The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt

The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt

By

Elizabeth Hicks

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

The Still Life in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt, by Elizabeth Hicks

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2385-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2385-2

There are . . . things made with hands . . . that live a life different from ours, that live longer than we do, and cross our lives in stories . . . .

—Byatt, A. S. “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” 277

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ARTWORKS

INTRODUCTION

> It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking . . . Novels have their obligatory tour-de-force, the green-flecked gold omelette *aux fines herbes*, melting into buttery formlessness and tasting of summer . . . They do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading.
> —Byatt, A. S. *Possession: A Romance* 470

> Still life, in all its manifestations, has demonstrated that it is a remarkably flexible device for exploring not just the domestic areas of human experience but also much broader areas of experience . . . .
> —Lloyd, R. *Shimmering in a Transformed Light* 157-58

For more than thirty years, British writer A. S. (Antonia) Byatt has produced fictional texts which foreground descriptions of art and artists. In particular, her body of work contains many examples of the still-life[1] genre, with one of her novels tellingly entitled *Still Life*. The still-life descriptions embedded in Byatt's fiction may be regarded as examples of *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical term originally used for poetry that describes art, but which has expanded to encompass depictions of artworks in other literary genres such as fiction and travel writing. These still lifes may be looked at, firstly, as written representations of still-life paintings, whether they be real or imagined works of art; and secondly, as passages that depict meals, kitchen scenes, rooms and market stalls using a similar lexicon to that which describes artworks. This second category of descriptions may be termed "verbal still lifes", a phrase also employed by Rosemary Lloyd in her study *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life* (2005), to describe literary passages which resemble realist descriptions of still-life paintings. Byatt's fiction contains many examples of these extremely detailed sentences and paragraphs that employ painterly language and are separate from, yet at times 'spill over' into, the text in which they are embedded. This category also encompasses lists of objects which, while brief and factual, nevertheless convey the sense of a room, a table or a person. Lists figure prominently in Byatt's fiction, as may be observed in her statement in the novel *Possession*, that "the lists were the

[1] I make the distinction between the 'still life' and its adjectival form of 'still-life'.

important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry"[2]. Such lists may be regarded as verbal still lifes because, like visual still lifes, their purpose is to present a tangible and material arrangement of 'things' which tell a story.

Like those of many writers, Byatt's texts feature lengthy descriptions of artworks, whether still lifes, landscapes or portraits. However, Byatt also describes interior and exterior settings in a manner which may be termed 'painterly' in that these descriptions evoke the visual through the incorporation of vivid imagery, metaphor, simile and colour adjectives. This technique is not, of course, unique to Byatt and is, in fact, how most writers write if they in any way aspire to a realist descriptive style. In the words of Malcolm Kelsall, "[w]riters interpret what they see, and the way in which things are seen is conditioned by how they are described. There is no firm division between the visual arts and literature".[3] What sets Byatt's work apart, however, is the presence of a certain 'knowingness' about this technique which ultimately distinguishes her from practitioners of so-called conventional realism. Not only does she include what may be termed *ekphrastic* representations of still-life paintings in order to comment on, explain or elucidate aspects of both the narrative itself and of art, but her employment of terms such as *memento mori* and *vanitas* clearly evokes associations with the still-life genre.

Many critics, as well as Byatt herself, have discussed the *ekphrastic* descriptions of artworks in her texts as reflecting the attempt to achieve a 'visual' language, or as a means by which to compare the relative effectiveness of the visual and verbal. In her explorations of the relationship between the two modes of representation we recognise her debt to E. H. Gombrich, one of her "great heroes"[4]. In *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, he has famously written of various correspondences between sight and sound, including sounds which "can indeed imitate or match visual impressions"[5] and the existence of synesthesia as evidence of the close association between the two senses. Gombrich asserts that "[a]rtists at all times have been interested in these correspondences, which are invoked in a famous poem by Baudelaire" and proffers numerous examples such as the fact that

[2] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: a Romance* (London: Vintage, 1990), 473.
[3] Malcolm Kelsall, *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (Hemel Hempstead, Eng.: Harvester, 1993), 8.
[4] Nicolas Tredell, "A. S. Byatt," in *Conversations with Critics*, ed. Nicolas Tredell (Manchester, Eng.: Carcanet, 1994), 68.
[5] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 310.

"Rimbaud assigned colours to the five vowels"[6]. This relationship between the visual and verbal is strongly evident in Byatt's texts. Michael Worton attests to the visual qualities inherent in her writing, stating that she "*sees* paintings very well; she also knows how to make her readers see them"[7]. Byatt also admires this quality in other writers: speaking of her esteem for American writer Willa Cather, she notes that she "liked to use painting as an image for what she was trying to achieve", quoting Cather's statement in a letter[8] that "[s]ince I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of St Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something like that in prose"[9]. Most previous analyses have pointed out that Byatt's fiction does indeed achieve a comparable but distinctive visual-verbal fusion.

However, it is possible to take this point further in saying that Byatt venerates the act of reading as offering an experience to the reader which does not have an equivalent in viewing a work of art. This is because as a writer she is celebratory of the unique pleasure afforded by the unfolding of a written text, and this unfolding is intricately bound up with the act of consumption. In other words, the reader 'consumes' words quite differently to the way in which a painting is viewed because, while a painting can be taken in relatively quickly, a written text takes time to read. It may be argued that looking at a painting could or should take just as long, or longer, than reading about it. However, on average, reading an *ekphrastic* description may be regarded as the more time-consuming activity. In addition, reading can be seen as a more intimate pursuit than looking at art, in that viewers experience paintings at a distance, whereas literature demands a more direct consumption by the reader.

Byatt's verbal still lifes display considerable pleasure in the consumption of food, art and literature. Consequently, her language itself is sensual, evoking the pleasure to be experienced through eating or looking at a painting. Further, Byatt's deliberate choice of the still-life genre indicates her awareness that her writing and the act of reading keep the artworks described 'alive'. The quartet's motif of the urn from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" draws together these related concepts of pleasure, consumption and the inherent tension between impermanent life and the

---

[6] Ibid., 311.

[7] Michael Worton, "Of Prisms and Prose: Reading Paintings in A. S. Byatt's Work," in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt*, ed. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), 28.

[8] In *Commonweal* 7 (27 Nov, 1927)

[9] A. S. Byatt, "American Pastoral," *The Guardian*, no. December 9 (2006): n.p., www.guardian.co.uk/books/206/dec/09/fiction.asbyatt.

permanent yet 'still' work of art. These qualities may also be regarded as the central tenets of still-life painting.

The verbal still lifes in Byatt's fiction, then, convey her sheer pleasure in description, revealing her fascination with materiality, a hitherto unexplored aspect of Byatt scholarship. Her writing reflects what may be regarded as 'creature comfort', encompassing the pleasures to be experienced through such activities as eating and drinking. Through her still lifes Byatt taps into a realist literary tradition which celebrates the sensual appeal of food through language. Indeed, the first epigraph to this Introduction draws out not only Byatt's pleasure in "the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking"[10] but also her veneration of literature. This is her most overt statement regarding the pleasures of reading and writing, one of *Possession*'s major themes. It occurs near the end of the novel when Roland Michell, one of its two main protagonists, experiences an epiphany regarding the work of fictional nineteenth-century poet Randolph Henry Ash, and becomes free to write his own poetry. It is located within a paragraph which obliquely references *The Pleasure of the Text* by French theorist Roland Barthes (from whom, arguably, Roland derives his Christian name). Barthes states:

> In an old text I have just read . . . occurs a naming of foods: milk, buttered bread, cream cheese, preserves, Maltese oranges, sugared strawberries. Is this another pleasure of pure representation (experienced therefore solely by the greedy reader)? . . . [P]erhaps, the novelist, by citing, naming, *noticing* food (by treating it as notable), imposes on the reader the final state of the matter, which cannot be transcended, withdrawn.[11]

Here, Barthes's concept of the "pleasure of pure representation" ties together textual and gastronomic pleasure, the reader "greedy" for both food and words. The joys of reading and eating are also described in Byatt's passage. Just as she refers to the pleasure of the "green-flecked gold omelette *aux fines herbes*"[12], Byatt also conveys Roland's knowledge that "(n)ow and then there are readings which make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact"[13]. This passage clearly

[10] A. S. Byatt, *Possession: a Romance* (London: Vintage, 1990), 470.
[11] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill, 1975), 45.
[12] Byatt, *Possession: a Romance*, 470.
[13] Ibid., 471.

shows Byatt's delight in "the language of poetry"[14] as well as in the sensual pleasure of food, thereby paralleling Barthes's text.

Barthes's use of the term "pleasure" distinguishes between the two meanings of "pleasure (contentment)" and "bliss (rapture)"[15]. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle elaborate on these definitions as "pleasure of the 'comfortable' sort and pleasure of a more disturbing and subversive kind'"[16]. It is this latter meaning to which Richard Miller refers in "A Note on the Text" at the beginning of the English translation of Barthes's essay, when he states that Barthes's term "*jouissance*"[17] is probably most closely translated as "'bliss'; but of course he cannot come up with 'coming', which precisely translates what the original text can afford"[18]. Textual pleasure in Byatt's writing may be examined in terms of these two meanings of comfort and of bliss, the latter most notably evident in her overt references to Lacan's theory of *jouissance* in *Possession*. Moreover, it encompasses many forms and aspects of pleasure including pleasure in looking, whether at artworks or more generally (scopophilia); pleasure in the creation of art; narrative pleasure or closure; pleasure in the preparation and consumption of a meal; and sexual pleasure. Although Val, Roland's beleaguered partner in *Possession* "had not done anything that was simply designed for pleasure . . . since she could remember"[19], the reader receives the impression that Byatt herself is familiar with and sets out to convey many facets of pleasure through detailed description. This is because, for her, the unfolding of pleasure is a temporal experience.

One point of difference between the idea of pleasure in Byatt's fiction and in Barthes's theory concerns the concept of narrative closure. According to Barthes, "pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the

---

[14] Ibid., 473.
[15] Ibid., 19.
[16] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, Eng.: Pearson, 2004), 264.
[17] Jouissance: (Fr. 'bliss', 'pleasure', including sexual bliss or orgasm) a term introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, to refer to extreme pleasure, but also to that excess whereby pleasure slides into its opposite. Roland Barthes uses the term to suggest an experience of reading as textual bliss. Similarly, Jacques Derrida suggests that the effect of deconstruction is to liberate forbidden jouissance. (Bennett and Royle 293)
[18] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, v-vi.
[19] Byatt, *Possession: a Romance*, 414.

hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy's dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)"[20]. In other words, textual pleasure does not depend on closure for Barthes, whereas Byatt has stated that "I think closure is the really revolutionary narrative mode at the moment"[21]. Her desire for narrative satisfaction is further expressed through her statement in *Possession* that "[c]oherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frighteningly and enchantingly desirable"[22]. *Possession*, in a sense, has it both ways. While we as readers are able to admire Byatt's cleverness in the use of techniques such as authorial intervention, self-reflexivity and 'knowingness', we come away from the novel having experienced narrative pleasure in a number of ways: Roland's relationship with the academic Maud Bailey has a 'happily ever after' ending; the novel's literary detective story ends with the finding of the letters in Ash's coffin; and, finally, the reader witnesses the meeting between Ash and his illegitimate daughter Maia. In this last scene, the reader experiences narrative pleasure in a way that the majority of characters in the novel cannot. As Chris Walsh has noted, "what *Possession* offers is an elaborate and fascinating meditation on the *pleasures* and problems of 'reading as a form of life'" (emphasis added)[23]. Byatt's pleasure in reading informs her use of *ekphrasis* which, by taking time to unfold, provides a more pleasurable and direct experience for the reader than viewing a painting.

However, Byatt acknowledges that not all reading is pleasurable, referring in *Possession* to "the regressive nature of the pleasure, a *mise-en-abîme* even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy"[24]. Here she demonstrates her veneration of realist narrative, associating its pleasures with those to be experienced through sex or the consumption of food. She expresses writing's ability to engage the reader's sense of sight, touch and smell in a way that paintings cannot. The examples of *ekphrasis* in her fiction engage the reader more fully because they take time to convey the

[20] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 10.
[21] Tredell, "A. S. Byatt," 59.
[22] Byatt, *Possession: a Romance*, 422.
[23] Chris Walsh, "Postmodernist Reflections: A. S. Byatt's *Possession*," in *Theme Parks, Rainforests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 186.
[24] Byatt, *Possession: a Romance*, 470.

materiality of objects. Indeed, when Phineas Nanson in *The Biographer's Tale* feels "an urgent need for a life full of things"[25], he echoes Byatt's pleasure in 'things'.

When art critic John Berger somewhat bluntly declares that "[o]il paintings depict things"[26], he is referring to the fact that oil is a medium which is extremely successful in rendering the palpability of material objects. As he suggests further,

> [w]hat distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts . . . Although its painted images are two-dimensional, its potential of illusionism is far greater than that of sculpture, for it can suggest objects possessing colour, texture and temperature, filling a space and, by implication, the entire world.[27]

Thus, glassware, china, cutlery, fruit and other foodstuffs are given depth and life-like qualities through the oil painting technique. Byatt strives to capture this tactility and realism through her highly mimetic verbal still lifes.

British author Evelyn Waugh has commented on the experience of describing food in literature. In the introduction to the 1959 edition of *Brideshead Revisited*, he states that he had originally written the novel during the latter years of World War II in "a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster – the period of soya beans and basic English – and in consequence this book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful"[28]. Here, Waugh applies the term "gluttony" to the consumption of both food and literature, paralleling Byatt's own linking of the pleasures to be experienced through eating and reading. Even though Byatt was writing at a later time than Waugh and the privations of war were far behind her, she too may be said to have instilled her fiction with a similar "kind of gluttony". While Waugh was later to reject what he saw as his previous "ornamental language", many of Byatt's verbal still lifes strongly demonstrate that sensual and vivid language is integral to the pleasure conveyed by realist description.

---

[25] A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Chatto, 2000), 4.
[26] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1973), 83.
[27] Ibid., 89.
[28] Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (London: Chapman, 1960), 9.

In Byatt's novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, Marcus Potter and his mother Winifred visit Allenbury's butcher shop[29], an event described through a lengthy verbal still life which conveys visual pleasure through the description of the "consuming human" as "an artist in the destruction and reconstruction of flesh", who creates "from sweated suet, mangled breast of calf, chopped parsley, bread and beaten eggs an incurving sculptural spiral of delicate pink and white and green and gold"[30]. In the use of the word "consuming", Byatt ties together both eating and reading about food as acts of consumption. Rosemary Lloyd has labelled this scene "a sardonic doffing of the cap to such writers as Dickens and Zola"[31]. She states:

> The way in which this passage begins with an apparently exuberant tribute to the artistry of the butcher, bringing us through aesthetics and folklore to the unvarnished vision of butchery and decay becoming such artistry, is of course a *tour de force* compelling us to look directly at elements of the still life that are generally overlooked when aesthetics take precedence over pragmatics.[32]

To this I would add that the passage also venerates realist description as a form of consumption, Byatt's enthusiasm and detail exhibiting certain similarities, as Lloyd has indicated, to those of French realist writer Emile Zola. Bettina Knapp, in her analysis of Zola's novel *The Belly of Paris*, which is partially set in the Parisian markets Les Halles, states that

> Zola's descriptions of foods in piles, baskets, boxes, encouraged some to call him the 'Courbet of literature, so precise were his delineations with regard to form, colour, and texture . . . . Like 'an immense still life', a 'gastric poem,' Zola takes his readers from one stall to another, one canvas to the next, brilliant, frenetic, vital, and impressionistic.[33]

The art critic Meyer Schapiro states that in Zola's "depiction of the food in the market are expressed his great appetite for life"[34]. He notes that,

---

[29] According to Norbert Schneider, "paintings of butchers' shops" (34) were a sub genre of still life paintings.
[30] A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 93.
[31] Rosemary Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005), 70.
[32] Ibid., 71.
[33] Bettina L. Knapp, *Emile Zola* (New York: Ungar, 1980), 59-60.
[34] Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life," in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries*, ed. (London: Chatto, 1978), 18.

ironically, while Zola lamented the lack of realism in visual still lifes by artists of his acquaintance, he placed a great deal of importance on the verbal equivalent. Schapiro is of the opinion that *The Belly of Paris* "monumentalises still-life and reveals its enormous fascination as a part of existence and as a symbol of the animal forces in social behaviour"[35]. Byatt's fiction, too, may be said to both elevate verbal descriptions of food to an artform and to express her own "appetite for life".

Olga Kenyon describes the Allenbury's butcher shop scene as "an evocative visual image for the disintegration of material objects, yet represented in discourse which recalls [food writer] Elizabeth David's joy in cooking dead flesh, transforming it for one's children to eat"[36]. Kenyon here points to another likely influence for Byatt's exuberant food descriptions in British food writer Elizabeth David, whose books such as *Italian Food* may be regarded as a reaction to post-war rationing in Britain during the 1950s. Indeed, Byatt's verbal still lifes bear subtle but vital similarities to those of David. In the sensuousness and exuberance evident in her descriptions of markets and meals, Byatt may be said to pay homage to the earlier writer. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Frederica Potter is an inexperienced teenager unsuccessfully planning a seduction meal for teacher Alexander Wedderburn. Her limited knowledge of cooking becomes evident as she deliberates over potential menus. Byatt's authorial voice intrudes with the observation that

> [it] was before the days of Elizabeth David and her ideas of what constituted a nice dinner for two were derived from *Woman's Own* and her mother's exceedingly infrequent practical example. Grapefruit with cherries, and a roast duck, and fresh fruit salad and cream? Hors d'oeuvre and steak with jacket potatoes and salad, followed by baked bananas with rum and cream? Soup with hot rolls followed by trout followed by trifle with lots of sherry in it? [37]

The influence of David is more clearly signposted in *Still Life*, where the narrator states that "a civility of Alexander's life at this time was the discussion, the repetition, of the detail of [Elizabeth David's] cookery books with Elinor Poole"[38]. Also in this novel, Byatt writes of "Elizabeth

---

[35] Ibid.

[36]Olga Kenyon, "A. S. Byatt: Fusing Tradition with Twentieth-Century Experimentation," in *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties*, ed. Olga Kenyon (Brighton, Eng.: Harvester, 1988), 62.

[37] Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden*, 412.

[38] A. S. Byatt, *Still Life* (London: Vintage, 1995), 195.

David's descriptions of the colours and patterns of fish on the stalls"[39]. This is arguably a reference to "the great heaps of shiny fish, silver, vermilion or tiger-striped, and those long needle fish whose bones so mysteriously turn out to be green"[40] in the introduction to David's classic 1950 text, *A Book of Mediterranean Food*.

In *Still Life*, Byatt's verbal still lifes of market stalls in Bloomsbury employ similarly intense visual and olfactory imagery, with "Italian grocers smelling of cheese, winecasks, salami, Jewish bakers smelling of cinnamon, and poppyseed, Cypriot greengrocers overflowing with vegetables unobtainable in the North, aubergines, fennel, globe artichokes, courgettes, glistening, brilliant, green, purple, sunshine-glossed"[41]. David uses a similar listing of foods in her description of the same market, when she advises that

> [t]hose who make an occasional marketing expedition to Soho or to the region of Tottenham Court Road can buy Greek cheese and Kalamata olives, tahina paste from the Middle East, little birds preserved in oil from Cyprus, stuffed vine leaves from Turkey, Spanish sausages, Egyptian brown beans, chick peas, Armenian ham, Spanish, Italian and Cypriot olive oil, Italian salami and rice, even occasionally Neapolitan mozzarella cheese and honey from Mount Hymettus.[42]

As this description reveals, David introduced a certain continental cosmopolitanism to the British public who began to take pleasure in at least reading about these foods, whether or not they consumed them. She is an indispensable point of reference for Byatt because of her introduction of this *idea* of gastronomic pleasure which so thoroughly permeates Byatt's fiction.

Rosemary Lloyd terms Byatt's market scene from *Still Life* "an attempt to seize a particular moment, when the English left food-rationing behind and, under the influence of such gifted food writers as Elizabeth David, began to expand their tastes and indulge their senses"[43]. Here she likens the pleasure to be found in Byatt's description to that experienced in reading David's cookery books. In writing of David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, Marion Halligan terms it "one of the few truly vicarious recipe books in existence, since at the time it was written its

---

[39] Ibid., 68.
[40] Elizabeth David, *A Book of Mediterranean Food and Other Writings* (London: Folio, 2006), 5.
[41] Byatt, *Still Life*, 195.
[42] David, *A Book of Mediterranean Food and Other Writings*, 10.
[43] Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*, 148-49.

readers would have had little chance of finding any of the ingredients needed. It was designed to comfort them in those dreary late 1940s of rationing and shortages . . ."[44]. As British author Julian Barnes writes in his preface to the 2006 edition of David's book, "[w]eather, food, herbs, colours, smells, tastes: the austerity-ridden housewife of the early 1950s must have been . . . astonished by the way David piles up potential – and at the time, often unobtainable – ingredients like a small stall-holder skilled in the art of temptation"[45]. As David herself notes,

> even if people could not very often make the dishes here described, it was stimulating to think of them; to escape from the deadly boredom of queuing and the frustration of buying weekly rations; to read about real food cooked with wine and olive oil, eggs and butter and cream, and dishes richly flavoured with onions, garlic, herbs and brightly coloured Southern vegetables.[46]

The experience of reading David's books indulges the senses and brings a vicarious pleasure to the reader in a similar way to the depictions of food in Byatt's fiction.

The resemblance between Byatt's verbal still lifes and David's non-fictional descriptions of food is evidence of her employment of realism in her fiction. In the opinion of British critic David Lodge, realism is "*the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in non-literary texts of the same culture*"[47] (italics in original). Byatt's realist style may be seen in *Still Life*, in which she intended naming to be a way of cataloguing the world of the novel in an orderly manner. She has stated in the essay "*Still Life/ Nature morte*" that she "wanted to write about birth, about death, plainly and exactly"[48] in *Still Life*. In this she resembles Zola[49] who, according to Wendy Lesser, described his writing process as "'copying life exactly and

---

[44] Marion Halligan, *The Taste of Memory* (Sydney: Allen, 2004), 45-6.
[45] Julian Barnes, "Preface," in *A Book of Mediterranean Food and Other Writings*, ed. Elizabeth David (London: Folio, 2006), x-xi.
[46] David, *A Book of Mediterranean Food and Other Writings*, 9.
[47] David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 25.
[48] A. S. Byatt, "*Still Life / Nature morte*," in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Chatto, 1991), 11.
[49] See Byatt's discussion of Zola and his relationship with Cézanne in *Portraits in Fiction* (32-41).

meticulously'"[50]. As further evidence of her commitment to the realist project, Byatt has said: "I am resistant to the idea that the world hits us as a series of random impressions (V. Woolf) and that memory operates in a random manner. I wanted at least to work on the assumption that . . . words denote things"[51] (parentheses in original). Byatt goes further, stating rather bluntly that "[w]hen Virginia Woolf says that life hits us as a series of random impressions, it jolly well doesn't"[52]. For Byatt, the denotative capacity of words is extremely important as she believes that language can capture the 'truth' of a person, object or experience. She has stated in a television interview with Iris Murdoch that "[w]e live at a time when there are a great many theories about, as it were, the untrustworthiness of language, and not many theories about the enormous power of it, . . . so that you *can* describe a flower or a hospital room and none of your readers will see the same flower in their minds but none of them, if they can read at all, will not see more accurately"[53]. For Byatt, language can provide the right words if one looks hard enough. Consequently, she shuns what she regards as the relativity of the structuralists and poststructuralists, and disagrees with the concept of slippage of meaning.

As part of her desire to tie words strictly to their meanings, Byatt states that in writing *Still Life*, "I found myself writing into my text 'taxonomies' – from one girl's study of all young men in Cambridge, to a formicary and an essay in field grasses, from children's pictures representing alphabets to a long discursus on a child's pre-speech"[54]. She also includes taxonomies in *The Biographer's Tale*, such that Jane Campbell states of this novel, "Byatt's fascination with the relationship of words and things, always present in her fiction and non-fiction, is for the first time set squarely at the centre of the text"[55]. Byatt's desire for words to denote things is arguably the reason for the prominence of lists in her fiction. But despite her efforts, these often unintentionally move away from words and naming to become imbued with metaphorical associations.

One of the aspects which characterises realism is the fact that language features are not "foregrounded so that they become the focus of the

---

[50] Wendy Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 65.
[51] Byatt, "*Still Life / Nature morte*," 11.
[52] Tredell, "A. S. Byatt," 60.
[53] *A. S. Byatt with Iris Murdoch.* Videotape. (Northbrook, IL: Roland Collection of Films on Art, 1984)
[54] Byatt, "*Still Life / Nature morte*," 17-18.
[55] Jane Campbell, *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2004), 216.

attention", while "the narrator does not draw attention to her or his role in interpreting events"[56]. Clearly, then, Byatt cannot be said to be solely a realist as she employs techniques such as irony, puns and the intrusive narratorial voice as part of her realism. Rather, as has been pointed out by Kathleen Coyne Kelly, she combines her version of realism with a postmodernist stance, in that "she passionately uses description and allusion and metaphor as if they could capture some truth, while her plots are often open-ended and celebratory of the inability to do so"[57]. Indeed, Alexa Alfer refers to Byatt's "creative and ever-questioning experimentation *with* realist formats"[58]. These comments highlight the fact that, while Byatt venerates realism, her relationship to the realist canon encompasses an awareness of its limitations. Furthermore, she engages with the realist form in a pleasurable way through her use of *ekphrasis*, and it is this pleasure that gives realism purpose for her.

As Lloyd points out in the second epigraph to this Introduction, the still life is a highly suitable vehicle for exploring "not just the domestic areas of human experience but also much broader areas of experience"[59]. Consequently, her own study draws out the ideological implications of the still-life genre, focusing particularly on issues of class and gender. Referring specifically to the Bloomsbury market scene in *Still Life*, she states that, "[w]hile this list is partly a sign of linguistic pleasure, it also acts as *social commentary*, comparing English North Country life with that of London"[60] (emphasis added). In these two quotations, Lloyd positions the still life within the broader social fabric which has shaped it. Similarly, my study encompasses the ideological implications inherent in the feminine and domestic associations of Byatt's verbal still-life descriptions. Her fiction coincides with second and third wave feminism, being set at a time when there is a desire to revalue domesticity. Consequently, the fact that Byatt views domesticity as integral to the pleasure experienced in the consumption of food is shown in her attention to the domestic objects associated with meals and market stalls. At the same time, however, her fiction demonstrates an awareness of a certain tension between the domestic and the feminine, in the fact that marriage can prove stifling for

---

[56] Martin Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature* (London: Routledge, 2000), 213.
[57] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *A. S. Byatt* (New York: Twayne, c.1996), xiii.
[58] Alexa Alfer, "Realism and its Discontents: *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*," in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, ed. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), 48.
[59] Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*, 157-58.
[60] Ibid., 148.

some women. Byatt addresses this, relieving females of the domestic burden by depicting male characters engaged in shopping for and preparing food. In addition, she separates the still life from the domestic through meals taken outside the home in settings such as parks and restaurants.

I intend, to adopt Christien Franken's phrase, to "counteract a narrow-minded image" of Byatt as "traditional" and "highbrow"[61], showing that aspects of her writing which have hitherto been taken to be ideological or class-affiliated might also be viewed as a vivid experiment in the critical and technical question of textual pleasure. I believe that Byatt's engagement with the realist canon in fact assumes an awareness of its limitations, and that her verbal still lifes explore realism in a pleasurable way by enabling the reader to take time to 'consume' the text. The still life is an appropriate choice for her because the genre underscores this association between art and the consumer by depicting objects 'frozen' before or during consumption. Further, the still life is the genre that perhaps best illustrates this tension between ephemeral life and passionless but eternal works of art, as does Keats's urn. Because of the centrality of the still life to this study, it is pertinent at this stage to explore the origins of the term, as well as to offer examples of the various ways in which the genre has been interpreted over time.

The Still Life and *Ekphrasis*

The still-life genre originated in the *still-leven* of seventeenth-century Holland, paintings which depicted objects that were regarded as 'still' and immovable. As Charles Sterling points out, the *still-leven*, "in contradistinction to the paintings of figures or animals, was the painting of things incapable of moving"[62]. Ingvar Bergstrom defines the genre as "a representation of objects which lack the ability to move (e.g. flowers, shells, plate and which are for artistic purposes grouped into a composition"[63]. The term came to be closely associated with the French expression *nature morte*. Schneider draws out this comparison, stating that the

---

[61] Christien Franken, *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (Houndmills, Eng.: Palgrave, 2001), 4.
[62] Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1981), 63.
[63] Ingvar Bergstrom, *Dutch Still Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Hacker, 1983), 3.

> Dutch word *stilleven* originally meant no more than 'inanimate object' or 'immobile nature' (*leven* or 'model') . . . A century later, in France, the term *nature morte* was coined", which referred to a painting of "'inanimate things' (*les choses inanimées*)" or "'immobile objects' (*objets immobiles*)"[64].

Carolyn Korsmeyer's view of the French term is that it "came into use in the mid-nineteenth century, probably under the influence of academicians who expressed their contempt for the genre with the notion of 'dead nature'"[65]. Interestingly, Byatt endows the terms 'still life' and '*nature morte*' with equal emphasis in the title of her essay "*Still Life / Nature morte*", acknowledging the close relationship between these two facets of the still life. The essay states that the ruling metaphor for her novel *Still Life* was that of "flesh into grass"[66], this concept of mortality being an inherent element of both the still life and *nature morte* genres of painting.

As E. H. Gombrich asserts, the subject matter of the still life is predictable, in its "dead pheasants or peeled lemons, of skulls and leather folios, pewter or flowerpots"[67]. The general purpose of still life painting was traditionally to celebrate the bounty of nature, through descriptions of breakfast tables, kitchens, market stalls, fruit baskets and flower arrangements. According to Anne W. Lowenthal (1996), this was taken to extremes in the case of *pronk* still lifes, as they represented "a concentration of *objets de luxe*"[68], such as nautilus shells, Chinese porcelain, silver, and even citrus fruits, which were difficult to grow. Within the still-life genre are several subgenres, such as game still lifes, depictions of the five senses, flower still lifes (tulipomania), *vanitas* still lifes, kitchen scenes (*bodegones*), breakfast or laid table (*ontbitje*) and fruit still lifes (fruit baskets). In Byatt's fiction, each of these groups is represented, as her verbal still lifes depict a range of objects from arrangements of flowers, fruit and other foodstuffs, to the skulls and dead animals which are traditional subject matter of the *vanitas*.

---

[64] Norbert Schneider, *Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Koln: Taschen, 2003), 7.
[65] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), 156.
[66] Byatt, "*Still Life / Nature morte*," 10.
[67] E. H. Gombrich, "Tradition and Expression in Western Still Life," in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, ed. E. H. Gombrich (London: Phaedon, 1963), 96.
[68] Anne W. Lowenthal, "Contemplating Kalf," in *The Subject as Object: Studies in the Interpretation of Still Life*, ed. Anne W. Lowenthal (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 29.

The well-known art critic Norman Bryson emphasises the still life's associations with the domestic and the material in his definition:

> Still life can be said to unfold at the interface between these three cultural zones:
> (1) the life of the table, of the household interior, of the basic creaturely acts of eating and drinking, of the artefacts which surround the subject in her or his domestic space, the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are not at all the large-scale, momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance;
> (2) the domain of sign systems which *code* the life of the table and 'low plane reality' through discourses which relate it to other cultural concerns in other domains (for example those of ideology, sexuality, economics, class);
> (3) the technology of painting, as a material practice with its own specificities of method, its own developmental series, its own economic constraints and semiotic processes.[69]

Here, the discussion of the still lifes in Byatt's fiction will foreground the ideological implications of the genre, including aspects such as class and gender. It also takes into account material considerations such as cultural practices and the processes of production.

In addition to the *still-leven* of seventeenth-century Holland, the still life has as its basis a second tradition of the visual representation of food: the *xenia* of ancient Greece and Rome. According to John Hollander, the *xenia* (hospitable or friendly gifts) were written about by the historian Vitruvius (ca. 20 BCE). Sterling states that favourite subjects of the *xenia* of ancient Greece were "loaves of bread, fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs and dairy products, seafood, choice meats such as game and fowl, jugs and vases containing water, oil and wine, together with terracotta ware, fine glassware, metal bowls and goblets, and table napkins"[70] Bryson refers to the *xenia* as "things standing still, *nature reposée*, things at rest; such things as fruit, baskets of flowers, loaves of bread, ewers, platters, fish, seafood, game – the familiar repertoire of the later genre"[71]. As an example of what could be termed a verbal *xenia*, both Hollander and Bryson relate a description of a painting, thought to be imaginary, by the third-century CE writer, Philostratus, from his work, the *Imagines*:

---

[69] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1990), 14.
[70] Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 28.
[71] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 17.

> Purple figs dripping with juice are heaped on the vine-leaves; and they are depicted with breaks in the skin, some-just[sic] cracking apart to disgorge their honey, some split apart, they are so ripe. Near them lies a branch, not bare, by Zeus, or empty of fruit, but under the shade of its leaves are figs, some still green and "untimely" [figs that are pickled while green and usually don't ripen], some with wrinkled skin and over-ripe, while on the tip of the branch a sparrow buries its bill in what seems the very sweetest of the figs. All the ground is strewn with chestnuts, some of which are rubbed free of the burr, others lie quite shut up, and others show the burr breaking at the lines of division.
>
> See, too, the pears on pears, apples on apples, both heaps of them and piles of ten, all fragrant and golden. You will say that their redness has not been put on from outside, but has bloomed from within. Here are gifts of the cherry tree, here is fruit in clusters heaped in a basket, and the basket is woven, not from alien twigs, but from branches of the plant itself. And if you look at the vine-sprays woven together, and at the clusters hanging from them and how the grapes stand out one by one, you will certainly hymn Dionysius and speak of the vine as [and here Aristophanes' Peace is being quoted] "Queenly giver of grapes". You would say that even the grapes in the painting are good to eat and full of winey juice. And the most charming point of all this is: on a leafy branch is yellow honey already within the comb and ripe to stream forth if the comb is pressed; and on another leaf is cheese new curdled and quivering; and there are bowl [sic] of milk not merely white but gleaming, for the cream floating on it makes it seem to gleam.[72]

This passage has been quoted in full as it bears a considerable resemblance to Byatt's own realist style of description. Philostrates's urging of the reader to "See too" and "look" foregrounds the visuality of the passage, as do the vivid adjectives such as "purple", "quivering" and "gleaming". Byatt's still lifes similarly employ rich visual imagery and colour adjectives.

With the introduction of the novel, verbal depictions of food became popular, Hollander noting that "the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presented many occasions for the description of food"[73]. Writers such as Flaubert and Dickens described visual still lifes in their fiction, a practice which was, as Lloyd states, closely related to the *transposition d'art*—"a technique many nineteenth-century writers loved, taking a work of visual art and transforming it into prose"[74]. Arguably the

[72] John Hollander, "Writing of Food," *Social Research* 66, no. 1 (1999): 199-200.
[73] Ibid.: 205.
[74] Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*, 62.

most well-known example of a verbal still life is a product of the early twentieth century, that being the "exquisite minutia of Proust's madeleine dipped in tea"[75]. Among Hollander's many proposed reasons for the popularity of the still life, perhaps the most pertinent here is "the sheer joy of naming"[76]. This reiterates Barthes's assertion that "naming of foods" is a "pleasure of pure representation"[77]. Byatt's verbal still lifes also reflect this joy in naming, as many of them may be regarded as lists of food or other objects.

In addition, many of Byatt's visual still lifes convey a range of cooked and raw foods, including such complex dishes as syllabub, roast dinners and full English breakfasts. This highlights one of the differences between verbal and visual still lifes in that, according to food writer Reay Tannahill, "[a]rtists in general have been inclined to paint [food] in its natural rather than its cooked state"[78]. She posits two reasons for this: firstly, the fact that, in its raw state, the food "was easier to identify"; and secondly, "it side-stepped the fact that food depends as much for its appeal on sense of smell as it does on sight, by showing the fresh colours and crisp shapes of raw materials, by offering the appetizing promise of food tomorrow rather than an aroma-less substitute for food today"[79]. For readers of Byatt's verbal still lifes the experience of food is more pleasurable than if they had merely seen a painted still life because reading takes more time and so engages their other senses such as smell and taste. This resonates with the opinion of Marion Halligan who, in speaking of D. H. Lawrence's writings on food, "would not swap his words for half a dozen photographs, however wonderfully atmospheric, of the vegetable market at Palermo"[80]. Like Lawrence's descriptions, reading Byatt's verbal still lifes constitutes a more engaging and rewarding act of consumption than viewing an image of the same scene.

An important point is the fact that, in considering painters of various genres, "[t]he lowest type is the painter of still-life"[81]. The reason for the low status of the still life is its link to 'rhopography', or "the depiction of those things which lack importance"[82]. As Sterling has outlined,

---

[75] Hollander, "Writing of Food," 206.
[76] Ibid.: 201.
[77] Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 45.
[78] Reay Tannahill, *The Fine Art of Food* (London: Folio, 1968), 122.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Halligan, *The Taste of Memory*, 50.
[81] Wendy Steiner, *The Colours of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982), 12.
[82] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 61.

> still life painting was originally designated in Greek by the term '*rhopography*' (i.e. depiction of insignificant objects, of odds and ends); then, forcing the pejorative nuance a little, it was mockingly baptized '*rhyparography*' (i.e. painting of the sordid).[83].

According to Bryson, there is a paradox inherent in this, for while "'rhyparographer' means painter of *rhyparos*, literally of waste or filth"'[84], he points out that "[t]hough humble, the *forms* represented in still life are virtually indestructible"[85]. Thus, ironically, the iconography of the still-life genre was characterised by objects which were indeed lowly yet which were essential for human survival.

Despite its domestic associations, the still life has been extremely popular with major artists such as Caravaggio, Cézanne, Matisse and Van Gogh. While Rosemary Betterton contends that "food is culturally gendered as feminine"[86], these artists worked within the genre largely because of its "potential for isolating a purely aesthetic space"[87], and because its subject matter was easily accessible. Bryson has pointed out that for Caravaggio, "the value of food as nourishment is denied, and food becomes the pretext for a bravura display of artistic strength. Similarly, for Cézanne, the table is ignored as a place of nourishment and converted, instead, into the space of the studio, where creatural dependency turns into extraordinary aesthetic ambition"[88]. The still life for these artists is more about solving problems associated with artistic composition than about faithful representation. In twentieth-century permutations of the genre, then, we see domestic objects disassociated from their original purpose of providing nourishment and instead being adopted by artists for their aesthetic qualities. Of 'actual' still lifes depicted in Byatt's fiction by far the majority are by canonical male artists such as Van Gogh, Velázquez and Matisse. As in her relationship to the realist literary canon, Byatt reveres these artists yet shows an awareness of the visual canon's limitations through the choice of writing as her preferred art form. In other words, for her verbal representation through *ekphrasis* is a more total pleasure than visual representation.

---

[83] Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 27.
[84] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 136.
[85] Ibid., 137.
[86] Rosemary Betterton, "Body Horror?: Food (and Sex and Death) in Women's Art," in *Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London: Routledge, 1996), 160.
[87] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 81.
[88] Ibid., 174.

A fundamental strand of feminist art criticism has long been the paradox inherent in the fact that canonical male artists have dominated the still-life genre even though it possesses associations "between the conventional subjects of still life and the domestic space to which women have traditionally been relegated"[89]. As feminist critic Linda Nochlin points out in her seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists", the assertion of a "*quintessentially* feminine style" is an invalid one, as "the Dutch Little Masters, Chardin, and the impressionists – Renoir and Monet"[90] have all depicted domestic subject matter in their paintings. In the 1970s, Marxist feminist art critics began to question why, in cases where women did paint within the still-life genre, their achievements were not recognised. As Griselda Pollock notes in *Vision and Difference*, prior to the nineteenth century, women were forced to participate in the 'lesser' artistic genres due to "[t]he simple fact of prevention of study of the nude", and were thereby "regarded as artists of lesser talent"[91]. On this matter, Korsmeyer points out that, paradoxically, "at the time when women were granted the opportunities to excel at this type of painting, it was slipping in esteem and headed for its nadir of reputation as a 'minor' branch of painting"[92]. Perhaps in Byatt's choice of an artistic genre in which canonical male artists excelled, yet which in many ways appeared to suit women more than men, she is subtly pointing out the issue of gender inequality in the genre and signalling her reclamation of female territory.

Notwithstanding these ideological questions, it is unsurprising that an author as overtly visual and driven by artistic interests as Byatt should employ the still-life genre so prominently throughout her writing. Over time, the term has expanded considerably from its origins in the *still-leven*, coming to possess a much broader, cross-disciplinary meaning within such diverse fields as art, food writing and interior design. Among artists who have recently reinterpreted the genre is Donna Kendrigan, an Australian who employs the wunderkammer, or 'cabinet of wonders', a term referring to a collection of objects arranged as a still life, as part of her 2005 installation entitled *Transplants*[93]. Another is Australian ceramicist

[89] Lloyd, *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*, 118.
[90] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?," in *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 4.
[91] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 44.
[92] Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, 164.
[93] "*Transplants* is an 'unnatural history Wunderkammer', housed within an 18th century French style botanist's cabinet constructed by Lindon Davey-Milne.