Pornography as ludism and diegetic interpenetration in A.S. Byatt's *Babel tower*

I would like to begin by amending my title, the Anglo-Saxon brutality of which will be seen in due course to result directly from the nature of the novel in question. A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*[127] is the third in the projected tetralogy which began with *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life,* the completion of which is expected imminently, with *A Whistling Woman*[128]*.* As my topic suggests, I have chosen to concentrate on the darker aspects of this novel, placing it in two distinct schemas of intertextuality – that of the tetralogy, and that of Byatt's work as a whole – and looking also at how the text functions intratextually, by examining the relations between the various parts of the diegesis, which reach a climax of virtuosity in *Babel Tower*. This, given the very dark subject-matter of the novel, creates unpleasant and disturbing effects. I will begin with a general overview of as much of the novel as is necessary to situate the ensuing intertextual critique.

The tetralogy is the story of Frederica Potter, born into a family of northern left-wing intellectuals, whose characterisation owes something to D. H. Lawrence. We first meet the Potters in a fictitious northern town in the 1950s. In *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, which play with and on very different modes of intertextuality – the Shakespearean and the inter-semiotic, to schematize very broadly – Frederica has been through the sixth form and Cambridge, plunging into passions, both intellectual and carnal, but refusing offers of marriage from various well-connected if ultimately insipid young men. *Babel Tower* takes up the story of the Potter family in the 1960s, a few years after the accidental death of Stephanie, the elder daughter, and Frederica appears in a new incarnation, introduced to the reader for the first time through the eyes of an

[127] A. S. Byatt, *Babel Tower*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1996.
[128] This paper was written before the publication of the novel, in 2002.

old Cambridge friend, Hugh Pink, who hardly recognises her: she has become a country gentlewoman, and lives, as she herself gloats, in a "moated grange", with her husband, "black-avised".

It emerges that Frederica has accepted a marriage proposal from Nigel Reiver, mentioned in *Still Life* without any indication as to the possible outcome. She lives with him, their four-year-old son, Leo, his sisters and his servants, in Bran House, the Reiver family seat, and has almost completely severed her ties with her Cambridge friends, with her family, and with Blesford, the town where she grew up. Discontented with her idleness, Frederida decides either to find a job, or to prepare a doctoral thesis. When she suggests this plan to Nigel, who has a violent temperament, and regularly attacks her, he seriously injures her by throwing an axe at her. At this point Frederica makes use of the chance encounter with Hugh Pink, and escapes to London with Leo, where she moves in with a new character, Agatha Mond, and her small daughter, eventually beginning divorce proceedings against Nigel, and the battle for the custody of Leo. Frederica once more takes up the friends of her old existence, reading manuscripts for a publishing-house and lecturing part-time at an art school. Here she "discovers" a marginal character, Jude Mason, a new character in the tetralogy, an ex-public schoolboy from Swineburn, the same institution as Nigel Reiver, it emerges. Jude is a bohemian, a neo-romantic, highly conscious of the political and ideological climate of his own epoch. He is working as a life model while battling with religious doubt and psychological breakdown – and writing a pornographic novel called *Babbletower.*

Babel Tower is different from the two novels which begin the tetralogy in that the interaction between the various diegetic levels is considerably more complex. The narrative schema of *Babel Tower* brings to mind more that of the more recent *Possession,* with its two distinct temporalities, although in *Babel Tower* one of these temporalities, incarnated in the extracts from Jude Mason's novel, is entirely hypodiegetic, which is not the case in *Possession*. *Babel Tower* is a complex mosaic of texts juxtaposed and superimposed: as the title suggests, the work is highly polyphonic. *Babel Tower* can also be considered as a sequel of a sort both to *Morpho Eugenia*[129] and to "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye"*,* in that it continues to vehicle through endlessly varied textual play, including the weaving of

[129] The first novel in *Angels and Insects,* London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.

vast webs of intertextuality, the themes of marriage and childbirth.

To turn for a moment to the reception of *Babel Tower,* it must be said in fairness that the novel was a disappointment to many, and an offence to some. The very dark ambiance of the story is announced by the Man Ray illustration of the Marquis de Sade on the back cover of the hardback edition of the book. Published almost a decade after the essentially comic, although erudite, *The Virgin in the Garden, Babel Tower* had been long and eagerly awaited, and, when it did appear in April 1996, many of the reviewers showed a simple lack of comprehension, comparing it unfavourably with the ever-popular *Possession,* and, particularly, denouncing its use of pornography and the references to Sade. That a female writer, and one who had been read rightly or wrongly as championing the "feminist" cause, should write pornography[130] was seen as a betrayal – notwithstanding the technical brilliance of the framing of the pornography in question, which seemed to pass largely unnoticed[131]. Susan Hill demands rhetorically, "How do you write about decadence without being decadent, violence and pornography without being violently pornographic?", and goes on to assert, "[t]he novel is all of these things […]. Reading it is like being plunged into a hideous nightmare full of appalling and vicious people, a pit of nastiness and corruption"[132]. She refers, apparently, particularly to the scene of the death of Roseace, the main female character in Jude Mason's novel, *Babbletower,* who is tortured to death by means of penetration with a many-

[130] The definition of pornography with which I am working is based on the work of Andrea Dworkin: "The vileness of women and an intense hatred of female genitalia are major themes in every Sadeian opus. Both male and female characters evince a deep aversion to and loathing of the vagina […] Sade is concerned too with the violation of the mother – not only as wife to her husband but also as victim of her children. A constant conceit throughout Sade's fiction is that fathers are wondrous sexual beings, mothers stupid and repressed prudes who would be better off as whores" (Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London: The Women's Press, 1994, 96-97).

[131] Byatt herself refers to the equivocal reception of this, her most recent work, and particularly its embedded novel, commenting thus on her refusal to bend to the expectations of the market: "[T]he English reviewers, particularly women, who had identified madly with *Possession,* [were] both baffled and angered by *Babbletower,* perhaps because the text-within-a-text was not a delightful primitive fairytale, but something dark and didactic together" (Helen E. Mundler, Interview with A. S. Byatt, Paris, April 1996, included in *Le Texte dans le texte dans l'œuvre d'A. S. Byatt : 1978 – 1996,* Thèse de doctorat*,* Université des Sciences Humaines (Strasbourg II), May 1998).

[132] Susan Hill: " 'A Bit Too Clever', Review of *Babel Tower* by A. S. Byatt", *Literary Review*, May 1996, 38-39.

tongued instrument. The reader's sentiments regarding this scene, which it is difficult not to qualify as repulsive, are likely to echo Frederica's when she thinks of the death of her sister: “The violent ending makes the whole story appalling” (99). The extracts from *Babbletower,* breaking up the long-awaited continuation of the diegesis about Frederica may be experienced as brutal interruptions in more senses than one.

In fact, despite the furore provoked by its publication, *Babel Tower* is in many respects coherent with Byatt's previous work. By its partial affiliation with realism, and through its play on fictional language – Babel is reduced to babble and then to a totalising univocity which kills – it displays a higher and less comfortable degree of self-consciousness than the previous fiction, and Byatt can no longer be reduced to an essentially realist writer with a few metafictional flourishes, and this is what may have disappointed many of her readers.

Against the historical and metaphorical background of the French Revolution, *Babbletower* tells the story of a group of aristocrats and their servants who, in order to escape from the Terror (to which some of their number already owe their lives), go with their leader, Culvert, and his lady, Roseace, to the Tour Bruyarde, an immense and isolated castle, far away from “the old world”, and from “rhetoric, fanaticism and terror” (11). They try to create an ideal society, with self-government and a form of communism by children, and those goods which they still possess are held in common. The Tour Bruyarde is peopled with workmen and domestics, but, according to the wishes of Culvert, who has egalitarian ideals, the company dispenses with the idea of social rank, as well as with the institution of the family[133]. The necessary work is performed by the high and the lowly alike, and each member of the community is free to pursue his or her leisure. The aim is to create a new race of children, who will live unhindered by the problems of their parents. This utopic project goes badly wrong, and the attempt at ultraliberalism swings to extremism, for Culvert is heedless of the warnings of the significantly named Fabian[134]. The principle

[133] Culvert has an ontological status similar to that of William Adamson in *Morpho Eugenia,* a character who is based loosely on Darwin and who functions partly as a mouthpiece for Darwin's ideas. Culvert shares several characteristics with the Marquis de Sade: his love of rhetoric, his ultraliberalism, his prolific writings.

[134] The name Fabian seems to refer, albeit anachronistically, to the English Fabians, founded in 1884. Opposed to capitalism, this group aimed to institute socialism by peaceful means. The policies were more gradualist than utopic.

of egalitarianism on which the community is supposed to be founded gives way – inevitably, as Jude Mason shows – to untrammeled sexual vice dangerously coupled with ideological tyranny, engendering a spirit of murderous violence, and it is thus that Roseace is killed.

Babbletower functions as a sort of fable, extracts of which are dotted through the diegesis, without necessarily being framed by an act of reading on the part of one of the characters, although it is understood that Frederica reads the whole text at some point in the events of the diegesis. *Babbletower* provides a complement to the analysis of the 1960s which is made in the main diegesis, and certain characteristics of the end of the eighteenth century are taken up in the portrait Byatt draws of the 1960s[135]. The political ideas of the Revolution find their parallel in this period, the decade which is still celebrated for its rejection of "norms", of institutions, of the family, of religion, and for its quest for liberty, personal and absolute. *Babbletower,* which overtly proclaims itself didactic and boasts a moral intention, condemns the ideological and artistic excesses of the counter-culture[136]. However, whereas the diegesis of *Babel Tower* aims at a limpid analysis of the socio-political movements of the 1960s, *Babbletower* is clearly a *mise en abyme* of this treatise on the ideology of that period, evoking in the fantastic mode the conflict between the counter-culture and the establishment (as well as the conflicting currents within the counter-culture)[137].

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[135] James M. Glass comments, "If anything in these times approaches the Sadeian rejection of convention, society and "norms", it is the burgeoning "youth" culture and its revolutionary stance as an alternative to technological forms of existence and value" (James M. Glass, "Modernity and the Marquis de Sade : A Question of Perception and the Limits of the Self", included in Colette V. Michael [ed.], *Sade: His Ethics and Rhetoric,* New York: Peter Lang, 1989, 43-63).

[136] "Both the intellectual and the more popular branches of the counterculture launched a critique of technocracy which was anchored in a Rousseauistic belief in the possible liberation of an essentially whole but repressed self. For the student movement, as for radicals such as Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, salvation would only be found in a return to the Romantic and German Idealist belief in spititual liberation" (Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature 1960 to 1990.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 6).

[137] "Barriers, thresholds and doorways, which must be blown up or broken down, are pervasive metaphors throughout the countercultural manifestos of the time: William Blake was invoked so that the doors of perception might be cleansed (whether through drugs or poetry); followers of Laing at the Tavistock Clinic analysed the false and conformist ego produced through the internalization of a repressive social "reality principle"" (*ibid.*, 7).

The idea of the "alternative society" is the great theme of *Babbletower,* but this idea also appears in an attenuated form throughout the diegesis of *Babel Tower:* the inhabitants of Bran House form a microcosm, as do the pupils of the public schools (real and imaginary) which crop up in the narrative. Other examples range through the evangelical group founded by Gideon Farrar in *Still Life,* "The Children of Joy", which continues to grow, the encounter group organised by psychoanalyst Elvet Gander, and the experimental community of women and children formed by Frederica and Agatha Mond[138].

What interests me for the purpose of this article is the insertion of *Babbletower* in the novel. As well as functioning as a *mise en abyme* for the ideology of the 1960s and a forum in which it can be parodied and satirised, *Babbletower* can also be read as a *mise en abyme* of the story of Frederica and her search for a place within the community, which will be seen in turn to be a part of her long apprenticeship as a writer. Clear parallels are established, between the narrator of *Babbletower* – the observer, the giver of dire warnings – and a character in the hypodiegetic narrative called Turdus Cantor, who warns, "Culvert will see where he is going, and I shall look on" (283-284), and also between Nigel and Culvert. The principal parallel is between Frederica and Roseace, for while in *Babbletower,* the portrait of a utopia (tending towards a dystopia) takes its most explicit form, utopia is a trope which also characterises the diegesis of the 1960s. Bran House, Nigel's family seat, with its vast stables and outbuildings, as well as its moat[139], is also an isolated society, functioning according to particular rules which impose tyranny, and silence dissenting voices. By means of the interpenetration of the diegetic levels, a parallel is drawn between Frederica's destiny and Roseace's.

The "connection" between the various parts of the text has always been among Byatt's strong points, but the embedding of *Babbletower* in *Babel Tower* is executed with a technical

[138] This brings to mind "Bethany", the household of independent women founded by Christabel and Blanche in *Possession* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).

[139] "[B]ran House was an ordinary dwelling-place, so that its dairies and conservatories, outhouses and stables seemed endless […] [Frederica] had walked through the fields with Nigel to the home farm, surprised that a man could *own* so many free-growing trees, so much wild grass […]" (*Still Life,* London: Penguin, 1986, 355).

mastery as yet unknown in Byatt's work: the interaction between the embedded novel and the framing diegesis is not only very rich, but also extremely suggestive and disturbing, with a high degree of ludism in the foregrounding of the hinge-devices. A quotation from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* echoes through the novel: "Only connect" (308-309) and the "connection" between the various parts of *Babel Tower* tends to be semantically subversive. By virtue of its hinge position, and of the juxtapositions thus set up, the most innocent remark is rendered insidious. To cite a compact example, it is thus that Stephanie's widower Daniel's well-intentioned remark to Frederica, "Blood's thicker" (218) – suggesting the proverb, "Blood's thicker than water" – when he is trying to encourage her to get back in touch with her family, prefigures the ultimate bloodbath of the Tour Bruyarde. I will now seek to demonstrate the functioning of this hinge-device, and how it produces interpenetration of the diegetic levels, with a series of more complex examples.

In what I have called the Bluebeard scene – for *Babel Tower* contains, among a host of other intertextual references and reworkings, a rewriting of this tale, with Nigel as Bluebeard[140] – Frederica, in the process of trying to recuperate a letter stolen by her husband, finds an unknown key which fits a trunk, the existence of which she was unaware of, and thus discovers a stash of pornographic magazines[141]. This scene can be analysed intratextually along two axes: by comparing *Babel Tower* with Byatt's other work[142], and by analysing the parallels

[140] The husband's absence, the near-fatal curiosity of the young wife, the search for the key and the stupefaction of the discovery all contribute to the evocation of the tale of Bluebeard. The implicit reference to this tale is made explicit by the judge at the divorce trial, who exclaims: "A real foray into Bluebeard's cupboard" (493).

[141] "Inside his wardrobe are various locked cases and briefcases […] She tries various […] keys on various of the boxes and cases. One largish suitcase gives off, when opened with a very simple key, an odour of decay like ripe cheese. It turns out to contain a wad of clearly unwashed rugger clothing […] The fitting of this key is encouraging, and so she persists through several failures […] Then a very small, rather complicated, not at all flimsy key – a key which is not one of an endless series randomly distributed but a special key, with a barrel and fierce little teeth, opens a large rather battered document box not unlike the box brandished by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Budget Day. She has not found Wilkie's letter. She has found a collection of magazines and photographs. "*You* know the kind of thing", one man might say to another, or one woman to another. And nod, with sophisticated understanding" (101).

[142] Jean Ricardou terms this process "intertextualité restreinte". Quoted in Lucien Dällenbach, "Intertexte et autotexte", *Poétique*, n° 27, 1976, 282.

between the various parts of the diegesis within *Babel Tower.* The unhappy discovery of one lover or spouse by the other recalls the many other such discoveries, attached to the myths of Melusina and of Cupid and Psyche, and to the tales in the *Arabian Nights,* which are particularly concentrated in *Possession, Morpho Eugenia,* and "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye". Alternatively, taking *Babel Tower* in isolation as our frame of reference, the scene is prefigured, in a manner which amply demonstrates the device of interpenetration, by an apparently innocent scene in which Frederica reads a story to her small son at his bedtime, ostensibly creating a charming tableau of maternal-filial love. With this, the narrator ironically juxtaposes, in the space of sixty pages, another way of going to bed, as well as another way of perceiving the female role: the peaceful bedtime of a little boy, reassured by his mother's presence, is vividly opposed to that of a grown man, Nigel, whose only satisfaction lies in inflicting pain and humiliation on women he sees as his playthings.

However, apart from the irony of juxtaposition, there is also a process of infiltration, for the bedtime story scene is retrospectively contaminated by the discreet allusions to other parts of the diegesis and to other diegetic levels; and in fact, retroactively we see that the four-year-old Leo, has in fact shown himself to be an avid and greedy listener to *The Tale of Mr. Todd* by Beatrix Potter – a story judged "unsavoury" by the narrator of *Babel Tower* – precisely because of the cruelty it hints at (104):

> [Tommy Brock] "I will bury that nasty person in the hole which he has dug." [...]
>
> He was quite dry himself and grinning; and he threw the cup of scalding tea all over Mr. Todd. (105)

Leo's delight in this scene sets up a parallel with the Romantic notion of the innocence of the child brought into question in *Babbletower*[143]. The evocation of this little story by Beatrix Potter is used to show that Leo, like his father, is attracted by cruelty – "I love it when they do horrible things to each other" (105). It serves also to introduce into the text the word "Brock" (Tommy Brock being one of the characters in *The Tale of Mr. Todd).* "Brock's" is the name of the preparatory

[143] I refer to the ideas of writers such as Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, as well as to the English Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth.

school where the sons of the Reiver family have been sent for three generations, and where Nigel, to Frederica's horror, is determined to send Leo. We can identify a semantic hinge here, for "brock" means badger, an animal renowned for its dirty habits – and moreover a frequenter of tunnels, or *culverts,* which plunges us back into the dark world of the Tour Bruyarde; and Brock's School, according to Frederica's suspicions and Jude Mason's confirmations, is indeed a place where small boys are sexually abused, where "normal" instincts are perverted, so that the abused become in turn the abusers of others[144].

The suggestion of bodily orifices misused is reflected in the unpleasant infiltration of one level of the text by another. Later, in a more condensed version of the device of suggestive juxtaposition, William Burroughs-style cut-ups of letters to Frederica from Nigel's lawyer regarding his request for custody of Leo are used to suggest veiled accusations to these establishments: it is thus that Brock's School is described as having "French facilities Latin elementary all confusion" (425). The "French facilities", in the context of the oscillation between *Babbletower* and the main diegesis, beg to be read as a reference to Sade, while "Latin elementary" brings to mind Latin anatomical terms. Moreover, through her evocation of Brock's and Swineburn, which turn on a hierarchised world and on petty rules and disproportionately severe punishments for breaking these rules[145] Byatt makes an implicit comparison with the evil and disturbing world of the Tour Bruyarde.

Frederica begins to see in her son from a very early age manifestations of a brutally aggressive libido, uncomfortably redolent of that of her violent husband: it is thus that the Beatrix Potter passage is attached to the Bluebeard scene. The

[144] The names which Byatt gives to the two independent boys' boarding schools which she invents in *Babel Tower* both suggest immorality, bestiality and brutality: "brock" is in the north-east of England a regional word for "badger", an animal reputed for its dirty habits, while the name Swineburn (the public school of which Nigel Reiver and Jude Mason are both former pupils, known as "Erstwhile Hogs") combines a reference to the pig and to Swinburne, the English poet remembered for his sado-masochism. The tortures practised between pupils, evoked in *Babbletower* by Jude Mason, are immediately recognized by his publisher Rupert Parrott, also a former pupil, who calls them "Wholly convincing. Traditional even" (303).

[145] At Rugby School until the 1980s, pupils were forbidden to carry an umbrella until their third year. Corporal punishment, including the punishment of a younger pupil by an older one, was allowed until forbidden by pan-European legislation.

quotation from *The Tale of Mr. Todd* which follows can be read as a commentary on Frederica's desire to purify herself and to exorcise from her conscience the images of the women in Nigel's magazines, who are literally and figuratively made filthy:

> "I will get soft soap, and monkey soap, and all sorts of soap; and soda and scrubbing brushes; and persian powder; and carbolic to remove the smell. I must have a disinfecting". (104)

The child's bedtime scene thus has to be read in association with Nigel's pornographic reading material, the one contaminating the other. Disturbingly, while Leo's "innocence" is sullied by the evocation of his father's tastes, Nigel's virility is also brought into question. The titles of his preferred magazines – *My Bad Little Bedside Book, Naughty Girls Well and Truly Punished* – are at first view as innocent and childlike as the world of Beatrix Potter. Nigel's abstruse desires are thus brought down to the desire of the child for the comfort of the mother, and the reader is presented with one of the classic theses concerning male violence towards women: the seed is sown in the mother's affection for her son, which can later be transformed into hatred of all women, who are seen as emasculating and suffocating (282-283)[146]. This theme is played out in *Babbletower* at one of Culvert's confessional-cathartic theatre sessions (based on Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*). The interpenetration of the bedtime scene and the Bluebeard scene brings into question the relativity of the behaviour of father and son: is Leo, at four, corrupted by his father's penchant for cruelty, or is Nigel unable to come to terms with the needs and impulsions of his childhood?

In fact the key with which Frederica chances to enter Nigel's secret world is a key in more senses than one, for it creates one in a series of nodal points which govern the interaction of the 1960s diegesis and the obscure fantasy world which is hidden behind it (a world which is evoked principally in *Babbletower,* but also in other meta-narratives).

The key to Nigel's trunk can be seen as representative of the narrative device by which, in *Babel Tower,* certain nodal points or points of connection are set up between the two principal

[146] In *The Virgin in the Garden,* Edmund Wilkie observes that, according to Winnicott, "People were afraid of Woman because they had all, once, in the beginning, been totally dependent on Her, and had had to establish their individuality by denying this dependence" (*The Virgin in the Garden* [1978], London: Penguin, 1981, 246).

diegetic levels[147]. These nodal points are often signalled by objects, the appearance of which in one diegesis points at the interpretation of the other and of the interaction between the two. The axe which Nigel uses to try to prevent Frederica from leaving[148] is transmuted into the many-tongued instrument of torture which kills Roseace in *Babbletower*, and immediately after the chapter of *Babbletower* in which Fabian's wife, Mavis, finds herself incapable of living according to the laws of the Tour Bruyarde, and jumps off the tower, Frederica goes to see a lawyer, Arnold Begbie, to instigate divorce proceedings, and finds that his tie is "spattered regularly with blood red dots" (267). The use of such hinges is significant in that it allows *Babel Tower* to oscillate between metonymic and metaphoric progression, a tendency in Byatt's work which can be observed to intensify as time goes on[149].

This short paper represents a brief moment only in my analysis, and leaves many questions unanswered, but it is thus that the two principal diegetic levels interreact, reflecting each other in a darker and more insidious way than in *Possession.* At the interfaces of the 1960s diegesis and *Babbletower,* we find indications that the latter can be read as elements in an allegory of the life of Frederica (an allegory in the sense that there is to a certain point a correspondence between the apparent discourse and the implicit). In certain respects, *Babbletower* functions in *Babel Tower* similarly to the embedded tale, "Things Are Not What They Seem" in *Morpho Eugenia,* which is addressed by Matty Crompton to William Adamson, even if *Babbletower* is not addressed exclusively to Frederica, who is never its only reader. In spite of my initial reservations as to this novel, it is irrefutable that *Babel Tower* deploys a rich and original romanesque, very far removed from the emergent "feminist realist" texts actually written in the 1960s, which Byatt treats so satirically in *The Game*[150]*,* at the beginning of her career.

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[147] The field of reference of these objects does not only concern intratextual relations between parts of the novel, but indicates also intertexts outside the novel, creating a vast and diverse tissue of intertexts which cannot be treated here. See Helen E. Mundler, *op. cit.*, Part III.

[148] "[H]e gives a great whoop of laughter, and throws the axe at her […] She feels blood and blood, her blood, great hot puddles of it. It has a finality" (122).

[149] The device of the key is thus used less restrictively and more insidiously than in *Morpho Eugenia,* Byatt's *roman à clef*. See Helen E. Mundler, *op. cit.*, chapter 3.

[150] A. S. Byatt, *The Game* (1967), London: Penguin, 1983.