

distribution of rights for its citizenry, that mode which has demonstrated the most consistent ability to carry out periodic self-correction.

Though *The Seeds of Time* is rather long on problem delineation and short on resolution, it is a valuable book. It encourages students of postmodernity to seek new political and theoretical paradigms with which to understand contemporary history even if its inability to point out a superior alternative to liberal democracy serves to confirm, if obliquely, that the latter offers us rather more than Fredric Jameson would have us believe.

A.S. Byatt

Babel Tower

London: Chatto and Windus, 1996. Pp. 625. Can. \$34.00

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

In this ambitious novel, the third in her projected quartet about the Potter family (the earlier volumes, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, were published in 1978 and 1985 respectively), Byatt continues the story of her characters, Frederica Potter (now married to Nigel Reiver), Daniel Orton, and Alexander Wedderburn, and their families and friends. *Still Life* ended with the accidental death of Stephanie and the desperate journey of her clergyman husband Daniel from his parish in Yorkshire to London. He was given sanctuary by Alexander, who had also helped Frederica in the first moments of her grief for her sister. Our last sight of Frederica in *Still Life* was an ominous one: in Nigel Reiver's possession, in his alien, isolated country house. *Babel Tower* is set in the Sixties. One of the book's narrative threads traces Frederica's progress as she leaves her now abusive husband, taking her young son Leo with her, and, finding work and friends (Alexander among them) in London, eventually begins divorce proceedings.

This novel, however, like its predecessors, is much more than a family chronicle. Its narrator identifies four possible starting points, each of which contains issues in the book. First, we could begin with the thrush, hammering his prey, the snail, to death and, after his feast, singing his lovely song. "Why does his song give us such pleasure?" The inseparability of pleasure and pain and the description of the broken snail shells introduces the book's preoccupation with opposites: order and chaos, creation and destruction. The reappearance of Frederica, encountering by chance her old Cambridge friend Hugh Pink, is the second beginning; the third returns to Daniel, now a worker on a church-sponsored telephone help line. His most recent anonymous caller is a frequent one, privately nicknamed Steelwire, calling to inform Daniel that because God is dead, "do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" (9). Finally, there is the first chapter of the book within this book, *Babbletower*, which turns out to have been

written by Steelwire, and becomes the subject of an obscenity trial which parallels Frederica's divorce trial. The four threads interweave: the pleasure-pain complex, for example, in the details of Frederica's sexual life with Nigel, as well as in the horrific degeneration of the utopian community, inspired by Sade, in *Babbletower*.

The chapters of this embedded narrative, flagged for the reader by intricate drawings of snails, are interspersed with the story of the twentieth-century characters, thus juxtaposing the issues of freedom and oppression, rule and misrule, in post-revolutionary France and in 1960s Britain. (Byatt's prefatory note reminds American readers that the Sixties was the era of the Profumo scandal and the Moors Murders.) Questions of guilt and innocence proliferate. Drawing all together is the image of Byatt's title (changed from her original idea, *Evidence*), which points to fractured speech, the collapse of discourse and the cutting of the connection between words and things. Legal language notably fails to define its subjects or even to frame its questions (adultery, pornography); and, at a more basic level, the teaching of language to young children is fraught with widely divergent points of view. Does the learning of grammar, asks Alexander's committee, provide a liberating experience by way of the beauty of order and complexity, or does it, as one teacher insists, impose mental torture? Multiple forms of discourse appear, from the computer symbols used by Frederica's new lover John Ottokar to the mathematical formulae of Gerard Wijn Nobel, the scientific language of Frederica's brother Marcus and his friends, and the private language of John and his twin brother Paul. The issues of accurate representation and of individual perceptions of reality have been concerns of Byatt's from the beginning of the quartet; this volume intensifies the discussion and turns up its volume.

Babel Tower ends in 1967. The future of the characters is hinted at by two previous texts: the Prologue of *The Virgin in the Garden*, dated 1968, and the Prologue of *Still Life*, dated 1980. In the first, Frederica arrives at the National Portrait Gallery where she meets Alexander and Daniel, stopping on her way to embrace a figure whom readers of *Babel Tower* can now identify as John Ottokar. In the second, she again meets Alexander and Daniel; there is no Ottokar figure now. At the end of both, Daniel separates himself from the other two to follow his own imperatives. The final volume will be set in the Seventies; within the frame outlined by the two Prologues, the future of the characters, like the questions they ponder, remains open.