Familial Complications:
Review of A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*

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A.S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*
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At a time when politicians on both sides of the Atlantic regularly bewail family breakdown as the great social ill, in large part responsible for the presumed weakening moral fabric of today's society, it is hardly surprising that writers too should (re)turn to the theme of family and its variform manifestations in history. The neo-Victorian novel opportunely lends itself to explorations of the historical processes that have increasingly undermined the nuclear family, which has traditionally provided the backbone of modern patterns of capitalism and consumption, firmly established in the course of the Industrial Revolution and the nineteenth-century advent of globalisation. Rather than hearkening back nostalgically to some idealised notion of 'Victorian family values', however, neo-Victorian writing more often mirrors the dysfunctional, exploitative, and commodified, not to say gothicised domestic relations found in much nineteenth-century literature by Dickens and the Brontës, as well as later sensation fiction. Almost inevitably the familial bower of bliss and security is exposed as a fantasy, its supposed humanist values nothing but a thin screen, beneath which lurk unacknowledged conflicts, abuses, and perversities.

Appropriately, A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* combines glittering aesthetic surface with disturbing depths, as it spans the period from the fin-de-siècle to the end of WWI. The novel positively scintillates and glows like its luscious cover design, featuring one of René Lalique's bejewelled and enamelled art nouveau dragonfly brooches, with vicious claws and the upper body of a Gorgon-like woman, equally beautiful and monstrous. Like the dragonfly, the complex family configurations revealed in Byatt's text have a sting in the tail. If readers allow themselves to be lulled into a (false) sense of security by the idyllic setting the Todefright, the home of the children's

author Olive Wellwood, her socialist banker husband Humphry, and their brood of offspring in the Kentish countryside, bordered by the Weald like a magic forest, they do so at their own risk – for all that Part II is titled 'The Golden Age'. Todefright may appear an innocent and quixotic unending Midsummer Night's Dream – the play annually performed by the Wellwoods and their bohemian artist friends at the summer solstice – promising happy endings for all but, of course, Byatt's choice of Shakespearean play is not coincidental. The comedy's deceptions and transformations ironically hint at the convolutions of inter and intra- familial desires, longings, jealousies, and betrayals that ensnare Byatt's characters in an intricate web of consanguinity, friendship, and affinity, as well as echoing the inadvertent tensions of William Morris and Co.'s experiments with ideal communities. Indeed, at times, it becomes difficult to keep the multitude of protagonists and the numerous concurrent threads of individual and family lives disentangled, and some readers will no doubt wish for a convenient series of family trees to have been included as an appendix.

In any case, the dream of bliss is undercut from the very outset, with the carefree and privileged childhoods of the young Wellwoods, their wealthy cousins, and their London friends, the Cains, brutally counterpointed by those of Philip Warren and, somewhat later, his sister Elsie, one-time child workers in the Burslem potteries, where grinding poverty, back-breaking labour, sickness, and death were their only reliable daily staple. Their far from magical past, in fact, mirrors the harsh working-class childhoods of Olive and her sister Violet Grimwith in a Yorkshire mining community, which surface intermittently as repressed memories in the course of the novel. Perhaps not surprisingly, Philip is discovered by Julian Cain and Tom Wellwood in the subterranean vaults of the South Kensington Museum (that would become the V&A in 1899), a symbolic "crypt" of the Victorians' collective unconscious (p. 6), which senses the inherent untruthfulness of its valorisation of childhood and family, but refuses, Peter Pan-like, to relinquish it.

The dragonfly cover also functions as an apt metaphor for Byatt's psychological realist mode, flitting lightly between myriad characters' minds, dipping into pools of consciousness with Woolfian deftness, but always conveying the sense of further hidden deeps that cannot – and perhaps should not – be plumbed. As does her epilogue to *Possession* (1990), Byatt's latest novel suggests that for all the author's meticulous re-

imagining of the fin-de-siècle and its gradation into a new and, in many ways, fiercely would-be different era – arguably a deliberate parallel to our own post-millennial situation – something of the past will always elide the grasp of the late(r)comers, adding to the mystery of retrospection. Byatt's treatment of trauma proves especially sensitive in this respect. At the same time as she bears literary witness to extreme violations of bodies and psyches (extreme bullying, child sex abuse, incest, suicide, death in the trenches and No Man's Land), Byatt figures these as finally *un*representable. Here she displays a circumspection rather a-typical of the neo-Victorian novel that so often revels in exposing past horrors in depressing and excruciating minutiae. The sensitive free spirit Tom Wellwood is indelibly marked by his peers' homosexual abuse and likely rape at boarding school, yet the acts themselves are only described euphemistically as "being touched" and "handled" (p. 196); even to Tom himself they remain unimaginable. Similarly the inspired potter Benedict Fludd's incestuous assaults on his daughters are only expressed indirectly, through his youngest daughter Pamona's sleepwalking and his haunting pornographic artworks in his private locked collection, which, following his death, she buries with the help of Philip. The mass deaths in World War I are similarly muted through individuation, though not elided outright. The stories of many of the male descendents of the novel's families are abruptly cut short on the battlefield, but in nearly all cases death is instantaneous and narrated with scant detail, as are the young men's horrific experiences in the trenches prior to extinction. Yet all this suffering stands as an inassimilable excess in the text, much like Prosper Cain's "terrible dreams in which things will not fit" (p. 423). Hence, Byatt self-consciously resists the temptations of escapist nostalgia or the kind of selective memory that "smooth[es] nastiness and horrors into gilded patterns" (p. 412).

All of these personal and collective traumas problematise nineteenth-century family structures and values. The public school serves as a replacement family aimed at deliberately weakening the unduly 'feminine' influence of the domestic sphere of home to turn boys into hardened men, who would define themselves and their duty in transcendental terms of group, nation, and empire rather than concrete personal relations. (Ironically, Robin Wellwood and Robin Oakeshott, Humphrey's son from an extra-marital affair, admit their kinship just minutes before a shell blows Oakeshott apart, while Wellwood is killed by sniper fire two day later.) The

primal taboo of incest perverts the ideals of care, interdependency, and mutual responsibility amongst family members, simultaneously underlining the excessively unbalanced power relations established along strict gender lines, which enable the abuse in the first place. Hence, incest also subverts any larger political notion of a community of equals, a greater 'we' that supersedes the desires of the singular subject. (As an expression of narcissistic individualism, incest might also be intended as an implicit commentary by Byatt on present-day society's elevation of egoism to the status of self-actualisation at any cost. Significantly, the most successful artwork in the novel, namely Olive's play *Tom Underground*, is figured not as the product of solitary genius, but as a communal effort with her fellow artists Anselm Stern and August Steyning, in line with the Arts and Crafts Movement's endorsement of socialist ideals and collective collaboration.) When it comes, WWI thus almost appears as the natural culmination of a rejection of the values of community in the wider sense of a family of nations, all prepared to sacrifice their future generations to abstract political and economic self-interests. This severance of bonds of kinship is underlined by the novel's earlier depiction of the extensive pre-war cultural exchanges and artistic cooperation across national borders and the subsequent literal division of families, with blood relations fighting on opposite sides during the conflict.

Childhood as a golden age is further undermined by the underlying secrets, tensions, and complicated attachments between generations that lie at the heart of the book and its middle and upper class families. Fludd's eldest daughter Imogen's planned marriage to her father's patron Prosper Cain – ironically a substitute 'good' father figure with a daughter her own age – precipitates Fludd's suicide by drowning. This self-destruction, intended as much perhaps as a punishment for Imogen's perceived disloyalty as an admission of the abuser's guilt, is later re-enacted by Tom, in part as a result of another intimate betrayal, namely by his mother Olive. Unbeknown to Tom, Olive reworks her son's continuous fairytale, written especially for him in the course of his growing up, into a public theatrical performance that appears to him as a further invasion of his already fragile selfhood. (Not coincidentally, the final attack at school occurs after Tom is discovered reading 'his' story, sent him from home, in secret and his abusers proceed to burn it.) Even the seemingly close-knit Wellwood family, then, is built on an amalgam of unvoiced part-incestuous secrets:

some of the children are actually the offspring of only one or the other parent; the housekeeper-aunt Violet is revealed to be the biological mother of two of the Wellwoods by her own sister's husband Humphrey; and the latter at one point propositions Dorothy who, though another man's daughter, passes as his own. The resulting complexities rival any present-day configurations of alternative families with multiple sets of parents, half-siblings, and adopted members, constructing the Victorians as our pre-postmodern intimate doubles rather than Others.

Admittedly, there are some stylistic problems with the scope and complexity of the novel. Intermittently, didacticism compromises Byatt's superlative storytelling capability, when she interjects extended summaries of socio-political events which, however informative, read too much like gently condescending history lessons for under-educated readers. Chancing upon the odd hitherto unknown fact does not quite compensate the reader for resultant delays in the story proper or for the disorientation of finding her/himself periodically ejected from the novel into a virtual schoolroom. In one sense, the novel could be said to be *too* dense. Early on, in what reads very much like a metafictional authorial reflection, though presented as Olive's musings, the writer, having listened to a 'true' tale of buried treasure told by Prosper Cain, "had the feeling writers often have when told perfect tales for fictions, that there was too much fact, too little space for the necessary insertion of inventions" (p. 12). Some such similar reserve of space for the *reader*'s imaginary interventions in the text might have been preferable. Similarly, in spite of claiming that children at the fin-de-siècle were something quite different to "children before and after", "neither dolls not miniature adults" (p. 29), Byatt's children's self-conscious psychological and emotional complexity at times seem more commensurate with adult minds, though this may be a necessary legerdemain to do full justice to the novel's title. For arguably it is still comparatively rare in neo-Victorian fiction – actual children's or young adult fiction excepted – to find convincing and three-dimensional child protagonists, who can convey the nineteenth century from a child's point of view and recoup for us the capacity of wonder, rather than disillusion.

Towards the end of *The Children's Book*, as in her other neo-Victorian 'classic' *Possession*, Byatt succumbs to the temptation to play *dues ex machina*, piling one coincidence atop another to the point of sacrificing realism for romance. Readers might (just) accept the symbolic

fittingness of Philip nearly drowning, quite literally, in mud, which he himself remarks upon, when brought to the field hospital encased in a sarcophagus of hardened slime: "When I went under, I thought, it's a good end for a potter, to sink into a sea of clay" (p. 608). Yet the unlikelihood of his attending surgeon being Dorothy Wellwood, the woman he loves, smacks of prestidigitation. So too the double reunion scene staged in the final chapter, in which Charles/Karl Wellwood, presumed dead, miraculously returns to his wife, new-born son, and parents, while his sister is reunited with her lost love, Dorothy's half-brother Wolfgang Stern, now an escaped German prisoner whom she hides at the family home. Whom exactly Byatt aims to compensate – and for what – remains unclear. The pervasive theme of loss and lost children will make some readers wonder whether, much like Olive's obsessive writing of underground worlds that to some extent re-enacts the fearful mining disasters of her youth, in some sense Byatt too may be working through the autobiographical trauma of her own 11 year-old son's death, which seems to inform text and make her write the impossible different and happier ending to mourning. (Somewhat ironically, in view of Tom's later suicide, she also affords that ending to Olive the first time round, following Tom's first disappearance, when he runs away from boarding school.)

Byatt's trans-millennial perspective emphasises continuities as much as differences between the Victorian 'then' and the Edwardian 'now', as when her omniscient narrator cuttingly remarks, that in 1901 "[t]he poor were [still] a menacing phantom, to be helped charitably, or exterminated expeditiously", while elsewhere, for the privileged, "[t]he land […] was running with honey, cream, fruit fools, beer, champagne" (p. 391). This has a curious resonance with current debates about the ever widening gap between the have and have nots in both 'Western' societies and between the developed nations and their less developed counterparts. That some things do not change, then, has implications also for the neo-Victorian temptation to configure the Victorians as our own, all too convenient, somehow lesser, or less 'developed' Others from social, political, racial, or gendered points of view. Indeed, Byatt's Edwardians arguably stand in for our later selves:

> They stared and glared backwards, in an intense, sometimes purposeful nostalgia for an imagined Golden Age. There

> were many things they wanted to go back to, to retrieve, to reinhabit.
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> They wanted to go back to the earth, to the running rivers and full fields and cottage gardens and twining honeysuckle of Morris' Nowhere. They wanted to live in cottages (real cottages, which meant old stone, mossy cottages) and grow their own fruit and vegetables, getting their own eggs and gooseberries. They wanted, like Edward Carpenter, to be self-sufficient on smallholdings, and also be naked and dabble their toes in real mud, like him, having taken off real, hand-made sandals, like him. They did love the earth […. and to] dream of humans as part of the natural cycle, as they no longer seem to be. (pp. 391-392).

Byatt adopts the metaphorical designation of novel parts typical of Victorian novelists like Dickens, as in his 'Sowing', 'Reaping', and 'Garnering' in *Hard Times* (1853), to indicate not progress since, but a gradual declension and decline – from "The Golden Age" to "The Silver Age" to "The Age of Lead". This rather leaves open what we should consider our own age to be.

There is a close symmetry here with *Possession*, which also posits the Victorian experience as somehow more sumptuous, authentic, and vigorous, so that the neo-Victorian encounter with the past can, paradoxically, serve to enrich and revitalise, rather than ossify. Byatt's vibrant descriptions of created objects and the making and enjoyment thereof (though already implicated in commercial processes and commodification) opposes today's throw-away consumerist culture of incessant substitution, updating, and ever shorter shelf-lives, just as the length of her 600 plus page tome derides short attention spans. *The Children's Book* makes one *want* to write, to potter, to make something beautiful, to *create*. This is both a hauntingly elegiac, but also sensual and visceral novel, appealing directly to the senses in order to convey beauty – as well as its sordid inverse – not just intellectually, but on a whole other level of literally (re-)experiencing the nineteenth century. A writer figured in a book is perhaps also always a figure of the writer her/himself, so it seems fitting to end with Olive's words: "A writer made an incantation, calling the reader into the magic circle of the world of the book. With subtle

words, a writer enticed a reader to feel his or her skin prickle, his or her lips open, his or her blood race" (pp. 185-186).