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Literature and Pastoral Psychology

Perception, Unharmonisation, Movement

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ABSTRACT

Precedents of pilgrimage are drawn on by nineteenth-century novelists who combine a strong story line with Christian moral understanding of humanity. Transitions in plot move toward moments of revelation. Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the latter paralleling Queen Vashti, show increasing ambivalence toward easy harmonisation of plot and character, reflecting some biblical narratives. Modern writers create resonances between the 'flickery, discontinuous instability of consciousness' and firm footholds in the past. The post-modern story may no longer conform to the allegory of pilgrimage, but its threads weave changing patterns that issue in fresh revelations.

READING novels is a rich resource in enlarging our understanding of ourselves, combining the story an individual might tell of his or her life with moments of revelation, breaking up and changing the narrative as it is told. Two essential features of good pastoral psychology are, firstly, the ability to understand and reflect upon our life story and, secondly, the ability to recognise the different ways in which God is revealed to us at key points in that story.

The English novel flourished as a genre in the nineteenth century by drawing upon the precedents of Defoe, Bunyan and later Fielding and Richardson who combined a strong story line of the events in people's life described as fiction with a Christian moral understanding of human nature. It was therefore an unsurprising thesis of F. R. Leavis in his book *The Great Tradition* that 'the great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad – to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history.'¹ The justification for this statement is Leavis' contention that their greatness lies in their connections with the Puritan tradition and theology. Leavis enlarges on his thesis with reference to the art of Jane Austen:

The principle of organisation, and the principle of development, in her work is an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones.²

1 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Chatto & Windus, London 1954, p 9.

2 *The Great Tradition*, p 15.

The novel, he argues, is sustained by a threading together of plot and character to define a moral purpose. It is the Puritan tradition which informs this principle of organisation: the growth of the novel in the nineteenth century relied heavily on the Bible, a knowledge of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a clear narrative and a happy ending. This structure enabled a complex process of reflection and psychology to take place. Leavis argues that his idea of the Great Tradition is a means of understanding the 'intense and moral preoccupations' which make a novelist great.

Leavis' thesis is still a useful way to enlarge upon the subject of literature and pastoral care. He explains that the moral centre of a work of fiction is what elucidates the personal development of a character. The relationship between private and public morality is often the means by which the story is told, and as it develops the 'progress' is one which gives specific insights into human psychology.³ The value of literature to pastoral psychology is that it is a means of exposing our pain and joy to ourselves through the experience of others.

Jane Austen's *Emma* explores the power of pride as a means of self knowledge. Central to the novel is the creation of a character who eventually has the ability to reflect upon her own weaknesses. Matthew Arnold once described Edmund Burke's ability to change his mind about the effect of the French Revolution as one of 'the finest things in English literature'.⁴ The plot of *Emma* analyses the same kind of change. The prose style gives us a clue, since from the beginning of the novel we notice that George Knightley and Emma Woodhouse are intended for each other; their conversation is matched, their sentences are balanced and both are given equal weight and space; but the relationship cannot work before Emma has glimpsed something of her egotism or before she has begun to reflect on the consequences of her behaviour. The fairy tale of the rescuing knight in the person of George Knightley is never far from the plot, and the process of an education of Emma in the *Bildungsroman* tradition is also in the forefront of the novel. Emma is set up for us as one who is used to dominating events and controlling her own and other people's lives. We are engaged with Emma's follies as the story unfolds, we watch her misjudge Harriet Smith, the Eltons, Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, until we reach the point where Emma's judgement is in question when Knightley reproves her for her cruelty to Miss Bates. The effect is to bring out self-knowledge of a rare kind in Emma:

The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! – How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued!⁵

The value of self-knowledge seen through the eyes of another is what enables Emma to understand herself and arrive at a more balanced judgement of her own life. The process is both one of a psychological unfolding and one of personal growth.

3 *The Great Tradition*, See also p 16 where Jane Austen is described as a modern novelist.

4 Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems and Prose*, J.M. Dent, London 1978, pp 196f.

5 Jane Austen, *Emma*, J. M. Dent, London 1815 rp. 1964, p 331.

Emma has often been described as one of the first psychological novels. There is much interior reflection that accompanies the action. The function of these insights is to reinforce the change that takes place in *Emma* when she moves from her own selfish concerns to a realisation that she can give herself wholly to Knightley, the only person she can truly love: 'It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself.'⁶ Even in this statement Jane Austen does not miss the opportunity of exposing self-seeking irony. The novel charts the interiorisation of this movement, a shift from self-centred manipulation to an understanding of the power of self-sacrificial love. This is her personal redemption and the point of the novel.

Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* stands as one of the finest examples of a story of moral education, for the voice of the narrator is that of the adult Pip who is recalling his own experiences in a way that gives a poignant account of all that he has learned. Just as with *Emma* the moment of revelation is the key to a change of heart, so with Pip too there is a significant turning point. Christopher Ricks locates this in the comma which falls between the words 'But', and 'there' in the following passage:

'Can I only serve you, Pip, by serving your friend? Regarding that as done, is there nothing I can do for you yourself?'

'Nothing, I thank you for the question. I thank you even more for the tone of the question. But, there is nothing.'⁷

Ricks points out:

That comma after 'But' must be the least careless comma in Dickens – the decent mystery of leaving the rest unsaid.⁸

For it is in that pause that Pip takes responsibility for himself and grows up. He is no longer looking to others for his future or for his identity, and in that moment he establishes for the first time a dignified and right relationship with Miss Havisham. In turn this new found security in Pip's life enables the spell that Miss Havisham has bound for herself to be broken:

'What have I done! What have I done!' She wrung her hands, and crushed her white hair, and returned to this cry over and over again. 'What have I done!'

I knew not how to answer, or how to comfort her. That she had done a grievous thing in taking an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection and wounded pride found vengeance in, I knew full well.⁹

The opening out of the interior life made the exterior life reduce to ashes in the fire which followed. What Dickens achieves in *Great Expectations* is a hierarchy of psychological insights brought about through his observations

6 *Emma*, p 361.

7 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861), Penguin, London 1861 rp. 1965, p 409.

8 Christopher Ricks, 'Great Expectations' in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross & Gabriel Pearson, Routledge, London 1962, p 207.

9 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p 411.

of Pip's role as a prodigal son and also of that son's return. He rehearses his repentance and his return to Biddy at the forge:

The purpose was, that I would go to Biddy, that I would show her how humbled and repentant I came back, that I would tell her how I had lost all I once hoped for, that I would remind her of our old confidence in my first unhappy time. Then, I would say to her, 'Biddy, I think you once liked me very well, when my errant heart, even while it strayed away from you, was quieter and better with you than it ever has been since. If you can like me only half as well once more, if you can take me with all my faults and disappointments on my head, if you can receive me like a forgiven child (and indeed I am as sorry, Biddy, and have as much need of a hushing voice and a soothing hand), I hope I am a little worthier of you than I was – not much, but a little.'¹⁰

This moving speech is all the more poignant when yet again Pip expresses his feelings against himself. When he returns to the Forge Biddy is of course already married to Joe and Pip expresses his 'great thankfulness that I had never breathed this last baffled hope to Joe'.¹¹ For it was Biddy, 'who with her woman's wit had found me out so soon.'¹² What she had exposed was Pip's arrogance and the nature of Joe's dignity:

Biddy having rubbed the leaf to pieces between her hands – and the smell of a black currant bush has ever since recalled to me that evening in the little garden by the side of the lane – said, 'Have you never considered that he may be proud?'

'Proud?' I repeated with disdainful emphasis. 'Oh! there are many kinds of pride', said Biddy, looking full at me and shaking her head; 'pride is not all of one kind.'¹³

In this moment of revelation, and not through what is said, Pip's pride is also apparent. The novel is written in the style of a confessional narrative with Biddy as counsellor and confessor and her role is established early in the novel:

'Biddy,' I cried getting up, putting my arm round her neck and giving her a kiss, 'I shall always tell you everything.' 'Till you're a gentleman', said Biddy.¹⁴

The novel is also a serious study of guilt and its effect upon adult life. Pip knows that his home is in the forge but his aspirations reach further. The peculiar struggle that he has with himself gives expression both to his guilt and to his pride. The power of his account is reinforced through the language of the novel which draws on the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorized Version of the Bible. Indeed Pip rehearses his guilt in prose that echoes a liturgical expression of repentance: the opening of chapter 14 reads like a litany:

10 *Great Expectations*, p 481.

11 *Great Expectations*, p 487.

12 *Great Expectations*, p 479.

13 *Great Expectations*, p 175.

14 *Great Expectations*, p 157.

It is a most miserable thing to be ashamed of home. There may be black ingratitude in the thing, and the punishment may be retributive and well deserved; but, that it is a miserable thing, I can testify.¹⁵

This is followed by Pip's statement of belief:

Home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister's temper. But, Joe had sanctified it, and I had believed in it. I had believed in the best parlour as a most elegant saloon; I had believed in the front door, as a mysterious portal of the Temple of State whose solemn opening was attended with a sacrifice of roast fowls; I had believed in the kitchen as a chaste though not magnificent apartment; I had believed in the forge as the glowing road to manhood and independence.¹⁶

Then after some further reflection on how Pip understands himself there follows what reads like prayers expressed in the form of versicle and response:

It was not because I was faithful, but because Joe was faithful, that I never ran away and went for a soldier or a sailor. It was not because I had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, but because Joe had a strong sense of the virtue of industry, that I worked with tolerable zeal against the grain. It is not possible to know how far the influence of any amiable honest-hearted duty-doing man flies out into the world; but it is very possible to know how it has touched one's self in going by, and I know right well, that any good that intermixed itself with my apprenticeship came of plain contented Joe, and not of restlessly aspiring, discontented me.¹⁷

It may be seen from this that at times the older Pip is a little severe on his younger self. The theme of faithfulness, against which Pip's expectations rebound, is represented for us in Biddy's wisdom and listening ear and in Joe's heavy footstep on Pip's stair, ever ready and willing to redeem the situation. It carries with it the theme of God's faithfulness: 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.'¹⁸ And this theme is interwoven with the theme of redemption. The novel picks up on this in its lyrical conclusion which enlarges on the effects of faithfulness taken from a verse in the Epistle of James: 'Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.'¹⁹ Pip meets up with Estella, who had been his light and his inspiration despite her unfaithfulness:

I took her hand in mine and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.²⁰

15 *Great Expectations*, p 134.

16 *Great Expectations*, p 134.

17 *Great Expectations*, p 135.

18 2 Tim. 2:17.

19 James 1:17.

20 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p 493.

Dickens wrote an alternative ending which was more realistic and brooding. The equivocal nature of the ending quoted above with its biblical allusion pleased the Victorian public.

The precedent of Defoe and Bunyan providing a happy ending which mirrored the idea of a new heaven and new earth was in constant demand. F. R. Leavis points out that the conclusion of *Silas Marner* draws heavily on the ending of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* there is a break in the narrative and the prose style modulates into a dreamlike vision of an ideal life in rural Canada in contrast to the grim realities of industrial Manchester. Eschatological hope was used as a means of providing a welcome alternative perspective.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their feminist critique of nineteenth-century fiction *The Madwoman in the Attic* drew attention to the significance of the use of *Pilgrim's Progress* particularly in relation to *Jane Eyre*. They begin by quoting Matthew Arnold who said of Charlotte Brontë in 1853 that her mind 'contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage'.²¹ (It is therefore remarkable that this novel is given as a set text to thousands of schoolchildren in their first year of secondary school without appearing to have any major subversive effects.) The kernel of the rebellion is to be found in chapter 12 of *Jane Eyre* where Jane explains:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally, but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation; precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.²²

The exposition of these sentiments produced a wave of feminist literary criticism which followed the argument that women were repressed and needed to express, as Gilbert and Gubar described it, their 'constitutional ire'²³ which was a by-product of their social position. One of the means by which Jane is seen to come to terms with her circumstances of enclosure is through the process, the journey which they see as a female *Pilgrim's Progress*. The stages, they point out, are easy to discern: 'oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield) and coldness (at Marsh End)'.²⁴ But this analysis is a simplification of Charlotte Brontë's plot and purpose in the novel. Both the allusion to *Pilgrim's Progress* and the feminist position are there, but there is also a stronger and more subtle argument at work. Jane's character is not dependent upon allegory or

21 Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Yale University Press, 1984, p 337.

22 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin, London 1847 rp. 1966, p 141.

23 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p 349.

24 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p 339.

analogy; it is seen for what it is in her relationships with Brocklehurst, Rochester and St John Rivers. Her ability to relate directly to each of these men on her own terms explains the position of women more powerfully than the brief manifesto contained in chapter 12. What horrified the Victorians was Jane's anger,²⁵ but in this they missed the point of her achievement. Deftly and without fuss she moves, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, from one relationship to another but always maintaining her integrity, her position and a sense of her own personal and moral worth. A number of feminist readings fail to distinguish between the social position of women and true feminine strength of character.

Jane Eyre's penultimate confrontation with St John Rivers is the most powerful encounter of the novel, with its exposition of Jane's strength and St John's weakness. She has made her choice: not to marry St John, nor to go with him as a missionary to India:

Not that St John harboured a spirit of unchristian vindictiveness – not that he would have injured a hair of my head, if it had been fully his power to so. Both by nature and principle he was superior to the mean gratification of vengeance: he had forgiven me for saying I scorned him and his love, but he had not forgotten the words; and as long as he and I lived he never would forget them. I saw by his look when he turned to me, that they were always written on the air between me and him; whenever I spoke, they sounded in my voice to his ear, and their echo toned every answer he gave me.²⁶

This calculated study of human nature draws attention to the subtle distinction between forgiving and forgetting. Here is a man who would seek to spread Christianity to the pagans, but there is little evidence of redemption and grace in his own soul. The importance of his own mission is denied in his own life. And his failure to forget his own personal hurt calls not only his calling but his character into question. Her refusal has far reaching implications in laying bare St John's motives for Christian work.

Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot were interested in the power that women can exercise by refusal through hidden acts. In *Middlemarch* George Eliot sustains an argument for the effectiveness of the unseen act which diffuses goodness, and the novel ends with these words:

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.²⁷

Lucy Snowe, the heroine of *Villette*, lives through her hiddenness; she is present by being absent. In fact she shows her power as narrator precisely through withholding information and never allowing a complete picture to form. The technique suggests some of the devices of modernism as the reader engages with a narrator who keeps secrets and refuses to declare her own

25 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p 338.

26 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p 436.

27 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p 896.

viewpoint. The result is that the narrative has a fascination for and exerts a power over us. There are some interesting if oblique parallels between *Villette* and the book of Esther. In the first three chapters of Esther, Queen Vashti overturns an empire by refusing to give heed to the king's request that she should appear before his guests after they had been drinking for seven days. It is through her invisibility that Queen Vashti exerts her power: by not going and most probably by not speaking she disobeyed the king's command. The result was in effect that she overturned the nation and the king had to send an edict to all the royal provinces that 'every man be lord in his own house and speak according to the language of his people.'²⁸ This incident proved the power of one woman's silent protest.

'Silent', 'invisible', 'weak' and 'apathetic' are words that are used to describe Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. And yet the narrative voice in this novel still baffles the critics because of the deliberately withheld information. Lucy exercises an extraordinary influence over the reader through the partial and equivocal account that she gives. In chapter 16 ('Auld Lang Syne') Lucy is once again staying with the Brettons in La Terrasse. She describes the furniture and the interior as if these are familiar to the reader, but all these observations she had kept to herself in the first chapter of the book. The detailed description of the blue, white and gold furniture and hangings are there to draw our attention back to the opening chapter of the book of Esther:

There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings caught up with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver.²⁹

Lucy notes some significant points of detail in the room where she begins to recognise familiar details:

...pale walls over which a slight but endless garland of azure forget-me-nots ran mazed and bewildered amongst myriad gold leaves and tendrils. A gilded mirror filled up the space between the two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa.³⁰

The moment of personal recognition and revelation of identity at this point is as important as the connections that deftly connect the book of Esther with *Villette*. In the middle of *Villette* there is a key chapter entitled 'Vashti' in which there is a powerful theatrical presentation of Queen Vashti by an actress who entralls her audience. The placing of the chapter 'Vashti' is in fact pivotal in the novel for it illumines the significance of Lucy's narration which is variously described as 'evasive', 'devious' and 'duplicitous' by Mary Jacobus,³¹ or that she is apparently ordinary, 'given to apathy and incipient collapse' which is Lyndall Gordon's account.³²

28 Esther 1:22.

29 Esther 1:6.

30 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, p 238.

31 Mary Jacobus, ed., *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, Croom Helm, London 1979; Mary Jacobus, *The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in Villette*, p 43.

32 Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë, A Passionate Life*, Vintage 1995, p 255.

Lucy is deeply moved by the presentation of Queen Vashti on stage. The very strangeness of the setting and performance enabled her to see herself in a new way. It draws from her an awareness of herself which is different and separate from her own perceptions and that of her social setting. It also made her aware that true power transcends sexual boundaries:

Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength – for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passion of the pit!... It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.³³

Lucy's response to Vashti gives us a commentary on the narrative voice as well as an interesting insight into her equivocation. *Villette* is not a conventional novel and the main reason for this is that its narrator holds several perceptions of the events in tension so that it defies an authoritative [obvious authorial] viewpoint and voice.

The demise of the third person singular narrative voice and the break-up of the relationship of character to plot are often seen as corresponding to the loss of faith in God at the end of the nineteenth century. The process saw a shift in understanding of the author's role from omniscient and exterior to partial and subject to the vagaries of human experience. That change is one we glimpse in *Villette*. The author is no longer remote, as James Joyce described him, like 'the God of Creation'³⁴ but is instead one who merges with his characters in the degree to which they appear and disappear. Modern characters are created to exist and then deny themselves. David Lodge in *Nice Work* describes Robyn Penrose as 'a character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself believe in the concept of character.'³⁵ The reader has to judge the veracity of the characters and follow states of mind through into a state of being and beyond. Thomas Docherty in his most recent study of post-modernism, entitled *Alterities*, describes the process like this:

Post-modern characters typically fall into incoherence: character traits are not repeated, but contradicted, proper names are used, if at all, inconsistently, signposts implying specific gender are confused, a seemingly animate character mutates into an inanimate.³⁶

This might at first sight appear to be a frightening account of the disintegration of the human character in literature but, when we look at the description in more detail, what we might see there is an interesting reflection of the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. On the Emmaus road the disciples did not recognise Jesus: his character was inchoate, the things that they most remembered about him were not repeated, he did not introduce himself by name, it was not immediately obvious in any of the resurrection appearances

33 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, p 339.

34 James Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, London 1916 rp. 1968, pp 214f.

35 David Lodge, *Nice Work*, Penguin, London 1989, p 39.

36 Thomas Docherty, *Alterities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p 60.

who he was. In another account when the disciples were gathered together in a house:

The doors were shut; but Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'³⁷

The animate resurrection body of Jesus can pass through an inanimate object. In these respects some of the more far-reaching effects of post-modernism bear a close resemblance to the mystery of the resurrection life of Jesus. On each of the occasions when Jesus appeared to the disciples his true identity eventually became known through reference to his own life, to Scripture and by analogy and by action. It is through these means that characters in novels in the twentieth century are substantiated.

It has been rumoured, for example, that a character who first appears in Iris Murdoch's *Accidental Man* reappears in A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*.³⁸ The connections between the style and method of Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt do not end with this playful ruse; they are more deeply interwoven. Iris Murdoch's appreciation of John Paul Sartre gives an insight into the way that she herself constructs character:

The other contrast which Sartre uses is that between the flickery, discontinuous instability of consciousness (we are moody, lacking in concentration, the 'depth' or 'richness' of our apprehension of our surroundings varies, we cannot hold an object steady for long in our attention, however intense or delighted) and a condition of perfect stability towards which it aspires.³⁹

Here Sartre touches on the two strands of ideas suggested in this paper, one of the 'flickery, discontinuous instability of consciousness', whereby characters come and go and move in and out of relationship, and the other which has to do with the firm foothold of the historic past, the measured account of the life history of the individual.

The interaction between these two is a clue to the structure of Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* and to A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. Both use the past as a foil and as an explanation for the life of the characters in the present. The mediaeval story of the nun taking a lover in *The Bell* and the bishop cursing the abbey with the result that the bell 'flew like a great bird out of the tower and fell into the lake', is the focus for understanding how to reconcile the aims of a religious community with human desires in the twentieth century. In A. S. Byatt's *Possession* the life and work of the nineteenth century poets R. H. Ash and Christabel La Motte are the means through which the story of Roland Michell and Maud Bailey is told in the twentieth century. The connections between the present day narratives and the past uncover a web of inter-related ideas about the self, morality, myth and authority.

There are some similarities between the story lines of *The Bell* and *Possession*. In *The Bell* Michael Meade is described as moving from homosexual

37 John 20:27.

38 *Private Eye*, May 1996, review of A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower* entitled 'Babel Babble'.

39 Iris Murdoch, *Sartre*, Bowes & Bowes, London 1953, rp. Fontana 1967, pp 63f.

love to religion ending in an uncertain single state. In *Possession* Christabel La Motte moves from a lesbian relationship to an affair with R. H. Ash and ends her life in loneliness. The bell in Murdoch's novel stands as myth, symbol, substitute and reality, and provides a means of judgment and a reflective commentary on all the characters. Melusina is the point of connection between the various narratives in *Possession*. Both Christabel and Maud are identified with Melusina and live out her legend. Melusina imprisoned her father for offending her mother but as a punishment she was turned into a snake from the waist down every Saturday. She married Raymond Count of Lusignan who eventually found out her secret and asked her to leave him. Thereafter she was destined to wander about as a spectre until the day of doom. Christabel describes herself as 'an old witch in a turret', and someone who has been Melusina for thirty years; because of her passion she has become an outcast and a wanderer. Maud Bailey, in deciding to take the top bunk above Roland aboard the *Prince of Brittany* identifies herself with Lilith because:

Lilith refused to take the inferior position. So Adam sent her away and she roamed the Arabian deserts and the dark beyond the pale. She's an avatar of Melusina.⁴⁰

Lilith in Jewish mythology was Adam's wife before Eve. Maud's identity with her enables her to reach back through her blood relationship with Christabel and the connections with Melusina to a point in mythological history before the biblical account of creation and the Garden of Eden. There are in *Possession* persistent references to Eden and to R. H. Ash's poem 'The Garden of Proserpine'. These interlocking threads of mythology, history and experience work on a number of different levels to give the characters their form and being. The connections between these relate to the way that Iris Murdoch describes Sartre's understanding of consciousness:

Sartre pictures consciousness by means of two contrasts. The first is the contrast between the flickering, unstable, semi-transparent moment-to-moment 'being of consciousness, the shifting way in which it conceives objects and itself' – and the solid, opaque, inert 'in-themselvess-ness' of things which simply are what they are... Alternatively, we may be aware of ourselves, not as transparent to our own reflective gaze, but as solidified and judged by the gaze of another.⁴¹

A study of literature provides for us an insight into the relationship between the two and through it we glimpse a richer understanding of our identity and our existence. Literature holds a mirror through which we see ourselves more clearly in relation to others and through it we develop an ability to be judged by another.

It is fashionable to talk of the various features of post-modernism, and recently in the Christian press some alarm has been expressed about the effects of the break-up of continuity, the loss of tradition, the threat of

40 A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, Vintage, London 1990, p 333.

41 Sartre, pp 62f.

disorder.⁴² Our common experience is described as tormented, broken and subjected to change. And yet there is still a thread of continuity in the progress of a person's story. The details may no longer conform to the allegory of a pilgrimage but the separate threads can be seen as weaving a pattern. The pattern, in turn, breaks and reforms with the introduction of different circumstances, changed relationships and above all with fresh revelation. All these features are present in the final chapters of St John's Gospel. In his moments in the journey of Peter, for instance, John moves from continuity to discontinuity, the anguish of despair and the surprise of transformation. We feel the pain of his denial as Peter warms himself by the fire, as well as the mystery of intimacy as breakfast is prepared on a charcoal fire by the shore. And finally we witness the significance of the question that is asked three times: 'Do you love me?' John's Gospel represents many techniques of post-modern writing as the final sentence explains: some details are deliberately withheld from his narrative; we have only a selection of the things that Jesus did, since if every event were accounted for '... the world could not contain the books that would be written'.⁴³

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42 Graham Cray, *The Gospel and Tomorrow's Culture*, CPAS, Warwick 1994.

43 John 21:25.