a literary conference in Turkey. The narrative is a complex interweaving of text types, including myth overlaid with wonder tale, fairy tale, history, and text-within-text (inserted fairy tales and poems). Intertextual references include several poems, a variety of fairy tales, Shakespeare, and novels.

Patricia Nimmo, in "Crocodile Tears" seeks to escape or evade her fate. A recently widowed woman also in her fifties, Patricia attempts to escape her grief on her husband's unexpected death, exiling herself to Nîmes in the south of France. This narrative also includes a variety of intertextual references such as Roman, Greek, and Norse myths, discourses of art, history, and alchemy, and Shakespearean texts. Folk tales and myths are inserted as texts-within-text.

Byatt's 1990 Booker Prize novel, *Possession: A Romance*, is examined in Chapter Four. *Possession* incorporates a self-consciously controlled plot that weaves alternately

between the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Christabel LaMotte is an unmarried and independent Victorian poet who embarks on a train journey from London to Yorkshire where she and fellow poet Randolph Ash conduct a brief but passionate affair. Its repercussions are tragic and long-lasting with no denouement possible until a century and several generations later when her descendant, academic Maud Bailey, together with researcher Roland Michell, unravels the carefully concealed thread that links their past to the present. Ironically, Roland's purloined letter written by Ash provides a thread for the path to Christabel's poetry which, in turn, becomes a thread of ancestry leading Maud through a literary and personal maze. Eventually she and Roland discern an exit from their own labyrinth and enter into a more coherent existence together. Byatt's postmodern parodic text, written as a practice run for *Babel Tower*, relies heavily on fantasy and improbable plot structures. The narrative is multi-textured and multi-layered, consisting of several storylines woven together and resonating with cultural, historical, and individual experiences. In adopting the romance genre, Byatt is enabled to borrow not only from literature of the past, but also to incorporate the mythical references that inspired such writing. The resultant text facilitates non-mimetic constructs and the existence of dual and tri-fold meanings, and subverts or undercuts various representations of women created from past narratives.

My fifth chapter is concerned with the journey of Frederica Potter, in Byatt's *Babel Tower*, from respectable county squire's wife and mother of a four-year-old son to runaway wife; from idyllic pastoral Herefordshire to 1960s London. The same female issues that concerned Murdoch's Dora and Marian are also confronted by Byatt's Frederica. While the solipsistic Frederica bears a striking resemblance to Murdoch's characters, she also deals with her struggles in a more complicated yet open way, owing to contemporary differences in gender relations and social structures.

While Byatt's narrative in this novel has a simple chronology and an uncomplicated linear narrative, its incorporation of a large number of intricate techniques and intertextual references demands a persevering and hardworking reader. *Babel Tower* contains several

parallel texts and includes examples of the text-within-text technique so favoured by Byatt: the *Babbletower* and *Flight North* stories.

The precocious Frederica, an educated but unhappily married young woman who was once independently progressing towards self-awareness, now finds her journey halted abruptly. She realises she has become an “imprisoned princess.” No longer able to survive a marriage in which her existence is neither acknowledged nor encouraged, she believes that only in escaping will she commence to exist. Her midnight flight from the ancestral walled and moated country estate enables her to make her way to a small basement flat in London. While life in the small world of the country estate erodes Frederica’s selfhood, the slum-like suburb nurtures her evolving sense of self. Ironically, it is here, in an area that the embittered Nigel describes as “deprived and socially unstable” (376) that Frederica and her son become part of new communities, reconnected to individuals from the past. Arrival in the city enables a safe domestic haven and a broader experience of life amongst a varied cultural and social community.

Byatt’s use of increasingly metafictional techniques to construct *Babel Tower* demonstrates a correspondingly complex state of human relationships in the real world. While Murdoch’s female protagonists, from whom Byatt’s characters are descended, are aware of being caught in a plot, their ability to change their life’s course to another, better plot is curtailed by social expectations of the time. Murdoch’s fiction reveals women’s struggles for self-determined lives in circumscribed situations. Although some of her protagonists appear to achieve independence and autonomy, this can, at best, be measured in degrees of freedom. Byatt’s narratives, however, despite their portrayal of protagonists who are more self-conscious than Murdoch’s, reveal that equitable self-determination requires a sustained attention to others manifested through cooperation, compromise, and acceptance of the equal value of the other. Consequently, Frederica, unlike Dora, is able to anticipate a meronymic existence in *A Whistling Woman*, the final part of Byatt’s Potter tetralogy. Frederica’s combination of strength, intelligence and feminine qualities helps her to find

Ariadne's thread and work her way through life's labyrinth. Her preparedness to imagine herself in another plot nurtures a willingness to locate and identify herself in relationship with others. Byatt's fiction, with its contemporary advantages revealing progression from Murdoch, enables her to provide transformative possibilities for women that enable them to be "both part of and merged with other people and, simultaneously, ... [be] independent of them" (Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 85).

¹Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. John Buchanan-Brown. London: Penguin, 1994, 557.

² See Thelma J. Shinn, "What's in a Word?" (xiv). *Possession* is described as a meronymic text. A "meronym" is "an image composed of discrete parts that simultaneously constitute an independent image." The meronymic thought process must be distinguished from that of synthesis where two become one, and often the elements of one or both original ideas are lost or diminished. The possibility is suggested of a "middle world in which opposites can be united and alternatives discovered ... It is a 'both / and' perspective, inclusive rather than dualistic." Drawing on aspects of both masculine and feminine Romanticism, without discounting either perspective, the narrative presents the result as a third discrete entity: a Romance that is a unified whole, composed of both the masculine and feminine points of view and all three concepts interact while continuing to exist independently.

³ The Bildungsroman genre is discussed in detail by the following: Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* and Suzanne Hader, *The Bildungsroman Genre: Great Expectations, Aurora Leigh and Waterland*, who states that examples of such fiction depict "an individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order," where the process of growth or maturity, reminiscent of a quest, is "long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order" (N. pag.). Rita Felski redefines aspects of the genre and labels some contemporary feminist texts as "feminist Bildungsroman" – "a story of development toward coherent selfhood through a process of moving into a wider community" (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 141).

⁴ Byatt was recently described in a literary review as "the self-appointed heir" of George Eliot and Iris Murdoch. See Amanda Craig, "When Ideas Get in the Way of Fiction" (20).

⁵ Letter to the author. 18 Feb. 2000.

⁶ Letter to the author. 18 Feb. 2000.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion, see Waugh's "Postmodernism and Feminism: Where Have all the Women Gone?" (1-33).

⁸ A selection of these texts includes: Jorge Luis Borges' *The Labyrinth, The Garden of Forking Paths* and *The Library of Babel*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, André Gide's *Theseus*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, Michel Butor's *Passing Time*, Lawrence Durrell's *The Dark Labyrinth*, Anaïs Nin's *Seduction of the Minotaur*, Albert Camus' *The Minotaur or the Stop in Oran*, and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

⁹ Enrico Garzilli, *Circles Without Center: Paths to the Discovery and Creation of Self in Modern Literature* (8). While Garzilli favours the masculine pronoun, the predicament he describes is also appropriate for the females examined in my study. My preferred reading is one of gender inclusiveness.

¹⁰ While Heusel notes that Murdoch's fiction refers consistently to the imagery of Plato's parable – a spiritual quest from appearance to reality (8), Joyce Carol Oates observes that the work "is central to an understanding of Murdoch's oeuvre ... all of Murdoch's novels are commentaries on it" (6).

¹¹ See Baker (xxviii). Baker argues that Augustine stipulates the type of behaviour that will engender harmonious relationships, beginning with the family and spreading into the community: “we should serve and aid our neighbours ... If we do that, we shall be living in peace – which is ‘ordered concord,’ which again is ‘society’ – with our neighbours ... The first circle of such society will be the family; and in the family there will be authority and subjection. But since the rule of the society is love, and love means service, any authority will only be a mode of service, and it will be exerted in the spirit of service.”

¹² See Sizemore (8, 10, 11). Sizemore explains that the oldest image of the city is one that dates back to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries during which the city was often regarded as an organism, especially a body or a part thereof. Negative overtones associating the body with illness or infectious diseases were soon part of the imagery which Lynch finds is destructive yet still exists today. In literature, Defoe described London as “a plague-ridden body,” while Tucker’s and Cobbett’s derogatory portrayals are still used to illustrate an earlier London. Nowadays, slums or the poorer areas in any city are regarded as eyesores that city planners would prefer to have hidden from general sight but, as Lynch notes, would ideally have them cut out and removed in order to prevent their infectious spread. A matrix is associated with the womb and its characteristics of spatial expendability. In mathematical definitions, the matrix is adaptable due to its lack of dimensional limitations and non-hierarchical nature. Sizemore reasons that, as the model of the matrix incorporates time, space and connections, it leaves room for people and allows them to define the urban spaces around them.

¹³ Murdoch, “Literature and Philosophy” (15-16). Murdoch explains in a television discussion with Bryan Magee on 28 October 1977, that although both Plato and Schopenhauer believed that art was important to the world, they disagreed at a fundamental level. Plato believed that the noble part of the soul sought sources of enlightenment through Ideas, whereas the “selfish stupid part of the soul” simply gained pleasure, rather than knowledge, from art. Schopenhauer, Murdoch points out, argued that art lifted a veil of subjectivity from the eyes of the perceiver and “makes us see the real world.” While Murdoch expresses some reservations over Schopenhauer’s “attractive and lofty view,” she is generally in agreement with his opinion that art is a “moral and intellectual striving.”

¹⁴ The period in which Jane Austen (1775-1817) lived and wrote may more correctly be termed the “late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century.”

¹⁵ Gasiorek maintains that as a family, realism is composed of members who include, for example: comedy, irony, magic, socialism, and so on. He suggests that instead of relying only on formalist textual characteristics, a more productive way of looking at the genre would be from a historical perspective. Realism, he believes, reveals “a general cognitive stance *vis-à-vis* the world, which finds different expression at different historical moments, manifesting itself in a wide range of fictional forms” (*Post-War British Fiction* 14).

¹⁶ See Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafictions?* (15), and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (6). Metafiction has been described as fiction about fiction – examining its linguistic and literary processes. It has also been called self-reflexive, self-conscious, or post-modernist fiction. Waugh explains that metafiction desires to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. Ommundsen adds that it is a form of communication between authors and readers insofar as readers are at once in the text and outside it, unable to change the text but responsible for its realisation: metafiction plays with the idea of “literalising the reader’s input” (65).

¹⁷ See David Lodge, *A David Lodge Trilogy: Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work*, with its deliberate fictionalisation of theoretical models.

¹⁸ Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble observe that, “Byatt’s fiction does indeed constantly remind us that theory may be as much in need of storytelling as fiction is of serious thought” (Unpublished draft “Introduction” 1) while Thomas Mallon comments that Byatt’s writing “doesn’t commute between the creative and critical worlds; it inhabits them simultaneously” (“The Real Nonfiction Novel,” N. pag.).

¹⁹ Kenyon, *Women Novelists Today* (75) and *The Writer’s Imagination* (13-4), and Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (13).

CHAPTER ONE:**A Reluctant Nomad:**

Dora Greenfield

(The Bell, Iris Murdoch)

*“The traveller is the journey.
What we see is not what we see
but who we are”*

– Fernando Pessoa¹

Dora Greenfield’s fraught search for identity and autonomy is a labyrinthine journey – one in which, misled by the attraction of appearance or by fantasy, she frequently chooses the wrong paths. Dora is an immature and solipsistic character: an unhappily married young woman who expects her husband to provide her with a sense of selfhood and a meaningful role in life. When reality does not match her dreams she desperately seeks an escape from the constricting space of her marriage. An impulsive creature, she acts spontaneously and has scant regard for either the lessons of the past – “memory was something for which [she] had little use” (12) – or her responsibilities to others or the future. The labyrinth is a fitting model for Dora’s unfolding quest as its deceptive paths, abrupt changes of direction, and unexpected revelations require, if it is to be successfully traversed, the voyager’s undivided attention – a skill that Dora is yet to attain. In spite of her shortcomings, though, Dora bravely negotiates the labyrinth with all its twists, surprises, and disappointments and develops the ability to navigate her own life path. Her perseverance finally enables her to progress towards overcoming her isolation and obsession with

self by learning to value not only her own but others' experiences, both past and present, while she anticipates and prepares for her integration within the wider community.

Although she is possessed of a keen aesthetic awareness, her potential for attentiveness towards others is hampered by the lack of a corresponding moral sense in her world. Faris suggests that such a "world of the sensuous imagination, of the vaporous labyrinth, must be tempered with the heavier weight of one's past, one's duty, and an aesthetic based on a rational as well as an intuitive relation to the world ... poetic flight is to be combined with prosaic exploration" (128). It is insufficient that Dora sees and admires beauty, and that she is receptive to those who are personally appealing to her: her moral progress demands that she become open to the existence of all of reality, however remote. As she ventures further into the labyrinth and becomes engaged in a challenging series of encounters with others, her aesthetic consciousness gradually develops into a clearer-eyed vision of reality. Her altered and more genuinely reciprocal relationship with her immediate world and those in it kindles a corresponding growth in self awareness and a burgeoning autonomy that enables Dora to exit the labyrinth in anticipation of a self determined life.

Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* is an exploration of the theme of spiritual betterment and the forms it might take in the contemporary world (Conradi, *The Saint* 113). Spiritual betterment, Murdoch believed, was attained by a process of clear-eyed and open-hearted attention to others that would in turn occasion appropriate choices and actions towards them. This process is an "actual experience of freedom" ("The Sovereignty of Good" 367) – the freedom of choice. Dora's initially unwitting quest for moral and spiritual betterment occurs as an exploration of possibilities within a labyrinth that incorporates the constricting space of her marriage, the challenging walled enclosure of the Imber² community, and a field of potential autonomy in the world beyond. The moral choices that face Dora at Imber provide opportunities for real progress through the labyrinth and lead towards an exit into a self-determined life. Dora's first attempt at making an independent choice – to journey to Imber in order to effect a reconciliation with her

estranged husband – indicates that she is prepared to venture further into the labyrinth of self-discovery and to proceed gradually towards an awareness of and appropriate response to others. She finds that despite the high aspirations of the Imber lay community, its isolation from the world, and its proximity to goodness in the form of the nuns of the abbey, such factors do not ensure self-improvement by a kind of osmosis.

During her extended stay in the community, Dora makes the painful discovery that she has a moral obligation to make choices and to carry them out, and that simply drifting along, allowing things to happen to her (or to others), or behaving defiantly, are not acts of freedom. Her entry into the labyrinth, a structure of initiation, challenges Dora to negotiate a choice of paths that leads to her realisation that life ought to be a series of conscious acts rather than mere playing of roles. Her relatively isolated existence as Paul's wife in London has made her unprepared for the web of interconnected relationships she encounters at Imber. Although her interactions are frequently characterised by clumsy and ill-judged behaviour that is partly the result of her inexperience and lack of self-confidence, Dora possesses a potential for an astute consciousness of others. Her aesthetic awareness, initially indulged as an innate curiosity about people, gradually evolves into a perceptive vision and consciously exercised respect for individuals.

On her marriage to Paul, Dora is seduced into crossing the threshold of the labyrinth by the image of potential happiness, yet despite its optimistic promise, she finds it a place of “opposing forces – order and confusion, reason and passion, playfulness and fear” (Faris 1) where she is torn “between choice, control and bewilderment” (6). Her youthful confusion and anxiety about a suitable life role, together with her hasty appraisal that her life's potential paths are meagre at best, cause her unhesitating and grateful acceptance of a marriage proposal for a life of perceived order and reason with Paul. Although she notices disagreeable aspects of her future husband's personality she does not contemplate that these may eventually cause her to regret her decision. Dora justifies her choice with “a great many reasons” (8), not the least of which is that Paul's overwhelming passion convinces her she is in love. After a year of marriage, though, she

discovers that growing into the role of Mrs Greenfield “was not so easy as she had imagined” (8). Neither are her other roles of daughter or step-daughter ones that she can manage with ease: her relationship with her remarried mother – “with whom she had never got on very well” (7) – is not an affectionate one. She realises belatedly that her happiest role was that of an art student at the Slade. Her initial sense of playfulness and enjoyment in playing the part of Paul’s “teasing yet pliant mistress” (11) soon degenerates into fear of his “violent and predatory gestures” (11). Sadly, Dora’s inexperience in making reasoned or realistic choices is shown by her confusion and lack of discernment of the better path to follow and she plunges headlong into what proves, for her, an ambiguous space at best.

Dora’s choice is based on illusion and fantasy, and she shares her difficulty in discernment with several other women discussed in this thesis (Frederica Potter, Marian Taylor, Yvonne Geary, Gillian Perholt, and Patricia Nimmo). Dora enters the promising space of her marriage with an inadequate understanding of either her own personality or the true nature of her tyrannical husband. She admires what she perceives as Paul’s obvious maturity, authority and passion: qualities which none of her “thin neurotic art-student friends,” “her boyish contemporaries,” (8) or “the friendlovers of her student days” (10) possessed. She resembles Byatt’s Frederica Potter, who as a student at Cambridge marries businessman Nigel Reiver precisely because he does not belong to her world, “because he was different” (*Babel* 80) from her university friends. Flattered by the persistent attentions of an older and sophisticated man, Dora hopes to regain the happiness and love she lost as a child and to be transported into a better world. She seeks Paul’s assistance in learning how “to get inside society and ... how to behave” (8), and trusts her husband to guide her into this new and alluring location. Even the violent streak that Dora notes in Paul before their marriage appeals to her as a sign of his virility rather than a warning of his growing hostility, and she considers it a mark of his superiority over any of her male peers as a prospective partner. Her romantic notions assist in preparing the ground for Paul’s imminent restrictions on her freedom of movement while her unfamiliarity with the new

territory she is about to enter is exploited further by the older and cunning Paul as he gauges her inability to defend herself verbally. Dora is warned of his future attempts to domineer over her life when he tells her with relish that “they [are] likely to quarrel” (9) as newlyweds. Despite several explicit warning signs, Dora’s infatuation with Paul’s image and her fantasy of a magically happy existence as his wife blind her to reality and prove to be poor grounds for choice. She realises, belatedly, that her pursuit of illusory contentment has led her instead into a dead end of domination and constraint.

Once married, Dora, like Frederica Potter, finds that her romantic expectations and well-meaning efforts towards matrimonial harmony are thwarted, and that far from being a loving and patient mentor, Paul’s controlling gestures are exacerbated by a “threatening personality” (10) that makes her afraid of him. She is confused about the role she plays: Paul’s long hours at work leave him with neither time nor patience to coach Dora in social niceties and without meaningful work of her own she becomes bored and resentful. Whereas Paul makes his needs abundantly clear to her: “I want to do my work and be married to you. I want to fill your life as you fill mine” (12), there is no obvious space for Dora’s needs within the marriage: Paul neither acknowledges that they exist nor attempts to make room for them. The fact of their marriage is regarded unreasonably by Paul as a tacit agreement by Dora to devote herself exclusively and unquestioningly to his well-being. Her marital situation, like Frederica’s, resembles the model described by Felski:

... the female protagonist ... [places] the needs and desires of a male partner before her own. Women’s confinement to the private sphere denies them the potential for public activity and independent self-fulfilment, while locking them into a relationship of psychological or economic dependence upon a lover who is unable to acknowledge women other than in relation to his own emotional and sexual interests. (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 129)

Just as Frederica Potter allows Nigel's sexual prowess to sway her judgement so that she follows the route he requires, so Dora is overwhelmed by Paul's sophistication and finds that any choice and control she may have had at the beginning of their relationship have been usurped by her partner. Her belief in his superiority over her enables him to gain the upper hand in all aspects of their relationship, allowing her no suitable place to test her own judgement without fear of censure. Dora's lack of self esteem aids Paul's contemptuous attitudes and undermines her sense of self worth. While she attempts to please Paul by following his directions and abandoning her studies, devoting herself to domesticity and attempting to become the ideal Mrs Paul Greenfield, a "cultivated woman" (8), there is no reciprocity on Paul's part. Indeed, due to his increased work commitments following his marriage, Dora is, in effect, abandoned in a dark and lonely place, confined solely to an undernourished existence in the private sphere. She finds herself contained in a too-small-space that requires conformation to its dimensions and allows no room for individuality, yet demands that she stretch and grow like Alice. Her frustrated search for a suitable space of her own within marital boundaries is neither provided by attending simply to Paul's exacting needs nor eased by his intermittent company, and ends in her bewilderment.

Initially the novelty of marriage brought Dora superficial happiness, but with time, and with increasing alienation caused by Paul's behaviour, the road she travels becomes narrower and rockier. She gives up her art studies on his insistence and in doing so relinquishes not only an activity that she enjoys and a role in which she is comfortable, but also a path to her economic independence. Dora is uneducated and not qualified to turn to meaningful employment for either her current distraction or self-support, while her options for future exploration of new territories are diminished. The terrain in which she finds herself now is perplexing: afraid to rearrange or disturb anything, she makes no personal contributions to the flat. She neither cooks for Paul's friends nor buys clothes for herself. Her attempts to please Paul succeed only in antagonising him, while she becomes more and more disgruntled at her own shortcomings, both real and imagined. Life with Paul does not transform her into the confident person she anticipated she

would become. Eventually Dora realises she is no longer able to continue negotiating this particular path: the direction in which she once wished to travel suddenly seems incomprehensible, nor is she equipped with the necessary knowledge, energy, or confidence to pursue an unfamiliar and challenging path. She is left without a meaningful role to pursue, within the walls of Paul's home or outside it.

The immaculate Knightsbridge flat does not represent a home to Dora but, rather, a repository for Paul's "*objets d'art*" (134): a place as "lifeless as a museum" (60). His home – a shrine to precious artefacts where "she did not dare to disturb any object" (8) – is a cold place to Dora, and without any warmth below its carefully tended surface, it reflects Paul's personality and intensifies the differences between them. Dora has a keen aesthetic sense and relates easily and naturally to others, while Paul is intellectual and aloof. Dora is easygoing, unable to judge people, and prone to changing her mind, while Paul is a stickler for convention and appearance. In becoming Paul's wife she crosses a threshold into a dry and airless space where conditions and objects are carefully controlled. She surrenders her identity and becomes powerless: she moves into his flat, has no occupation or income, and doubts her judgment. She feels as if she is simply one of Paul's inanimate objects, part of his valuable collection, that he always intended to "install her as one does an art treasure ... locking the door" (134), and that she, too, is carefully controlled and that Paul is the keeper of the keys. Dora's conventional view of marriage, which leads her to believe that union with Paul will legitimise her presence in the world, contributes towards locking her into a bitterly restrictive and stagnant space. Her identity, of which she was never convinced yet for which she held such high hopes before her marriage, is now further reduced to that of "merely a woman, worst of all, a wife" (19). Once installed in Paul's flat, she is poised to comply with the patriarchally prescribed and socially sanctioned female function of safeguarding the morals of the domestic environment described by Laura Mulvey:

... the private sphere, the domestic, is an essential adjunct to the bourgeois marriage and is thus associated with woman, not simply as female, but as wife and mother ... [she]

guarantees the privacy of the home by maintaining its respectability, as essential a defence against incursion or curiosity as the encompassing walls of the home itself.³

Dora's situation is similar to Frederica's in that her presence (and her potential child-bearing role) is required by her husband for the sake of appearances – a legitimising and finishing prerequisite for his collection of valuable objects – and Dora's identity is effectively barricaded or partitioned into an ever-decreasing space. Both Dora and Frederica are regarded as objects of curiosity – “full of novelties” (25) as Paul tells Dora – and subject to critical scrutiny. Dora and Frederica are creative women, who are open to the opportunities and possibilities of life, yet they choose to marry men with whose worlds they are not familiar and whose very difference (their novelty, perhaps) appeals to them. In spite of their anticipation of the stimulation of new lives, both characters find that their husbands' uniqueness ceases abruptly in the early days of their marriage when the men signal their requirement for a conventional wife. Keen to return to his rigorous work schedule after the distraction of his courtship of Dora, Paul expects that his life will continue as before. While adherence to conservative domesticity fails to fulfil either Dora or Frederica, their recourse to discussion of their plight with their husbands fails to engage either Paul or Nigel and ends in silent disenchantment for both female characters.

Bewildered by her confined and powerless marital state, Dora desperately seeks flight to somewhere that “she [can] be herself” (11) and survive. Trapped in a place that fails to nurture her existence, she cannot see a viable path out of her dead end with Paul, and bereft of an imaginative vision of her own potential, she only manages to retrace several previously travelled and well-known labyrinthine paths. Her impulsive steps trace a zigzag and haphazard course. Despite her status as a wife, and lacking both skill in artful deceit and a guiding moral sense, she feels no compunction in attempting a dual life of sorts by returning to the “irresponsible Bohemian” (12) patterns of her single days. At the same time, she makes sincere promises to Paul to mend her ways. She is frustrated by her own immaturity and helplessness and becomes involved in long regular arguments with Paul that leave her humiliated and exhausted. Despite

Paul's premarital gloating, their quarrels do not bring "fun" or "pleasure" (9) to Dora, acting instead as increasingly constricting walls of her enclosure. With no real alternatives to choose from, Dora breaks away from Paul's hostility by reverting again to another familiar path, moving into a flat in Chelsea with a gentle former lover, Noel Spens. Retracing her footsteps is a comforting retreat into familiar territory and provides a temporary safe haven but culminates in another dead end from which escape is also eventually necessary. Flight from Paul brings a certain relief, yet is accompanied by Dora's "conventional" (13) feelings of remorse at deserting her husband, for she is a woman subject to the lower middle-class values of her upbringing, which encourage a view of marriage in terms of submission and sublimation and the desire "to be enclosed in the aims of another" (17). She believes that as Paul's wife she ought to be with him. Besides, without the prospect of employment, Dora's economic dependence on her husband remains a harsh reality and she realises despondently "she [has] no other life to escape into" (12). Looking ahead, Dora sees only a bleak pre-ordained future of reliance on Paul, and so after six months' separation she grudgingly reverts to living with him. In making the decision to return to Paul, Dora not only confronts the futility of her reluctance to negotiate the moral labyrinth she entered on her marriage to him but also reveals her preparedness to commence a more mature phase of her life.

During her confinement within the silent and narrow marital boundaries which stifled her growth and threatened her survival, Dora manages to maintain a tiny but tenacious glimmer of self worth – a safe female space in the labyrinth. Her determination to retain a sense of self, no matter how tentative, becomes a matter of urgency in the face of Paul's hostility. At first, simply as an intuitive rebellion against Paul's domination, Dora retreats in silent withdrawal from their arguments, "cherishing herself ... increasingly aware that she [exists]" (10), to an internal secret place – a kernel of existence that refuses to be crushed and functions as a female capacity of self protection. While dialogue between the newlyweds ceases within their first year of marriage, Dora becomes progressively more aware that her actions arouse Paul's displeasure, and more

aware of the extent of the differences between them, subsequently keeps all her experiences to herself. By the time they reunite at Imber and Dora, seeing her reflection in a mirror, ponders Paul's contempt of her, she realises that "the person who [is] there ... [is] unknown to Paul" (45). Aware that her tenuous attempt at a fresh start with Paul appears to be doomed from its outset and despite her conviction that she has no other life to escape into, Dora has the creativity and determination to withdraw into the safety of her confined space, fully aware nonetheless that "she [exists] ... [and] no one should destroy her" (45). Such a struggle for self worth, however, is not the path that Dora imagined she would be following, having commenced her marriage intent on "the business of being happy" (8).

That her persistent search for an assured place and firm sense of identity within her marital and social relationships remains unfulfilled exacerbates Dora's sense of liminality. She is acutely conscious of her marginalisation and of being excluded not only from the particular level of society she longed to infiltrate, but also from the lay community at Imber who she believes consider her an outcast, and most hurtful of all, from her husband Paul. Mulvey and Friedman address the dialectics of "inside / outside" as one of many possible features in a landscape of identity and which is illustrated by Dora's refuge into a safe female place ("Melodrama Inside" n. pag.; " 'Beyond' Gender" 19). Such a sense of difference, with its emphasis on the positionality of a subject, argues Friedman, gives rise to a "mapping of territories and boundaries" (" 'Beyond' Gender" 19) which in turn explicates various locational identities. Dora's perception of her outsider's status, and especially her fear of being hurt again by Paul, encourage her distinction between herself and others, and in response she creates a barrier to the pain of exclusion around the safe female space into which she escapes, as a form of protection and resistance (19). While not impervious, it helps Dora by creating a buffer zone against the community's and Paul's animosity. Furthermore, the female safe space represents a private zone inadmissible to others wherein independence and autonomy might be cultivated: a metaphor that Byatt adopts and develops in her writing several decades after Murdoch's *The Bell* was published. Dora's self-

cherishing is similar to that of Byatt's Maud Bailey in *Possession*, who believes she is a woman set apart from others and keeps herself in a bright safe box inside her protective barriers: her glass coffin. Maud sees out, but whatever or whoever is beyond her enclosure is unable to penetrate it and hurt her. Her action is also similar to Frederica Potter's escape into her safe internal literary world at times of threat from her husband Nigel or his sisters, who make it quite clear that she does not belong in their world. While these characters experience segregation by their own choice and in reaction to the behaviour of others, they also simultaneously engage in a nomadic, constantly fluid search for a space in which identity is achieved through relationship with others.

In choosing to travel from London to the unfamiliarity of rural Gloucestershire, Dora takes a crucial step in her development. Even though she is powerless and is relegated to the margins, she decides to continue her nomadic search for re-connection with her husband and connection with a wider community. She is a candidate for positive growth because she comes to the community with a tarnished reputation. It is possible for moral growth to occur for Dora in a place like Imber, as she has no recourse to the comfort of predictability or familiarity. Imber is a world set apart from the ordinary world – its baffling paths, passages, and dead ends enhance Dora's survival skills and force her to perceive, think, and act in ways she has never had to do in the past. As an outsider, she has the potential to see everything with fresh eyes – other people, and herself in a positive relation to others. This skill, though, must be cultivated slowly and painfully, and Dora is a reluctant learner. Imber provides a painful path towards true vision for Dora, who must make many mistakes before she can see reality without its disguises: she must trace and retrace her steps. Despite her dread both of Paul's violent nature and the "hateful" lay religious community whom she associates with "superstition" (22) and of whose negative judgement she is already convinced, she is courageous enough to join them. Her courage is apparent in her preparedness to endure not only the strangeness of a new place and new people, but also public humiliation by Paul.

While Dora has “never valued herself highly” (8) and has never been encouraged to show what she is capable of, she is already equipped with the most important skills she needs for her journey: a joy for life, aesthetic awareness, empathy for others, a sense of optimism. These are passive qualities, however, and in order for Dora to progress further towards a full participation in life, her natural attributes must be enhanced by her exercising patience, perseverance, humility, and self-denial. Dora’s painful initiation into the baffling world of moral choices and decisions is met initially with frustration, anger and rebellion, but finally with clarity of vision. She chooses the wrong paths repeatedly before she is able to achieve a successful negotiation of parts of the labyrinth and confronts its centre – her self-obsession. She receives help from Michael, who sees her as a real and worthwhile person and encourages her vision for the future. His perception of Dora is a reciprocal action to her attention to others: only in her awareness of and selfless interaction with others is she also genuinely seen as an individual.

Her tendency to be charmed by appearances contributes to Dora’s sense of disorientation on her first glimpse of the Gloucestershire property. Dora is “a habitual town dweller” (26), who is more at ease with the noise, dirt and anonymity of London, and so she is suspicious of this “too luxuriant ... too sculptured ... too green” (26) pastoral scene. Overwhelmed by the magnificence of Imber’s physical beauty, she contemplates the property as she would a work of art: as an object of passive contemplation, but not of active involvement. She instinctively feels out of place in the presence of such perfection. As if in agreement with Dora’s reaction, Byatt details her own impression of the “sensuous immediacies” of Murdoch’s “very English” rural environment in her introduction to *The Bell* and compares it with Henry James’ countrysides which “always invoke paradise, [yet] whose elegant dreaming facades hide demons” (ix). While the aesthetic splendour of Imber’s buildings and surroundings overcomes Dora on her arrival, she shivers on first touching the house as if experiencing a premonition of the difficulties that will soon face her. Dora’s demons travel with her to the beautiful property: her lack of past experience, her low self-esteem, and her excessive subjectivity leave her unprepared and under-equipped for her tentative

dealings with Imber's inhabitants and its environment. Her appreciation of Imber's attractiveness is a reminder of her first feelings of awe for Paul's flat and its contents, and exacerbates her feelings of inadequacy. Although she wishes to row the small boat across the lake's mysterious reflective flatness, she remembers that she can neither row nor swim. Her admiration for her new home exaggerates her awareness that she is an outsider to these rural surroundings and the particular social milieu in which she finds herself, and her optimism in her ability to cope in this situation starts to erode.

Murdoch's Imber Abbey forms the physical and symbolic centre of *The Bell*. The world of the lay community and the Abbey is a place set apart from the daily grind of London. Murdoch's familiar novelistic ploy of creating a smaller world-within-a-world incorporating a small number of characters in an isolated community and an idyllic environment suggests that a protagonist will journey to such a setting in order for a crucial development to occur.

While *The Bell* is a relatively straightforward linear narrative, readers are encouraged mainly by Murdoch's use of symbol and allusion to trudge through the labyrinth with Dora as she seeks Ariadne's thread towards the exit. Readers, encouraged to actively engage in Dora's moral progress as they read, are led to expect that the narrative will depict her transition from an immature and carefree Bohemian to a responsible young woman. *The Bell* reveals Murdoch's appropriation of the conventions of pastoral, which dictate that a character must retreat from the everyday world of the city into a healing rural place in order to discover things of real value, in a manner similar to the events that take place, for example, in *As You Like It*. Accordingly, readers' expectations that characters will undergo moral and spiritual revelations or transformations, and then return to live life in an enlightened manner, are in accord with characteristics of the labyrinthine journey. To this end, the world of Imber is both a physical and social labyrinth that Dora must negotiate so as to achieve moral growth and enable her re-entry into the world beyond as an involved and aware participant.

Accordingly, the visual circularity of Imber's setting, reminiscent of the imagery of classical texts the *Phaedo* and Dante's *Inferno*, physically resembles a labyrinthine maze with its circuitous path towards a centre. Dora's first glimpse of the property's "enormous stone wall" (26) and "tall iron gates" (27) makes real her fear that she is about to enter, once again, an intimidating and restrictive enclosed world. The Abbey represents to the world beyond its walls an example of stability and sanity, an ideal centre in the complicated struggle for spiritual and moral goodness: a "citadel of esoteric virtue" (Conradi, *The Saint* 114). This centre represents a place of confrontation between selfishness and awareness of others – a painful process for each member of the community, and for Dora in particular. She arrives at Imber as a hesitant and reluctant potential participant in a community for which she has little empathy. The landscape, despite its loveliness, also frightens her, and unfamiliar with its landmarks and features, she enters into it uncertainly through the forbidding gates. Dora quickly becomes disoriented as she tries to make her way around the property. She succeeds only in choosing the wrong paths, stumbling accidentally into other people, forgetting important details, and inadvertently engaging in voyeurism as she clumsily tries to navigate her way in and around Imber and the surrounding locality. Yet, despite her suspicions and fears, Dora enters the physical and social labyrinths of Imber, where she begins to learn how to negotiate her way successfully through the confusing turns, false paths, and dead ends, arrive at the centre, and find her way out. It is only by coming to a strange new place and learning to interact with others that Dora is able to develop and grow in awareness. Familiarity in her old world has encouraged only complacency and hopelessness and an escape into too-easy and futile patterns.

Dora's progress through the physical labyrinth is initially hampered by her inability to understand that the nuns' choice to enter the enclosed Abbey, and travel towards their centre, is an exercise in freedom. Dora sees only that they have closed themselves off from the pleasures of the world behind their high walls and cannot imagine that their new lives could possibly be joyful. She fails to perceive that in choosing how to live their own lives the nuns progress towards

happiness. Dora's life, too, is one that she believes offers few choices, and she considers her hesitant arrival at Imber as a last (and disagreeable) option. In turning her back on the predictability of London to join Paul at Imber, Dora surrenders her ability to travel without conscious thought or effort to and from a known destination. She abandons a carefree Bohemian existence in a world where she evades making difficult moral choices and acting on them. Her life's decisions, to this point, have been based on a surrender of will rather than a well-considered weighing up of alternatives.

By contrast, the nuns' rigorous yet cheerful denial of material things connected to the world beyond their walls actually enables them to attain spiritual virtue and tranquillity. The nuns' tranquil centre is a safe female space to which the occupants do not escape, but is rather one they inhabit with a higher degree of awareness of the concerns of those within the world, one that contrasts with Dora's personal safe female space which is a barrier to incursion by others. The nuns' discipline, in turn, "allows them to perceive more clearly the particular beauty of things outside themselves" (Birdsall 62). Dora misunderstands such a conception of self-denial that does not divorce its adherents from the remainder of the human race. At the centre of the Abbey lies the graveyard, which the nuns tend lovingly and joyfully, their conversation and laughter clearly audible to Toby when he ventures close by. While the nuns belong to an enclosed order, instead of exclusion they practise an inclusiveness by which they manage to integrate seamlessly past, present and future through their concern for the lives of others. Unlike Dora, they place great value on memory, honouring those gone before them while simultaneously maintaining their own vital and happy existence. The Abbess shows that separation from the world does not necessarily include an ignorance of the doings and wellbeing of its inhabitants as she tells Michael that despite their lack of physical contact with the lay community, "You are most constantly in our prayers" (235). Similarly, the Irish nun who greets Toby when he climbs the fence into the Abbey cemetery tells him that, "Although we never meet, we seem to know each one of you, as if you were our dearest friends" (179). The nuns demonstrate a more astute

consciousness of the lives of others than the overanxious Imberites whose gaze turns obsessively inwards.

A critical and perceptive outsider, Dora witnesses the contradictions in the lay community. For all her awareness, though, Dora remains self-absorbed and preoccupied with her own personal dilemma as she struggles to discern a path through her personal maze and cannot conceive that concern for others could help alleviate her own problems. While the lay community is unable to strike a balance between self-denial and joy, Dora is unable to balance her need for autonomy and independence with a clear-eyed and consistent perception of others and of herself.

Dora's wish that she could delay indefinitely her entry into Imber's social labyrinth reveals her inability to imagine an alternative narrative for herself in which the community could act as "a structure of initiation," opening paths that offer opportunities for the "the acquisition of new knowledge" (Faris 92). Rites of initiation imply a candidate's readiness and ability to perform difficult tasks, often blindfolded and without assistance. Courage and perseverance are essential aids. Dora possesses both qualities, to a degree, but her negativity and belief that she is "a socially unacceptable waif" (304) hinder her progress. She fails to recognise that in this maze of relationships lies the possibility of personal growth and that her life could change for the better as a result. Her emotional outlook is darkened by her conviction that the community will judge her negatively, and this hypersensitivity in turn encourages her feelings of alienation. For example, her lack of self-worth, which surfaces when she attends the communal prayer gathering in the chapel on her first night at Imber, causes her to escape from the dimly lit room into the night outside. Although Dora finds Imber's setting breathtaking, her defensive entry into the buildings leads her to judge them critically as unattractive and austere, and causes her excessively negative reaction to those present. She is smothered by the atmosphere of the chapel, finding the setting too difficult to endure and forfeits the opportunity to learn from her first attempt to pursue a new and foreign path, reacting instead "with the resignation of one who had never in her life got away with anything" (34) and running from the room. Her reluctance to undertake a

reconciliatory meeting with Paul, of whom she is understandably afraid, also contributes to her “suffocating nervousness” (29).

While Dora’s presence at the isolated Imber demonstrates her courage and perseverance, her blindfold of fear and pessimism impedes her ability to learn from her errors and thereby acquire new social skills. Dora believes that she has simply exchanged one place of confinement for another, and as Johnson notes, Dora’s sense of alienation is acute because “she has no real context in the Imber community” (83) other than that of a recalcitrant young wife. Her profound sense of unease indoors leads her to seek escape outside as she clumsily gropes about to negotiate a labyrinthine array of corridors, halls and doorways, finally succeeding in making her way onto the balcony. Her exploration provides evidence that she is resourceful and resilient: if one door fails, she tries another. Dora finds difficulty in sustaining a tenacity that can help in trying various paths into relationship with other people until the right path is found; she tends to act impulsively instead. Her lack of regard for the consequences is demonstrated when she kicks off her shoes, and runs towards the reedy edge of the water, and when she is unable to find her shoes on her return, her temporary relief is overshadowed by her embarrassment. Like Yvonne Geary in Murdoch’s short story “Something Special,” Dora finds herself without the appropriate attire for her journey, and her introduction into a foreign landscape commences in self-induced hardship and discomfort. Nevertheless, when Mrs Mark provides Dora with a guided tour of the labyrinthine Imber and its grounds the following day, and Dora’s initiation is hindered by her lack of preparation (represented by her inappropriate footwear) Dora perseveres (in her high heels) and makes slow and painful progress despite feeling overwhelmed by the numerous prohibitions and restrictions.

Dora’s inability either to get inside society or to affect a genuine breaking in with other people is demonstrated by her failed attempt to engage with Mrs Mark and is symbolically reflected by her clumsy meandering along the edges of the lake. Dora doggedly follows Mrs Mark as they descend several flights of steps to the lake’s edge opposite the Abbey wall. Only

one of the two doors set into the wall provides access into the Abbey. While facing the stone wall, Dora attempts to open a door into a friendlier and more welcoming space in her social labyrinth by asking Mrs Mark about her pre-Imber days. Dora is rebuked painfully into silence for her curiosity, and the metaphoric door remains shut while the Abbey's stern façade and the water's unmoving and harsh reflection correspond to Mrs Mark's censorious response. This causes Dora to feel confused and resentful, as her misguided efforts in finding a guide to help her navigate her through the labyrinth are met with misunderstanding or disapproval. Although Dora makes well-meaning attempts to gain access and insight into potentially reassuring kindred emotions and experiences, her stumbling exploration of the social space of the labyrinth only leads her to a closed door that refuses to budge – another dead end – and she is unable to penetrate the barriers that impede her progress. Greatly discouraged and unable to perceive her situation dispassionately, Dora, who is left alone most of the time, feels cornered and “shut in” and believes that everybody is “covertly observing her” (182).

Dora's continuing journey through Imber's physical labyrinth leads her to the Abbey itself and to a space that offers a concrete representation of her acute sense of confinement. At the end of a corridor, entered through a narrow vestibule, is the “almost complete blackness” (68) of the visitors' chapel. Stifled by its silence, darkness, and enclosure, Dora is relieved to escape into the breeze, sunlight, and openness of the Abbey's grounds and lake. Her horror at the nuns' enclosure – and at her own heightened sense of imprisonment – finds voice in the outburst “It's terrible to think of them shut up like that” (69). Her initial awe at Imber's beauty, transformed into fear and apprehension, evolves into an intense dislike of what she perceives as the property's endless array of various enclosures and places of constriction. Dora experiences an intensified sensation of inability to find her way at Imber. Ill-equipped in material terms, she seems unable to compensate with her usual strategy of friendly curiosity, and her exasperating emotional journey is duplicated in her frustrating attempts at orientation within Imber's physical maze.

Accordingly, she and Mrs Mark continue to walk in single file, Dora tottering all the while in

silence in her unwieldy high heels along an overgrown and barely discernible path while Mrs Mark expounds on the virtues of the nuns' lives.

Although Dora considers the nuns' situation a negative one and is not yet capable of seeing others in a completely selfless way, she is often capable of an appropriate response when it matters. On meeting the other young woman at Imber, Catherine, Dora is enabled by their similarity in age to imagine Catherine's state of mind concerning becoming a postulant – a prospect Dora finds appalling. Dora, initially aware of Catherine because of her good looks, is mystified by the girl's decision to enter the convent. While Paul holds up Catherine to Dora as “everything that a woman should be – lovely, gentle, modest, and chaste” (139) – and by extension, confined and dependent – Dora is intuitively aware of Catherine's actual feelings about entering the Abbey's enclosed order, and her awareness turns out to be accurate. Aware of Catherine's deep sadness and possible regret at her impending entry into religious life, Dora is interested to hear Catherine's thoughts in more detail. Unable to contain her consternation any longer, Dora eventually tells Catherine: “You can't really want to go in there! To shut yourself up like that, when you're so young and so beautiful ... it makes me quite miserable to think of you in there!” (138). Her aesthetic sensitivity is coupled with a sense of unease at Catherine's despondent demeanour and therefore she is able to relate to Catherine's situation as a reflection of her own before marriage to Paul. Consequently, when Catherine tries to drown herself, Dora is able to see her agitated state while others do not, and chooses to act selflessly and without hesitation to save her from drowning even though she can't swim herself. Dora's quick thinking, a “practical action ... in response to the real world” (Birdsall 55), is her first automatically independent choice instrumental in her progress towards a self-determined life.

Dora's curiosity and inquisitiveness about other people is also engaged when she observes Toby Gashe on the train from London to Pendelcote. Toby represents freedom for Dora and she observes him furtively as he wanders along the edge of the lake in the dark, while she is engaged in a hostile exchange with Paul. Dora, who is more attuned to physical beauty than to the

reality of others' lives, admires Toby's lack of self-consciousness when she sees him naked by the side of a sunny pool of water and compares his grace and beauty to that of Donatello's David. The tentative affinity between them is cemented further after Dora observes him again listening to a recital of Bach recordings and, noticing her, Toby makes his way out of doors towards her. Dora reacts to Toby in response to her aesthetic sense and openness to people and becomes increasingly at ease with him, reflecting that, unlike the others, he alone does not "enclose or judge her" or attempt to force her into playing "their role" (195).

Dora is indeed disturbed by her lack of a suitable role at Imber and feels that here, too, just as before, she has no real place within her surroundings – that what she sees is just "inside her head ... it [is] all imaginary" (182). Imber's tranquil yet impenetrable landscape, argues Johnson, is representative of "Dora's sense of alienation from her own body" and reflects "her bewildered emotional state" (83). Dora's powerlessness to connect with others and her overwhelming sense of being "organized and shut in" (182) is embodied in Imber's solid enduring architecture, the mysterious depths of the lake, and the restrictions governing use of spaces. Dora is uncomfortable indoors, associating such places with difficult tasks and continual scrutiny from others. Unable to persevere in dealing with the disagreeable sensations generated by her presence in these spaces, she seeks instead to evade such restrictions and those who impose them by escaping into the relative freedom of the outdoors. Her artist's eye notices the natural beauty of water, woods, and skies. Here, where Imber's boundaries and definitions of enclosures are less obvious, Dora is generally not required to interact with others and she is able to pursue her daydreams unhindered, managing to sidestep real involvement. Gradually, she interacts uninhibitedly with Michael and Toby, without the critical observation of either her husband or Mrs Mark.

The high stone walls of the Abbey, secure against intruders, only provide access through a lone door. Dora notes that even the reflection from "the lake was hard" while she contemplates the Norman tower with its "one golden face and one ... [in] shadow" (182). Reminiscent of the

Lady of Shalott, Dora impotently tries to “somehow to break into the idle motionless scene” of the lake’s surface by throwing her lipstick into the lake, “hard and full of reflections” (182). The stony and cold exclusion from community life that Dora experiences is made material in the physical features of the buildings. She finds the many corridors, passages, walls, and enclosures, as labyrinthine and constraining. While her bedroom is upstairs and affords an expansive view of the lake, her perspective of the property’s components and their relationship to each other is generally partial and obscured. In a remarkable resemblance to Frederica Potter’s experience at Bran House, Dora feels her presence amongst the others lacks importance to the degree that, in effect, she is absent in their midst. On catching her reflection in the mirror, she is unable either to summon interest or to “even focus her eyes properly” (182) on her face. A similar feeling is registered by Sartre’s Roquentin, who cannot recognise his own face when he is alone, needing other people to structure his identity (85), which is in turn echoed in Enrico Garzilli’s sentiment that, “A person makes his appearance by entering into relations with other persons” (10).

Likewise, the rules concerning use of the Abbey’s chapel and its parlours, restriction of personal decorations, and prohibition of conversation at mealtimes increases Dora’s frustration at inhabiting a world where there is no way of establishing her own identity through interaction with others. These rules and prohibitions add to Dora’s feeling of being enclosed in an ever-tightening space, similar to her experiences of suffocation in the earlier days of her marriage. Dora’s introspection causes her wearily and repeatedly to trace the familiar paths of dejection and frustration. Dora struggles, in particular, because of her social, educational, and personal limitations. She is ill-equipped to interact with others on an equal footing, convinced of her own inferiority and worthlessness. A habitual retreat into comfortable patterns of behaviour from her past prevents Dora from pursuing a cautious exploration of alternative avenues towards her desired destination. She tearfully decides that the only act of self-assertion she can manage is to return to London without telling anyone, and so whatever tentative progress she has made within the labyrinth is about to be undone as she retraces her steps once again to Noel Spens’s flat.

The decision to go to London causes Dora to feel “at once more real” (183). Dora mistakenly believes her reactive and simple decision will help her regain some ownership of, and direction in, her life and she does not consider that her action may be regressive and repetitious. Her desire for the reassurance of the familiar is common, though, since “the more we are displaced into unknown territory, the more tenaciously we cling to what is already known as a way of coping with the disorientation of change” (Hospital 68). Consequently, London beckons Dora as a place of familiarity and comfort. While London’s features are labyrinthine in nature, Dora deals with its maze of locations, streets, (and relationships) with the ease of familiarity. In returning to the predictable Noel, she seeks to recapture not only some friendship and fun but also a sense of control and involvement in the reality of her own life within a real, imperfect world. On her arrival at Paddington station she stands still, trying to absorb the noisy, busy and smelly streets of London and the “healing anonymity” (183) provided by the city. Dora’s attempt to grasp Ariadne’s thread of reality, however, is thwarted and she ends up caught again in an entangling circularity of movement that appears to be little more than a regressive retracing of steps.

Her impending moving encounter and subsequent moral awakening at the Gallery illustrates Murdoch’s belief that “Art ... is the most educational of all human activities ... [it] is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness ... [and] it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see” (“The Sovereignty of Good” 372). Dora’s carefree sojourn with Noel is short-lived – her feeling of gaiety dissipates as she answers the phone and hears Paul’s voice and the blackbird’s song at Imber. Her sudden awareness that being in London in Noel Spens’s flat is an experience of false reality occurs in response to her hearing the blackbird’s song and not because of what Paul has to say. Her recognition of the beauty of the bird’s song is a sharp reminder that she has just chosen a path that is simply a diversion from the reality she knows she must confront. Escaping from her problems will not help solve them.

In spite of her growing moral awareness, Dora is still unable to deliberate and choose an appropriate course of action. In a fog of misery and confusion, she instinctively hails a taxi to the National Gallery – automatically retracing a path to somewhere “familiar” and “well-loved” (190). In the midst of the beautiful paintings she “worshipped so often” she starts to feel calm and consoled as if in the presence of “something welcoming” (190). The gallery represents a place that is akin to a spiritual home for Dora, and Gainsborough’s painting of his two young daughters causes her to experience a spiritual revelation of sorts. She contemplates the painting and feels that it is “something real and something perfect” (190). The painting has an independent, stable existence that is constant irrespective of any other external occurrences and is resistant to being absorbed into Dora’s personal fantasies. It exists on its own merits. The subjective falsifying veil through which Dora regards the world and its inhabitants is pierced by her realisation that others, too, experience a reality as real as her own. Although Dora’s “revelation” leaves her humbled and ecstatic and her thoughts are “not clearly articulated” (191), she decides very quickly that she must return to Imber at once. Her gallery experience provides her with a fleeting yet electrifying instance of attention whereby she discerns, at last, the true path she must follow: “Her real life, her real problems, were at Imber ... her problems would be solved after all” (191).

Although Dora’s Gallery experience functions as “a signpost on her road to freedom,” Seiler-Franklin notes it is “too brief to provide a permanent escape from her solipsism” (37). Dora’s hasty trip to London is made as a spontaneous act of revenge and spite against Paul and the community, yet she returns with the intention of putting things right. The revelation that takes place at the National Gallery appears to set her on a path of self-confidence and self-reliance, in the belief that she is capable of dealing with whatever troubles confront her. While the veil is only temporarily lifted, Dora’s vision is altered irrevocably, and she experiences a brief insight that “seeing and understanding, seeing and appreciation, seeing and loving, seeing and good are all related” (Heusel 247) and are necessary conditions for exiting the labyrinth and functioning effectively in the real world as a self amongst others. Dora’s openness to the existence of other

people therefore places her at an advantage to the rest of the lay community, who are so preoccupied with their own utopian vision that they forget that others like Dora exist. Dora returns to the difficult path of travelling alongside and seeing others, face to face, for who they really are – real individuals worthy of respect and genuine engagement despite their foibles – rather than continually seeking to escape. This incident in the National Gallery functions as one of the major turning points in Dora's journey and causes her to reassess her motives. She begins to realise that her tenuous vision of the "connexion" (191) between her previous subjectivity and the reality of the world presents her with enormous tasks to be accomplished. Nevertheless, while her progress within the labyrinth is dependent on her willingness to return to the community, her success is not guaranteed and may prove to be partial at best.

That Dora's vision of reality, irrespective of the incident at the gallery, is still far from perfect is demonstrated in her impulsive and foolish plan to salvage the sunken Abbey bell and substitute it for the new one. Even though she recognises the importance of the bell's discovery "for art and history and so on" (198), her most pressing desire is to shock the community into awe of her – "to shake everybody up a bit" (199). Her newfound awareness of the reality of things outside herself is short-lived, as slipping back into old habits, she persuades the compliant Toby to help her. Dora, repeating her usual rash pattern, stops neither to deliberate on the possible repercussions of her actions nor to contemplate an alternative avenue. The plotting of the substitution of the old bell for the new is an attention-seeking ploy. The solipsism at the heart of Dora's being remains the guiding force for her blundering and repetitious movements within the labyrinth. The full extent of her moral clumsiness and misguided efforts to obtain the community's respect is demonstrated when Toby discovers the sunken bell. Dora selfishly believes that the bell will provide her with the opportunity, for the first time in her life, of performing an independent and important (but rebellious) action. When Dora (who knows of the bell's legendary status and is convinced of its importance to art and history) hears Toby's news, she persuades him to help her pull it out of the lake and surprise the community with something

“like a real miracle” (198). Dora’s desperate search for recognition by others and a place of importance amongst them deceives her into making yet another poor choice.

Her silly plan loses momentum and its gradual and premature end commences when she contemplates the bell’s sheer physical presence and is awed by its engravings and its history. Suddenly, the bell, now lifted from its watery resting place and elevated above the ground, is a confronting reality for Dora – no longer just a component of her ingenious plan or a “thing from another world” (220). As she attends to the bell named Gabriel – reminiscent of the angel Gabriel whose appearance before the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation leads to a response of service and obedience on Mary’s part – it is transformed from an inanimate object that will serve to bring her glory into something that resembles “a living presence,” with “strange warmth in it” (265). Dora’s appreciation and respect for the bell as a precious work of art awakens in her a sense of awe and responsibility in a way similar to that of her earlier visit to the Gallery. She kneels before the bell as she had wanted to do before Gainsborough’s painting in an awareness of the “spiritual energy of the past” (Johnson 85) which speaks to the present. The spiritual energy of the past is transferred to Dora as she studies the strange human faces of the biblical scenes engraved around the bell’s edge and recognises their familiarity and significance in her own life. Her “ignorance of religion” (14) is lifted a little as she identifies scenes of the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection and realises that these, together with the Lord’s Prayer, which she used to recite, form part of her past too. The “voice of Love” (221) inherent in the bell’s name resonates for Dora as she reflects that it has been made real by the love and efforts of its medieval artisans. Once again, her aesthetic sense allows her a brief glimpse of reality beyond herself, but still blinded by her overarching desire for self gratification, her plans for the bell’s reappearance continue, albeit at a diminished pace.

Ultimately, Dora’s labyrinthine journey requires that she enter into a Plato’s Cave to face her illusions. This Plato’s Cave is represented in the physical labyrinth by the dark barn where the bell awaits, and where the crucial moment in Dora’s moral awakening occurs. In this space, she

confronts her daydreams before exiting into growing enlightenment. Despite her reluctance to face her fantasies, she does eventually contemplate them, dealing honestly and painfully with her shortcomings, and seeing reality for the first time. Murdoch's words further develop this image of the cavern, describing the black space inside the bell as an "inhabited cave" (267). This is the confronting centre of the labyrinth to which Dora's faltering steps have led her and in which she gains insight into the truth that dictates that:

the world of ... sensuous imagination ... must be tempered with the heavier weight of one's past, one's duty, and an aesthetic based on a rational as well as an intuitive relation to the world. (Faris 128)

By now attired more appropriately in sandals, Dora navigates confidently and speedily through Imber's dark and rain-soaked grounds to the barn. She is drawn irresistibly to the barn by her aesthetic imagination, and although overwhelmed by the magnitude of the bell's interior, she commences a sustained examination by torchlight of the engraved human figures before her. While her eyes perceive the shadowed figures on the bell, her imagination enables her to recognise the humanity present in them, relating them to the fully alive members of the Imber community. Despite the simplicity of the figures, she is able to appreciate the artistic merit and beauty of each one, and to associate these basic drawings and their underlying complexity with the human figures of the community. She ponders their sincere efforts towards spiritual betterment and contrasts these with her own rather shallow preoccupations during her time in their midst. She reflects on her intended "enterprise" to shock the community with her substitution of the old and new bells and now sees it simply as a "cheap ... vulgar ... and thoroughly nasty" plan (265). Her realisation that her foolish actions of the past were a result of her own lack of attention to the community alerts her to the likely harm that her continued inattention is about to cause. For the first time, she has no excuse for her behaviour and her sustained contemplation of the medieval figures affects recognition that her earlier actions were simply an "abortive fantasy" (265). Her acknowledgement that she ought to have "reflected more

carefully” (265) prior to acting makes it possible, finally, for Dora to contemplate selflessly the full import of the “connexion” (191) that had been revealed to her at the National Gallery. Now able to contemplate her past actions in a clear-eyed manner for the first time, she accepts that her duty compels her, alone, to bear responsibility for averting potential damage to Imber’s reputation.

Her denunciation of her own behaviour and admission of her planned substitution of the bell is juxtaposed now with her earlier negative reaction to the nuns’ choice of entering the Abbey and denouncing a self-obsessed existence. In choosing to divulge her own weakness rather than make excuses for it, Dora denies the self-centredness by which she is normally motivated and puts the well-being of others first. She engages in an honest examination of her motives and their repercussions, and her decision to inform the community of her error in judgement is made as she recalls that “the truth-telling voice must not be silenced” (267). Her courage to walk this particular new path despite its painfulness is evidence of her newfound vision and, with it, a desire to exit the Cave and live out of the shadows.

As winter encroaches, and Michael and Dora are left at Imber, Dora immerses herself enthusiastically in office and household tasks, revealing an enjoyment and aptitude for the responsibilities she undertakes of her own volition. Her sense of reality becomes keen and her self-identity is fostered by her careful attention to others. By the time she leaves the community her change in attitude occasions significant moral development and growth in self-awareness. She completes several independent actions, including teaching herself to swim. The lake represents more than just a stretch of dividing water: several of Murdoch’s characters, including Dora, experience spiritual and/or physical ordeals in or near water. Conradi observes that, for Murdoch, ... swimming seems to act as the unofficial counterimage of a healing surrender to the mysterious supportive properties of the world ... To be able to swim ... is almost to possess moral competence. Both depend on ‘one’s willingness to surrender a rigid nervous attachment to the upright position’. (*The Saint* 109)

Dora's inability to swim, symbolic of her lack of competence in establishing a connection (a mutually trusting and respectful engagement) with others, is related to her life's usual pattern of surrender (which resembles a tacit admission of submissiveness or defeat and revolt). Despite her stubbornness and her lack of skills in finding a way into the uncharted territory of more meaningful relationships, Dora possesses abundant potential with which to transform her interactions and enable her to swim. The lake simultaneously challenges her courage to explore the frightening unknown and to travel in a new direction in the future while providing a precious link to the past (in the form of the submerged bell). She also remembers how to row, and expresses her new view of Imber in paintings rather than in words. Her mastering of these skills is symbolic of her progress to maturity and is a bridging step from the labyrinthine world of Imber into the real world beyond its gates.

Her increased knowledge of herself, her strengths and her weaknesses, garnered from "all the dreadful things that had passed" (305) in the past few months, and her growing attention to others, enable her to make considered choices as to her life's future paths. Instead of avoiding difficult tasks, or escaping from onerous situations by reverting to old comfortable habits, Dora gives them her full attention and makes an attempt to unravel their various threads. The recriminatory letters posted by Paul on his return to London no longer frighten Dora but receive her carefully considered and argued responses. Her calmly resolute decision not to return to Paul by the narrative's end represents a choice informed by attention to their individual natures and is in marked contrast to her earlier duty-driven and tearful return to him. Dora's choice to pursue a path towards an independent life, free of Paul's influence, is representative of Felski's contention (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 127) that a female character must break free of restrictive familial situations in order to escape into a wider cultural space so that self-determination can occur.

When Michael leaves, Dora returns to Imber confidently without losing her way as in the past, despite the foggy conditions. Her earlier stumbling within Imber's maze, analogous to her own life, typified the flustered and irresolute girl with an ineffectual attention towards landmarks

and people. Murdoch's use of weather as an analogy for her characters' moral states is emphasised as Dora prepares to leave on a morning that becomes radiant with sunshine as the fog clears: her formerly negative attitude and alienated perspective on life have altered as a result of her interaction and dialogue with members of the community. As she attempts to row across the lake for the last time, the little boat is still invisible in the fog. Her gradual mastery of manoeuvring the vessel, accompanied by the dissipation of the mist, allows Dora to see clearly for the first time the direction in which she wants to travel. Her "new" vision, signalled by her earlier torch-lit examination of the bell's ancient figures, enables a completely new perspective on the things of real value, marking her exit from Plato's Cave and the labyrinth into a bright new world full of possibilities. Like a number of Byatt's female characters several decades later, Dora discovers that she can now imagine an alternative narrative for herself.

As she finishes packing and returns Imber's key to the Abbey nuns, "the sky [is] clear ... and the sun [begins] to warm her" (316), and she busily contemplates her journey to Bath to stay with her friend Sally and commence a new life as an art teacher. She imagines herself telling Sally the whole story, "fictionalising her own experience at Imber" (Johnson 105). Her preparedness to put her present and future into context with her past, as if in a narrative in which she is one of the characters, indicates Dora's progress within the labyrinth. Previously she had had no use for imagination or memories of the past, and was unable to look carefully at events or people that required further contemplation or attention.

In her final contemplation of Imber Court, with its buildings and the lake now lifted out of the vaporous labyrinth into brilliant light, Dora considers the role it has all played in her past. Although relieved that "she had survived" (316) while Imber is about to be joined to the Abbey and locked away from the world, the culmination of Dora's journey is her mastery of the social and physical labyrinths through which she has trudged. Her hesitant and stumbling steps through the bewildering maze of interactions with others during her short time at Imber have led her to a more accurate perception of the world and those in it. Repeated occasions of following

misleading passages, getting lost, seeking help, retreating to safe spots from the past, and attempting the testing of new paths, and paying attention to the astute guidance of others (such as Mother Clare and Michael Meade) foster Dora's acquisition of new skills and self belief. Her tendency to self-obsession is moderated by an acute awareness not only of the beauty of the world and its contents, but also by a demonstrated sense of moral responsibility for her own actions. Dora's future, although not assured, contains the promise of an independent and meaningful life built on a freedom of choice unclouded by illusion and fantasy.

¹ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*. Trans. Richard Zenith. New York: Penguin, 2002. (53).

² Peter Conradi, in *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, notes that Imber Court and Imber Abbey, the setting for *The Bell*, were inspired by and modelled on Malling Abbey in Kent, an Anglican Benedictine community founded in 1090 and refounded after 1916. Murdoch visited Malling Abbey three times between the years 1946-9, during her own "search for peace of mind" (420) in times that were marked by "particular desolation and difficulty" (428) following her harrowing war-time experiences with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Commenting on some of the sources for the novel, Conradi believes that Murdoch's personal quest for spiritual tranquillity at Malling Abbey, her private labyrinth at the time, serves as a model for the troubled searches of her main characters in *The Bell*.

³ Laura Mulvey, "Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (n.pag.), qtd. in Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," *Sexuality and Space* (82).

CHAPTER TWO:
The Era of Realism:

Marian Taylor

(*The Unicorn*, Iris Murdoch)

*“What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.”*
– T.S. Eliot¹

Iris Murdoch’s seventh novel, *The Unicorn*, bears resemblance to *The Bell* published five years earlier, insofar as it focuses on a central female character making a journey away from the city to a more isolated place, and to a physical labyrinth of building and a wider setting that extends the labyrinth to incorporate paths, bogs, enclosed spaces like the garden, and the sea. In *The Unicorn*, the main barriers to “attention” are fantasy and self-delusion. The form of the novel in this case is more symmetrical and “crystalline”² than that of *The Bell*, and that fact may encourage readers to consider the text as embodying a process in which the journey is more important than the outcome of the plot. The female journey involves enclosure and male domination even more explicitly than the narrative of *The Bell*, because its use of gothic conventions and “feudal” Irish society permit that kind of depiction. The main female character, Marian Taylor, a young unmarried woman, traces a labyrinth that is physical, social, and personal, and makes her way out by following the thread of attention to the identity of others and of herself that enables her to overcome the fantasy and self-delusion that mislead her for much of the labyrinthine journey.

Despite Murdoch’s professed abhorrence of imposing too formal a structure upon narrative, *The Unicorn*’s overtly symmetrical and patterned form encourages readers to concentrate on the process of the journey rather than the plot outcome. Several recurring images

in the opening and closing sequences of the novel reinforce the notion of a circular and contained structure. For example, Marian arrives by train, and in the novel's final scene, having come full circle, departs by train, "getting into a second-class compartment" (269). Marian's difficult voyage incorporates movement backwards and forwards between past and present, alternately revealing and obscuring paths to further knowledge. Her painfully indirect and lengthy (yet productive) journey is summed up in Doob's comment in relation to labyrinths that a "circuitous route may be the only effective way to reach a goal."³ Extensive reference to the number seven, "an important number for the labyrinth as the common Cretan design had seven circuits" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 859, 862), also occurs throughout the narrative. For instance, the locals believe superstitiously that a flood seven years earlier is about to be repeated (*Unicorn* 64). The number seven is regarded as a "holy number," frequently appearing in groupings such as the seven days of creation and seven days of the week, while the seventh day is the Sabbath, the seventh year is sabbatical, and so forth.

Murdoch's deliberate appropriation of the gothic genre's conventions, which is emulated by Byatt's pointed adaptation of the romance forty years later, produces expectations in readers of a tale of mysteries, discoveries and uncovering of secrets, the isolation of threatening landscapes, and social conservatism. This use is ironic; the main character is shown (like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*) to be deceiving herself for much of the narrative.

The allusive nature of *The Unicorn* assumes the complicity of readers in constructing a mysteriously compelling world. Murdoch's narrative encourages readers to work through a labyrinth of interwoven texts such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey*; works by the Brontës; Plato's teachings; religious and spiritual beliefs, and Greek myths, resulting in a novel that is rich in literary, philosophical, and mythical references. This world, however, is a deceptive textual labyrinth in which readers are called upon to read beyond appearances in order to discern the fable contained within.

Because the resolution of the plot is overtly symmetrical and patterned, readers may interpret the journey as carrying more importance than the plot, which appears almost parodic. Events, such as the flood at the end, occur on cue: the floods caused seven years earlier by a “big storm”(9) and referred to by Gerald Scottow as he introduces Marian to the local topography occur once again as “a great flood coming down at the Devil’s Causeway” (249) just before she leaves. Similarly, Marian’s and Hannah’s joint reading of Paul Valéry’s poem “Cimetière marin” in the fourth chapter foreshadows the major characters’ deaths that occur at narrative’s end, and Gaze Castle, with bodies laid out in a funereal manner, comes to resemble a cemetery by the sea. The deaths are almost a means to the end of Marian’s enlightenment. The main resolution sees Marian returning to the city as a self-aware and self-reliant woman after her female journey.

The female journey depicted in *The Unicorn* reveals women to be self-limiting and defined with reference to men. Marian’s motivation to enter the labyrinth is her belief that she is not valuable without a man. She is conscious, at twenty-nine, of being trapped in a boring and unfulfilled life: she feels she is “no longer, after all, so young,” and wonders if she has become “settled, perhaps too settled” (10) in her profession as a teacher in London. Her job, despite her intellectual ability, has become predictable and is no longer exciting. Lacking the confidence to develop her personality or capabilities on her own terms, Marian seeks direction and recognition from others, reflecting resentfully that “society ... had given her no help” (28). She, like other female protagonists in this study, is unable to imagine an alternative narrative for herself, and cannot accommodate ideas of personal growth and development through carefully considered, independent action. At best, she manages a retaliatory move in response to her perception of rejection by others.

Like Dora in *The Bell*, Marian is dependent on a male for her identity and self-esteem. Dora decides that marriage to her teacher Paul Greenfield will give her status and recognition; Marian is convinced that her future happiness hinges on marriage to fellow teacher Geoffrey, but he does not reciprocate her feelings. This disappointment, and her poor appraisal of her life’s

achievements, acts as a catalyst for action. Marian dreams of stepping outside of day-to-day mediocrity into a situation where she will be appreciated for herself, find a husband, and as a result, become more self-assured. This dream, however, is built on shaky foundations. She hopes to achieve success and happiness through an image that appears desirable to her. While her imagination is bent towards a future in which she is Geoffrey's wife, it is based solely on fantasy since no meaningful relationship yet exists between them, let alone one of intimacy – a prerequisite for contemplation of marriage. Out of frustration and pique, she grasps the opportunity to move beyond her accustomed world and takes a new job in a new country. Consequently she pursues an enticing but misleading labyrinthine path that leads to her confinement within *The Unicorn's* alien world. She realises belatedly that Gaze Castle and its environs form a closed world – a site of dangerous game-playing.

Women in *The Unicorn* are enclosed. Murdoch's (and Byatt's) narratives include a range of enclosed spaces in which women undergo emotional or physical pain and are prevented from pursuing their own choices or decisions. Marian and other female characters are isolated and enclosed in Gaze Castle (the gothic mode supports this) and are limited by distance from the reality of the city. Despite Marian's wish to leave her old life behind, she is enclosed physically as well as within the self-constructed boundaries that impel her to seek her identity through a man. Such self-imposed constrictions may be compared with the experiences of Dora Greenfield and Frederica Potter, who face real external limitations on their freedom in their isolation in the Gloucestershire and Herefordshire countryside respectively, and loss of autonomy through the restrictions imposed by their husbands or society. Marian is eventually able to step beyond her enclosures when she overcomes her disposition towards fantasy.

Women in *The Unicorn* are dominated by men. The male characters hold the keys, literally, and are deciders of fate. Female protagonists initially do not question this necessity for lock-and-key, a decision which in turn confers additional power upon male control. Gerald Scottow is a "demon enchanter" (Sullivan 156) whose ability to dominate depends largely on

acceptance of fantasy and on sexuality. Scottow, as manager appointed by Gaze's absentee master, Peter Crean-Smith, promotes a male-controlled dominion of Gaze and its surroundings. As a keeper of the keys, Scottow, aided by Jamesie, determines and enforces suitable spaces for the constrained women – Marian and Hannah – thus creating a site of multiple oppression. Scottow unlocks the door to the sitting room, allowing Marian to enter. He also enables the key to the bookcase to be found so Marian can open its doors and inspect the books; he is custodian of the keys to Hannah's bedroom door, which is unlocked to permit Marian's entrance. Marian must be contained because her cleverness and intelligence are threats to patriarchal control, while Hannah's incarceration is justified primarily by her identity as an adulterous woman. Scottow argues with Marian that individuals at Gaze do not possess the freedom to determine their own movements or relationships with others, but must submit to the established patterns of behaviour and self-imposed myth of feudal authority, and to the control of superstitious religious beliefs. His words of warning to Marian reinforce the implicit attitude that Gaze has no place for free-thinking or strong-willed individuals, least of all women, wishing to pursue their own freedom through independent action or in encouraging others to do the same. As a result, Marian reacts similarly to other Murdochian and Byattian female protagonists who rebel, often covertly, against a situation in which others are seemingly content, and continues resolutely to seek a path out of the maze.

Women in *The Unicorn* lose their identity. They are cut off from the reality of the city and a range of human contacts and only Marian's contact with Geoffrey (which she temporarily ignores) helps her to regain her sense of self. Isolation from the outside world within the artificially gothic environment at Gaze jars Marian's sense of identity. Her disconnection from the real world causes a correspondingly decreased awareness of self and others. She admits in a letter to Geoffrey that, despite a "sense of loyalty to her employers" (*Unicorn* 28) and a willingness "to attach herself" to Hannah (30) which renders the outside world so distant, she is starting to forget who she is (27). Having arrived at her longed-for destination, the castle with its

towers, she now finds that it really does not match her expectations. Similar sensations are shared by other protagonists in this study. For example, Frederica Potter, in Byatt's *Babel Tower*, craving the solace of a rural moated and towered grange, eventually realises her identity is threatened by the seclusion of her country home and pleads with her husband: "You can't see *me*, you've no idea who I am, I am someone, I *was* someone. I am someone, someone nobody ever sees any more –" (38). Likewise, Murdoch's Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* suddenly becomes aware, as she stares at the Norman tower opposite her window, that allowing herself to be defined by her husband's identity results in her personal isolation.

Marian, dependent on male approval for her sense of self-worth, is defined as "a stranger" by Violet, while Gerald denies this, saying, "She's one of us, or soon will be" (20). Marian initially resists becoming part of this weird community but soon realises that perhaps she is being "*influenced*" (27) into their particular mode of existence. Her disdain and disregard for Geoffrey's subsequent correspondence effectively shuts out the lone voice of reason and reality available to her. Frequent confinement to her bedroom, interspersed with intermittent visits to Hannah's quarters, foster her perception that her world is rapidly shrinking. Even in Hannah's room she "felt herself shut in, almost menaced, by the circle of faded armchairs piled with books and papers" (24), contained within a much narrower way of life than she had been accustomed to in London.

Women in *The Unicorn* are self-absorbed. They are surrounded by mirrors, in an enclosed space. Marian almost succumbs to the self-absorption that leads to Hannah's downfall. Marian's energy, curiosity, and courage help her to retain enough independence of mind to escape. The false paths of the labyrinth magnified by mirrors represent self-absorption and fantasy which cause disconnectedness from the real world. Marian observes that Hannah's room is adorned with "a great many mirrors" (24) that create a repeating pattern of empty surfaces and cause an endless repetition of an empty centre. Murdoch's use of mirror imagery in Hannah's room is a cautionary observation on the dangers of self-absorption. Closed off from the exterior

world, Hannah seeks herself in reflections. Although Marian quickly notices Hannah's obsession with her reflection, suggestive of a "neurotic self-absorption" (Kane 47), she does not heed the warning and, instead, becomes drawn further into her own fantasising and speculation over Hannah. This, in turn, serves as complicity in Hannah's fantasy, with Marian reflecting Hannah to herself. Marian becomes charmed by her own reflection, too, and also becomes preoccupied with her position.

Hannah becomes caught in a "literary" labyrinth which she helps construct from elements drawn from the medieval, feudal, fairytale, and psychological realms. Yet the contributions are hollow and provide only a glittering quality of emptiness hinting at an unreachable or untouchable reality similar to that which distracts Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* and drives her to her death. Marian and Hannah both fall victim to the inability to see beyond one's own image in the mirror – a sort of bewitching through which the real world is eclipsed by the self: a distorted, short-sighted vision that excludes others. Both women become complicit in the other's fantasy. Marian eventually discovers that discerning vision is free of self-consoling fantasy and requires "constant revision" (Faris 30) for the ability to see "something else, something particular, as existing outside" herself (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 215). She understands that she is able to emerge from the darkness of the labyrinth of self-importance and vanity to return to the harsher light of her old, real world with a new ability to see others and herself more realistically.

The importance of Marian's journey and its negotiation, rather than its destination, is supported by Murdoch's deliberate use of labyrinthine imagery throughout the narrative. Readers are expected to become aware of a deliberately more complex Murdochian narrative, and to engage actively in pursuing the literary clues to paths of new understanding. Marian's journey is driven largely by self-delusion and fantasy, as is much of the motivation of all the characters in such an isolated, gothic setting. Similarly, readers are drawn into a particular reading of the narrative by the conventions of gothic. Like Marian, whose delusion deepens as her journey continues, readers must also struggle to maintain an objective interpretation of symbols and

allusions. Marian's motivation to enter the labyrinth grows from fantasy. Her decision to travel to an unknown life at Gaze Castle, and abandon a stable and predictable life in London, is motivated by her conviction that she is finally poised for "some of kind of distinction" (28) with all the "stage-setting preliminaries" (10) over. Like many Murdochian characters, she allows her romantic imagination to be seduced by appearances and has difficulty seeing the reality beyond her fantasies. Marian's eagerness to embrace an adventurous new life, sustained by a belief that she will rise above her "timidity" and will "love and be loved" (30), leads her into a personal labyrinth of self-deception and vanity. Her impatience to fulfil her fantasy of a new life causes her hasty response to an advertisement for a job at Gaze Castle, located in the Scarren. Employment as a governess in a grand mansion in a distant and wild environment is a reference to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. She daydreams that the governess's position in the castle resonates with romantic opportunities, and imagining herself as being summoned to play a Catherine Morland role, Marian believes this path will lead to her destiny. Although she is well educated and an enthusiastic learner, and ought to be capable of distinguishing "fact from fantasy[,] ... [Marian] is handicapped by a tendency to filter life through Romantic lenses" (Kane 54).

Daydreaming and self-congratulation on her appointment blind Marian to the advisability of conducting further research prior to her acceptance of the position and she disregards the possibility, gleaned from a cursory glance at a map, that Gaze is situated in extremely inhospitable terrain. Her romantic and dramatically inclined imagination is captivated instead by the prospect of enjoying an elegant life in the Castle, set in what she believes will be magnificent yet beautiful isolation on the west coast of Ireland. Murdoch regarded Ireland, her country of birth, as "a very romantic land, a land I always wanted to get to ... and discover" (Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* 53). Clinging to her conviction that she is about to embark on the "high life" (*Unicorn* 10), Marian forfeits the opportunity to proceed with caution into new surroundings and embarks on her journey to Gaze Castle as an outsider with little to guide her other than an eagerness to give new experiences "her full and devoted attention" (18). She commences her

quest for self-knowledge and independence with an optimistic resoluteness to face the personal challenges that might lie ahead.⁴

Imagining herself as the heroine in some sort of romantic fiction, she considers it “more romantic” (7) to arrive unannounced at the local railway station. She finds, though, that there is nothing romantic about being left without anyone from Gaze to greet her. Her daydreams are quickly shattered when Marian realizes that, instead of resembling romantic heroes, the locals are “big slow men ... [who] entirely lacked the responsiveness of civilisation” (7). She feels an acute sense of embarrassment at her silliness and short-sightedness and sees that her actions are, indeed, “foolish” and “discourteous” (7).

Marian’s entry into the physical labyrinth is accompanied by a niggling disappointment in an environment so greatly at odds with her expectations. Her haste in commencing a new life leads her into an isolated and distant world separated from everyday reality. The setting of this novel is a labyrinth of castle, bog, pathways, and sea. Many of these are dangerous and forbidden by other characters. Her fond hope that “her journey’s end [could be] the beginning of some sort of happiness” (10) leads her to expect no less than “a real civilised place with shops and a public house” (9). Yet Marian’s hopes start to crumble as soon as she observes the “solitude” and barrenness of the “appalling landscape” (11). The rocky countryside with its unique geological formations and spectacular vegetation fails to impress Marian with its splendour as she forlornly surveys the “desert” with its “miserable” (12) shrubs and little else, due to the “big storm” (9) that swept all away several years before. She eagerly expected the gentle beauty of a natural environment, and a straightforward path into a pleasant social hub into which she could ease herself, but now she finds neither. Frightened by the magnificent coastline, the natural treachery of the rocky coast, the danger of the peat bogs, and the emptiness and silence of the sterile land, Marian longs for the familiarity and safety of London, just as Dora does in *The Bell*. Murdoch deliberately creates an environment unlike the pastoral tranquillity of *The Bell*’s Gloucestershire. The Scarren appears dangerous and threatening and plays on Marian’s imagination to form a

suitably menacing Gothic setting. Eventually, the disparity between Marian's expectations and the reality she confronts gives rise to the extreme conviction that "She had never seen a land so out of sympathy with man" (11). Her tendency towards a dramatic imagination is exacerbated by her clashing emotions and on reaching Gaze, overwhelmed by fear of "the onset of a new world" (16), she is predisposed, like Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, not only to expect the worst of her new abode, but actively to seek it.

Murdoch's setting for *The Unicorn* is an alien world in which the Gothic⁵ form is self-consciously parodied in its consistent and sustained incorporation of a strong element of the supernatural, a stupefying atmosphere of desolation, the murderous and sinister landscape where the bogs swallow people and the seas drown any potential swimmer, a remote and mysterious castle with "staring windows" (16) that seem to watch⁶ its occupants, a bewildering abundance of seen and hidden passageways, menacing characters, imprisoned or punished people, and unexpected or sudden deaths. Marian's journey, as well as the reader's, is complicated by her fantasies which are fed by the "Gothic" surroundings of buildings and inhospitable terrain, the woman at the centre, and Gaze's "feudal" inhabitants. Her orientation to her new physical environment becomes a labyrinthine encounter of thresholds, barriers and dead ends. Floors are bare and "tilting, creaking, echoing" (17), while cobwebs hang from doorways. Flickering oil lamps in murky corridors are occasionally left unlit or, untended and depleted of oil, extinguished. Unable to relight the lamps, Marian feels her energy "being sapped simply by resisting some influence upon her of too silent surroundings" (38).

Surrounded by bleak and hazardous terrain complete with carnivorous plants, *The Unicorn*'s setting also resembles that of classic Gothic novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in that the residence contains an imprisoned woman who once tried to murder her husband. In contrast to the neighbouring "big handsome house" (13) called Riders, which appears mirage-like in the sunny mist, Gaze is "dark ... rather cold" (16) and enveloped in a silent "semi-darkness" (17). Marian's excitement over Gaze Castle's anticipated stately elegance evaporates completely

when reality reveals it is a decrepit and rambling building, “a big grey forbidding house ... built of local limestone” (15).

Despite her steps forward, her orientation within the physical boundaries of the Gaze estate is punctuated by stumbles, falls and potential injury or death. While Marian attempts to find a path to the beach through bogs and cliff tops, she absent-mindedly walks alongside a stream only to find “her feet sinking alarmingly into earth which had the consistency of soft fudge” (31), almost losing her shoes as Dora does (*The Bell*). Ignoring the warnings of the locals, she intends to swim in the sea which is depicted in typical Murdochian fashion as a place both of potential pleasure and extreme danger, associated with death or rebirth. Deciding eventually not to swim, she falteringly negotiates a steep stony track back to the house, falls over twice and cuts her knees.

Marian’s uncertain wanderings about the inherently dangerous physical surroundings parallel her social experiences in her new household, where her discovery of yet another unsettling aspect of *The Unicorn*’s labyrinth disrupts her expectations even further. Expecting Hannah to be an elderly woman, Marian is stunned to learn that in her place is a “young ... strikingly lovely” person, “scarcely older than herself” (23). Similarly, the anticipation of meeting her young pupils is upset as she notes that there is no physical evidence of children at Gaze. Eventually, Marian is made aware that she has been employed to provide companionship for Hannah.

Marian’s self-caused error about the physical setting makes her susceptible to uncertainties about the alleged feudalism of the people, her own status as a professional, a servant, and a friend (should she accept gifts from Hannah?) – and as a woman. Her curiosity and intelligence lead her to seek answers to the mysteries of the place, and in so doing she follows false trails, explores forbidden areas and makes surprising and unpleasant discoveries, follows misleading guides, and has to deal with people who will not tell her about the past or face its truths.

While Marian's arrival at Gaze is disappointing, her conflicting sensations of elation and of being "frightened ... in an ordinary way" (16) form a strangely fitting initiation into a social labyrinth where she is no longer entirely in control. Her acute awareness that she has departed her normal "affectionate, vanished world" (19) for a foreign environment is echoed in Faris' observation that "the labyrinth ... suggests play and terror ... [and] bewilderment" for wanderers within it owing to a lack of "control over [their] environment" (1). On climbing the rickety stairs, Marian simultaneously negotiates a psychological labyrinth in which her fears and misgivings almost overwhelm her, and she admits to "an appalling crippling panic" (15).

Gaze's bizarre fantasy world operates according to its own rather peculiar "medieval and feudal set of values" (Scholes 118), which has its roots in a rural, Anglo-Irish society described in some of the poems of Yeats and the Western Irish peasant superstition of the plays of Synge.⁷ Marian notes that the Gaze household is divided into gentry and servants, but considers herself quite set apart from the other inhabitants although they "were always vaguely ushering her about ... It was the nearest they came to treating her as a servant" (*Unicorn* 37). Marian's status is problematic and contradictory, as she is neither an equal nor a servant. Her subjectivity, as Friedman posits in the "geographic" (17) paradigm of identity, is a site of multiple positions. Marian is British, university educated, and an accomplished teacher, and on the basis of her class ought to occupy a position of privilege within Gaze's confines. Yet, by virtue of her gender and her British nationality, she experiences exclusion (she is referred to as a "stranger" [20]) in the male-controlled Irish household. In a further complication, Marian's identity is also "situational" (Friedman, 23) insofar as different aspects of her identity are foregrounded according to her situation. For example, she commences as an outsider, becomes "one of us" (20), and becomes an independent outsider once more as she leaves.

Marian's "liberal, enlightened" (117) belief in the subject as a conscious agent is painfully at odds with the attitudes of those at Gaze. Hannah tells her that Denis, her "page," would allow her to "kill him slowly" (43). Her self-imposed confinement fosters a self-

perpetuating and repeating myth amongst the locals whose superstitious fantasies lead them to believe that Hannah is cursed. All characters, regardless of their status, participate in the bizarre myth that allows them to be Hannah's jailers but that ultimately imprisons them, too. This myth of entrapment is described in the spatial terms of "pattern," "central web," "coils" and "rigid networks" (Kane 44-45) – or a labyrinth – which together confine all the participants in the story – even Marian, who, keen to find her own particular path, ends up misinterpreting signs and taking wrong turns.

She finds that her negotiation of a confusing social labyrinth is complicated by a lack of clear boundaries or guides. Several aspects of the "big self-absorbed house" (*Unicorn* 30) puzzle Marian, especially the interactions (or lack thereof) between its occupants. A few stilted social gatherings do not present "a reassuring scene" (30) and are anxious affairs. There is no sound of human activity, and the house, with its decaying air of neglect, is dark and damp. No interest is shown in Marian's life prior to her arrival at Gaze and no information is offered her about the household. Life exists on a day-to-day basis without co-existence of past and present. Nobody at Gaze speaks about the past and Marian feels prohibited from broaching the topic. Such a pervasive aura of gloomy introversion and lack of vitality is symptomatic of a withdrawal from reality and represents yet another dead end which conspires to hold Marian firmly in place. Yet Marian responds to this conspiracy of silence, which renders a vital, engaged and involved reality impossible, with an increased determination to pursue her journey of discovery, to continue questioning and learning. As an eager and fast learner, Marian becomes self-reliant, walking in darkness from one room to another, negotiating corridors, ascending and descending stairs, and memorising her way by retracing her steps. Although she feels humiliated by her lack of necessary strategies and skills for these hazardous paths, she compensates with her eagerness to seek the assistance of individuals who appear to know their way and from whom she hopes to learn.

Yet caught between ignorance and knowledge, Marian intuits that she is about to confront abhorrent revelations and she hesitates briefly. Such moments of indecisiveness are explained by Doob as follows:

movement through ... a maze is halting, episodic ... a maze walker may lose confidence, retrace his [or her] steps, take another path, right or wrong. The essence of the maze experience is confusion, doubt, and frustration as one ambiguity succeeds another Uncertainty may be heightened in that the maze-walker ... cannot know until reaching the end that the chosen path is correct; indeed, she cannot even be sure there *is* an end.

(46)

Confused and upset, Marian is immobilised by the fear of what she may find out. To remain in ignorance of the truth of Gaze is no longer a possibility, as she has ventured too far forward to simply retrace her steps. Although Marian's ideas and observations about life at Gaze seem to have reached a dead end, her realization that the labyrinth is "a place of perilous error, a path to disaster unless sound guidance intervenes" (99), necessitates her quizzing of others. While her informants are willing conspirators, they ultimately prove to be unreliable guides, setting Marian on false paths in her psychological labyrinth. Their information confuses her, as does Hannah's strange behaviour. Even though Marian is undeterred by obstacles and struggles to unlock and push open both physical and metaphoric gates, her passage through the wall and beyond proves to be even more confusing than before. The reader, who is also likely to experience the frustrations of misleading clues and unreliable guides, must persevere in attempting to unlock confusing allusions and clues. The ability to keep a firm hold of all narrative threads is essential to revelation of the fable at the centre.

Marian's resourcefulness extends to investigating passages in and around the house alone, even though males, as keepers of the keys, determine whether or not particular areas may be entered. Her desire for knowledge motivates her exploration of Gaze's multicursal labyrinth, eventually leading her to make a useful and revealing discovery. She discovers that the "curious

patterned wallpaper on the walls” (*Unicorn* 130) in Jamesie’s unattended bedroom is actually a “mass of photographs” (131) of Gerald in various erotic and suggestive poses. Marian’s incredulity is compounded by her own feelings of physical attraction towards Jamesie and Scottow. In her confused search for information, imparted initially by Jamesie, she turns next to Denis Nolan, who subsequently admonishes her not to meddle further, lest more “trouble and violence” (132) are unleashed – an unmistakable warning about not transgressing boundaries. While Marian chooses to disregard some of the male admonitions to stay within prescribed limits, her partial vision allows her to be misled by unreliable and false guides and she continues to pursue confusing and bewildering paths.

The Unicorn warns of the inherent danger of such inadequate vision. As Marian shrugs off her rationality and allows her stubborn personal fantasies to join with the self-delusion of the Gaze community, her entrance into her personal labyrinth may be read as a parallel with the experiences of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. As her self-absorption increases, Marian enters the “plot” she has created. She sees herself as having a role in a play – a narrative with a predetermined outcome she cannot avoid. Marian’s subsequent actions illustrate Murdoch’s belief that when individuals “are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of [their] own” (“The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited” 216), the ability to see others can become so distorted and partial that actions can lead to disaster. Marian misguidedly believes she is a heroic figure rescuing Hannah, whom she sees as a Sleeping Beauty, and whose elaborately contrived room she misreads as a shrine. Determined to pursue her valiant cause, she sets herself up as a good angel against the evil angel of Scottow, and completes her fantasy by abetting Scottow (as Maid Marian, Robin Hood’s lover and helper in a feudal setting). Geoffrey’s letters, her one link to reality, are regarded as unwelcome intrusions into her new world and cast aside. Murdoch’s narrative, with its intertexts of fairy tale and folk tale, encourage readers’ active co-operation in constructing *The Unicorn*’s increasingly strange world.

The numerous references to a world inhabited by “people ... related to the fairies” (*Unicorn* 44) and influenced by enchantment or spells also invites recognition of Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” as an intertext. The drowsy inward-looking community of Gaze Castle confounds Marian with its tendency to pass a large part of each day in sleeping silence as “people retired to their rooms after lunch and were not heard of again until five o’clock” (28). While Marian expects lively communication and dialogue with those around her, she must adjust instead to an oppressive daily monotony: Gaze is “nervous ... Its quietness ... aimless rather than calm ... [and] its sleepy dragging routine ... expressive of some futility” (29). Even allowing for its isolated location, she finds the “sudden quietness ... a new kind of silence” (16) almost unbearable. While Sleeping Beauty’s castle becomes involuntarily immobilised by an evil magic spell, the inhabitants of Gaze appear to shut themselves away willingly during the “dead time of the afternoon” (103), choosing sleep rather than interaction. Individuals participate in the construction of their own enclosures by allowing themselves to be imprisoned by a “sinister enchanted siesta” (103). A strange “sense of stagnation” (Kane 47), akin to death, renders Gaze’s labyrinth as Sleeping Beauty’s Castle, enveloping its occupants and representing a dead end that Marian must escape.

The Unicorn’s theme of deliberate separation from a wider community is reinforced through the labyrinth’s association with enclosure and imprisonment. Although Hannah’s supposed incarceration is the focal point of the novel’s action and the household gazes at or contemplates her and her fate, nobody looks at her objectively, and consequently, imagery of the embowered maiden and the Lady of Shalott and an atmosphere of self-imposed suffering suffuse the narrative. While Marian speculates about individuals’ lives, she guesses initially that perhaps Hannah is an “eccentric” (*Unicorn* 42) widow. Marian’s enthusiasm in seeing herself as a player in a romantic fiction predisposes her to a willingness to believe that Hannah is an imprisoned heroine. Marian’s subsequent actions are the result of her conviction that she has arrived to rescue the captive princess in order to achieve her own long-awaited recognition by others. She

continues to fantasize that Hannah, who is confined to a room filled with mirrors into which she frequently gazes and who shuns involvement with the world beyond, resembles Tennyson's Lady of Shalott.

Each character experiences a failure of vision and sees only what he or she chooses to see: Marian ascribes fairy tale or mythic attributes to Hannah, noting that she looks "like some brave beleaguered lady in a legend" (50) while other characters connect her with the "Lady of Shalott ... [a] unicorn ... Sleeping Beauty ... a beautiful pale vampire ... a *belle dame sans merci* ... a Lilith, and Circe" (Gasiorek, "Art Beauty and Morality" 260) and see her as "a character in their private dramas – not ... a real woman" (Kane 46). This concerted communal willingness to ascribe fantasy attributes to a human being is symptomatic of individual failure to pay attention. It eventually leads to a propensity to construct increasingly misleading, albeit convincing, fantasies that in turn become subjective reality for those with a restricted vision and inclines them to see themselves as players in a drama of their own making. Ultimately, Marian's misguided efforts to assert Hannah's freedom culminate in actions that fail to imagine other human beings as having separate and complex lives.

Hannah is described as "the centre of the story" and "the unattainable centre"⁸ around whom all events and actions revolve and against whom the individuals at Gaze define their own existence. Marian is led towards Gaze's centre, Hannah's room, by Scottow. They come through the darkness of the downstairs sitting room, up a staircase, and along the way pass "a lamp on the landing which shone dimly as in a shrine" (*Unicorn* 22). While centres of labyrinths may appear to provide respite from the bewilderment of pursuing confusing paths, they may also contain confrontation, although this aspect may become apparent only in retrospect. Faris, however, refers to Mircea Eliade's naming of the labyrinth's centre, despite its inherently ambiguous nature, as a " 'sacred zone,' a temple" (8).

That *The Unicorn's* labyrinth may contain a "sacred space" is a delusion, but an idea that Murdoch encourages by her use of language and connotation. Hannah contributes to this false

notion, too, by her participation in the myth spun around her. The concept of her enshrinement is created by a narrative layering of symbolic descriptions. The colour gold, frequently associated with privilege, sacredness or idols, is used liberally throughout Murdoch's text to encourage a reading of Hannah as being a special character and a symbol, quite set apart from the ordinariness of daily life. Her room, glimpsed for the first time by Marian, is indicated by a "golden light ahead," while an inner room beyond is "brilliantly lit with a great many lamps" and warmed by "a small turf fire ... burning in a big grate" (24). Hannah, "dressed in a flowing robe of embroidered yellow silk," possesses "reddish-gold" hair with "eyes of almost the same colour" (23). The golden radiance of the room, enhanced by its occupant, provides a vivid image of a brightly-lit and holy shrine. The sacred centre at Gaze is misleading and is in reality empty because it is a construction solely of the fantasies of Hannah and complicit others. Hannah, in turn, complies with their fantasies.

Hannah is an ambiguous character who encourages the construction of individual fantasies of her situation and whose true nature cannot be identified. Marian's pursuit of a true path at Gaze is complicated by Hannah's obsessive and perverse need for others, while her own confused relationship with her requires many alterations of perception until she finally regards Hannah as "a woman infinitely capable of crimes" (223). Her identity is complicated further by her occupation of multiple and contradictory subject positions: she is simultaneously a wealthy, privileged woman and mistress of the household, yet is powerless because she is managed by her servants (especially Scottow) and imprisoned. She is imprisoned insofar as she is unable to step beyond her own role-playing, and her household are unable to move beyond the roles she imposes on them.

Murdoch contributes to the illusion by deliberately making Hannah a character and a symbol (the unicorn of the title), the significance of which has been debated vigorously by others.⁹ Hannah's recognition of her central role in the household, her tacit acknowledgement of her infidelity, and her awareness of the locals' superstitious beliefs, encourage her creation of her

own fantasy in which she presents herself as a sacrificial and somewhat otherworldly figure. Kane notes that a corresponding ambiguity exists between the character of Hannah and the symbol of the unicorn insofar as both can be interpreted as demonic or Christ-like figures (53-4). His argument is supported by the variety of opinions expressed by other characters, including Max Lejour's speculation that Hannah is "a sort of enchantress" (*Unicorn* 99), and Violet's impassioned outburst that she is nothing more than "a murderous adulterous woman" (181) and "a bitch ... a perfect bitch" (253). Yet Marian first perceives Hannah as a barefoot and "slightly unkempt" but lovely woman (24), while Effingham sees her as "marvellously strange ... a fey almost demonic creature" (92). While cast predominantly as an incarcerated princess, Hannah eventually admits her complicity in a drama in which she has taken advantage of others: "I have lived on ... my worshippers. I have lived by their thoughts ... – just as you have lived by what you thought were mine. And we have deceived each other" (219). The complicity of all players is required, and eventually even Marian, in her utter failure of attention to reality, is seduced into the trap. It remains a difficult task for the reader to maintain a steady and confident progress through the literary labyrinth when presented with such a multiplicity of opinions and admissions. Yet Murdoch's narrative complexity invites continued exploration and unravelling of clues as further sources of information are provided.

For example, a sustained use throughout the narrative of theatrical references, with particular emphasis on roles, performers and audiences, also emphasizes the characters' willing conspiracy in the self-delusion of the Gaze myth. Marian's observation that her own life is little more than a performance on a stage, "a series of makeshift ... preliminaries" while she rehearses for an eagerly awaited "event" (10), leads to her reasoning that her own arrival at Gaze is the significant seven-year marker – "The ghastly tale had become a reality ... [and] nothing happened at random" (64). She sees herself as part of a plot: "her own place in the story occurred to her for the first time" (64). Marian's awareness is echoed by Roland Michell in Byatt's *Possession* (1990), when he is struck by "a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being

driven by a plot ... apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle” (421). The author’s incorporation of this particular intensity of characters’ self-consciousness seems to point to the need for readers, who are trudging through their own dark and confusing paths, to remain aware that the characters are simply actors in a plot. Although some characters relinquish the ability to imagine themselves in a different sort of plot, the author’s message is implicit: paths of knowledge and opportunities for further understanding must be pursued vigorously. To do otherwise can be catastrophic, as *The Unicorn* reveals. Marian’s belief that a shadowy external authority is somehow responsible for her fate results in her abandonment of accountability for her own actions and underlies her complicity in “pattern” and myth – yet another delusion. Roland, like Marian, also believes that if indeed he was in a plot, “it [was] appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot” (422). Marian’s “prophetic flash of understanding” (*Unicorn* 65) causes her to believe she has been sent to rescue Hannah, whom she sees as Sleeping Beauty “under a spell” who ought to be “wakened up” (65).

That *The Unicorn* is a self-conscious drama in which the characters are aware of their own participation¹⁰ is supported by Donna Gerstenberger’s observation that “the local gentry act out agreed-upon roles” (40). This is confirmed by Jamesie’s eventual melodramatic revelation about this role-playing: “The play is over, the Vampire Play, let us call it. The blood is all shed that we used to drink” (*Unicorn* 253). While each of the characters interprets Hannah according to individual fantasy, Hannah, “absorbed in her own sense of sin and suffering” (Kane 47), also contributes to the myth herself by perfecting her role. Marian’s faulty understanding of reality causes her to succumb to the romance of the myth, her initially fierce resistance to becoming caught in Gaze’s atmosphere of submission completely undermined by her belief that she was now “part of the pattern” (*Unicorn* 154). She is unable to return to her previously aloof state. Her dogged pursuit of liberal values is overtaken by the irrationality of superstitious fears and imaginings.

Marian is blinded by a sense of purpose justified by her particular belief in freedom, but her noble intentions are shaped by notions of self importance and vanity urging her on to perform some truly significant action. She has, after all, “wanted always ... some kind of distinction of life which had so far eluded her” (28). Gaze’s restrictions or cautions – do not swim in the sea, do not enter the locked rooms, do not walk off the paths into the bogs, do not disturb Hannah’s peace with talk of freedom – represent confronting barriers and detours compelling Marian to explore alternative paths or to turn inwards into the unhealthy obsessions of the place. The strange constrictions of Gaze’s narrow world facilitate Marian’s perception of her role “for the first time” (64), and she decides that her duty to “let the fresh air in at last” (134) is best served by planning an escape for both Hannah and herself. Yet she refuses to consider that pursuing her plan to kidnap Hannah, hatched from her imagination, is a foolhardy option. While Hannah admits to having lived, vampire-like on her audience, Marian regards each member of the household as a potential actor in her own drama. She trembles with excitement, anticipating her success in rescuing Hannah, and reflects that: “she ... was to be the one to break the spell which had dazed and defeated so many” (141). Marian’s self-delusion is complete. Convinced that the entire Gaze community is controlled by a spell, she reassures herself that ultimately all would benefit from her actions as she brings about “the last day of the prison ... the end of the legend. What would come after would be inconceivably different ... would be real life” (141). Her pride and stubbornness oblige her to proceed, even if it is “all an absurdity, a wicked irresponsible absurdity” (120).

Now convinced of her own place in the plot, she defiantly decides to locate herself as a good angel against the evil angel of Scottow (65). Despite her consternation on Gerald’s pronouncement about the emptiness of freedom, she retraces her steps to her room where, trapped in a rapidly darkening space, she is overpowered by his magnetism until “she seemed almost to lose consciousness” (152). Scottow’s words of reprimand reveal that the labyrinth functions at Gaze as a constraining pattern of self-imposed fantasy:

Do you think that ... I am free? I am part of it too. ... I belong to it. And that is the only way it can be here ... the pattern ... has authority here, an absolute authority.

And that is what anyone must submit to, if they are to stay here. (151)

Considering herself attracted irresistibly to Scottow, Marian is incapable of asserting her own autonomy. Her self-delusory vision of herself as involved in a metaphysical battle with Scottow allows her to imagine herself defeated by his domination. Constricted and unable to think, Marian is contained within the space designated for her by Scottow, and overwhelmed by his sexual attraction, surrenders to his feudal rule “without a movement, without a moan” (155). Conscious only of her body and mind being “sapped and broken” (150), and no longer able to retaliate, she yields to Gerald’s demands that she do as she is told by submitting to the “absolute authority” (150) that all must obey. Scottow’s words wrap about her tightly like a rope or whip, as if “she was being entangled in some dreadful coil of thoughts” (151). Her submission to Scottow’s feudal domination is fuelled by his persistently addressing her as “Maid Marian” – Robin Hood’s lover and helper. Yet Marian, employed in the twentieth century on a professional basis, is either unable or unwilling to refuse the absurd feudal title or to retaliate against his ridiculous assertion of an absolute authority.

Scottow is another in the line of Murdochian “demonic enchanter” (Sullivan 156) figures like Mischa Fox in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Father Carel in *The Time of the Angels*, and Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who wield power over others. Much of this power or capacity for evil is aided by the complicity of the potential victims who are mesmerised by their charmer’s “general aura of mystery and romance” (163). Consequently, now complicit in the myth operating at Gaze, Marian readily attempts to atone for her rebellion by acting the role of the “good girl” (*Unicorn* 151) demanded of her. Her inability to assert her autonomy with males at Gaze in a non-sexual manner causes not only her readiness to be seduced by Scottow, but also to regard Jamesie as a potential lover, seduce Denis Nolan, and flirt with Effingham Cooper.

Marian recognizes and feels ashamed of her foolish entry to the labyrinth yet her consistent courage and curiosity assist her escape. Her wanderings are marred by wrong turns, stumbles and a degree of negativity. But she is a resourceful woman accustomed to the constant need for learning and is able to use her abilities to reassess a given situation, learn from it and move forward. The labyrinth wanderer's need for such an "acceptance of constant revision" (and an essential strategy for readers) as referred to by Faris, is highlighted particularly when the emphasis of a particular narrative "falls on the complications of the journey, not on the arrival at a center – on process, not product" (30). Early in the text Marian initiates the first symbolic unlocking action at Gaze when she finds that books are kept locked away in a neglected bookcase and causes it to be opened. She witnesses the final unlocking action in the narrative when Jamesie insists on her presence as he unlocks Hannah's door.

The ability to question, to learn, to instruct, and to benefit from all these processes forms Marian's "safe female space" in much the same way that Dora Greenfield's is the ability to escape within herself from a painful or threatening situation. Marian's ability to access this "space" and turn negative experiences into positives, to commence a process of reconnection with others and reality, becomes apparent when she finally retrieves Geoffrey's previously ignored letters and prepares a response to his communication. Dora displays a similar ability when, having repeatedly withdrawn in silence from Paul's anger, she makes an effort to confront and argue rationally with Paul by replying to his letters, too.

Marian's previous justification for her actions is revealed to her as a wilful blindness to the possibility of living in ways other than those which she prescribes. As a result of the thwarted attempt to abduct Hannah and her failure to overcome Scottow, Marian faces the reality of the situation at Gaze and her own part in it. As she examines the follies of the others, she sees her own delusions for what they are. She is forced to retrace her steps, literally and figuratively, as she walks "about the room, walking fast and then stopping suddenly to think and walking again" (*Unicorn* 149). Marian realises belatedly that her guides through the maze were, in fact,

unreliable and misleading, and is aware of her own guilty part in Hannah's fate: "She had so naturally ... been thinking about herself ... It all now seemed a terrible mistake. She ought to have respected Hannah's condition" (149). The regret of imposing her own ideas on another individual is exacerbated by Marian's sickening realisation of being "accepted into the family" (154), in fulfilment of Gerald's earlier prophecy that she would soon be "one of us" (20).

Unlike the others, though, Marian has a capacity to see reality even though her path has been complicated by her limited perception and faltering vision in dark and confused passageways. Marian sees that her self-centred sincerity towards Hannah was in fact blindness towards others and herself. Her desperation to achieve connection allowed her personal fantasies of moral superiority to distract her from reality. While Murdoch's narrative warns of the dangers of excessive introspection in respect of Hannah's obsession with her suffering, Marian's determination to save Hannah has, in turn, caused her to become increasingly self-absorbed as well, thus "leading attention and energy back into the self" (Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good' " 355). The preoccupation with self is symbolically represented in Marian's gazing into her own reflection, which in turn signifies a hollow image in the centre of both Hannah and Marian. Gazing at one's reflection may reveal a total turning-in upon self to the exclusion of others: while looking at self, one is not looking at or aware of others. Although she risked becoming as empty and self-obsessed as Hannah, who in choosing to stay in the centre does not have the deeper comprehension of herself that others could help her attain, Marian chooses to seek an exit from the labyrinth.

Gradually aware that she is in a metaphoric Plato's Cave facing shadows on a wall that have temporarily bewitched her, Marian glimpses the light of the world outside and realises she has been deluded all along. Denis, acting as a useful guide inside the Cave, represents solid reality – while all else appears deceptively golden and bright, his features alone are sharply defined and fierce enough for the "shock of the encounter" (*Unicorn* 155) to unsettle Marian's momentary contentment. As she considers her guilty part in all that has transpired, Marian comprehends that

the reflections she has gazed at have been only empty shadows of an enclosed and destructive world. As a result of the revelation of her narcissism, Marian agrees with Effingham's sentiment that: "It's as if I'd been, all the time, looking into a mirror, and only been vaguely conscious of the real world at my side" (208).

Effingham's comment implies how dangerous and easy it is to be seduced by patterns and intriguing reflections, and represents Murdoch's call to the reader to look beyond the deliberate and "complex symbolic structures" (Kane 61) of the narrative and remain open to possibilities that are challenging and different. Readers must not allow themselves to be charmed into following false trails of clever and pretty pictures, but must be prepared to work hard at unravelling the demanding moral truths that Murdoch weaves throughout her narratives. The reader's labyrinth, despite its incorporation of symmetry, is nevertheless a multicursal construction demanding patience and perseverance, as the plot's resolution reveals.

As Marian readies herself to leave Gaze's labyrinth, a series of tragedies occurs, causing the reigning pattern or absolute authority espoused by Gerald Scottow to unravel. The dreaded homecoming of Hannah's absent husband, Peter Crean-Smith, is transformed into a funeral rite after he drowns in the flooded roads on his way from the airport and Hannah, after her seduction by Gerald, shoots and kills him, then jumps off a cliff and is drowned. Gaze Castle becomes a metaphoric cemetery by the sea, mimicking Paul Valéry's poem "Cimetière marin" read by Marian and Hannah on Marian's arrival at Gaze. The circular nature of Marian's journey becomes more apparent in the symbolic action of the flood which simultaneously obliterates the stagnant and barren landscape and visits death upon the household. By narrative's end, three corpses are laid out in the parlour – ironically, a living room full of dead people. There is no longer any place for fantasy or imagination about her role as Marian confronts the reality of death – the labyrinth composed of place, Gothic convention, myth, "literary" setting, and the complicity of her self delusion, is now shattered.

Finally, Marian's self-awareness and independence are realized as she heeds the call to participate once again in reality by accepting Geoffrey's invitation to his wedding. Her previous refusal to open his letters, reminders of a real world which seems so far away, amounts to a reluctance to heed a useful guide. Having turned her gaze away from herself, she turns back now towards the real world and looks forward to sharing others' genuine joys and sorrows. Despite her struggle with obstacles, dead ends and false passages at Gaze, which she now recognises was a false world after all, Marian resolves at last to "go back ... to the real world" (264), in which she can now imagine a different narrative for herself that commences with her joyful participation in a community of individuals.

Independence and optimism replace her desperate need for male validation, enabling her realisation that she does not need to fit any particular role except that of her own self in the midst of other ordinary human beings. She begins to see that her place can be self-determined after all. Her self-imposed exile concludes as she anticipates dancing at Geoffrey's wedding. Finding Ariadne's thread allows her to escape from the labyrinth and to return to the reality of the city knowing that she has value without Geoffrey.

¹ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (221-222).

² Birdsall, "Art, Beauty and Morality" (14): "in the sense that it is a patterned world, finished, formal, and enclosed."

³ See Doob (82, 83, 87), quoting Plato's *Euthydemus* 291BC: "... we thought we were at the finish, but our way bent round and we found ourselves as it were back at the beginning, and just as far from that which we were seeking at first."

⁴ See Conradi (450). He believes that *The Unicorn* concerns Murdoch's theme that life is – or should be – a spiritual quest or pilgrimage. Marian's journey to Gaze Castle is as much a spiritual quest as it is a search for adventure and self-fulfilment.

⁵ This opinion has been offered by many critics and reviewers, including: Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch* (54), who states that "*The Unicorn*, like *The Italian Girl*, possesses a 'Gothic environment'"; Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (501), where *The Unicorn* is described as a " 'closed' Gothic novel"; A.S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind* (129), states it is "an anthropological Gothic romance" while noting that it possesses qualities of the "High Gothic" mode satirised by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (*Iris Murdoch* 29); and Donna Gerstenberger in *Iris Murdoch* (40), describes *The Unicorn* as "unabashedly gothic," and qualifies her opinion by explaining that the action in Murdoch's novel "takes place against the background of a world at once artificial and natural" and is "influenced by ... Irish writer of gothic tales, Sheridan LeFanu." See also Cuddon, *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* (381-382).

⁶ Murdoch's description calls to mind Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which the house has "vacant eye-like windows" and contains a woman who is entombed alive and ends with a storm and the collapse of the house (138).

⁷ See Yeats, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (1876-1878), and "Under Ben Bulbin" (1896). In Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (256), he comments harshly on Synge's plays set in the west of Ireland, the most famous of which were *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World*. Joyce did not have much time for Irish nationalism; in the same novel he makes fun of people speaking Irish, playing sports like hurling, and forming the IRA. For example: "John Alphonsus Mulrennan has just returned from the west of Ireland. European and Asiatic papers please copy. He told us he met an old man there in a mountain cabin. Old man had red eyes and short pipe. Old man spoke Irish. Mulrennan spoke Irish. Then old man and Mulrennan spoke English. Mulrennan spoke to him about universe and stars. Old man sat, listened, spat. Then said: — Ah, there must be terrible queer creatures at the latter end of the world."

⁸ See Scholes (118), Gerstenberger (41), and Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (112-113). Johnson notes that Murdoch's fiction depicts a decentred world, populated by displaced persons, "a world where the old stable social and ethical systems no longer provide security." Murdoch acknowledges that humans have a continual need to locate and define the centre, and to work out their relationship to the centre: "The whole matrix shifts and we shift with it." The centre, therefore, can be unattainable if it, along with its boundaries, is continually changing.

⁹ The symbol of the unicorn and its philosophical implications are discussed at length by critics including Richard Kane (53-4), Rodney Simard (1772), and Robert Scholes (123-4).

¹⁰ See Barbara Stevens Heusel, *Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s* (226). Heusel explains that Murdoch's familiarity with Greek archetypal patterns is part of the reason for her frequent use of the stage metaphor in her fiction and notes that: "The Greeks saw the stage as a holy ground on which to teach fellow citizens how to behave." As well as incorporating the stage literally in her novels, she also adopts it metaphorically in characters' conversations, behaviour, and so on, as they play act or allude to roles.

CHAPTER THREE:Paths and Stories

Yvonne Geary
 (“Something Special,” Iris Murdoch)

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

Patricia Nimmo
 (“Crocodile Tears,” A.S. Byatt)

*“But in order to make you understand, to give you my life,
 I must tell you a story – and there are so many, and so many –
 Stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, and death,
 And so on.”*
 – Virginia Woolf¹

The protagonists of the three short stories discussed in this chapter, Yvonne Geary, Gillian Perholt and Patricia Nimmo, all find themselves constrained or “trapped in some kind of hell” (Heusel 144). Although each character’s imprisonment, a function of gender, varies greatly, it bears similarities to the enclosed spaces of the characters in the novels.² These characters’ journeys are labyrinthine in nature. Each woman has a desire to step beyond her own restrictive margins in an attempt to be autonomous and to find Ariadne’s thread – self-knowledge through recognition of others – and must learn to “see” beyond herself. Murdoch describes such consciousness of others as “the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real” (“The Sublime and The Good” 215). An astute awareness of others not only makes individuals more real, but also helps in the discernment of paths available for exploration, influences the journey’s degree of difficulty, and assists in a successful exit. Labyrinthine journeys in these stories also challenge protagonists to deal creatively and intelligently with obstacles rendered metaphorically as series of boxes, containers or spaces, frequently representing fears springing from the association of

sensory perceptions with unpleasant events or memories. Courage and persistence are required to negotiate disruptions or dead ends in the labyrinth, and steps may need to be retraced. Characters may be challenged by the opportunity to trust in a guide, and although this task often proves demanding, it provides characters with chances to achieve connection, reclaim self-identity, and exit towards an optimistic future.

The short stories for this chapter were chosen because, together with the novels analysed, their characters occupy a range of subject positions. Since nearly four decades separate the publication of Murdoch's only short story (1957) and Byatt's collections (1994, 1998) the writers' fiction eloquently demonstrates the prevailing social and cultural changes in women's lives that occurred during this time. The protagonists' experiences provide sharp contrasts between the constraints on women of 1950s Irish Protestant society and the opportunities and choices available to women in England in the 1990s. Yet many of the circumstances of the lives of Dora, Marian, Maud, Frederica and Yvonne, Gillian and Patricia are similar. The majority of these women are privileged in many ways, but some of them still struggle to achieve self-direction or autonomy. Their subject positions are multiple and contradictory (Friedman 19). For example, while Maud and Gillian are self-supporting, Yvonne is dependent on her mother; while Dora, Marian, Maud, Frederica, and Gillian are well-educated to varying degrees, Yvonne is not; Maud is in a professional situation Gillian was in when younger; while Yvonne is "at home" in Ireland, British Marian is an outsider and "stranger" there; while Maud feels her beauty works against her professionally, Gillian believes her advancing age is a disadvantage; while Dora and Frederica are oppressed by their husbands and wish to be free of them, Yvonne and Marian daydream about acquiring personal status through marriage; while Gillian has been abandoned for a younger woman, Patricia mourns the death of her husband.

The enclosures from which the women wish to escape include the repressive social expectations and restrictions against which Yvonne struggles, and Gillian's and Patricia's inability to reconcile past, present and future. Yvonne, a single 24 year-old woman who lives

with her mother in Dublin in the mid 1950s, fantasizes about freedom beyond the shores of her Irish home, yet her choices are limited. Yvonne is trapped by a more circumscribed time and place than either Gillian or Patricia, and so her chances of escape depend not only on her ability to imagine a life beyond her immediate experiences but on her willingness to embark on such a risky venture. She regards marriage as “another poky hole” (7) where she will be stuck forever. Gillian and Patricia, in the 1990s, are both aged in their fifties, occupy a privileged socio-economic status, and are accustomed to lives of opportunities and choices. Byatt’s “The Djinn” is an example of a feminist revision of a fairy tale that rejects the usual formulaic narrative structure and instead offers alternative possibilities for women’s lives in the contemporary world.³ Gillian is glad to be freed of her shackles when her husband leaves her for a younger woman but feels the intervening years have robbed her physically and emotionally, while Patricia, unable to come to terms with her husband’s sudden death, avoids reconciling her memories of the past with the present by running away.

Each woman is on a quest for autonomy, free of controls and limitations, yet seeks relationship with others. Initially, each woman feels constrained by the narrative of her life – that her existence is reduced to an unavoidable “life-in-death.” Jane Campbell observes that women require a redefinition of the quest plot insofar as a protagonist aims for an ultimate goal which lies not beyond any physical boundaries, but within the heroine herself (journeying within) and amounts to “narrative freedom” (137). This is a goal towards which Dora and Marian could also strive, as both have contributed by their own personal fantasies towards becoming locked into exceptionally narrow and restrictive visions of what is possible. Narrative freedom assumes the importance of narrative in making sense of one’s life and suggests that women ought to be enabled to take charge of their own lives, freed from the imprisonment of a variety of cages. Yvonne is trapped by the narrative of women’s lives in 1950s Ireland and cannot imagine a different life for herself. Although Gillian and Patricia are freed of the shackles of earlier times, they are still trapped by plots that dictate their sexuality, behaviour, and freedom.

Eventually, Gillian and Patricia develop the awareness that to some extent they may have been complicit in their own imprisonment or separation from others and the world, and they set out on paths towards narrative freedom by re-imagining their futures: “You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see you could change it to another one” (Byatt, “The Story of the Eldest Princess” 66). Yvonne’s narrative, however, is more circumscribed than Gillian’s or Patricia’s. Her imagined life, based on the plots of the equivalent of Mills and Boon romances, is neither possible nor desirable. Seeking “something special” according to society’s prescribed and sanctioned behaviour for women amounts to the relinquishment of female control and freedom.

While exploration of each author’s writing reveals the undeniable influence of their much-admired eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, both Murdoch and Byatt retain only those features of their predecessors’ work they deem most valuable and appropriate to their own historical moment, combining these features with a variety of narrative techniques frequently described as “postmodern.” For example, characters are aware of their participation in a narrative. Yvonne convinces herself of the futility of planning a future other than the one she believes has already been written for her. Gillian, however, acknowledges the patterns of fairy tales, and recognising her involvement in one, sees their magic at work in her own life. Patricia finally recognises the patterns of her own life through the retelling of a folk tale, a Shakespeare play, and ancient myths. The three stories analysed in this chapter reveal both writers’ reliance on extensive use of symbolism and allusion to classical myths and fairy tales. But these are myths and fairy tales rewritten for a modern audience; happy endings are not guaranteed, and the protagonists must take personal responsibility for their own actions (they can no longer blame the gods, or fate, or luck – even when the supernatural is present). The protagonists are flawed and contradictory characters who reveal their own hypocrisies and delusions. But through it all both writers insist on the absolute need to retain sympathy and respect for all characters – the “real,

impenetrable human person” (Murdoch “Against Dryness” 294) – the chief concern of the writers’ fictional narratives.

Murdoch’s creative process includes her frequent sketching of the spatial relationships of spaces and enclosures in her novels. The diagrams, recorded in holographic notebooks in the University of Iowa Libraries, reveal that Murdoch was particular not only about harmonious and balanced spatial relationships, including buildings, trees, gardens, and empty spaces, but also her characters’ movements within these environments. Her construction of such highly detailed drawings allowed her to create “a more detailed description of characters’ movements in a more specifically conceived spatial area” (Heusel 231). Therefore, while Murdoch provides her female characters with opportunities to move beyond their enclosures, if they choose to do so, she also exercises a degree of control with respect to how far they can go. Characters’ movements often appear to be almost choreographed, so to speak, taking place in unrestricted yet structured surroundings. Yet, although Murdoch’s environments are engineered, characters seem to be ultimately free to make their final choices about how and where to move. Emphasis on interaction between humans and particular environments is strikingly evident in Yvonne’s maze-like movements throughout the evening. As Yvonne struggles to find a space for her self, she deals not only with her conflicting expectations of place and her own contradictory self images, but also with the demands or expectations of others.

Yvonne Geary:

“Something Special,”
Iris Murdoch

“*The sentiment is all*” (15).

Yvonne Geary's disenchanted experiences in the labyrinthine streets of Dublin reflect her dissatisfaction with the circumstances of her personal life. Yvonne⁴ has grown to womanhood in limiting familial, economic, and social circumstances and now finds herself in a stifling personal maze that offers her only unappealing alternatives and an apparent lack of an exit. While Yvonne's mother runs her own retail business, Yvonne has no job of her own; nor is she well-educated, and so her prospects are slim. Her stumbling around the streets and spaces of Dublin typifies her muddled pursuit of lacklustre choices in her personal life. Yvonne's family makes it clear that she has almost squandered her chances of making a good matrimonial match and she feels cornered by a society whose expectations of post-war women are defined predominantly by their marital status: a woman's husband and family validate her existence, particularly if she is without an occupation, and this sentiment is echoed throughout the early part of the narrative. Yvonne despairs of finding an exit from the darkness, convinced that whatever the decisions she makes and the turns she takes, she is blocked by the dead ends of disappointment, frustration, or potential danger. Seeking "something special" of life, she resorts to the solace of reading paperback romances and daydreaming of an escape to distant shores with a handsome hero. Despite her lack of feelings towards the gentle Jewish tailor, Sam, she finally decides to settle on marriage to him. Sam does care for Yvonne and could offer her a more fulfilling marriage than her upbringing leads her to expect. While Sam can imagine change and growth, Yvonne condemns herself to a miserable future based on what she reads and her elders' comments. She does not find Ariadne's thread to get her out of her maze.

Yvonne's physical labyrinth is composed of the streets of Dun Laoghaire and Dublin (with their echoes of *Ulysses*). She moves through the city, a series of rooms (her home, Kimball's, the rough bar), and various levels (too high socially in Kimball's, too low in the rough bar). Christine Wick Sizemore notes that Murdoch's fiction frequently portrays women's experiences in the city as adventures within a multicursal labyrinth with its "many branchings and dead ends," where there is an emphasis "on the intricacy and irregularity of the pattern" (9). She

notes that Murdoch's female characters in particular are highly sensitive to "boundaries of spaces and relationships between spaces" (16-17), and this is apparent in all of Murdoch's fiction where women are constantly portrayed trying to break their way out of their enclosures. Both Dora and Marian both provide good examples of protagonists' attempts to escape suffocating physical and psychological restrictions. The women do not achieve success on their first attempts, but persevere in renegotiating boundaries and spatial relationships by trying a range of alternative strategies. Sizemore's study provides the beginnings of a common point between Murdoch's fictions and Byatt's writing. While Sizemore focuses on the experience of Murdoch's female characters in the labyrinthine city, Byatt also portrays women trying to find their own way, whether in the city or in rural settings. Although Murdoch and Byatt share a common interest in the situation of women, Murdoch vigorously rejected the feminist label attributed to her by some critics. Yet her writing often explored women's perceptions of self and their attempts "to integrate themselves into the world beyond their homes" (Dezure 212). This is something that Byatt does, too, but she takes it further than Murdoch.

In "Something Special," Yvonne's indecision over suitable and desirable spaces leads her to settle for what she regards as a safe yet disagreeable option at the end of her journey through the labyrinth. Murdoch's narrative, with its precise naming and description of Dublin's streets, alleys, bridges, river, and park bears a striking resemblance to James Joyce's short story "The Dead," and to his novel *Ulysses*. "Something Special" resembles Joyce's texts in its evocation of a precise sense of place and enables readers not only to visualise particular locations and landmarks, but also to plot these features in relation to each other. Heusel considers that "It is fruitful ... to compare Murdoch's world with the labyrinth of Dublin" (221) in Joyce's fiction. Both writers' city labyrinths are elaborate and real, and draw on Greek myth to create complex worlds of the mind and space.

The narrative form of "Something Special" resembles that of *The Unicorn* in that both plots are circular with emphasis on journey rather than resolution. In fact, in the case of

“Something Special,” there is no clear resolution. Yvonne’s failed journey is framed by a conversation between her mother and herself in the Geary’s shop on Upper George’s Street. Her wanderings span several hours between evening and some time later that night, concluding as she retraces her steps to the shop and the bedroom she shares with her mother. The narrative circle is completed by a conversation between Yvonne and her mother, in their bed, as Yvonne tells her the “sad ... sad” (51) news that she has decided to marry Sam after all.

Yvonne’s dissatisfaction with her life leads her to fantasise about evading her constraints. As a diversion from her monotonous life, and to the derision of her family, Yvonne is an avid reader of popular romantic fiction that encourages her futile hopes of achieving “something special.” She perceives her present life as poor and boring with a future to match, and unable to change her circumstances, places herself within her own dream. It remains to be seen, though, whether or not Yvonne (like Gillian and Patricia) has the sense to see that she is caught in a particular plot and the sense to imagine herself in another. A rather grim weighing up of what she sees as her only available option – to stay in Ireland – leads to her fanciful notion that she must escape to some other place. Like many others, she regards England as her true destination – an unknown utopia that beckons risk-takers and adventurers. Yvonne’s daydream fails to account for the shifting nature of her identity. While she is in Dublin she is relatively comfortable and assured of her place in society, however despised that position may seem. She does not contemplate the notion that she may be even more oppressed in England than she is now, overlooking the reality that without qualifications work might prove hard to find, and that as an Irishwoman in England – an outsider in a foreign land – she would be rendered powerless.

Yvonne’s bold sense of adventure, grounded in fantasy, does not extend to the more realistic notion of a potentially satisfying future with Sam. While Yvonne can imagine her escape to more appealing places, she is unable to imagine any possibility of happiness or fulfilment within her own boundaries. The shores of England represent an idyllic escape from the trap in which she finds herself: the poverty and domestic confines of life within her family circle, and the

traditional limiting female roles currently available to her in Ireland. She tells a surprised Sam that, like “every Irish person with a soul in them,” she too, wants to travel to England on the mail boat that she has seen leaving the harbour “a hundred times” (21). Despite Yvonne’s frequent rehearsal of her imaginary departure and journey, she is too self-absorbed to see what is actually in front of her – the possibility of a happy life with Sam, should she choose it – and the quay where she and Sam watch the mail boat sail away remains a dead end. In reality, Yvonne cannot use this daydream as a means of escape, and only Sam has a realistic idea of what is possible. He has the ability and desire to imagine a potentially satisfying partnership between them, unlike the drab life Yvonne foresees ahead of her. Sam is real and offers Yvonne the possibility of providing a solid and dependable presence in her life. While his love offers the chance of an “equality in which ... [they] can relate to one another freely and in which [their] needs and complexities ... are fully recognised” (Sellers 131), the veil of Yvonne’s fantasies prevents her from sharing this vision.

Yvonne’s lack of readiness for a journey of any degree of difficulty is reflected symbolically in the narrative’s specific mention of her choice of shoes. Stepping out in high heels, she tells Sam that she cannot walk along the rocks. By the end of the evening, she complains that she is “destroyed walking in these shoes” (39, 42) and her stockings are torn. Dora, in *The Bell*, also commences her ill-prepared journey through Imber’s labyrinth with a completely inappropriate choice of footwear. The deceptive nature of appearances is demonstrated by Yvonne’s shoes – they look pretty but cannot adequately perform the required task. Just as each woman’s shoes are unsuitable and impractical for the journey ahead, so her outlook is deficient for the issues and decisions she needs to face – her immaturity indicated by her inability to see beyond appearances.

Yvonne’s fantasy and Sam’s realism are revealed in the physical and personal labyrinths they wander that evening. Although Yvonne professes to “know what [she’s] about” (2), she has no definite plans for that evening or beyond, her attitude contrasting sharply with Sam’s realistic

ideas and his desire for practicality and an achievable destination. Yvonne's shoes show that she is unprepared for anywhere that Sam wants to take her. Although Yvonne's ability to pursue a path out of her dull existence in Dublin is ineffective, she manages to manipulate Sam into numerous attempts at satisfying her longings. Consequently, they travel the many irregular city streets and lanes on foot and by tram as they pursue Yvonne's whims, frequently changing direction and mode of travel. After catching a tram to Nelson's Pillar, they cross several streets and bridges, negotiate flights of stairs, entries and exits through doors, gates, and gaps, and traverse a range of inner and outer spaces. A vague notion of wanting to go to a "new saloon lounge ... like a real drawing-room" (2, 12) in the hope of diversion causes Yvonne to lead them along many fruitless paths (11). Her earlier plea for freedom to make her own choices amounts to nothing as she finally reneges on her options, responding huffily to Sam that he had "better lead" (26) while she follows. On their eventual arrival at a dead end, neither of them is happy. Yvonne is uncommunicative, telling Sam to "shut up" (29), "be silent" (37) and "stop whingeing" (46). He is rendered speechless in frustration while Yvonne resorts to tears and a tantrum. Despite Sam's persistent efforts, no meaningful dialogue is exchanged between the characters the entire evening. Yvonne feels herself caught in a trap. She cannot make a living for herself and needs Sam to keep her. Staying in her mother's shop is not an option as Yvonne does not have the skills to manage such a venture effectively. Taking up a menial job is out of the question given her social status, and she lacks the opportunity to take such a job anyway. Dora and Marian, by contrast, are young women who can support themselves and survive economically because they can earn a living.

Yvonne's freedom of choice is limited with few real paths available to her. Despite her wilfulness and independent nature, Yvonne is simply a young woman claiming that her life is her own to live as she chooses, but this freedom is an illusion. She is a petulant social creature, resisting containment, seeking excitement and glamour in the city. Her mother and uncle remind her that she is "no longer so young" (2) and already too old to be single. While her family is

intent on pushing her into a match with the gentle but uninspiring Jewish tailor's assistant Sam Goldman, Yvonne is oblivious of his qualities and downplays his interest in her. She cannot see the real Sam, but the reader is aware that he does have something to offer her despite her disdainful attitude towards him. The personal labyrinth depicted here is further elaborated in *The Bell* and *The Unicorn*. Yvonne's actions prefigure those of Dora Greenfield in *The Bell*. In marrying for the wrong reasons, Dora effectively consigns herself to isolation, regret and heartbreak. She is initially unable to perceive others as unique and important beings, but does possess an aesthetic sense and an imagination that eventually helps her to learn to see individuals as real and valuable. Her longing to pursue deferred dreams comes to fruition only after a delayed and painful journey towards maturation. Similarly, Yvonne is too self-absorbed in her own fantasies to see what is actually in front of her, and may act as a precursor to Hannah Crean-Smith and Marian Taylor in *The Unicorn* who also become obsessed by the myth they help create.

Like Leopold Bloom, Sam is a Jew and an outsider, but he has ideas that are much more interesting and much less materialistic than those of the Gearys. His heartfelt wish is to be accepted as an equal into his community.⁵ He is realistic enough to know that marriage to an Irish Protestant will help him to this end. Yvonne's alienation within her own borders is emphasized in the decorations and banners festooned on the O'Connell Bridge proclaiming "that Ireland was At Home to visitors" (22). It is precisely because Yvonne is so much at home in Ireland that she is restless. In a reversal of Sam's situation, she craves to leave Dublin and its bleak future, while Sam's dearest wish is to settle and achieve the status that so annoys Yvonne – a "modest, middle-class Protestant existence" (Dezure 214). He perceives Yvonne to be at the "top of the heap" – a place he can only aspire to. Both in their own way struggle with the notion of their otherness: Yvonne fantasises about escape while Sam yearns for social acceptance. There is a tension between Yvonne's status as a bored insider and Sam's outsider's insecurity. While she is a single woman with no economic security, but only the assets of class and religion, marriage to Sam may

place her insider's status at risk. Although Yvonne is privileged by class and religion, she is simultaneously oppressed by her gender (Friedman 21). If she had any imagination she would see that Sam can offer her better possibilities. Although he is oppressed by his religion, Sam is prepared to share his more privileged economic status with Yvonne, thus elevating her status and empowering her.

Sam's obvious Jewishness is a social disadvantage and part of the reason for his timidity and lack of self-assertion. His mild nature makes him reluctant to cross Yvonne and allows her to vent her impatience. This, in turn contributes to her flawed perception that she is in charge, and consolidates her inability to see the reality of her position. Yvonne fails to see that Sam is different from other males, especially those in the fiction she reads. He is something special, but Yvonne lacks the ability to see that he can offer her other choices. In choosing the unconventional Sam, she would be gaining economic certainty. In not being able to "see" Sam or the possibilities he offers for her future, she cannot see her own possibilities. In the moonlit scene, Sam reveals emotional and imaginative strengths of which Yvonne remains unaware. He displays a gentleness and eagerness to please her that suggests he sees beyond her petulant exterior to a person who is capable of sharing his optimism for their future.

Yvonne's and Sam's negotiation of a variety of locations and features in the physical labyrinth faces further difficulty created by a combination of horizontal and vertical planes. It is noteworthy that the following scenes are also full of movement – downward, horizontal and upward – which includes noise, jostling, shoving and pushing. Emotional or psychological shifts of direction and abrupt changes are also experienced by both characters.

Yvonne and Sam ascend to an uncomfortably high level in the labyrinth on their arrival at Kimball's renovated saloon lounge. As they travel towards their ultimate destination, Sam escorts Yvonne to the quays past the O'Connell Bridge where they stop to look at the Liffey River, "as black as Guinness" (22), flowing on towards Dublin Bay. The young couple cross the river, symbolically a stream of life and death, in order to continue the journey.⁶ From the bridge,

they negotiate a dark and dirty little side street to reach the hotel Yvonne has chosen, ascending a staircase to reach the first storey. They observe that the surroundings are too sophisticated and refined, Yvonne finding it dull and silent. Her uncomfortable realisation that they are out of place here prompts the outburst that: “It’s like a lot of dead people giving a party” (25) – a statement that acts as a pointer to Joyce’s “The Dead” – and corresponds to the deathly imagery of the Lethe (suggested by its phonetic similarity to the Liffey) which she crossed not much earlier. The contradictory images challenge her: in seeking a space of vitality and novelty that she believes ought to enhance her enjoyment of life, she finds only a dreary environment and a sense of morbidity. The inattentive Yvonne fails to heed the lesson in this experience and continues to allow her expectations and obsession with appearances, rather than a willingness to be open to possibility, to guide her steps.

Their discomfort at Kimball’s is intensified when Yvonne’s disappointment makes her desperate for a space in which she can belong and they descend to a level too low in the labyrinth. Yvonne is determined to go to the rough downstairs bar in spite of Sam’s cautionary statements, “It’s not nice” and “Ladies don’t go downstairs” (25). She flounces ahead of Sam and they descend the iron staircase to the smelly, noisy basement. The masculine space and raw world of the downstairs bar offers the male parallel to the women’s inner room – the Geary bedroom – which is a private place. Once inside the cavernous public bar Yvonne, with whisky in hand, notes that the patrons are predominantly male and that the few women are probably prostitutes, yet she enjoys the excitement of this drunken crowd. Trouble erupts, and frightened by her involuntary involvement in the melee, Yvonne is unable to find a way out. Alarmed, Sam grasps her hand and leads her out the doors and up the stairs into the safer space of the street. This movement momentarily jolts Yvonne out of her romantic fantasies but she fails to acknowledge Sam’s earlier commonsense and his present goodness, and runs off.

Yvonne’s disappointed silence and humiliation at the evening’s failure lead her to turn to her only remaining choice: to retrace her steps along a known path to return to the safe boredom

of home. Ascent to the quiet and genteel saloon lounge emphasizes Yvonne's and Sam's lack of ease in such surroundings. Descent into the commotion of the public bar, a potentially hazardous place, provides a temporary entertaining thrill for Yvonne but ultimately confirms Sam's anxieties about its suitability for respectable women. Their ascent and descent are markers of class and of Yvonne's silliness. That neither of them belongs in either of the two extremes is obvious, while Yvonne's lack of realism is evident as her bravado crumbles. The romantic images towards which she ventures are false passages masking a reality she cannot see. Sam possesses a realistic vision which he is prepared to share, but Yvonne resists his worldview, preferring to stumble along blindly in her own way to locate an exit.

Metaphors that resonate with references to the natural world, including flowers, water, moonlight, and trees, feature dominantly in this short story as does an extensive set of opposed pairs: light / dark; life / death, freedom / responsibility, fantasy / reality, male / female, inner / outer space, and growth / decay. Yvonne's association of flowers with a more romantic existence proves to be contradictory. She recalls with fondness that a former boyfriend, the English Tony, "brought me flowers" (8). Yet, despite the romance of roses, their relationship did not last and Yvonne dismisses his memory with an abrupt "Good riddance to bad rubbish!" (8). Similarly, her wish for romance colours her desire to go to the new Kimball's lounge where the décor is complete with "flowers and those crystal lights" (12). The visit to Kimball's also ends in disappointment. Yvonne has not yet learnt that appearances are deceptive and illusory and she is not at home either with Tony or in Kimball's with Sam.

As well as their connotations of romance and gentility, flowers throughout "Something Special" also connote female sexuality and loss of innocence. Yvonne is described as a "rose in the bud"⁷ by a drunk, and in Kimball's downstairs bar, a prostitute has a red carnation torn from her hair and thrust into the bosom of Yvonne's dress (30). The flower is, in turn, roughly grabbed from Yvonne and returned to its owner. Outside the bar, a comic scene ensues as the drunk aspiring young poet labels Yvonne "one of the wonders of Nature ... a flower" (35) and showers

her, “who makes rose petals rain from heaven” (36), with uprooted geraniums (complete with soil) as “a tribute” (35). Ironically, it is the inanimate cards in the Geary shop with their embroidered roses that Yvonne admires and considers “something special,” while she regards the growing and alive geraniums with stony silence (37).

The Geary household encapsulates extremes in attitude: her mother has no patience for romance or imagination, while an excess of both makes Yvonne’s life tolerable. Mrs Geary is harshly realistic and materialistic but Yvonne is carried away by fanciful daydreams. Their feelings are revealed when the Christmas card salesman arrives and Yvonne is captivated by a gold card with its embroidered roses. Although she tells her mother it is “the nicest one” she has seen, and “really special” (14), Mrs Geary refuses to stock it, telling her daughter that “the dull ones” (6) sell and that despite appearances, “The sentiment is all” (15). In a similar vein, Yvonne’s uncle insists that there is no room for romantic feelings or notions in the matter of marriage, which ought to be a union governed by sense. His opinion is an oblique introduction to Sam’s suitability as Yvonne’s future husband because of his potential as a provider and little else. While Yvonne remembers a previous suitor’s gift of flowers, her mother recalls that Sam paid for two rounds of beer at Sullavan’s bar. She reasons that Sam’s Jewish background is likely to include hidden wealth, with his feigning of poverty a ruse so his “own people won’t be taking [his] bits of money off [him]” (9). Sam is considered by Yvonne’s family to be a worthy suitor because of their assumptions about his wealth, while his personal qualities are never mentioned. Unable to see Sam’s qualities, Yvonne thinks only of herself and, encouraged by her elders, she admits that, “A diamond ring would be a change at least” (10). Appearances obscure reality once more. Although Sam does not resemble the handsome heart-throb hero of Yvonne’s paperback novels, he is a gentle man, thoughtful and considerate, a shy romantic and quick to right wrongs.

The dark, musty “inner room” (13) – a bedroom shared by Yvonne and her mother – is a distinctly female space. Yvonne and her mother continue an age-old tradition of the familial sharing of beds by unwed or widowed mothers, daughters, or sisters. The room smells of “ancient

fabrics and perspiration and dust” (13), and is reminiscent of the Dickensian Miss Havesham’s cobwebby room where she dreams and ages. The bedroom, a “little dark room” (5) that resembles a cave-like space, is Yvonne’s “female space”: a place to escape, like Alice, and enter the make-believe world of her novels and magazines. While other Murdochian or Byattian characters’ “female spaces” enable them to retreat into a freer place that helps nurture or strengthen their inner resources, Yvonne manages only to escape and hide in a world that encourages her to believe in false appearances. The “female space” is a temporary space that a woman ought to be able to leave, yet Yvonne, excessively dependent on her fantasies, still needs to grow up and is neither prepared nor willing to leave its false comfort.

Sam provides Yvonne with the opportunity to see beyond herself when he invites her to see and share something special in the natural world with him at night’s end. Sam’s love of the outdoors is apparent from the outset when he suggests they walk along the seaside towards Dublin. Yvonne’s earlier words, “Just go somewhere yourself and I’ll probably follow” (22), show their positions to be reversed as Sam takes charge for the first time. Although Yvonne’s mother and uncle accuse her of “leading [Sam] up the garden” (2), it is actually Sam who “boldly” (39) clasps Yvonne’s hand and leads her through the maze-like darkness and through a gap in the railings into the locked and deserted unlit garden (of Eden). The Stephen’s Green public gardens, in stark contrast to the public bar they visited earlier in the evening, provide a tranquil and undisturbed private spot for the couple. Sam’s decisive action helps him appropriate a private area for himself and Yvonne in a public space. The garden is, however, a place of competing elements and is a culturally laden signifier whose connotations include perfection, beauty, temptation, contentment, fertility, decay, death, and regeneration. Murdoch’s narrative juxtapositions of life, death, and fecundity are also found in Byatt’s work. She admits to using the “image of the Garden as both fertility and growth and temptation” (Dusinberre, “Forms of Reality” 55).

Yvonne is awed into silence for the first time by the tranquillity of the moonlit scene as Sam leads her to the beautiful centre of the park, just as “medieval wanderers in labyrinths were often imagined to emerge into heaven depicted at their centre” (Faris 18). Yvonne’s name is a variant on Eve; this Eve is, however, uneasy in the garden. Sam has a sensitive and poetic soul and is more confident in the garden than anywhere else. Assured and resolute, he reveals the “something nice” (41) he wants to show Yvonne – the fallen tree at the side of the lake. Yvonne looks into his face while he looks at the tree. Sam, expressing sadness at its state, speaks calmly and asks her to “be quiet for a minute and see it. It’s so beautiful” (42). He asks her to pay attention to something other than herself and her imaginings, something real and alive, something special. Sam has aesthetic awareness – through attention, the ability to see the beautiful. His tender streak continuing, he suggests they step among the branches and “be a pair of birds” (42), an imaginative reaction to the tree’s possibilities. Unlike Yvonne, he can imagine a future other than a “poky hole” (7). He can imagine change and growth, yet she cannot imagine change. Sam’s optimistic view is in marked contrast to the gloomily religious quotation made by Mr Lynch, the card salesman, who notices only negative “change and decay in all around we see” (13), his words echoing the hymn “Abide with Me.” Mr Lynch’s grim outlook on the transience of life, together with the imagery of the hymn, fits well with Yvonne’s negative view of her prospects.

Yvonne angrily retraces her steps through the labyrinth of Dublin’s streets to the shop. Her crossing of the threshold is a retreat from Sam’s invitation for her active involvement in a joint future into a darkened, familiar, and insular world. She defers her passage into the shared bedroom – or into a life beyond it – and waits instead, silently, in the shop. The women’s bedroom is simultaneously a private and a commercial space. It is a place of illusions: the card salesman displays his wares here and here also Yvonne escapes into her fantasy worlds. For the first time, Yvonne stops, standing silently for “nearly fifteen minutes. She had never stood still

for so long in her whole life” (47). She is suspended, in transition from making the choice of one life over another, reluctant to face either her mother’s questions or her inner self.

The verbal exchange about marriage between mother, daughter and uncle in the shop earlier in the evening echoes with notions that Yvonne is “for sale” or “in the market” for marriage. Soon she would be left “on the shelf,” after all – even her younger school friends were married. Her mother and uncle subscribe to a rather dreary materialism and conventionality which sees Jews as being primarily interested in money. They consider Sam a good bargain, implying that Yvonne would gain privilege and power through his supposed wealth (Freidman 23). Her mother’s words about Christmas cards provide an apt echo: ever conscious of a balance of expenditure and profit, she chooses those cards that sell and, irrespective of appearances, “The sentiment is all” (15). Her uncle implies that marriage for love is foolish, suggesting instead that it ought to be a transaction based on sense. For Yvonne, it appears to be imbued with aspects of commercialism. Her final choice requires that she abandon the illusion of the romance plot for the commercialism of security with Sam. Yet the reader can see the possibilities that marriage to Sam could bring that she cannot see. Yvonne fails to see that marriage to Sam could affect the constituents of her identity, bringing independence of her mother, responsibility and freedom within her own domestic domain, economic stability, and happiness in relationship is the reality offered by Sam. In so doing, she sees the choice as either / or rather than being able to recognize that she can change the narrative to include romance with Sam if she could just see what the time in the garden reveals: that he is “something special.” Instead, she opts for what she believes is predictability and dullness.

Significantly, Yvonne’s decision to marry Sam is made in the public commercial space of the shop, not in the private and romantic space by the tree in the garden. Her “choice” to marry implies that she is about to sell herself into the public view of marriage rather than enter into a private, personal relationship offered by Sam. Yvonne’s inability to see the real and positive chance before her causes her to tell her mother that “it’s a sad thing” (51). As she cries herself to

sleep, her tears signify her grief at her perceived lack of options, and amount to a lack of belief in an optimistic future. The “falsifying veil” (Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good” 369) of her own fantasies prevents Yvonne from considering the notion that her impending journey into marriage with Sam could be anything other than an endlessly predictable straight line vanishing into the horizon. Yet readers can see what she cannot see. While Yvonne cannot imagine a story other than the particular romance plot in which she is caught, if she had “the sense to see” the situation as readers can, she “could change it to another one” (Byatt, “The Story of the Eldest Princess” 66).

Gillian Perholt:

“The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,”

A.S. Byatt

*“You had the sense to see
that you were caught in a story, and
the sense to see that you could change it
to another one.”*

– A.S. Byatt⁸

Byatt’s short story “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” from a collection of the same name, commences with the classic opening of the fairy tale, “Once upon a time ...”. Byatt’s stories repeatedly feature women who are trapped or enclosed within both real and imaginary labyrinthine spaces where neither the freedom of self-expression nor self-actualisation is permitted. “The Djinn’s” protagonist, the narratologist Gillian Perholt, like several of Byatt’s and Murdoch’s characters, feels constrained in such a narrative. Having fulfilled a conventionally

accepted version of the Western woman's hopes of life – she has married, and raised her children – the fairy tale ending does not ensue; she does not live “happily ever after.” Instead, she bleakly regards her story as already having been written, and sees herself stuck in a dead end, “redundant as a woman” (103), waiting for death. Gillian becomes actively engaged in a journey through a physical labyrinth of a series of enclosed spaces, and a personal labyrinth of listening to and retelling others' stories during which she becomes involved with a magical djinn. The physical labyrinth is not as obvious here as in some texts (here the multicursal labyrinth gives way to a linear arrangement of enclosed spaces similar to the one Maud Bailey and Roland Michell face in *Possession*), with the protagonist working her way through one enclosure after another.

Despite Gillian's expertise in patterns and forms of stories and the paths they follow, she possesses only a partial vision of her own narrative, and continues tracing a repetitive cycle of the same steps, retelling the same sad tales. At first, Gillian resembles Yvonne Geary in her inability to imagine that she can take charge of her life's narrative. She is enabled, though, with the djinn's help to outlive the standard “happily ever after” plot. Unlike “helpless females in fairy tales” (Campbell 140) remaining at the mercy of Fate, Gillian begins a life of narrative freedom and rewrites her own fate. As Alexa Alfer notes, “when Byatt's characters become cognisant of the plots driving their respective fates, they often emerge as competent co-creators of the plotted nature of the realities they inhabit” (Alfer and Noble, *A.S. Byatt* 10). Gillian subverts narrative expectations by escaping her apparent failure prescribed by conventional endings of women's stories, and having located Ariadne's thread, emerges from a labyrinthine obstacle course to follow a new path.

While Byatt draws heavily on several intertextual references,⁹ “The Djinn” resounds in particular with allusions to Yeats's poem, “Sailing to Byzantium.” Gillian, an aged and intellectual woman, crosses the seas to attend a conference in Istanbul, formerly Byzantium. She does not sing songs for herself but, as a narratologist, assists in transmitting fairy tales into

eternity by telling and retelling them. She is encouraged by an ancient djinn, her sage, or “singing-master” (20) in Yeats’s terms, to realize that she can and should sing for herself as well as for the “lords and ladies” (31). Consequently, Gillian as the dull brown female nightingale is set against Yeats’s male golden bird of Byzantium; she does not wish to be “out of nature” (25) but is content to sing about what is natural and to accept mortality.

Gillian is connected with the realm of fairy tale and magic. Her retelling of tales helps her to establish a close relationship to storytellers of the past, and although she is described as “a link in the long chain” (Maack 125), she considers herself merely “a being of secondary order” (96). Gillian resists being cast as a respected elder – a “wise Crone” (104) – and desires to be simply a teller and reteller of others’ stories. Similarities of nomenclature also suggest her affinity with the djinn (Gillian / djinn). He pronounces her name “Djil-yan Peri-han,” and “Peri,” meaning “Persian elf,” forms part of the name of the luxurious hotel, the Peri Palas, where Gillian stays in Istanbul (Campbell 141). “Perholt” implies kinship with Charles Perrault, the famous collector of European fairy stories, cited by Marina Warner as “the champion of womankind” (169), a man who wrote stories that liberated women. Yet both mortal Gillian and the magical djinn are imprisoned in their particular cultural enclosures and need to be liberated by generous and reciprocal actions. The djinn is contained within his bottle and by his inability to alter his circumstances even though he can alter those of others. Similarly, Gillian is constrained by her inability to find the voice to tell her own story even though she can hear and retell the stories of other women’s limited lives.

Gillian endures several forms of female imprisonment throughout her life, and because of these contradictions of her identity she is simultaneously powerful and powerless (Friedman 23). Her identity, shifting constantly, is still not resolved and she continues to feel constrained (22-3). For example, although society values youthful beauty, she endures the limitations imposed by her perfect teenage body, feeling trapped by the undesirable attention it causes and frightened by its

implications. While marriage is considered by many as a fulfilment of women's romantic dreams, Gillian experiences its restrictions. As an older woman free of the trappings of her younger days, she is able only to contemplate a grim and inescapable Fate – death. Although Gillian is oppressed by her gender and age, she is privileged in terms of class, education, and economic independence. The demise of her marriage frees her from the constraint of a stultifying relationship with all its accompanying duties and negotiations, and she suddenly feels “herself expand in the space of her own life” (104). Gillian believes that her release from a confining marriage and the departure of her good looks ensure that she can at last live as she chooses. Yet her anticipation of an independent and autonomous life is tempered by her grim view of reality. Her loss of physical beauty, a double edged sword, figures in her contemplation of her redundancy. She considers that she has been “let go,” after all, because she is “superfluous, unnecessary” and because her ageing body no longer fits the part of the roles of “woman ... wife, mother ... mistress” (103). She can foresee no other suitable roles – only a grey vacuum, a premonition of death, hovering before her. Despite Gillian's perceived powerlessness, she occupies a more privileged position than Yvonne. As an educated woman, Gillian possesses an ability to maintain her financial independence while Yvonne, lacking education, is solely dependent on her mother or future husband. Gillian's knowledge of the literary conventions relating to women's roles temporarily deserts her and she fails to recognize the cyclical aspects of the goddess – virgin, mother, crone – complementing mortal women's lives and which could provide her with alternative possibilities. Her visions of death cease only when she is able to recognize the cyclical nature of life into which death fits naturally.

Gillian commences negotiating a physical labyrinth, a series of boxes resembling an obstacle course by moving from her suburban London home to a conference in Ankara, Turkey. There, and in Istanbul she navigates a maze-like array of landmarks and enclosures before returning to London and subsequently travels to the cities of Toronto and New York. A respected academic collector and teller of tales, a modern day Scheherazade, Gillian frequently travels

alone to conferences – “Two or three times a year she flew to strange cities, to China, Mexico and Japan, to Transylvania, Bogota and the South Seas” (96). Gillian travels on a contemporary version of the magic carpet – floating “on metal wings [to] journey above the clouds, above the minarets of Istanbul” (95, 97).

The conference in Ankara purports to provide a “space for everyone” (105). Its darkened cave-like space, a meeting place for “wise crones” (104), fosters an exchange of stories of women’s limited lives. Gillian, however, feels stifled in the hot and airless place which resembles “a bazaar ... a cavernous theatre with no windows on the outside world” (106). The stories, like the windowless theatre, are dark, stultifying and excessively inward-looking.

Gillian’s Turkish friend Orhan Rifat accompanies her to Istanbul, where they go visit the cavernous Hagia Sophia and the Grand Bazaar. Hagia Sophia, despite its sacred status, is “echoing and empty [an] exhausted barn” (172, 173), prompting Gillian’s punning comparison of the once magnificent church with an ancient and worn out “Hag” (178). It is a barren deserted space where Gillian hears frightening predictions of *jihad* from the lips of an Islamic pilgrim. By contrast, the Grand Bazaar is composed of a “warren of arcades” (179) full of movement, colour, fragrance, and texture. Gillian, now temporarily “hidden away in an Aladdin’s cave” (179), is transported to a more exotic world and is once again “full of life and singing with joy” (180).

The bazaar and the conference share similarities: stories are traded in both locations, academics exchange spoken tales at the conference, and the stories at the bazaar are contained within the narrative of the carpets. The bazaar, like the conference, is an inward-looking world, a variety of trading spaces enclosed by boundaries of draped carpets, pots, pans, and other saleable goods. The carpets with their woven stories are contained inside the market’s maze of shops. Here, Gillian sees the wedding and dowry rugs, and listens to stories of Orhan’s former students. Yet the women whose stories are intertwined into the silk and wool of the *kilim* remain

anonymous, and the male carpet merchants speak for them. Like the weavers of the carpets, Gillian is an expert in listening to and conveying stories, yet is unable to tell the story of her own life. Nobody speaks on her behalf.

Gillian's passing through lion gates at the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations, set cave-like into a hillside, is a symbolic entry into another narrative form and yet another labyrinthine space. As she wanders through the graceful museum, Gillian, accustomed to stories about fairy tale characters, is confronted instead by the history of real people's lives interwoven with the Gilgamesh myth. This superscription of history and myth, a "process of retelling and reformulation in language," enables an "active process of cognition ... to make truth comprehensible for the teller and the listener" (Maack 126). Gillian experiences a creative leap of imagination by which she connects the past, and mythical tales, to the present, in a Murdochian type of "attention." Her imagination is awakened by the images from the stories she hears from the guide as she makes her way through the museum's specially arranged passages and courtyards, "like a minor maze in a cool light"(143). Her physical negotiation of the museum's maze is accompanied by her evolving awareness of, and attention to, the stories of real people in the historical past.

When Gillian and Orhan visit the complex of palaces in Istanbul named Topkapi, "a central box inside a series of carved boxes and cupboards inside the quarters of the Valide Sultan" (170), Gillian once again hears more real people's stories. She learns of the fate of the sultans' sons strangled by silk cords as they waited in their cages, and the women who were drowned while tied inside sacks, or beheaded. As at Ephesus, when she recalls the "true" (163) biblical stories of St Paul and the persecutions that frightened her in childhood, she finds herself struggling "with the passions of real stories" (171). No longer able to remain aloof and detached, Gillian finds she cannot separate her feelings from the fates of fellow human beings who lived and died. She briefly steps into the lives of these other individuals who waited, seemingly, for a

death without hope of a future, and tries to imagine their fear as they endured physical, emotional, and psychological entrapment. Overwhelmed by the reality of their lives (and deaths), she is reminded of her own situation in which she believes she also does not have a future other than death. Yet Orhan tells her that, despite the terror of the plights of those others, “They believed in a future life. We can’t imagine that” (171).

Gillian’s journey through her personal labyrinth is meshed with her encounters in the physical labyrinth and challenges her to develop an imagination capable of seeing her own freedom. As she proceeds through a number of “caves” such as the conference venue, Haghia Sophia, and the Grand Bazaar, she gradually learns to see and comprehend the stories of others in relation to her own life. She travels slowly on an imaginary journey of solidarity with both fairy tale characters and real people of the past. Reflecting on the images she sees, the stories she hears, and the sad women’s narratives she retells, she is reminded of her own dreary plight. She contemplates the notion that the imagination rather than reality has the power to render individuals and events more vivid, and that as a person without a story to tell, as a mere reteller of stories, she will ultimately become just “scattered atomies” (166). Running parallel to these thoughts is her realisation that neither the memory nor the past should be ignored, but ought to be interwoven with the present.

As these ideas overwhelm Gillian, she experiences a phenomenon of “stopped energy” – momentary freeze-frames of her life when she feels trapped as if “inside a glass box” (118), initiated by visions of an old grey hag. Gillian recognizes these hallucinations as representations of emptiness – emptiness and ultimately, death. She thinks of the “cavernous ... female form ... [a] windy vacuum of nothing” (118) as a “sense of my fate – my death ... waiting for me ... to remind me it’s there ... The more alive I am, the more suddenly it comes” (167-8). The unexpected visions occur at the same time as Gillian listens to or retells fairy tales and correspond with her own life’s disappointing occasions. Ironically, Gillian’s self-proclaimed moments of

liveliness are actually occasions of regret over her own physical decline, hastened by her comparison of herself and the female protagonists of stories she has told or heard. Her retelling of “Patient Griselda” is accompanied by a hallucination that prompts her to reflect (in a moment of acute self-recognition) that “A woman’s life runs from wedding to childbirth to nothing in a twinkling of an eye” (114).

Gillian encounters a dead end, and prevented from proceeding any further, is forced to confront the grey void and its implications. She reflects on the simple expectations she held for her adulthood and which led her into an earlier dead end as she listens to her friend Orhan retelling a story from *The Arabian Nights*: “What did I think my life was to be, then? ... I would have a veil and a wedding and a house and ... someone devoted” (136). The conventional expectation has not come true but she has not yet learnt that she is “caught in a story” and that she can “change it to another one” (Byatt, “The Story of the Eldest Princess” 66). Gillian’s sense of empathy with fairy-tale characters who “are subject to Fate” and perhaps simply “mortal and return to dust” (258) intensifies her awareness of her own unavoidable physical decline and eventual death. Her fatalistic assumption that the fictional characters’ destinies indicate the futility of attempting to alter her own future locks her into another negative space. Although Gillian understands that there is no such ending as “lived happily ever after,” the djinn’s fulfilment of Gillian’s first wish helps her to shift the shape of her fate briefly as she learns that she can come to terms with her own situation in a positive and fulfilling way.

Gillian is adept at seeking out positive spaces. On her arrival in Istanbul, she shuns her hotel room, a “bright box of space” (189), in preference for the delights of the hotel’s “secret cistern” (170), where she achieves a temporary escape from her body. She locates the beautiful underground pool, a dark green cavern, with its softly murmuring water gently lit with golden light. The body of water is a place of liberation and freedom where Gillian finds herself floating, albeit in a different medium, once again. Unconcerned about her age or appearance, in the compassionately fluid medium she is lithe and graceful, suspended from the very real worries of

“her sad body” (169). Gillian creates “waves of her own” (169) as her tired body is loosened and calmed in the glassy and cushioning water, once again “alive and joyful” (170). Byatt’s depiction of the “transforming vessel” which enables a “figurative death and rebirth” bears a resemblance to Murdoch’s narrative depiction of the “mysterious circular pool” (Johnson 93) in which Gertrude Openshaw, in *Nuns and Soldiers*, bathes. Her lover, the young artist Tim Reede, however, resists the urge to swim in the pool’s “translucent water” (159) as he remembers Gertrude’s earlier graceful presence in its waters. His awed response to the beauty of the pool endows it with an ethereal, spiritual quality. The hidden, underground and regenerative Peri Palas pool is also reminiscent of the Melusina’s secret fountain, La Fontaine de la Soif, described in the poem “The Fairy Melusine” in Byatt’s *Possession*:

A kind of hollowed chamber in the hill

Sheltered a still and secret pool ...

Dark green but sparkled with gold and amethyst. ... (295-296)

Gillian experiences a longer lasting physical transformation in the Peri Palas’s box-like bathroom when she inadvertently frees the djinn from the enclosure of his bottle. While the djinn has been trapped within his bottle, Gillian has been trapped within the enclosure of her body. Yet the djinn’s offer of the obligatory three wishes introduces an element of magic into the narrative of Gillian’s life and allows her partial escape from her restrained existence. On wishing that her body could be as it was when she was thirty-five, she returns to the mirror where she earlier observed “her death advancing towards her” (189-90), but this time she gazes in approval at her new body (202). Although Gillian is physically rejuvenated, her perception of herself as dull and boring remains unchanged. Unable to fulfil the djinn’s wish that she tell him the story of her life, Gillian panics. Convinced that her life is uninteresting and uneventful, she tells the djinn “that she had no story” (231) and listens to his stories instead.

When the djinn recounts the story of his life, telling Gillian about his former owners — all women, imprisoned or contained in confined spaces or within the harems of powerful men — Gillian is witness once again to the stories of real women who, like the fairy-tale characters whose fate she champions, are restrained from telling their own stories or from living fulfilling lives. His narration reveals stories of clever women who, despite creating certain spaces of freedom for themselves, were nonetheless restrained from living lives of self-determination. The djinn admits, sadly, that it was often his lack of intervention that kept the women from pursuing their opportunities, and kept them within their small spaces so that he could continue to enjoy their company and maintain a certain power over them. These women, like the fairy tale nightingale, had exquisite voices yet were prevented from coming and going at will or from singing for themselves, and detained by the djinn for his own pleasure. Despite the ever-present opportunity to do so, he declined to act as the women's guide through their personal labyrinths.

Eventually, Gillian tells her story and has it heard by the djinn. Her ability to do so enables her to accept a life in which she is ageing. Gillian has progressed from despising and denying the role of "wise crone" to an acceptance that she has a lived wisdom as well as an oral tradition to share. In the telling of her own story, and in listening to the stories of fictional and real women's lives (and recognising her own life in theirs), she learns to accept that although Death is inevitable, she has narrative freedom and can be co-author of her life. As Campbell notes (138), it is essential that a teller have her story heard in order for healing, or new growth, to occur. Gillian, "in telling the story, [feels] pure pleasure in getting it right" (138), and recognises that her past, present and future can co-exist comfortably. Eventually, she accepts her own reality and that of the other (even if it is a mythical creature) by paying attention to the story and stepping imaginatively and creatively into it.

Gillian pursues a new magical path in her life when, in fulfilment of her wish made in Hagia Sophia, she attends the Toronto conference. Her hotel room, suitably plush despite the

fact that it is merely another “bare concrete box,” is akin to a “magician’s stage set” (254), transformed by the appropriate illusory decorative touches. She releases the djinn from his bottle within the walls of the concrete box at the ironically-named Xanadu Hotel and begins a process whereby her own glass box is about to be transformed into a place of liberation rather than imprisonment. In her telling of the story of the fisherman and the apes, the djinn helps Gillian to construct an ending that fulfils the desires of both characters in the story. Campbell observes that the characters “stand in for Gillian and the djinn” and that “with the help of the story, Gillian is able to accept the loss of the djinn and the inevitability of her death” (143). Gillian comes to understand that liberation from their respective fates, in the form of a reciprocal rescue, is possible for both herself and the djinn (144). In the end the djinn is released by Gillian’s third and final wish, from his enclosure made of glass, and in a reciprocal gesture, Gillian is also freed from the metaphoric glass boxes – images of coffins – which signify death through continued imprisonment and isolation. Gillian’s own amazing life transformation occurs as a result of the “romance of language” (Campbell 145) which allows her to recognize not only that her own tale is similar to that of others but also that, unlike them, she has the freedom to take up the idea of changing stories. Consequently, Gillian is enabled to step out of her well-trodden narrative path to create new exits from the maze for herself.

Gillian’s negotiation of the maze ends with a choice of paths that will both lead towards the exit. One path provides longed-for liberation for herself, while the other, incorporating a degree of sacrifice on her part, will also free the djinn. Gillian’s choice of path brings liberation, in the form of a reciprocal rescue, for both herself and the djinn, and subverts the usual fairy tale ending. Instead of wishing selfishly, she uses her third and final wish to attain the djinn’s liberty and in so doing, enjoys reciprocal freedom. Two years later, on a trip to New York, Gillian is visited by the djinn who gives her two glass paperweights containing images of flowers and a snake – symbolic of the cyclical nature of life and of her own fate. The image of the snake also

emphasises the circular nature of the plot. At the beginning of the narrative, Gillian recalls how Milton's snake entranced her imagination in her youth, while at the close, and middle-aged, she is endowed with a physical representation of the snake, signifying the possibility of continued imagination. The djinn's gifts acknowledge that Gillian's exit from the labyrinth has indeed achieved freedom for them both. While she is enabled to live creatively in a joyful acceptance of the cyclical nature of life, the djinn is free to travel the universe at his leisure.

Gillian leaves the labyrinth knowing that she can live optimistically despite, or perhaps because of, the knowledge that death is ever-present on the horizon for all creatures. Her acceptance of her own fate hinges on her realisation that the crone is not a negative image, but an essential regenerative aspect of the birth-life-death cycle. Gillian's recognition of her humanity – her dull, brown exterior – enables her to see that just like the fairy-tale nightingale she, too, is blessed with the gift of a magical voice and can sing for herself as well as others.

Patricia Nimmo:

“Crocodile Tears,”

A.S. Byatt

In remembrance lies the secret of redemption,
– Baal Shem-Tov¹⁰

Byatt's short story, “Crocodile Tears,” appears in her fourth collection of short stories, named *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). The protagonist, Patricia Nimmo, struggles to escape from a situation that horrifies her with its sudden unexpectedness: the death of her husband, Tony. Ill-prepared to cope with such an event, Patricia's spur of the moment decision to

escape from London becomes a physical journey through a labyrinth of spaces, enclosures, obstacles, and confrontations between past and present. She arrives in France's ancient city of Nîmes, with its abundance of crocodile emblems, and manages only to shed tears that appear to have little to do with her husband's death. The image of the crocodile signifies Patricia's reluctance to confront memories of the past and integrate them into her present. Eventually, she negotiates a personal labyrinth that enables her to see that life and death can co-exist and she is freed to express her grief. Patricia's sorrow metaphorically entombs her within an ice coffin.¹¹ Her frozen isolation and disengagement from others is a drastic means of survival. Byatt comments tellingly that, for women, instead of dreaming of fairy-tale rescues, "Preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may ... be a way of preserving life" (*On Histories and Stories* 158). It is a lesson that also applies to Maud Bailey, who, accompanied by Roland Michell, learns to step out of her icy restraint. Similarly, Patricia, who is accompanied through the maze by Norwegian Nils Isaksen (a man burdened with his own grief and guilt), is challenged to escape from a frozen life-in-death into active participation in life. Previously constrained by the narrative of her life, from which she feels she has no choice other than to escape and disappear, Patricia is now enabled to exercise narrative freedom in making a discerning choice about her future story.

Byatt's *Elementals* is a narrative exploration of the elements – earth, air, water, and fire – which are, according to alchemical principles, essential to life and cannot be reduced by chemical means to simpler substances. Her short story collection also examines an "elemental" state of being beyond the perceived world of objects – the unconscious and uncontrollable promptings that make us behave in certain, often inexplicable, ways.

The essential elements of fire and water (including ice) are contrasted in "Crocodile Tears," set in Nîmes in southern France – described in the text as France's hottest city – and an appropriate place for Patricia, whose emotions are frozen.¹² Byatt's oppressively hot landscape is dominated by bright open spaces where the harshness of the sun is broken infrequently by

welcome drifts of shade. It is a place of extreme cold and extreme heat. For Patricia and Nils, who both arrive from cold climates, it is a setting in stark opposition to the conditions of their homelands. Both are frozen emotionally and need to “thaw out.” As Patricia entrusts him with the truth of her own situation, and commences to “warm” towards him, Nils’s frozen state also begins to melt. He tells her that he “burn[s] already ... under the fiery disc of the Mediterranean sky” (70-71) for his wickedness. Yet he has compassion towards Patricia and recites the story “The Companion” about a man frozen in a block of ice in order to help her escape her own solitude.

Patricia’s self-imposed exile to Nîmes is a spontaneous and unconscious “slipping out of everyday reality into another, more ‘elemental’ dimension of being” (Emck 25) in which she avoids coming to terms with the possibility of continuing to live after her husband dies. Unable to accept the fluidity of her identity – she is now a widow, no longer the comfortably happy wife of a man she truly loves – Patricia evades having to accept the mantle that society would impose if she were to stay in the midst of her family and normal everyday life. While Patricia’s escape to Nîmes will not remove this unwanted new axis of identity, it will provide her with time, space and distance to contemplate this change and perhaps to accept it (Friedman 23). She behaves in an elemental or basic way – acting on impulses rather than in a socially accepted and sanctioned manner. She shops, eats lunch, sleeps, eats dinner, returns to her room, sleeps. She tells Nils, not entirely truthfully, “I am on holiday,” but adds later, “I have just lost my husband” (30). She repeats her daily actions in an almost ritualistic manner and relishes the prospect of sleep, although her welcome unconscious state is haunted by dreams she would prefer not to have. Ironically, she runs from death but ends up in a stone city where death stares from every building and monument. The many fountains scattered throughout the streets and plazas are adorned with images of the crocodile, an animal commonly associated with the elements of fire, earth, and water, and with the interrelationship of life and death.

A connection between the crocodile and the elements of fire, earth and water, is alluded to in Lepidus’s comment to Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.7.26-7): “Your serpent of Egypt

is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun: so is your crocodile.” The reptilian symbol of the Roman city of Nîmes may be seen as a reminder of death and rebirth, as is the “elemental” salamander. The crocodile, Lord of the Underworld, actively associates life and death in Mayan and many Asian and South American Indian symbolic systems: “What he displays is inevitable – darkness falling so that daylight may return, death striking so that life may be reborn” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 244). Nîmes’ streets, steeped in the blood of long dead gladiators and hundreds of years of wars and revolutions, are linked inextricably to their bloody Roman past by the symbol of the crocodile. Patricia’s encounters with the iconic beast are a catalyst, encouraging her to integrate Tony’s death into her memories of their past life and her new life alone.

Patricia’s unavoidable encounters with the crocodiles of Nîmes prompt her unconscious mind to contemplate Tony’s existence. Seated in a cafe, she recalls his playing Lepidus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and their secret names for each other – Antony and Patra – and reminisces that “he could always make her smile by calling her Patra. It was a joke and not only a joke” (24). She and Tony *were* Antony and Cleopatra. Despite her apparent indifference, Patricia is subconsciously as preoccupied by her emotions for Tony as Cleopatra, who committed suicide in her grief, was obsessed by her passion for Antony. Patricia’s awareness of the crocodile in her dreams causes her to wake feeling distressed, knowing that “she had dreamed something she didn’t want to remember” (13). Following her visit to the museum where she sees “mummies of crocodiles” and “a very large cayman ... mounted on the wall” (46), Patricia wakes suddenly “from a confused dream of long corridors, lined with high glass cases” (49) and recalls words from *Antony and Cleopatra* relating to an extinguished life, that of Antony (and by extension, of Tony): “This case of that huge spirit now is cold” (50). The dead, preserved crocodiles challenge Patricia to pay attention to the reality of her love for Tony and their life together through the act of conscious memory.

The expression “crocodile tears,” an allusion to artificial sorrow or insincere grief or regret, seems apt when describing Patricia’s uncontrollable weeping when she reads about the hit-

run death of a local unidentified man. Her inexplicable crocodile tears shed in the hotel salon for a stranger are a delayed reaction to the shock of her unexpected loss of Tony and support Nils's observation that she has "a great grief" (27). Paradoxically, when Tony died she neither lingered to identify him nor shed tears of sorrow or grief. Instead, she left Tony for strangers to cry over. Yet, Byatt has stated that a conscious confrontation of the finality of death is essential if life is to continue: "death is what you need to understand in order to live" (Tonkin 24). Patricia's "crocodile tears" signify her resistance to dealing with the reality of Tony's death and all that this will entail in her life. By evading Tony's funeral and her return to their home, Patricia evades the reality of learning to live without him. Until she is able to accept that he has died, she is unable to shed real tears of sorrow, only superficial ones over somebody else – as if the fear of mourning Tony will signify her acceptance of the permanence of his physical absence.

On Tony's death Patricia seeks to escape tragic reality by going "Anywhere, nowhere, somewhere" (13). Her train journey to the south of France marks not her escape, but her entrance into a physical and personal labyrinth. She arrives at Nîmes, a city reputedly gifted to the Romans in return for their victory over Antony and Cleopatra on the Nile. The city's name reminds her of her surname, Nimmo, and resonates with the mythic Nemo, "no-one," which in turn links to the concept of her loss of identity upon Tony's death. Consequently, she regards the name of the city of Nîmes as a good omen for the staging of her disappearance there. However, her desire for anonymity that renders her invisible or nonexistent equates to a life-in-death existence.

Patricia's entry into the physical labyrinth at Nîmes is marked by her negotiation of a series of box-like structures in the Hôtel Impérator Concorde. The first of these, the old lift, is likened to "a bird-cage" (27). In the Bar Hemingway, she is contained within its "glass box ... full of warm, deep yellow light" as she looks "out at the dancing blue cube of water in the dark garden" (29). Patricia's room is a blissfully dark place of refuge, closed to the heat and sun by the blistered shutters and curtains, its balcony looking out into a walled garden. The room is a cocoon, a welcome respite from contact with reality – the city and its people.

Patricia, who is a businesswoman running her own affairs, accustomed to making important decisions for her retail chain, attempts to maintain a correspondingly ordered sense of self as a means of coping with her grief. The interplay of the power and powerlessness of her identity as a wealthy but emotionally-shattered widow leaves her feeling disoriented. Consequently, she confines herself to the solitude of her room, and escapes consciousness by sleeping frequently in the soothing darkness. Although she is numb and resists stepping beyond her hotel room, she notices Nils Isaksen, another self-exiled Northerner, sitting alone on the terrace bent over his writing. On her later meeting with Nils, he tells her that he is also grieving the death of his spouse. Nils's name – “nil” meaning “nothing” – similar to Patricia's “no-one,” reinforces the notions of absence, lack of identity, emptiness, virtual death, or invisibility. Nils and Patricia – nothing and no-one – both attempt to be nobodies in the unfamiliar city, frozen human beings united in their crocodile tears. Despite Nils's harbouring of his own dark secret, his behaviour provides a positive contrast to Patricia's withdrawal as he engages with the city and its landmarks while she prefers “indifference” (17).

Patricia restricts her initial exploration of Nîmes to the tiny maze-like narrow streets around her hotel. In her effort to retain a conscious sense of order and control, lest the environment elicit her unwanted emotions or memories, she travels only the path between her hotel suite, walled courtyard, restaurant, bar, and small shops in the hotel's vicinity. Her self-imposed confinement represents the safety of familiarity, with little chance for discovery of or confrontation with the town's sad past which could magnify her own personal sorrow. She attempts to maintain control and order in her life and, unable to step beyond the firm boundaries she has set, she simply negotiates and exchanges one constraining set of enclosures, on a variety of levels, for another. Her reluctance to venture further is mirrored in her emotional outlook: she attempts to avoid a confrontation with memories or her immediate past, unsure of whether she is capable of travelling such a path. Patricia avoids the chaos of interaction with local historical

buildings and monuments by refusing to see them as repositories of a living past, representative of the histories of real human beings.

Although Patricia's explorations in the maze-like landscape of narrow streets, boulevards and squares often lead her accidentally to various entrances to the Arènes, the cubes that compose the Maison Carrée, or the Carré d'Art, she retraces her steps to avoid potential openings into the Arènes. While Patricia conscientiously avoids touching the historical past, to her consternation Nils invites her to the museum to look at the gladiators' gravestones, "to read the life of a city in its monuments" (34). His invitation is a challenge to her to take the next step in her journey – an essential confrontation with death and with the past which she must negotiate before progressing to the next stage. Together they negotiate the various parts of the building – down to the tombs of the ancient gladiators, along a corridor, up stairs and into a long narrow room – mimicking their search for an exit from their own labyrinthine enclosures. As they look at ancient burial stones, part of the city's sad history is revealed. "Under cafes and cinemas, patisseries and churches" are buried "three or four centuries ... of dead young men" (43). Patricia, no longer able to confront their tragic past, rushes away.

Despite Patricia's reluctance to go to the museum she decides, as a final gesture prior to departing Nîmes, to look instead at the Maison Carrée because "Ezra Pound had said it was a structure of ideal beauty" (35). Deliberately ignoring its historical relevance, she focuses on its aesthetic properties. Climbing the steps of the portico, she finds herself surrounded by another box-like structure. The square house, used in the past as a Roman forum, a monastery eventually wrecked by invaders, a mausoleum, and finally "a place of sacrifice" (36), is simultaneously a monument to life and death. Patricia is overwhelmed by the dark red blood-like space within, and trapped in the archaeological maze, she walks helplessly "along, around, and across" (36) in it. Feeling trapped by an aura of death, and despite her resistance, she senses that the past catches up with her through elemental, subconscious means and she is no longer able to shut it out. Just as she begins to wonder "when it made sense to stop looking" (36), her memory is recalled suddenly

and involuntarily, as if she were hypnotized, to the Narrow Gallery and the circumstances of Tony's death.

Patricia's excursion to the Maison Carrée initiates her fledgling awareness that "beauty and danger" (52) can be present together. When she decides to see an exhibition of "ghastly and lovely" (52) surrealist paintings at the Carré d'Art, she is confounded further by the realisation that death and life do co-exist, in real life as well as in art. The surreal images of "vanishing and danger" (52) composed of unstable chemicals and poisonous pigments reflect her inner turmoil. Her seemingly calm and dreamy confrontation with the colourful and bizarre paintings masks the agitation of her subconscious: her attention is "churning, like water boiling in a jug, a stream of rising currents, a troubled, jagged surface, a downdraught, a bubbling up" (51). While she keeps her emotions to herself, her memories surface involuntarily and she wonders once again, "How do you decide when to stop looking at something?" (52).

Patricia chooses to practise "indifference" (17) rather than focus her full attention. While she notices the beauty of her surroundings, enjoying colours, shapes and textures of food, architecture and her hotel's environs, she remains detached and does not take part in a sustained contemplation of any particular object or feature. Patricia's view of her world is partial and incomplete. She is incapable of thinking about a continuous past and future, while a limited existence in the present is the only choice she is able to make. Throughout the narrative Patricia faces the dilemma of "How do you decide when to stop looking at something? ... You give it your attention or you don't" (3). Her indifference takes the form of a sensual yet distant engagement with individual objects and certain aspects of the city. A result of grief, Byatt explains, is an ability to gain a "terrible distance on things and see them with great clarity ... partly because you don't have a stake in them" (Tonkin 25). Patricia tells Nils that she sees life as a series of disconnected events, without an overall pattern. Yet indifference does not work, he tells her, and amounts to an abandonment of choice, a denial of one's humanity, and an attribution of events to "blind fate ... [or] destiny" (41). Nils's words echo Byatt's interpretation

of Murdoch's concept of "attention": that people ought to focus and continue to give attention, developing and maintaining a "greedy curiosity" about the world, and that in choosing to do otherwise, "people are dead" (23).

Patricia's traumatic psychological journey from being a frozen and uninvolved outsider to becoming a vulnerable, involved and feeling person is mirrored in her physical experiences. Her confrontations with death in the museums and galleries instigate a potentially fatal yet elemental response – an unconscious desire for her own death. Upset and disoriented, Patricia runs into the path of a car and almost falls from a balcony onto rooftops below. In the hot, unshaded space of the Place d'Assas she faints and is about to fall into a fountain. On each occasion Nils saves her. Angry, she tells him he is interfering in her life, while he retorts that his actions are "interference in your death" (54). Despite her preference for "indifference," and her resistance to being "rescued" by Nils, she eventually thanks him (38). She sees Nils as "dreadfully inhuman ... like a gargoyle" (41), resists his efforts to help her, telling him she does not need "a guardian angel" (41) but realises she ought to interact with him. Her lack of interest is justified by her belief that "the nerve-endings with which she had once felt out the shape of other people's feelings were severed or numbed" (32).

Recognising her trapped state, and in an attempt to free her, Nils tells her the Norwegian story of "The Companion" about the "sinner" (56) entombed in a coffin of ice. His telling of the tragic story provides Patricia with a path she can take towards telling him the truth. She tells him the true reason she came to Nîmes. Subsequently, Nils's refusal to judge Patricia and his encouragement that she can "set it right" (60) causes her reserve to break down and, in an inversion of the Sleeping Beauty story, she kisses his cheek in gratitude and the stage is set for the next phase of their journey. Patricia's reaction to Nils reveals an awareness of the person who exists beyond appearance – the beginning of her attachment to Ariadne's thread.

Patricia's gradual return to consciousness causes her to feel that she has been "floating largely in some other dimension" (62). Her acclimatization to attentiveness is gradual and

disconcerting. Although she has a new urge to speak to Nils when she notices him fighting aggressively on two occasions, she remains encased within “the real glass wall of the Bar Hemingway and the molten glass cocoon of her own consciousness” (63), watching but incapable of intervening. Despite her wariness about venturing too close to the entrance of the Arènes, the ancient amphitheatre used for bullfights and gladiatorial contests, Patricia now follows Nils along the Rue de l’Aspic and into the circular Arènes which she has resisted since her arrival in Nîmes. Her fears of coming face to face with her own buried, chaotic emotions and finding herself trapped in the centre, losing emotional control, are forgotten as she enters. Doob’s summary of the similarities between the structures of maze and amphitheatre provides feasible grounds for Patricia’s reticence in venturing towards the Arènes, which resembles

... ‘a vast labyrinth, great in circumference, from which an ignorant intruder can find no way out unless with the aid of a lamp or a ball of thread’ ... The similarity between amphitheatres and medieval labyrinths – both designed in concentric circles broken by radial axes, both without easily recognisable internal reference points – is obvious. Order and chaos are inherently conjoined in both images. (102)

Yet Byatt’s narrative stresses that “the Arènes is not a labyrinth” but rather “an orderly structure ... open to the sky” (65). Patricia, who has “stepped into the circle” (65), follows the orderly path of the unicursal and symmetrical maze that leads her inevitably to the centre, the amphitheatre, where she is challenged to connect past and present so that she can continue towards the exit. She ignores the chaos of her own fears to pursue Nils, whom she now sees as somebody worth attending to. Her sense of connection with him forms the symbolic “thread” that will lead her out.

Walking at ground level, she finally begins to confront the reality of the Arènes. Inhaling the smell of fear and death of the beasts of times past, she remembers reading about the centuries-old entertainment of the ritual slaughter of men and beasts. Climbing four tiers of stairs, she looks down into the lower galleries and sees Nils sitting, head bowed, silent and still in the blinding hot

midday sun. She prepares to confront him to seek the truth about his behaviour. Inside the bright white circle of Nîmes' arena of death, the centre of the labyrinth, Patricia encounters Nils, who confesses that he lied about his dead wife and has actually abandoned his senile aunt in a Stockholm clinic. Patricia attends to his story, recognizes similarities to her own, and attempts to console him while he condemns himself to "burn already" (70) for his misdeed. Her confrontation of his truth is her encounter with the Minotaur, and allows her to see Nils, and conversely herself, as more fully human and subject to failure. Their positions are reversed as he resists her consolation, yet in her attentiveness to his story she recognizes that fear and desperation are common elements in both their narratives. Her realization enables her to grasp more firmly the symbolic thread of connection which leads towards the exit.

Patricia's personal journey through the labyrinth nears completion as her unconscious thoughts reveal what her conscious mind forbids. Following her encounter with Nils at the arena, she experiences a distressing dream in which she is metaphorically trapped – "not permitted to turn her eyes away ... or speak" (72) – and forced to confront the repeated carnage of two men. They continue to slice each other to pieces, while Tony comes and sits next to her, encouraging her to pay attention. The gladiators represent Patricia's fears, competing for survival but eventually dying, allowing Patricia to be released into a new life. Their contest resembles the Etruscan *munus*, held to honour the souls of the dead and keep the dead person's memory alive (Owens, "The Roman Gladiator," n. pag.). Patricia's witnessing of this event forms an essential part of her path towards the exit into a new life. In contemplating Tony's death with full attention and without fear, she will allow him, and herself, to rest with dignity. By remembering Tony and their happy life together Patricia is also acknowledging and accepting her self. It is not possible, the narrative implies, to remember selectively segments of life to the exclusion of the rest. Patricia is unable to run away again from the fact of Tony's death – she must stay and face it, finally. The need to remember Tony ought not to carry a requirement to be mournful, nor should Patricia attempt to forget him and try to be happy. Instead, a balance of remembering and

continuing to pursue life is required. Eventually Patricia visits Tony's grave and writes on it that "... there is nothing left remarkable / beneath the visiting moon" (76), echoing Cleopatra's words on learning of Antony's death. Ironically, in life, Patricia denied Tony his memory box, together with his identity at his moment of death, but in time she bestows on him the honourable memory and identity he yearned for – that of Cleopatra's Antony: the most important person in her life.

Byatt's narrative suggests it is important to remember and acknowledge the past in light of the present because it helps us know who we are. The past remembered makes us see others and thus makes them present or real, mirroring Murdoch's plea for the individual's realisation "that something other than oneself is real" ("The Sublime and The Good" 215). Patricia, with Nils's help, gradually works her way out of the frozen tomb she finds herself in. She progresses from being a frozen creature stuck within a frustrating maze of indifference, to being someone who can exit into an active participation in life and become part of the continuum of life and death with nothing left to fear. Patricia's dread of losing her veneer of self-control and becoming powerless and vulnerable should she accept her role as a loving and grieving widow begins to dissipate as she starts to accommodate this facet of her evolving identity.

As Yvonne, Patricia, and Gillian seek to shrug off the oppressive circumstances of their lives, they navigate vastly different personal labyrinthine journeys. Each character is caught within a particular narrative plot's restrictions that encourage her to fantasize or daydream about an alternative life story. Yet escape from the maze of isolation and solipsism can only be achieved when a fruitful search for Ariadne's thread, interactive and unselfish attachment to others, takes place. Success is never guaranteed. While each woman endures a "life-in-death" existence, only Gillian and Patricia have the sense to imagine different narrative plots for their

life stories. The forging of an unselfish alliance with another character is an essential aspect of freedom for both individuals.

While Gillian is able to recognize and appreciate the djinn's guidance in her efforts to escape, she avoids the lure of absolute self-gratification, and grants him his freedom in her third wish. Her attention and attachment to him frees them both. Patricia, shocked into an introverted indifference by the death of her husband, meets Nils, who shares a similar pain and guilt. By recognizing and acknowledging his pain and conversely her own, she travels through the maze with him and, enabled to escape, frees him too. Although Gillian and Patricia succeed in grasping and following Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth's exit into new lives, Yvonne remains trapped in an enclosed and arid space. Even though she has fewer choices than the other characters, she opts to retain a negative and pessimistic outlook about the future. Unlike Gillian and Patricia, she is reluctant to take note of the goodness of another individual. Consequently, she is unable to form an unselfish attachment to Sam and cannot find a way out of her narrative plot. Yvonne has no conception of her own rights in a loving relationship because she can't recognize Sam's. She has no independence, unlike Gillian and Patricia.

Although success is never guaranteed in either fiction or real life, Murdoch and Byatt remind readers, through their characters' actions, of the need "to unlearn their ways of perceiving" (Heusel 257) and become more attentive and attached to others. The three short stories discussed in this chapter allow for a productive comparison of Murdoch's fictionalisation of her philosophical discourse on human relationships and Byatt's own fictive pursuit of the thread that leads towards achievement of individual freedom. Such freedom, both writers seem to suggest, can only be attained through an "an imaginative understanding" (Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" 52) of fellow human beings.

¹ Daniel Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories* (23).

² “Something Special” by Iris Murdoch was first published in 1957, in 1959 in Japan, posthumously in Britain in 1999, and most recently as an illustrated edition in the United States in 2000. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” and “Crocodile Tears,” short stories by A.S. Byatt, were both published in short story collections. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” appears in a collection of the same name published in 1994, while “Crocodile Tears” appears in the volume titled *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, published in 1998.

³ Both Campbell and Maack examine Byatt’s re-writing of fairy tales in order that women are enabled to have more power over their own lives and to recognise the “stopping off of women’s energies” that is so often a feature of narratives about women (Campbell 135, Maack 125).

⁴ Yvonne Geary is based on Murdoch’s older cousin, Eva Robinson. Murdoch and Eva often sat on the rocks at Dun Laoghaire beach during Iris’s summer holidays, making up stories (Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* 53).

⁵ Dezure notes the presence of Jewish characters in Iris Murdoch’s fictions, noting that they are either “demonic or sufferers of passive anguish and insularity” (213). Sam belongs to the latter category and exemplifies “otherness” (214).

⁶ The symbolism of rivers is that of “universal potentiality,” particularly with regard to life, death and renewal. The river is considered the stream of life and death. Jewish tradition regards the river as carrying grace and heavenly influences. The ancient Chinese considered crossing a river carried considerable importance, above all if done so by a young couple. It denoted a true passage, especially from yin to yang (Chevalier and Gheerbrant (808-810).

⁷ Dezure’s interpretation of this description is that it identifies Yvonne as “a virgin among whores” (215).

⁸ A.S. Byatt, “The Story of the Eldest Princess” (66) in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye*.

⁹ Sources of allusions and intertextual references include: *The Arabian Nights*, various Turkish poems, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Winter’s Tale*, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Paradise Lost*, Grimm’s fairy tales, and Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Nightingale* (Maack 123).

¹⁰ Qtd. in Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories* (113).

¹¹ Byatt’s fondness for the images of ice, glass or snow is detailed at length in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*. She recalls Grimms’ “The Glass Coffin,” “about an indomitable Little Tailor who discovers in an underground fastness not one but two glass cases, one containing a miniature palace with stables and outhouses ‘carefully and elegantly worked’ and the other a beautiful maiden with golden hair” (154), and Andersen’s “Snow Queen” where “the cold woman takes the young man away into her ice palace where she keeps him from the ordinary cycle of life and affection . . . The ice palace is a false eternity, a duration outside time, to be escaped from” (155). Much of Byatt’s fiction deals with life-in-death experiences of female protagonists enclosed within transparent confines of castle, casket or case and who, like Snow White, wait for Prince Charming to rescue them. Byatt’s narratives do not, however, allow for such glib conclusions and she compares her youthful delight and interpretation of these stories to her adult reinterpretations of metaphors of isolation and detachment.

¹² The theme of emotional and physical numbing in an unbearably hot climate is repeated in Byatt’s short story, “Cold” in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, when Princess Fiammarosa realises that in order to live she must feel “the cold penetrating her surfaces, all over” (127). She is told by her tutor, Hugh, “You must live – when the thaw comes – in cool places. There are ice-houses in the palace gardens – we must build more, and stock them with blocks of ice, before the snow melts,” to which she replies: “It may be that I have ice in my veins, like the icewoman . . . But you did not tell me I had a cold nature” (132).

CHAPTER FOUR:**Recognition and Sympathy**

Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey

(Possession, A.S. Byatt)

“... then she saw
His smiling face, and by it, knew her own –
And so they stared and smiled ...
In recognition and in sympathy.”

– Randolph Henry Ash¹

Possession: A Romance incorporates textual and physical labyrinths in a manner distinctly different from each of the other texts examined in this thesis. As a romance, the novel portrays characters' quests for connection with others through love. Each seeks equality: intimacy and connection without diminishment of individual identity. While female characters are depicted struggling to escape their boundaries, the narrative reveals that similar limitations can also constrain males. Victorians Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash both break social conventions and transgress moral codes in order to achieve a brief moment together. Meanwhile, their contemporary counterparts, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, although unconstrained by rigid codes of sexual behaviour, are highly wary of relationship and commitment despite their desire for both. Each character craves to walk a path of intimacy with another while still retaining individual identity and freedom. *Possession* suggests that labyrinthine paths can lead to a third possibility: a “meronymic” relationship in which, as Thelma J. Shinn explains, “two become one” where “neither original is diminished” and “in which the three concepts both interact and continue to exist independently” (xiii).

The meronymic perspective is demonstrated in Byatt's narrative as the main characters, confined within their enclosures, attempt to follow individual and solitary paths but join together

as pairs (Christabel and Randolph, Maud and Roland) to pursue their quest for self through unity with another. While Maud and Roland have a capacity to exit their labyrinthine journey to form the third entity described by Shinn, Christabel and Randolph are prevented from achieving such unity and remain constrained by their circumstances because of stifling societal demands.

Because it is a meronymic text, *Possession* reveals that both women and men, walking parallel paths, can have very similar experiences and be located at life's margins. The labyrinth formed by the search for the hidden clues to the Victorians' true past is explored by Maud and Roland, who simultaneously traverse their own modern day maze. Their exit from both constitutes a meronymic conclusion in that their navigations create a third, interactive and independent entity: an ongoing narrative that combines the Victorians' past with Maud's and Roland's present and future.

Maud Bailey, the great-great-great-great granddaughter of Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte and her lover Randolph Henry Ash, is the central figure of Byatt's 1990 Booker Prize winning novel, *Possession: A Romance*. Maud longs to remain independent yet craves connection with others and is representative of all Byatt's female characters. Her frustrations are an unspoken echo of those of Byatt's teenage character, Frederica Potter, in *The Virgin in the Garden*, whose lament that surely "it was possible ... to make something of one's life *and* be a woman" (223) reverberates through a common labyrinthine path traced by Byatt's and Murdoch's women.

Maud Bailey encloses herself within a glass coffin but becomes restless as she realizes that her existence could be enriched by love, while Christabel LaMotte, in her golden cage, longs for an experience of intellectual and physical fulfilment. Although the spaces they inhabit have served well in the past, Maud and Christabel feel the urge to step out of their self-imposed boundaries in order to find love and completion. Both women are fiercely protective of their independence but tentatively seek a path through the labyrinth towards a state in which self is not subservient to another and in which individuals can interact and emerge undiminished. Maud, a LaMotte expert, is beguiled by Randolph Henry Ash researcher Roland Michell's audacious

proposal that she help with his search for the secret correspondence between the nineteenth-century poets and lovers. Maud makes a courageous first step, taking Roland to Seal Court, Christabel's final home, and is assisted by him to leave her own enclosure of fear to try travelling different paths and ways of making connections with others.

As the modern day academics, driven by "narrative curiosity" (238), plan their literary quest, they are compelled to move beyond their existing personal constraints to explore physical labyrinthine paths that lead them through a new understanding of the poets' actual past to better knowledge of each other. Maud's and Roland's journey, as a retracing of Christabel's and Randolph's steps, illustrates the desirability and possibility of constructing self in partnership with others. While their discoveries about the Victorians grow, Maud and Roland also become increasingly aware of being "caught" in the same romance plot, and so they behave accordingly. In a natural progression of the romance form, as the couples draw towards each other in search of equality and freedom, they find love. Love's idealised outcome is that of a "touchstone for the future," providing "an equality in which individuals can relate to one another freely and in which the needs and complexities of each are fully recognised" (Sellers 131): a meronymic relationship.

Unfortunately, despite their love, Christabel and Randolph cannot achieve a relationship in which each others' needs are fully recognised and met. It remains for Maud a century later, with Roland's assistance, to reinscribe the path that will simultaneously validate her ancestor's identity and reveal her own. This path intertwines a gradual unfolding of knowledge of Maud's true identity with a past linking her inextricably to Christabel. Maud's and Roland's intervention succeeds in bringing Christabel's story to life by enabling her recognition as a writer of eloquent poetry and the inspiration for much of Ash's work. She is no longer regarded as just a silly fairy poetess, or a bitter and unfulfilled spinster, but an ambitious and talented woman in her own right. The unearthing of Christabel's final undelivered letter to Randolph, explaining their daughter's birth, provides Maud and Roland with an exit from the labyrinth. Their individual freedom,

gained through mutual awareness and negotiation, also achieves Christabel's and Randolph's liberation through the recognition of their romance.

Byatt signals her intention to use the romance form in a very particular way when she quotes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance*. Hawthorne states that romance provides a writer with greater creative freedom than the novel, and Byatt gleefully and self-consciously takes up this loosening of restrictions. While Hawthorne believes that the romance allows a writer to "choose the circumstances" of the tale, he also stresses that the "truth of the human heart" must remain ever present. In privileging the romance, Byatt avails herself of the freedom to create a text that relies heavily on fantasy and improbable plot structures and which allows her to fashion an "'other world' [that is] richer ... brighter ... more alive than the daily reality at its brightest" ("The Reader as Writer" 5).

The romance is described by Bronfen as a literary form that lends itself to postmodern narrative technique (130). As such, it enables Byatt to manoeuvre the plot legitimately and self-consciously so that several storylines are woven together. Her deft plotting of a variety of narrative paths challenges readers to work towards a coherent resolution and fulfilment of the romance's convention of a happy ending. Byatt has frequently acknowledged her need for the co-operation of astute readers in the mutual construction of this multifaceted text. While Byatt's narrative presents readers with various intriguing literary avenues, her construction is peopled with characters who "think critically about their own lives, their own stories, and their own times" (Alfer and Noble 9). Maud and Roland, while fulfilling the romance's condition that they withdraw into a brighter other world, leaving their demanding everyday life behind, also spend a great amount of time reflecting critically on contemporary literary issues while pursuing the object of their search. Their contemplation and discussion of the concerns of the "real" world playfully mimics twentieth-century literary theories, philosophies, and attitudes – with their distrust of closure and romantic love – and results in a postmodern commentary on contemporary beliefs and values.

Possession, despite its postmodern preoccupations, remains directed primarily towards self-conscious portrayal of the love story and its happy conclusion – “the truth of the human heart” – wherein the majority of characters, even those resistant to the notion of romance, self-consciously engage in romantic pairings or seek idealised love in a plot that gains impetus from Roland’s chance discovery of Ash’s letter. Yet while readers expect (and accept) the passionate union of the protagonists, Byatt’s narrative portrays an ever-changing and lengthy series of events abounding in coincidental circumstances. These happy coincidences culminate in a remarkable dénouement that requires readers’ complicity in a final and significant willing suspension of disbelief.

While the main pairs of protagonists become involved with each other, secondary characters are also linked romantically in a surprising fashion. The financially constrained Val, starved of fun and attention, is wooed by Euan MacIntyre, a wealthy solicitor and racehorse owner, while the bisexual feminist academic Leonora Stern pursues dour Ash scholar James Blackadder. Depiction of unlikely events and improbable scenarios is exemplified in the circumstances of Maud’s and Roland’s involvement in solving the mystery of Christabel’s and Randolph’s relationship. As a staunch feminist academic based in a regional university, Maud’s professional path is unlikely to cross that of Roland, who is located in London and whose career trajectory is uncertain. Yet they are thrown together, aided by mutual colleague Fergus Wolff, their relationship driven by *Possession*’s romantic quest. While appearing to be placed at odds by personalities, ideologies and professional situations, Maud and Roland are impelled by the desire to find out what happened next – “narrative curiosity” – which motivates them to move beyond their individual dead ends in the labyrinth. These improbable events are framed by a primary plot with its highly unlikely premise that Maud, as a direct descendant of Christabel and Randolph, not only unearths the secret relationship of the Victorian poets when she unexpectedly locates their hidden correspondence, but also on reading Christabel’s final letter to Randolph, accomplishes a tidy conclusion in which all narrative threads are brought together. She is

unexpectedly provided with significant assistance by researcher Ariane Le Minier whose name, appropriately, means “to do with mining or digging,” and is also a derivative of Ariadne. Her supplying Maud with the indispensable clue for resolution of her quest is equivalent to Ariadne’s provision of the thread in the labyrinth.

Readers of the romance, familiar with its formulaic predictability, expect a twisting labyrinthine plot with false moves and dead ends, and a maze-like switching of locations and settings. That characters will successfully find their way out of restrictive spaces or misleading passages is happily anticipated. Byatt, aware of the postmodern disdain for such neat endings, deliberately constructs a link that joins Maud’s and Roland’s “narrative curiosity” with their success in finding out what happened to the Victorian romantic pair.

The romance form presents a chance for characters’ maze-like exploration and validation of identity through intimacy with a particular other. Christabel’s and Randolph’s letters to each other, for example, commence innocently enough but evolve into a burgeoning romantic exchange in which each seeks to clarify her or his own uniqueness through the other. Randolph confidently and openly writes to Christabel that, “ever since that first meeting, I have known you were ... my Love ... for I most certainly love you” (192-193). Their correspondence is a journey of discovery in which each of them alternately reveals a facet of his or her own identity and searches for corresponding or complementary aspects of the beloved. Maud and Roland, on the other hand, are highly defensive of their selves and join forces in weaving their own silent trail of hidden actions and concealed evidence from their peers. While the Victorians believe in the possibilities of love and their own importance, the emotionally barren Maud and Roland are sceptical of the “grand narrative” of romance yet feel increasingly overwhelmed by its influence. Roland speaks on behalf of himself and Maud when he reflects that, “He was in a Romance, ... one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world” (425).

Roland's thoughts provide an oblique reference to Byatt's expectation that readers are also controlled by the "expectations of Romance". They imply that readers should possess a certain familiarity with the romance genre and its conventions in order to participate consciously in the narrative's construction. The romance form, consequently, provides readers with the opportunity for maze-like exploration and validation of identity through intimacy with a particular other, even if vicariously.

Maud and Roland are "children of a time and culture which mistrusted love" (423) and the concept of romance, yet these very things may afford them a chance at self validity through relationship as opposed to the critical theories, so dismissive of intimacy, which they espouse. The proposition that the notion of romantic love provides a possibility of freedom and self-realisation and a means of individuals' gaining some control over their future is explored by Anthony Giddens, who suggests that "Romantic love introduced the idea of narrative into an individual's life" (40). Such a narrative, like a journey, is a venture involving personal attachments and emotions that lead to risk-taking human commitments. A successful outcome or destination includes the enhancement of the individual's life and an enriched understanding of their place in relation to others. While they acknowledge the difficulty of their contemporary situation, Maud and Roland puzzle over their need "to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them [Christabel and Randolph]... believing in ... Love – themselves – that what they did mattered –" (267). Although they are highly suspicious of love, Maud and Roland are also entranced by its prospects. As their reading of the original lovers' correspondence advances, Byatt makes Maud and Roland gradually succumb self-consciously to their own romance – a self-constructed narrative that is dependent on their reading of each other and understanding and respect for each other's often contradictory theoretical positions. Maud and Roland tentatively wend their way through the labyrinth as they deal with their fear of the unknown – love and each other – until Roland is able to "see the romance" (149) of a particular

situation, while Maud gives in first to the “tyranny” of love, abandoning herself to its domain by telling Roland, “I love you” (506).

Possession's internal cohesion is achieved despite the narrative's alternation of genres within and between chapters, incorporation of a cyclical timeframe, and abrupt shifts of focus onto different characters. Byatt's weaving together, or “entrelacement” (Beer 20), of disparate narrative elements to create a unified whole, a technique common in romance novels, is reminiscent of the convergence of several labyrinthine paths, and can be compared to Doob's observation that labyrinths present an image of “multiplicity and unity, parts and the whole, means and ends” (62). *Possession* is a multicursal labyrinth for readers. As such, it requires that readers explore and become familiar with a wide array of literary paths while simultaneously continuing to pursue clues towards an exit from the narrative maze.

Byatt's successful mixture of her liberal borrowings from literature of the past, forms of popular fiction, and contemporary discourse make it vividly apparent that “Romance thrives in the shifting borderland between legend and facts” (Beer 22). Such an amalgamation of “the linear and the circular” within one text is identified by Doob as “peculiarly labyrinthine” (225). The *mise en abyme* parody incorporates a range of mythological and literary allusions: constant references are made to various Greek, Roman, Breton, and Norse myths and mythic poetry written by Ash and LaMotte, as well as intertextual references to Wordsworth, the Brontës, Dickinson, Keats, Browning, and their works. Byatt's re-creation or imitation of Victorian letters, journal entries, and poetry creates a connection of sorts between the four characters and mythical past, historical past, and actual present. Christabel and Randolph appropriate the stories of the past into their own writing – the Breton and Norse myths especially – in an effort to connect themselves with their literary past yet ground themselves in their own present, while Maud and Roland, as LaMotte and Ash researchers, have become adept at tracing the poets' textual temporal movements. A metaphoric enmeshing of the past and present of the two pairs of

characters occurs as Maud and Roland retrace Christabel's and Randolph's steps on the beach at Thomason Foss.

Byatt constructs a highly individual romance fiction by adopting and subverting various aspects of the conventional romance form and incorporating facets of the morally outspoken feminine Romanticism into the narrative. Her characters, seeking new paths, challenge particular ideologies in turn, alternately questioning the past and the present, and as a result of this conversation, they help to create a new meronymic text.

While *Possession* is an entertaining postmodern romance, the narrative incorporates an implicit awareness of the moral concerns of "feminine Romanticism".² In her depiction of characters "to whom serious thought matters, and who are changed by it" ("Her Philosophical Essays" 27), Byatt echoes Murdoch's belief that literature has a responsibility to advance "civilisation and justice and freedom ... clarity and truth" (Murdoch, "Salvation by Words" 241). Mary Shelley, despite her direct association with male Romanticism through Percy Bysshe Shelley and Byron, saw the Romantic ethos as "profoundly immoral" and instead promoted an "ethics of care," which regarded all individuals as equals standing in mutual respect and responsibility to each other.³ This sentiment bears remarkable similarity to Murdoch's plea that individuals pay attention to one another. Shelley emphasized an acute awareness of others in relation to self, advocating that individuals (especially women) take responsibility for their actions in order that others were not harmed. Writers such as Jane Austen, who shared similar beliefs to Shelley, had little patience for Romanticism and endorsed Mary Wollstonecraft's very serious view of marriage, emphasising the need in relationships for a "rational love ... based on understanding, compatibility, equality, and mutual respect" (Mellor, "A Criticism of Their Own" 31). While Christabel and Maud desire relationships in which they are recognized for their individuality and treated as equals, such desire seems to be an impossible dream, and both women subsequently withdraw from interaction with others. Leading female Romantic writers, including Shelley, Austen, Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and Dorothy Wordsworth,

espoused the notion of the self as “fluid, absorptive, responsive, with permeable ego boundaries,” locating “its identity in its connections with a larger human group, whether the family or a social community” (31). In her portrayal of Christabel’s and Maud’s consciousness of their lack of such connections, and their eventual interaction with Randolph and Roland, Byatt not only incorporates Murdoch’s view of relationship but also integrates the understandings of Friedman’s “geographics of identity” (17-35). Although both Christabel and Maud occupy spaces that initially meet their needs, their new, demanding, intimate interactions with Ash and Roland require that their personal boundaries move and adapt to accommodate another. The characters demonstrate a passionate search for “spaces of dynamic encounter,” “fertile borderlands,” “the liminal spaces in between,” and “hybrid interfusions of self and other” (Friedman 19). Eventually, the women’s paths, paralleled by those of the men, produce a third, joint path (as a result of the fluid interaction of power and powerlessness) that can be travelled together.

At first, Maud and Christabel mark out boundaries in order to be able to write in a room of their own and achieve autonomy through their acceptance of imprisonment as freedom. Increasingly isolated in their safe female spaces, the characters are defined not by their human relationships, but by their writing. Mythical and fairytale allusions, while providing imagery of insular existence or distinctive appearances, also reinforce the notion of rigid constraint.

Christabel speaks on behalf of herself and Maud when she states, “words have been all my life, all my life” (180). Christabel’s and Maud’s disappointing individual experiences with the wider world lead them to trust instead in their literary efforts, devoting time and energy to their craft rather than nurturing more personal interactions. The characters create self-imposed spaces or enclosures to protect themselves and their work from invasion. Such spaces are very private domains, hard won; they provide autonomy and are inaccessible to others. The process of reading, thinking and writing about writing is for both women a solitary and time-consuming activity that permits only limited interaction with others and, consequently, a restricted perception of the larger world. The characters’ single-minded approach towards their work demonstrates that

“the boundaries between text and life can become blurred, and writing becomes both a medium of, and a substitute for, personal relations” (Felski 110). It is, by choice, an isolated and isolating activity for both characters. Gains are questionable: existence within a confined space, limited communication and interaction with others, diminished self-esteem, construction of divisive boundaries, and abnegation of one’s own and denial of others’ needs. Yet Hélène Cixous believes that “Woman must write herself” (“Castration or Decapitation” 43) in order to construct and empower the self. Writing is a courageous act. Writers offer and construct themselves on the page, making themselves vulnerable and exposed to others – readers – who can re-construct according to their own response. An example of partial, inaccurate reconstruction is the contemporary feminists’ reading of Christabel’s poetry as that of an enraged, bitter lesbian, when in fact she wrote from a number of perspectives, including those of a woman passionately in love with Randolph Ash and as an anguished mother separated from her only child. The singular, narrow reading serves only to reinforce Christabel’s boundaries, in a manner similar to how Maud is constrained by narrow readings of her identity a century later.

The threshold to a more complete and accurate reading of Christabel’s life and love appears when Maud and Roland re-read and re-interpret both poets’ letters from their own richly diverse personal and theoretical perspectives, ensuring “the apprehension of a greater whole in which the diverse parts coexist and interact” (Shinn xiv). A further opening “into a middle world” where “alternatives [are] discovered” (xiv) also occurs when Christabel’s writing is seen in a more inclusive context. A meronymic outcome is achieved when Maud’s LaMotte research not only nears its completion, but her own background is revealed for the first time, thus transforming enclosures into new openings.

Possession’s mythical resonances and various fairy tale allusions also function as forms of containment. The irony of Christabel’s and Maud’s surnames, LaMotte and Bailey – “motte-and-bailey” (the mound of earth on which castles were built and the castle’s outer wall) – is a metaphoric reference to their attempts for protection from personal invasion, their isolation from

the wider community, and efforts at self-sufficiency. A consistent emphasis of the imagery of fortresses, their defence, and real or symbolic towers is maintained throughout the narrative.⁴ Christabel, in fact, pre-empts the future revelation of the connection between herself and Maud when, in her final letter to Randolph written from her “turret” (500) but undelivered, she refers sadly to her failure to keep within her “motte-and-bailey defences” (502). Paradoxically, the protection of isolation is, like the labyrinth, a site of freedom and imprisonment. The narrative’s numerous allusions to poets or poems of the Victorian era (their names are titles of poems by Coleridge and Tennyson), fairy tales and myths, suggesting many similarities between Christabel and Maud, provide clues of their kinship from the outset. Such a consistent textual association with mythical or fairy tale figures (or the physical resemblances and behaviours that allude to their close connection: pale, fair, assertive, cold and aloof) encourages a perception by readers of the characters as simply conforming to the characteristics or “type” of their fantastic or literary namesakes. Consequently, Christabel and Maud are somewhat “contained” by the images of these heroines, and while they gradually become more rounded characters, the original associations may linger.

The space Christabel creates for herself, while safe from the conventions and expectations of her nineteenth-century world, blocks out stimulus from beyond her own tight boundaries. Bethany becomes a place of restricted movement and little development. While staying inside her walls is safe but stationary, moving out requires risk-taking and a belief in growth and continued life. Encouraged by Randolph, Christabel bravely attempts to pursue a path towards increased knowledge of herself and the other but pays the price for stepping beyond her cage and behaving as if she had freedom of choice. Although she dares to imagine a different life for herself, Christabel’s attempt to achieve narrative freedom is thwarted by the Victorian conventions that dictate her sexuality and behaviour.

Christabel chooses seclusion as freedom and attempts to preserve her autonomy in her gilded cage. She establishes her home, Bethany House, as a means of escape from a society that is

based on patriarchal values. Like many unmarried women of the mid-Victorian era, she constructs her own narrow boundaries of existence in response to the dominant nineteenth-century ideology of marriage and family. Women of the time eschewing marriage opted for existence within alternative enclosures or boundaries which Horner and Zlosnik describe as “metaphors for the way in which society refuses to let women wander beyond the cultural ‘room’ of marriage and motherhood” (33). She makes it clear to Randolph that she and Blanche Glover, artistically and ideologically like-minded, consciously choose to live “the Life of the Mind,” renouncing the “outside World – and the usual female Hopes ... in exchange for – dare I say Art – ... It was a Sealed Pact” (187). Their domestic arrangements reflect desires to live independently so that they “neither served nor were served” (186) and “drudgery was Artful ... and it was shared, for no Master” (187). The doubleness of freedom and imprisonment provided by Christabel’s chosen life of solitude, she tells Randolph, is akin to “the terrible tower” with its “thickets round it – no companionable Nest – but a donjon” (137).

Fiercely protective of her autonomy, Christabel cautions Randolph that “The core is my solitude ... without which I am nothing” (195). Her pleas that he not “ameliorate or steal away [her] solitude” (137) are challenged by his protestation that her creativity will not benefit from such relegation, like the Lady of Shalott, to a “barred and moated Tower” (188-189). She makes it plain to Randolph that their continued correspondence is costing her dearly, eroding her writing time. Yet while she stresses her desire to be left as she is, within the security of her circle or egg – a dichotomous symbol of freedom and constraint – she also longs for the passionate life experiences that will enrich her art, aware that seeking them involves a dangerous and irreversible step. In accepting Ash’s proposal for their liaison, Christabel not only concedes the boundaries imposed by bodies, but also celebrates the possibilities of stepping beyond individual limitations to experience a “mutual subjection of the soul between a man and a woman” (Shinn, “What’s in a Word?” 173). Despite her awareness that she “shall regret” (276) their impulse to share time together in Yorkshire, Christabel tells Randolph that she considers such a move is “necessity”

(276) which he compares to the human need to be “complete” (279). Consequently, enticed from her golden cage, Christabel relishes exploring the open spaces introduced by Ash, but they destroy her safe place Bethany which, like the Lady of Shalott’s mirrored world, shatters and collapses on her departure.

Christabel, single and pregnant, finds herself in a finally inescapable personal and physical enclosure. Although she dared to redefine her personal boundaries by leaving her golden cage for a moment, in the end she simply exchanges one enclosure for another. As an adulteress and unmarried mother, Christabel pays a dear price to grasp a moment of eternity with Ash. Bethany collapses, Blanche commits suicide, Christabel loses her maternal claim on her daughter, her autonomy and self-possession are compromised, and she retreats to isolation in her “closed castle ... behind [her] motte-and-bailey defences” (502). In order to ensure that her daughter is well provided for economically and is not taken from her, she seeks safety with her sister’s family, shutting out Randolph completely, leading him to plead with her, “Why did you turn away from me? Out of pride, out of fear, out of independence, out of sudden hatred, at the injustice of the different fates of men and women?” (456). Randolph’s words reveal an awareness of Christabel’s powerlessness in Victorian society with respect not only to men, but to women as well. Her identity is composed of multiple subject positions. Of French descent, she is educated, liberally-minded, sexually active, of independent means, and unmarried. Although Randolph acknowledges, respects, and celebrates her autonomy, his attitude is not reflected by society at large. Despite Christabel’s axes of power, her freedom is frowned upon and renders her powerless in the patriarchal Victorian era (Friedman 17-35). Christabel is trapped again but in an enclosure not entirely of her own making. Ash has managed to shatter her “egg” (137) and dispossess her of her “solitude” without which she feels she has “nothing” left (326). Despite a publicly happy marriage, Ash is constrained physically and creatively by its unconsummated nature, yet he retains a freedom to roam the world that is denied to Christabel. Believing he has found his kindred spirit and his muse in Christabel, he shares his creative ideas with her, asking

“to whom but you could I even begin to describe such indescribable things ...?” (182). Although Randolph maintains an egalitarianism and unusual degree of sympathy about the unjustly constrained position of women, his attitude provides Christabel, who takes a necessary but dangerous step, with little comfort with which to ease her days.

Christabel places herself within the enclosure of self-constructed myths. Her identification with Melusine, the Lady of Shalott, and Mariana lasts until the end of her life. With grave fears for her independence, Christabel admits to Ash that her own “life-history and the Melusina-epic ... are so intertwined” (174), and pleads that he neither mock nor deluge with cold water the fairy of the fountain. Ash perceives Christabel as anything but a generic Victorian lady and calls her “my selkie, my white lady” (283), equating her with a Breton version of the Celtic white lady myths. Walking on the beach at Scarborough, they discuss “selkies ... seals ... seal-wives, seal-women ... from the sea, who come for a time and then must leave” (280). Ironically, her final home, Seal Court (seal caught) is an ironic reference to Christabel’s entrapment: she is Randolph’s selkie and having been involved sexually with him, he possesses her skin and she is trapped. Unable to reclaim her skin and consequently her freedom, she consigns herself to a solitary existence in the tower. Her self-imposed exile includes her abnegation of her motherhood, a choice akin to death. At the end of her life, installed once more in her tower like her mythical re-creation, she writes to Randolph that she flies “about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind” (501).

Although Christabel’s narrative freedom is limited by circumstances, she is able to experiment with alternative fates for women through her own interpretation of the romance. Christabel’s creative aspirations demonstrate Byatt’s faith in the transformative abilities of fairy tales which, in Warner’s words, aim to show that they “offer the possibility of change ... not only in fairyland, but [also] in this world” (xi, xii). As a result, Christabel’s epic “Melusine,” her re-writing of a Breton myth about a lamia – a creature that is half-woman, half-snake – demonstrates her challenge to the “existing [Victorian] cultural values, changing women from perceived to

perceiver, passive to active, object to subject ... and attack[s] the negative myths” (186) that surrounded women of her time. Christabel’s Melusine is depicted as a beautiful golden-haired fairy who builds castles as well as being a destructive, vindictive spirit of the air, “an unfortunate Creature – of Power and Frailty” (175). The fairy / woman “has two aspects – an Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and *handy* woman” (174), similar to the view Christabel has of herself. Melusine simultaneously expresses women’s longing for creative opportunity and their rage at being denied it. The original Melusine asked her husband not to look at her on Saturdays, and when he did she was obliged to leave him and wander as a spectre. Byatt’s narrative suggests that in Randolph’s leading Christabel into becoming sexually involved with him and pregnant, he forced Christabel into “wandering” and “shrieking on the wind” (there is in Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* a reference to the *Cri de Mélusine*, “A sudden scream; in allusion to the scream of despair uttered by the fairy when she discovered the indiscreet visit of her beloved husband” [828]). Christabel writes her epic in an effort to walk a new path within her labyrinth: one that will grant her the freedom of “poetic and imaginative truth ... where the soul is free” (373). She attempts to present the fairy Melusina as a loving, responsible woman who is in a commanding role – in charge of her own destiny and no longer at the mercy of the wrongful actions of men. Christabel exhorts her cousin, Sabine de Kercoz, to write in that form because, “Romance is a proper form for women,” which can be appropriated so that “women can be free to express their true natures” (373). Her attitude resembles Marina Warner’s opinion that romance’s strong affinity to the fairy tale grants it the ability to “ ‘remake the world in an image of desire’ ” (xii).

Society’s limitations force Christabel into a life of calculated strategies and manoeuvres as she attempts to step outside her golden cage to negotiate a new space of worldly and emotional experience. In nineteenth-century England, Christabel is privileged by her comprehensive education and independent financial means, yet her position as an unmarried woman with lesbian and heterosexual desires renders her powerless. Oppressed by her gender and sexuality, she risks

everything, including the future, to have a liaison with Randolph. Penalised for her transgressions, she turns once again to the freedom of writing in solitary confinement as a means of expressing her “true nature.” During her lifetime, in Richmond, Christabel is described by Ellen Ash as “essentially French in her way of seeing the world” (120) while in Fouesnant, Brittany, her cousin considers her English. In the late twentieth-century Christabel is regarded by Sir George Bailey and Roland Michell as a “silly fairy poetess” (86) and a “generic Victorian lady, specific shy poetess” (38) and it remains to Maud to reconcile her predecessor’s multiple subject positions.

The safe space established by Maud allows her, Shalott-like, to observe the world and its players, but prevents her involvement. Tennyson Tower represents a secure environment where she maintains an orderly and self-sufficient life. Yet, like Christabel, Maud also longs for a relationship of equality and autonomy but is afraid of having her feelings annihilated again. The desire for self-preservation overrides the conflicting need for risky human intimacy. Unlike Christabel, however, Maud has narrative freedom and choices. She has both the ability to imagine an alternative future and the means by which to achieve it. Although Roland, as Lancelot, crosses her threshold and shatters her glass box, his attitude helps them both to negotiate the terms of their mutual freedom.

Maud observes life from the safety of a glassy sanctuary. While aware that she is aloof, Maud is metaphorically locked away behind her glass partition in the belief that this space ensures her self-preservation. Yet, despite her longing for unconditional interaction with others, she is immobilised by her fear of being hurt again and equates the risk of connection with invasion. Neither wishing to be entirely divorced from the world, nor ready to be fully immersed in its trappings, Maud worries that if she steps out of her safe space she will be unable to return, and instead consigns herself to a place from which the outside is visible. Maud keeps her life tidily segregated. Although Byatt considers that women need to compartmentalise aspects of their lives so they can achieve their goals – citing Elizabeth I’s strategy for her (“Ice, Snow, Glass”

158) as the only way for her to maintain power and creativity – she cautions that the risk of gaining a false eternity through isolation is the loss of one’s life. Maud begins to feel that she has traded autonomy for love. Eventually Maud becomes disenchanted and stifled within the safety and sterility of her space, worrying about why she can “do nothing with ease and grace except work alone” (136) inside her “walls and curtains” (137) while the world beyond beckons. Her sentiments echo those of Murdoch’s Dora in *The Bell* and Marian in *The Unicorn*, both of whom feel a restless tugging within their narrow walls as they also crave lively interaction and engagement with others.

Maud is a modern-day Lady of Shalott. She protects and safeguards herself and her self-sufficiency while watching life from her (Tennyson) tower while Roland, acting with empathy and understanding, tries to coax her from her enclosure. Tennyson’s poem provides Maud’s name, and Roland has no difficulty in associating her beautiful face with her poetic namesake’s “icily regular, splendidly null” (506) features. Trapped by her beauty and others’s perceptions of it, her extreme self-consciousness causes Maud to be perceived as an independent, insular “chilly mortal” (144). Following a disastrous liaison with Fergus, intimate human relationships overwhelm Maud, and she chooses to distance herself from further involvement with others. In order to attain autonomous and independent existence, she embraces the life of an “embowered maiden.” Although the enclosed space is claustrophobic, it offers safety because of its tightness and impenetrability. Yet her safe haven constrains her physically and psychologically.

The “embowered maiden,” represented by the Lady of Shalott, is a recurrent motif of the Victorian Romantic artists focusing on chivalrous notions of courtly love and the tragedy of a victimised woman imprisoned. Byatt explains that the iconic image of the Lady of Shalott used extensively in both her own and Murdoch’s fiction represents “the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame around things” (“Ice, Snow, Glass”156). In her isolation, the Lady longs for interaction with others, but if she steps out she is unable to return. The world she knows, however grey and drab, shatters. Maud’s

hypersensitivity to the dangers of being distracted by Roland, her Lancelot, forces her to choose between living an independent life, with its shadows and reflections, or a life of vital connection with others, complete with risks and compromises. Because of her painful past experiences, Maud believes that it is impossible to combine work with love and consequently puts a frame around her world by closing love out, devoting herself entirely to her work.

Maud's conflicting desires for enclosure and freedom are reflected in her field of literary interest. Liminality is concerned with "agoraphobia and claustrophobia and the paradoxical desire to be let out into unconfined space ... and at the same time to be closed into tighter and tighter impenetrable small spaces" (54). Maud's preoccupation with isolation, similar to that of the Cumaean Sybil and her jar (the subject of one of Christabel's poems), and her awareness of the self-imposed confines of her own – Pandora's – box illustrates the dialectics of "inside and outside" (Mulvey 82). Mulvey speculates that the allure of Pandora's beautiful exterior suggests an attraction / anxiety ambivalence exerted by the mask of femininity (60-61). Maud, like Pandora, is blessed with "all the gifts of beauty, grooming, intelligence, and eloquence" (Brumble 257-258) and while recognizing her beauty, refuses to admit that her reflection alone is an accurate indication of her true identity. Regarded as the "very image of feminine beauty," the mythical Pandora was sent with her jar (or box) to Epimetheus by Hermes, and although Prometheus warned his brother to resist her charms, he was powerless in the face of this "essential temptress" (257-258). The legendary Pandora provides an apt model for Maud, who suffers the ostracism of her peers and is punished for her physical beauty. Consequently, Maud erects barriers between herself and others, locking herself into a constricting but safe space.

Maud impulsively allows Roland to cross her threshold. Although she is initially distrustful of Roland's academic intentions, she learns to trust him. Her aloof exterior masks her fear of being hurt again and she reacts instinctively to protect herself. Roland, observing disdainfully that Maud is extraordinarily beautiful, decides that she is "a most untouchable woman" (48) while Maud, in turn, feels guilty over her "bossy" (137) attitude towards him.

Accustomed to silence, Maud is momentarily stunned when Roland breaks his own silence over his purloined Ash correspondence because “he needed to speak” (49) – to Maud. Roland’s revelation provides an alternative path towards friendship and intimacy, and although their acquaintance commences with silences and gaps, it eventually evolves into open dialogue. As Maud and Roland examine LaMotte’s *Tales for Innocents* they share their ideas, feelings and personal reasons for pursuing their areas of research. Maud relates to Roland’s textual yearning when he defensively confides his passion for wanting “to be the one who does the work,” needing “to know what happened next” (50). Maud realises that she feels the same way. Consequently, their lively conversation leads to an embarrassing moment of self-revelation and self-realisation for Maud as she blushes furiously, ashamed of assuming that Roland wanted to achieve a “considerable academic scoop” (50). So far, Maud has considered Roland a “gentle and unthreatening ... meek” (141) person, academically her inferior. Yet, she notes his quiet dignity in comparison to Fergus’s voracity and begins to feel she might be able trust him as an equal.

Roland, who is trapped in the subterranean vaults of his workplace and his home, is an embodiment of modern-day alienation, disillusioned with his job, his girlfriend Val, and his environment. His powerlessness and acute alienation from Maud are caused partly by her family circumstance of land and money, which is completely at odds with his humble urban situation. Maud also occupies a powerful academic position, ideologically opposed to his perspective. Maud, however, aware of the effects on Roland of her curt demeanour and aided by the catalyst of his intentions for the purloined letters, lets down her guard and offers to help him. Consequently, Maud’s veneer as a chilly and superior individual commences to lift, and her glass coffin gradually commences to crack as Roland helps her take her first hesitant steps out of her enclosure.

Maud’s painful inheritance from Christabel is her fear of being caught up in making the same restrictive choices between love and work, but Maud has twentieth-century advantages that were unavailable to Christabel. Born into a relatively privileged family, Maud is empowered by

her formal education and financial independence. Her identity, however, is fluid and capable of shifting according to the setting (see Friedman 17-35). An example of the interplay of various aspects of her identity is apparent when Maud converses with Sir George Bailey at Seal Court and her background of wealthy land-owning class is foregrounded. Roland observes Maud making “noises which ... came naturally ... [and] that she would never make in the Women’s Studies building” (77). The sexual freedoms available to Maud but forbidden to Christabel include, for example, the possibility of open lesbian relationships (with Leonora) and of heterosexual liaisons (with Fergus and Roland). Yet while she appears to be at the centre of her academic world, Maud is marginalized by her gender, beauty or status and feels at odds to varying degrees with Fergus, Leonora, her feminist colleagues, and Roland. Despite these contradictions, however, Maud has greater possibilities for fulfilment than Christabel.

Maud’s and Roland’s quest requires that they follow a challenging route composed of alternative labyrinthine paths represented by a cyclical timeframe connecting past with present. It is apparent from the outset that the quest is “one version of the Romance” (Shinn 102) as Roland, like his romantic literary namesake, Browning’s “Childe Roland,” becomes self-consciously aware that he is implicated in a “bewitching ... quest for knowledge” (4). Success on the quest, however, depends largely on Maud’s goodwill. Despite her misgivings, Maud leads knight errant Roland into her private space at the top of Lincoln University’s Tennyson Tower. In so doing, she signifies her grudging complicity with the romance and is thrown together with a most unlikely potential conspirator.

In allowing Roland into her enclosure, Maud not only grants him entrée into the quest, but tacitly indicates her willingness to join him. As she experiences a frisson of anticipation over the romantic mystery of Ash’s drafts, she confides in Roland, “I want to know what happened ... I thought you were mad ... with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn’t professional greed. It’s something more primitive ... Narrative curiosity” (238). Her words apply equally to readers’ compelling motivation to pursue the literary clues that enable progress through

the maze. Maud's willingness to let down her barriers further is emphasized when, on their arrival at Seal Court, her ease with the Baileys gains them entry to Christabel's former home and access to the rooms in which she wrote. Their admission into Seal Court represents their crossing of yet another threshold in their physical labyrinth and bodes well for progress in their search for the elusive evidence about Christabel's true past. Although they are confronted initially with promising yet dark and prohibited passages and rooms, their impulsive quest accelerates rapidly when Sir George unexpectedly opens up the east wing of the house. Their trudging through "bleakly lit corridors ... dark shuttered places ... up a stone staircase ... further up a winding wooden stair" and through a locked heavy door leads to "a dark, cramped, circular space" (81), the metaphoric centre of the final stage of Christabel's existence – her dark, safe space – where Maud and Roland find the treasure of concealed letters. The unearthing of Christabel's and Randolph's correspondence represents a multifaceted love-object which unexpectedly connects past with present by revealing Maud's origins and discoveries about the poets' lives, and readers' acquisition of this new knowledge promises substantial progress along their labyrinthine path.

Maud's and Roland's journey through the labyrinth, their search for the facts about Christabel's and Randolph's true relationship – the object of the quest – commences as they set out to retrace the earlier couple's steps. Their negotiation of the physical maze, which mirrors the readers' journey, is guided by the textual clues they glean from journals and letters from the past and their own knowledge and interpretation of LaMotte's and Ash's writings. Yet as they travel to the same places as the Victorians, Maud and Roland are hampered by misreadings and false judgements about each other's motives and behaviour. While they manage to find many clues that help solve their literary mystery, they also engage in a simultaneous process of mutual discovery. It is poignant that Maud and Roland metaphorically step into the Victorian poets' past to garner valuable understandings for their own future as the outcome depends on what was alive in the past. Byatt comments that "the whole joke of the novel [is that] the dead are actually much more alive and vital than the living" (Wachtel, *Writers and Company* 82). Throughout their quest

Maud and Roland encounter a series of traps, similar to the illusions contained in Plato's Cave, that prevent Maud from permanently leaving her enclosure – her beauty and others' perceptions of it, masking of the self, obsessive self-analysis, distrust of language, and fear of being caught in a plot. Gradually overcoming these together helps Maud and Roland gain the knowledge to help them find their own modern solution for exiting the labyrinth, while an unexpected outcome of their search for the truth of Christabel and Randolph's relationship is that they also discover their love for each other.

Following an educated guess and wanting “to – follow the – path” (238), Maud and Roland retrace and reinscribe the poets' physical footsteps between various locations in Yorkshire – Filey, Whitby, Thomason Foss, and the Boggle Hole. As they discover explanations in these places for similarities in Christabel's and Randolph's works they also begin to see beyond their misleading preconceptions of each other, revealing similarities in thought and attitude. Enlightenment for Maud and Roland is not a sudden flash but an incremental process of revelations and subsequent understanding. Their journey through the labyrinth requires that they go into a metaphoric Plato's Cave and engage in repeated and sustained contemplation of the “phantom flames” of the “centre” as they cast their strange shadows on the wall (265). For example, during an excursion to Thomason Foss, they enter the “cavern” (265) and notice the strange effects of sunlight that Christabel described in her Melusine poem. Roland is mesmerised by the “fire” that seems to set the “whole cave roof ... alight” (266). This visual revelation is matched by Maud's and Roland's subsequent realisation that they both share “[e]xactly the same” (267) notions of self, even commenting upon the coincidence of having come to that particular place “for this purpose ... [to] ... discover – *that* – about each other” (267).

Excited by their discovery that both Christabel and Randolph had also been in this place together, Maud and Roland's experiences continue to run parallel to those of the Victorian couple. They “paced well together [as] ... both were energetic striders” (251) along the water's edge in Filey where a century earlier Christabel and Ash's footprints met in a straight line, diverged, and

met again, and where they, too, noticed “we walk well together ... our paces suit” (280). This additional insight, another moment of enlightenment, which takes place in bright sunlight, contributes to shattering Maud’s and Roland’s illusions of otherness even further and is the next in a series of Plato’s Cave confrontations. Their outing to the Boggle Hole takes place on a similar blue and gold day to that enjoyed by the Victorians when they picnicked there. The circular nature of the tale and of the path the characters trace is repeated in the physical description of the scene. Both couples notice the repetition of circular patterns of fossils or shells in the grey layers of the cliffs, and examine the proliferation of the large round stones at their base. In Whitby, they look for examples of the jet that fascinated Ash.

Maud is trapped by her beauty and others’s perceptions of it. Her attempt to exert restraint over her physical attributes results in the creation of another enclosure. Her beautiful blonde hair, the cause of taunts by her feminist sisters, remains hidden inside a scarf. As Maud removes her jet brooch for closer inspection by the old shopkeeper in Whitby, she unpins her headscarf. Roland sees Maud’s imprisoned hair for the first time, all braided tightly “round and round her head” (259). In the Plato’s Cave of the shop, festooned with its mysteriously glimmering black treasures, Roland is forced to face his misconceptions about Maud again and sees her as she really is. Within the dark cavern-like space, Maud’s uncovered bright hair is “startling white” (259) in the gloom. As Maud’s “supercilious face” changes to being “simply fragile and even vulnerable” (259), Roland feels his own skull constricting in compassion for her and they “both put their hands to their temple, as though he was her mirror” (260). Her metaphoric nakedness reminds Roland of “a denuded window-doll” (259), contrasting starkly with her previously beautiful mask. The tightly coiled hair wound around Maud’s head emulates the circularity of paths within a unicursal maze, while its revelation represents possibilities for their mutual freedom. When Roland sees her hair he feels empathy for Maud as if seeing her for the first time. Conversely, she begins to see him in a moment of mutual recognition and enlightenment “as though he was her mirror” (260). As they

continue to work together, their relationship changes, and an imperceptible sense of physical and emotional connection emerges.

Maud is encouraged by Roland to release her hair as Rapunzel did. As she begins to relax her reticence with Roland, she realises she has little reason to fear him and in a gradual building of trust, is enabled to share intimate details with him. Finally confident enough to ask, “why do you always cover your hair?” (271), Roland challenges her to confide in him and break her self-imposed silence. Roland encourages her to “let it out,”⁵ telling her “It has a right to breathe” (272), and as Maud loosens her hair, Roland, too, feels a kindred sense of freedom. He no longer fears Maud, seeing her as another person, like himself, who is trapped by the world. Giddens remarks that such vesting of confidence in the other is “more than a matter of good faith only” and may be considered a “gamble upon the capability of the individual actually to be able to act with integrity” (138). Maud is surprised that Roland does not attempt to invade her personal boundaries. When he tells her he is “not making a pass” (272), Maud, unused to male kindness and friendship, tells him that he is “an odd man,” trusting his truthfulness, an experience that she finds is “so odd” (272). His gentle behaviour is disconcerting, accustomed as she is to aggressive demands on her space and her person. Magrath compares this empowering exchange with Cixous’ “feminine economy”: in giving generously of the self without expectation of a return, the other is empowered, whereas giving with stipulations and anticipated reward disempowers the other (80). Roland, seeking Maud’s friendship and expressing concern for her well-being, expects no personal gain and so takes her by surprise, empowering her and, conversely, himself. Fergus, on the other hand, proposes a liaison as a coup for his own ego, regarding Maud’s physical beauty a prize, and a mirror for his own good looks and intellect. Not bothering to acknowledge Maud’s individual attributes, capabilities, or her real feelings, Fergus just assumes his own desires will be met. Roland, however, is not intent on seduction and Maud’s awareness of this allows her to begin trusting him.

Byatt’s literal and metaphoric use of reflections, glass, and mirrors in her fiction is extensive. She admits to being fascinated by such imagery in Grimms’ and Andersen’s fairy stories where

glass performed a similar function in each fairy tale – providing a transparent barrier or mask between self and the world – but this purpose could be “both chilling and life-giving, saving as well as threatening” (“Ice, Snow, Glass” 156). Byatt contends that while it is good and often necessary to maintain a self-preserving distance between self and the world, individuals cannot exist in isolation, and relationships and warm-heartedness are also needed. Optimistic and life-giving aspects of mirror symbolism⁶ are illustrated extensively throughout *Possession*, “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” and Murdoch’s *The Bell* and *The Unicorn*.

Maud is trapped by excessive introspection and imperfect observation of others. The imagery of reflections throughout *Possession* suggests Maud’s and Roland’s needs to see their true selves and, consequently, pay attention to the other. While looking at their own reflected images, Maud and Roland contemplate likenesses, ponder memories, or see similarities between self and other. They initially look at their reflections merely to see themselves, conscious only of vivid memories of their own tangled, ruffled and stained pasts. Inside the immaculately glassy space of her bathroom, Maud is transported into disturbing visions and grubby recollections of her affair with Fergus. She sees a domestic battlefield – a rubbish-strewn space – complete with a nauseating image of a “tormented bed” (141), reminiscent of “dirty egg-white” (222) or “old whipped eggs, like dirty snow” (235). At first, Maud and Roland experience a mixture of traumatic introspection and ambivalent feelings towards the other. The self-referring gaze of the mirror has the potential to cause pain, suffering and death. The inward-looking obsessiveness must be turned outwards to life in the world. Liberation of self and fullness of life are only possible if a clearer vision of others is achieved. As Maud and Roland progress beyond the simple self-referring gaze to reflect upon their behaviour and their past, they are gradually led towards contemplation of the other’s circumstances into full recognition of the other’s presence. Consequently, their accurate vision of the other – “a willed, thoughtful, selfless contemplation” (Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* 299) – signifies achievement of Murdoch’s ideal of attention.

Roland manages to see past his reflection in Maud's green basin and envisages the messy bathroom he left at home. At Seal Court, he sees his reflection as "a furry darkness" although he imagines "Maud examining her perfection" (148) in the old mirror. Not yet attuned to Maud's thoughts or feelings, and overwhelmed by the grandeur of his surroundings, Roland can only pity Maud, smugly believing "she wouldn't have been able to see the romance ... as he could" (149). Consciousness of the other develops incrementally, and as yet neither character is ready or able to move forwards beyond traumatic introspection to imagine the circumstances of the other.

The imagery of illusory "masks" or reflections serves not as a motif of deliberate means of concealment but rather as a need to reveal the self⁷ as they move through the labyrinth. Maud and Roland, preoccupied with private thoughts, are effectively masked from each other by solipsism as they read the newly-unearthed letters. They keep their true feelings, and their selves, hidden. Masks appear variously as the wax faces of Christabel's dolls and Maud's face – a "doll's mask" (57) – in a mirrored reflection she resents. Yet Maud is the first person to see the dolls, eerily reciting from memory Christabel's clue-ridden poem, "Dolly Keeps A Secret" (82). As she kneels towards the dolls, Sir George's torch illuminates Maud's face "as though Latour had painted its waxiness" (81, 83). Her true feelings remain concealed behind her striking face as she locates the letters hidden underneath the dolls. Her emotions are also disguised on a sentimental visit one snowy morning to the winter garden "much loved by Christabel" (141). Brushing snow from the ice, Maud sees her reflection: "ghostly and pale in the metal-dark surface a woman's face, her own, barred like the moon under mackerel clouds, wavering up at her" (142), and feels betrayed by the likeness. Maud, resenting Simone Weil's words that a beautiful woman recognizes her own reflection, is reminded painfully once again that her physical beauty prevents her true self from being seen properly. Her frustration with her image exacerbates the need for acceptance of her own beauty and overcoming fear of being judged solely on appearance as a means of progressing in the labyrinth.

Maud's beautiful "icily regular, splendidly null" mask-like face is transformed by reflections cast by stained glass windows at Seal Court. Forced to see her from a different perspective, Roland

begins to consider the notion that Maud is an individual also seeking answers to life's puzzles. While Maud and Roland read the Victorians' long-lost letters in the dining room during a research visit, the light from the windows reflects their colours onto Maud's face and "defamiliarise"(133) her. No longer the "ice maiden," white-masked, pale and cold, Maud is suddenly bathed in gloriously ethereal rainbow colours, complete with "a shadowy halo round her shifting head" (133). Maud is unaware of her transformation, yet Roland is transfixed. No longer perceiving her as his "opponent," he thinks of her romantically as his "partner" in the quest (133). Their teamwork after all, in the form of Maud's family connections and her ability to communicate with Sir George and Roland's chivalrous behaviour towards Joan Bailey, has gained them entry into Seal Court. Roland's romantic imagination, however, still prevents him from seeing Maud's reality fully as he persists in favouring his own view. He believes that Maud, despite her precise vision, is actually missing out on his romantic vision – something that only he can see clearly – little realising that his vision, too, is partial and imperfect (129).

Maud is trapped by obsessive critical self analysis. Hampered by her inability to see that a basic need for friendship and love is a starting point for any meaningful involvement, her over-scrutinising makes it difficult for her to become involved in a normal relationship. As Byatt remarked in an interview, "Like all good feminists [Maud] is totally obsessed by sex – you have to be – and obsessed by the language in which you describe sex and gender and sexual relationships. This has caused her to feel a faint disgust and a faint unreality about her own body and life" (Wachtel 82). And like Roland, she also muses on the linguistic ambiguity of subjectivity: "Whose subjectivity was being studied? Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? ... There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist" (250-251). Maud and Roland compare the contemporary tendency towards overly critical self-analysis to Christabel's and Randolph's seemingly assured attitude towards love and sexuality and the open urgency of their desire. Yet selfhood and identity are also issues of perennial concern for Christabel and Randolph. Christabel, acutely conscious and

questioning of her own individuality, writes in response to one of Ash's letters, "And you say – ... 'I love *you*. I love *you*.' – and I believe – but who is she – who is '*you*'?" (199). Ash, too, is intensely self-reflexive and confides in Christabel that he is also beset with doubts as to truth and identity, saying that he holds "a very confused, very incoherent, indeed inchoate set of ideas, perceptions, half-truths, useful fictions" (164). Maud admits to Roland that she was first acquainted with Christabel's writing on reading her poem, "Who Are You?", dealing with the poet's own self-identity and triggering a sense of recognition, while Roland reflects that "He had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion"(424). Agreeing that modern knowingness leads to cynicism unknown to the Victorian couple, Roland comments that, "all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire" (267).

Maud and Roland share a similar fantasy about autonomy and self-sufficiency as they dream of a return to simplicity and innocence:

"... – what I *really* want is to – to have nothing. An empty clean bed ... a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked."

"I know what you mean ... It's a much more powerful coincidence than that. That's what I think about, when I'm alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White."

"White."

"Exactly the same."

"How strange." (267)

Byatt adopts Lacan's argument about the Subject's lack, allowing Maud and Roland to reveal to each other their identical feelings. Françoise Meltzer comments that,

Lacan's argument is that the Subject, constituted as he or she is by a lack, will try to overcome the tension of desire with the achievement of stasis (pleasure, or the absence of desire). It is desire that makes humankind different from animals, the latter experiencing biological *need* but not psychological *desire*. The unconscious manifests itself, among other

ways, by insisting on filling the 'gap' left by that which the Subject feels is lacking in him or her. (157)

Maud's and Roland's contemporary exhaustion causes them to crave a death-like withdrawal from the world and its demands. Their shared vision, although symptomatic of the emptiness, sterility, and confinement of the coffin leads Maud, who is amazed that she has something in common with Roland, to enjoy a "companionable silence" (267) with him.

As Maud and Roland learn to trust each other, they learn to walk new paths and move further away from the fears of their past. Sharing secrets and knowledge, they become partners in the quest. While continuing to work together, piecing together clues and constructing new knowledge about Christabel and Randolph, they overcome many of the personal traps confronting them by talking about their own feelings and circumstances. Maud feels unthreatened by Roland, treating him with dignity and valuing his judgment, while the discovery of their similarities draws them closer together. Despite Maud's and Roland's progress through the maze, however, they have yet to overcome traps created by their suspicions about love and romance before their quest is complete.

Although Maud and Roland grow in trust, both are still trapped and scarred by the verbal shortcomings of their relationships with Fergus and Val respectively. Their wariness causes them to believe that "Speech ... would have undone" their new closeness, while "Neither was quite sure how much, or what, all this meant to the other. Neither dared ask" (424). Byatt's writerly preoccupation with the ability of words to convey reality or truth adequately is emphasised in the patterns of silence and dialogue in which the characters engage. As contemporary practitioners of literary theories and criticism, Maud and Roland distrust language's ability to convey truth. Their scepticism is apparent in their lack of faith in words to reliably communicate their own deeply felt desires and needs. Unable to profess their love and without the courage to discuss their dilemma, a new silence of awareness develops between them even as "They touched each other" (423) and "fell asleep side by side," and while "He slept curled against her back, a dark comma against her pale elegant phrase," they "did not speak of this" (424). Roland's chivalrous behaviour not only

exemplifies the notion that a romance's love and adventure are presented through a ritualised code of conduct preoccupied with niceties of behaviour, but demonstrates his trust in actions rather than in verbal communication.

Christabel and Randolph, though, felt no need for agonising over words, initiating an immediate and sustained passionate dialogue that leads to their physical union. On their way to Scarborough, their experience is the reverse of Maud's and Roland's as Ash says to Christabel, "I could call you, with even greater truth – my Love" (193). Their faith in the value of their short-lived physical intimacy, although soon to cease abruptly, sustains and nurtures them creatively for the rest of their lives despite their self-imposed and unexplained silence. Byatt, however, compensates for their silence, reaffirming the ability of words to convey meaning and closure by providing a narrative Postscript for the reader, thus completing Christabel's and Randolph's abandoned dialogue. While Maud's and Roland's relationship continues to grow closer, neither is prepared to admit that they have achieved this degree of intimacy because of a combination of words and actions. Consequently, Maud "can't – speak out" (506), but with Roland's encouragement she eventually voices her feelings, evading another potential trap.

Maud and Roland remain trapped by their suspicion that they are caught in "the plot of a Romance" (425). Although their relationship has changed, they still continue to be "children of a time and culture which mistrusted love" (423). Their discovery of love for each other confounds their denial of the possibility of love in a contemporary climate yet, unlike the Victorians, Maud and Roland are very tentative and cautious about admitting to being in love. Roland, torn between feeling "pleasure" and "dread" (421), deliberates on the implications of being caught with Maud in a "self-referring, self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil" (421) that is beyond their control. Yet despite their doubts, they allow themselves to be caught up in the process, acutely aware of doing so. Having decided that they are implicated in such a plot, they "suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot" (422). This notion of being stuck in such a predetermined narrative path recurs throughout Byatt's and Murdoch's fictions. Although Gillian

("The Djinn"), Patricia ("Crocodile Tears"), and Marian (*The Unicorn*) feel themselves caught in plots they do not like, they have the sense to see that they can imagine themselves in alternative and more satisfying narratives.

While Roland accepts the realization that he "was in a Romance," acknowledging it as "one of the systems that controlled him" (425), the "system" of the romance controls both him and Maud. Maud's complicity with the romance plot encourages her to propose that they run away together to pursue new clues about Christabel and Randolph, first to Yorkshire and then to Brittany. Their conformation to the plot continues throughout their quest as their initial miscommunication is transformed by concern for and implicit understanding of one another, enabling them to realize that they are in love themselves. On their return, Maud finds herself duly distracted from her work, preoccupied by her feelings for Roland. However, Maud fears being caught permanently in a love plot that will stifle her and destroy her solitude. Unable of her own accord to imagine a narrative freedom in which she can negotiate a more fulfilling alternative plot than the conventional one, she tells Roland regretfully that "love is terrible, it is a *wrecker* –" (507) and it remains for Roland to help her avoid this final potential trap. He proposes that they "think of a way – a modern way," a meronymic way in which to "work it out" (507). Roland proposes that their love is cunning enough to enable each of them to retain their autonomy and independence, yet work out a way to be a couple as well.

Maud possesses a different kind of identity from Christabel because of her circumstances, and brings it along with new possibilities, to her relationship with Roland. Greater opportunities exist for women during Maud's time than in Christabel's. Education, employment, and mobility enable Maud to be autonomous and independent and she is relatively free in terms of social and sexual codes, whereas Christabel was constrained by convention. In revising Christabel's history, Maud shatters some of the images that enclosed her and reveals her as she really was – a clever woman attempting to achieve her goals who fell in love with a man she could not have and whose society did not support her. Maud makes possible a metaphoric resurrection for Christabel as a

uniquely alive and individual woman whose voice can finally ring out in truth. In resurrecting her predecessor's voice, Maud inherits understanding of the past that can inform and enrich her own life.

Despite Maud's newly acquired knowledge of her background and her contemporary advantages, she remains nervous and uncertain about which path she ought to follow in the future. Yet she realises that as the "central figure in [the] story" (503), she has a narrative freedom and ability to make choices that Christabel did not. Roland also brings a new found confidence to their relationship that allows him to say, in an inversion of their previous positions, "What a coward you are after all. I'll take care of you Maud" (507). Seeing himself now as an autonomous individual capable of relating to Maud in an egalitarian way, he does not propose to dominate her, simply acknowledging that they both have options for a joint and fulfilling future that could never have been available to Christabel and Randolph. Roland, like Ash, shatters Maud's private space, her bright safe box, when he draws her out of her isolation. When he leaves, Maud feels her apartment becomes "grey and empty" (430). Yet in admitting his own desire for solitude, Roland proves he does not intend to enclose or suffocate Maud as Fergus did, and that she need not fear Christabel's fate of the loss of her "unbroken egg" (506). Despite their differences – Maud is female and has independent financial means and academic tenure, while Roland is male, has no income and no employment – they are more balanced in their relationship than Christabel and Randolph were, and Maud is aware that through negotiation of their situation, she can be free.

Romance helps Maud and Roland find a way out of their labyrinth of self-imposed isolation as they recognise that there are "no boundaries," just "the smell of death and destruction ... fresh and lively and hopeful" (507). In a meronymic outcome, Maud and Roland attempt to overcome their fears with love, and balance their personal needs with their mutual desires in order to achieve a future where both can walk a path of intimacy with the other in equality and freedom.

Following their tentative declarations of love, Maud's and Roland's mutual calm acknowledgement of the importance of their boundaries is neither negative nor defensive but

rather, an important aspect in the sustaining of intimacy. Whether or not personal boundaries become obstructive divisions, Giddens points out, is dependent on the balance of openness, vulnerability and trust present within the relationship (94). Giddens' opinion bears a marked similarity to Shinn's meronymic solution in that, "Intimacy is not being absorbed by the other, but knowing his or her characteristics and making available one's own" (94). While the narrative romance does not provide a conclusive ending, it resonates with the optimistic possibility of a future in which Maud and Roland live in dialogue. As Maud and Roland complete their labyrinthine quest, "a good romantic form" (425), by reinscribing Christabel's and Randolph's romance, the constraining boundaries between past and present dissolve, and they leave their own narrow paths behind to enter a newly created wide open space in which they are free to inscribe their own romance.

¹ Randolph Henry Ash, "Ragnarök" II, 1 et seq., in *Possession* (242).

² The feminine Romantic aesthetic, an ideology promoted by a prominent group of British women writers during the period between 1780 and 1830, upheld the belief that relationships of support and friendship, rather than nature alone, were sources of inspiration to be nurtured. One of the main beliefs of the predominantly male Romanticism was that the human imagination was divine, while bodily sensations and the emotions were seen as supremely valuable. Mellor explains that many women writers and literary critics of the time recognized these central ideas of Romantic ideology as intensely egotistic and selfish, and chose instead to pursue an alternative fictional course ("A Criticism of Their Own" 31).

³ Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* as an appeal for the reform of relations within the human community; see Mellor, "Why Women Don't Like Romanticism" (283-284).

⁴ The use of such imagery is supported by Lacan's theory that "dreams commonly symbolise the formation of the ego in terms of 'a fortress or a stadium – its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish tips, dividing into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle,' which is the unconscious" (Lacan, qtd. in Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* 86). This psychoanalytic symbolism underlines both characters' laborious endeavours towards a desired goal, the benefits of which are, at best, ambivalent: the centre is not always the best place to be despite our conscious wishes.

⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (f/n 5, Ch. 6, 223): Roland's sentiments echo Nietzsche's belief that clothes are a European indispensable masquerade, an obvious pretence owing to which the onlooker experiences the irresistible urge to see what is underneath.

⁶ Linguistically, the Latin for "mirror" is *mirare*, meaning "to look at" while the dictionary description of "mirror" is "an accurate reflection or description of something else." On a spiritual plane, Plato and Plotinus regarded the soul as a mirror while later St. Gregory of Nyssa developed Plato's line of reasoning and noted that: "the well-made mirror reflects upon its polished surface the image of whatever is set in front of it, so the soul, cleansed from all earthly corruption, receives in its purity the image of incorruptible beauty. This is no longer mere reflection, but participation, in which the soul becomes part of that beauty to the degree to which it lays itself open to it. When the soul becomes a perfect mirror, it becomes part of that image and, through becoming part, undergoes transformation. There exists ... a relationship between the object contemplated and the mirror which contemplates it ... the soul becomes part of that beauty to which it exposes itself" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* 659-660).

⁷ Enrico Garzilli, *Circles Without Center: Paths to the Discovery and Creation of Self in Modern Literature* (75). In his discussion of the fiction of Luigi Pirandello, Garzilli observes that: "A person or self can have so many masks ... that at times he questions which one of these is really himself. Is he the sum total of all his masks or is he none of them? ... What part of himself is really 'I'? Coming to terms with the nature of mask and personality, then, is very important in any exploration of identity. Central to this search for self, masks and the use of masks ... are revelations of self ... although persona and mask seem to suggest the hiding of something, they are as much a revelation as a concealment. In the choice of persona and in the enforced use of mask, the self concomitantly yields something. Every choice of a mask eliminates at the same time the use of another." Maud's realisation that she wears a doll-like mask actually enables a self-revelation to occur and a gradual although painful peeling-off or removal of the mask takes place and a more human, less doll-like Maud is revealed – one who cries out in delight.

CHAPTER FIVE:**The Castle is *not* a Woman's Home:**

Frederica Potter

(*Babel Tower*, A.S. Byatt)

*“You can't see me, you've no idea who I am,
I am someone,
I was someone.*

I am someone ...”

– Frederica Potter¹

Byatt's *Babel Tower* is the third in a tetralogy of novels concerned with Frederica Potter's labyrinthine journey of self-discovery – of integration and quest – a feminist Bildungsroman.² While only a portion of Frederica's adult peregrinations are presented in *Babel Tower*, the portrayal of her life commences in *The Virgin in the Garden* with her isolated girlhood at Blesford Ride in which the adolescent Frederica sees only herself as important. Her negotiation of undergraduate years at Cambridge, composed of its “many small worlds” (140) is depicted in *Still Life*, and her misguided arrival into the isolating enclosure of marriage and motherhood takes place at Bran House in *Babel Tower*. Byatt's series of narratives charts Frederica's development as a precocious and self-obsessed young woman learning to relate to others but whose own pleasure is foremost in her mind. Marriage to the domineering Nigel Reiver, her attempt at combining physical pleasures with the life of the mind, effectively traps her in an intellectual and social vacuum from which she yearns to escape. *Babel Tower* takes up Frederica's journey from her realisation that she is stuck in a dead end with no obvious means of escape, to her painful and arduous bid for freedom commencing on her arrival in the “several small worlds” (326) of London. Her continued negotiation of multiple life paths is pursued in the final part of the series, *A Whistling Woman*.

Frederica's journey resembles those of other female characters, particularly Dora and Marian, as she engages in a determined quest for self fulfilment. Unlike Murdoch's characters, however, Frederica makes a journey from the supposed peace and tranquillity of rural Herefordshire into the "sanctuary" of a crowded, busy, and noisy 1960s London. While Dora and Marian contend with the physical, emotional and social labyrinths of the rural Imber and Gaze respectively, Frederica traverses similar mazes in the city in her search for opportunity, fulfilment and autonomy. Her situation differs substantially from theirs, though: even allowing for her responsibility for her child, she still has more options for her future. The same female issues that affect Dora and Marian also affect Frederica, but more openly and complicatedly. Frederica is comparatively fortunate, but subject to law that does not see her as independent. While she is an outsider in Herefordshire, alienated by her in-laws, and economically and socially inferior to the wealthy landed class of the area, she is well-educated, resourceful and intelligent, able to earn a living, supported by a network of friends, and familiar with London's urban maze. Frederica stops temporarily in the supportive spaces of her friends' homes, eventually settling in a safe female place – a basement flat in the racially-mixed suburb of Kennington with fellow single mother Agatha Mond. The democratic co-operation she experiences with Agatha is in stark contrast to the male-sanctioned female autocracy left behind at Bran House.

The female journey explicitly involves enclosure and male domination. Although Dora and Marian seek to define themselves primarily through their relationships with men, the academically-inclined Frederica seeks something more demanding that she considers to be potentially more fulfilling: she "wants to have sex and books, to be a passionate intellectual and a desirable, independent woman" (Hulbert 7). While Byatt's narrative presents this as an almost impossible proposition for a 1960s woman, eventually Frederica does manage to achieve her desired balance of the physical and intellectual aspects of life. Drawn irresistibly by Nigel's sexual prowess during her time as a Cambridge undergraduate, Frederica is beguiled into marrying him while mourning the death of her older sister. Frederica, like Dora, chooses marriage when she is vulnerable and ill-prepared, hoping for a romantic solution to

her life's dilemmas, but consequently finds that the relationship has become stifling instead of nurturing. Torn between her need for autonomy, her maternal bond with her small son, Leo, and her passion for her husband, Frederica is confused by the thought of leaving. Nigel Reiver, the latest in the line of a wealthy landowning county family and a member of the anti-intellectual English gentry, is one of Byatt's wolfish males; Fergus Wolff in *Possession* is another. Both characters, in seeking to control and possess the women they desire, succeed in constraining and demoralising them.

Frederica's presence in the city, a place which is frequently characterised as selfish and indifferent, initiates an enriching and enlivening sense of self in relation to others. Her escape from the dead ends of her marriage and Bran House towards a more positive existence in the city necessitates her negotiation of a perplexing array of choices. This selection of options resembles a journey along paths in a multicursal maze incorporating aspects of the physical, emotional, and social domains. During her often stumbling and unsure attempts to create a safe space for herself and her son, Frederica comes to experience and understand "the glory of London, her present London, which is several small worlds" (326), a city that enables her to become part of a new community, simultaneously reconnecting her to those from her past who were most important to her selfhood. Her enthusiasm to make her new life work for herself and her son enables her to appreciate the difference between escaping her previous life and venturing forth into a better one. Pursuit of a thread of attention to others, exemplified in her interactions with Daniel Orton and Jude Mason,³ helps her to progress through her maze and find a place that is uniquely her own. The discovery of such a place is in turn connected to her increased self-awareness and assumption of the roles of daughter, sister, mother, lover, friend, and teacher.

Babel Tower, with its simple chronology and linear narrative, is a maze of interwoven texts, the main two being the parallel texts of Jude's dystopian fantasy *Babbletower* and Agatha Mond's Tolkienesque *Flight North*, which acts as an antidote to both Jude's story and Frederica's "laminations." Both *Babbletower*, described by *Salon's* Laura Miller as "an over-ripe fairy tale of a utopia gone bad" ("Review of *Babel Tower*," 2), and *Flight North* resonate

with echoes of the culturally-shaping texts of the 1960s, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Jude's *Babbletower* represents his use of language to break free from the silence of abuse and demonstrates Byatt's warning of what could happen if the freedoms of the Sixties are not limited by the need to treat others as subjects rather than objects. Frederica's laminations, phonetically similar to *lamentations* (expressions of grief, sorrow, mourning, loss or regret) approximate roughly to the genre of confessional writing that allows authors to reveal their innermost feelings and thoughts. While not conforming strictly to this classification, Frederica's collages, reflections on her life's difficulties, represent her attempt to regain emotional control over chaos by expressing various aspects of her life in a visual and verbal form. Agatha's *Flight North*, by contrast, is a positive, optimistic tale about individuals using their gifts and talents for good purposes.

Byatt's seventh novel combines several narrative strands to create a variety of texts-within-a-text. This is a form with which she achieved critical acclaim and the Booker Prize in 1990 for *Possession: A Romance*. At first glance *Babel Tower* (with its court reports, "laminations," excerpts from Forster, Kafka and Lawrence, reports on English curriculum, and reviews of fiction manuscripts) bears little resemblance to the Victorian-inspired *Possession* (which included epic poetry, literary criticism and impassioned love letters) and its cyclical time frame. Nor does it appear to be reminiscent of the classic linear narrative of the first two novels in the Potter saga, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*. Like its Biblical namesake, *Babel Tower* is a collection of disparate voices in the form of many texts, constructing a fragmented, layered narrative. Byatt admits that *Possession* was written as a practice run in order to develop the "technical ability" (Cambiaghi 67) to break up *Babel Tower's* multiplicity of voices. Some of these texts are narratives involving Frederica directly or indirectly (solicitors' letters, court reports), some are background against which the ferment of the Sixties can be read (*Babbletower*, *Flight North*, Frederica's "laminations"), some are both (the Steerforth Committee linking Frederica, Agatha, Frederica's father, Leo's language development, and responsible freedom versus unfettered liberty), and some are intertexts (*Bluebeard*).

The narrative's conglomeration of plots and themes suggests an image of a multicursal labyrinth with its various paths and deviations and compels readers to expend substantial effort in order to achieve eventual consolidation. Such a tricky maze-like narrative demonstrates Byatt's intent to depict "the shifting relation between language and reality" able to "take apart the fabric of language and feeling and thought" (Cambiaghi 67). This is a process she commenced in *Possession*, the blue print for *Babel Tower*, and which required readers to pursue a dense path through poetry, letters, fairy tales, and conventional narrative. In *Babel Tower*, as readers pursue several narrative paths once again, they also begin to confront the ability of language to simultaneously construct and split worlds, both imagined and real. For example, readers (in common with Frederica) are required to negotiate not only a constantly changing selection of literary texts, but also a complicated and obfuscating course laid out by the legal system. Frederica's divorce trial constructs a new yet unwelcome world of language into which she, and the reader with her, is forced to plunge. Although she is trained to use language in a truthful and transparent way, Frederica is unprepared for the seemingly deliberate attempt by the solicitors to construct a world of lies and deceit. Readers accompany Frederica into this hostile new world, aware that language is being manipulated and twisted, yet compelled to pursue the path to its end.

Faris recognises that an important aspect of using the labyrinth as a metaphor for fiction lies in readers' simultaneous sensation of compulsion and a freedom to wander within an already constructed field of language and thought, and suggests that although "such fictions increase the quotient of reader participation ... they also implicitly highlight the labyrinthine nature of all language" (31). Such a tricky maze-like narrative demonstrates Byatt's intent to depict "the shifting relation between language and reality" able to "take apart the fabric of language and feeling and thought" (Cambiaghi 67). This is a process she commenced in *Possession*, the blue print for *Babel Tower*, requiring readers to pursue a dense path through poetry, letters, fairy tales, and conventional narrative. In *Babel Tower*, readers once again need to pursue several narrative paths at once while considering how language simultaneously constructs and splits worlds, both imagined and real. Consequently,

Frederica's journey not only provides the focal point and main plot around which others are entwined but also allows Byatt to portray a convincing world of the everyday manipulation of language into which the reader must enter.

Babel Tower's labyrinthine form, with its emphasis on physical movement through a maze, encourages readers to focus on the process of journey rather than plot outcome. Frederica's negotiation of her way from confinement in Bran House to freedom in the city and through its various buildings, spaces, and locations is reminiscent of similar steps traced by Yvonne in Dublin and Dora in London. Readers work through a labyrinth of interwoven texts created by allusions and intertexts, (including the *Bluebeard* tale, Tennyson's "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott," and Kafka's *The Castle*). These allow Frederica to see herself as an actor in a plot she cannot control, and provide reference to the struggle between freedom and power in her restrained world of Bran House and her escape into the city. Jude's idealistic commune at La Tour Bruyarde is an opposite world to the city but a parallel for Bran House.

Frederica's starting point on her journey through a physical labyrinth commences in the dead end of Bran House. Her marriage and her home combine to deny her access to the language that she craves and she consequently "disappears" into confinement within a moated grange. She is kept under control and silenced by a man and his family. The Reiver family, in their incomprehension of Frederica's need to be involved in an intellectual community with its active and free exchange of ideas, exacerbates her sense of isolation. "Attention" is not important to them. Frederica feels her presence at Bran House is superfluous – her sisters-in-law choose largely to ignore her or, at best, tolerate her because, "She happens to be there, Nigel happens to want her, she is a necessary part of Leo's wonderful existence ... There is nothing she can do ... Except, possibly, keep out of the way" (95). And stay silent. She does not understand their language, nor they hers.

Frederica, seen by Nigel as an extension of his property, becomes objectified. Informed from the outset that she is to fulfil a particular role at Bran House – "I shall need a wife to care for my house" (354) – Frederica ends up cut off socially from the surrounding public world. Nigel's requirement that his wife is a chaste⁴ possession symbolises the

patriarchal caste system. This is the only way in which Bran House (the castle) can function. Laura Mulvey's comments in relation to Dora apply here also: it is mothers, symbolic of domestic respectability, who are perceived as ensuring the privacy and respectability of the home (82).

Nigel relishes Frederica's presence for the sake of appearance, regarding her as a trophy – a legitimising and finishing prerequisite for him to be king of his castle – while her own identity is denied. His behaviour is reminiscent of Paul Greenfield's predatory attitude towards Dora, who becomes part of his collection of *objets d'art*. Nigel treats Frederica with physical and mental cruelty. Without the verbal skills necessary for effective argument, he responds with physical violence instead and admits after beating her severely that, "I could kill you any time ... you would hardly notice" (94).

Frederica disappears into a physical and emotional dead end within the walls of Bran House. The narrative demonstrates that while a woman may inhabit a particular space, even a castle labelled "home," it will not be her home. The castle, a patriarchally constructed metaphor for social control, does not allow for women's participation in construction. In fiction, women usually occupy castles because they are cursed or incarcerated, or legitimise a male's position as "king of the castle." Dora experiences the constrictions her husband imposes within the shadow of the Norman tower; Marian discovers that Gaze Castle, with its towers, robs her of her sense of identity; Gillian learns from the upper windows of the Sultan's quarters that imprisoned women were drowned in the pool at its base; Maud finds herself isolated in Tennyson Tower for self-protection; and Christabel takes to the tower in order to preserve her autonomy. *Babel Tower* reveals that it is possible eventually for a woman to find a positive and nurturing space in which to create a home where human interaction and dialogue exist, but she must be brave enough to leave the castle behind.

Rendered transparent and redundant without a sense of purpose or functions to perform, Frederica's presence is effectively masked both within the household and from the wider world. The Reiver's Tudor manor, hidden behind a "high encircling wall ... both blank and beautiful ... encrusted with mosses and lichens ... [and] ivy-leaved toadflax and wild

snapdragons” (18), provides a sharp distinction between inside and outside while simultaneously containing and excluding Frederica. Although firmly restrained by her situation, Frederica’s longing to exist once again as a thinking, feeling woman beyond Bran’s walls forces its way beyond the bricks and mortar. Her restraint, although it does take place within a building, is likened metaphorically to entrapment within a building’s internal structure. Karen Bermann’s examination of the paradoxical nature of spaces created by and within buildings and the sorts of camouflage and subterfuge they provide is elaborated as follows:

Every existing wall contradicts itself with openings, places where the obduracy of matter yields to the necessity of passage ... where materials meet and pull away.

These gaps present us with opportunities to be seen and heard ... The expressions of the body ... are critical evidence that we would hold back if we could. If only these things could be kept inside, as if we were sealed containers. (169)

Like the building materials that “meet and pull away,” Frederica’s self – body and mind – reveals a gap that can no longer hide what has until now been kept inside. No longer able to endure the enforced separation of her mind from her body, the only way Frederica can imagine reclaiming some sense of self is to be re-united with her love of literature in a meaningful way, and to work once again with language.

Frederica, like her fictional predecessors Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey, is a woman who wants it all and ends up imprisoned for her desire. The women’s relationship to language – each can justly claim that “words have been all my life, all my life” (*Possession* 180) – also links them to each other. Janice Rossen comments that “these characters are seen to be struggling to negotiate the best combination of endeavours which they can manage” (53). While Maud Bailey, in the fictional 1980s, finds it almost impossible to achieve the elusive combination of personal autonomy, academic integrity and interpersonal connection, and resigns herself to living a life locked away in her bright shiny box instead, Frederica finds it harder to achieve in the fictional 1960s. A long time ago, prior to her marriage, Frederica wondered if “it was possible ... to make something of one’s life *and* be a woman” (*Virgin*

223), this thought carrying forward into her married life at Bran House. Contemplation of her continued miserable existence deprived of her beloved words leads her to reflect, “I cannot do without them” (126).

Frederica’s disappearance from the world she inhabited prior to her marriage is in fact another form of appearance. When she leaves her family home to marry Nigel, she leaves behind all that forms her identity: her family (her sister is dead), her former family home in Yorkshire, her books, her academic life, the city, employment, friends, and her hopes for a future that Nigel now seems determined to thwart. In the absence of contact with Frederica, her family and friends construct a narrative around her disappearance from their lives. In their minds, she inhabits a very different existence from the one she actually lives. In her own mind, Frederica’s perception of her self is precarious:

She thinks, I am a woman, and thinks what a silly pretentious thought *that* is. She thinks, I thought that, because the kind of woman I am is not quite sure she *is* a woman, she likes to be reassured about that. I am a thin woman, a sharp woman, a wordy woman. (119)

Her realisation that life at Bran House has effectively negated all her previous abilities, skills and markers of identity prompts her impassioned outburst to Nigel that, “You can’t see *me*, you’ve no idea who I am, I am someone, I *was* someone. I am someone, someone nobody ever sees any more – ” (38). Frederica believes that living at Bran House has not only caused her to become invisible to others but also that it has absorbed her self-identity. Ironically, once she disappears from Bran House, she suddenly becomes visible to its occupants. The theme of a woman’s disappearing identity recurs throughout Byatt’s oeuvre: Gillian Perholt in “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” feels that as she ages she is becoming redundant, while Patricia Nimmo, whose name echoes “nemo” – “no-one,” in “Crocodile Tears” believing her life has ended with the death of her husband, embarks on a self-imposed exile to Nîmes and seems to disappear.

Frederica is dominated and silenced by Nigel and his sisters. The male-defined, yet female-dominated household of Bran House comprises Frederica’s often-absent husband, his

sisters Olive and Rosalind Reiver, and the housekeeper, Pippy Mammoth. “Attention” to Frederica’s individuality is not important to them but maintaining privileged appearances is paramount. Painfully aware that the myth of romance and marriage has seduced her into believing that she could live happily ever after, Frederica finds herself existing in silence and denial of self-knowledge. Her marriage to Nigel is reminiscent of Dora’s union with Paul in that Frederica has also unwittingly allowed herself to be led into an ever-tightening and suffocating space. Despite being part of the family, inside Bran House Frederica is ignored and excluded from the more vivid life of the real, heartfelt exchanges that take place in her absence behind closed doors. There are never questions about her past or her family. The wealth of words that once permeated her existence is now chokingly channelled instead into “conversation of a repetitive kind” and a trickle of day-to-day small talk (94). Frederica, neither willing nor able to conform to their ways, feels alienated and is left out like an intruder. Her existence as an individual is neither acknowledged nor encouraged. Aware that she is imprisoned in the Reivers’ Herefordshire ancestral home and estate, complete with its moated grange, she compares herself to a “girl in a gothic” (109), like Marian in Gaze Castle. Aligning herself with the mythical embowered maiden, the Lady of Shalott, Frederica tells one of her friends that she is “half sick of shadows,” and reflects that she was “locked up with ... womenfolk, like Mariana in the Moated Grange, but worse” (308). Frederica’s reference to Mariana creates a noticeable link between herself and Murdoch’s Marian in *The Unicorn*. Frederica’s realisation that she is trapped within a labyrinthine dead end forces her to take stock of her survival strategies.

Frederica is designated a tight and narrow space within her marriage and is regarded by Nigel as one of his possessions. Despite her experience of a vastly different social and cultural world from that inhabited by the Reivers, Frederica is expected to conform to Nigel’s closely defined expectations of her – to look and behave as a devoted wife, mother and caretaker of the ancestral property. His intentions are clear – Frederica is to remain firmly in the domestic sphere. He tells her:

I don't see why any girl would marry, if she can't put up with being a wife. And a mother ... You have a lovely boy like Leo, and you whinge ... My mother bolted, you know that. Bolted when I was two ... I've told you. I've told you often enough ... I thought you could look after Leo and be resourceful. I told you that. (37)

While she is educated, articulate, and from a financially modest family and has chosen marriage instead of an academic career, she retains notions of somehow integrating her own desires into her family situation. She yearns for the stimulation of work or study, believing that this may lead to an alleviation of the suffocation of her dead end, yet Nigel scornfully responds to her proposal of a return to Cambridge with the opinion that, "Cambridge spoils girls. It's a sort of a hothouse. It gives them ideas" (38). Eventually the household closes ranks against the independently-minded Frederica, who can no longer submit to either the traditional dominating power structure of Bran House or to the family's expectations that she comply with the conservative gender roles ascribed by the prevailing social ideology and expressed so bluntly by Nigel. His sisters help to counter any possible intrusion of the world beyond the wall by vetoing letters and telephone calls from Frederica's former friends, and frequently ignore Nigel's violent attacks on his wife, wordlessly replacing broken furniture and silently cleaning up blood stains.

Frederica is kept in place by Nigel's physical and mental cruelty. He is adept at enclosure and containment, managing to confine Frederica for five years in a marriage within the impermeable walls of Bran House. Although Nigel "is not a verbal animal" he manages to grasp the most basic ground rules that determine "the strategic importance" (38) of certain words – that is, to use "language ... for keeping things safe in their places" (39) and to maintain the balance of power firmly in his own favour. He has learnt, instinctively, how to make certain language work for him:

... if he does not think about language, he does think and has thought, about women, and has discovered the force of ... words as troublers of wrath, promoters of indecision, softeners of eyeballs and mucous membranes. If you say, I love you to a woman, it makes her wet, his body knows (39).

He does not possess the language of Frederica's worlds – he has no language of mourning, no language of the Cambridge worlds, nor language of the city worlds. He relies instead on his mastery of the language of sex and violence. Intimidated by Frederica's verbal sophistication, Nigel compensates by reinforcing his words with physical and emotional aggression.

Frederica's pleas to travel with him or to look for a job are met with language that is intended to belittle and silence her – effectively keeping her in her “place.” When Frederica challenges Nigel about his restrictions on her freedom, she tells him, “You knew what I was when you married me – you knew I was clever and independent and – and ambitious – you seemed to *like* that” to which he responds with “rueful, charming ... bullying” (37), physically blocking the door. Unable to master her with words, he relies on seduction. Nigel is accustomed to gaining control of his adversaries. His time in the army taught him to wound as well as to kill – “I’ve been taught how to find where it hurts” (94) and he responds to an escalating argument by demonstrating this skill. There is no room for negotiation. Refusing to discuss Frederica's needs, he beats her instead. To prove that language is futile, he follows his attack with lovemaking and an admonition – “don’t talk. You are a talkative silly bitch ... Talking *hurts*” (94) – actions that reinforce Frederica's resolve to break free somehow from the too-tight “elastic cage” (88) of marriage.

Bran House becomes Bluebeard's castle. Like Bluebeard,⁵ Nigel is wealthy, mysterious, possessive, jealous, and leaves his wife alone for lengthy periods of time. Early in their courtship Frederica notes Nigel's resemblance in name⁶ and appearance to Sir Walter Scott's reiver “pirate or border robber” (*Still Life* 35, 38) and to Perrault's Bluebeard, with his beard a “mussel-blue shadow from jaw to cheekbone” (96). Frederica's carefully monitored existence resembles that of the unfortunate young girls captured by the piratical Bluebeard. Like the wife in the tale who finds the tortured corpses of her predecessors hanging in a grisly dungeon, Frederica finds Nigel's nasty collection of pornography in his wardrobe. Robbed of her right to speak and voice her desires, her freedom is plundered further, and she is driven deeper into the dungeon when Nigel forbids her contacting her friends or seeking autonomy

through literary pursuits. Letters from Frederica's university friends are confiscated during Nigel's jealous fit.

Nigel's character is related to enchanter figures such as Murdoch's Gerald Scottow in *The Unicorn* or Mischa Fox in *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Each of these is charming and debonair, wields a dangerous authority, and has a mysterious occupation. Otherwise sensible, intelligent women such as Frederica, Marian Taylor, and Rosa Keepe find these enchanters difficult to resist. Frederica finds Nigel charming prior to their marriage – he is the only one capable of comforting her when Stephanie dies – yet he resembles an enchanter who takes advantage of her vulnerability, mesmerises her into marriage, and leads her into a dark and frightening place as he dispossesses her of language. Frederica, like Marian and Rosa, realises that escaping such charms is difficult. While being torn between her need to escape and wanting to stay with her familiar lover, Frederica is wounded by the axe-wielding Nigel and realises that she must make the first difficult step to leave. Like Bluebeard's last young wife, she must manage to flee and survive.

The confinement of Bran House is a parallel of the underworld and the Persephone myth. Following the death of her older sister, with whom she shared a "life of the mind," Frederica undergoes a symbolic death that while uniting her with Stephanie, forces her to exist in a dark and frightening place. Frederica finds that she cannot contemplate Stephanie's death, concluding that Stephanie's death "annihilated" her (126). She believes that her own survival requires that she "lose herself [in the mind] and find herself in the body" (125), while it remains for her to be rescued by her friends who are, "Old faces ... Old footsteps ... Old voices ..." from the past (Tennyson, "Mariana" 66-68).

In her grief, she allows Nigel to lead her into an alien landscape – a place where she can shut out Stephanie's death and everything associated with it, consequently turning her back on her parents, brother-in-law Daniel, and the family home in Yorkshire. As she watches Nigel and thinks of the "lord of the dark underworld" (Hamilton, 50), whose "dark eyes/Are not seen elsewhere" (*Babel* 80), Frederica aligns herself with Persephone. In her attempt to achieve "sensuous happiness" (125) with Nigel, as she believes Stephanie did with Daniel,

and deprived of the stimulus of language, she endures a death of self, like Persephone. She fears that neglecting her too-acutely-feeling mind has resulted in her mental faculties' deserting her. Yet, her pining for her old life of books and words is reminiscent of Persephone who, in Hugh's poem, is longing for the earth and "Considers, remembers / The taste of earth, and water, faintly sweet" (77).

Hugh Pink's poem, "Pomegranate," takes up the theme of the similarity between the Persephone myth and Frederica's life with Nigel. His suspicion that beneath Frederica's seemingly charmed existence as a country squire's wife lies a vastly different reality of sadness and disappointment is paralleled by an awareness that the sensuality of "this sort of landscape" (16-17) conceals bloodshed and violence of the past, forming an imprisoning underworld. Hugh's consciousness of his own mortality enables him to scrutinise his overwhelming impressions of the pastoral world he finds on Frederica's doorstep. He concludes that this apparently gentle environment composed of an "essentially green, and blue, and grey" (17) palette actually disguises the fact that "every inch of this turf has absorbed ... knuckle-bones and heart-strings, fur and nails, blood and lymph" (17). Similarly, Frederica's privileged economic circumstances hide the violence and danger that constantly simmer below an outwardly calm surface, clouding her ability to "see" her situation properly or understand her complicity in it.

Frederica feels an overbearing guilt for her marital woes and responsibility for her own entrapment. Her decision to marry Nigel now seems to have been foolish and hasty, and the starting point of all their troubles. She reflects that, "I should never have come here ... I have been a fool, a fool, a fool" (80) and concludes that she was never able to be the wife Nigel wanted, giving him instead "something that didn't exist" (282). She wearily admits to Nigel when he visits unexpectedly at her family's Christmas gathering in Freyasgarth that "*it's all my fault ... All*" (243).

Rossen observes that while Frederica's instinctive search for fulfilment through a marital relationship demonstrates a "traditional resolution to the problem of channelling women's emotional 'instincts' " (42), it brings no guarantee of happiness. Marriage to Nigel

seemed to promise tranquillity “at least in part because his composed silence appeared to be the opposite” of her father’s wrath which was expended in “howls of rage ... tempests of invective and maudlin reconciliation” (92). However, “Bill talked a lot, and did not hurt. Nigel repeated one word over and over, and hurt a great deal” (92). Yet Frederica believed Nigel “*was* more alive than – nice, clever, second-hand Cambridge people. I thought he was the opposite of everything – ... [but] he wasn’t really” (143). Frederica’s disillusionment parallels that felt by Dora, who also enters marriage with a man who she imagines to be superior to her own acquaintances or former lovers. Although Nigel manages to speak a sexual language that Frederica understands, his intellectual shortcomings lead to her inevitable resentment of her situation.

Despite Frederica’s sensual fulfilment, her mind reawakens to its craving for connection through the use of words that Nigel is unable to provide. Frederica rejects Hugh’s instinctive quoting of Forster’s phrase, “Only connect” (18), becoming distressed at her realisation that a desire also to share this connection with Nigel has betrayed her. Forster’s and Lawrence’s words about “an undifferentiated All, a Oneness, body and mind, self and world, male and female” (310) reverberate in her mind, exacerbating her need for a meronymic existence – to be able to establish connection with others while remaining a separate being. Frederica desires autonomy above all – “to be all the things she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously separate” (312), and not about to join together, becoming fused.

Frederica makes a wrong turn because of her excessive reliance on the physical side of her nature at the expense of her intellect. In allowing passion and fantasy to rule her head, she is subsequently unable to cope with real problems as they occur in her marriage. Despite an acute consciousness of others, Frederica remains intensely self-obsessed and does not respond with a genuine attention to a given situation, seeking only to alleviate her own dissatisfaction. Dusiinberre observes that “the more sensitive and perceptive the person, the more the novelist exposes a fatal propensity for the image-making faculty to fail to keep pace with the real event” (“Forms of Reality,” 59). This notion is reminiscent of Murdoch’s

caution against finding consolation in “the idea of life ordered into art” (58). Byatt’s narratives reveal that she heeds Murdoch’s warning. Her fiction does not attempt to portray sympathetic characters but ones instead who are “whole human beings” who also “do stupid things” yet these “real people ... do think quite hard about things” and “are changed by what they think” (Tonkin 22). Consequently, Byatt’s fiction depicts characters like Frederica, who represent flawed real people who do illogical and inexplicable things, as real people are wont to do, and with whom readers can identify.

Frederica is ultimately rescued by her friends. The myth of Persephone, in detailing the goddess’s return to the earth, describes the awakening of spring and new beginnings. Frederica’s escape to life in London from the stagnation and isolation of Bran House resembles the transition from winter to spring and the start of new life. Her resemblance to Persephone is reinforced further when she later turns to Daniel in fear as Nigel pursues her. Daniel,⁷ who still lives in his own underworld since Stephanie died – he is one of its “walking dead” (59) – and is familiar with the “ghouls, phantoms, [and] terrible shapeless figures flailing in empty air” (99) that assail others, is able as a result of his own pain to help Frederica stay in the brightness to regain her mind while living in her body.

Frederica’s journey of self-discovery, a feminist Bildungsroman – a process of confrontation and dialogue with a broad social environment – can only occur after she breaks free of the constricting space of Bran House. Her female journey of self-development commences as she heads towards the labyrinth of the city of London and its “several small worlds” (326). Its spaces are “meronymic” in that they allow for the possibility of the meronym, providing Frederica with new opportunities and narrative freedom. Frederica has to fight for freedom without licence, and for the degree of freedom possible without injustice to others, especially Leo. London, unlike the seemingly idyllic but actually nasty Bran House, is a real world of complications and mess. Frederica’s “passport” to narrative freedom is language.

Felski argues that since the late 1960s, women’s narrative structures have seen the emergence of the process of separation as an essential aspect of the journey to self-knowledge

(*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 127). The female protagonist, unlike the male, is not free to enter upon the journey of self-discovery but must break away from constricting personal situations or family conflicts to make the journey (127; Philips and Haywood, 62). This female need of separation as a prerequisite to establishing autonomy is also depicted through the experiences of Dora and Marian in Murdoch's *The Bell* and *The Unicorn*, discussed in Chapters One and Two of this study. Frederica's liberation hinges on separation from an oppressive household and pursuit of the opportunity for self-determination through wider social contact and employment. Caught in a narrative that does not allow her to move beyond the narrow cultural space of marriage and motherhood, Frederica escapes with help from her friends and enters into a new set of imagined narratives that allow for autonomy and growth. As noted earlier, Felski points out that this act of separation is the defining moment for the beginning of any self-determination (127).

Frederica's arrival in the city offers her the chance to create a safe domestic haven for herself and her child, and a broader experience of life for both of them in the midst of a varied cultural and social community. She begins to forge an interactive network of acquaintances, friends, and family that contribute to her evolving selfhood. Her ensuing contacts and encounters within a wider community enable her to appraise more critically her previously secluded existence, and assist in shaping and defining her new parameters of subjectivity. Frederica's lack of social graces and relationship skills dissipates as she learns to attune herself to others' thoughts and ideas while learning that "individual humans cannot exist outside social relationships" (43). Such interaction with others is an essential aspect of the ongoing search for selfhood, while "paying attention to others is at the heart of the self" (Jenkins 49). Involvement in communities demands action and interaction with others: a mature tolerance in giving of oneself and a readiness to allow others to make claims on her. The need to find meaningful employment, a possibility offered by the city and of very real concern to Frederica, is also an important means of developing a mature personal identity (Philips and Haywood 63).

Frederica enters a physical, emotional and social maze – a series of worlds – on her arrival in London. Byatt’s portrayal of the city takes on extraordinary importance for female characters, allowing them a place for personal achievement, positive growth, and understanding of self and others. While traditional British literature has tended to present the city as a negative place, hierarchical and alienating, and pastoral settings as idyllic and a place for opportunities, female writers tend to favour the opposite view (Sizemore 25). Byatt and Murdoch both use the imagery of rural landscapes to emphasise harm or disruption to a protagonist’s self-possession. Nigel regards the city as an evil, smelly, noisy place, devoid of physical or spiritual nurture or opportunity, and lacking the assumed benefits to his child of property and tradition. His reasons for wanting custody of his son reflect an age-old literary antagonism of city versus country. Nigel declares Frederica’s and Leo’s Kennington address “deprived and socially unstable,” and their home “a near-slum,” in contrast to Bran House and the surrounding Herefordshire district – “healthy country surroundings” (376), eminently suitable for the child’s upbringing, in his opinion.

The normally self-obsessed Frederica understands that in any decision to leave her marriage, Leo’s well-being is a major consideration. On several occasions, in fear of losing custody of Leo, she even acknowledges that Bran House offers a superior material existence for a child compared to what she might be able to provide for him as a single mother in London. Certainly, she has little to offer at present but fears annihilation of self if she were to stay with Nigel. Yet surely, she believes, it is better for her son to have a mother who is assured of her own identity elsewhere than to continue to exist as a “mummy” of “passive quietness” (126) in Bran House. She is fully aware of the implications of the word “mummy” – “a swaddled corpse and cuddly maternity” (125) – believing that her own sister sacrificed herself to both these images, and determined that her own sense of self will not be subsumed into such a cocooned existence. She thinks that if she were to leave Leo behind, she might never see him again, but even so she cannot stay – the idyllic surroundings are the sinister background of a terrifying attack by her husband. Leo’s life unfolds in blissful yet potentially dangerous surroundings. While the natural beauty of the landscape is described eloquently,

there is also a counterbalancing and sobering acknowledgement of the possibility of malevolence even in the face of loveliness. Despite appearances, danger is ever-present, as evidenced by Nigel's axe attack. At the time, the Yorkshire Moors are the site of the horrific Moors Murders, while Frederica's parents' new home is sited close to the Fylingdales Moor Early Warning System against nuclear attack. Little Leo is not happy in his supposedly ideal environment and tells his mother as he takes "matters into his own hands" (129), following her out of the house into the darkness and joining her to run away to London, "I'm tired of thinking and thinking what to do ... I want to come" (128).

Frederica's arrival in London necessitates her adaptation to very different physical features and spaces. The physical setting of Byatt's city is important in establishing it as a place of freedom. While its depiction is as detailed as Murdoch's urban environment in, for example, "Something Special" or *The Bell*, it is also a much more complicated place than either the Dublin or London of Murdoch's texts. The world of the city is especially important to Frederica as it provides everything she did not have before. Although it is the opposite of the countryside, it offers her peace of mind, sanctuary, and freedom of movement and choice. She commences a visible life in London, like Dora who is "at once more real" (*Bell* 183) on her arrival in the city.

A change in physical space, comments Felski, is as important in the female Bildungsroman as the changes in personal relationships (127). A feature of the female Bildungsroman, according to Felski, is that the protagonist leaves her husband / lover to find solace in a community where a safe space is provided. Consequently, Frederica's former academic peers find safe accommodation for her and Leo in Bloomsbury. Her escape from her underworld existence culminates in her arrival at Thomas Poole's bright sixth-floor flat from which can be seen the new Post Office Tower, symbolising "another world" (139). Thomas's household, a family community made up of himself, his four children and a housekeeper, proves to be a favourable environment where Frederica has "a place to be quiet, and think" (138), a desk at which to write, and the opportunity to contemplate her new journey "step by step" (138). Her hesitant quest for independence is nurtured and supported

by Thomas and the other adults in his household and social circle. In this space of flexible boundaries, Frederica begins to learn about being Leo's mother and becoming a productive member of a community. She tells Daniel that it "works beautifully ... we all share the babysitting" (218). Cooking and chores are worked out together, and she takes part in open conversations about ideas, plans and emotions.

Despite her past self-centredness, Frederica is motivated now by her maternal responsibility for Leo to be independent and self-supporting. In her eager search for employment, she pursues a personal Ariadne's thread through London's urban labyrinth. Frederica's determination to succeed leads her to plunge onward into unknown and strange directions, following various paths, passing through many doorways, gaps, and openings, crossing a variety of thresholds, and ascending steps or stairs.⁸ Her orientation to new spaces forces her to start making connections with others and includes her meeting with Jude. While an imperceptible yet progressive overlapping of the paths between her worlds has already commenced, her acquaintance with Jude is life-altering, with the potential to bring all her worlds together.

Her recent language-starved existence contrasts sharply with an almost-immediate offer of three jobs: teaching literature to art students at the Samuel Palmer School of Art and Craft, an extramural class on Post War British Fiction at the Crabb Robinson Institute, and proofreading and writing reports on fiction manuscripts for publisher Rupert Parrott. While the buildings in which the classes are held are dissimilar, one distinctive feature unites them all: Frederica must climb several flights of stairs in each to arrive at the space in which she will be teaching. Teaching is not an occupation she would freely have chosen, yet her survival and Leo's hinges on her willingness to apply herself to it. Her negotiation of stairs might be seen as signifying Frederica's gradual accomplishment of new skills and knowledge. She becomes accustomed to different types of students – the black-clad art students so disdainful and dismissive of literature and the eager adult students of her extramural class – and she develops appropriate strategies for their learning. Frederica learns to read art and manages to decipher a narrative in even the most obscure creations. She gradually learns to understand

the art students. Her attainment of new awareness is an incremental process, and the symbolic stairs must be climbed each time she teaches. Ultimately, she finds that teaching literature, an activity to which she is remarkably well-suited, provides her entry into one of the many small worlds of London.

As Frederica manages the physical aspects of her multicursal maze, she also negotiates various intellectual and social challenges. Her reconnection with language revivifies her and teaching provides a joyful and genuine means of becoming linked with others. As she meets each confrontation, a gradual process of interconnection begins between the small worlds in which she now moves. The various paths she traces – physical, social, and emotional – start to overlap and continue to bind more closely together so that ultimately Frederica’s labyrinthine journey occurs in a tightly braided and entwined structure.

Her passage into a world of teaching that is alternately familiar and strange commences in an impressive long stone building in the centre of London, its façade distinguished by bas-reliefs, and its imposing portal set beneath a round stone arch. Her earlier alignment with Persephone is apparent once more as she ascends a set of steps and enters through the heavy doors recalling “Lady Chatterley quoting Swinburne ... She goes on about ‘Pale beyond porch and portal’ and how she has to go through them. Something to do with Proserpina coming up from the earth” (160). As she enters through the arch, she leaves behind the dark underworld of Bran House and the old life with Nigel, so reminiscent of Dis.

First, she encounters an anachronistic clash between the classically constructed interior of the building, with its long corridors, wrought iron balustrades and wide stone-stepped staircases and its decoration of Pop portraits featuring film stars and singers, brightly coloured abstracts, masks and collages. Frederica’s debut into a slippery world where old rules no longer hold is epitomised by the juxtaposition of classical architecture and modern art which confronts her. A stranger to the world of visual arts, her second startling confrontation with the jarring juxtaposition of past with present takes place when she observes that Blake’s poetry is partnered with abstract paintings and child-like collages. Despite feeling disconcerted at having stumbled into an “other-side-of-the-mirror” (165)

world, she concedes that, at least, this world is “alive” (165). Like Persephone, Frederica rises towards the bright new world, ascending a dark staircase “up, up, up” (162) to the top of the building where the glass-roofed and light-filled studios are located. There, a third and initially uninspiring confrontation occurs when Frederica meets Jude Mason, a Gollum-like art model. His path eventually intersects and intertwines with Frederica’s as he unwittingly helps her to successfully pursue a thread of attention to others successfully.

Her teaching of extramural classes requires that she enter yet another of London’s small worlds. The ugly red brick Our Lady of the Sorrows School in suburban Islington is in bleak contrast to the Samuel Palmer School in the centre of London. Once again, Frederica ascends to the top level. Her motley class of fifteen adult students awaits her on the fourth floor, sitting on infant chairs. While she notes that individually they are “too heterogeneous to form a group” (220), she also wonders at their reasons for coming to her class. Her thoughts about their motivation unconsciously reflect her own reasons for being there. “[P]erhaps ... they desperately need to meet someone ... and find Post-War British Fiction a convenient background noise ... or perhaps they have to get out of a house they are shut in, or want to change themselves in some definable or undefinable way” (220). Her students facilitate a perception that both she and they are searching, through literature, for ways to connect with and make sense of their world. Frederica finds a flexibility and preparedness to change herself and broaden her perspectives even further as these engaged students “of the real world” (222), as opposed to the disdainful art students, challenge her once again. As she, too, becomes a student, her “ambition” (223) and hunger for knowledge increases. In response to their pleas for different texts, Frederica agrees to teach Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Proust, Mann, and Kafka for the first time. Consequently, by also adding Freud and Nietzsche to her own reading, she begins to explore additional alternative narrative paths, amending her ideas and railing against the narrowness of the Lawrence and Forster of her Cambridge days.

Despite her professed aversion to teaching, Frederica finds that she has stepped easily and confidently into this space of dialogue and intellectual engagement. She feels responsible for her students’ learning and is aware of the need to connect with them and to connect them

with each other. Her analogy of weaving with its knots and threads relates to the students' involvement and she intuitively entwines "a web of attention" (221) between them. By the end of her second class, she realises that she has also entered into relationship with them. Her encouragement of them to speak and listen to each other results in "threads ... being knotted" (221). As they develop a common language of response to the literary texts, a community begins to form. While the books and their characters encourage a particular sort of connection, the students' non-academic backgrounds ensure that they combine their discussion about literature with a meaningful and fruitful examination of relevant social issues. The perceived world of academic prestige and privilege, to which they do not belong, plays no part in their discussion of ideas. Consequently, their "discussion ... is carried on in the lingua franca ... gossip at one extreme and precise philosophical discrimination at the other" (329). Taken aback by and caught up in the excitement and passion of her adult students who are so "unlike the professional students" (222) of her Cambridge days, Frederica's initial ambivalence towards teaching starts to dissipate and she finds herself eager to be a student once again. Frederica experiences a genuine sense of connectedness in the midst of this group as she teaches and learns from them.

Frederica's interaction with a wider social environment, represented by her students, contributes towards her developing sense of self. Byatt's narrative is evidence of her regard for Murdoch's frequent reminder that an essential aspect of a continuous process of the search for selfhood is paying attention to others.⁹ Such open acknowledgement of the unique selfhood of one individual confers a reciprocal selfhood upon the other. Thus, the notion of attention creates a simultaneous action of unification and separation. As she begins to engage with her students, she initiates a reciprocal process whereby they also engage with her. Frederica thinks that "the thread of the language [the students] have to construct to speak to each other connects [them] ... with a web of knots and separations" (329). Her notion is reminiscent of the metaphor of the self in which Byatt explains her own personal sense of interconnectedness with others: "We are connected, and we are also a connection which is a separate and unrepeated object" ("Identity and the Writer" 26). As Frederica continues to

pursue her own Ariadne's thread of connection, she struggles to achieve a meronymic type of relationship, "To know, yes, but not to be *fused* with someone else ... I am a separate being" (312). She actively and fiercely resists Forster's imperative to achieve "Oneness," reasoning that it must be possible to be all the things she wishes to be through a rigorous process of separation or fragmentation, if that is what is required.

Frederica's web of knots and separations also incorporates her neglected relationship with her family. At Daniel's instigation, he, Frederica and Leo journey to Freyasgarth for Christmas despite hesitations and misgivings about returning to the home from which Stephanie is now absent. While Frederica feels guilty at not having taken four-year-old Leo to meet his maternal grandparents until this time, Daniel's gentle persuasion and appeal to her sense of duty, and her own troubled situation, convince her to return to Yorkshire. Consequently, the physical route she follows is linked imperceptibly to the emotional journey she needs to make and the two entwine inseparably. Daniel's reminder that she is, after all, Winifred's and Bill's only surviving daughter, together with his admission that his own children, Will and Mary, do not know their cousin Leo, is a painful disclosure of his consciousness of both their needs to reconnect their past to the present. In order for Frederica, in particular, to progress on the road to selfhood and cope with her present challenges of balancing freedom and licence, it is necessary for her to begin to understand the necessity of acknowledging and accepting the pain of family history.

For the first time in her life, Frederica's attention to others enables her finally to see herself in relation to them. Her thoughts turn to the struggle that exists within all families. She reflects that theirs is a relationship in which they all "pull together and fly apart" yet feels "pleased and excited to see all these faces which resemble mine and each other" (236). Considering the effects of Stephanie's death on each family member, she notices the changes wrought in her now visibly ageing parents and her calmer, grown-up younger brother, Marcus. A connection is forged in her mind between the tragic events of the past and what she observes now. Her return to her family makes it possible for her to confront the reality that there can be no present or future without a past, and results in a reconciliation with her

parents. Frederica's willingness to temper unfettered freedom with responsibility indicates her choice of walking not just her own selective individual path, but also each of the remaining arduous paths of daughter, sister, and mother. As a result, the dark emotional path along which she struggles starts to brighten considerably.

The next phase of Frederica's physical journey, and another layer of her web's knots and separations, takes place as she and Leo travel to Hamelin Square in suburban Kennington, south of the Thames. She gradually becomes aware of the interconnections occurring in her life, resembling an imaginary line connecting her past, present and future and overlaid with a messy and intricate pattern of human involvements and relationships. Frederica seeks accommodation with single mother Agatha Mond and her daughter Saskia and ends up living with Leo in the ground floor and basement section of the immaculately kept house. Although the south London neighbourhood is considered by Nigel and his family to be a deprived area for a child to grow in, the shortcomings of life are outweighed by the personal and communal gains instigated by a broadening of Frederica's and Leo's horizons.

Kennington is a level area with a variety of houses, "Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian, wartime prefabs" (292), small wire-fenced parks, and dusty wide streets, adjacent to the tall grey concrete towers of rows of flats. Hamelin Square is a cul-de-sac lined with a conglomeration of variously maintained houses and a muddy patch of park. Frederica observes a group of racially mixed children playing amongst the car wrecks strewn about the park. Despite the competing images of order and disorder, and Frederica's initial dismay, she and Agatha soon come to the realisation that they both think and feel the same about childhood, experience and innocence, and their own ideas of selfhood. A bond of friendship is forged.

To outward appearances, Frederica appears to make an easy physical and emotional transition into this latest of a series of new spaces. Her daily life is filled with situations that stretch her ingenuity, skills, and emotional strength. Although she appears to relish her new roles of teacher, student, mother, and friend, her inner life is in turmoil. She searches for appropriate ways to assert her own identity while maintaining an external semblance of

tranquillity and calmness that she does not feel. Frederica strives to attain a degree of freedom without injustice to others, particularly her son. She has no home, no job, and is unsure of her future. Always a self-obsessed individual, Frederica now realises with a shock that Leo “is the centre of [her] existence” (237). The powerful maternal bond she experiences resembles “a love so violent that it is almost its opposite” (233). Even though her past feelings towards motherhood have been ambivalent – “It is not what she would have chosen” (233) – Leo’s wellbeing is now uppermost in her thoughts and actions. Yet she constantly endures a secret guilt at having tried to escape Bran House without him. Frederica continues to reproach herself even as she struggles to meet her teaching obligations with the demands of single parenting. Yet her single-minded determination and belief in her own abilities enable her to manage the practicalities of daily life with the additional responsibility of caring for a small child. Leo is not an endearing child, and fiercely jealous of his mother, is capable of manipulating almost any situation to his benefit. As J.M. Coetzee observes, Leo “resorts to all means, fair and foul” to stage-manage Frederica, fiercely demanding “that she subordinate her happiness to his” while he “treats her almost as a prisoner” (17). Despite this, Frederica gracefully tackles the challenges issued by her insistent child, balancing her own needs with the need to work as well as nurturing Leo and providing him with a balanced home life.

Frederica and Leo learn to adapt to life involving various groups of new people. Both experience the challenges, excitement, and fear of negotiating new relationships, not only with others but also with each other. Their personal boundaries are required to flex and stretch considerably in order to accommodate these interconnections. Frederica, a solitary creature for most of her life, finds that she must now rely on others such as Thomas Poole, Alexander Wedderburn, and Agatha Mond for practical and emotional assistance. In learning to interact and co-operate with others in a variety of ways, Frederica is enabled to commence establishing her own unique set of interconnections. Leo’s social development – previously limited to interactions within his family circle – also grows as his horizons widen in London.

While Frederica renews her acquaintance with former friends and also makes new ones, Leo has the opportunity to interact with a range of adults as well as with children of his

mother's friends. He comes to know Lizzie and Simon Poole in Bloomsbury, meets and becomes familiar with his cousins, Will and Mary, develops a close relationship with Agatha's daughter, Saskia, and learns to relate to children of racially and economically mixed backgrounds, such as Clement and Thano Agyepang, both in his neighbourhood of Hamelin Square and at the William Blake School. Had he stayed at Bran House, he would have attended Brock's Preparatory School in Herefordshire and Swineburn School in Cumberland and received, as a fourth generation Reiver son, "an excellent education"(376), mixing with boys of his own social class and "expectations" (376).

Frederica and Agatha are "two responsible women ... two efficient women" (597) who happen to be single working mothers who form a successful small community. Frederica and Leo join Agatha and Saskia to create a predominantly female community where Frederica and Agatha collaborate in decision-making. In this positive and optimistic space, unlike that of the female community in Bran House, and by virtue of Agatha's provision of a non-exploitative relationship grounded in common goals and interests, Frederica is provided with a refuge from a potentially threatening social order. The female community, notes Felski, is not simply a feminist device, but one that "has its roots in a long-standing tradition of female friendships which emerges as an insistent theme in women's writing" (139). As an independent single mother pursuing her own career, Agatha provides a role model for Frederica, who is initially filled with self-doubt and recriminations over her circumstances. Yet Agatha supports Frederica and enables her to commence an autonomous and dignified existence. The intimacy of women experienced either between individuals or within a community is an essential aspect of a female protagonist's departure from a heterosexual relationship and its accompanying exploitations. A key feature of such relationships is a special affiliation with another woman in which "knowledge rather than desire" (Felski 131) is the main focus. The other woman frequently acts as a symbolic mirror, allowing the protagonist to discover herself while her female identity is reflected. Agatha's successful balancing of her roles as mother, working woman, and friend challenges Frederica to imagine that she can also live her own life in a similar way. Consequently, having observed Agatha

and developed confidence in her self and her identity, Frederica later tells a custodial hearing that while “It isn’t ideal to have to try to earn your living and bring up a son ... it can be done”(597).

The feminist Bildungsroman, an optimistic narrative, “charts women’s movement into the urban and public spaces of a modernity from which they have been excluded” (Felski 140). Protagonists are portrayed undergoing a process of learning that is marked by dialogue with and engagement in society. Frederica’s active and successful engagement in society occurs through her involvement in a number of small communities that foster mutual social relationships. Community members depend on each other and knowledge of their interrelationship binds them together. The most influential community in which Frederica is involved is the one she forms with Agatha, which is also influenced by an ideal of sisterhood. Contemporary feminist literature explores the attempt by like-minded groups of women to form sufficiently independent and co-operatively functioning households or discrete community groups. The personal bonds forged by women committed to an ideal of sisterhood, Felski asserted, are capable of challenging the established social relations in a male-defined public sphere (140). Such groups are not just an idealised vision of how things might be, but a reality that seeks to challenge and alter existing social values, and a necessity in a protagonist’s progressive development. Frederica’s survival in London would not be managed in such an empathetic manner were she not assisted by her fellow single mother, Agatha. Tonnies,¹⁰ who examined and described the motivation of individuals to join communities, observed that a relationship based on bartering, where two individuals fulfil each other’s needs by negotiation, is the most simple and basic community situation. While one person has expectations, the other also has expectations plus restraint. Frederica’s involvement, first in Thomas Poole’s household, then as a tenant in Agatha Mond’s basement flat, illustrates this mutually beneficial process of negotiation in a community context. She and Agatha form a successful community because they both gain something valuable by joining together. Reliable childcare arrangements, for instance, are understood intuitively by both women to be of utmost importance to the wellbeing of their children and their own sense

of responsible parenthood. Their unhesitating cooperation with each other in this regard and in others assists in binding them as separate individuals into a community. Her community involvement as an active and contributing member enables her to take stock of her past so that she can move onwards to a hopeful future.

An essential aspect of life for any of Byatt's and Murdoch's characters is the membership of a particular group of people or connection to those with whom a sense of affiliation can be experienced. Both writers' novels, and Byatt's *Babel Tower* in particular, contain a range of functional and dysfunctional forms of community types, including the academic, family, neighbourhood, religious, and utopian varieties. Tonnies found that feelings of sympathy or antipathy significantly influenced certain relationships within community groups such as these. Sympathy is often aroused by shared circumstances, experiences, affiliations, and origins, while antipathy may be felt towards those in the "other camp." Such feeling can turn to hatred but is often transformed to indifference and then, as a result of close acquaintance or other motives, into sympathy. This development is demonstrated eloquently in Frederica's and Daniel's changing relations with Jude Mason throughout the narrative.

Natural relationships, such as those within families, with their engendered intimacy, affirmations of existence, and shared common values, are the most basic social form with the deepest foundation, observed Tonnies (26). Yet if a person's needs are not met within such a situation, fulfilment has to be earned or bought elsewhere. Frederica's marriage to Nigel exemplifies a relationship of interdependence – the opposite of freedom – where one individual is bound to another by virtue of moral obligation, imperative, or prohibition. It is an emotional or intellectual consciousness of a tie that binds with an implication that one of the persons does not or cannot have a will of his or her own. Frederica's desperation to leave Bran House is based on her being bound to Nigel's will without a voice of her own. He restrains her emotionally and physically by calling on her obligations as a wife and mother. Consequently, Frederica experiences the disappointment and frustration of an inability to communicate her needs to Nigel. His refusal and the stony-faced exclusion she feels within their household lead her to consider looking to outside sources in order to survive.

Frederica comes to the city in order to feel a sense of community that was unavailable to her in the country. As part of the community in Hamelin Square, Frederica and Leo are connected to others by the bonds of friendship and shared interests. Social status is irrelevant. The group's main concern is the members' common needs and how these may be met from within the group. Felski argues that the purest manifestations of community occur between those with strong personal ties, shared interests or traditions, bonds of kinship or friendship, or other connections that create and sustain a sense of collective communal identity (140). A demonstration of this type of cooperation takes place on the Bonfire Night in Hamelin Square when several of the residents, previously unknown to each other, gather together informally to celebrate Guy Fawkes Night. Someone brings homemade sticky toffee and hot apple cider to share while another brings Roman candles. Someone else brings sparklers and Vesuvius fountains and sets them alight. The Guy – created by Leo, his friend Theo Agyepang, and Agatha – is fixed to the pyre. Wood and cardboard for the bonfire has been stockpiled and guarded against theft by the “middle class and working class” (391) fathers in the Square. The bonfire night is a successful community event. By the end of the evening, despite class differences, everyone has amiably shared food, drinks, and entertainment.

Frederica's pursuit of yet another personal path in London's maze and her occupying of an additional new and creative space brings the entwining paths of her life even closer together. Her search for literary work leads her to Rupert Parrott's door at the offices of publishers Bowers and Eden, where she enters a world of other peoples' fantasies and nightmares which, conversely, makes “her feel that she is herself again ... because her mind is alive” (155). While Frederica's painstaking meandering through the building resembles her tracing of her life's new paths, it is here that she grasps a thread that will progressively draw her nearer to the disagreeable Jude. Her increased and more intimate involvement with Jude and her championing of his novel, *Babbletower*, challenge her to respond unconditionally to the needs of a vulnerable individual and help her develop a greater awareness of herself through relationship.

Frederica arrives at the tall, thin and ramshackle Dickensian building, joined to other similar houses and connected with various “makeshift doors” and “bridging corridors” (146). The structure is in stark opposition to the classic proportions of the Samuel Taylor School and the utilitarian bricks and mortar of the Islington school. A rickety arrangement complete with an antique lift “with a creaking iron trellis door, and a jerking, whining . . . method of hoisting itself” (146), the building causes Frederica and Hugh to weave through a maze of dusty corridors to reach Parrott’s office. Crossing Parrott’s threshold gives her entrée into a world she despaired of regaining. Frederica agrees to read four manuscripts and write reports on them for Parrott. Her worlds of teaching adults and art students now align with a previously familiar world of the pleasure of reading, engaging with, and writing about the imagined universes created by others, subsequently lifting her beyond the “bounds of her world” (155) and providing her with yet another means of creating connections.

As Frederica balances the demands of her various worlds, a series of subtle connecting and reconnecting threads pulls the worlds inseparably closer. Her acceptance of her responsibilities motivates her to follow the paths she deems necessary to her own and Leo’s economic survival, and she experiences a new freedom in a real world to which she contributes. Part of that freedom comes about from her involvement with Jude. His *Babbletower* manuscript, with which she is already familiar, leaves her “surprised” and “excited” (284) and she hands it to Parrott, urging him to consider it for publication. The publication of this book causes the drawing together of a number of previously unconnected characters, and results in a fusing together of Frederica’s separate worlds. Frederica and Parrott each experience a macabre personal fascination with Jude’s book which they agree is “not . . . nice” yet it “sticks in the mind” (302). The function of the connecting threads becomes apparent in Frederica’s detection of a disconcerting similarity between the brutal goings-on in the society based on freedom without licence and her former life at Bran House, and Parrott’s identification of the source of Jude’s dark fiction as his own former school, the Swineburn School in Cumberland. The unexpected confrontation with his childhood horrors, the origins of his own suicidal tendencies, also reveals the cause of Jude’s reclusive

tendencies and deliberate attempts to alienate others from himself. Significantly, Swineburn is also Nigel's former school and the institution he nominates for Leo's education. While horrible tales of boys' experiences at the school go some way towards explaining Nigel's cruel streak and his perverse tastes in literature, they also frighten Frederica and steel her resolve that her son will not attend such a place.

The focal point of Jude's dystopian fantasy is the enclosed and isolated world of La Tour Bruyarde – subsequently translated during an obscenity prosecution trial as “the noisy Tower” (544). The compound includes a multi-turreted castle randomly constructed of scores of towers, labyrinths, and dungeons, providing the setting for an alternative utopian community. Imagery of “all these rich and lovely towers” (Miller, “Limeade Seas” 2) is a frequently recurring motif in the fictions of both Byatt and Murdoch. Although the tower can be deciphered in various ways, a common symbolic interpretation may include the notion of imprisonment or enclosure with associated issues of power or disempowerment. As well as the imprisoning towers of the derelict La Tour Bruyarde and Bran House, *Babel Tower* also portrays restraining towers such as the one in Agatha's *Flight North* story from which Artegal flees, the medieval tower that looms over the crypt in St Simeon's church from which Daniel eventually ascends into the world above, and the dismal residential “Wastwater Tower” (606) from which Jude is rescued by Frederica and Daniel.

Jude's *Babbletower*, with its La Tour Bruyarde, resembles the original Tower of Babel with its clamour of discordant voices, lack of consensus, and its occupants' eventual inability to function as a cohesive community. The dysfunctional fantasy world of the “noisy Tower” is a parallel for Bran House, with both settings functioning in opposition to the messy but real world that Frederica explores in the city. Frederica's escape from both towers initiates entry into a labyrinthine female journey that culminates in attainment of degrees of freedom.

Babbletower's group of eighteenth-century idealists flee a revolutionary situation in the city, arriving at the confined space of the towers as they try to establish a new freedom far from the turmoil they left behind. Their optimistic hopes for a society based on unfettered freedom, love and pleasure, is not a real, complicated world, but a constructed one. The

“perfect” society contained inside the walls of the decaying castle bears very obvious similarities to de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* and *Justine* and Charles Fourier’s visionary “phalansteries.” Established on the belief that individuals have absolute freedom, the community members submit to the tyranny of oppression and torture from within the walls of its castle as well as from without. The community plunges into a barbaric orgy of degradation, violence, and torture, and disintegrates. The result is murderous; absolute freedom becomes enthrallment by absolute power.

The circumstances of the world of La Tour Bruyarde and the experiences of Lady Roseace provide an approximate parallel for that of Frederica’s existence at Bran House. While Frederica marries Nigel in the hope that she will be escaping the horror of her sister’s death and entering a utopian life of sexual compatibility and economic ease, her initial euphoria dissipates as she realises the extent to which her movements, like the Lady Roseace’s, are limited. Her discovery that she has stumbled blindly into a life where her presence is objectified is reminiscent of the women at La Tour Bruyarde, Lady Mavis and Lady Roseace, who painfully learn about “the metamorphosis of freedom into humiliation and slavery” (409). Frederica is kept as a plaything by Nigel, who resembles the controlling Culvert and whose collection of pornography mimics the orgies so favoured at La Tour Bruyarde. While Culvert prevents Lady Roseace from fleeing and extracts a harsh revenge, Nigel tries axe-throwing to stop Frederica from leaving his world and pursues her to the divorce courts when she manages to run away.

The constructed world of La Tour Bruyarde is in sharp opposition to Frederica’s escape into the real complicated world of life in London, which is both freeing and constraining. Frederica lives in a time of liberation that carries with it the same problem as the French Revolution: if there are no limits, and if we do not respect each other, we eventually murder each other or destroy ourselves. Consequently, she learns about the need to balance freedom with responsibility through her obligations to her son, her teaching duties, her familial ties, and her friends. Her involvement in several small communities teaches her the value of human connectedness and reflects the importance of freedom without licence. The

messiness and challenge of Frederica's daily life in the city is bound by the realisation that real life is not perfect and never can be – that respect for others always includes restraints and limitations.

Jude's morality tale, subtitled "A Tale for the Children of Our Time," is a warning of what could happen if the freedoms of the Sixties are not limited by the need to treat others as subjects rather than objects. Byatt completes her fictional prophecy in the fourth book of the tetralogy, *A Whistling Woman*, which portrays the tragic outcome of anarchy and madness in the utopian commune at Dun Vale Hall. *Babbletower* is Jude's attempt to use language to break free from the silence of abuse. His abuse by his teacher at Swineburn's boarding school, the result of arrogation of absolute freedom by a man charged with the responsibility of a parent and in a situation of absolute power, is similar to what happens at La Tour Bruyarde. The publication of Jude's book, a publication perceived by 1960s society as a threat to moral order, is subsequently tried for obscenity under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act: Lord Chancellor's Office. Although Jude attempts to gain solace and vindication through his use of language his words, turned against him, function as a sword rather than a shield. The law is an imperfect way of dealing with Nigel's and Frederica's dispute, and of dealing with Jude's alleged obscenity. Yet the law works after a fashion and can even be altered on appeal – better than the effects of unbridled freedom. Jude finds himself enclosed temporarily in a dead end in a tower just as Frederica ends up in Bran House. Ultimately, Frederica's unconditional attention to Jude and his past not only enables her to help him experience freedom, but also frees her from self-obsession.

Frederica is made acutely aware of responsibility to others when, following the book's obscenity prosecution trial, Jude is feared dead. Despite Jude's determination to arouse antagonistic responses from others and Frederica's subsequent decision to "dislike him *intensely*" (218), she develops a degree of empathy towards him after her own arduous path continues to cross annoyingly with his. This repeated contact between them reveals common ground in their love of literature and enables Frederica's recognition of Jude's suffering. During her efforts to establish a space of her own in London, Frederica is challenged,

particularly by Daniel, to pay attention to others, her family especially, and learns to act from a genuine concern towards her new communities and her reclaimed family.

This challenge to attention leads her to wander a variety of paths across London, connecting her with individuals and worlds she does not know. Jude's failure to sign an Appeal document and his suspected disappearance leads Parrott to ask Frederica for help. Daniel acts as Frederica's collaborator and companion on the journey when they set out together to find Jude's home – a thirteenth-floor flat at the top of a tower in South London: “the Wastwater Tower in Stockwell, on an estate called the Wordsworth Estate” (606). The estate, ugly and neglected, is “depressing” (607) in its appearance and smell. Frederica enters its forlorn open spaces, urgently seeking Jude. In her anxiety, she runs up the stairs and again, her negotiation of stairs leads to her attainment of increased knowledge of others. The lift is broken and Frederica and Daniel struggle to climb all the way to the top. It is Frederica who calls out to Jude, emaciated and close to death underneath a pile of blankets, identifying herself and Daniel as his “friends” (608). Doing the previously unthinkable, Frederica helps carry Jude to a taxi to Daniel's home and helps to bathe and dress him. In tending to Jude, Frederica's progress within the labyrinth is revealed in her ability to act selflessly and with full attention to another.

Despite Frederica's growing sense of the value of human connectedness, her daily life remains messy and frightening while she continues to see herself as an actor in a plot she cannot control. Her journey into the city, despite its bright and nurturing new spaces in which she thrives, proves at times to be a confusing maze full of dark and frightening paths, particularly as her humiliating divorce trial looms nearer. She has to negotiate a labyrinth of languages – legal, literary, genetic (Leo and Nigel), and mathematical (through her involvement with John Ottokar). Frederica's passion for language nurtures and sustains her during her bleakest moments, yet she reflects bitterly that language has also been made into a net¹¹ by words that do not describe truthfully what one feels is happening (324). Her “laminations,” a seeking of refuge in language, reveal her frustrated attempt to assert a degree of control over her life and resemble Jude's attempt to do the same for himself through his

creation of *Babbletower*. Agatha's *Flight North* story, however, provides an alternative and optimistic narrative to cruelty and fear, while the Steerforth Committee debate, a background to the Sixties, provides links between Frederica, Agatha, Alexander, Bill Potter, Leo's language development, and responsible freedom versus unfettered liberty.

The ability of language to be shield or sword is made vividly real to Frederica as she becomes in turn closer to her father in their sharing of teaching experiences yet is driven even further from Nigel as they dissect their marriage and fight over Leo. She observes and experiences the ability of language to create, distort, or change life and the social world. The result, Frederica feels, is that an individual may be caused to feel like a "caged or netted beast" (324). Faris compares the perplexing dual nature of language to the labyrinth which, when regarded "as a sign of language itself and of writing, embodies the sense in which we control and yet are controlled by language, in which we write and are written" (4). Frederica's journey reflects Faris's imagery of enclosure, a search for a way out, and the challenge of achieving escape. One of the other "worlds" that Frederica discovers is that of the British law that turns her into something she is not. (Jude's *Babbletower* suffers the same fate – the law cannot accommodate its difference, at first.)

Frederica's divorce and custody hearings become two more opportunities to (mis)interpret the language of the human spirit. She quickly learns that although Nigel does not have perfect language skills, he is adept at the language of stand-over thuggery, and opts for the manipulative language skills of the legal profession instead of rational discussion and negotiation offered by Frederica. He is helped to use language so that his threats eventually transform into a wilful transgression against the precise and truthful use of language when he and Frederica meet in the Divorce Court. Not only do Nigel's lawyers succeed in magnifying the social, political and educational differences between the divorcing couple, but his sisters' lies help to portray Frederica as a promiscuous young woman totally unsuited to caring for their son. Such a deliberate twisting of truth frustrates Frederica, who has been educated to use language as precisely as possible. The court treats her harshly. Despite the freedoms of the 60s, law is still patriarchal, and Frederica is still treated as Nigel's possession. The court

cannot comprehend why Frederica refuses to return to Nigel and why she does not want to avail herself of the social advantages of life with him, such as boarding school for Leo. The system is further confounded by Frederica's wish to live in a socially and racially mixed neighbourhood while working to support herself and her son. Consequently, her unsatisfying interactions with the legal world, analogous to her broken marital relationship, increase her perception that she is no longer in charge of her life.

In a desperate attempt to re-arrange and to gain emotional control over the various elements of her chaotic life, Frederica consoles herself with her "laminations" – a verbal and visual collage of cut-up and re-arranged letters from Nigel's solicitors, her journal entries, assorted quotations, and lists of words she hopes one day to use in poetry (reminiscent of Roland's gathering of words in *Possession*). The fragmented and nonsensical format of the laminations reflects the absurdity and disjointedness not only of the ferment of the Sixties, but also of Frederica's life, which has been metaphorically "hacked" – she feels emotionally and psychologically brutalised. The resulting collage looks like a ludicrous conjoining of disparate elements, where the borders and joins created by the cut-and-paste technique expose obvious seams yet create a unified text of sorts.

Frederica's creative project is one of catharsis in which the process of writing encourages a healing and regenerative action. Her laminations resemble the genre of confessional writing insofar as they provide her with means to express her troubling thoughts and feelings about the way she is trapped by events and relationships. Felski notes that confessional writing, as a "questioning of self" (10), is frequently inspired by a personal crisis that acts as a catalyst. As a pursuit of self-identity, it forms part of a critical process of self-understanding – "Writing as a calling of myself into being" (10). Byatt observes in an interview that Frederica feels "that she is herself again" when she is writing, that "her mind is alive," and that writing makes "her body real to her" (Cambiaghi 155).

Agatha's *Flight North*, in comparison to both Jude's *Babbletower* and Frederica's laminations, is a positive and optimistic tale about individuals using their gifts and talents for good purposes, and acts as an antidote to the rebellious and restless Sixties. An instalment of

Agatha's narrative is inserted into *Babel Tower* at a point where Frederica struggles to describe love and connection in literature for her lectures, while attempting to draw up a list of evidence against Nigel for her divorce petition. Agatha tells Frederica that she wrote the fantasy to entertain "bookish children" like herself and Frederica as youngsters, and to prove that it is possible to "*learn to live*" (316) from such tales. Agatha's story succeeds in transporting Frederica to "another world" (314) in which she, like the characters, is "afraid of the thicket she is in ... of losing Leo, of hurting Leo" (326). Yet while Agatha resists giving Frederica unsolicited advice, her story carries the implicit belief that "People [can] change" (314). Artegall, like Frederica, has experienced an education that included endless numbers of books while incarcerated in his tower. After he is rescued, and considered to be useless by others, Artegall eventually asserts his identity by claiming as Frederica did at Bran House, that "I am *someone*" (316), and proves that his scholarship makes him useful to his fellow travellers as a "finder of paths" (316). Similarly, Frederica learns to discern which paths are the best to follow by relying on the connections she makes through her literary involvements just as Artegall relies on his "princely education" (316). Frederica's revelation of her true self becomes apparent in her selfless rescue of Jude, similar to Artegall's rescue of the burning snake. Attention to the creature enables him to hear it and other creatures speak. They, in turn, help him find his way. So, too, Frederica's pursuit of a thread of attention involves her listening to those from worlds previously not familiar to her and with whom interaction enables her to choose future paths more wisely.

While Frederica continues to struggle in her attempts to balance freedom and responsibility in the city, the Steerforth Committee debates the English curriculum. The narrative of the Committee's discussions and conclusions is both a background to the Sixties, and another world to which Frederica becomes linked. She is inextricably connected to the debate between social control and grammar through her own language experiences and because of her relationships with Agatha, Alexander, and Bill Potter. The tension between freedom of expression and obedience to rules, emblematic of the rapid changes of the 60s, is played out in the committee's discussions and is analogous to Frederica's own attempts in

learning how to deal with much more fluid and complex social situations. She is challenged to progress even further along her path of self development by a need to pay closer attention to Leo's wellbeing and his language development in particular.

The narrative portrays the conflicting positions of those on the Steerforth Committee. Members argue for the right to "freedom of expression against ... conformity to rules" (167), and support the notion of learning by discovery, unrestricted by rules, while others feel that certain things ought to be taught by rote. There is a sharp delineation between one approach and the other, with no middle ground apparent. While Mickey Impey advocates anarchy in the classroom and a general disdain for all parents' and teachers' authority, his attitude encourages comparison between grammar's rules and social control. Good teachers, however, seem to be people who can pay attention and exercise minds while remaining creative and inventive. Frederica experiences first-hand the distress caused by an unstructured learning program and lack of attention when, on discovering that Leo, aged seven, is unable to read, she is simply reassured with, "Don't worry ... He'll learn" (602). Frederica is plagued by guilt that her lack of attention prevented her from noticing Leo's slow development, while Agatha admits that, suspicious herself, she has "tried him out once or twice" (602) to test him. Quick to acknowledge that Leo needs help with language, Frederica's sense of responsibility as a parent urges her to seek help rather than believing that "nature" will take care of the problem. Consequently, her resolve illustrates that there is a need for creativity and liberty tempered by responsibility in education, as in all social settings. Her fight for her own personal degree of freedom without injustice to others is exemplified in her determination that her son will not only attend a school renowned for "progressiveness and innovation" (369), but that he will also receive the appropriate structured help for his learning difficulties.

Frederica's labyrinthine ventures ultimately lead her into a risky world of emotional and physical intimacy. This section of her journey is problematic for two reasons. She is acutely aware by now of the need to exercise responsibility towards Leo in her search for freedom and endeavours to shield him from any potentially unsettling experiences. While she manages to balance these needs, she is also frightened by the implications of intimacy, fearing

loss of self once more. Her laminations, while a symptom of her need for control, also reveal her fear of losing her “power and intelligence” (359) were she to enter into a close relationship again. Consequently, while the desire for a meronymic existence is at the heart of her dealings with John Ottokar, her exit from the labyrinth depends on her ability to “be all the things she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously separate” (312).

Frederica freely admits her sexual impulses cause her much anguish, claiming that her marriage to Nigel was due mostly to their compatibility in bed (Felski 131). Although Felski remarks that “sexuality rarely plays a dominant role in the self-discovery process” and that “Erotic passion ... can sabotage the protagonist’s ... sense of independent identity” (131), Frederica needs to achieve a successful connection of this sort while remaining a separate being in order to complete her journey out of the labyrinth. Her gradual involvement with one of her adult students, John Ottokar, occurs at his instigation. Like Nigel, John does not “have” language, finding it hard to communicate confidently in words, yet as a computer programmer he fluently deploys a highly complex and different form of language. He admits he needs to learn to communicate in a “human” way, confiding in Frederica that the texts she teaches have shown him “what it is to be a human being” (286). Despite his sexual allure, which she compares to Nigel’s, Frederica sees that John values language as a means to freedom and finds that, despite his tentativeness, he can communicate. Their lovemaking is mutually generous and satisfying. Yet Frederica, frightened and cautious, continually scrutinises her motives, asking herself, “Do I want this?” (345, 351) and “Do I love him?” (381), finally admitting, “I want this. I think I want this” (346). Total abandonment, however, is still impossible.

Her tentative searching out of her feelings towards John is tangled with her fears of losing Leo to Nigel should she be found guilty of adultery, and of losing her separateness. Frederica recognises that “she is not free, as once she was” (434) and although she and John are compatible in many ways, she is “now highly aware of Leo watching her ... calculating, jealous” (434). Her responsibilities to her son and her wish to gain custody forbid her

anticipation of anything more than a casual relationship with John. Yet John, who lives his own messy and complicated life with a jealous twin brother and knows about degrees of freedom and responsibility, also shares Frederica's desire to be separate while at the same time craving intimacy and relationship. He, too, is wary of becoming "all *snarled*" (438) in others' problems and fears jeopardising his involvement with Frederica. John understands her need for autonomy and her sense of responsibility towards Leo. While John shares with Frederica his desire to be separate from his brother, Paul, he also tells her he cannot abandon his duty to help him.

Frederica's final movements within the maze take place as she travels down, like Persephone into her dark world, into London's Underground. The otherworldly space is eerily lit, smells anciently of soot and is devoid of flowers. Oblivious to those around her, she is conscious only of an anonymous white blur, seeing "nothing, no faces, a white procession" (615). In a subway scene remarkably similar to one in Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* which involves Morgan Browne encountering her estranged husband Tallis, Frederica notices John travelling up the escalator while she descends.¹² Frederica, aggrieved at John's self-imposed absence of several weeks, decides to continue her journey home rather than speak to him. She hesitates, waits, and retraces her steps back down, eventually meeting him in the train carriage, telling him without rancour that she can manage without him. Undeterred, John readily affirms Frederica's self-sufficiency and challenges her to try to accommodate him in her independent life. Having proven that she can indeed manage to balance degrees of freedom with responsibility, Frederica agrees.

Frederica's labyrinthine physical, emotional and social journey culminates in an increased respect and understanding of the value of language in her world. She discovers that words are simultaneously ways of connecting to others as well as to the self. Her reading, writing and teaching activities reinforce her own evolving relationship with language and her sense of connection to a wider community. Frederica finds her home: she gains independence and autonomy, re-establishes her severed family ties and manages to forge new connections to others who allow her room to be an individual. Her teenage lament that, surely, "it was

possible ... to make something of one's life *and* be a woman" (*Virgin* 223) is affirmed during her own arduous pursuit of Ariadne's thread through the maze of several small, connected worlds. Her seemingly impossible wish "to have sex and books, to be a passionate intellectual and a desirable, independent woman" (Hulbert 7) appears about to be fulfilled as Frederica succeeds in creating a balance of the physical and intellectual aspects of her life.

¹ Frederica Potter, in *Babel Tower* (38).

² Rita Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, points out that the Bildungsroman has been recognised for some time as a specifically German phenomenon. Yet, she urges that in order for the genre to become more widely accepted and valued, its historical and national parameters ought to be broadened while still retaining its distinctive feature of "the individual's development in society" (127). Four specific requirements to fulfil the above requirement would include: a coherent individual character as the focal point of the narrative; this character's identity would be the result of the interplay between psychological and social forces; the protagonist's identity formation would occur as a temporal process via a linear and chronological narrative; and the narrative's main concern would be the protagonist's goal of self-knowledge.

³ Byatt's Jude Mason, named Julian Guy Monckton-Pardew by his parents, admits in court that he chose his name as a tribute to Thomas Hardy's protagonist Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude Mason regards himself as "obscure," regarding Hardy's Jude as an appropriate and "Romantic" model for himself as they are both self-styled intellectuals "excluded from the inner circle of university life." Jude Fawley, a stonemason by trade, is "an honest tradesman" whom Byatt's Jude hopes to emulate: "he saw the poetry in stones. I believe art is craft first. I always meant to be an artist. 'Mason' seemed a good place to start" (571-72).

⁴ Catherine Keller, in "Warriors, Women, and the Nuclear Complex: Toward a Postnuclear Postmodernity" analyses the relation between masculine castration anxiety and militarisation of culture in the ancient construction of fortified camps by tracing an etymological relationship commencing with the root metaphor of "castration" (68). She finds that the Latin verb "castrare" means "to remove the testicles" (68). The noun form "castrum," refers to "a fortified place, a camp" and forms the root of "castle" (68). The common denominator, she notes, is the idea of separation. It is ironic that a well-defended place, in order not to be cut off, must already be cut off. Further, the word "chaste" meaning "cut off from" also stems from the same root, with ancient definitions of "holiness" or "purity" (69) associated with chastity.

⁵ The Bluebeard tale is discussed at length in Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (267-8). One modern version, in particular, is especially interesting: Georgette Leblanc, the lover of Maurice Maeterlinck, persuaded him in 1899 to write a libretto called *Ariane et Barbebleue* based on Perrault's *La Barbe bleue*: "... the wives of Bluebeard become the young Cretan maidens sacrificed to the Minotaur's lust; his most recent bride, Ariane, takes on the role of her classical namesake and Theseus combined" (267). Margaret Attwood and Angela Carter have also produced variants on the tale.

⁶ Nigel's family name, Reiver, is derived from the Scots verb *reive* meaning to raid or plunder (*The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1138).

⁷ Daniel is described in *The Virgin in the Garden* as dark and solid, a large man – "hirsute, with coarse springing black hair, dense brows and a heavy chin shaded by the stubble of an energetic beard" (44). Stephanie, his dead wife, by contrast was "a mild, soft, blonde girl with large breasts, elegant legs" (34, 35). This dark and light imagery recurs throughout Byatt's fiction and may also be observed in both couples in *Possession* – Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte – as well as Nigel and Frederica in *Babel Tower*. Murdoch's Sam and Yvonne in "Something Special" are also associated with dark / light symbolism.

⁸ Chevalier and Gheerbrant point out that stairways, as the “classic symbol of ascent can denote not only the ever higher pursuit of knowledge, but a concerted elevation of the whole being” (924). Likewise, Leonard Lutwack in *The Role of Place in Literature* observes that pre-Christianity held that both great heights and great depths were sacred while stairs symbolically afford a passage from one level to the next: one mode of existence to another (40).

⁹ Byatt recalls in an interview with Boyd Tonkin: “I remember Iris Murdoch saying that she had learned from Simone Weil that the word ‘attention’ was the most important moral word. You must attend and go on giving attention, and then you won’t hit a moment of high decision as to whether to go this way or that, because your proper attention will show you what is the *small* right thing to do” (23). She admits, though, that her application of the concept is “much more primitive,” resembling a “‘greedy curiosity’ ” (23).

¹⁰ German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1865-1935) in his study, *Community and Association*, focused on changes that occurred when rural society became urbanised. People were bound together by fellowship and authority into neighbourhoods (26-7). Tönnies defined different types of human communal and social relations as *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

¹¹ In her early study of Murdoch’s fiction, *Iris Murdoch*, Byatt discusses similarities between Murdoch’s *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince* regarding the “tension between the attempt to tell, or see, the truth, and the inevitability of fantasy” (35). Byatt explains that Hugo, one of the characters in *Under the Net*, feels that language is a “machine” for creating lies – a trapping net under which it is difficult to creep. This image “comes from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in which he likens our descriptive languages to a mesh put over reality” (36). Frederica reflects at her divorce trial that a “linguistic net” has been thrown over the proceedings and has trapped her, Leo, and Nigel “over what can’t be named or defined or understood” (520).

¹² See Murdoch’s *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*: “When [Morgan] was halfway up the escalator she suddenly saw Tallis. He was standing on the opposite escalator going down, gliding slowly downward towards her, standing in the long line of people on the right-hand side of the escalator ... The scene shook and shimmered before her eyes, the row of blurred faces moved onward with mesmeric slowness ... Then he was gone, sinking downward past her, and a moment later Morgan was stumbling off the escalator at the top” (329).

CONCLUSION

*“Knowledge is gained ... by undertaking the pilgrimage,
not by reaching the destination.”*

– Andrew Gasiorek¹

Murdoch's and Byatt's fiction exemplifies their beliefs in the complexity of human beings and the importance of fiction as a means of conveying and embodying important truths about the self. They reject the solitary, Romantic self, that is absolutely free, and depict instead the struggles (of women especially) to develop a self in community. The way they find most effective in portraying the process is the journey through the labyrinth, because for them a facile, “linear” depiction of the development of the self cannot show the process of making mistakes, of confronting and struggling with social and political reality, of learning about oneself, (and of seeking and achieving a meronymic relationship in Byatt) in the way that the labyrinthine journey does.

In this process women have to learn to see the real rather than the illusory as the inhabitants of Plato's Cave do. For women, constrained by lack of education, belief that marriage is a solution to one's problems or necessary to identity, or the desire to “have it all” (Dora, Marian, Frederica), Plato's Cave has *particular* illusions that a male Plato's cave might not have. Not all women have the same experience, though: it is not a case of the simple “oppression of women” idea in early feminism, as Friedman and Felski show. Women can be in a multiplicity of subject positions – hence the labyrinth rather than a simple journey.

For Murdoch, art has very definite roles to play. She believes that reality can be portrayed in fiction and can help us to live our lives better; and introspection can be decreased thus creating more awareness of others. These are moral benefits. Murdoch's fiction does not seek to provide answers *per se* to dilemmas – great art does not console, after all (“Against

Dryness” 292). Instead, Murdoch simply attempts to teach “readers to unlearn their ways of perceiving” (Heusel 257). Her fiction challenges readers to step beyond their assumptions and confront otherness and particularity in the characters she portrays. This sort of attention, prescribed in her fictions as well as in life, has been well documented in Murdoch’s philosophical writings. “Attention” requires of us that we recognise that others, however eccentric or contingent they may appear, have a right to exist. Several of Murdoch’s characters learn this lesson the hard way. Marian Taylor, in *The Unicorn*, for example, allows herself to be swayed by the pity she feels for Hannah Crean-Smith, the enclosed princess of Gaze Castle, and decides to act to save her from her miserable existence. In the end, Marian allows appearance to outweigh reality and becomes involved in a tragic cycle of events culminating in Hannah’s death. As she leaves Gaze, Marian reflects that she ought not to have acted as she has, and must now return to “the real world” (264). While Murdoch passes no conclusive judgement on her characters, the reader is left pondering their actions long after the narrative ends. In due course, each character realises that while she cannot be an autonomous individual without meaningful interaction with others, men and women share the need to be both independent of yet connected to each other.

Byatt’s short story “Crocodile Tears,” which focuses on Patricia Nimmo, widowed in tragic circumstances, illustrates eloquently the need to confront one’s minotaur. Patricia acts in a manner with which it is difficult to empathise, and escapes to the south of France without pausing to identify her husband when he dies. Her time spent in Nîmes is an ordeal during which consecutive events, along with dreams and memories, force her to confront the reality of her husband’s physical passing from her life. Patricia is aided by her angelic gargoyle, Nils, to stop looking away and confront reality, however painful it is. The need for meaningful interaction with others is demonstrated best when Patricia, finally enabled by Nils’ help to deal with Tony’s death, agrees to help him face the tragic circumstances of his life and prepares to journey to his homeland with him.

Murdoch believes stories are important and essential to life. She regards “art, and the novel, as an attempted vision of the good and the true,” pointing out that humans “need ...

stories (as we need food, or light)” (Byatt “Her Philosophical Essays” 27) and sees literature’s task as encouraging tolerance through exercise of the imagination. While Murdoch perceives the storyteller as an important moral agent, “a truth-teller and ... defender of words” (27), she also cautions against using the art of literature as an illusory consolation or simple personal fantasy or evasion of reality through escape into daydream. The warning against seductive appearance is explicit: the “novelist is potentially *the greatest truth-teller of them all* ... [yet] he is also an expert fantasy-monger” (27). Murdoch’s call to heed the reality of life despite its distractions is reinscribed throughout her fiction as a guiding thread in the labyrinth.

Byatt’s beliefs are similar to Murdoch’s. While Murdoch challenges readers to contemplate reality more deeply, Byatt considers that stories help us “think consciously about human beings and the world they don’t cure ... they join us to each other” (“Fairy Stories” n.pag.). The notion of being joined to others while still retaining independence is a dominant theme throughout Murdoch’s and Byatt’s narratives. The majority of characters find it difficult to achieve “subjectivity based on a relational identity where sameness *and* difference are not mutually exclusive ... but are recognised as *equally* important aspects of an effective sense of self” (Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 85). Protagonists want to experience self as “both part of and merged with other people and, simultaneously, as independent of them” (85), and to occupy their own subjective space, although Murdoch’s women, who are more constrained than Byatt’s, are less assured of such an outcome.

While Murdoch’s fiction proposes that individuals can attain autonomy through their increased awareness of others, Byatt suggests that individuals can advance beyond mutual recognition and respect to meronymic relationships in community. An obvious development in the writers’ fiction is the progression of characters’ abilities to negotiate a sense of identity that does not diminish others’ subjectivity. Female characters’ struggles evolve from the need to become free of patriarchal control (Dora, Marian, Yvonne) to situations in which they can negotiate complex relationships of mutual freedom *and* dependence (Maud and Frederica). Friedman and Felski argue that as women’s political and social status has become more complicated, their identities have become correspondingly more multifaceted. As a result, the

array of possibilities available to characters is represented as an increasingly varied choice of paths forming a journey through the labyrinth.

The powerful cultural symbol of the labyrinth forms part of a mythical and artistic vocabulary that dates back to ancient times. The ambiguity of the labyrinthine passageways as they simultaneously evoke “the tortures of hell” but also lead to “the space of enlightenment” has been documented extensively (Santarcangeli 401). The labyrinth’s dangerous centre, along with the possibility of becoming lost forever within its circuitous intricacies, has ensured the perpetuation of its predominantly negative and sinister image. While the symbol of labyrinth has been associated with the female domain, as a narrative model it has existed almost exclusively as a male space.² It is possible and desirable, though, to imagine an alternative model created by a combination of the traditional labyrinth and a feminist re-writing of Plato’s Cave myth. The insistent feminism present in the image of the cave, along with its links to sexuality, religion, philosophy, literature and history, have been explored in depth by Heusel and Johnson.³ By virtue of this revised space, the female protagonists examined in this study can enter the labyrinth, grasp Ariadne’s thread, negotiate the centre, and pursue a path that leads to the exit. Although the path out is fraught with many dead ends, wrong turns and enclosures, and patience and perseverance are needed for a skilful negotiation of the journey out of the maze, it is after all “the journey, not the arrival, that matters” (Faris 198).

The notion of the labyrinthine journey is a fitting metaphor for characters’ struggles through a multitude of obstacles and diversions as they seek autonomy and independence. The women’s journeys are similar to those of the Bildungsroman – stories that portray the protagonist’s “growing up” as a process of location and development of self in community. Murdoch’s and Byatt’s women live constrained existences that lead each woman to crave the stimulation and sustenance of involvement with others. Consequently, they seek a thread that leads towards integration within a wider world, despite its inherent dangers. Most protagonists, though, venture willingly from seclusion into the disorientation of the maze towards relationship.

The narratives commence with physical journeys – on foot, by car, train or plane – to another place, and conclude either with a return to that place or to a new destination where life can start afresh. The circuitous nature of the protagonists' travels reinforces the correspondingly crucial aspect of circularity in traditional mazes or labyrinths. While the path from entry to exit includes many choices, it is never a direct route from A to B. Paths are often confusing and ill-lit, strewn with obstacles, wrong turns, and dead ends. Protagonists must often retrace steps in order to re-orient themselves and locate the correct path. Isolation and anxiety are frequent and harrowing travelling companions, yet occasions of unexpected and welcome guidance and connection may also occur. The labyrinthine journey is about gaining knowledge acquired through hardship and repetition.

For example, as Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* engages in a desperate search for identity and self-knowledge, she ventures back and forth with people from her past, repeating actions about which she feels guilty but is unable to stop. Eventually she follows her husband into the country, retreats to London, and then returns to him once again. Her painful journeys even in and around the rural surroundings of her temporary home are repeated occasions of stumbling and groping to find her way, getting lost, and seeking help. Dora's circuitous travels do, however, eventually result in her gaining much knowledge and, finally, independence.

The circular structure of the narrative may also represent the completion of a symbolic life-death-rebirth cycle, aspects of which are often illustrated in the Shakespearean manner of the changeability of weather, the progression of seasons, or the progression of time. In a further labyrinthine complication, Murdoch and Byatt also employ timeframes that alternate past with present or vice versa and in which characters are depicted metaphorically retracing their own steps or those of others. An example of this technique is evident in Byatt's *Possession*, in which a Victorian past is alternated with contemporary time. Byatt's signature technique of text-within-text presents the past, in part, through the poetry and love letters to each other written by characters Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. As contemporary academics Maud Bailey and Roland Michell re-read the Victorians' writing,

they become obsessed with retracing the poets' past. As they pursue the paths trodden by Christabel and Randolph, their own steps form a parallel image and they resurrect the past by falling in love with each other, while the past conversely breathes into them a life much more real than the one they had before.

Each character's journey involves a search for an elusive something – and it is not always apparent in the end if what is sought is found. Each of the protagonists, though, does find something. In her stumbling and faltering attempts to grasp Ariadne's thread each woman encounters the other, and directly as a result of this attention to another human being, confronts her self. Sometimes the self is the monster in the labyrinth. Yvonne Geary in "Something Special" attempts to challenge her family's intimations that she ought to marry the gentle tailor, Sam Goldman. Her dream of an interesting life in England does not include marriage to Sam. Even the prospect of marriage, a new home, raising children and financial security do not sway Yvonne, who seeks something special from her life. As she and Sam wander the maze-like streets of Dublin, Yvonne realises that although none of the roles on offer fit her imaginary future, she can no longer avoid serious contemplation of her own fate. Confrontation of her minotaur involves her despondent deliberation of her seemingly lacklustre options. Yvonne is trapped in the labyrinth by her inability to imagine an alternative future for herself with Sam. She lacks the courage to contemplate the other and in doing so, see herself. Instead, she tells her mother tearfully that she will marry Sam after all.

Murdoch's and Byatt's fiction proposes alternative roles for women and constructions of self different from those prescribed by a patriarchal tradition. Felski identifies the contemporary interest in subjectivity shaped by "spirituality and myth" as "a significant dimension within feminist literature ... The feminist self-discovery narrative represents a concern with questions of identity and autonomous selfhood, tracing a distinctive plot which marks out some form of movement from alienation and lack to self-knowledge and a potential for self-determination" ("Beyond Feminist Aesthetics" 150). The fictionality of such development of self is augmented by a feminism that seeks subjectivity foregrounding the construction of identity in relationship, especially that found in community, and

understandings of sociology such as those described by Anthony Giddens and Richard Jenkins. The incorporation into fictional narratives of these sorts of cultural and ideological perspectives is an important way of articulating women's changing concerns and self-perceptions.

Felski's description replicates the general trajectory of the paths wandered by the protagonist within the maze – an optimistic but frequently uncertain search for “a different vision of human change and possibility” that will lead away from “alienation and failure of relationship and the [poor] level of intimacy and nurturance” (Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 32). Murdoch's and Byatt's female characters reveal a determination to explore the possibilities of a future lived in dialogue with others. Irrespective of her particular life circumstances, each woman is involved in a growing-up process during which she simultaneously attempts to move beyond her current situation into the next stage of selfhood, growing into, or attempting to find her place within, a community of selves. This process is summed up eloquently by O.B. Hardison as follows:

The world of the self is a refuge, and we need it in order to retain our identity. But it is also a prison that we need to break out of to enlarge our identities. To surrender the self is an adventure under the best of circumstances. It is always an adventure to leave what is familiar with the knowledge that the experience will change us in such a way that we will never be able to return to precisely the point from which we began. (299).

Frederica Potter, in *Babel Tower*, struggles to grow into the next stage of her selfhood in the midst of several communities. Part of her steps towards autonomy involves her teaching unenthusiastic students. As she attempts to bring literature to life for them, to “seduce them into seeing” (212), she imagines the novel as “a long thread of language, like knitting, thicker and thinner in patches” which is “also made of *ideas* that connect all the people like another layer of interwoven knitting”(213). This textual metaphor is extended when she reflects, later, that her students are listening and that her “knitting is a fishnet” (213) – pulling them in, connecting them to each other and to her, through her teaching of the ideas conveyed in the

fiction. Later, as Frederica's teaching skills develop, she becomes aware of her ability to construct "a web of attention" amongst a new group of adult students amongst whom "threads are being knotted" (221). Frederica's belief in the text's ability to intertwine and connect ideas of the imagination to real flesh and blood seems appropriate given that the medieval Latin etymology of "text" is "to weave."

Not surprisingly, Byatt describes her perceptions of the multifaceted craft of writing thus: "I associate weaving and embroidery and tapestry with the art of narrative too" ("Fairy Stories" n.pag.). It seems appropriate therefore, that the thinking, feeling women of Byatt's and Murdoch's fictions are depicted so frequently as resembling the Lady of Shalott – as enclosed or confined characters trying to escape their individual forms of entrapment. The Lady spent her days weaving a tapestry and observing life as reflections in her mirror. Her tapestry, as a metaphor for her life, however, was dull and colourless as it lacked the vitality of connecting threads to others. These essential human links that Virginia Woolf expresses in her writing through images of "knitting, stitching, weaving" (Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 93) imply the necessity of working at those constructions which will in turn sustain, delight and enrich human life.

The life-changing experience of exploring the labyrinth applies equally to the reader deciphering the text as to the characters within the narrative. The notion of texts as labyrinths has been examined throughout this study insofar as the creation and reception of texts resemble labyrinthine processes. Writers create fictions that reflect on the intricacy of the world and in so doing create a verbal or textual labyrinth. The resultant text is mimetic as well as metafictional. While characters make sense of the labyrinth – from the inside – step by step, and do not see it in its entirety, the reader – from the outside – also painstakingly progresses through the narrative searching for Ariadne's thread of meaning, and with perseverance will eventually see the narrative in its entirety. Byatt believes that the making of meaning in a text ought to be a collaborative effort between author and reader, while Doob argues that a good textual labyrinth will exercise the mind of the creator and interpreter, leading to a goal of enlightenment for the intended reader. A seemingly inextricable text, like

a maze, challenges the reader to labour at deciphering meaning and its ambiguous and confusing path may simultaneously be traced by protagonist and reader alike. Iser compares the process of perception as follows:

[the] novel offers only a potential presentation, the working out of which has to be done actively by the reader. The reader is not led into a ready-made world of meaning, but is made to search for this world. Fiction's place [is] as a potential stimulus for looking more closely at one's own life. Thus reading itself has an archetypal structure which ... is unable to lead to any defined goal. It is a quest which brings to the surface the possibility of any number of findings. (228).

Iser's textual model, with its "possibility of any number of findings," alludes to a multicursal labyrinth with its array of choices and paths. Consequently, Murdoch's and Byatt's narratives – recognised for their intertextuality – are often critically identified as possessing characteristics of postmodernism in their combination of realism and fantasy. Murdoch and Byatt create highly original fictions that are composed of a complex warp and weft of threads from varied sources: myths, classics, poems, and fairy tales entwined with both writers' own individual bright strands of invention. While Byatt also draws heavily on folk tales from a variety of cultures and eras, Murdoch includes elements of psychological drama into her work, in which entire plots are frequently reconstructions of Shakespearean dramas. Heusel's examination of Murdoch's techniques prompts her to observe that Murdoch's blending of diverse genres succeeds in interjecting "a strong irreverent carnivalesque flavor into her texts" and that her use of "postmodern practices" (252) results in an "indeterminacy created through irony and contingency, openness, and improvisation" (257). The alternating of the past with the present, referred to previously, also allows for the interplay of history and memory in characters' consciousness.

While Murdoch's fiction has been described as an area in which she "plays" with various philosophical ideas, Byatt "plays" in much the same way with literary or critical theory. Byatt's fiction, her "critical storytelling," creates a space whereby "the creative potential of an intersection (rather than mutual effacement) of fiction and critical thought" is

possible (Alfer and Noble, *A.S. Byatt*, 2). Byatt's inheritance of Murdoch's fondness for the great literature of the nineteenth century is revealed in her determination to portray with unerring honesty and generosity individuals who are "real impenetrable human persons" just as Murdoch, "her literary mother" does (Levenson, "The Religion of Fiction" 338). Although Murdoch and Byatt share many writerly traits and obsessions, the fictional worlds they present to their readers provide vastly different journeys and excursions into simultaneously familiar yet challengingly new paths. Their stories are interwoven of many strands and help us to see ourselves in a more complex way. In fragmented times, their fictions offer an Ariadne's thread to women, either as protagonists or readers, who seek the meaning, direction, and transformative possibilities provided by stories.

¹ Andrew Boguslaw P. Gasiorek, "A Crisis of Metanarratives: Realism and Innovation in the Contemporary English Novel" (290).

² See Wendy Faris, *Labyrinths of Language* (6, 7). The entrance to a labyrinth is often guarded by a woman – the Sybil of Cumae, but Daedalus designed its intricate passages (although Pasiphae was the labyrinth's originator) and Theseus conquered them, albeit with the help of a woman – Ariadne. Faris comments that this is an "ambiguity of sexual dynamics" which, although it is necessary to acknowledge here, will not be pursued in detail in this study.

³ For further detailed discussion of this idea, see Barbara Stevens Heusel, *Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s* (241), and Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* (Chapter Four).

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