CHAPTER-II
CHAPTER II

INTELLECTUAL AND SENSUAL STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

The present chapter deals with two of Byatt's novels namely Possession, Booker Prize winning novel published in 1990 and The Virgin In The Garden published in 1978.

Possession – a literary puzzle in a high comedy mode, is a story of four people: Randolph, Henry, Ash and Christabel LaMotte, two poets of the nineteenth century. Ash and LaMotte have an intellectual and physical affair - being kept secret for a century, then in 1986 Roland Michell and Maud Bailey happen upon a letter that leads them deeper and deeper into the mystery of this affair, a mystery which threatens to overturn scholarly assumptions about each poet. There is a clear description of scholarly desire when Roland finds a half written letter from Ash to an unidentified woman, a letter which is clearly in Ash’s writing but completely different from anything else known about the poet. LaMotte lived a somewhat lonely life, and her poetry and herself have become a spokesperson for modern feminism. R. H. Ash lived a somewhat boring life, was a devoted and satisfied husband with a devoted and satisfied wife, and has become some what of a romantic embodiment of British culture.
Maud and Roland both recognize the possibility, the likelihood that their
discovery will overturn current scholarship on their respective poets. In
short, “Possession” is a story of passion between two Victorian poets and
the modern day scholars studying them. The beginning of Possession,
and the first choice, was most unusual for Byatt. She thought of the title
in the British library, watching the great Coleridge scholar, Kathleen
Coburn, circumambulating the catalogue Byatt thought she had given all
her life to his thoughts, and then mediates his thoughts to her. And then
she thought, ‘Does he possess her, or does she possess him?’ There
could thus be a novel called Possession about the relations between living
and dead minds. At that stage this Gestalt was more like the plan for a
painting than a novel. It had colour and texture and was a grey cloudy
web, ghostly and spidery, to do with the ghostliness and connectedness of
the original idea. Byatt imagined her text as a web of scholarly
quotations and parodies through which the poems and writings of the
dead should loom at the reader, to be surmised and guessed at Byatt had
the idea that the word “Possession” involved both the daemonic and the
economic. Reading the Browning letters made her see that “Possession”
had a primary sexual connotation, too. She made a decision: there should
be two couples, man and woman, one alive and one dead. The novel
would concern the complex relations between these two pairs. Byatt’s
grey cobwebby palimpsest changed colour - it took on a lurid black shot
with crimson and scarlet, colours of passion. It occurred to Byatt that in
the world of the nineteenth – century spiritualism and feminism,
Possession had both its meaning at once. So there was a need for the
nineteenth-century woman to be a lesbian, or thought to be a lesbian,
and the twentieth-century woman scholar to be a feminist. She half –
knew that the form of her novel should be a parody of every possible
form, popular and “high – culture” and it should be a parody, not of
Sherlock Holmes but of the Margery Allingham detective stores she grew
upon. It should thus be an epistolary novel, which meant writing the
letters the scholars should find, it should contain early narrative forms
and the poems of her two poets. Her mind had been full since childhood
of the rhythms of Tennyson and Browning, Rossetti and Keats. She read
and reread Emily Dickinson, whose harsher and more sceptical voice she
found more exciting than Christina Rossetti’s meek resignation. She
wanted a fierce female voice and she found she was possessed.
A.S. Byatt’s – Possession [1990], Peter Carey’s – Oscar and Lucinda
[1988] and Graham Swift’s – Waterland [1983] all take place in both the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they seek to reconcile the
nineteenth and twentieth – century views of the nature of narrative. In the
nineteenth century Romanticism celebrates the wholeness of vision
gained by exploring the fantastic and the supernatural; in the twentieth
century post modernism insists upon the fragmented narrative as a more
accurate reflection of unruly life. Byatt, Carey and Swift compare these two narrative traditions in light of one enduring archetypal narrative: the fall from innocence to knowledge A.S. Byatt’s Possession considers the fall from innocence as a state of imaginative possession. In this moment of possession, the writer’s imagination becomes other by fusing with the world exterior to the writer.

According to Jill Clayton, the nineteenth century romantic writer understood this moment as crucial to creativity but also acknowledged its destructive, demonic aspect:

As Coleridge puts it, the imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate”. [Biographia Literaria] In this disruptive phase the romantic imagination can usurp all the other elements of the poet’s would, but such moments are necessarily brief. The “light of sense / Goes out”. Wordsworth writes in his most important comment on the visionary power of the imagination, “but with a flash that has revealed / the invisible world”. [Prelude 6: 600-2]

This flash illuminates narrative: When a narrative becomes ‘other’, it grows vivid, concrete. This incarnation of the imaginative idea is Byatt’s chief objective in Possession. Byatt becomes the last link in a chain along which the act of creative possession is enacted and deferred. Byatt initiates this series in the distant path of pagan myth: Possession begins with Randolph Ash’s. “The Garden of Proserpina” the first of Byatt’s
ventriloquist acts within the text Byatt inflicts the myth of Proserpine with a dual symbolism. Intellectually, the instant of imaginative possession enables a creative synthesis; physically, the instant of sexual possession incarnates the idea of simultaneous destruction and regeneration. In the “Garden of Proserpine”, Randolph Ash sets the stage for both of these moments.

At the old world’s rim,

In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit

Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there

The dragon Ladon crisped his jeweled crest

Scraped a gold claw and sharped a silver tooth

And dozed and waited through eternity

Until the tricksy hero, Heracles

Came to his dispossession and the theft

[PS: 4]

Byatt dispossesses the past and blends it with the present in her novel, thus creating a cyclical time scheme. Like Proserpine, Byatt rises from the ‘old world’s run’, the garden of the under world, to the present, only to descend once more. [Proserpine rises from the under world every six months and therefore she is associated with spring time and regeneration]

In Possession the cyclical exchange of past and present generation and destruction represents a fall from the Victorian concept of linear time.
Darwin's theory of evolution and August Comte's philosophy of Positivism "rang the death knell to the ages of Theology and Metaphysics and proclaimed scientific sequential order as the new religion of humanity". The Victorian rise of the scientific sequential order causes a fall in the individual's conception of life: the "linear certainty of death as our 'real' future overshadows the cyclical, thereby hiding the vital, iterative part of its own constitution", Byatt conflates this Victorian moment of fragmentation with contemporary post modern conceptions of narrative.

At risk of losing "Our sense of progress and individuality", Byatt renews the cyclical conception of time and thus renders the conflation of past and present, a positive moment instead of a negative one. Randolph Ash's view of his time is indeed postmodern in its "linear exhaustion and its lack of a unifying grand narrative":

The truth is - my dear Miss LaMotte.. that we live in an old world, a tired world a world that has gone on piling up speculation and observations until truths that might have been graspable in the bright dayspring of human morning are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest, by thick horny growths over that clear vision. The scribe of Genesis did well to locate the source of all our misery in that greed for knowledge which has also been our greatest spur in some
sense to good. To good and evil. We have more of both those, I must believe, than our primitive parents.

[PS: 181]

In Possession Byatt downplays Ash’s perception of the “Smutty” accretion of knowledge and instead emphasizes his sense of the enduring dual nature of knowledge. To accommodate this dual nature of knowledge within her text, Byatt resurrects the Romantic narrative of Coleridge.

Coleridge’s poem ‘Christabel’ which gives Byatt’s Christabel her name appropriately unites the creative and sexual moments of possession. Christabel casts the moment of possession as an instance of discursive paralysis. These moments are necessarily brief but they represent the ability of idea and incarnation to cancel each other out at the height of their powers.

In Christabel, this ability has important ramifications for narrative. “In extreme cases the connection between visibility and otherness can make the world of a novel seem not nearly visible but opaque”, In Coleridge’s poem, Christabel is possessed by the spirit of Geraldine, who symbolizes the destructive and regenerative power of knowledge and momentarily erases Christabel’s power of utterance. Geraldine’s presence usurps Christabel’s narrative space. At the same time, Coleridge portrays Geraldine as a nurturing presence, “a mother with her child” [Coleridge
After the moment of self obliteration has passed, Christabel finds that she has acquired the knowledge of wholeness. She has encountered the power of imagination and understands it as good and evil. The union of opposite forces carries that promise of wholeness and the threat of self-effacement. Incarnated on a sexual level, the ambiguity of this union accounts for Roland’s and Maud’s fear of possession. Like Alfred Lord Tennyson’s Maud, Byatt’s Maud is “icyly regular, splendidly null”, Maud stubbornly separates sexuality and knowledge. In Roland’s and Maud’s study of Ash and LaMotte, Maud also feels “...urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity ---curiosity more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge” [PS :92]

In one scene before Roland and Maud fall in love, Roland proves the intensity of this desire. In order to prime himself for conciliatory sex with his girlfriend at the time, Roland fantasizes about Randolph Ash’s wife Ellen. Thinking about her own last lover, Maud recalls their unmade bed as an “empty battle field” and agrees with Freud that “desire lies on the other side of repugnance” [PS:63] At the price of her own wholeness, unwittingly rendering herself “null”, Maud only acknowledges the self-obliterating aspect of sexuality and fiercely dissociates her physical attractiveness from her intelligence. Like her ancestor Christabel, Maud’s character is possessed by the fairy Melusine and goddess Diana,
both of whom are commonly considered as emblems of female self-sufficiency.

Yet Byatt interrogates this self-sufficiency. Forever aware of her own fictiveness, Byatt parodies the moment when both Melusine and Diana strike down men who have seen them in their bath. As Maud comes out of the shower, she catches Roland peeping in the keyhole. As a post modern re-visioning of Melusine and Diana, Maud represents her society's eagerness to possess the past, while the contemporary level of Byatt's novel reveals that instead we are possessed by the past. Like postmodern society itself, Maud meditates on her own fragmentation. Maud realizes eventually that she must consent to a mutual possession in which her past and present assert equal claims to each other, as do she and Roland.

Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I?--- It was both a pleasant and unpleasant idea, this requirement that she thinks of herself as intermittent and partial. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist [PS : 273].

As Byatt restores the cyclical conception of time to her narrative at the cost of the narcissistic linear conception, she risks and enriches her character's selves by transforming "dialogic" confrontations [with the past] into conversations which expand the understanding of each
participant by exposure to the “other” perspective. Interestingly, Beatrice Nest, one of the most self-effacing characters in the text, uses this word as well, “Beatrice hated writing”. The only word she was proud of in this correct and dull disquisition was ‘conversation’, which she had chosen in preference to the more obvious ‘dialogue’. For such conversation Beatrice would have given anything in those days” [ps: 127] Maud finally participates in sexual conversation with Roland. Byatt conflates their love making with Heracles’s theft of the apples from the Garden of Proserpina, thus cyclically ending the novel where it began:

In the morning the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath--a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitter apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful [PS : 551]

Byatt follows this sexual possession with a postscript: Randolph and Christabel’s illegitimate child Maya [the name of the Hindu Goddess of illusion]ironically represents the shattering of her parents’ enchanted world. Maya [who prefers to be called the more down to earth May] unwittingly meets her father in a cornfield and forgets to relay her father’s poetic message to her mother [whom she believes is her aunt]. Byatt’s postscript shows this symbolic Persephone in her cornfield. May represents springtime and the starting and ending of Byatt’s cycle—the reversion to innocence after the fall. A.S.. Byatt’s Possession: A
Romance utilizes non normative sexuality to write modern renditions of Victorian life. It exploits what is popularly received as the defining characteristic of the Victorian period: sexual reticence. This exploitation which takes the form of a painted inclusion of unexpected forms of sexuality, functions to create and sustain the narrative of the novel. In fact sexuality occupies the fulcrum point in the plot of the novel. However the kind of sexuality that Byatt represents manipulates the modern reader's assumption about. Victorian sexuality. Representations of incest, a hyper awareness of the body, including the sexual organs, and adultery are some of the departures from the sexual norms that this novel uses to rewrite Victorian sexuality. A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Romance questions a dominant Victorian construction,--female sexuality. A novel about a pair of young scholars who trace the correspondence between a well-known Victorian poet and a lesser known female poet, is a patchwork of letters, poetry and narrative. In her depiction of the Victorian past, Byatt recognizes Victorian culture's allusion of all discourse surrounding sexuality. Byatt depicts Victorian marriage represented by the poet Randolph. Ash and his wife Ellen in the same way as a Victorian would have represented it--evacuated of sexuality. Yet one of Byatt's projects in Possession is to valorize the sexual act itself. To accomplish this, she must look outside of Victorian culture to find a way of representing the sexual act. In her representation of
Randolph Ash’s marriage to Ellen, Byatt follows the Victorian tradition of displacing the sexual act from marriage relationship. We learn that Ellen Ash marries Randolph after she has already lost her youth, implying that she has also lost her sexual attractiveness. She thinks back on her life,

“A young girl of twenty four should not be made to wait for marriage until she is thirty six and her flowering is over” [PS: 499]

Her memory of her wedding night reveals her terror over the sexual act. She did not remember it in words. There were no words attached to it that was part of the horror. She had never spoken of it to anyone, not even to Randolph, precisely not to Randolph.

“An attempt. A hand not pushed away. Tendons like steel, teeth in pain, clenched, clenched. The approach, the locked gateway, the panic, the wimpering flight. Not once, but over and over and over when did he begin to know that however gentle he was, however patient, it was no good, it would never be any good? The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and tidbits.

She become his slave”

[PS: 498-499].

The marriage between Randolph and Ellen is thus characterized by its lack of sexual intimacy. Ellen, the quintessential Victorian Woman, does
not enjoy the sexual act itself. For her the sexual act is a brutal experience, incompatible with marriage. Marriage, according to Ellen Ash’s construction of it is frighteningly close to a master slave relationship. By removing sexual intimacy from the marriage of Ellen and Randolph, Byatt is drawing on typical Victorian notions of female sexuality and marriage.

Victorian writers often depict the marriage relationship in the same terms as Byatt in Possession. Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her novel poem ‘Aurora Leigh,’ likewise evacuates the relationship between Aurora and Romney of all sexual interest, for Aurora, marriage has very little to do with sexuality or desire. She imagines marriage as the final step in becoming a complete woman and a complete artist, Where as in Book II, Aurora refuses Romney’s marriage proposal because she cannot imagine herself dependent on a man, in Book IX She changes her mind.

Passioned to exalt

The artist’s instinct in me at the cost of

Putting down the woman’s I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here

From any imperfect woman

Art is much but love is more

O Art, my art, thou’rt much but love is more!

Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven

[PS: 645-649,656,659]

Aurora claims that, because she is not a wife, she is not a perfect artist. She believes that love must inform the artist, since love finds its origin in God and the artist’s task is to create an art that is infused with spirituality. The defining characteristic of Aurora’s marriage to Romney, therefore, is their love, which has its roots in the divine love of God. Barrett Browning’s text eludes any discussion of sexuality, we can infer from this omission that, for Barrett Browning at least, the sexual act itself is subordinate to the sublime love the husband and wife feel for one another. Since the Victorians did not have a way of discussing sexuality within the context of marriage, Byatt must locate Randolph’s Ash’s sexual encounter outside of marriage. Likewise, since Victorian culture presumed sexual activity outside of marriage was sinful, Byatt is forced to look to other traditions to describe Randolph Ash’s sexual encounter with Christabel LaMotte. Byatt draws on the medieval courtly love tradition in her depiction of Ash’s affair with LaMotte. That the relationship between the two poets develops by way of their written correspondence is one characteristic of the courtly love tradition. In this tradition, literature often has the power to seduce the [usually female] individual. A second characteristic of the courtly romance is the
furtiveness of the relationship. The novel revolves around the secrecy of the poet’s relationship and around Maud and Roland’s attempt to figure out precisely what went on between them. Third, Randolph’s imagining of LaMotte as the hidden princess connects Byatt’s description of their relationship with the courtly love tradition Byatt describes Ash’s thoughts as he and LaMotte travel together on the train. “All the way from London, he had been violently confused by her real presence in the opposite inaccessible corner. For months he had been possessed by the imagination of her. She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower, and his imagination’s work had been all to make her present, all of her, to his mind and senses” [PS: 301] Byatt is clearly drawing from a pre-Victorian tradition in her description of the affair, since Victorian culture cannot give her the terms to discuss sexual intimacy in an affirming way. In contrast to the Victorians’ omission of discourse concerning sexuality is the twentieth century’s hyper theorization and discussion of it. Maud and Roland recognize this as they search for clues together.

Maud says to Roland,

“Do you ever have the sense that our metaphors eat up our world? I mean of course everything connects and connects ... I mean, all those gloves, a minute ago, we were playing a professional game of looks and eyes the mediaeval gloves, giants’ gloves, Blanche Glover,
Balzac’s gloves, the sea-anemone’s ovaries and it all reduced like boiling jam to human sexuality. Just as Leonora Stern makes the whole earth read as the female body- and language all language. And all vegetation in pubic hair” Maud laughed, drily. Roland said “And then really, what is it what is this arcane power we have, when we see that everything is human sexuality? It’s really powerlessness”. [PS: 275-276]

As much as Byatt finds Victorian constructions of human sexuality limited, she suggests that twentieth century fascination with sexuality and sexual theorizing is equally limited. We come to find out that Leonora Stern who reads LaMotte’s poetry as a mapping of the female body, has in fact misread LaMotte’s texts. Her training in French feminism has limited her ability to read text accurately. Byatt’s text thus casts a critical eye on the utility of modern theories of sexuality. We can read Possession as critiquing both the Victorian system, with its omission of sexuality, and the modern one with its intense analysis of sexuality. Significantly, one of the final images of the novel is the sexual encounter between Maud and Roland. Here Byatt offers a valorization of the sexual act on its own terms. Byatt’s Possession thus conflates the Victorian past’s omission of sexual discourse with modern discourse on sexuality only to subvert them both and to claim the significance of the sexual act itself. Dr. Maud Bailey- associated with the Lincoln University- who
runs a Women's Resource Center knows all that is known about Christabel LaMotte. Her character in the novel is that of a serious scholar dedicated to the study, particularly from the feminist perspective of the fictional poetess LaMotte.

Roland Michelle, also a literary scholar and the protagonist of Possession, close to losing his job and girlfriend, appears stifled in his present environment and an embodiment of modern day alienation. Roland, who is detached from his girlfriend and his colleagues, works in the Ash factory which Byatt compares to "the Inferno" [PS: 31] and he lives in an apartment that smells like "cat-piss" [PS: 22] Described as "Full of old underwear, open pots of eye paint, dangling shirts and stockings, sticky bottles of hair conditioner and the tubes of shaving foam", [PS: 63] Roland's bathroom mirrors the chaos and disorder of the modern world. Furthermore, the novel describes Roland as stagnating in an almost non existent job. Describing Roland as having "this thing about this dead man, who had a thing about dead people" [PS: 23] Val characterizes Roland's career interests in terms of a linear time that constructs the past as dead. Trapped, Roland's stagnant life lacks meaning until he finds the letter, and then the past starts to come to life. Maud, its other leading contemporary character is portrayed as hiding from the chaotic modern world that originate from a lack of faith and from technological progress. Maud creates an orderly, clean world for herself in which she can avoid
this disorder of reality. Noting the orderliness of her apartment, Roland compares it to “an art gallery or surgeon’s waiting-room”. [PS: 58] Describing her as “repressive and cold” [PS: 83], Roland reveals that in order to function outside of her created world, Maud must detach herself from others. Signifying her fear of disorder and her emotional limitation, Maud covers her hair under scarves, an act that symbolizes her sexual repression. Realizing her emotional detachment, Maud asks herself, after an awkward interaction with Roland, why she can “do nothing with ease and grace except work alone, inside these walls and curtains, her bright safe box” [PS: 151] Maud wants to find a way to live in the outside world but also to retain a sense of order. Trapped in the modern world, Roland and Maud feel detached from others and desire the “young vitality of past” [PS: 151] which Maud claims feeds her life once Roland and she begin their quest. Together, Roland was Maud are launched by this discovery into a pursuit to demystify the two poets, also discovering each other in the process.

From their first meeting, Roland is intrigued and struck by Maud, describing her as,

Much taller than Roland, She was dressed with unusual coherence for an academic. Roland thought, rejecting several ways of describing her green and white length, a long pine green tunic over a pine green skirt, a white silk shirt under the tunic and long softly
white stockings inside long showing green shoes. Through the stockings veiled flesh diffused a pink gold almost. He could not see her hairs which were bound tightly into a turban of peacock-feathered painted silk, low on her brow. Her brows and lashes were blonde, he observed so much. She had a clean milky skin, unpainted lips, clear cut features, largely composed. She did not smile. She drove an immaculately glossy green Beetle She smelled of something ferny and sharp., Roland didn't like her voice [PS : 44]

Driven by the twin impulses of academic interest and personal curiosity, Roland and Maud reluctantly agree to a professional collaboration to uncover the relationship between Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel Lamotte, that will enable their scholarly sleuthing and ideally, academic promotion. Initially, Roland hesitates to ask for Maud’s help when, facing her frigidity. He conjures up the “ridiculous and romantic” vision of “their two heads bent together over the manuscripts, following the story, sharing, he had supposed the emotion” [PS: 144] Like wise the novel attributes Maud’s frostiness towards Roland to her near anti-masculine brand of feminism, her reluctance to assist him is also probably due to her greater scholarly achievement and respectability in the field. Neither skittish Roland nor chilly Maud could possibly anticipate the romantic closure that Byatt had in store for them. More interestingly, their discovery of their love for
each other mirrors their discovery of Ash and LaMotte’s romance in surprising and complex ways. As they doggedly follow the paper train of this Victorian love affair, they unintentionally arrive at the post modern Edenic site of promising union, either ultimately awakening together to a world that “had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin of crushed wood and splitted sap, a tart smell, which fore some relation to the small of bitten apples” [PS: 551]

Yet Byatt’s novel escapes easy classification as either romance-infused post modern or a post modern-infused romance while Ash and Christabel’s relationship doubtlessly blossoms into romance, Roland and Maud’s relationship reaches a more complex end [an end we could more accurately call a beginning]. Byatt complicates their love for one another largely through the motif of possession. For these two scholars, the possession of knowledge is one way in which they establish coherence in the world, as they study Ash and LaMotte’s love letters they construct a narrative of their romance and discover the influence of this relationship on their poetry. In this sense, Roland and Maud willingly heed the drive to know, to find out what really happened between these two Victorian poets. Byatt suggests that this will to know is more ‘fundamental to humanity than ever sex’, something Roland admits when he and Maud are about to discover Ash and La Motte’s letters,
“Roland lifted the lid on a bare casket. They were empty arched
pigeonholes at the back, fretted and carved, and two empty little
drawers the felt unable to tap and tig at the framework, the was
unable to large the unbuckling of the trunk. The felt as though he
was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some
violent emotion of curiosity hot greed, curiosity, more fundamental
than even sex, the desire for knowledge the felt suddenly angry with
Maud, who was standing shock still, in the dark, not moving a finger
to help him, no urging, as she with her emotional advantage might
well have done, further exploration of hidden treasures or pathetic
dead caskets. Sir George said, “And what in particular might you
expect to find?” Roland did not know the answer. [PS: 92]

In this passage, Roland aligns his sexual with his intellectual drive the
expects Maud, soon to be. his lover, to help and urge him along towards
the impending discovery of the letters. It’s as if he cannot become a
complete or accomplished scholar without first uniting romantically with
Maud. His possession of knowledge is thus intimately linked to sexual
possession [i.e. of Maud], and these forms of possession in turn lend
coherence to their professional and personal lives. As the plot unfolds, it
becomes more and more evident that Roland’s and Maud’s romance is
predicated upon their common, human will to know. Together they
discover this own romance alongside that of Ash and Lamotte, despite the fact that, "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable"[PS: 456]

Information regarding the letters leaks to other literary critics and buyers, and Bailey and Michell slip away on extended vacations in order to produce a coherent and valid argument that Ash and Lamotte were romantically allied. Their attempts to unearth the romantic couple’s past leads them to abandon their lives at home and at their respective universities. Roland withdraws from his live-in-girlfriend Val, leaving her without any information as to his whereabouts. Despite Roland and Maud’s collective effort interpreting the letters between Lamotte and Ash, they often work in the same room, though separately and without speaking. Solitude plays a substantial role not only between Roland and Maud, but also between Ash and LaMotte. Ash threatens Christabel’s liberal life style which includes living in her own home and doing as she pleases. Their correspondence reflects her apprehensions regarding their relationship, describing how it might infringe upon her sense of solitude and freedom. The style in which the novel is written, and the connections between various documents and characters suggest that isolation and solitude, which is often desired, by Christabel and Roland is difficult to obtain and maintain.
"The most important thing to make clear to you is this I make No threat to your solitude, How should I? How may I? Is not your blessed desire to be alone the only thing which makes possible what would else in very truth harm someone?"

[PS: 214]; Ash to Christabel

Ash desires a relationship with Christabel. She desires solitude and space, while he yearns for her presence. Thus, he must combine solitude and togetherness in some way in order for them to be with one another. He says he does not threaten her solitude.

Aurora Leigh desires freedom to complete her work, poetry, yet ultimately falls in love with a man. While Ash tried to become closer to Christabel he distanced himself from his wife Ellen. Roland and Maud examine his letters before they are sure of the affair between poets.

No. They read exactly like the letters of a solitary husband on holiday, talking to his wife of an empty evening. Think about it if you were a man in the excited state of the writer of the Christabel letters—could you sit down every evening and write to your wife in front of Christabel, it would have to have been? Could you produce these travelogues?" [PS:235]

In a letter from Ash to Christabel, he suggests a concept of freedom which does not mean complete solitude.
"The true exercise of freedom is – cannily and wisely and with grace – to move inside what space confines and not seek to know what lies beyond and cannot be touched or tasted. But we are human and to be human is desire to know what may be known by any means".[PS; 218]

Maud and Roland must escape and leave others behind in order to complete their investigation. They claim that they must "disappear", Maud leaving Leonora, and Roland leaving Val, without explanation. This is simply because they must keep their work a secret and solitude and isolation is a necessary requirement for intellectual progression. They are working within a confined space mentioned in the above statement and are also creating their own space.

The writing style of possession indicates that human curiosity makes solitude impossible. The documents are interconnected. Byatt includes Ash and LaMotte’s letters, Ash’s letters to his wife, LaMotte’s poetry and narrative to produce a puzzle piece type of story. Everything appears interconnected, nothing stands alone.

The cyclical time frame which the Ash- LaMotte correspondence establishes, rejects the construction of a dead past and instead provides the stimulus of the living past which encourages Maud and Roland "to act". Explaining to Maud that he took the letters from the library "because they were alive"[PS.56], Roland introduces the idea of a living
past. The desire to construct Ash and LaMotte’s story, gives Roland and Maud a purpose in their present life. Despite Roland’s and Maud’s desire to discover the truth about the Victorian poet’s love affair, Byatt, by privileging the reader to the Victorian past, suggests that the truth of the story does not matter. Roland and Maud believe they know the full truth when they open Ash’s coffin, but in the postscript the reader discovers a scene that is lost to everyone but Ash, Maya, and the reader. Though Roland’s and Maud’s story does not involve the whole truth, it still serves a purpose by changing their present reality. The truth, however, is important because though,

There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of .... it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. [PS: 552]

The fiction Maud and Roland create helps them cope with reality but the truth of the past though unknown still affects the present. Roland and Maud’s development exemplifies the effect the past has on the present. Their desire to sleep alone in “white beds.” [PS: 455] symbolizes their desire for simple order, but even though they live in a time and culture that mistrust [s] love” [PS: 458] their trip together begins to take on a marital or honeymooning aspect-“[PS: 455]. Despite this closeness, the text portrays them as fearful of emotional attachment because they keep
“separate lives inside their separate skins” [PS: 459]. The final letter from the past, which for them finishes the Victorian poets’ story, allows Roland and Maud finally to admit their love for each other. Reading Christabel’s letter, Maud realizes her descent from the two poets identifies with Christabel and emotionally attaches herself to Roland. Maud still feels “afraid” [PS: 550] to begin an intimate relationship but the story of the past has shown her the meaning that love gives to life. Though Christabel ends her life dependant and dejected she still feels “clear love” [PS: 545] for Ash and thanks “God for” [PS :546] him Roland’s journey through the past excites him about writing again and gives him the strength to leave safety with Val for the more uncertain love with Maud.

Addressing the scholar’s development and its connection to their journey through the past, Giobbi comments that through a literary discovery, Roland finds his poetic vein and a satisfying job, while Maud retraces her roots and abandons her frigid detachment”[PS: 52]. Finally consummating their relationship in the white bed that each of them had slept in separately, Roland and Maud enter the orderly world they desire but with the chance to love and give meaning to both of their lives.

Possession establishes a cyclical narrative by interweaving the past and present storylines. Rather than presenting the cyclical time frame didactically, Byatt makes the connection between the past and the present
by setting up two parallel sets of characters in both time periods. The force of the past on the present becomes so strong that the reader often cannot tell to which couple the narrative refers using the pronoun ‘they’ [PS : 297] and ‘the man and the woman’. Byatt self-consciously introduces this confusion into the narrative to forge this strong connection between the past and the present. More over Byatt also uses objects like Christabel’s brooch, which Maud wears, and Ash’s pocket watch which Cropper owns, to weave together the two time periods. Possession constructs the human past as a force that affects present life. Following the mystery of Christabel and Ash’s love affair, Roland and Maud trace the Victorian lovers’ path while the text makes connections between the two couples. The narrator explains that Roland and Maud “Paced well together” [PS:273] and then later in the Victorian narrative, suggesting a strong parallel between the two couples. Randolph tells Christabel,” We walk well together. Our paces suit”[PS: 304] Similarly Roland refers to Maud as a “Princess suffering the muffled pea” [PS : 65] and in the Victorian narrative Randolph refers to the mattresses upon which Christabel sleeps as “separating a princess from a pea” [PS: 307]. Realizing the connection between the two couples, Roland while thinking about the fate that drove Ash and LaMotte, suggests that “he and Maud are being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others”[PS :456].
The parallel of the two couples and Roland’s portrayal of the past as a present day force construct a cyclical time frame that opposes the stifling linear time frame.
In the Virgin In The Garden, Byatt begins her series of four novels about the startlingly intellectual Potter family. In this first installment it is the early '50s, the II world war is just over, and Elizabeth II has just been crowned Queen of England. The plot revolves around an amateur dramatic production of the life of the earlier Queen Elizabeth, and ends as a kind of coming of age novel in which Frederica, the most ambitious of the Potter children, begins to realize the necessity of escaping from her smothering family. In the Virgin In The Garden published in 1978, Byatt introduced us to the Potters: the erudite, defiantly atheist school master father, his well educated but quieter wife, their introverted mathematically gifted son, Marcus, and their two intellectually formidable daughters, gentle, blonde scholarly Stephanie and spiky redhead clever Frederica. This is a family for whom literature matters. Set in Yorkshire during the coronation year of 1952, this novel highlights the bright daughters of the Potter family and the strange halfling Marcus. The family and others become involved in the production of Astrea- a verse play by poet Alexander Wedderburn about the early womanhood of Elizabeth I. It is a richly alchemical novel alive to the poetic truth of antiquated science as Byatt is. The young Marcus prone to visions which seem to annihilate his own body is scared almost to the brink of insanity by his ability to see another world caged within this one, a world of
abstract ideas imprisoned within matter. The play Astrea is also imprisoned within the novel just as the old Elizabethan world is caught up for its present day readers. The novel is also about how ideas are enclosed within the body, a work of art and how the original inspiration for art becomes confined. The Virgin In The Garden is a wonderfully erudite entertainment in which enlightenment and sexuality, Elizabethan drama and contemporary comedy, intersect richly and unpredictably. The tumultuous events in this tale of a brilliant, eccentric and fatefully divided family begin with the staging of a play about Elizabeth I and comes to a shattering climax sure to keep the Byatt fans spellbound. Set in 1952, the year of Elizabeth. II’s coronation, The Virgin In The Garden has as a major part of its plot the casting, rehearsals, and performance of a play written by one of the characters about Elizabeth I. The differences in the two times but similarities of human nature are major concerns of the work. Sexuality in most of its forms is chief among the work’s social concerns- premarital, marital, extramarital, and homosexual relationships among the characters cause complications of the plot and suggest problems that these relationships create. Some of the important themes of the novel are suggested in its title, ‘The Virgin In The Garden.’ A number of possibilities for the identity of the ‘Virgin’ and of the ‘garden’ are offered in the novel, secular mythological and historical readings of the phrase are all possible. In Elizabeth 1’s days, Byatt’s playwright
character says, there was a richness of symbolic meaning and people thought in symbolic terms.

The term "Virgin" has many connotations. It means, "By definition":

- [noun] a person who has never had sex
- [noun] [astrology] a person who is born while the sun is in Virgo
- synonyms: Virgo, Virgin.
- [noun] The sixth sign of the zodiac, the sun is in this sign about from August 23 to September 22.
- [adjective] being used or worked for the first time, "Virgin wool".
- [adjective ] in a state of sexual virginity :"pure and vestal modesty". A spinster or virgin lady”.

Synonyms: pure, vestal, al, virtuous.

Virgin may also refer to:

1. Young emerged Queen bees that have not yet mated.
2. The Virgin, an epithet for many, the mother of Jesus; sometimes the epithet “Virgin” is applied particularly in languages other than English, to other women in Christianity who were considered particularly pure.
3. The Vestal Virgins in Rome- the Virgins who tended the temple at Delphi famous for its Oracle.
The ‘Garden’ may at times also refer to ‘The Garden of Eden’, described by the Book of Genesis as being the place where the first man-Adam-and woman-Eve-lived after they were created by “God”. The past physical existence of this garden forms part of the creation belief of the Abrahmic religions. In the Garden of Eden story, God moulds Adam from the dust of the ground, then forms Eve from one of Adam’s ribs and places them both in Paradise Garden. God charges both Adam and Eve to tend the garden in which they live, and specifically commands Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, a tree peculiarly pleasing to the eye. In the narrative Eve is quizzed by the serpent why she avoids eating of this tree. In the dialogue between the two, Eve childishly elaborates on the commandment not to eat of its fruit. She says that even if she touches the tree she would die. Psychologically the serpent induces in her a state of inferiority. Eve is then filled with desire to be like God and have wisdom and knowledge. She and Adam then eat the fruit. Adam becomes aware of his “nakedness” and ashamed, hides from God. God finds them, Confronts them, and judges them with a sentence of “death”, beginning with the serpent first, then Eve, then Adam. God then expels them from the garden because they have disobeyed him by eating the forbidden fruit. In order to guarantee the punishment of death and to keep Adam and Eve from partaking of the Tree of Life, [which would give them perpetual life], God places
cherubim to guard against any entrance into the garden with an omni
directional “flaming” sword, preventing Adam and Eve from returning in
the future. Christianity and Judaism associate the serpent with Satan
based on a common interpretation of Old Testament Texts. The serpent
is given a natural desire to eat “dust”, which was previously described as
the original stuff from which Mankind was made and the stuff to which
they would return. Other passages of the Hebrew Scripture describe
Satan as the perpetual prosecutor of mankind, devouring them whenever
he gets the chance. So in this interpretation God’s words to the serpent,
that he would “eat dust” was an analogy to his evil nature after the curse.
In Christianity, there is also a correspondence between Genesis and the
Revelation. Garden as depicted in Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly
Delights includes many exotic African animals.

The Book of Genesis contains little information on the garden itself. It
was home to both the Tree of Life and the Tree of knowledge of Good
and Evil, as well as an abundance of other vegetation that could feed
Adam and Eve. Some anthropologists have hypothesized that the Garden
of Eden does not represent a geographical place, but rather represents
cultural memory of “Simpler times” when man lived off God’s bounty [as
“primitive” hunters and gatherers still do] as opposed to toiling at
agriculture [being “Civilized”] The Garden of Eden motifs are most
frequently portrayed in illuminated manuscripts and paintings are the
“Sleep of Adam” [“Creation of Eve”] the “Temptation of Eve “by the serpent, the “Fall of Man” where Adam takes the fruit, and the “Expulsion”. The idyll of “Naming Day in Eden” was less often depicted. Much of Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ occurs in the Garden of Eden. Michelangelo depicted a scene at the Garden of Eden in the Sistine Chapel Ceiling.

The Virgin In The Garden, which Kenyon [1988: 59] calls “one of the most impressive works of the 1970’s “is set in 1953, the year of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The novel introduces to the reader, the Potter family- the ambitious, brilliant schoolgirl and an avid reader Frederica, the Cambridge undergraduate, English major Stephanie, Marcus, their mathematically gifted inwardly brother, their father Bill, erudite school master, and his wife Winifred, a highly intellectual woman, struggling with the demands of domesticity. As Juliet Dusinberre [in Todd 1983.: 182] has suggested the novel is “in tradition of realist fiction which goes back to George Eliot but draws on modernist images and on contemporary interest in the novel as a mirror of itself”. Kelly [1996: 64] calls the novel a “theatre drama”. “Byatt mixes the personal dramas of the main characters with the long preparation for and rehearsal in a play based on the life of Elizabeth I” The play ‘Astrea’, in which Frederica portrays the queen, is authored by the playwright and don Alexander Wedderburn. The novel captivatingly joins the rendering
of the social and cultural sensibilities of the new Elizabethan age and the lives of the Potters, most notably and coming of age of Frederica.

In her own highly revealing essay on The Virgin In The Garden, Alfer and Noble [2001] discuss the nature of time and historical knowledge, the social context as well as metaphors, visual and verbal forms of perception, and the imaginary and the real in the novel. Her emphasis lies on examining Byatt’s use of both literary experimentation and realist allegiances. She [2001 : 48-49] notes, “It is her creative and ever questioning experimentation with realist formats that not only marks her out as a highly innovative storyteller, but also renders her fictions valuable and important interventions in and contributions to the ongoing debates on our ways of world making, both within and beyond the literary text”, thus pointing to the ways in which Byatt’s challenging of realist formats and her use of experimentation offers more general insights into the nature of meaning making. Alfer [2001 : 57] also suggests that Byatts experiments show how realism is a potentially self-conscious narrative mode, preoccupied not simply with the close mimicking of reality but, “the problems and pitfalls of our desire for such representations and the always textual strategies we employ in pursuit of them” Alfer thus shows how realism and self consciousness are not mutually exclusive modes of representation.
Frederica indeed is “magnetized by print, by lettering, she takes sensual pleasure in reading anything at all, instructions about Harpic and fire alarms, lists, or - - - the title of books” [VG 99] when thinking about her life, Frederica thinks about literature; she thinks about Paradise lost, which she sees as “a closed world, made of language, and religion, and science, the science of a universe of concentric spheres which had never existed; and had constructed the minds of generations. It was part of her”.

The Virgin In The Garden offers especially revealing insights into the reading processes in the scenes showing Stephanie and Frederica engaged in dialogues with texts. Stephanie reading Keat’s “Ode to the Grecian urn”, comes to realize that this is “the poem she most cared for, saying ambivalently that you could not do, and need not attempt, what is required of you to do, see the unseen, realize the unreal, speak what was not, and that yet it did. it so that unheard melodies seen infinitely preferable to any one might ever hope to hear [VG 78] She further thinks that people “might so easily never have hit on the accidental idea of making unreal verbal forms, they might have just lived, and dreamed, and tried to tell the truth “[VG 78]. The scene clearly illustrates thought processes accompanying reading and the character’s tackling the concepts of reality, truth, imagination and functionality.
Characters like Frederica and Stephanie serve as prime examples of Byatt’s literary characters for whom thinking about abstract concepts is crucial. It is an intellectual, physical and emotional need for them. Indeed, as Byatt [in Kenyon 1992: 1] points out,” I see thinking as an activity like running; experience isn’t all narrative, and love and relationship. Many of my important experiences have come from seeing what Milton is saying”. Byatt’s characters manifest the author’s intent: “I want to convey that the experience of thinking very hard in abstract terms is just as immediate as the experience of standing next to a rosebush” [Byatt in Tredal 1994:70] Indeed the reader can sense the immediacy and power behind the characters thinking and feeling deeply indicating that thinking in abstract terms can be a vital source of experience.

Byatt’s characters at times see themselves as, perhaps uncomfortably, close to other, as it were, real-life literary characters Frederica talks about Women in Love and notes.

I was suddenly afraid I might be Gudrun, I mean, I saw the house as an awful trap like the red-brick Brangwen house in that book and Daddy was really beastly to me and I thought of how Stephanie and I used to talk about it and thought Stephanie was Ursula, and then I got really put out because that only left Gudrun and I don’t want to have to be her [VG 348]
The phenomenon is especially intriguing as it shows how Byatt’s imaginary characters “real” to themselves connect their lives to literary characters who the reader knows belong of real life and one thereby “real” while also being in essence “imaginary” fictional..

Interestingly, Byatt also points to the idea that her characters and the real-life literary characters can become inseparable. For example, Alexander, looking at Marcus, who played Ophelia, “called up this boy’s face and voice when he thought of Ophelia, and worse still, Ophelia immediately came to mind when he saw the boy” [VG: 352]. Byatt there by foregrounds the dual dimension of intertwining a literary character with a specific person, which influences both the ways in which Alexander thinks of Ophelia and how he thinks of Marcus. Also, Byatt’s characters at times feel that they have lived through and in some author’s fiction. For example, Frederica, listening to a speech from Alexander’s Astraea realizes that the soliloquy “by the young prince, thrust into the Tower by Mary Tudor, [is] a moment of history, and fiction, that Frederica had lived often enough, since she had grown up on the heady romantic emotion of Margaret Irvin’s Young Bess” [VG 100]. Interestingly, the idea of having lived in a real-life author’s fiction comes to Frederica while listening to Astraea, the fictional work by her friend.
Real life authors and fictional characters of the books have a profound influence on the 'real' life of Byatt's literary characters. Stephanie finds relief in thinking about authors, choosing it over thinking about her own life. "She thought of her childhood, and it was nothing to do with her. She thought of Daniel and decided not to. She thought of Wordsworth, and felt a momentary relief" [VG 255]. Frederica turns to books and literary characters in search for instructions on how to lead her life and interpret people. For example, pondering complex connections between literature and life, Frederica realizes that her decision to marry Nigel was greatly influenced by the power of Forster's Howards End and Lawrence's Women in Love. The novel shows how Byatt's characters relationships with one another, especially regarding the opposite sex, can be filtered through a fictional prism, heavily influenced by literary characters. Frederica frequently comments on connections between literary characters and the 'real' people in her life, especially men. Thinking of Alexander, she notes that "he too, like Daniel Orton and unlike Mr. Rochester, was flesh and blood "[VG 190].

Frederica thinks about the idea that one can fall in love with or through literary figures; already before meeting Alexander, she had wanted to know him, as she had a similar 'character type' in her imagination in the way that "some women might desire unknown actors at first and through them Benedick [from Much Ado About Nothing] and Berowne [from
Love’s Labour Lost] or Hamlet, and through them a dead playwright” [VG 325].

Alexander illustrates the idea that one’s perception of romantic relationships is deeply influenced by the imaginary, sometimes making the imaginary and the real trade places: “He liked the imaginary relish. He liked imagined contact with real women, and real contact with imaginary women” [VG 343].

The relationships with members of opposite sex also illustrate the extent to which the characters minds are infused with literature, as they cannot stop thinking about literature even when making love. Alexander, cradling his lover Jenny in his arms murmurs, “Don’t take on, ah, don’t ….., wondering, even then where he had got an idiom like that northern and not his own” [VG 346] and “track [s] it down wryly a few moments later to Lady Chatterley’s Lover [VG 346]. In another scene of Alexander and Jenny making love, Alexander thinks of T. S. Eliot, his voice and tenses [VG 45], Similarly Frederica making love to Wilkie, thinks, “ with a moment of nausea of Lawrence’s description of Constance Chatterley’s florid spreading circles of satisfaction” [VG 420]. Indeed her mind, like Alexander’s, abounds in images and thoughts she has obtained from reading.

In the novel one can find examples of real - life persons appearing in fiction, which mixes the diegetic levels and blurs the boundaries between
fact and fiction. The Virgin In The Garden records how the characters meet with real-life professors, biographers and scholars, such as Helen Gardner, Lady Longford, and Frances Yates [VG 12, 246]. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction manifests itself in an especially evocative way in The Virgin In The Garden, in which the reader may get confused and start to wonder whether the texts or authors referred to actually exist, as they are often discussed side by side with real-life works and writers. Also, Frederica, being deeply engrossed in comparing Shakespeare, Racine, and Shaw, finds herself thinking that tracing recurrent images in the authors works, for example “blood and babies in Macbeth, blood and light and dark in Phedre” [make] both Shakespeare and Racine seem very much like Alexander Wedderburn [VG201]. Her comment shows how the real-life and fictional can be seen in the light of one another. Additionally, Byatt’s characters are reminded of real-life characters and books through the fictional works of their friends; for instance, Stephanie, watching Alexander’s Astraea, sees in the play a parody of the resurrection of Hermione in A Winter’s Tale [VG 362]. Frederica senses that fiction can be some how truer and more real than reality, reaching the core of human essence. Frederica, from early childhood was influenced by the literary ideas of her father; is shown to think about the quality of ‘realness’ of fiction:
So, early injured to the knowledge that Lear was truer and wiser than anything else she had never been surprised enough to ask herself why, why a man should want to write out a play and not simply dealt at no removes with the grim truths of age, ague, recalcitrant daughters, folly, spite and death or why a man should want to write. O Western Wind rather than be in bed with his love or the pleasure and pain of absence. Knowing nothing, she imagined that poem and play were somehow more what they were than those things they were images of [VG 104].

Byatt’s characters frequently ponder the use of words, their effect and their associations and images words evoke. Byatt, who has stated, “I write novels because I am passionately interested in language [IS 4], tackles the metafictional concern with language from various view points, looking at the ways in which language creates fiction and the world outside fiction. Byatt depicts characters most notably Frederica, Stephanie, and Alexander, who feel the utmost importance of words. Frederica learns the world around her and makes it familiar by first relying on words. The reader can sense her reliance on words particularly clearly in the following paragraph:

She had never, she realized, looked at a picture or a carving or even landscape without some immediate verbal accompaniment or translation. Language was ingrained in
her. Bill had done that. He had described her own early words to her, sung them back at her, repeated them admiringly to others in her presence and improved on them unconsciously.

He had read and read and read [VG 104].

Stephanie is similarly acutely aware of the fact that her connection to the world is built with words; she moves around the world verbally; “what she touched with words was for her defused and neutralizes; acceptable” [VG 280].

Alexander reflects upon his word based thinking, realizing that he is so much in the habit of rendering things into language that he found them hard to see or touch without some kind of mental naming and comparing, in words. Also, Alexander becomes aware of the power to construct or change one’s reality. After saying, involuntarily, to Frederica, “I suppose I love you too” [VG 333], Alexander is shown to realize, “He was a man of words. Once those were said, they took hold of him” [VG 333].

Alexander finds out that words, once spoken, can make certain phenomena come true, which points to the performative power of language: “He [Alexander] saw with a kind of haggard horror that those were, now, true, that he had made them true. That perhaps, though unfortunately not certainly, it was only leaving them unsaid that had kept him so coolly secure from then” [VG 333].
The characters whose minds are ingrained with words and who often discuss and think about word associations and word origins are contrasted with the characters who draw the reader’s attention because of the near absence of words. When Daniel, Stephanie’s husband compares himself to the Potter’s obsession with words, he realizes that “his imagination could not correlate black marks with an informed knowledge of the precise passion of Racine, with writing clearly, at least, about the terrors of Hamlet and Lear” [VG-377].

Stephanie’s and Federica’s love for words is contrasted with the lack of words in the mind of their brother, Marcus, who distrusts words. He assumes that words are “Crude indicators any way and their messages only approximations at best” [VG 145]. In these characters Byatt also portrays different readers, as the characters less reliant on words are in striking contact to the passionate reading of the Potters. Marcus “had been allergic to poetry, which had lain about his house all his life, like so much dust or pollen, all over, and he how considered himself desensitized” [VG 310].

Daniel, a slow and not a passionate reader however, takes up king Lear and discovers that the verbal world can have truth and honesty in it:

He had been driven to it [reading king Lear] by a kind of wrath and a more obscure desire to deal with the Potters, particularly Stephanie. He did not know, as he read, exactly
what he was reading for, and so read for the story . . .
admiring, without awe, Shakespeare’s cleverness in creating so
hugely real old man, so maddening, so injured, so inevitably
broken and cracked . . . he knew, at a point where he asked no
questions, that the world was like this, King Lear was true . . .
As he came to the end, he realized he had learned something
about pain [VG 56].
The Virgin In The Garden mirrors Alexander’s writing of Astraea, and
the novel depicts how Frederica and Alexander talk about language and
meter. The book also shows how Frederica attempts to love in language:
“He [Lawrence] loved language, he lied in a way when he indicated all
those values ‘beyond’ and ‘under’ it. I like language, why can’t one love
in language. Racine’s people speak the unspeakable” [VG 349].
Byatt’s characters are not only avid readers but also devoted writers.
There are major and minor characters who write books, plays, poems,
articles and book reviews. They frequently comment on their writings,
writing styles, and authors who have influenced their writing techniques.
The major writer figures are Alexander Wedderburn, who is the author of
a lesser known play. The Buskers, written in line of “metaphysical
puppetry” [VG 317] and during the events of The Virgin In The Garden
is working on the play Astraea, the performance of which forms one of
the central events of the novel. Alexander recognizes that the writings of
Dr. Frances Yates on the images of Elizabeth Tudor as Virgo Astraea had “significantly changed the whole shape of his own life” [VG 12], an illuminating example of the possible far-reaching impact written works can have indicating that somebody else’s writing can intrude with another person’s reality.

Apart from thematizing the process of writing by several characters in the construction of their texts, Virgin In The Garden comments on the decisions, anxieties, and rewarding moments these characters face as writers. Alexander and Frederica offer particularly revealing portrayals of writers in the act of writing. The novel draws the reader’s attention to the thought that writing is hardly a smooth process and illustrate problems and anxieties that writers might face. The Virgin In The Garden shows, interestingly, how Alexander, despite working with words, can find uttering them cumbersome, as his true medium is writing, not speaking: when talking to Jenny, he says, “No, no. I would . . . I would . . . [VG 142]. As the narrator notes, “He [Alexander] could have written it. He could not speak it” [VG 142] More over the novel records Alexander’s difficulties with finding his own voice as writer: “He had a moment of panic.

He would never have a voice of his own: There was a line he had thought was his, or at least his with a clever modern – Renaissance
echo of ovid which he must change, he must remember to change, the
damned cadence was certainly Eliot’s” [VG 45].
Indeed Alexander feels like his voice as an author has become blurred
with the voices of other author, making him lose track of which thoughts
are his and which belong to the others.
An interesting account of Alexander’s wrestling with other author’s can
be observed in the following passages, recounting Alexander’s dream of
Shakespeare :

He woke up with sweat cooling in rivulets all over him and
thought of Spencer. This poet, more remote, more apparently
inaccessible [ than Shakespeare ], had proved easier to deal
with . . . Eterne, is mutability, as Spencer might, himself an
incorporator of archaisms, have said of the language, and had
said of Adonis, Alexander had incorporated the phrase itself in
Astraea. From where, in due course, it found its way into O-
level and A - level footnotes” [VG 13].
The idea of Byatt’s character struggling to find his own voice amid the
voices of other, real - life authors points to an intriguing mix of the
fictional and the ‘real’ outside Byatt’s work, showing how the two can
merge in the reader’s or writer’s consciousness. The passage also points
to the idea that Byatt’s literary characters who are writers can become
textualised, can become texts and there by stand next to the real life text
and find their way to schools and academic discourse. Indeed, after Alexander has written Astraea, Frederica arts, "Do you know you are how an established O level set text?" [VG 12].

Frederica's diary notes, reports on her marriage, and book reviews become, among a myriad of other texts, part of her Laminations. Showing Frederica putting together the texts, for the book provides one of the most revealing accounts of writing processes depicted in the novel. The processes of writing a book and it reception occupy a central place in it. Frederica gets the idea for laminated knowledge in The Virgin in the Garden, in which she realizes that Laminations produce a "powerful sense of freedom, truthfulness and even selflessness [VG 209]. Frederica becomes obsessed with an idea from Howards End - 'only connect' - and by Lawrence's thoughts on Oneness, however, she loses her faith in the mystic Oneness and thinks that there is a much greater power in keeping things separate.

The Virgin In The Garden is mostly rendered in a realist mode of writing in which the omniscient third person narrator maps out the events and people in the fictional world as true to life. However, in several cases the reader can scene the organizing influence of the intrusive narrator who introduces ideas on writing and the nature of characters. For example, the reader can notice the presence of the narrator in a sense where Marcus reads writings by his friend Lucas Simmonds: "He
[Marcus] has no desire, unlike every other person in this story, to prove his skill at reading people [VG:145]. The phrase “unlike every other person in this story” evokes the presence of the narrator who is putting the story together relying on necessarily fictive, made-up characters. Another interesting case of the presence of the narrator, commenting from outside the fictional world, occurs in a scene in which the don Alexander, holds Frederica, his student on his lap: “There was no doubt no private or star separate school girls to hold on your knee, if the truth were to know. And Lolita still unwritten“ [VG 351]

The reference to Lolita indicates the narrator’s leap in time, coming clearly out of the possible consciousness of the characters which lets Alexander and Frederica be seen an manipulable, created literary figures, like the ones in other literary works such as Lolita. One of the most intriguing instances of self-reflexivity, allowing for insights into the ways the narrator comments on his or her thoughts on the writing at hand, occurs in the following passages which maps out some of the difficulties of writing about an event such as reading:

Same passions are the regular subjects of fiction and some, though certainly passions, are more recondite and impossible to describe. A passion for reading is some where in the middle; it can be hinted but not told out, since to describe an impassioned reading of Books [by Wordsworth] would take many more pages than books itself and be
an anti-climax. Nor is it possible like Borges poet, to incorporate books into this text though its fear of the drowning of books and its determination to give a fictive substance to a figure seen in a dream might lend a kind of Wordsworthian force to the narrative [VG 251]

The narrator discusses what must also be among the central concerns of Byatt’s – how to write about the passion for and the act of reading without losing the narrative pace and making the characters and the plot seem papery and fictive. The narrator further comments:

It is not easy to describe a careful conscious reading as an event what Stephanie found in Books was a superfluous fear, a fear of drowning, of love, of dark powers, ambivalent about whether it was life or the imagination that was the destroyer, or where those two because one, where of at all, the undifferentiated narrator tells a solid tale [VG 251]

Although commenting on the difficulty of seeing the act of reading as carrying narrative power, Byatt’s novel undertakes to prove the opposite and show that reading can indeed be written about in a manner that renders it as an inspiring, immediate, and powerful act. Through the values of the characters the narrator also comments on aspects of form, Frederica, in response to Wilkie’s arguments that verse and psychological
realism are unfashionable, claims no form is inherently unsuitable. A form is as good as the writer who chooses it” [VG 359]

Wilkie’s suggests, “When you decide to be a lady novelist, and get set to write a long novel by Proust out of George Eliot, and it won’t get up and walk, its words decay and real people turn out to be hectic puppets” [VG 359]

Frederica’s and Wilkie’s discussion can be seen to highlight some of the key concerns that the narrator and Byatt are facing: Byatt’s novel is interested in exploring the realist dimension, while recognizing the contemporary distrust of nineteenth century modes of writing, and are preoccupied with creating characters who would appear not as “hectic puppets” in the writer’s hand but strike the reader as “Real people” who can be related to.

The Virgin In The Garden provides an intriguing discussion on the fictionality and reality of the characters by showing how the characters examine what if they were fictional, what if they occurred as characters in somebody’s novel. Alexander tells Frederica that he loves her because she is very clever and Frederica responds by pointing out that she loves him because he can write. To Alexander’s question whether these are good reasons, Frederica replies “well novels would say not, People in novels don’t love each other because they can both see that Racine is - is what he is……. If we were in a novel it would be most suspect and

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doomed to sit her dryly discussing literature” [VG 349]. Alexander suggests” If we were in a novel they’d just cut this dialogue because of artifice. You can have sex in a novel, but not Racine’s meter, however impassioned you maybe about it” [VG 349]. It can be argued that Byatt, again tries to claim the opposite and show that a novel can indeed talk about Racine’s meter and characters can indeed fall in love because they both think similarly or with a similar passion about writing and literature. Indeed, Frederica and Alexander in the same scene continue talking about Pound, Laurence and Wordsworth and the authors ideas about emotions, poetry, pleasure and love [VG 349], with little regard to the idea that discussing literature might doom them as dry.