

# **Fruit, Water, Ice, Glass, Gold: Images of Human Beauty in Post-1980 Anglophone Fiction**

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## **Abstract**

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a critique of the concept of beauty in art and philosophy (McGann 190), with Christopher Janaway characterising aesthetics as the Cinderella of philosophy who “doesn’t make it to the ball” (vii). However, since around 1980 an increasing number of artistic and critical voices have begun to speak about beauty once again.

Anglophone novels of this period, from 1980 to 2012, show a particular engagement with the subject through their exploration of human beauty. By figuring the beauty of characters in metaphorical terms, they demonstrate that conceptions of human beauty as either a sinful, fleshly temptation or an abstract ideal can be transformed. Five specific metaphors through which this is achieved form the subject of analysis for this thesis: fruit, water, ice, glass and gold. Ten post-1980 novels are examined in their use of these metaphors to reformulate human beauty.

The preoccupation with the transformation and rewriting of beauty will be shown to indicate a distinct trend in post-1980 fiction, one which enacts a notable move away from fiction regarded as postmodernist. It will be demonstrated that the present concern with beauty emerges from the emphasis on surfaces in postmodernist fiction (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 4), but that contemporary novels are characterised by a reconstructive and transformative approach which is less evident in earlier fiction.

This transformative approach is directed to the division of beauty into concrete and abstract by philosophers such as Plato, Augustine, Kant and Adorno. In post-1980 fiction and the critical work of Wendy Steiner, Denis Donoghue, James Kirwan and others, this dichotomy is profoundly challenged. This thesis engages with these aesthetic philosophies in close readings of the ten chosen novels, to expound how the relationship between concrete and abstract human beauty is represented and rewritten in post-1980 fiction.

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## Introduction

### Reintroducing Beauty

By drawing on a syntax of enchantment that conjures fluidity, ethereality, flimsiness, and transparency, writers turn solidity into resplendent airy lightness to produce miracles of linguistic transubstantiation.

Maria Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*

Jerome McGann writes in *The Scholar's Art* that for “about a hundred years there has been something called ‘the death of beauty.’ Recently people have been telling us that it’s time for beauty to come back into the eye of the beholder. But how does one make that happen?” (190). This thesis presents one way in which the revival of beauty is already happening: in anglophone fiction published since 1980, which recuperates and reforms ideas of human beauty through the workings of metaphor, the “linguistic transubstantiations” from solid to ethereal described by Maria Tatar in the epigraph to this work. In asserting that post-1980 fiction demonstrates a notable concern with human beauty, and exploring the manifestation of this in a number of novels, this thesis makes a claim that spans the fields of contemporary literature and aesthetic philosophy. The analysis presented in this work knits the two fields closely together, as mutually illuminating ways of examining the artistic representation of human beauty. The four fundamental arguments posited by this thesis are as follows, and this introduction will explore each point in detail:

- Post-1980 fiction is deeply concerned with the aestheticisation of the world, and particularly of the human body.
- This concern grows out of the postmodernist emphasis on surface (Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism* 4), and its challenge to the idea of producing meaning through ‘grand narratives’: without these structuring

systems to govern the production of meaning, the aesthetic becomes a central driving force for fiction, and “rather than disappearing, has actually incorporated everything else into itself” (ibid. 5-6).

- The inheritance from postmodernist writing of a deconstructive attitude towards history has led post-1980 fiction to unravel the history of human beauty and its artistic representation, and to remake it in alternative ways.
- This reconstructive and transformative approach is characteristic of post-1980 fiction.

*Post-1980 fiction is deeply concerned with the aestheticisation of the world, and particularly of the human body.*

This thesis takes a selection of post-1980 novels that demonstrate a clear concern with human beauty. There are many more that lie beyond the scope of this project, so ten key novels have been chosen, spanning from the 1980s to 2012, which together indicate a particular trend in contemporary fiction. This trend comprises an exploration of the conflict between the abstract and concrete aspects of human beauty — the idea and the body — and this conflict is investigated through metaphor. This conflict is part of the “sea change” observed by Jago Morrison in “understandings of the body and its relation to identity” in the last thirty years (40). Since the establishment of a “formal distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the 1960s” (ibid.) the concept that the body is a discursive construct with both abstract and concrete aspects has become particularly significant to the novel, which explores the linguistic nature of the body and identity. Theorists of this period such as the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, in his 1968 work *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, emphasised and made explicit the constructed nature of gender, an idea which had been pioneered earlier in the twentieth century by works such as Joan Riviere’s essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929), and Simone de Beauvoir with her famous assertion in *The Second Sex* (1949) that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (249) through

socialisation. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault asserts that the body is “a historical construct” (105) through which the “production of sexuality” (ibid.) takes place via “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (105-6). With the advent of this conception of the body as “a discursively ordered product of institutionalized knowledge and power” (Saunders, Maude and Macnaughton 4), fiction in the second half of the twentieth century has been given the tools for analysing the body and its beauty through these “strategies of knowledge and power” (Foucault 106).

Human beauty entered this arena more explicitly in the 1990s with Judith Butler’s feminist theories asserting the socially constructed performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), works contemporaneous with much of the fiction studied in this thesis. In Butler’s work, beauty is interpreted as part of the performance of femininity, a “discursive production that claims to be prior to all discourse” (*Gender Trouble* 54). Taking up Riviere’s ideas but from the masculine perspective of the ‘Phallus’ as signifier of masculinity, Butler claims that if this “ontological specification of the Phallus is masquerade, then it would appear to reduce all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances” (ibid. 47).

Surfaces, appearances and aesthetics then are key: a concern which will also be shown to be central to postmodernist fiction and theory. The implications of such a view are twofold: some feminist critics such as Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Germaine Greer in *The Whole Woman* (1999) regard this constructed beauty as an oppressive tool of patriarchy, responding to the advances of second-wave feminism: “The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to

control those women whom second wave feminism would otherwise have made relatively uncontrollable" (Wolf 10-11). Wolf states her claims boldly, with the result that the widespread success of *The Beauty Myth* propelled into the mainstream the concept of beauty as an impossible ideal that women have been persuaded to feel they must achieve in order to be legitimate and successful as women and as individuals. Jane Gallop articulates this mode of thought in *Thinking Through the Body*, asserting that the way in which we "make sense of, rationalize, aestheticize our bodily givens, our embarrassing shapes and insistent tastes is to transform them into a consistent style" (1988 13). In claiming that we stylise our bodies Gallop introduces the category of aesthetics into her arguments, demonstrating the endurance of beauty as an inherent concern in discussions of the body.

Conversely, Elizabeth Grosz makes a claim for the specificity of individual bodies, within the context of the body's socially constructed nature, writing in *Volatile Bodies* (1994) that "All the effects of depth and interiority" (vii) of an individual's identity, usually considered distinct from the body, "can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject's corporeal surface" (ibid.). We will return to surfaces repeatedly in this introduction, tracing the increasing importance of surfaces and appearances to postmodernist and contemporary fiction and theory. In a similar move, Thesander argues that gender is a social and cultural construction which is then transposed on to the body as an ideal, a requirement: "Women have been made synonymous with their bodies, the cultural form of which was an expression of the specific meanings attached to them" (1997 9); in Butler's terms, an "ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time" (*Bodies that Matter* 1). Beauty, in this view, is equally a product of discourse that is conflated with femininity to create "a female physical ideal" (Thesander 11).

Fiction of this period, however, has frequently adopted a more optimistic interpretation of Butler's theories than is characteristic of post-1980 feminist works, without disregarding the oppressive potential of

human beauty that these works explore. As Morrison states, “what we see in contemporary writing is a polymorphous rethinking of the body and its relationship to identity and experience” (42), in which novelists utilise the potential for change and transformation offered by a view of gender that is biologically unfixed, determined by a performance that individuals and social groups may consciously adapt to rework gender and beauty into new forms. From the perspective of gender, Alice Ridout has observed that younger, twenty-first-century women writers such as Zadie Smith “feel far less anxiety about the woman writer’s entry into text” (2) than their predecessors, of whom she cites Toni Morrison, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood. This thesis does not focus specifically on women writers although they happen to form the majority of the novelists studied, which can perhaps be attributed to human beauty having been addressed by many critics as a feminist concern — Butler, Wolf, Greer and Grosz for instance. However, the decrease in anxiety noted by Ridout is evident more broadly in contemporary fiction, referring not just to human beauty but to a widespread emphasis on transformation and reformation in the contemporary novel.

This pattern in post-1980 fiction has been described by Waugh as a sense of “celebration” (*Metafiction* 9), by Mengham as one of “endless change” (2003 1) and by James as a period of “reconstruction” (3) with particular regard to literary treatments of history. Worthington persuasively contends that “many contemporary fictions in fact explore and exemplify the creative, constitutive capacity of subversive linguistic play” (17), in contrast to the “aesthetics of negativity” (18) identified in postmodernist fiction. In a similar mode, Hoberek et al claim that twenty-first-century novels “share a perhaps surprisingly consistent suspicion of modernism and (especially) postmodernism, suggesting that these categories may be losing some of their sway” (9). However, Worthington and Hoberek are in a minority of critics who have explicitly noted a distinction between postmodernist and contemporary fiction. Arguably this is an issue of time, so that it is possible now in 2012 to observe a shift in fiction from around

1980 that had not yet become evident for critics such as Edmund J. Smyth in 1991, who conflates the terms ‘postmodernist’ and ‘contemporary’ in arguing that “postmodernism has come to be used . . . to designate either negatively or positively the contemporary cultural condition as a whole . . . [or] describing the contemporary novel in general” (9). The difficulty in formulating a coherent argument that encompasses the work of a period still in flux is expressed in Mengham’s use of the same phrase as Morrison to describe contemporary fiction, a “sea change transforming fiction in English” (Mengham, 1999 1) in response to the “major alterations” (*ibid.*) undergone in “Perceptions of history, the environment and the politics of culture” (*ibid.*): a transformation which is still occurring.

Nonetheless, the attempt to analyse contemporary fiction is necessary in order to understand, as far as possible, the developments in the novel which are presently unfolding. In particular the shift in attitudes towards beauty and aesthetics appears increasingly definitive of fiction in the contemporary period; the process began in the 1980s when, as recorded by Dipple in 1988, “while Franco-American and ‘cultural’ academic critics denigrate the aesthetics of literature, fictionists continue to produce as though their activity counts” (4). Dipple’s statement offers an implicit acknowledgement of the significance of beauty and aesthetics to post-1980 fiction: this thesis will demonstrate it in detail. Since the 1980s, criticism and theory have begun to catch up with the novelists in their renewed attention to the role of beauty in fiction, matching the changes in perspective evident in post-1980 fiction by “focussing less on formal and spiritual aspects and more on issues of ethnicity and sexuality, gender and the body, history and memory” (Childs 275) — a list echoed almost exactly in the chapter headings of Bentley’s 2008 work *Contemporary British Fiction*.

The present work is, necessarily, only able to tap into a limited range of these fields, but the focus on beauty and aesthetics is directly involved with questions relating to every element in Childs’ list. This accounts for the importance of studying beauty in contemporary fiction: it

acts as a vehicle for the exploration of these varied topics. As Heilmann and Llewellyn argue, fiction of this era engages in “a process of critique” (2) of its cultural and political contexts, with the particular intention to not only “deconstruct” (*ibid.*) but to subsequently “reinterpret” (*ibid.*). This thesis details the reconstructive and transformative character of post-1980 fiction through the lens of beauty, which is just one subject currently undergoing a celebratory rewriting in fiction.

Recent works of criticism have adopted a range of approaches to beauty and the body, which will be examined in more detail in the overview of aesthetic philosophy and theories of beauty towards the end of this introduction. Saunders, Maude and Macnaughton state that the object of study for their essay collection *The Body and the Arts* is the “dynamic relation” (1) between the body and art, in which the body acts as “inspiration, subject, symbol, metaphor and medium” (*ibid.*). They also assert that a constant in this field has historically been “the body as real versus the body as ideal” (2), a tension whose present significance forms the subject of this thesis. The role of metaphor within this conflict is also a primary concern; not only the metaphors employed by novelists, but also those of philosophers and critics, and which all display a remarkable consistence. Waugh takes as inspiration a passage from Virginia Woolf which metaphorically casts the body both as glass and as wax, to ask the question, “Are we inside a body ever buffeted, scraped and sculpted by the elements, alternately softening and hardening . . . ?” (ed. Saunders, Maude and Macnaughton 131). Similar metaphors of human beauty appear in the work of writers as varied as Plato, St Augustine, Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno — the four philosophers whose aesthetics are closely studied in this thesis — as well as the novelists and critics who engage with the same questions of beauty and its embodiment. Waugh continues, “metaphors reveal the bodily grounding of cognition, undoing the transparency of concepts” (132): it is because metaphors traverse the gap between the abstract and the concrete that they are the chief object of analysis in this thesis.

The novels examined here present human beauty through a set of metaphors that each parallel the conflict between abstract and concrete which is enacted in human beauty in contemporary fiction. Like human beauty, the five metaphors — fruit, water, ice, glass and gold — are all physical in origin, each gradually becoming abstracted and sublimated into an artistic form as the narrative of each novel progresses. Although a range of post-1980 novels are discussed in the chapters that follow, extended close analysis is presented of the following texts:

- In Chapter 1, Fruit, Margaret Power's *Goblin Fruit: A Novel* (1987) is discussed in detail, with comparative discussion of *The Other Side of the Fire* (1983) by Alice Thomas Ellis and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002) by Anne Enright.
- Chapter 2, Water, closely analyses Lisa St Aubin de Terán's *Joanna* (1990), *Fingersmith* (2002) by Sarah Waters and *The Sea Lady* (2006) by Margaret Drabble.
- In Chapter 3, Ice, detailed discussions of Alice Hoffman's *The Ice Queen* (2005) and Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012) continue the arguments of the previous chapters.
- Chapter 4, Glass, focuses on *The Girl with Glass Feet* (2009) by Ali Shaw and *Possession: A Romance* (1990) by A. S. Byatt.
- Finally in Chapter 5, Gold, Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003) is discussed along with *Venus as a Boy* (2004) by Luke Sutherland.

In each of the novels studied, a character is transformed into a work of art, through a manipulation of their beauty achieved through metaphor. In this way, sinful and fallible flesh is transcended, so that human beauty becomes purified and immortal in an artistic, textual form. The five metaphors all have extensive — and often interconnected — histories as metaphors for human beauty in classical mythology, fairy tale and literature. By exploring their evolution through these fields, and their manifestation in contemporary fiction, the thesis presents a history of

human beauty from the angle of the tension between abstract and concrete, idea and flesh. This is achieved by engaging with philosophies of beauty that address this question, and which will be discussed later in this introduction, in a chronological overview of aesthetic philosophies that discuss the concrete-abstract divide; the overview concludes with contemporary discussions of beauty by Wendy Steiner, Denis Donoghue, Elaine Scarry, James Kirwan, Elisabeth Bronfen, Arthur Marwick, Jerome McGann, Dave Hickey and Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith.

In parallel — and in connection — to the contemporary concern with the body and its beauty, Susan Redington Bobby remarks on the “resurgence of works whose archetypal motifs allude to the genre [of fairy tale]” (7) in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in one of many critical works discussing the postmodernist and contemporary fictional engagements with the fairy tale form. Stephen Benson’s description of Robert Coover’s use of a “dense, elaborately loaded and knowing voice of a fairy-tale character bearing the full weight of experience” (122) can be extended to include not only much of the postmodernist fiction of Coover’s time, but also post-1980 fiction which consistently reutilises this style, elaborating fairy tale plots and motifs into the detailed texture of novels which have not, however, retained the characteristically postmodernist fragmentation and disjunction of Coover’s work.

This ‘knowing’ and experienced reworking of the fairy tale is also characteristic of the particular trend described by Redington Bobby as “feminist postmodern contemporary fairy tale revisions” (7), the ambiguous conjunction of postmodern and contemporary in this phrase accurately expressing the enduring connection between them (this work was published in 2009, so presumably it is broadly post-1980 writing that is referred to as contemporary). She cites as the proponents of this trend Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton and Angela Carter, whose influential short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* of 1979 presents what Lorna Sage terms “a dazzling series of transformations” of traditional fairy tales (*Contemporary Fiction*,

1988 6). I am studying a later and wider range of writers, some well known (A. S. Byatt) and others less so (Luke Sutherland), and some who have only just made their debut (Eowyn Ivey), in order to trace the directions in which these postmodern fairy tale transformations have developed in more recent writing.

Susan Sellers encapsulates an important element of contemporary engagement with the fairy tale: “One of the strengths of reworking fairy tales, I would suggest, is precisely the interplay between the known and the new: like the good fairy, the presence of customary elements reassures and underpins our daring to defy prohibition and go to the ball” (14). Since post-1980 fiction seeks to rework established representations of human beauty into new forms that both celebrate beauty but also resolve some of the ambivalence surrounding it, writers require a literary form that facilitates such a process. Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* identifies the fairy-tale form as a tradition which offers a way to address and resolve social issues, due to its inherently transformative nature:

The tendency is to break, shift, debunk, or rearrange the traditional motifs to liberate the reader from the contrived and programmed mode of literary reception. Transfiguration does not obliterate the recognizable features or values of the classical fairy tale but cancels their negativity by showing how a different aesthetic and social setting relativizes all values. Though the liberating and classical fairy tales may contain some of the same features and values, the emphasis placed on transfiguration as process, both as narrative form and substance, makes for a qualitative difference. (180)

The majority of the novels examined here — and many more post-1980 novels — present reworkings of fairy-tale narratives and motifs, in a paradigm of transformation described by Zipes that engages with both fictional forms and traditions, as well as contemporary social, political and

cultural questions, especially those surrounding beauty in its varied guises. For instance, Andrew Teverson writes that Salman Rushdie's fiction "reutilizes fairy tales in order to contest the models of social and cultural identity that such narratives have, in their canonical forms, reinforced" (ed. Benson 48).

This inherent tension within the fairy tale form, especially in its postmodernist and post-1980 manifestations, between the promotion or subversion of social norms is a central concern of this field of criticism. Discussion of this conflict is vital to the arguments of Cristina Bacchilega, who locates the emergence of strongly subversive aspects in fairy tale within its transformation into a literary form: "the tale of magic within a folk context was not and cannot be simply liberatory because within its specific community it would also, to some degree, rely on and reinforce social mores" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 7). What happens when the fairy tale is developed into a literary form functioning in larger, more anonymous and less controlled public contexts is one of the subjects of this thesis, from the angle of human beauty. Bacchilega focuses on postmodernist fairy tales by writers such as Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, and their use of metafiction and narrative fragmentation. However, Elizabeth Wanning Harries offers the insight that "the 'postmodern' narrative techniques Bacchilega so brilliantly explores are strikingly similar to the narrative preoccupations of [sixteenth-century writer] Giambattista Basile and of the late-seventeenth-century *conteuses*" (15). The fairy tale has been adopted by postmodernist and contemporary writers because it already serves their transformative purposes, is already amenable to their narrative experiments. Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde* asserts that "On the whole fairy tales are not passive or active; their mood is optative — announcing what might be" (xvi), thereby establishing their capacity to advance either repressive or emancipatory ideologies: however, Warner's statement makes especially clear the fairy tale's potential for utopian stories of 'what might be'. As we shall see in the following chapters, post-1980 engagements with the fairy tale also make use of the utopian potential of the form, as well as

its capacity for social critique. However, these rewritings are clearly distinct from their postmodernist predecessors, and rather than deconstructing fairy tale narratives to expose the discursive systems underlying them, contemporary novelists are turning their transformative agenda to the metaphors and motifs of the fairy tale. By placing these metaphors in specific temporal settings — usually the twentieth and twenty-first centuries — recent novels examine their workings, their influence and their relevance to actual social situations. Zipes ascribes the potential for radical social change to the fairy tale, along with other fairy-tale critics whose own preoccupations differ from Zipes' Marxist position. Bacchilega, for example, adopts a feminist standpoint to argue for the repression of women through the fairy tale via the “long tradition of representing women both as nature and as concealed artifice” (9): the metaphor upon which she focuses to prove this is the magic mirror, because by “showcasing ‘women’ and making them disappear at the same time, the fairy tale thus transforms us/ them into man-made constructs of ‘Woman’” (*ibid.*). Here again is the transformative aspect of fairy tale which Bacchilega goes on to explore in postmodern fairy tale fiction.

This thesis aims to extend this kind of criticism, analysing a further series of transformative fairy tale metaphors through a slightly wider lens than that of gender. Important though the fields of gender and feminism are, and strongly connected to the study of human beauty, this is a different project intending to identify and explore a pattern that is becoming visible in post-1980 fiction, without implying or imposing socio-political agendas. Therefore, this thesis discusses fairy-tale rewritings in the context of Zipes' identification of the fairy tale as a potent form capable of both reinforcing and reconstructing social mores, rather than ascribing to feminist interpretations by critics such as Bacchilega, Warner, Sellers, Kate Bernheimer (1998) and Merja Makinen (1992). Equally, their work primarily studies fiction published before 1980, analysing the work of authors such as Angela Carter and Anne Sexton who belong more to studies of postmodern writing: this thesis casts light on their successors. In this

context, Zipes' arguments are largely borne out by the novels analysed in the following chapters, whose consistent use of fairy-tale symbols of human beauty as a vehicle for various transformations upholds both his claims for the form, and my own argument that transformation is a central theme and concern of post-1980 fiction — transformation of human beauty and its representation in literature.

Not all of the novels examined in this thesis contain an explicitly fairy-tale element, but each of the metaphors studied here do. The clearly emerging pattern within contemporary fiction of reworking metaphors of human beauty that have lengthy histories in previous artistic works, fairy tale or myth is fundamentally related to the transformative character of the novel now. As Zipes and other fairy tale critics have proved, the fairy tale is an eminently changeable and versatile form — “metamorphosis defines the fairy tale” (Warner xvi) — which helps to explain its prevalence in post-1980 fiction whose collective aim appears to be an ideologically and socially reconstructive response to the deconstructions of postmodernist writing. Tatar writes that, “In a world that has discredited that particular attribute and banished it from high art, beauty has nonetheless held on to its enlivening power in children’s books. It draws readers in, then draws them to understand the fictional worlds it lights up” (76). Tatar is specifically referring to fairy tales in her discussion of children’s books: as we have seen, the fairy tale is no longer just for children, and it has taken its fascination with beauty with it into adult literary fiction.

It thus becomes possible to recuperate and re-examine human beauty, both its fascinations and its dangers, through familiar metaphors that already carry cultural and historical associations. By addressing and then reshaping these associations — such as the fickleness and unpredictability of human beauty that has been frequently articulated through the metaphor of water, or the pursuit of human perfection and immortality implicit in the metaphor of gold — post-1980 fiction can envision new and often subversive forms of human beauty using the transformative operations of the fairy tale and its metaphors.

Max Lüthi observes in his influential 1947 work *The European Folktale* that “the folktale tends to render things and animate beings in metallic or mineral terms . . . shoes made of stone, iron, or glass . . . Golden apples are especially favoured. Golden and silver pears, nuts, or flowers, tools of glass, or golden spinning wheels are some of the folktale’s regular accessories” (27). Tatar extends this to claim that fairy tales “are committed to surfaces — to clarity, tangibility, and solidity as well as to all that glitters, dazzles and shines” (73): the importance of beauty to the fairy tale is evident in this statement, both in its physical, tangible forms and also in its esoteric glitter. Tatar continues with the observation that the “chief components” of the fairy-tale articulation of beauty are “Metals, ice, glass, mirrors, silver and gold” (*ibid.*). My choice of fruit, water, ice, glass and gold as images worthy of study is not, therefore, arbitrary: they are traditional fairy-tale metaphors for magical metamorphosis, and a great many of these changes involve beauty. Cinderella with her glass slipper and Snow White with her poisoned apple and glass coffin are two of the strongest presences in recent fiction, while Greek mythology is also entwined with these images — the Midas myth reworked by Luke Sutherland in his protagonist’s transformation into gold, conflated with Cinderella’s slipper by Ali Shaw in *The Girl with Glass Feet* (2009), whose protagonist turns to glass from the feet up. These organic and mineral metaphors are so often employed by recent writers because they explore the process by which physical human beauty can be transformed into other bodies and abstracted into metaphor. Such metaphors, therefore, are the tools with which Zipes’ radical fairy tale can offer a reimagination of contemporary life, representing the real changes that are possible.

*The concern of post-1980 fiction with human beauty grows out of the postmodernist emphasis on surface, and its challenge to the idea of producing meaning through ‘grand narratives’: without these structuring systems to govern the production of meaning, the aesthetic becomes a central driving force for fiction.*

The period from 1980 to the present is one of transition and transformation in the novel, in which the “crisis of narratives” (Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* xxiii) which characterises postmodernism maintains a strong presence, but one from which writers are beginning to move on. Something new is afoot, but it remains intertwined with the old, and its agenda has not yet been clearly articulated either by literary works or criticism. Postmodernist fiction responds to and engages with the breakdown of established systems of knowledge in the second half of the twentieth century, leaving “the status of knowledge unbalanced and its speculative unity broken” (ibid. 35). Referring to the self-legitimating systems (or narratives) of knowledge, such as history, philosophy and religion which had defined and directed the pursuit of ‘truth’ for centuries, Lyotard describes the “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv) that prevailed during this period, and that comprises the legacy passed on to contemporary writers and critics. However, Patricia Waugh noted in 1984 that “The paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies is … slowly giving way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms” (*Metafiction* 9).

While modernist fiction “sought to master the world’s messy contingency from a position above and outside it” (McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 21), postmodernism on the other hand, “far from aspiring to master disorder, simply accepts it” (ibid.). Indeed, Ihab Hassan ascribes to postmodernist fiction a “fanatic will to unmaking” (89), though he acknowledges that it also displays the need (if perhaps not the achievement) of some kind of unity between its diachronic and synchronic experimentation (ibid.). Post-1980 fiction emerges from this scene with an acceptance of disorder that nonetheless resists transferring this mess into the structure and style of narrative. Instead, perceptions of disorder are unravelled, explored and moulded into a new form which yet remains wary of all-encompassing ‘wholeness’. The celebratory and transformative approach of post-1980 fiction is what distinguishes it from previous

decades, and human beauty is a particularly significant node of this transformation, since it involves questions of representation and the role of the human in art.

The “literary-historical fiction” of postmodernism as McHale called it in 1987 (*Postmodernist Fiction* 4), turns on questions of ontology and representation: he argues that postmodernist writing rejects the metaphysical centre (or totalising system) of esoteric ‘truth’ underpinning modernist writing — the “grand narrative” in Lyotard’s famous term (xxiii) — and from this position develops the features of fragmentation, aleatory structure, parody and self-consciousness which have become so well-known (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 4-5). For postmodernist writers, it is not an option to attempt to represent outer worlds as they ‘really are’ in the mode of realist texts, or indeed to represent the truth of inner worlds, as in modernist fiction. Representation itself comes under question, its history becoming the subject of self-aware postmodernist critique. Linda Hutcheon explains the relationship of postmodernist writing to history and representation in *The Politics of Postmodernism*; a work published in 1989 and which itself demonstrates the simultaneous involvement in, and retrospective detachment from, postmodernism that post-1980 fiction also displays:

In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations. The representation of history becomes the history of representation. What this means is that postmodern art acknowledges and accepts the challenge of tradition: the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody. (55)

In post-1980 fiction this postmodern struggle with the representation of history has evolved into a specifically aesthetic concern with representation: this is manifested in explorations of literary style as well as

the concept of beauty. Richard J. Lane and Philip Tew detail how “Throughout contemporary fiction the adjacency of past and present becomes an aesthetic dynamic, a motive force for narrative, self-identifications and cultural models in a changing society” (12). The significance of this ‘aesthetic dynamic’ stems from the shift described by Waugh in which the “playful irony, parody, parataxis” (*Practising Postmodernism* 5) and other features of postmodernist writing were transformed from mere “aesthetic practices” (*ibid.*) into a profound concern with the category of the aesthetic itself. This occurs because, as Waugh continues, if history has come to be considered as “a series of metaphors . . . ‘truth’ cannot be distinguished from ‘fiction’ and . . . the aesthetic, rather than disappearing, has actually incorporated everything else into itself” (5-6).

Jameson remarks of Derrida’s essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1967), that “In this essay, which has sometimes been taken as the opening move in what we now call poststructuralism, it seems appropriate to suggest that Derrida’s unmasking of the secret *modernism* of Lévi-Strauss constitutes a first step in the inauguration of a *postmodernism* based on play and randomness (in short, on the ‘aesthetic’ itself, when you stop to think about it” (*Late Marxism* 244 emphasis in text). Theodore F. Scheckels emphasises the importance of surfaces in the postmodern aesthetic: “the postmodern eschews both supposedly realistic stories and less realistic mythologies for explorations of aesthetic surfaces” (ed. Gaile 85). Post-1980 fiction, as we shall see, attempts to reconcile ‘realistic’ narratives and descriptions with the awareness that these are indeed constructed narratives that rely more on the operations of their aesthetic surfaces than may be immediately apparent. Therefore, the concern with representation that continues from postmodernist through to more recent fiction arises from the influential poststructuralist “conviction that there could be no thinking separate from language, and that everything identified or designated as ‘thought’ was already in some more profound way a proto-linguistic event” (Jameson,

*Late Marxism* 234). Fiction has a crucial role in examining the value of this theory, and its implications, from the inside because it is precisely the boundary between fiction and theory, or fiction and history, which is disputed. In particular, the conception of language as all-encompassing has important consequences for beauty, which becomes a linguistic phenomenon, and it is for this reason that post-1980 fiction explores so explicitly the process of creating and representing beauty through linguistic metaphor.

In the 1980s and after, the prerogative of self-reflection requires that postmodernism also be self-consciously examined, and the “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (Hutcheon 11) characteristic of postmodern writing is adopted by later fiction with a retrospective and contemplative detachment. The drive towards detached self-examination that emerged in postmodernist writing subsequently becomes a feature of post-1980 writing, and my argument regarding human beauty extends from this. In novels after 1980, postmodernist self-detachment is applied to explorations of human beauty: self-detachment develops so far that beauty becomes detached from the flesh which harbours it and is transformed into an abstract, artistic representation. By addressing beauty in this way, contemporary writers are able to engage with postmodern (and older) techniques of representation, while interrogating their significance to the present time, and transforming human beauty and its modes of portrayal into new and hybrid forms.

Recent fiction shows a marked engagement with beauty, in a revival that attempts some redemption of beauty from accusations of being “far too pretty or sensuous or complacent to be taken seriously” (Steiner, *Venus in Exile* xvii), while still addressing the problems that arise from our perennial fascination with all things beautiful. Jameson’s 1981 work *The Political Unconscious* offers a useful example of the attitude towards theories and studies of beauty for the duration of the twentieth century until the 1980s: in emphasising his “essentially historicist perspective” (xi) Jameson is unconcerned with “the specificity of poetic language and of the aesthetic

experience, the theory of the beauty, and so forth" (ibid.), clearly separating them from the "priority of a Marxian interpretive framework" (x). As a preeminent critic of the 1970s and early 1980s, Jameson's relegation of beauty and aesthetics to critical irrelevance is typical of the era.

However, the literary scene has changed, and contemporary criticism is making the same shift as contemporary fiction, although the transition is by no means complete. The study of beauty is no longer regarded as precluding a historicist understanding of fiction: instead, post-1980 fiction engages in an exploration of the history of beauty, frequently in the specific context of human beauty. Jameson implies a prediction of this combined study of beauty and history, when he asserts, "The point is that in such a society, saturated with messages and with 'aesthetic' experiences of all kinds, the issues of an older philosophical aesthetics themselves need to be radically historicized, and can be expected to be transformed in the process" (*The Political Unconscious* xi).

It is precisely this kind of transformative rewriting of previous conceptions of beauty which fiction began to pioneer after this time, in response to the highly aestheticised nature of twentieth-century culture described by Jameson. However, traditional modes of studying aesthetics must be overhauled: in his discussion of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, to which we shall return in Chapters 2 and 3 (on water and ice), Jameson describes Adorno's rejection of art as a universalised concept, abstracted into categories such "harmony, consonance, proportion" (*Late Marxism* 158) in the manner of many philosophers from Aristotle to Kant. Instead, the implication of Adorno's theories is that "the project of yet another philosophical aesthetics after this end of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline remains entangled in this dead conceptuality which it cannot jettison but must somehow untangle and provisionally readapt for new purposes" (ibid. 159). The contention of this thesis is that post-1980 fiction engages in the transformation of the category of the aesthetic through its particular focus on human beauty and its representation in art. In this way the role of the aesthetic is transformed from two sides, in its manifestation

as beauty and as art. This claim is evidenced through close readings of specific works of art while resisting the generalisation of these texts under a universal concept or school of thought.

*The inheritance from postmodernist writing of a deconstructive attitude towards history has led post-1980 fiction to unravel the history of human beauty and its artistic representation, and to remake it in alternative ways.*

The recent return to beauty as an important topic of study and of art is best understood in relation to its historical treatment in aesthetic philosophy. Donoghue makes the useful distinction that “Aesthetics and theories of beauty are not the same, because the theory of beauty may be concentrated on objects and appearances, but aesthetics is concerned with perceptions and perceivers” (43). A novel, of course, can accommodate both, and is the ideal forum for exploring the relationship between beautiful objects and their perception: what happens when an artist’s perception of beauty begins to overwhelm the beautiful person, engaging in the process of representing — and thereby transforming — the beautiful person in art, is unravelled in the novels studied here. Although I agree with Donoghue’s distinction between beauty and aesthetics, the two are nonetheless profoundly intertwined, and one important element of aesthetic philosophy has consistently been the division of beauty into concrete and abstract. What follows here is a necessarily brief overview of some of the major proponents of aesthetic philosophy, selected for their focus on the dichotomy of abstract and concrete beauty.

Plato’s concept of beauty, in the *Symposium* in particular, is of a pure essence of beauty as the source of all other beauty in the world, taking in both physical phenomena and abstract ideas. Insofar as Plato offers a definition of beauty, it is through “measure, moderation, and harmony” as Iris Murdoch explains (*The Fire and the Sun* 11). One can reach absolute beauty by progressing from the love of “beautiful bodies” to “beautiful . . . thoughts” (*Symposium* 40-1; 210a-e), from which one can comprehend the

beautiful as “a single form” (41; 211b). Here of course is implied Plato’s famous theory of Forms, which are the “pure objects of spiritual vision” (Murdoch 10) upon which the physical world is based, as a concrete (and inferior) manifestation of these Forms. Plato establishes a clear hierarchy within this system of beauty in which fleshly beauty is located firmly at the bottom.

The aim, ultimately, is to achieve an entirely abstract beauty: Plato adapts the perception of physical beauty into an attitude towards philosophical enlightenment, co-opting our love of beauty into acting as an incentive, a mere imitation of the condition of wisdom. So beautiful bodies and objects are metaphorical representations of the abstract form of beauty which has no physical being itself. A beautiful person is just a metaphor or symbol of beauty itself, and an artistic representation of them is “a symbol of a symbol” (Brittan 11), even further from true beauty. For Plato, human beauty is only the first step towards perceiving the absolute, and once this stage is passed one should consider the beauty of a physical body as “something trivial” (41; 210c). Earthly beauties are also, in the *Phaedrus*, temptations to abandon the pursuit of “beauty itself” (31; 250e1), in favour of “surrendering . . . to pleasure” like an “animal” (31; 250e5), placing in peril the noble, rational part of the soul. Plato is not generally an enemy of human and natural beauty, but he does place them emphatically at the bottom of his hierarchy of beauty, and those who fail to climb higher than that rung are irredeemably base and corrupted.

Equally, Plato’s well known denunciation of the arts arises from their adherence to physical beauty, so that “literature shares its sister arts’ corruptive potential for inciting the passions” (Faas 17) by “misrepresenting reality” (*ibid.*) to make it more beautiful. Plato’s position regarding the arts is given some clarification by Warry’s distinction that for Plato, the “effect of beauty in art is different from that of beauty in life” (84). Partee explores this matter in more detail, claiming that the “beauty of all harmonious physical objects — if properly regarded — can lift the soul to a vision of pure beauty” (xi). To regard beauty ‘properly’ is

to view it with the “spiritual vision” described by Murdoch (10) which sees beautiful objects as manifestations of the Form of beauty, but without intrinsic value in themselves except to elevate the soul of the perceiver.

Partee continues with the distinction that “language cannot for Plato raise man above physical appearances. Beauty in language presents a danger, for words are the only means by which we can communicate ideas” (xi). This statement seems inconsistent, given Plato’s privileging of ideas over physical appearances in the *Symposium*. However, it is the connection of ideas with the empirical objects and scenes represented by literature which is problematic for Plato, since the fact that while “passive exposure to harmonious objects can instil harmony in the soul, language demands an active involvement of the mind” (Partee 1-2). Literature therefore draws the perceiver away from a ‘pure’ contemplation of beauty and further into the complexities of the empirical world. Plato’s emphasis on pure beauty also rules out the beauty of living things according to Janaway, as true examples of beauty: presumably this includes human beauty, because “living things are like pictures in that they excite desires and emotions, so that we cannot appreciate their beauty ‘pure,’ as we can that of a geometrical construction” (Janaway 70).

Post-1980 fiction, we will discover, explores the question of beauty’s purity — if this exists in any way at all, and how such an esoteric essence might actually be manifested in everyday life. The pattern that emerges from Plato’s insistence on purity in beauty continues throughout the history of aesthetic philosophy, with the sentiment that Janaway observes in the *Symposium*, that “a sharp distinction cannot always be made between ‘erotic’ and ‘aesthetic’ contemplation of human beauty” (79): a sentiment that reverberates through the centuries all the way to contemporary theory and fiction.

Aristotle dismisses the bulk of Plato’s visionary quest, instead asserting that beauty resides in function. Characterised by “order, symmetry, and delimitation” (*Metaphysics* 400; bk. Mu 1078b), something is counted beautiful when it is appropriately formed to fulfil its function.

This applies to people as much as to objects: in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle compares the beauty of a young man, “his body useful for the toils of competition and force” (89; pt. 1 sec. 3 1361b), with an older man for whom beauty is “related to military service and combines a pleasant appearance with awesomeness” (ibid.). Although Aristotle regards the functionality of the human body as definitive to its beauty, he nonetheless stresses that both a young and a mature man must have a pleasant appearance as well as an appropriately functional body. Function is key, but does not fully account for beauty. Warry writes that for Aristotle, “since order, proportion, and limit are the fundamental ‘causes’ of existence, beauty is in the same way to be treated as a fundamental cause” (87). This statement is more enlightening when read in conjunction with Aristotle’s statement in the *Poetics* that “fineness lies in magnitude and order” (10; 50b 35), so that beauty arises from the most appropriate proportion and coherence of the material. Warry notes that this material may be intended as either melody or “the disposition of the limbs. It depends how one translates ‘mele’” (87). This linguistic ambiguity implies a possible connection between human and artistic beauty, and critics such as Warry have indeed interpreted Aristotle’s philosophy of beauty as applying to both. In fact, Warry argues that Aristotle’s theory of beauty is in agreement with Plato’s, adapting the concept of beauty as a “fundamental cause” (ibid.) to the assertion that there “is a primitive harmony to be discovered in certain objects of the phenomenal universe, of which beauty is an aspect or ingredient” (88). The statement does indeed contain echoes of Plato: in my opinion, Warry suggests a metaphysical component for which there is little evidence in Aristotle’s writings.

What is notable in Aristotle’s philosophy of beauty and art, however, is a relative synthesis of the abstract and the concrete which arises from his empirical focus, insisting on the study of observable, knowable phenomena while broadly rejecting the speculative flights of metaphysics found in Plato. For Aristotle as for Plato, art is “a matter of representation or ‘imitation’” (Barnes 83), but unlike his predecessor, Aristotle considers

art to represent the empirical world, not the metaphysical. This calculated argument considers the work of art primarily in terms of criteria and function, denying beauty any significant metaphysical quality. As Halliwell writes, art for Aristotle “involves a true alignment of the axis of potential/realisation in human productive activity: it is concerned with bringing into being, by intelligible and knowledgeable means, objects whose existence depends on their maker” (46-7). Therefore, because of the concrete origins of art in the human individual who creates it and the empirical world it represents, beauty in art must be primarily concrete in nature.

According to Gulley, Aristotle is dubious of literature’s moral value because “there is a close connection between using language to imitate something and using it to present what is fictional” (ed. Barnes, Schofield and Sorabji 168). In this way, literary art takes us even further away from truthful things. Schaper, however, offers a different interpretation, arguing that Aristotle rises to the defence of the arts in response to Plato’s denunciation of them. She claims that while the mimetic aspect of art is negative for Plato it is a positive quality for Aristotle, since “what art imitates is nature’s productive activity” (61), redefining the concept of imitation to mean, not that art is a mere imitation of an abstract form as it is for Plato, but instead that it presents “a semblance” (*ibid.*) which reflects and critiques empirical phenomena in a socially useful fashion.

In Aristotle, then, beauty is neither highly lauded nor condemned, but his emphatically empirical study of concrete works of art and their observable effects fails to address the fascination of beauty, the intimation of transcendence that philosophers such as Plato identified in its manifestations. St Augustine takes up this question, concerning himself with the religious paradox of beauty’s appearance of goodness and its simultaneous potential to incite vice. *De Ordine* tells an allegorical story of reason’s progression from ignorance to the contemplation of the Christian divine. This narrative may be reminiscent of Plato’s ‘soul’ pursuing absolute beauty in the *Symposium*, but the story’s content is distinctly Aristotelian. Reason as a protagonist, of course, has an inherent bias

towards function and order, at the expense of rapture and pleasure. Augustine characterises the senses as tempting forces trying to divert reason from the true path to beauty, which is via the contemplation of mathematical design, since “nothing which the eyes behold, could in any way be compared with what the mind discerned” (trans. Russell 35). All earthly beauties are renounced as perilous and pointless distractions in accordance with Augustine’s Christian agenda, which is particularly suspicious of the metaphorical powers of physical objects: Brittan writes that everything “that exists in the physical world has a potential symbolic value, but Augustine needed to ensure that the interpretation of Scriptural symbols was not left entirely to the imagination of the individual” (25). As we shall see in Margaret Power’s *Goblin Fruit*, the capacity of human beauty to inspire a range of literary metaphors increases the fascination of this beauty, thereby leading the individual into carnal sin by privileging the body over the divine.

Sin and evil are, however, central to Augustine’s conceptions of the good and the beautiful, and which he returns to in his *Confessions*; this will be extensively discussed in Chapter 1. Nicholls describes the Platonic return in Augustine’s philosophy to a clear distinction between esoteric and fleshly beauty: “The Beauty (capitalisation appropriate here) we should seek dwells in the realm of reason and the soul. Conversely, the beauty found in things of sense captivates negatively through ensnaring the mind on ground level” (5). Augustine himself in the *Confessions* is preoccupied with “Bodily desire” which he describes as a “morass” (13; bk. II ch. 4). Physical existence is not itself to blame, as Nicholls is careful to observe; the mind is not ensnared by beauty because “the very ontology of material things embodies what is evil” (5). Instead, when beauty appears in a physical form it must not be regarded as a physical phenomenon, for that entails the danger of idolising a beautiful body which should only be appreciated as an example of the beauty of God. It is here that the importance of the rational mind becomes clear, since for Augustine a perception of beauty can only be morally and philosophically pure if it is

perceived with the kind of rationality that finds mathematical designs beautiful. In fact, the dualistic nature of Augustine's philosophy creates a fundamental split in human nature: "Because the human mind is essentially intelligible rather than material, he classifies the human and angelic natures together, all other creatures being primarily physical" (Burnell 20). Such a distinction cuts a deep divide through human existence, casting its physical aspect as animal.

In Chapter 1 this impasse is examined in more detail, through narratives by both Augustine and post-1980 novelists who explore the difficulties of being both an animal and an angelic being, through the metaphor of fruit with all its associations with sin and sex. However, in an interesting turn, Babcock establishes that in Augustine's philosophy, the "contrast between good and evil . . . contributes to the harmony (*congruentia*) and enhances the beauty (*pulchritudo*) of the whole" (ed. Lienhard, Muller and Teske 237). Human sin serves to accentuate God's divine beauty by contrast — though it must be viewed from a rationalised perspective — and in the autobiographical *Confessions* it is precisely this apprehension of sin that converts the young Augustine to the beauty of Christian devotion. Beauty is, therefore, once again clearly separated from the empirical world and particularly from the human body, whose fleshly manifestations of beauty act as an incitement to sin.

In his brief discussion of human beauty in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Immanuel Kant extends the definition of physical beauty through functionality established by Aristotle, even so far as to recycle his metaphor, describing "one whose rugged features might be softened and given a more pleasing countenance, only he has got to be a man, or is, perhaps, a warrior that has to have a warlike appearance" (61; bk. 1 sec. 16). Kant reserves his more detailed discussion for the relationship between beauty and art as we will shortly see, but the difficulties that his aesthetic theories face in practical application is made very clear in his attempt to resolve the opposition of abstract and concrete beauty within the human form. He writes, "the *ideal* of the beautiful is still

something different from its *normal idea* . . . it is only to be sought in the *human figure* . . . all that our reason connects with the morally good in the idea of the highest purposiveness — benevolence, purity, strength, or equanimity, etc. — may be made, as it were, visible in bodily manifestation" (66; bk. 1 sec. 17 emphasis in text). For Kant, then, the human form serves as a metaphor for genuine beauty (which itself represents goodness), as the physical incarnation — the *ideal*, in his terms — of the rational *idea* that beauty resides in form and function. Unfortunately, this offers no illumination into our actual experiences of human beauty, as evidenced by Kant's bizarre assertion that when considering the beauty of a man, "one gets a perception of the average size, which alike in height and breadth is equally removed from the extreme limits of the greatest and smallest statures; and this is the stature of a beautiful man" (65; bk. 1 sec. 17). In none of the other discussions of beauty examined here is 'average' synonymous with 'beautiful'.

In establishing his philosophical system, Kant continues to aim towards the conjunction of the concrete and abstract within art, moving away from Aristotle's and Augustine's efforts to subsume beauty under rationality. Arguing that the feelings evoked in us by beauty are non-cognitive, Kant fashions a place for sensual appreciation of beauty within his phenomenological philosophy: "If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to . . . the understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination (acting perhaps in conjunction with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (*Critique of Judgement* 35; bk. I). In claiming that our purely subjective response of pleasure or pain co-operates with our understanding in our judgement of an object as beautiful, Kant establishes the question of the perceiver's role in the judgement of beauty, addressing the influence of their mediating mind on the beauty that they perceive. This is clearly shown in his answer to Augustine's paean to mathematical design: "To apprehend a regular, purposive building by means of one's cognitive faculty . . . is something quite different from being

conscious of this representation as connected with the sensation of satisfaction" (35-6).

However, Lyotard contends that in the judgement of beauty the imagination and the understanding actually, for Kant, "compete with each other, one with forms, the other with concepts" (*Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* 73). The focus on processes of perception and judgement continues to be interrogated by post-1980 novelists, in their analyses of artists, muses and their metamorphoses from concrete to abstract beauty. Nonetheless, Kant does establish a set of criteria for beauty, focusing on the disinterestedness of our pleasure — a notion directly opposed to Aristotle's argument for function. Drawing similarities with logical judgements — that these and aesthetic judgements, not driven by personal interests, can therefore be presupposed to be universally valid (42-3) — Kant places logical and aesthetic judgements side by side, each concerned with different aspects of human nature. J. M. Bernstein in *The Fate of Art* attributes great significance to this "categorial separation" (2) of art and aesthetics from cognitive spheres such as reason, justice and truth. Such a separation precludes art and beauty from participating in the production of meaning in these cognitive spheres, and so the aesthetic is relegated to useless trivia.

Wendy Steiner, in her important 2001 work *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art*, considers Kant one of the central figures in the repression of beauty in art and discourse. She argues that Kant privileges the awe and terror of his conception of the sublime, as a noble and masculine "model" (xxiv) for aesthetics, over the "pleasurable and complex reciprocity" (*ibid.*) brought about by beauty. However, other critics discussing Kant's dichotomy of the sublime and the beautiful interpret his influence differently. Luc Ferry's *Homo Aestheticus* offers an alternative reading of Kant, finding sentiment and the subjectivity and contingency of beauty to be central to his aesthetics. Having "relativized and brought down" (Ferry 78) the notion of an abstract Absolute to "the rank of a simple 'Idea' of reason" (*ibid.*), Ferry reads Kant's reinstatement of the finite world as a progressive move away from the classical

domination of reason, most clearly illustrated by Plato's Forms — which would have beauty as an abstract, eternal essence. Although we should still be ruled by rational consideration, Kant regards the understanding and the imagination working in harmony, which is generated especially in the perception of the beautiful.

While Ferry is right to emphasise Kant's challenge to the notion of absolute beauty, the Kantian understanding of beauty is still underpinned by ideals of purity — disinterestedness — which regard only the most sequestered appreciation of beauty as genuine, divorcing it from any engagement with the human empirical world. Allison in fact identifies two types of purity as essential to a genuine judgement of beauty for Kant, arguing that, "Here 'pure' has both the negative sense of being purely or merely a judgement of taste, that is, a merely aesthetic judgement based on feeling rather than a concept, and the positive sense of having an *a priori* or normative component. A judgement of taste must be pure in both senses if it is to be able to make a valid demand on the agreement of others, while still preserving its aesthetic character" (86). Therefore, the beauty of an object or work of art is distanced from the concrete existence of the object and sublimated into an *a priori* idea which can be objectively apprehended by everyone: there is no room for subjectivity in Kant's philosophy. In this there is an undeniable echo of Plato.

McGann also identifies this tension within Kant, arguing that he "struggles to preserve a transcendental ground for human judgements in the face of the radical process of secularization set in motion by Locke" (20). In this struggle, beauty seems to slip through the gap that opens between an aesthetics claiming legitimization from a transcendental source, and one which finds its legitimization in empirical grounds, as expounded by English philosophers such as Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). James Kirwan, whose 1999 study *Beauty* will be discussed later, states in *The Aesthetic in Kant* that "it is noteworthy that, even as the secularization of thought once more appeared to gather momentum in the later nineteenth century, this form of aesthetics, which it would seem could

hardly sustain itself without a commitment to something beyond the secular, nevertheless lost none of its hold" (3). Here again the fundamental conflict between abstract and concrete beauty is active, pursuing a transcendental essence of beauty and relegating "to a secondary order of practice" (McGann 20) fiction and other art forms that create or engage with beauty, an attitude which persists "until the cultural emergence of sensibilities we now associate with postmodernism" (ibid.). McGann's statement implies that the postmodernist disintegration of the metanarratives that divide beauty into concrete and abstract has been the crucial move in enabling new conceptions of beauty, even if postmodernist fiction itself had little interest in doing so — rejecting the harmony and proportion associated with beauty is central to its agenda. Fortunately, the retrospective view on postmodernist fiction that is now available to contemporary writers has brought the project of recuperating and reforming beauty into the foreground.

Steiner identifies the modernist disavowal of beauty as the primary cause of the twentieth-century rejection of beauty as an object of serious study. She traces this back to Kant, arguing further that the early twentieth-century "hostility to the female subject and the beauty she symbolized had deep roots in the past. It arose from the Enlightenment notion of the sublime and from a disgust toward women and the bourgeoisie [who were strongly identified with beauty as a vulgar, uneducated pleasure] that had been building throughout the nineteenth century among increasingly disaffected artists and writers" (1). Such a claim is borne out by critics such as Lyotard, who in "Return upon the Return" analyses Joyce's *Ulysses* as an example of the modernist "counteraesthetic (an an-aesthetic) of the sublime" (*Toward the Postmodern* 197). The modernist evolution from Kant inheres in the use of the sublime to "assault . . . signifying syntheses" (ibid.) which construct fundamental connections between the general and the particular (198). Lyotard argues, in a mode that has become frequent in postmodernist writing, that these syntheses have for centuries "lent their signifying value to the signifier as well as foundation and

authority first to poetics and later to the aesthetics of the beautiful" (ibid.). Therefore, the postmodern deconstruction of beauty and rejection of aesthetics emerges from the modernist attack on artistic synthesis, the creation of the work as a deliberate, self-legitimating whole. According to Steiner, the modernist approach was inherited directly from Kant, although it should be noted in view of Lyotard's analysis that the modernist sublime, which suborns the beautiful, also begins to challenge the ideal of wholeness which underpins Kant's philosophy.

Following Kant, Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) presents a Romantic philosophy which places the artist and the ego (related to the imagination in Kant) at the centre of beauty's production and perception. His philosophy is concerned with wholeness, in contrast to the categorical separation which underpins Kant's work: Simpson explains that Schelling's philosophy tends "toward a synthesis of everything (self, nature, science and religion)" (117) which we will see thoroughly broken down in the twentieth century. However, although Schelling absorbs Kant's establishment of the subjective and objective faculties as distinct but complementary, this partnership is adapted into a privileging of the artist who unites these contradictory principles in the work of art.

This is Schelling's definition of beauty, the artistic resolution of the tension between ideal and actual: since "these two activities [of the conscious and the unconscious mind] are to be depicted in the product as united, what this latter presents is an infinite finitely displayed. But the infinite finitely displayed is beauty" (Schelling 225; pt. 6 sec. 2c). This results in the dismissal of natural beauty, for example of the landscape (ibid. 226), which is no longer considered the instigator and object of art because the contradiction between conscious and unconscious, subjective and objective, is not present in objects such as mountains which are obviously unconscious and objective. Instead, art shows us natural beauty: "so far from the merely contingent beauty of nature providing the rule to art, the fact is, rather, that what art creates in its perfection is the principle and norm for the judgement of natural beauty" (ibid. 227).

In this theory Schelling enacts a break away from Kant that is particularly significant to the question of human beauty, since as Steiner explains, “for Kant, any representation that evokes appetite is outside the realm of the beautiful; a notion of beauty as a human interaction rather than a ‘property of things’ risks the introduction of impure interests” (11). Schelling posits art as precisely and centrally a human interaction, a development which is vital to fiction that attempts to unravel the issues surrounding human beauty. Llewellyn details further the importance of symbol and metaphor to Schelling’s development of Kant, in that “the highest flight of the imagination will be symbolic . . . [in the sense that] neither does the general signify the particular nor does the particular signify the general, but in which these significings are absolutely one” (ed. Ross and McWalter 193-4). In this Schelling synthesises Kant’s categorical separation of the faculties of the imagination and the understanding, by extending Kant’s more tentative connection of these through the human process of artistic production — which is, for Schelling, a process of synthesis. He also opens the question of the role of the artist and the perceiver, and in each of the following chapters we will see recent novelists exploring the process of constructing artistic beauty, and the implications of this process for both the creator and the raw material. Aesthetics for Schelling, then, is concerned with artistic productions of beauty, and for him this beauty is elevated to “the ultimate and absolute expression of what is true and of value” (Simpson 117).

Even though Schelling’s Romantic aesthetics continue to problematise beauty, particularly in its intensely idealist conception of the value of beauty, it nonetheless represents progress which is particularly noticeable when compared with Hegel’s subsequent return to classical ideals, as Faas colourfully expresses it: Hegel “tried to rebuild those castles in the empty sky whither the butterfly wings of metaphysics had raised philosophers before Kant” (171). Writing in the 1820s-30s, Hegel moves back towards Plato’s subordination of the aesthetic sphere to the rational, arguing that art “reveals the absolute. It represents the absolute as spirit.

And it reveals or embodies the Idea" (Inwood xiv). This highly esoteric idealism has a very Platonic appearance, with Hegel placing an abstract, metaphysical concept at the centre of his philosophical system.

Classical art (particularly ancient Greek art) is for Hegel the highest form because, as Desmond explains, the "classical formation yields the Ideal: the ideal form wherein an individualized and determinate unification of Spirit and sensuous embodiment is found" (ed. Maker 6). The privileging of classical art over Hegel's other categories, the symbolic and the romantic is attributed to the fundamental connection within the classical of art and religion, which lends determinacy to the spiritual content of art. It is the lack of such determinacy that for Hegel renders the symbolic inferior, and the inward-looking lack of material determinacy that bedevils the romantic (ibid.). Beauty in art, therefore, requires a delicate balance of the concrete and the abstract, with the concrete nonetheless subsumed to the influence of the metaphysical. In this sense, we will find a similar theory in Adorno, although the balance he advocates is couched in more antagonistic terms in the context of twentieth-century capitalism.

Equally, the same emphasis on moral and ideological purity encountered in Plato, Augustine and Kant is evident in Hegel: to "deny that there is an absolute is seen by Hegel as little more than a recommendation that we revert to this exclusively sensory and appetitive condition" of animals (ibid. xv). Hegel writes that art reconciles "the will in its spiritual universality to its sensuous natural particularity" (*Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 1886 59) by "revealing the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape" (ibid. 61 emphasis in text). Essentially, this is another expression of the conflict between the concrete and the abstract, arguing that they are reconciled in art through the mediation of the human mind — which in itself marries physical form with metaphysical thought.

In his discussion of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Stephen Bungay argues that the crux of this reconciliation of concrete and abstract in art is beauty: "Beauty is art's ideal because it is the centre, the point of balance between the mind and the senses which only art can reach, and to which the highest

value is attached . . . because in it, form and content are completely identical" (42). Hegel's own writing in fact attaches particular importance to the concrete, in complete contrast to the philosophers we have studied before him. He claims that in art:

[W]e have essentiality or universality, and particularization, together with their reconciled unity, and only such unity is the concrete. Now since a content, in order to be true at all, must be of this concrete kind, art too demands similar concreteness, because the purely abstract universal has not in itself the determinate character of advancing to particularization and phenomenal manifestation and to unity with itself in these. (*Aesthetics*, 1835 70-1)

For Hegel, then, the abstract and universal concept is the object of pursuit, but it cannot be attained or expressed except in concrete form, and it is in art that this kind of fusion can be achieved. However, though this appears to redress the consistent disavowal of the concrete, empirical world throughout aesthetic philosophy until this point, Hegel stresses that it is only in art that the concrete has this status. Equally, he continues that "this sensuous concrete thing, which bears the stamp of an essentially spiritual content, is also essentially *for* our inner [apprehension]" (71); it is only by virtue of its connection with the abstract absolute that the concrete has any value, and it is not even appreciated in concrete terms. The abstract prevails again.

Benedetto Croce heralds the twentieth century's exasperation with ideal forms and ineffable truths, asserting in his entry on 'Aesthetics' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Fourteenth ed., 1929) that the "pure poet", the "votary of pure Beauty . . . is no real figure but a caricature" (264). Beauty, for him, is not the "innate idea" (265) that haunted Plato, Schelling and Hegel, but is instead an "*a priori* concept" (*ibid.*) brought into being by the objects and artworks that we deem beautiful, and by our perception and

discussion of them. Croce is equally scornful of the demotion of natural beauty from the sphere of aesthetic philosophy — and indeed the sphere of beauty — arguing that “The phrase *natural beauty* properly refers to persons, things and places whose effect is comparable to that of poetry, painting, sculpture and the other arts” (267 emphasis in text). It is the experience of beauty which links natural and artistic objects, and Croce denies any need to elevate one above the other. It is interesting, however, that this description nevertheless converts natural objects into human artistic creations in the moment that our mind views them as beautiful.

Although Croce does acknowledge the significance of the natural in human experience and in the discourse of beauty, his contention is arguably another way of subsuming the inexplicable potency of natural beauty under human agency. The claim, much like Schelling’s, that *we* make a natural object beautiful, remains lacking in justification. Perhaps what is implied is simply the Kantian observation that all aesthetic judgements are subjective — flowers are only beautiful to the human mind, and so beauty is reciprocally formed by the processes of perception. But it does not follow that this understanding of beauty should be referred to our experience of art, as if that is the guiding principle of beauty.

In *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (1902) Croce modifies his previous elevation of artistic beauty by distinguishing aesthetic feelings from other kinds of experience. He claims that it is not the artwork itself which affects the perceiver but solely its content, in an echo of Aristotle’s contention that the function of art is to represent the empirical world. Croce writes that these aesthetic feelings “do not trouble and agitate us passionately, as do those of real life, because those were matter, these are form and activity; those true and proper feelings, these intuitions and expressions” (54). Moss offers the interpretation that this aesthetic feeling is “a cognitive yet emotive expression of the human spirit” (37), and that Croce is in part redeeming the concept of feeling from its conventional consideration as “a turbid, obscure vibration of one’s brain” (*ibid.*). Croce’s discussion of the experience of the aesthetic serves as a prelude to his discussion of the nature of beauty, which arises from

artistic expression: “Art is the expression of impressions, not the expression of expressions” (1902 26). The artist in effect translates their experience of aesthetic feeling in response to something in the empirical world — it is the talent of the artist to discern what is essentially artistic in nature, which is non-artistic — into an artistic expression, a work of art. Carr summarises Croce’s definition of beauty thus: “Beauty is not truth and it is not goodness, but a value distinct in its nature from either. Beauty is successful expression” (161).

Croce’s attempt to purge aesthetics of ineffable absolutes and focus instead on the implications raised by concrete instances of beauty was in part adopted by modernism, although the writers and artists of this movement emphasised purity and clarity of image over beauty (and purity, of course, is not a new ideal). T. E. Hulme, in his essay “Romanticism and Classicism” of 1924, opens with the declaration, “I want to maintain that after a hundred years of romanticism, we are in for a classical revival” (113), by rejecting the Romantic focus on emotion and individuality in favour of the classical pursuit of the “universal” (Brittan 184) and abstract through art. Steiner claims that modernism privileges a masculinised ideal related to the Kantian sublime (xxiv), but T. S. Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), stresses that even the “semi-ethical criterion of ‘sublimity’ misses the mark” when perceiving the value of an artistic work (55). Instead, it is “the intensity of the artistic process” (*ibid.*) that counts — again placing the human artist centre stage, just like Schelling and the other Romantics towards whom the modernists were so hostile.

Zuidervaart makes the large claim that Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy is influenced by “Kant’s notion of beauty as a symbol of morality and Hegel’s view of art as a semblance of truth; Marx’s critique of ideology and Nietzsche’s suspicion of the ideology of critique; Lukács’s emphasis on social totality and Benjamin’s stress on artistic fragments” (xvi). What may be concluded from this list is that Adorno’s aesthetics explore the value of beauty and art as commodities in a capitalist culture with a deep suspicion of universalising concepts or systems; the

possibility of beauty and art retaining a moral or truth value in this context is the paradox with which he wrestles — a set of problems which have also preoccupied postmodernist and contemporary fiction. Adorno offers a thorough assessment of the aesthetic in a broadly modernist era in his *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970. Covering the juncture from modernist writing towards postmodernism via two world wars, Adorno summarises the twentieth-century role for art as a self-reflexive and challenging medium which blossomed into the socially and formally radical metafictions of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the face of the abnormality [sic] into which reality is developing, art's inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber. Yet art is not to be dismissed simply by its abstract negation. By attacking what seemed to be its foundation throughout the whole of its tradition, art has been qualitatively transformed; it itself becomes qualitatively other. (2)

The creation of art is always violent for Adorno, as the empirical world is forcibly translated into artistic form in a reflection of the collisions occurring throughout history: “The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society” (7). The ambivalent nature of beauty comes to the fore in this argument, showing beauty to be part of the “affirmative essence” (2) of art, a force which could be capable of prompting social change; yet the generation of artistic beauty requires the suppression of art's raw materials under the rigid rule of form. Baker states that both this affirmative nature of art and the process of producing art (in a twentieth-century context) is always negative for Adorno: “Writing throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Adorno describes how the logic of commodification had required art to appear autonomous in

order to fulfil that ideological role which Herbert Marcuse calls art's 'affirmative character'" (33). Therefore, in order for art to be marketable as a commodity, it must appear to be autonomous from the exchange systems in which it operates, must seem to have some transcendental value. Jameson's point must be noted, however, that with regard to the culture industry he discusses, "Adorno's concern is with the entertainment business and not with a theory of the cultural sphere he would never have accepted in the first place" (*Late Marxism* 230).

It is important to historically situate Adorno's aesthetic philosophy within the rise of capitalist commodity culture in the twentieth century; "The irony which saw Adorno flee the ubiquitous propaganda of Nazi Germany only to find the same principles of domination at work in US advertising is less the product of Adorno's prejudices than of history itself" (Baker 33). This context makes Adorno's work particularly relevant to this project, since the novels studied here all participate as commodities in the publishing industry — and they implicitly address this in their reevaluation of beauty and aesthetics, questioning anew the connection between transforming a person into a work of art and transforming them into a commodity. This question becomes explicit in the final chapter on gold, which functions in Rose Tremain's *The Colour* and Luke Sutherland's *Venus as a Boy* as a metaphor for a beauty which is necessarily a commodity, by virtue of the desire it evokes which propels it into a system of exchange.

Nonetheless, there remains the potential within Adorno's theories for art to escape the violent and repressive commodity systems in which it must now function, through an attempt at true autonomy which is likely, however, to push the artwork to the margins of the industry. Baker writes, "The truly utopian yearning of relatively autonomous art is discarded by the culture industry in its fusion of the aesthetic and the socio-economic. In its disavowal of autonomy, the culture industry indicates its refusal to posit the image or semblance of any alternative to actuality" (35). The implication of this statement is that artistic autonomy may be achieved by a utopian

envisioning of an alternative to the socio-political realities, by revisioning the role of the culture industry in relation to art.

Post-1980 fiction is making subtle attempts to develop new utopian possibilities through such mechanisms as the rewriting of human beauty through metaphor: it may not be forcefully revolutionary, but it is unmistakably present. In particular, the choice of recent fiction to address the topic of aesthetics itself, to reassess the importance of beauty, appears as a direct engagement with the assertions of Adorno, and a challenge to the market forces of the culture industry from within its structure. J. M. Bernstein argues that art must do this by challenging “its autonomous essence (autonomously), must, that is, acknowledge that its capacity to produce wholes is grounded in its distance from empirical reality, and hence acknowledge its wholeness as illusory” (196). In this postmodernist fiction’s metafictional resistance to internal coherence is clearly suggested, a paradox comprising both autonomy and constraint, wholeness and fragmentation, which postmodernist and contemporary fiction struggle to resolve.

In post-1980 fiction, the figure of the beautiful person who is at risk of being subsumed by artistic form, turned into a work of art, engages directly with the problems explored by Adorno, and so his arguments will feature prominently in the Water and Ice chapters here. Further, Adorno repeatedly discusses the dual nature of art in terms of water and ice: freezing, thawing, dissolving and flowing are a central part of his lexicon, which in turn demonstrates the metaphorical power and significance of water and ice in relation to beauty. An assertion by Jameson is particularly salient here: “the commodity form must somehow be made available and tangible in order for the activity of its dissolution to have any point: the work must designate itself as a commodity in order to acquire the means of escaping that status” (181). Bradford observes precisely this strategy in fiction “over the past twenty years” (47-8), the increasingly “amorphous, transitory and superficial” (*ibid.*) nature of commodity culture results in fiction that “tends to be attuned to the demands of the marketplace” (*ibid.*).

However, anxieties remain within the generally transformative and celebratory fiction of the contemporary period. Prosser remarks — specifically of 1990s American fiction — that “through all gender configurations, popular mediation, the reflection and construction of images, is evident” (9); in this we see the legacy of postmodernist fiction’s preoccupation with questions of representation as detailed by Hutcheon (55). Consequently, “In the image world, commodification of surface produces an anxiety about the body, the delusive lure of perfection. The hypergendered or hypersexual body is a vehicle for consumerism” (Prosser 9). From this the necessity becomes clear for post-1980 fiction to explicitly draw attention to its situation within the culture industry, exploring through metaphors of human beauty the value of the aesthetic both as a commodity, and as a potential site of challenge to commodity culture.

Having observed the pattern of reactionary alternation throughout the history of beauty and aesthetics, it is not surprising that the late twentieth century has seen a rebellion against the hard, cold, purity of the modernist ideal, as noted by Steiner. Postmodern literature grew from a widespread discontent with established structures and conventions, in artistic, academic and social contexts. Aesthetics became a crucial site of challenge to convention, as Waugh writes in *Practising Postmodernism*: “Postmodernism, an art of the surface, was the contemporary period’s answer to Adorno’s ‘negative aesthetics’ of Modernism: an art which in making itself opaque and resistant to interpretation would, in its effective silence, refuse consumption even as it partook of a culture of consumption” (4). In the 1960s, when feminism was dismantling gender roles and the new wave of Marxism was questioning the global sway of capitalism, structuralism and post-structuralism were helping literature to overturn its own rules of form as it addressed these debates. As Bacchilega explains in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, “postmodern studies have advocated anti-humanistic conceptualizations of the subject, played with multiformity and performance in narrative, and struggled with the gender and sexual

ramifications of problematizing identities and differences" (19). These arguments make clear the importance of both aesthetics and human self-examination to late twentieth-century fiction, and human beauty is a central theme through which writers can attempt to explore and resolve the manifold issues of the time.

Nonetheless, aside from feminist theory, which often addresses beauty as a side-issue or condemns it as a tool of oppression, contemporary criticism and theory have not sufficiently matched this focus, primarily continuing to study the traditional objects of aesthetic philosophy: landscape and art. Denis Dutton offers one example of this in *The Art Instinct* (2009), which discusses beauty and art from the perspective of human evolution. Human beauty, however, does not come into it at all, even as the object or subject of artworks as it so frequently has been. Denis Donoghue in *Speaking of Beauty* (2003) offers the insight that "modern theorists of beauty took natural landscapes or works of art . . . as their paradigm" (64) because "it was difficult to go beyond the flesh" (*ibid.*); to discuss beauty in isolation from sexual and personal interests.

This thesis seeks to redress that balance and analyse the hitherto neglected presence of human beauty in anglophone novels published between 1980 and 2012. In engaging with and reworking metaphors of human beauty that are part of the traditions of myth, fairy tale and literature, fiction of this period explores human beauty through its connections to — and differences from — natural and artistic beauty. The novels studied here develop webs of metaphor which conflate all three modes of beauty, resulting in a questioning of the natural and artistic elements of human beauty and the tensions that arise from this dual manifestation.

Therefore, this thesis is structured around five metaphors of human beauty which appear frequently in post-1980 novels, and which often connect with each other. These five metaphorical images — fruit, water, ice, glass and gold — are all natural in origin, but as the narratives containing them become more richly symbolic the natural aspect becomes

questionable: they are clearly being transformed into artistic constructions. The existence of a boundary between the natural and the artistic is thereby challenged, and since human beauty straddles this borderland it becomes the medium by which the challenge is further unravelled. When human beauty, which is so often represented in artistic forms, is portrayed through these metaphors the result is a range of investigations into the process by which human beauty is transformed into art. The flesh which physically constitutes this beauty is rendered textual and abstracted into quasi-visual linguistic images.

The prevailing ambivalence towards human beauty evident in my chosen novels is mirrored in contemporary critical writing. In *Speaking of Beauty* Donoghue echoes Walter Benjamin's claims in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), arguing that "a liberal society gets its way by making people feel that what they have to do coincides with what they want to do because it is accompanied by beautiful images" (6). The co-option of beauty to serve social, financial and political interests is particularly addressed in *Goblin Fruit*'s study of the artist's muse who lends her beauty to the canvas, in *Fingersmith* where human beauty is a vital part of an elaborate scam, in the self-conscious academic world of *Possession*, and in the commodification of people and their beauty in *The Colour* and *Venus as a Boy*.

The conflict of interests that render beauty both repulsive and appealing is encapsulated in Steiner's lament that, "Far from a God-given virtue, beauty now appears an impossible ideal set by voracious financial and sexual interests" (*Venus in Exile* xx). Here already we can see a separation occurring between beauty as a physical, sensual phenomenon inciting desire, and beauty as an abstracted value: in this case an exchange value in Marxist terms. Beauty can have a use-value, "realized in use or in consumption" (Marx, *Capital* 126) and constituting "the material content of wealth" (*ibid.*), as it does in the Gold chapter in the form of sexual services, but in this process of commodifying human beauty it is transformed into an exchange value "characterized precisely by its abstraction from . . . use-

values" (127). The very physicality of the desire for beauty and beautiful people is what causes beauty to be abstracted from the human individual into a disembodied value, generating a conflict in fictional representations of human beauty around the paradox of its double incarnation.

Along with Steiner's *Venus in Exile*, studies of beauty began to appear around the turn of the century in a reaction to its becoming "necessary to defend aesthetic pleasure" (*The Scandal of Pleasure*, 1995 xi). Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith clarifies the role of beauty in post-1980 art and criticism, in the wake of postmodernism: "The beautiful is no longer considered vital because it is too superficial to rival the depths of the unconscious or to make us understand history" (1999 135). The implication of Goldsmith's attribution of this event to the fact that "art must renounce the metaphysical constructions of the past" (136) is that the metaphysical or abstract aspect of beauty, which has never quite disappeared in discussions of the subject, may be to blame for its declining status throughout the twentieth century — until now. In an effort to produce a new consideration of beauty for the twenty-first century, post-1980 discussions of beauty address ethics, questions of gender and cultural productions with a redemptive tendency to seek an alternative to the dichotomy of pure abstract beauty or impure concrete beauty, while simultaneously voicing a concern about the dangers of beauty as an impossible and harmful ideal, particularly for women. Donoghue in *Speaking of Beauty* takes up Croce's strategy of studying "beauty in its social manifestations, its discursive presence" (Donoghue 3), looking at beauty's varied modes of existence in order to glean an overall idea of its workings.

I will also be taking this approach, studying specific images and examples of beauty rather than seeking an abstract universal within or beyond them but without in any way dismissing philosophical methods, in the hope that the revival of beauty will follow Donoghue's example in discussing concrete and abstract beauty in new ways. McGann articulates a similar view: "Beauty is immortal, then, not from its transcendental reality

*as such* but from our mortal experience of its perpetual flight" (20 emphasis in text). McGann's location of the transcendental aspect of beauty not in an esoteric and unknowable essence but in the disjunction of transcendence and fleeting mortality occurring in the same experience, offers a useful summary of the best contemporary approaches to beauty. In this manner the traditions of aesthetic philosophy, chasing the esoteric, are combined with a much more practical focus on actual artistic productions, instances of beauty and their socio-political implications.

Elaine Scarry employs this method in *Beauty and Being Just*, a work of ethical philosophy. Finding her instances of beauty in vases, Matisse paintings and flowers, she argues that beauty has been discredited because it is regarded as trivial, distracting "attention from wrong social arrangements" (1999 58) and even "destructive" (*ibid.*) to the moral integrity of both observer and observed. Her contention is that beauty is in fact the greatest incitement to morality and justice because it evokes the desire to reproduce and distribute the beautiful object and, by extension, all other good things in the world. Scarry's claim rests on the concept of reproduction as central to beauty: "It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication" (3) particularly in works of art, echoing Mothersill's contention that "Beauty is characteristically diffusive; good in itself" (1984 2). In this she draws upon Plato's definition of art as mimetic, necessarily producing only copies of the abstract Form of beauty, but expunging the negative aspects of Plato's attitude towards art. Instead, Scarry makes a dubious modification to Platonic philosophy, asserting that beauty's evocation of "unceasing begetting sponsors in people like Plato, Aquinas, Dante the idea of eternity" (5). However, her arguments rest on a vague and largely ungrounded association of beauty with virtue — one of her central propositions is that "beauty is sacred" (23) — for which she has been criticised by Kacandes, who begins by stating that Scarry sets up her "bogey adversaries" of beauty without "naming anyone specific" (2005 156), continuing to argue that Scarry's theories are purely speculative.

This line of criticism is forcefully taken up by the historian of human beauty Arthur Marwick who rejects her esoteric approach, arguing that “This equation of copulation with artistic creation or the promulgation of legal systems is the sort of drivel, gift-wrapped in olde worldly terms like ‘begetting’, with which philosophers habitually confuse such issues as human beauty” (*IT: A History of Human Beauty*, 2004 10). Although Marwick distorts Scarry’s argument slightly in his critique (her “equation of copulation with artistic creation” (*ibid.*) is not nearly as direct as he implies) his emphasis on the need for a clearer acknowledgement of the concrete, physical aspect of human beauty is well justified.

Marwick’s historical approach considers beauty to be in part — but not purely — a social construct employed as a marketing tool in capitalist commodity culture, in which “the received method of marketing products of every type is to associate them with a beautiful human being” (*Beauty in History*, 1988 13). However, although Marwick absorbs this element of Adornian aesthetics, his concern is to elucidate specifically human beauty. He argues that the study of beauty has been deeply partial because philosophers invariably “deal with moral or aesthetic beauty, often representing the two as being inextricably intertwined, very few descending to the mundane topic of the physical appearance of human beings. This is because the eternal quest has been for a universal concept of beauty” (*IT* 1). Here Marwick offers an accurate summary of the aesthetic philosophies discussed in this work, and his emphasis on human beauty is timely and refreshing. Yet his explanation for this philosophical imbalance betrays his narrowly historicist methodology, as he claims that throughout history “Status and wealth were still the major criteria upon which people were judged; beauty was recognised, but was seen as dangerous and disruptive, fomenting lust, tempting young people into socially disastrous marriages” (*ibid.* x). In the twentieth century, he continues, beauty has become “an independent characteristic” (*ibid.*) through its adoption by capitalism as a commodity. Although this presents an original angle on human beauty it is difficult to universalise Marwick’s claim that social

status has lain at the heart of considerations of human beauty: there must be more to it than that.

Steiner's *Venus in Exile* has already been discussed at some length, but it is worth adding here the socially transformative theory of beauty that she presents as a possibility: in the attempt to resolve the tensions surrounding beauty and its uses, she writes, "I would offer a twenty-first-century myth of beauty, freely adapted from the Hellenistic past: the story of Psyche and Cupid" (xxii). For Steiner, like Zipes, the fairy-tale form is ideal for rewriting our conceptions and representations of beauty, and here its interdependence with Greek mythology is demonstrated, since the narrative of Cupid and Psyche is directly echoed in that of Beauty and the Beast (the beautiful woman who cannot accept her lover in his un-beautiful form, and must then embark on a quest of atonement to get him back — at which point he is transformed into beauty). Steiner interprets this story as an articulation of the personal and social value of beauty: "This myth is a little allegory of aesthetic pleasure, as the soul, moved by beauty, becomes worthy of love and its delights" (xxiii). By extension, an appreciation of beauty untainted by base interests can prompt one into acts of goodness which themselves generate more beauty in the world. Although Steiner aligns herself in opposition to the philosophy of Kant, this attitude bears distinct resemblances to his decree that a true judgement of beauty involves no interests. This question of the purity of beauty and its appreciation will be explored further, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5 (Glass and Gold).

Feminist theory and criticism offers some of the most detailed interrogations of specifically human beauty, and although its political agenda often casts beauty as a tool of oppression (for instance Butler, Wolf, Greer, Gallop, Grosz) some works such as *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Zeglin Brand, offer a wider range of perspectives. Eleanor Heartney's foreword identifies causes for distrusting beauty: "The frightening consequences of the Aryan ideal, the obvious ethnocentrism of 'universal' standards of beauty, and the absurdity of the notion of a beautocracy" (xiii). She argues, however, that this is not necessarily the fault of beauty, but

rather of those who manipulate it for their own ends. Equally, Brand's introduction offers a reasonable — though by no means exhaustive — explanation for the lack of research into the significance of human beauty: "Given the central roles women's bodies have played in the making of art . . . it should come as no surprise that women have *not* dominated the academic 'talk' about beauty, that is, the philosophical, art-historical, and art-critical discourses" (5 emphasis in text). This has changed, however, in the past three to four decades, as women and men have reassessed and deconstructed these positions. Still, beauty continues to be most often gendered as feminine, if in more complex ways than previously, and the fundamental connection of philosophies of beauty with human physical beauty has not yet been fully unravelled.

Another strand in feminist studies of beauty has been the equation of feminine beauty with death. Taking as a starting point Edgar Allan Poe's statement, "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" ("The Philosophy of Composition", 1846 223), Tatar argues in *Enchanted Hunters* that "Beauty is often used as a mask for death, covering and concealing the presence of decay and corruption" (81), identifying in this metaphorical relationship some of the tension and ambivalence which we have seen surrounding the moral and social value of human beauty. Elisabeth Bronfen explores this question in more detail in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), in which she adopts a psychoanalytic position to apply Freud's theory of fetishism to the aestheticisation of death through the image of feminine beauty. She explains the "popularity of an aesthetic coupling of Woman and death" (60) with the assertion that we "invest in images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate owing to our fear of dissolution and decay" (62). Consequently, the repeated pairing of images of female beauty with death dissolves the boundaries between the two: death becomes beautiful and beauty becomes deathly. For Bronfen, this goes some way in accounting for the portrayal of human beauty as threatening and morally questionable. I shall return to these arguments in Chapter 4 on glass, where the image of Snow White in her glass coffin —

also discussed by Bronfen — will be analysed in its contemporary manifestations.

The moral ambivalence of beauty is also evident in studies of beauty in visual art, as shown in the art critic Dave Hickey's 1993 essay collection, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*, which he revised and re-published in 2009. Clearly he thought it necessary to expand upon his claim that while beauty does sell — itself or other commodities — that does not make it evil or dangerous. Bearing certain similarities to Heartney's defence of beauty, he identifies and challenges the prevailing view that, "Beautiful art sells. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells something else, it is a seductive advertisement" (8). He maintains that just because the undeniable enticement of beauty is used to manipulate our desires and purchasing habits, this is not necessarily the fault of beauty, and we must reassess our assignment of extreme moral positions to it, whether it is considered the highest good or the ultimate evil.

It is relatively characteristic of contemporary studies of beauty — even such disparate critics as Scarry and Brand — to vindicate beauty itself from charges of seduction and deception. Instead, the blame is placed on those institutions and individuals who use beauty to generate money or power. Although I agree that arguments in this mode are useful in enabling the open discussion of beauty, such approaches are at risk of celebrating a vague, abstract 'beauty-in-itself' that is to be equated with truth and virtue, whereas its specific manifestations are morally dubious. This direction is likely to lead to the same impasse that has baffled philosophers from Plato to Hegel, creating a dichotomy of ideal versus real beauty that forces beauty into a set of roles — as temptress, virgin, whore — which do not do justice to our actual experiences of beauty.

James Kirwan in *Beauty* (1999) distances his work from "the philosophy of art" (viii), claiming that in this field the term 'beauty' is employed "either without any meaning whatsoever, or given a meaning (for example, as a blanket term for the merits that art may possess) that is quite at odds with that normal usage which constitutes its meaning in the world

beyond” (*ibid.*). Kirwan draws on Croce and his contemporary Collingwood’s discussions of aesthetic feeling, and the various experiences of the beauty of art and of empirical objects (including people) to conclude that beauty is fundamentally related to desire — further, he implies that it is constituted of desire and is self-fulfilling. He writes, “This is the fundamental oxymoron of beauty. It is the desire alone that endures and, in enduring, itself provides that which is its end — beauty” (122).

Beauty, therefore offers an “ateleological” (124) alternative to the driving teleology with which Kirwan characterises contemporary life. However, in asserting that beauty is an end in itself, a quality manifest in the empirical world which offers intimations of the transcendent, Kirwan is not in fact proposing anything radically different to either Plato or Kant. Equally, the divide between abstract and concrete beauty has become implicit in his arguments, but is still firmly in place. Nonetheless, this work demonstrates the drive of post-1980 theory and criticism to explore human beauty in its own right rather than as an afterthought of aesthetic philosophy; the emphasis also evident in Donoghue and Marwick on the study of actual instances of beauty in conjunction with more abstract theorising is a promising beginning in this field.

In order to develop a clear and accurate understanding of the concerns and workings of post-1980 fiction, this thesis engages in extended close readings of novels in conjunction with detailed study of the aesthetic philosophers whose work analyses the same questions of concrete and abstract beauty. The employment of the metaphors under study — fruit, water, ice, glass and gold — in the writings of these philosophers is also examined in relation to the presence of the same metaphors in post-1980 fictional narratives. Since contemporary fiction has not yet been comprehensively theorised in its distinctions from postmodernism, as this introduction has shown, it is most appropriate to study these texts on their own terms, that is, without imposing the systems and theories of a particular school of thought upon them.

This thesis, therefore, does not engage in feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist or Marxist interpretations of the texts except where the novel itself demands it, through explicit or implicit participation in these modes of thought. For example, Byatt's *Possession* is set in late twentieth-century academia and directly discusses feminist theories, and Sutherland's *Venus as a Boy* explicitly questions the narrator's status as a commodity when he works in the sex trade, invoking Marxist ideas. In response to these critical engagements in the texts under investigation I have correspondingly examined the role of these schools of thought in contemporary fiction, but have resisted aligning the thesis as a whole to a single field. To do so would produce a very partial survey of human beauty in post-1980 fiction, and the intention of this work is to let the novels define themselves, rather than subsuming them under previous definitions of fiction.

The choice of aesthetic philosophy as the primary critical field is designed to keep the focus on human beauty and the rewriting of its history in contemporary fiction, an agenda which this introduction has shown to be vital to the novel form after 1980. Equally, this thesis engages primarily with the philosophy of Plato, Augustine, Kant and Adorno rather than with contemporary discussions of beauty by critics such as Steiner and Donoghue, because these studies continue to be substantially informed by analysis of the earlier philosophers, rather than offering a genuinely new theory of beauty. Still, their new perspective is valuable in working towards a more fundamental reconception of beauty.

Accordingly, this study also endeavours to analyse the five metaphors in question thoroughly, starting with an examination of the physical properties of fruit, water, ice, glass and gold — for instance, their molecular structure and physical behaviours — to ascertain what they really bring to a text. These qualities influence not only the images and concepts which are transferred to the beauty thus symbolised, they also affect the structure of the narrative. For example, water appears in Margaret Drabble's *The Sea Lady* first as a descriptor for the protagonist's watery

beauty; fluid, sparkling, unpredictable. This watery lexicon is expanded into metaphorical passages figuring the character as a mermaid or a fish, crossing human boundaries into the realms of the animal and the mythical, and exploring how these representations affect the protagonist's interactions with other characters. Ultimately the water metaphors infiltrate the structure of the novel, as the narrative (which alternates between the perspectives of various characters) blurs the distinction between different characters' thoughts and between past events and present, flowing into an abstracted narrative concerned with the beauty of things. In the case of glass and gold, human beauty becomes increasingly static, petrified into a statuesque attempt at immortality as the protagonist of Ali Shaw's *The Girl with Glass Feet* finds her body turning to glass, and the narrator of Luke Sutherland's *Venus as a Boy* turns into gold: here is portrayed an exquisite preservation of human beauty in artistic form, but it is lethal for the human individual.

I have chosen philosophers and theorists whose aesthetics explore the problematic dichotomy of abstract and concrete beauty, to help illuminate the processes by which the metaphors under study transform human flesh into art. Each metaphor is analysed in conjunction with a philosopher whose work also contains elements of this metaphor, so that I am able to trace the operations of the metaphor beyond the post-1980 novels on which I primarily focus. Therefore, in Chapter 1 the fruit metaphor is explored in Margaret Power's *Goblin Fruit* (1987) alongside St Augustine's *Confessions* which feature a story of the author's youthful theft of some pears — the fruit becomes a signifier for beauty, temptation and sin.

Chapter 2, Water, explores Adorno's arguments in *Aesthetic Theory* regarding the violent imposition of artistic form on "amorphous" (65) empirical nature, analysing the manifestation of this process in *Joanna* by Lisa St Aubin de Terán (1991), Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Sea Lady* by Margaret Drabble (2006). In these novels, watery beauty constantly changes shape and threatens boundaries, a subversive beauty that resists containment in a single artistic form. Adorno's figuration of

empirical material in watery terms as formless, chaotic and unpredictable is set in opposition to artistic form, which renders the formless material hard and fixed just as ice freezes water into form.

The third chapter on ice therefore extends the study of Adorno to examine a mode of beauty which is cold, hard and impermeable, fixed in its form — yet always menaced by the mutiny of the water which constitutes ice, making it equally unpredictable. The narrative and metaphorical instability arising from this conflict is traced in Alice Hoffman's *The Ice Queen* (2005), which rewrites Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale 'The Snow Queen' in a present-day context, and *The Snow Child* by Eowyn Ivey (2012), in which the protagonists find themselves apparently living out the fairy tale of the same name, as a little girl they make out of snow comes miraculously to life. Although icy beauty offers an image of immortal artistic perfection, this image is deceptive and subject to radical change at any time: ice can always melt back into water, its shape lost forever.

Glass, however, renders human beauty perfectly clear and unblemished, as cold and hard as ice but not prone to melting. In this fourth chapter, Plato's concept of an abstract 'beauty in itself' that is divorced from the physical world is explored in relation to Adorno's insistence on the violence of this separation, and the collision of the abstract and the concrete in art. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and *The Girl with Glass Feet* by Ali Shaw (2009) unravel the sinister consequences for human flesh of pursuing absolute and eternal beauty: Shaw's figuration of glass as a metaphor for a perfect, immortal beauty illustrates the paradoxical dilemma in which the individual gains such eternal beauty at the cost of their life. Byatt transforms the fairy-tale metaphor of the glass coffin into a multitude of metaphors expressing a cold, untouchable beauty, but then manipulates the workings of these metaphorical images to negotiate an equilibrium of abstract and concrete beauty, within which her protagonists are able to sustain an untouchable beauty without sacrificing human connection, by detaching the individual's beauty from themselves into an entirely metaphorical forum.

Finally, in the fifth chapter the sublimated image of human beauty presented by the glass metaphor is further abstracted into gold, a metaphor which eliminates even the image of human beauty (which can still be seen through glass), symbolising it in the exquisite mineral purity of gold. Kant's philosophy of moral purity and 'disinterestedness' in judgements of beauty is here analysed in relation to the entanglement of financial and sexual interests incited by gold and the kind of human beauty articulated in golden terms; these issues are examined in Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003) and *Venus as a Boy* by Luke Sutherland (2004) using Marx's theory of use value and exchange value in the commodity.

By analysing five specific images of human beauty in accordance with the emphasis placed on the study of actual instances of beauty firstly by Adorno, then by contemporary critics such as Donoghue, Marwick and Steiner, this thesis aims to expound how the relationship between concrete beauty and abstract essences of beauty is represented and rewritten in post-1980 fiction. Studying the metaphorical operations of fruit, water, ice, glass and gold through both their physical properties and their engagement with aesthetic philosophies, these images present an interlinked series of examples of the way in which fleshly human beauty is transformed into an abstracted work of art — and of the consequences of this change. Fruit, as the most fleshly image, comes first, followed by the dissolution of forms and bodies enacted by water. This unfixed, chaotic vision of human beauty is then gradually petrified, solidifying into ice, sublimated by glass and finally abstracted altogether in the mineral opacity of gold. Transformation is the key concept and driving force in each of the novels studied here, and in the argument put forward in this thesis. Transformative changes of state within fictional narratives allow readers to challenge the dichotomy of concrete and abstract beauty, as this division is blurred and manipulated in the text. As a result of this the novel form is also beginning to undergo a transformation, although it has not yet settled into a fixed state. Perhaps this is the point.

## Chapter 1

### Fruit

He feeds upon her face . . .

Christina Rossetti, “In an Artist’s Studio”

Since fruits are the matured and developed ovaries of a plant, it is no surprise that they have long been used as metaphors related to sexuality and reproduction, in art and literature throughout the world. But this is not a simple metaphor. When beauty is described using images of fruit, it is drawn into the natural cycles of the earth, and develops associations of growth and decay. Studying these images in ancient Greek and Norse mythology, fairy tale, philosophical, religious and scientific writing — and of course post-1980 fiction — it becomes clear that fruity beauty acts as both predator and prey. It can consume its observers, and be consumed by them; it consumes itself, and grows anew from its own decay. Historically, the fruit metaphor has played a substantial part in portraying human beauty as both nourishing and potentially poisonous, a paradox that taps into the uneasy partnership of desire and danger that we will find in every metaphor of beauty discussed in this thesis. As these metaphors transform human flesh into art, it is appropriate to begin with fruit: it remains fleshy and organic like the human body it represents, but draws away from the natural as apples turn golden and the human body becomes a still life. In contemporary fiction, the static and artificial image of human beauty as a still life is examined as it decays under the pressure of changing social principles from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and is grown into something new.

Max Lüthi suggests the connection between narrative and natural cycles in his description of the fairy tale as “a world-encompassing literary form” that “reflects all essential components of human

existence" (*European Folktale* 76). The natural cycles by which we observe growth and decay are themselves narratives developed as an aid to our understanding of our environment. And when fruit, an object intimately involved with, and representative of, these natural cycles as a synecdoche, is incorporated into a fictional narrative it brings along its implications of fertility and decay. In myth and fairy tale there exists an enduring metaphorical connection between fruit and people: in particular, human beauty is often described in terms of fruit. A key initial example from Greek mythology can be found in 'The Judgement of Paris', in which a golden apple is offered as a prize to the most beautiful goddess, fought over by Aphrodite, Hera and Athena (Capps 23). The flesh of fruit is metaphorically correlated with that of humans, both sharing the characteristics of desirability, soft fertile ripeness and the fallibility implied in their inevitable decay. This chapter traces the evolution of this metaphor as it is employed to interrogate the nature and value of human beauty, figuring beauty variously as an ideal, a temptation and a sin — characterisations which fiction since 1980 reworks and interrogates anew.

Fruit appears in all kinds of narratives and in a wide variety of disciplines as a representative of the cyclical process in which nature sustains itself: the new, growing element consumes the old and decaying so that together a fresh structure is formed. The fruit metaphor itself undergoes this process in its own artistic development, as post-1980 fiction absorbs the images and associations that have been attached to fruit since the ancient Greeks, pruning outdated concepts and watering others into further growth. When fruit appears in writings as a central element, remarkable parallels begin to develop between apparently disparate narratives. The narrative structure of Margaret Power's 1987 novel *Goblin Fruit* can be read in conjunction with the scientific account of fruit senescence (aging and decay) offered by Marianne Hopkins et al in "Regulation and Execution of Molecular Disassembly and Catabolism during Senescence" (*New Phytologist* 2007). Catabolism is a scientific metaphor that strings together the observable events of molecular breakdown, loss of

functionality and eventual death into the abstract idea of a single process, decay, repeating itself in all living entities.

Both Hopkins' and Power's narratives are structured around the principle that the dead become fuel for the newborn. Reading the two texts together, it becomes clear that their twinned descriptions of this process act as metaphors for a larger, more general cycle of regeneration that makes its way through all life. This principle applies to beauty as much as to botany: there is only ever room for one dominant party, and the decline of one advances the rise of the next. This can be seen especially clearly in fairy tales: a poisoned apple acts as the catalyst for the rise of Snow White and the decline of her stepmother; the Brothers Grimm mention a "tree with golden apples [that] grows from buried intestines or the hearts of beloved animals"<sup>1</sup>; in the Italian tale 'Apple Girl' an enchanted girl who lives inside an apple emerges bloodied but liberated when her apple is viciously stabbed (*Italian Folktales*, ed. Calvino 308-10).

Fruit in fairy tales is almost invariably magical, providing either healing, and often immortality, or punishment (Aarne-Thompson 207 and 220). It performs both functions in Christina Rossetti's 1861 fairy-tale poem *Goblin Market*, on which Power bases her novel<sup>2</sup>. Rossetti depicts sisters Laura and Lizzie, who are tempted by the "Bright-fire-like barberries,/ Figs to fill your mouth,/ Citrons from the South" (11) sold by sinister "goblin men" (12). Laura succumbs and wastes away almost to death having "sucked until her lips were sore" (20) on the fruit, bought with a lock of her golden hair: but she is saved by Lizzie, who confronts the

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<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to the second edition of *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, 1819 (trans. Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 416).

<sup>2</sup> *Goblin Market* has been extensively studied, from various viewpoints and with many agendas. Notably, feminist readings include Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Lynda Palazzo's *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* and Tricia A. Lootens' *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization*. There are also many psychoanalytic readings such as Ellen Golub's "Untying Goblin Apron Strings: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *Goblin Market*", and economic interpretations, for instance Terrence Holt in "Men Sell Not Such in Any Town: Exchange in *Goblin Market*" and Elizabeth Campbell's "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*". As is clear from the titles, many of these readings overlap. Nonetheless, I am not ascribing to a theoretical framework beyond my focus on linguistic and conceptual metaphor: my concern is specifically with the operation of fruit as a metaphor in the poem, and as it is developed by Margaret Power.

goblins and brings back some of the fruit juices for which Laura pines. However, in Power's *Goblin Fruit* as in many late twentieth-century reworkings of fairy tales, the traditional structures that lead virtuous protagonists to happy endings are subverted, not with the anarchic violence of 1960s and 1970s postmodernist fiction, but with a meditative manipulation that wonders how the broken pieces of fairy tale and literature might be put differently together. Zipes argues that many literary fairy tales, as works which continually engage with fairy-tale tradition, "reflect a process of struggle against all types of suppression and authoritarianism" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 178 emphasis in text) in their efforts to modify a tale to make it meaningful to the current social context. Since Power's novel is an explicit rewriting of Rossetti's fairy-tale poem, exploring its metaphorical connections between fruit and female beauty to address the place of beauty in 1980s Britain, Zipes' stance is justified; Power's sustained criticism of beauty's figuration as a sinful temptation enacts precisely the kind of struggle against suppression — of women as carriers of dangerous and damning beauty — that Zipes claims is especially accommodated by the fairy tale form.

Using extracts from *Goblin Market* as epigraphs and setting her tale in mid-nineteenth century London – Rossetti's own Victorian artistic scene – Power digs deeper into the metaphorical possibilities of fairy-tale fruit to tell a story of chaste maidens who wither on the tree, and plucked, ravished women who thrive on the juices of their dead sisters. Yet whether or not Power is aware of it, her alternative plot is neither new nor arbitrary: it has been occurring in nature for millennia. As Hopkins et al write, "A distinguishing feature of senescence that sets it apart from other types of programmed cell death is the recovery of carbon and nitrogen from the dying tissue and their translocation to growing parts of the plant such as developing seeds" (201). Senescence, or the aging process, is a slow and useful kind of death, since the carbon and nitrogen that dying cells produce is transferred to new growth to be used as fuel. Decay nourishes nascent life.

The fairy tale form provides an appropriate vehicle for exploring the cycles of growth and decay because it presents people as parts of a whole, like leaves, roots and seeds that make up a plant. Each character has their own place and function within the plot: in Lüthi's words, characters "unknowingly find themselves at the point of intersection of many lines and blindly satisfy the demands that the total structure places on them (64-5). The inescapable process of growth, ripening and decay that is so evident in the fate of human beauty is documented and lamented in the metaphor of fruit: the Greek myth of the beautiful Persephone (Proserpina in Ovid and Proserpine in *Goblin Fruit*), who must spend half the year in the realm of the dead so that new life can emerge in spring, uses the life cycle of human beauty to express the cycle of the seasons which mirrors it. Significantly, it is because Proserpina has eaten seven pomegranate seeds (six in some versions) that she ties herself to the Underworld: she has entered into its life cycle and become part of its revolving physical existence (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 200-1).

It is a common fairy-tale trope that one must never eat in the otherworld if one hopes ever to leave. In the old English tale 'Childe Rowland' the eponymous hero is given the following advice when he sets off to rescue his brother and sister: "after you have entered the Land of Faery, bite no bite, sup no drop; for if in Elfland you sup one drop or bite one bite, never again will you see Middle Earth" (*English Fairy Tales* 197-8). As Diane McGee writes, "in eating, we transform food into our own flesh" (*Writing the Meal* 22), so once one enters the organic processes of a world, one is caught in their cycle and, having taken nourishment, will inevitably become nourishment in turn. What these narratives reveal is that human beauty does not simply decay and vanish; like the fruits to which it is so similar, a dying beauty actually fosters its budding successor whether it wants to or not.

So, when *Goblin Fruit*'s ethereal waif Ida (based on Lizzie Siddal, the short-lived wife and muse of Christina Rossetti's artist brother Dante Gabriel), dies from an overdose of laudanum, her former friend Fanny —

ripe, fleshy and concupiscent — rises to prosperity. The cycle is echoed in the second part of the novel, in which the death of the chaste young Eleanor allows her spinster cousin Eliza to blossom into sexuality and art — with Eleanor's husband, Nicholas Suiter. Throughout, the painter Nicholas feeds on the beauty of these four women, sapping their lives to increase his artistic fruitfulness, just as the artist in Christina Rossetti's poem which opens this chapter feeds upon the face of his muse to produce a beauty "Fair as the moon", not "wan with waiting" as she actually is (*Poems and Prose* 52).<sup>3</sup> Nicholas' painting of Eliza as Proserpine is the final image of Power's novel, clearly based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Proserpine* (1888) which also provides the cover art for the edition used here.

In this painting of dusky blues and browns, the contrasting crimson of Proserpine's lips is matched only by the red of the split pomegranate she holds, centering the fleshy sexuality of the painting in these two images. Both are full and ripe, deliberately proffered to us but held back by a restraining hand, just as Proserpine herself is both returned and retained by Hades in the myth. The small but provocative sliver of pomegranate flesh is a nod to the Baroque tradition, which, according to Albala, nursed an "obsession" (*The Banquet* 83) with fruit. He advocates the straightforward sexuality of fruit, and explicitly connects it with eating: "Even if fruit was depicted as a symbol of decay, mortality, rebirth, or whatever, the sensual and almost erotic attention to the texture and glistening skin of ripe wet fruit gives some indication of how interested diners were in eating it" (*ibid.*). Here again the metaphorical connection of fruit and human is consolidated by the desire to assimilate one into the other, the eroticised appeal of the fruit described as enticing the diner like a bewitching female beauty.

D. G. Rossetti maintains this eroticism, though more subtly, at the centre of his painting with just a small slice of fruit. Alluding to the Biblical

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<sup>3</sup> Burlinson argues convincingly that 'In an Artist's Studio' is "almost certainly" (*Christina Rossetti* 49) modelled on the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal, as is *Goblin Fruit*.

image of the serpent in Genesis, the twist of Proserpine's neck has a distinctly serpentine appearance, borne out by the sinuous folds of her gown, supporting Eliza's complaint in *Goblin Fruit* that Nicholas has painted her as "a veritable Lamia" (91-2). A figure of Greek mythology who was turned into a half-woman, half-serpent monster, Lamia is often connected with Lilith, of the Biblical Apocrypha. Lilith was turned into another such monster because of her refusal to lie beneath Adam, an insubordination echoed by Eliza in her determination to have Nicholas as a lover, but on her own terms as a fellow artist. Unfortunately, any obstacles in Eliza's way, such as her cousin Eleanor, must be defeated and converted into fuel for Eliza's efforts. It is perhaps the truth in Nicholas' representation of her that troubles Eliza.

Having unravelled all these threads of association in one small section of *Goblin Fruit*, the immense productivity of the fruit metaphor is evident. Power's novel assimilates the Christian tradition that presents both women and fruit as sexual and sinful, an idea that has decayed over the twentieth century as women's roles and rights have been interrogated. Power reincarnates the metaphor of the serpent and the stories of Lilith (and Lamia) in a positive rendering of an insubordinate woman, who manipulates her lover's obsession with feminine beauty into a liberated life for herself. The natural cycles of decay that feeds new life remains dominant, but not oppressive, as Power shows how to win the game without breaking the rules — a development from the compulsive rule-breaking of 1960s postmodernist fiction, in which works such as Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* (1969) deconstruct the narratives and metaphors of fairy tales into disjointed fragments, challenging the ascription of meaning to these components. In post-1980 fiction, however, the metaphor of fruit and its relation to beauty stays intact, but not unchanged.

## **Green and Golden Apples**

One of the key fairy-tale images of life and sexuality is the apple. Its history as a metaphor is very long, and includes a distinct pattern of association between apples and feminine beauty, representing beauty's lustre and its decay. By 1629 there was an apple variety in England known as 'Woman's Breast', reflecting the ubiquity of the association as noted by Palter in *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots and Other Literary Fruits* (31). In the Walpurgisnacht scene of Goethe's *Faust* (1808) the title character suggestively tells a young witch referred to as 'Die Schöne' (the beautiful one) that he has been dreaming of "an apple tree,/ on which two beautiful apples glowed" (122, my translation); the witch invites him into "her garden" (ibid.). Along similarly occult lines, Toussaint-Samat observes in *A History of Food* that "In esoteric cults and white magic the apple is the feminine symbol *par excellence*, associated with Venus. If you cut an apple vertically into two exact halves you can in fact see some resemblance to the female genital system" (621-2). Although there may be some forcing of the connection in Toussaint-Samat's halved apple, it supports the equation of women with apples that has been made so many times.

The relation to white magic and also the occult (if you cut an apple horizontally in half it displays "a perfect five-pointed star, the pentagram, a key to the occult sciences" (ibid.)) draws us back to the fairy tale, a realm of superstition and magic. Snow White is poisoned by an apple whose white and red complexion mirrors her own, and it is only while a piece of it remains lodged in her throat that she is contained in her glass coffin. This is in fact a reversal of the usual function of the apple in myth and fairy tale, if the glass coffin is held to symbolise chaste seclusion: in Genesis, Eve's bite of the apple causes her to be banished from the paradisal stasis of Eden into a world of knowledge and action, while in the ancient Greek myth of Atalanta the heroine is tricked out of her sworn virginity by apples. The most swift-footed of girls, Atalanta vows only to marry the man who can outrun her. A suitor succeeds by throwing golden apples in her path to

distract her — these were a gift, significantly, from Venus, the ultimate seductress (Ovid 415).

As well as the Atalanta myth there are the apples of immortality which sustain the lives of the Gods in the ancient Norse *Edda* (Sturluson 36), and in one of Hercules' labours he must acquire a golden apple from a tree in the possession of Atlas, the fierce king of Africa (Keightley 251). In late ancient Greek art the three Graces were depicted holding golden apples (Palter 24). What is clear about these fantastical apples is that their enhancement by golden colour or magical properties distances them from real, natural apples: mythical and fairy-tale apples emphatically belong in the world of art where they symbolise wealth, beauty and the ultimate object of pursuit. What is required is that they are abstracted from nature into an enhanced, artistic perfection. This is also required of human beauty — Snow White's beauty, which mirrors the red and white apple that poisons her, is sublimated into its famous perfection when it is contained in the glass coffin, static and untouchable as a picture. The legacy of Snow White is evident in *Goblin Fruit*, which depicts Nicholas' relationships with women as defined by their role as muse for his painting: his deepest, everlasting love is for Ida, whose remote chastity and silent stasis render her a work of art even in life. Her image, therefore, endures while his other lovers are forgotten.

Apples hold a place of singular importance in Western culture as the Christian fruit of sin, whose enticing beauty hides its mortal danger. In Latin this symbolism is embedded in the apple's very name, *malum*, which is “a homonym of the Latin for evil” (Toussaint-Samat 622). They are the very first fruit mentioned in the long list of perilous delicacies in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, which builds an exemplary picture of tempting loveliness, “Sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (11). It is the apple in particular that expresses the dual nature of the fruit metaphor, its deceptive image that can mask poisonous flesh. The tendency of apples to rot — and in the process to contaminate other apples near them — has inspired the equation of corrupted apples with women's untrustworthy sexual virtue, from Catullus

to Shakespeare and beyond (Palter 25). In contemporary culture, the apple taps into our fears for our own integrity, in Sceats' words, our "uncertainty about how much the self is influenced, changed, nourished or poisoned by what is taken in" (*Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* 1). Are we really what we eat? If we are, how should we respond to the smooth, juicy, fleshy lure of the apple, which we have been taught to equate with sin and punishment?

Not only in the Christian tradition, but also in its connection to virginity and marriage (*Atalanta*) and to everlasting bodily life (the *Edda*), the apple represents the sensual. For Adam and Eve it is disobedience made flesh, and propels them into sexuality as well as the mortal world of labour; in Giambattista Basile's seventeenth-century fairy tale 'The Serpent' this wily creature succeeds in winning a king's daughter by turning all the fruit in the royal orchard to gold, combining material and sexual lust (*Pentamerone* 169-176); and the Italian tale 'Pome and Peel' tells of two boys conceived by the eating of an apple, and who display a corresponding beauty — one "ruddy as an apple skin" (95), the other "white as apple pulp" (*ibid.*) — braving the curse of a wizard to kidnap his daughter for their pleasure (Calvino 95-8). The apple signifies the transgressive choice of the sensual over higher, rational joys. It also includes the punishment within itself, causing death, disease or magical afflictions such as the growth of horns (Aarne-Thompson 207).

A. S. Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession*, to which we shall return in the Glass chapter, uses the apple as an intricate metaphor for growth and temptation, focusing on the creation of a new life at the expense of the old. The plot alternates between the story of two Victorian poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, who begin a secret affair (Ash is married) that takes them first to Yorkshire and then LaMotte to Brittany, where she bears their child. The other narrative is set in the 1980s, where two academics, the beautiful Maud Bailey and the unassuming Roland Michell investigate the mystery of Ash and LaMotte's affair, eventually feeding on it to develop their own. The colour green makes a number of notable appearances

throughout the novel, in connection with Maud, Christabel and the glass that acts as the dominant metaphor for their beauty — and especially in moments of change, where the metaphors begin to shift. Green suggests nature, plant life and deep water; a lively colour. Maud makes her first appearance dressed in green, “a long pine-green tunic over a pine-green skirt . . . long shining green shoes” (38), Roland notices that she “smelled of something ferny” (39), and her bathroom is also predominantly green — “a chill green glassy place . . . huge dark green stoppered jars on water-green thick glass shelves” (56).

Byatt consistently describes her shades of green through natural similes — plants and water. It is this constantly refreshing wash of green that prevents Maud from seeming utterly cold and dead in the glass boxes that contain her like a contemporary Snow White, and intimates her potential for a more lively and dynamic kind of beauty. The Latin for ‘green’, *viridis*, is related to *ver*, meaning ‘spring’, as well as *virga*, or ‘green twig’ from which we derive *virgo* — virgin (Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* 89). Such etymologies suggest that the generation of life does not have to be segregated from virginity, and offer a precedent for Maud’s green chastity in which she is productive in an artistic sense. *Viridis* is, however, also related to *vir*, or ‘man’, from which we have ‘virile’ as well as ‘virtue’ (*ibid.*). The colour green always has an undertone of sexuality vital to its life-giving associations. Maud does not evade this.

The Brothers Grimm observe in their preface to volume II of the first edition of *Kinder und Hausmärchen* that “The epic basis of folk poetry resembles the color [sic] green as one finds it throughout nature in various shades: each satisfies and soothes without ever becoming tiresome” (Tatar, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* 409). It is a curious claim that folk poetry (in the work of the Grimms this is synonymous with folk and fairy tales) *resembles* the colour green, suggesting that green holds specific and obvious associations also present in fairy tales. This strangeness may, of course, be attributed to the difficulties of translation, but Byatt in her introduction to Tatar’s edition takes the statement at face value with the

explanation that the green of the forest was central to “German perception of German folklore” (xx). She refers to this in conjunction with Lüthi’s observation that the colour green “is almost never specifically mentioned in folktales” (*ibid.* xix), despite its significance: unlike the moral binary of white and black, the preciousness of gold and silver, the modest virtue of leaden grey and the red of blood, green seems to provide an unacknowledged background to fairy tales rather than symbolising a value. Although she does not offer any further analysis in this piece of writing, Byatt addresses the mysterious omission of green in *Possession*, adorning her female protagonists almost entirely in shades of green to highlight the natural quality of their beauty.

It should be noted that although green is rarely mentioned in fairy tales, it does appear in several folk legends that found their way into medieval and early modern literature. In Chaucer’s “The Squire’s Tale” and *Against Women Unconstant* green figures as a symbol of inconstancy; equally, the tempting Lady of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* wears a green girdle which she gives to Gawain, and the character of Lechery in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* wears “a greene gowne” (85; 1.4.25). This is in keeping with the association of sexuality with green, and Ferber speculates that the changing of the seasons, in which green develops through many shades before disappearing entirely, may also underlie the motif (90).

As well as Maud, Christabel LaMotte is also curiously green: as Ash watches her in the opposite corner of the train carriage as they travel to Yorkshire to consummate their affair, he studies “the pale loops of hair on her temples. Their sleek silver-gold seemed to him to have in it a tinge, a hint of greenness, not the copper-green of decay, but a pale sap-green of vegetable life” (277). A very clear distinction is made that, at this moment of sexual anticipation, Christabel is no longer enclosed in her glass coffin but is following in Eve’s forbidden footsteps and entering the world of sexual knowledge and danger. The sexual current that runs through so many appearances of the colour green illuminates the reproductive aspect of the life it signifies: Christabel bears a child, in solitude, in Brittany where she

has fled to distant relations for sanctuary. Green, the colour of life, is closely connected with apples, which may herald new life, but also punishment and death as they do for Eve and Snow White. *Possession* opens with apples, when Roland reads Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova* (1725) in an attempt to trace sources for the poet's presentation of Proserpine (a mythological representation of nature). Roland's note that "Ears of grain were called apples of gold" (4) in ancient mythology, refers succinctly to a large assortment of myths centred around golden or magical apples, as we have already seen.

Golden apples reappear towards the end of *Possession*, when Roland thinks back to his first impression of Maud as "the Princess on her glass hill" (424) a reference to a Norwegian version of the Atalanta myth, according to Byatt in *On Histories and Stories* (151). She writes that the independent solitude of the princess who sits at the top of a glass mountain, throwing golden apples from her lap down to her suitors, always attracted her (ibid.). Maud, who sits in the Women's Studies Resource Centre "on an apple-green chair" (306), looks down on Roland from the heights of her class, beauty and "international reputation" (424). She also entices him with clues to the Ash-LaMotte mystery, nuggets of personal information and the golden threads of her hair, which she keeps hidden under a scarf. She does not show any intention of being a temptress, but Byatt occasionally depicts Maud as a new Eve: she puts "a little fan of apple curves onto a paper plate and handed it to [Roland]" (270) as they picnic in a paradisal Yorkshire setting. This tableau, layered as it is with the ghostly images of Ash and LaMotte's love affair in the same location, and the older image of Eve offering the apple to Adam, is as rich a use of the fruit metaphor as Power's reimagining of D. G. Rossetti's *Proserpine*.

As with golden apples, it is the emphatically artistic, unnatural quality of these presentations of human beauty that makes them both compelling and slightly disturbing: Eliza is uncomfortable with Nicholas' portrayal of her, and Maud deliberately tries to avoid her beauty being pictured as a sexual enticement. Byatt describes Maud with "unpainted

lips" (39): however, it is not cosmetics but a different screen of illusion which animates the metaphor of beauty: Randolph Ash writes to his wife Ellen a piece of trivia, that "the old painters gave an ivory glow to a rich skin by painting on a *green* base — it is a paradox of optics, strange and delightful" (461 emphasis in text). The colour green and the life-generating sexuality associated with apples is the base on which Christabel and Maud are painted, and it is through the metaphors arising from these that they come alive, in a self-contained solitude that for the emancipated Maud at least, can be refreshed and refashioned to forge connections with others. Their green liveliness accentuates the cold beauty that sets Christabel and Maud apart: observed as they are by their admirers, we see them through Roland's and Ash's eyes in tableaux, such as Christabel in the railway carriage or waiting for Ash in bed where her hair in the candlelight catches "a hint, there it was, of green again" (283), or Maud offering a fan of apple slices to Roland, who tells her at the end, "When I see you, you look *alive* and everything else — fades" (506 emphasis in text). It is the underlying tint of green that suggests that Maud and Christabel are not merely pictures of beauty, static and untouchable in the seclusion of their glass coffins, but have the potential for human connection. Yet it is also this greenness that *makes* them irrevocably pictures of beauty, ensuring that their animation is founded purely on illusion.

When Roland finally, at the close of *Possession*, attains the unattainable Maud and "to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness" (507), her beauty, which is painted on the base of her untouchability, is destroyed and a new metaphor grows from its remains. The novel ends with "the smell of the aftermath" (ibid.), in which Byatt foregrounds the illusion of life which will underlies the new metaphor as well as the old: it is "a green smell . . . which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples" (ibid.). Maud's beauty has been 'bitten' into and must be painted new, a picture *in potentia* that gives her room to manoeuvre within it, but which nevertheless seems — only *seems* — alive.

### **“White with Rosy Cheeks”**

Byatt's cannibalisation of old metaphors of beauty, reworked into a contemporary alternative, is essentially similar to Power's. Both are centred around the transformation of flesh into art, where a metaphor such as fruit or glass turns human flesh into a particular expression of beauty and draws in a corresponding range of associations. In *Goblin Fruit* beauty is temptation, woven into a complex web in which those who lure are themselves lured, and those who feed on others are fed on in turn, echoing the cycles of growth and decay in plants. We are first introduced to Fanny as a more knowing version of Rossetti's Laura, enticed by the mysterious male world from which she is prohibited. Viewed by the painter Edmund Le May through the glass of the milliner's shop where she works, the lively Fanny uses her “bright yellow hair” (3) and “peony blue eyes” (*ibid.*) to establish a much more lucrative position as his model and mistress. Fanny's “vivacious looks” (6) form a contrast to her friend Ida, “wraith-like” (*ibid.*) and “Straight as a wand” (*ibid.*) with ankle-length “outrageous red hair” (*ibid.*) and “deathly white” skin (*ibid.*).

Chaste as Lizzie in *Goblin Market* but not nearly as pragmatic, Ida is initially horrified by Fanny's new profession: “To have her image caught on canvas. To her it smacked of necromancy, a loss of herself” (11). However, here the casting of Fanny as Rossetti's Laura and Ida as Lizzie begins to break down. Ida has no desire for fleshly pleasures but she becomes addicted to the role of muse, unable to resist the goblin-like figure of Nicholas as Rossetti's heroine Lizzie does. Equally, the dark and reserved artist Nicholas is enthralled by Ida and she comes to crave his attention, “That his soul banquet upon hers” (24).

Power diverges from the framework of *Goblin Market* to shift perspective, examining the more sinister aspects of the Lizzie and Laura characters. Like Byatt in the later *Possession*, Power uses the extensive dialogue and description of the novel form to flesh out her fairy-tale characters from the “depthless” (78) figures that Lüthi describes into

psychologically complex people. So Ida's chastity comes to seem self-absorbed and barren, and Eleanor's virginal doll-like perfection becomes vacuous, especially in the very short section she narrates: "I sit in the drawing room and rearrange it in my mind's eye but I cannot yet quite decide upon the perfect decor. It is delicious though to sit and plot like a queen in her castle" (69). She cannot achieve Lizzie's wholesome strength, and Eliza — often called Lizzie by Eleanor — may have strength but not the selflessness of Rossetti's heroine, instead taking her sensual joys from Eleanor's husband and ultimately manipulating him into love on her terms. Power's novels implies that Lizzie in *Goblin Market* presents an impossible standard, and Laura a simplistic warning since sensuality can be nourishing as well as destructive.

Nicholas sees Ida as dangerous and magical, a siren who tempts mortals to their death with her "terrible beauty" (76). Although he exalts his desire into artistic inspiration, drawing "repeated haunted images of her face, her form" (15), Nicholas' ecstasy can be identified with the Christian concept of ensnarement by the flesh. St Augustine, in his *Confessions of a Sinner* (394 AD), describes a very similar experience: "Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart" (13; bk. II ch. 4). For Augustine, human beauty is a perilous imitation of the real thing which is God's beauty, conceptually related to Plato's eternal and abstract Form of Beauty. Nicholas' obsessive rendering of Ida's image is a spiritual capitulation to lust, and his awareness of the danger is evident in his depiction of her as "a livid corpse [who] drank rapturously of the lifeblood of her lovers" (15).

Eating and drinking is a pervasive metaphor in many treatments of lust, particularly religious, so influential that in early Christian works fasting is seen as "the only method for the suppression of the natural sexual urges of the body" (Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting* 192). Augustine provides an especially illuminating example through his consistent use of food or hunger as a metaphor. Prefiguring Nicholas' doomed rapture, he continues in his *Confessions*, "I defied you [God] even

so far as to relish the thought of lust, and gratify it too . . . For such a deed I deserved to pluck the fruit of death" (18; bk. III ch. 3). The danger of the sensual, for both Power and Augustine, is that the individual who hopes to attain it is inevitably consumed by their own desire: they decay as their obsession grows.

Ida's dead-white skin and red hair are as deceptive as the apple, "white with rosy cheeks" (*Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. Tatar 251), with which Snow White's stepmother attempts to kill her. Indeed, it is not always wise to trust the flawless appearance of a fruit: although many fruits have beneficial "antioxidant and free-radical scavenging properties" (Barberán and Robins, *Phytochemistry of Fruit and Vegetables* 2), one cannot always be sure that wild fruits do not have "toxic effects" (*ibid.*). Although Nicholas senses the peril in Ida's flesh, he relishes it as a piquant side-dish — until he begins to feel its poisonous effects. Ida may seem to take nothing from him, but as she becomes dependent on his obsession for her own continuance, having given herself to his canvases, she begins to feed on him as well.

Meeting Fanny and Edmund for dinner, Ida's need is first presented as corporeal: "Ida's lack of undergarments began to try her sorely; her flesh was starved" (24), but the connection to Nicholas soon becomes evident. She feels threatened by Fanny's overtly fleshy, ripe-peach beauty that "flagrantly asserted the voluptuary of female flesh" (*ibid.*), resenting "the fondling look that [Nicholas] cast at warm, blonde Fanny. It was as though his soul slavered" (*ibid.*). Buttoned up to her neck in an unfashionable black dress, Ida's prudery holds her back from her desires, her lack of undergarments not a provocative gesture but a mortification of her flesh. And yet she still sees herself as ripe for eating — flesh and soul are not clearly distinguished from each other, as Ida presents her flesh to tempt Nicholas away from Fanny, but it is not her flesh that she is offering:

Ida tossed back her loose downfall of red hair and her white throat was exposed. Columnar. Gleaming. Her soul craved his addiction.

That his soul banquet upon hers. The poisonous succubus of his tongue lap her thin blood, eat of her and envenom her soul making her his creature; drained, and replete with his bitter juices. (24)

Ida displays her throat as a column in direct defiance of Fanny's organic, fruity charms, casting herself as a flawless, mineral alternative; immortal but "exposed" (ibid.), vulnerable to him. She offers her flesh as a metaphor for their spiritual communion, feeding on each other's obsessions with her image in the centre, mediating. Power makes clear that Ida and Nicholas never have sex, but in Augustine's terms their banqueting of souls makes them as guilty of the sins of lust and gluttony as if it were flesh. In *City of God* (413-18 AD) Augustine observes that St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians includes among the "works of the flesh" (*City of God* 549) not only the obvious "fornication, impurity, lust, drunkenness" (ibid.) but also sins "which show faults of the mind . . . sorcery, enmity, quarrelsomeness, jealousy" (ibid.). Augustine is not a straightforward dualist: while the body and soul are distinct entities, he reads 'flesh' as it is used in the Bible as often denoting "man himself, that is, the essential nature of man", and not merely his body (548). The hunger Ida feels is not literally for Nicholas' tongue to "lap her thin blood" (24), but the necessity for a corporeal metaphor for this hunger reveals its blind, animal nature. Augustine explains that living by the rule of flesh means "living by the rule of self" (552). Ida has lost her self to Nicholas' canvas, as she feared, and it is only through his feeding on her image that she can steal a taste of what she has lost, now sublimated into art. It is for this that she hungers.

A woman is also torn out from her shelter in an artistic image in the Italian tale 'Apple Girl', collected by Italo Calvino in *Italian Folktales* (1956). Here, the comparison between an apple and a woman is taken further, and the princess and the apple are one. When a queen gives birth to a lovely apple, it soon catches the eye of a king who lives conveniently over the road. At first he only sees "a beautiful maiden as fair and rosy as an apple" (308), but "the minute the girl realized she was being observed,

she ran back to the tray and disappeared inside the apple" (ibid.). She does not speak, and emerges only to bathe and comb her golden hair while the king "looked on" (ibid.). She is cloistered inside the image of her own beauty — which is emphatically separated from her actual, beautiful flesh — as surely as Ida.

The Apple Girl is eventually forced out of her seclusion in an especially brutal manner, when the king's jealous stepmother stabs the apple repeatedly with a dagger, so that "Out of every wound flowed a rivulet of blood" (309): clearly the apple and the girl are intrinsically conflated, and the apple is not merely a container but a part of her. This is borne out by her emergence, after the ministrations of a fairy, covered "in bandages and plaster casts" (ibid.), at which moment she proclaims herself disenchanted from the spell and offers herself as bride to the king. This is strikingly similar to Ida's offering of herself to Nicholas in an attempt to preserve his obsessive imaging of her: when the Apple Girl's metaphor is broken open, she resorts to directly proffering herself. It is not only the observer who feeds on an image of beauty, but the beauty herself relies upon it for her continuing existence.

When Nicholas seeks solace from Ida's intensity in Fanny's abundant flesh, Ida takes revenge through her own body, his obsession. Having refused to eat during his absence of three days, he finds her "starved flesh like ice to his touch" (31): Ida is again using her flesh as a metaphor for her soul. She accuses him of having "ravaged her soul, infected her with his daemonic possession" (ibid.), and the fact that she is also "sodden with laudanum" (ibid.) adds another layer to the metaphor, as she fills her body with a bewitching poison that resembles the one already addling her soul, and that of Nicholas. Ida is true to her poisonous apple image, this new, physical addiction bringing her deathlike appearance — shown in Nicholas' portraits of her as the "beautiful Lady of Death" and the Lady of Shalott — into reality upon her body (26).

Ida withdraws first into "bleak, impenetrable silences locked up alone in her bedchamber" (33) and eventually "closed up into her desolate

self" (34). Though laudanum and malnutrition devastate her body, it seems that her flesh nevertheless lasts longer than her soul. Seeing her soul spread around her on the canvases that cover the wall, Ida finds herself "created anew by his inspiration" (*ibid.*), yet "bereft" (*ibid.*) of this fragmented self. Augustine argues that the soul can die, even while the body persists, "when God abandons it" (*City of God* 510), which will only happen when the soul abandons God. Wrapped entirely in her narcissistic obsession with Nicholas' image of her, Ida has clearly forgotten God, looking for her lost soul: "She was haunted by the self that was not herself and in her distress she had all his portraits of her turned to the wall and the only image she would allow herself to gaze upon was that of the spectre in the looking glass" (34). It is significant that Ida has become a 'spectre', a word that is repeated in this passage. She is now depicted as dead in life as well as in her portraits, yet still very much an image — 'spectre' comes from the Latin 'spectrum' meaning to look or see (*OED*). We do not need Augustine to tell us that it is futile to look for one's soul in the reflection of a spectre: an image of an image of the dead.

While Ida is almost exclusively visual — she hardly speaks or eats, and is never touched — Fanny caters to all the senses. Rather than finding her soul impoverished by modelling, Fanny is "making lots of tin" (25) and already looking around for "a comfortable berth" (26) to settle in once her looks have gone, since with her love of all sensual pleasures she knows she will "soon run to fat" (*ibid.*). Fanny's soul, in fact, is never once mentioned, whereas Ida's is discussed in almost all of her scenes. In Augustine's framework, Fanny's soul is conflated with her body, identifying her as one of the "ungodly" (*City of God* 511), who exist "not in the life of their souls but of their bodies" (*ibid.*). This is why Nicholas comes to Fanny as an escape from the constant haunting of Ida's soul: Fanny is encapsulated by her flesh, never being described in any other terms.

Nicholas visits Fanny in the early morning when she is only half-dressed and their mutual desire is unspoken, proceeding purely through body language. Once the conversation has "guttered" (29), Fanny kneels

“in a voluptuous attitude” (ibid.) with the “pretext” (ibid.) of stirring the fire. There follows a dialogue of the senses, in which they both “quaff” (ibid.) wine and the scent of Fanny’s hair oil reaches Nicholas “co-mingled with the heat and the aroma of wine” (ibid.). In answer, Nicholas kneels behind her, “burrowing his mouth in her plump shoulders” (ibid.): finally, though she “uttered no sound, yet her body unmistakably acquiesced to his foraging fingers” (30). Unlike Ida’s icy flesh, Fanny’s is “warm, very warm” (ibid.), inviting him to feed upon her physically, rather than the poisoned and unsatisfying draughts that his soul draws from Ida’s.

Once again, eating symbolises the surrender to temptation, as it does in Genesis and Augustine. To Fanny’s surprise, Nicholas does not simply “mount her” (30) and expend his animal passions. Instead, he begins “lapping” (ibid.) at her “mount of venus” (ibid.), the term ‘lapping’ evoking animals drinking water but also refers back to Ida’s desire for him to “lap her thin blood” (24) in a metaphorical reference to her soul. Nicholas, it seems, is helplessly governed by animal urges, and in this case Augustine’s extension of ‘flesh’ to include sins of the mind (or soul) that are equally self-directed, illuminates Nicholas’ desire for both Ida and Fanny as aspects of a single urge: to devour. The two women in fact share the need to be devoured. Ida craves that he “eat of her” (24) and Fanny finds, as he “gnawed at her relentlessly until she was almost frightened [that] she ached with a desire she had not previously experienced” (30). Dark and “dwarfed” (13), with a “mocking, sensuous mouth” (ibid.), Nicholas is presented throughout the novel as one of the “malicious goblin” men (*Goblin Fruit* 41) who tramp down the glen in Rossetti’s poem. But although all four of the women in the novel — Eleanor and Eliza too in the second part — are drawn by the goblin’s “evil gifts” (*Goblin Market* 15), Power does not have them sink their teeth into Nicholas’ fruits: he eats of them.

Rossetti’s Laura, of course, also finds herself consumed, by longing for the fruits she once tasted, wasting away in punishment for her sin. Power draws out the ambiguities in this presentation of devourment,

“earliest and most archaic of fears” (*The Bloody Chamber* 168) as Angela Carter puts it in her short story “The Tiger’s Bride”, with *Goblin Fruit* portraying devourment instead as a dangerous but desirable communion in which the self is exchanged for sensual experience. This is an extension of Laura paying for her goblin fruit with a “precious golden lock” of hair (*Goblin Market* 19), the movement towards the “Wholly Other” (Lüthi 5) at the cost of oneself that is the start of so many fairy tales.

This movement is often also toward the forbidden, straying from the forest path or speaking to “goblin men” (*Goblin Market* 12). Power’s novel opens with the explicit prohibition of the young milliners to talk to the men that loiter outside the shop. In the face of Ida’s hysterical possessiveness, Nicholas and Fanny “quaff” (29) the forbidden fruits of sensual passion: he deliberately chooses the delights of sin when he “coolly, slowly” (31) turns Fanny over to “practise sodomy upon her plump, unavailing buttocks” (*ibid.*), an illegal act in the Victorian era. In his *Confessions*, Augustine addresses the enjoyment of sin in a story about stealing pears. As a youth, he and a “band of ruffians” (15; bk. II ch. 4) pilfer a large quantity of pears that are “attractive neither to look at nor to taste” (*ibid.*), without even the intention of eating them: they cast the pears before swine. As it is for the characters in *Goblin Fruit*, the taste of forbidden fruit becomes metaphorical, and in the pears Augustine tastes “nothing . . . but my own sin, which I relished and enjoyed” (15-16). In fact, the word ‘fruit’ derives from the Latin ‘fructus’, meaning ‘to enjoy’, making fruit a natural choice of metaphor for pleasure (*OED*).

In the Christian tradition — this particular aspect of it being significantly influenced by Augustine — sensual enjoyment is one of the gravest sins, as it is a deceptive distraction from the only true enjoyment, that of God, who is for Augustine “the food of the soul” (17; bk. III ch. 1). He also paints sensual pleasure as highly addictive, finding like Rossetti’s Laura that one taste of earthly “pleasure, beauty and truth” (11; bk. I ch. 20) leads him into a constant and desperate search for more, ending in “pain, confusion, and error” (*ibid.*) because he should have looked for these things

in God. Beverley Clack is correct in emphasising that the crux of Augustine's thought is "less a hatred of pleasure, and more a desire to avoid the loss (and resulting pain) of valuing temporal, sensual things" (*Sex and Death* 21).

In her short story "The First Time" (*The Mermaids in the Basement* 1993), Marina Warner appears to redeem the Devil in an adaptation of the theme of decay nourishing new life. Here, pain is converted into pleasure as "the serpent" (85), disguised as "Lola — Trainee Customer Service Assistant" (*ibid.*) on a supermarket's tropical fruit stand, tempts a "hard green bright slip of a girl" (86) out of the pain of being discarded by her schoolboy lover and on to "my famous primrose path" (96) of pleasure. The method of temptation is, of course, fruit. Replacing the traditional apple are "tamarillo here, it's full of rich pulp under the tight shiny skin . . . There's pitahaya for you too — firm as a pear and slightly perfumed, like rose petals" (91-3) and many more, reminiscent of Fanny's cornucopia of fruity beauty in *Goblin Fruit*. In a typical late-twentieth-century technique, Warner engages directly with traditional motifs and ideas while subverting their moral and social associations. However, the hint of a satirical undercurrent resists a single interpretation. As in *Goblin Fruit*, luxury, pleasure and voluptuousness are celebrated, with pain and consequence acknowledged as a necessary side-dish. The quest seems to be for a pleasure that escapes being overwhelmed by despair and decay, and in Warner's story it appears that now this is — almost — possible.

It was not, however, conceivable for Augustine, for whom every pleasure was paid for with a thousand agonies, in life and afterwards. Augustine is notably concerned with beauty as pleasure and temptation throughout the *Confessions*, and in the story of the pears his ambivalence regarding it comes to the fore. Having initially claimed that the pears were unattractive, he then appears to contradict this statement, writing that "It is true that the pears which we stole had beauty, because they were created by you, the good God" (15; bk. II ch. 6). Theirs is not an earthly beauty, as is Fanny's warm plumpness, and so their mode of temptation is not exactly

equivalent to her flesh: the pears are symbolic, not evil in themselves (an innocent creation of a good God) but for precisely that reason they represent sin to the thief. In defiling something that is beautiful in essence, feeding it to the pigs, the sinner has stolen from God and feeds on the triumph of his own self-sufficiency. This explains why Augustine speaks of tasting the pears when he originally claims not to have eaten any, or at least not that he remembers. Later he offers a mere “*If* any part of one of those pears passed my lips” (15-16 my emphasis), but this hesitation actually betrays the necessity for stressing non-literal consumption, because it is central to the purpose of his story that he has metaphorically tasted the pears, to relish “the sin that gave it flavour” (ibid.).

Denise Gigante observes (in a discussion of Milton) that a Latin verb for ‘taste’, *sapere*, also means ‘to know’ (*Taste: A Literary History* 23). It is as true for Augustine as for Milton that “to partake of God is to know God, and thereby to know oneself” (ibid.). Language here offers Augustine a direct metaphorical transition from sensual taste to religious understanding. Augustine’s philosophy is characterised by a conflation of the physical and the abstract even while establishing them as opposing poles. Food in his works serves as a metaphor both for sin and for the rightful knowledge of God, rendering it an ambiguous mediator between virtue and vice. Later philosophers such as Kant address this consistent conflation of concrete and abstract by aggressively imposing a separation on them: there are no anecdotal fruit metaphors in Kant’s *Critiques*.

Instead, genuine beauty for Kant is distinguished as an abstract quality by the requirement that it be separated from base (and physical) interests. Such an interest is always linked to “the faculty of desire” (*Critique of Judgement* 36; bk. 1 sec. 2) through the “delight which we connect with the representation of the existence of an object” (ibid.). Therefore, any enjoyment of beauty which has an interest in the actual existence of the beautiful object (or its image) is impure, and a sensual experience rather than a true judgement of beauty. In a genuine judgement of beauty, it simply would not matter whether the represented object exists

or not, since only its beauty is appreciated. By establishing his definition of beauty in this way, Kant categorically separates any physical aspect or appreciation of beauty from the real quality of beauty, which is made necessarily abstract.

However, imposing such a rigid conceptual separation between beauty and the beautiful object (or person), Kant's philosophical framework is unable to engage with the ambiguities of human beauty, situated as it often is in both the flesh and the abstract. *Goblin Fruit* presents a portrait of the entanglements created by the different modes of appreciating human beauty, and it is Augustine's story of the pears that offers some illumination of the problem. Having converted God's beauty as it was manifested in the pears to his own sinful enjoyment, Augustine writes, "I had no beauty because it was a robbery" (15). The phrase seems slightly odd, a lack of beauty not quite logically following from the act of robbery, but because the pears are explicitly a symbol of God's beauty — emphatically not earthly beauty — it is precisely beauty which he has stolen and then thrown to the pigs. Fruit serves as a multi-faceted metaphor representing both sensual enjoyment in its sweet flesh, and the purity of divine beauty in the beneficence of its creation: clearly what is *done* with it makes all the difference.

This is precisely the case in *Goblin Fruit*. Ida and Fanny are both beautiful, though in dramatically opposing ways, and Nicholas enjoys their beauty in opposite ways which make all the difference to how it affects them. Fanny is a straightforward physical beauty, all glowing flesh and acquiescent sexuality, and it is in these terms that Nicholas enjoys her: Fanny's soul does not make an appearance in the novel because her beauty and her actions have nothing to do with it. She is a popular model and companion because she causes "no complications, no scenes" (23), being entirely "content to act upon the male senses like a full-bodied red wine" (24). As such, Nicholas enjoys the taste of his sin in her "juices" (*ibid.*), but she is in a sense as innocent as Augustine's pears, merely one of God's beautiful creations, and is fortunate not to be thrown to

the pigs. Ida's beauty, on the contrary, is never portrayed as pure or wholesome.

Although Fanny may be the fleshly beauty, Ida is in fact the poisonous enticement that lures Nicholas' soul into its all-consuming nightmare. Ida, therefore, is the earthly snare who truly tempts Nicholas on to the path of godlessness. Fanny is only forbidden to Nicholas because Ida demands the whole of him, which suggests that committing the sin of lust with Fanny is a relatively simple, minor misdemeanour in contrast with the selling of his soul to Ida in exchange for some paintings. But, as a "dark hobgoblin" (27) he not only gives himself to her, he feeds compulsively at the "corpse-like flesh" (ibid.) which has "bewitched" him (ibid.). However, unlike with Fanny his feeding is not literal and physical. Just as Augustine imbibes only the metaphorical savour of sin from his pears, Nicholas feeds purely on Ida's image in an unholy communion, with her multiplied face "pressed like so many disembodied wafers, to be quaffed with bitter wine" (ibid.). Paradoxically, the more he feeds, the more her image "consumed him utterly" (19), and in his addiction he feels "his flesh eaten out with the desire to attain that image within himself" (20). While Nicholas only briefly gives over his senses to Fanny, he destroys Ida completely and luxuriates in both the sin and the punishment it entails.

### **"Comfort me with apples, for I am sick with love"**

Sin is never treated straightforwardly in *Goblin Fruit*. The decline and death of Ida is good for Nicholas, relieving him of the financial and emotional burden she had become and thrusting him into commercial success as he becomes an eminent portrait painter. But the cycle begins again: in Book II, Nicholas becomes enamoured of the sixteen-year-old Eleanor, a naïve version of Fanny with her blonde hair, "ruby" lips (40) and eyes of "blue limpidity" (ibid.). The nature of his attachment is, however, hidden from us since this part of the novel is narrated in the first person by Eliza, Eleanor's spinster cousin, and is addressed to Nicholas. She

observes, for instance, that while painting Eleanor “You were nervous, with tremulous hands” (*ibid.*), but can only guess the reason; “distaste or possibly exasperation” (*ibid.*). After Ida’s death, Nicholas’ soul is closed to the other characters and to the reader, and appropriately he now paints in a “glass-house” (39) reminiscent of the fairy-tale glass castle or coffin in which life and warmth are frozen in an inaccessible stasis.

Even when he has married Eleanor, who insists on Eliza continuing as her companion, Nicholas remains distant from his wife and it is this that sends her into a decline of depression leading ultimately to death. Appropriately, she dies of consumption, devoured by Nicholas like Ida. To break her down through remoteness, always withdrawing to his glass-house, may appear in direct contrast to his smothering destruction of Ida, but it must be noted that it is only when Nicholas’ attention wavers from her that Ida is consumed by jealousy, and this is what develops into hysteria and addiction. Having given his lovers a taste of goblin fruit, it is the withdrawal that starves them to death, as Laura discovers in *Goblin Market* when she no longer hears “That goblin cry” (27-8) and her golden hair turns “thin and grey” (*ibid.*). Elusive love such as Nicholas’ has been represented by fruit — apples in particular — since the Ancient Greeks, with Sappho comparing an unattainable young woman to “the sweet apple that reddens on the topmost bough” (141; 105a, trans. Barbara Hughes Fowler). The myth of Tantalus, whose punishment from the Gods is a tree dripping with ripe fruit forever just out of his reach, also provides a vivid source for works such as Rossetti’s and Power’s.

Equally, the biblical Song of Songs explores the complexities of this metaphor through a focus on the difficult distinction between the flesh and the soul, offering illumination of this problem as it appears in *Goblin Fruit*. Nicholas gives his lovers a taste of “the fruits of his love” (51) and then withdraws, ensuring their lasting devotion as they pursue their lost joy. The bride figure in the Song of Songs (usually read as the Church, married to God, but this tends to be a restrictive interpretation) likewise finds exquisite pleasure in her beloved, only to be deprived of him, consistently expressing

her joy in terms of fruit: “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste” (King James Bible 761).

The *Song of Songs* is notoriously difficult to interpret, since reconciling its obviously erotic nature with ascetic Christian values incurs all manner of contradictions. Great assistance is provided by the *Glossa Ordinaria*, a collaborative collection of Biblical interpretations that (for this book of the Bible) dates in its present form to 1480/1, though most of its explanations come from a range of contributors from the Venerable Bede in the seventh century to twelfth-century religious scholars in northern France (Dove, *The Glossa Ordinaria on the Song of Songs* x). Several readings of the comparison of the beloved to an apple tree are offered, all of which turn on the distinction between flesh and soul to negotiate the problematic implication that sexual love is a healthy and virtuous balm for spirit and body: “comfort me with apples: for I am sick with love” (761). Such a literal interpretation would have Augustine screaming that sexual desire is “wild” (*Confessions* 12; bk. II ch. 1) and “rank” (*ibid.*), rendering the sinner “foul to the core” (*ibid.*). But since he also speaks of God as food for the soul, something to be enjoyed, it seems perfectly possible that the *Song of Songs* can be read metaphorically and fitted acceptably into his framework.

The shade of the apple tree provides “rest” (*Glossa Ordinaria* 37-8) and the fruit “refreshment” (*ibid.*) clearly enough, but the *Glossa Ordinaria* extends the physical meaning to include a spiritual one. The apple tree provides rest from “persecutions” (*ibid.*) according to one reading, and from “carnal desires” (*ibid.*) according to another. In Augustine’s terms, this would cast the apple-tree beloved as a divine love, perhaps representing Christ (if anachronism is permitted, since the *Song of Songs* is in the Old Testament) as a physical manifestation of God, giving shelter from the “pain, confusion, and error” (*Confessions* 11; bk. I ch. 20) generated by the search for fulfilment in earthly things. However, rest from carnal desires, and indeed from persecutions in general, can also be found in the satisfaction of sexual love, so the surface of the metaphor is not disrupted.

As long as sexuality remains on the surface, the metaphorical vehicle rather than literal meaning, the theological aspect is not compromised either. God comforts and satisfies *like* sexual gratification, but far more purely and completely.

Nicholas in *Goblin Fruit* offers something other than simple sexual pleasure too, even for Fanny with whom his connection is primarily sexual. All four of Nicholas' women are sketched or painted by him at some point, and it is this transcendence of their flesh into art, the fruitful mingling of their soul with his, that has them literally dying for more. Such an experience is not unlike the “sober intoxication of your wine” (*Confessions* 44-5; bk. V ch. 13) that Augustine enjoys in the contemplation of God. The *Glossa Ordinaria* explains that the apple in the Song of Songs is “sweet” (39) because in the fruit “the soul understands the source of life, while she also perceives it bodily” (ibid.). But this all-encompassing joy is fleeting, as Augustine often laments in the *City of God*, and the individual must continually work to regain it. In the opening of Chapter 3 of the Song of Songs the bride complains that “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not” (761). The setting of this scene in her bed appears superficially to be another sexual reference, perhaps alluding to her failure to attain the pleasures she has tasted earlier. However, she repeats that she sought *him*, not the pleasure he brings, and so it must be concluded that she is in bed alone. How then can she be searching for him, if she is lying in bed? Her search must be spiritual, an attempt to recover from within herself the reconciliation of soul and flesh in a divine joy that suffuses both together. But in her failure, she rises and goes “about the city in the streets” (ibid.) to search, still fruitlessly, as Augustine does in his youthful quest for “pleasure, beauty, and truth” (*Confessions* 11; bk. I ch. 20). Only when she has “passed from [earthly distractions]” (761), does the bride again find her love.

In Bede’s preface to the *Glossa Ordinaria* he asserts that “the bridegroom in this temporal world afflicts the bride with frequent tribulations, by means of which she may attain to the everlasting realm in a

state of greater purity” (1). Nicholas similarly generates an affliction of longing in his lovers that only he can satisfy, and only if they rearrange their flesh and soul into precisely the right configuration to inspire him. His is clearly a more selfish version of the education and refinement of the bride in the Song of Songs, and Power implies that in these complex later times one must take responsibility for the improvement of one’s soul. Eliza recognises the snare she has fallen into during their affair and turns Nicholas’ strategy of saturation and withdrawal back upon him. Committed to the higher concern of her work — writing about the “plight of slop workers and other victims of the sweated workshop” (94) — she uses the tribulations of her love for Nicholas to fortify her soul against his lures, gaining the independence to search for a more wholesome satisfaction. Augustine would approve.

### **Decline and Fall**

The fruits of many plants are internally fed by nutrients produced by the decay of other parts of the plant, often the leaves (Hopkins et al 203). Ida and Eleanor, as they decline, both lose the colour of their complexions and wither like leaves in autumn. The loss of leaf chlorophyll, which gives leaves their colour, “reflecting molecular degradation . . . is widely accepted as being one of the earliest indices of the onset of leaf senescence” (*ibid.*). The loss of colour is clearly not just a poetic touch but the beginning of an irrevocable natural cycle. It is no accident that Rossetti’s fairy tale poem taps into the cycle of the seasons to depict young girls withering into premature old age and death: the inescapable approach of decay is one of the aspects of human existence that we find hardest to face, and fairy tales offer us their image sweetened with the “otherworldly” (Lüthi 77) and with everything “in order” (*ibid.* 88). Novels such as *Goblin Fruit* take these cycles and extend them into the smallest details of language and metaphor, exploring various ways of understanding our inextricable binding to the workings of the world.

One of the most widespread and enduring fairy-tale plots involves three siblings with a task before them: the eldest two fail, leaving the youngest to ascend to victory and prosperity. On a more violent note, two rivals often have to fight it out for survival — Snow White and her stepmother or Cinderella and her stepsisters provide good examples. Equally, if three plum trees are planted very close to one another two of them will probably fail so that one flourishes (Brantley 8). Even within the one thriving plum tree the process is echoed, as the dying leaves feed the growing seeds, nestled inside the fruit. In the narrative of *Goblin Fruit*, too, the decline, defeat or death of an ancillary element “translocates” (Hopkins et al 202) nourishment to the story’s “developing seed” (*ibid.*), the one element that will bear fruit.

Throughout *Goblin Fruit* Nicholas appears to be the beneficiary of his lovers’ declines, taking and fruitfully multiplying their images while the original gradually decays. However, in a characteristic move for a novel of this period, a spirited woman succeeds in manipulating the cycle, forging a place in it for herself as artist — Maud does the same in *Possession*, and we will see Margaret Drabble’s Ailsa achieve this in *The Sea Lady* in the next chapter. *Goblin Fruit*, however, is unusual in implying that such prosperity can only be bought at the expense of others, but it is an honest suggestion borne out by the fruit metaphor which lies at its centre. At first, Eleanor is as perfectly chaste and composed as a “wax doll” (40), presented by Power in a still life with an “epergne . . . of crystallized fruits” (43) which “remained intact, unplundered” (*ibid.*). Displaying the same blonde prettiness as Fanny, but transcending the flesh in her quiet virginity, Eleanor seems a perfect model for Nicholas, traversing the gap between real and ideal.

The domestic containment of fruit as a symbol of feminine beauty also occurs in Alice Thomas Ellis’ novel *The Other Side of the Fire* (1983), which opens with the shattering of Mrs Bohannon’s homely happiness when she suddenly falls in love, which happens, significantly, “in a garden, as these things will” (7). Ellis tells us, with quiet contempt in her use of

capitalisation, that “For fifteen years she had accepted, had taken pleasure in, the role of the English Housewife” (8), and that Mrs Bohannon “had particularly liked . . . the pantry with its rows of shelves holding jars of jam and bottled fruit” (*ibid.*). Shephard explains that to preserve fruit it must be weighed down with “heavy solutions of honey, sugar, alcohol or vinegar” (*Pickled, Potted and Canned* 188), completely changing its inherent nature. Mrs Bohannon’s frankly acknowledged beauty has been, like the fruit, preserved and neatly shelved; unlike, for instance, a growing apple tree which, according to Toussaint-Samat, is “naturally adulterous” (623) since it will not bear fruit unless it is “fertilized with the pollen of another variety by birds or insects” (*ibid.*). When Mrs Bohannon transgresses the taboos on age and incest by falling in love with her stepson, she can find no pleasure in bottled fruit but reverts to the uncontained state of the live apple tree. Such images of bottled fruit and Power’s *epergne* of crystallised fruit are only appropriate to chastity, and cease to function when that is lost.

Soon after Nicholas has painted Eleanor’s “white and flaxen” image (40), she begins to be described in similar terms to Ida, first “feverishly acknowledging” (44) the admiration of her portrait and then, in the “yellow glare” (45) of the drawing room the “pallor of her skin seemed waxen, like the starved flesh of a corpse” (*ibid.*). She then falls ill, in a sequence which parallels *Goblin Market* more closely than any other in the novel. The “malignant sore throat” (46) that torments her can only be appeased by “red-fleshed melon” (*ibid.*) from the fruit basket sent to her by Nicholas, and which she calls for “like one bewitched” (*ibid.*). Ida’s “starved flesh” (31) is further echoed by Eleanor’s “parched throat” (46) and “scorched lips” (*ibid.*), all craving Nicholas’ goblin fruits.

Anne Enright’s 2002 historical novel *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* includes a chapter titled ‘A Melon’. The prostitute Eliza Lynch, carrying the child of the heir to Paraguay, sails down the Paraná River towards her lover’s country and dreams of melon (38). Overwhelmed by the rampant growth of South America and of her own body, she decides that “perhaps it

is melon that I need. I think about melon, am smitten by melon. I bite into the golden flesh and feel the seeds slither in their luscious frill. Is there anywhere in this godforsaken place where a melon might be bought or got?" (ibid.). Pining like Rossetti's Laura, in this image Eliza Lynch has unwittingly set the standard for her own beauty, which will be craved, dreamed of and found overwhelming by all the inhabitants of Paraguay.

Unlike Eleanor, however, Eliza Lynch takes firm possession of the artistic image of herself as a ripe and gorgeous fruit that is soon established in her new country, and exploits it so that her observers are the ones craving, not she: "Eliza was, in all the mud-coloured world, the most beautiful thing. And they ate her with their eyes" (135). But this eating remains metaphorical — only her lover, the heir and later ruler of Paraguay, actually enjoys her flesh. Eleanor, on the other hand, allows her image to be utterly consumed by Nicholas, and makes the same mistake as Ida of conflating her image with herself, and so letting him devour that too.

Even having recovered from her fever, nibbling "daintily at apples and peaches" (48), Eleanor's appetite remains sickly until her death. Like Ida's wilful rejection of food, it metaphorically demonstrates the hunger that only Nicholas' mysterious attentions can satisfy. However, this aspect of the metaphor reveals a connection between craving for Nicholas and craving for death, forging the link between decay and nourishment that also occurs in the botanical world. As parts of a plant senesce, the free fatty acids that act as food for cells are sequestered in "a structurally inert form" (Hopkins et al 203) and finally rejected from that part of the plant "as voided particles" (ibid.). In plants as well as delicate Victorian beauties the onset of death is signalled by the rejection of food. Eleanor lies "white and passive" (48) giving Eliza the impression that "her soul was dismantling her flesh" (ibid.), in the cultivation of an image that only reaches fruition when Nicholas paints her corpse, "the most consummate model I have ever drawn" (73). Only at this point does she return to her original "wax doll image" (ibid.). Eleanor's efforts to become the perfect wife to Nicholas are only successful at the cost of her life, when in death she transcends Ida's

mere imitation of a deathly beauty by offering him the real thing. Still, that night Nicholas returns to painting his “old subject” (75), Ida, and he dreams “not of my dead wife but of that other woman with whom my soul is interred” (*ibid.*). As in Rossetti’s poem which provides the epigraph to this chapter, the only beauty that retains a hold on the artist is not the one before him, but the abstract beauty “as she fills his dream” (*Poems and Prose* 52).

The metaphorical is consistently more powerful than the literal in this novel, but it is also more fragile. Though the pale, elusive metaphor of perfect beauty does not survive in life, in which the sturdy pragmatism of Fanny and Eliza alone is indomitable, it remains the central and overriding image, and one which Nicholas never gives up. He has a dream in which Eliza — with whom he has been having an affair, but regards contemptuously — has disinterred Ida’s body, which lies entirely uncorrupted in “her terrible beauty” (76). Since Ida’s beauty was always deathly, it follows that death itself would only enhance her image, and it is from this image of beautiful death that Eliza kneels down to feed; “she began to mouth reverently the holy corpse” (*ibid.*).

Cannibalism certainly has its place in fairy tales, most memorably in the desire of Snow White’s stepmother to eat her rival’s heart (or other organs in some versions), and the ravenous witch in ‘Hansel and Gretel’. Clearly, in these tales as in *Goblin Fruit* the eater tries to imbibe qualities of the person they are eating, specifically their youth and beauty. Nikolajeva identifies cannibalism as a way in which one can not only defeat an enemy, but “inherit his powers” (ed. Haase 368). But being eaten can also be positive, an “initiation” (*ibid.*), a possibility which Angela Carter traces to its logical, though extreme, conclusion in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972). In this fantastical world where metaphors become absolutely literal, thanks to Doctor Hoffman’s mind-bending desire machines, the utterly solipsistic Count is boiled alive — to his great pleasure. Informed by the chief cannibal that he is to die so that the chief can vicariously “immolate myself, to see how I should bear it” (210), the Count happily demonstrates that to be eaten is to know oneself, and to

become oneself most completely. Finally able to fully experience pain, and thereby anchor himself in reality rather than dream, he laughs “with joy — pure joy” (*ibid.*) and rises “up out of the cauldron in an upward surging leap, as of a fully liberated man” (*ibid.*). Allende recognises this same pleasure in her discussion of cannibalism and the eating of vital organs as aphrodisiac; the “strength” that one “absorbs[s]” (16) in this way is creative and sexual. In Nicholas’ dream Eliza desires the same affirmation of self, but through the mediation of Ida’s image, just as the chief cannibal experiences death vicariously through the Count. Ida and Eleanor have shown her that the price of absolution is annihilation, so Eliza finds a proxy in Ida’s beauty.

In dreaming of Eliza devouring Ida, Nicholas recognises that Ida’s image is the only way into “the chambers of my soul that slept with her through eternity” (*ibid.*). This dream is in itself a metaphor revealing the dynamics of Nicholas and Eliza’s connection: after Eleanor’s death, Eliza takes to wearing the medieval costumes that Ida wore to model for Nicholas, who acknowledges that “she had delved into my props to flesh out her wardrobe” (80). In this section, narrated by Nicholas, we are shown his resistance to Eliza’s attempts to enthrall him, but the fact that in ‘fleshing’ out her wardrobe she succeeds in transforming her unbecoming flesh into an artistic image for Nicholas — “she was like some wind-torn reed” (*ibid.*) — shows how effectively she feeds on Ida’s image, appropriating her qualities.

Eliza is also clearly presented as thriving on the aftermath of Eleanor’s death: Nicholas reports her claim to be “exhausted with effacement” (81) and wishing to “sit awhile in the sun and be replenished” (*ibid.*), like an overshadowed plant that is finally able to unfurl. His indirect repeating of her speech may appear symptomatic of his resistance to her, not allowing her to invade his monologue, but it is actually another sign of her success. Like the silent Ida, whose utterances are similarly narrated by others, Eliza has been absorbed into Nicholas’ mind, to be used as an artistic image; “I think I said aloud she was a

dryad" (80). But, unlike his original muse and his other lovers, she continues to force her way in and later does enter his narrative in her own voice, to tell him "boldly" (81) that, "Now your wife has been put away into the earth you can acknowledge me" (ibid.).

Although Nicholas tells himself "I thought her pathetic attempt to dress like my long dead love a ruse that smote of weakness" (81), and that "She was really quite artless" (ibid.), it is Eliza's own artistry that ultimately secures her a place in his life and a certain degree of freedom from her addiction to him. Artifice has always had its own allure, even regarding that most natural of objects, fruit: Laura Mason observes in *Sugar-Plums and Sherbert: The Prehistory of Sweets* that "Unseasonal fruit that has never been near a tree is a recurring theme in confectionary" (99), and such "perfect orchard produce and berries . . . shaped from marzipan or cast sugar" (ibid.) was, from the Renaissance to the Victorian era, "as valued for its artifice as the originals were esteemed for freshness" (ibid.). Eliza's carefully constructed image of enigmatic glamour appeals to the artist in Nicholas, who feeds compulsively on this untouchable, inhuman kind of beauty. Having cultivated Nicholas' infatuation, Eliza exploits it to establish a life for herself sharing rooms with him as fellow artist rather than kept mistress, earning money and independence by writing lurid gothic romances.

Wendy Steiner illuminates the radical nature of Eliza's actions: "Before modernism, few women could speak publicly about how it felt to be an artist, a person concerned with beauty . . . And yet, female subjects were everywhere to be found in the arts" (*Venus in Exile* xvi). Eliza only manages to sustain her transformation into an artist by channelling the force of the muse's beauty, ensuring that she remains for Nicholas an echo of Ida in pale, wild eeriness. She must live a double existence as both artwork and artist, and thus adds an extra facet to Steiner's comment that "In the nineteenth century [women] symbolized artistic beauty" (ibid.). It is only by feeding on the old tradition of women as beautiful inspiration for art that Eliza can evolve into an artist herself. Like Maud and Christabel in

*Possession*, her determined commitment to both her love and her work just about pulls her through, when weaker women have fallen by the way.

Power has just one small caveat, that suggests another factor in Eliza's success. A little earlier, Nicholas observes that of all his lovers, Eliza is "most like a fleshly yellow-haired model I once had a fine time with . . . In the eyes and the mouth both full and troubled, lies her fleshliness" (82). Intending primarily to tap into Ida's spiritual hold on Nicholas, Eliza has also recreated the pleasures of Fanny by offering Nicholas her flesh, wrapped as it is in the ghost of Ida's image. So he paints her as Proserpine, having "just eaten of one grain of a pomegranite [sic]" (92) to represent not only her "fleshly mouth" (ibid.) but also her fruitfulness, admitting that she has "blossomed" (ibid.). Nicholas' interpretation is that "her [romance writing] work is the root of her ingesting in some dark and alien Hades" (ibid.), failing to acknowledge that he stands in for that underworld figure. The root aspect of the plant metaphor, which has not so far appeared in the novel, indicates the natural process of feeding on the dead: it has been emphasised that Eleanor and Ida are both in "the earth" (81), but Eliza's foray down into its darkness is only temporary, like Proserpine's, sending down a root to gather sustenance. However, Hades' possession endures. Nicholas knows that when Eliza has been "paid a small sum for her stories" (93) she "sometimes relaxes" (ibid.) and he can once again make her "the breathless, mad creature I hold captive" (ibid.).

Yet the final word of the novel is Eliza's. Knowing that she will never have the kind of fleshly or even spiritual beauty to keep Nicholas captive in their blue room on whose walls "pomegranite [sic] bearing trees entwine convulsively" (91), she regards her work as the currency with which she will instead buy her own freedom. To escape her addiction to his poisonous love, Eliza plans an inverted version of Lizzie's defeat of the goblins in *Goblin Market*. She keeps "copious notes on the world" (94), and "the facts . . . impregnate" her (ibid.) rather than her lover's seed, so that the book she will write about Nicholas' underground artistic world will buy

her out of it: “I shall give him the book in lieu of a portrait” (ibid.). If this is a portrait of Nicholas, then the suggestion, appropriately subtle for a successor of postmodernist metafiction, is that Eliza’s book is *Goblin Fruit*.

Having saturated herself in his sensuality — both physical and spiritual — like Lizzie assaulted by goblins but refusing to eat, taking back the “juice that syruped all her face” (*Goblin Market* 37) to her pining sister, Eliza instead returns the crushed fruit to the goblin. Faced with his own image, “he will feast on me and find the fruit loathsome” (94), so that finally “he will not proffer the pomegranite” (ibid.) that ensnares her and Eliza will be free of all compulsion. Just as Augustine rises out of the “morass” (*Confessions* 13; bk. II ch. 4) of sensual desire to eat the food of the soul that is God, Eliza can rise out of sensual desire to pursue her only true fulfilment: “I am alive when I am writing” (94). Having fed on all the faces around him, Nicholas will finally be poisoned by his own. Eliza exploits the intricacies of the fruit metaphor, with its merciless feeding chains and sensual beauty, to direct its nourishing elements to herself and the toxic parts to Nicholas. She achieves this by deliberately constructing her beauty using the decaying fruit image provided by Ida, establishing herself as the new life which is fed by the old. Perhaps biology is not destiny after all.

## Chapter 2

### Water

In *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (1985) Ivan Illich writes that “the twentieth century has transmogrified water into a fluid with which archetypal waters cannot be mixed” (7), referring to the abstraction of water, as symbolic element, into the chemical compound H<sub>2</sub>O. The urbanisation and technological progress of the twentieth century, in this view, have overpowered our understanding of water as a symbol of “the whole of potentiality; it is *fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence” (Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 188). However, in the contemporary novels *Joanna* by Lisa St Aubin de Terán (1990), Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Sea Lady* by Margaret Drabble (2006), the symbolic fecundity and changeability of water remains present as a driving force of the narrative, so that the “water we seek” (24-5), in Illich’s lament, “the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination” (ibid.), has not been lost at all. And its endurance is due to the “nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors” (ibid.) that enables water to be employed in the three novels explored here as a shifting, slippery and subversive metaphor for human beauty. Linton offers the important qualification that although “almost anything can be distilled into a watery metaphor” (3), the shifting nature of the material concerned means that “we can always (re)turn to water as a means of dissolving the very things we have made of it” (ibid.).

This constant flux is evident in the structure of each narrative studied in this chapter, in which constructions of beauty predicated on watery images are destabilised by their own internal characteristics; beauty becomes an unfixed, floating image, divorced from the individual who had possessed it and destabilising the narrative that had constructed it. The inevitability of this process is made clear by Eliade’s characterisation of

water's symbolic significance: "Principle of what is formless and potential, basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, water symbolises the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return either by their own regression or in a cataclysm" (188).

### **Joanna and the Violent Waters**

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno establishes beauty as a site of transition between the empirical world and the abstracted work of art. Beauty is allied with artistic form, as it is in Kant; however, Adorno does not have beauty arising out of form, as his predecessor does, but rather beauty arises out of fear in a movement towards form. In this way, it straddles the divide between external materiality and artistic abstraction which Adorno negotiates.

The image of beauty as that of a single and undifferentiated something originates with the emancipation from the fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature. The shudder in the face of this is rescued by beauty into itself by making itself impervious to the immediately existent; beauty establishes a sphere of touchability; works become beautiful by the force of their opposition to what simply exists. (67)

Adorno describes this transformation from concrete to abstract, via beauty, in a curiously visceral way. It is unclear who or what shudders<sup>4</sup> in the face of nature's undifferentiated wholeness, so that the shudder itself becomes a metaphor for the imagined reaction of anthropomorphised art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno consistently figures art as an active agent, rejecting constraints, turning against itself or acting upon "materials" (passim). J. M.

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<sup>4</sup> There is a body of critical analysis of Adorno's shudder — J. M. Bernstein is a notable example — explicating the shudder as a memorial experience of fear and suffering. It is, however, only the visceral element that has relevance to my discussion here, and so I shall not enter into further discourse with writings on the shudder.

Bernstein describes this “act-like nature of works” (*The Fate of Art* 219) as a “sense of being something momentary and sudden despite the fact of their being actualised as durable products” (*ibid.*), but I would take the sense of an artwork’s agency implied by Adorno as a more emphatic and human ability of art to commit actions. Bernstein does, however, interpret Adorno’s shudder as being “released by the work of art” (220). This humanisation of art and artworks, though it may well incur philosophical questioning, foregrounds the specifically human aspect of the tension between concrete and abstract. Flesh and mind, even in aesthetic philosophy, collide and pull apart in what seems to be a doomed attraction of opposites.

In the detachment of artistic form from the ‘fleshly’ materiality of nature, Adorno’s aesthetics are predicated on the same kind of separation of art from flesh which this thesis argues is essential to the presentation of human beauty in fiction. Donoghue also discusses this binary as a particular contemporary concern, echoing Adorno’s privileging of form over matter in his claim that “form entails the conversion of matter, so far as possible, to spirit. At the moment of conversion, form and beauty seem to be one and the same” (107). The sense of conflict between two opposed elements — the fixed and the fluid — is perfectly expressed in the metaphor of water, which pervades the descriptions of beauty in *Joanna*, *The Sea Lady* and *Fingersmith*. In these novels, the mutable nature of the watery beauty on show causes it to become a slippery, shifting attribute, capable of changing its form and even separating itself from one person and attaching itself to another, as in Eliade’s words, “Principle of what is formless and potential” (188); beauty in *Fingersmith*, in particular, slides from character to character as their very identities slip from beneath them.

Kitty, in Lisa St Aubin de Terán’s 1991 novel *Joanna*, is an image of human beauty who strives towards the fixity of form out of horror for the uncontrollable physicality of the natural world. In this sense she enacts the formation of artistic beauty described by Adorno, but the specific metaphors with which de Terán drives this narrative, metaphors of water

and emeralds, challenge the validity of Adorno's purely abstract theory through the complexities of their material and metaphorical existence. The narrative of *Joanna* is divided into four parts: Joanna initially relates her account of her childhood, when she was called Joan and was tormented by her mother, Kitty, and comforted by her grandmother, Florence. The second narrative is Kitty's, offering both explanation and some rewriting of her abuse of Joanna; thirdly we are given Florence's perspective; and finally the circle is closed with Joanna's narrative of the present, as she prepares to die. Kitty is the focus of the novel, the enigma whose magnetising beauty and mercurial temper are figured in the images of water (particularly the sea) and emeralds that are handled in all four narrative strands. The act of divorcing human beauty from the flesh, from the individual who possesses it so that it may be immortalised in art, is played out in Kitty's traumatic oscillations between the material world and the formality of an aesthetic existence.

Early in her narrative, Kitty establishes the metaphorical binary which her beauty straddles, recalling how in her childhood she aligned herself and her beauty with the natural world.

... the tropical waters of my eyes. People called them emerald eyes, but I liked the men who said they were like the sea. Cartier, the jeweller's in St Helier, sold emeralds, and Maman had a brooch with one. But they were only stones. Water is better than stones; it wraps itself around the stones every day, twice a day, and drags them out to sea. (116)

Kitty locates the power of water in its movement, the dynamic force which overpowers the inertia of stones, and she harnesses this power in the beauty of her eyes. As her daughter notes when recalling her childhood, "She could frighten people just by looking at them, and she could make people do what she wanted" (21). Kitty's green eyes flash through the novel as a locus of the unpredictable but mesmerising dynamic of beauty. Movement is also

crucial to Adorno's conception of art, as an active agent engaged in subjugating empirical materials into artistic form: "Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants" (3). Although artistic form is by nature fixed in form, it cannot remain so in its fusion with the fluid empirical materials with which it is constructed. In Kitty's case it is precisely the dynamic aspect of the water, which she claims as a metaphor for her own beauty, that ultimately disrupts and destroys the crystallised aesthetic form in which she wants to live. Having first claimed water as the medium of her artistic form, her constructed beauty is menaced by the unstable nature of its material.

She marries Nelson Allen, Joanna's father, because he "could describe the sea as though I were looking out at it, and had grey eyes like the rough waters around La Corbière Point" (146). In him she recognises the kind of beauty she values — her own, powerful and changeable, mirrored in his eyes. But even in an aestheticised, metaphorical form, water in this novel retains its disruptive agency as a driving force of the constant movement of art identified by Adorno. In marriage, Kitty is forced into a full engagement with the empirical world whose "overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness" (Adorno 67) she fears: it is not acceptable for a wife to remain an untouchable beauty, and when Nelson is finally unable to restrain himself Kitty finds her carefully guarded form invaded by the natural forces of change and growth. She leaves Nelson before she even realises she is pregnant.

The violence that Adorno sees in the imposition of artistic form on empirical material is certainly present in *Joanna*, but the direction of the violence is (in part) reversed. For Kitty, the crystallised forms of beauty are violently attacked by the proliferating and uncontrollable physicality of the natural world. Her perception of her pregnancy is based on a total disgust for natural growth: "he planted his huge tainted seed in me and it grew, in secret, inside me like a fungus in my womb" (158). Her expressions of disgust stand in counterpoint to the purificatory and cleansing aspects of water, described by Illich in his history of water. "One very special way in

which the dual nature of water shows is water's ability to purify as well as clean. Water communicates its purity by touching or waking the substance of a thing and it cleans by washing dirt from its surface" (27). The distinction between purification and cleansing is important to Kitty, who requires both the erasure from her body of any superficial trace of nature's physical processes (such as Joanna's birth, which scars her badly) as well as the metaphorical purification of her spirit from the suffering in her past.

Illich continues, explaining how the chemical properties of water enable its metaphorical construction into a spiritual purifier, since water "acts as a solvent (it ab-solves), detaches these leftovers of past activities and disengages the person from an encumbrance" (29). In this context memories and past deeds acquire a character of dirtiness, burdening the individual who can only start afresh when it has all been washed away. The solvent nature of water arises from the "lack of rigidity in the hydrogen bonds between liquid water molecules" (Davie, *Fundamentals of Hydrology* 3); this accounts for its chemically unstable nature, which allows water to assimilate and dissolve other substances with which it comes into contact. Adorno's conception of the fluid and unstable nature of art's material element is perfectly embodied by water, as both substance and metaphor: as Kitty discovers, the changeability and movement that enables water to wash away dirt and memory can just as easily sweep away the gifts of beauty it has bestowed upon her. It is up to her daughter to harness the mutability of water to develop an equally changeable beauty of her own.

From this point in Kitty's narrative after she recounts Joanna's birth, she begins to privilege emeralds as the presiding metaphor for her beauty, gathering them from her admirers and wearing them to set off the dangerous sparkle of her eyes: "All that I own I own in emeralds, the stones I have gathered to repay my wrongs and the soft stones of my own eyes" (155). The possibility of making this shift is illuminated by Adorno's argument that "Artworks are static as much as they are dynamic" (106), their transcendent "instant of appearance" (*ibid.*) as art predicated on this balance between the fixed and the fluid. Donoghue's earlier suggestion that

form and beauty are one in the exquisite moment of conversion to artistic form (107) offers an explanation for Kitty's desire to inhabit that moment continually, in her fixed form of beauty. The identification of this as specifically a transitory 'instant' or 'moment' makes clear the inevitability of her failure to remain there. Kitty finds consolation and attempts to find balance in fixed, hard form, and from this position turns the violence she has suffered back on the principle of dynamic nature which injured her — now embodied in her daughter Joan.

As Joan's grandmother Florence reveals in her own narrative, over halfway through the novel, Joan has "lovely eyes, grey eyes like her father's that reminded one of the sea" (244). Coming just after Kitty's account, this statement offers some retrospective explanation for Kitty's antipathy towards Joan, whose huge size at birth almost killed her diminutive mother. Nelson's sea-grey eyes, reproduced in Joan, confront Kitty with a daily reminder of the violent disruption of her beautiful form, mocking her with the water metaphor that betrayed her. Equally, Joan continues to grow uncontrollably; in Kitty's words, "It grew like an enormous maggot" (178), and Joan reaches six feet by the age of twelve. The lifelong battle that rages between them embodies the tension which drives the novel, between abstracted beauty and dynamic materiality. The complexity of their relationship, in the destructive need that binds them and yet is continually productive (for the progress of the narrative and ultimately for Joanna herself), challenges Adorno's restriction of art's movement to one direction only. He claims that "Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form" (3), yet in *Joanna* we clearly see that the concrete materials of the novel, in particular water, are sublimated into metaphor without being separated from their physical nature. This material power is what animates the water metaphor into becoming a disruptive agent instrumental to the action and structure of the novel. Watery beauty thereby becomes a destabilising agent of change, through its own changeable nature.

An intimation of the force for change inherent in water is given in the opening of the novel. Joanna, recalling her childhood, formulates the desired “miracle” (3) that “could make Mother love me” (*ibid.*) in terms of water, by wishing that she could acquire a less offensive shape, “as indistinguishable from the mass as any drop of water in that cold sea” (*ibid.*). Kitty’s anger towards Joanna, her “ripples of discontent” (38) manifest themselves as physical violence: “For years she had slapped and pinched me until I wept. It was a seemingly endless flow of tears, provoked as by a recurring tide” (9). The image of water which underpins both their identities, but in opposing ways, continues to push them apart and draw them together again in a tidal pattern. In Kitty we are presented with the clear, green-eyed but perilous beauty of water, powerful and changeable; the latter description is also true of Joanna’s relationship with water, but the emphasis in her character is on the chaotic power and proliferation of nature.

Illich claims that “water is always dual” (5), therefore requiring two opposing manifestations such as Joanna and Kitty. This is also true in a chemical context, as a “water molecule can be described as *bipolar*, which means that there is a positive and negative side to the molecule” (Davie 3). The hydrogen atoms have a positive charge, while the oxygen atom has a negative charge, pulling in opposite directions while still bonded together. ‘Bipolar’ is a loaded word, one that could also be speculatively applied to Kitty’s psychological state — and Joanna remarks of her young adulthood during World War II that the “war brought out in my contemporaries the very things I had always felt in myself, the symptoms of manic depression. It was in me to swing from one extreme to another” (106). Joanna’s most profound swing occurs when she casts off the stigma of large, red-haired ugliness which has plagued her youth, and becomes in her words “a painted lady” (83). Here she does not refer to actual make-up but to her transformation into beauty, into an integrated artistic form — though emphatically not a fixed form, like her mother.

Joanna's transition from ugliness to beauty is oceanic: "my body, which had always worked against me with only an undertow of something pulling admirers towards me like a gathering tide, began to work for me" (ibid.). Once she begins "to be known as a beauty" (ibid.), Joanna embarks on a series of marriages and love affairs, always changing her image — "cutting my hair in a new way, learning to dress" (105) — and relishing the changes in her body as she bears four daughters. She states that "I was moulded by the recurring tides of my loves" (107), and this watery ability to adapt is what enables her to float on her beauty through the war, with "history welding our times into such drastic and different shapes" (ibid.). Kitty, holding to the past and to her fixed form of beauty, is cast adrift on the waves of madness and is institutionalised.

The metaphor of water, consistently connected to human beauty, washes through the text of *Joanna* in a wave of structural disruption. Functioning in a perpetually transitional state, neither fully physical nor fully abstracted, the water in the novel materially shapes the text and interrupts the movement from empirical to immaterial which for Adorno defines art.

In the impulse of every particular element of the artwork towards integration, the disintegrative impulse of nature secretly manifests itself. The more integrated artworks are, the more what constitutes them disintegrates in them. (68)

Zuidervaart observes how this inescapable return of the disruptive empirical has profound implications for Adorno's philosophy, explaining how the text of Adorno's work "resembles a continually shifting constellation" (47). Rather than adopting a conventionally linear approach, following established philosophical processes of logic, Adorno's writing embodies the watery dissolution of concepts which for him are not isolated entities but organic and fluid: "there is no first principle, no origin, no *arche* or Archimedean point from which philosophy may proceed" (ibid.). This of

course has come to be considered a postmodern attitude, as explained in the introduction to this thesis. In the above quotation from Adorno, the tidal circularity of his argument becomes clear; having initially established the violent imposition of artistic form on the empirical material, he then traces the disruptive return of the empirical and the necessity of this fluid movement to the continuing existence of form, which always seeks equilibrium. Adorno's 'definitions' of art and beauty do not themselves remain fixed, instead reflecting the mutable nature of their subject. This illuminates the particular relevance of Adorno's philosophy to this chapter on water, since the association of mutability and the disruptive potential of water as a metaphor, which are present in the novels studied here, shape the structure as well as the content of Adorno's aesthetics. Zuidervaart suggests this when he aligns Adorno with other radical philosophies: "Besides providing a clue for understanding Adorno's own writing, his rejection of first principles announces an opposition to logocentrism and foundationalism that links him with many pragmatist, poststructuralist, and feminist philosophers" (*ibid.*).

Adorno is also, in this sense, aligned with the character of Joanna, whose narrative rejects the conventional upper-class values of her grandmother and the ideal of isolated fixity embodied by her mother. The primary tensions of the novel constellate around beauty, the aesthetics of the human form, and so it is this locus that is fundamentally disrupted by the movements of water in the text. A symbol to which Kitty attaches particular personal importance is the lighthouse of La Corbière, off the coast of her homeland, Jersey. The island of Jersey itself, as well as the lighthouse, are fixed but isolated points surrounded by the sea, which is how Kitty sees herself; the lighthouse gains in significance as her own untouchable fixity is increasingly threatened. The four narratives are fundamentally separate accounts, largely the same story delivered from three isolated positions and encircled by Joanna herself, titular narrator and embodiment of the growth and changeability of the natural world. Under the pressure of Joanna's presence and the inescapable water metaphor that

runs through the whole text, the isolation of each narrative is broken down: connections proliferate and discordance between the narratives places them in tension.

One moment in Kitty's narrative, for instance, acknowledges and thereby perpetuates the dissolving of textual boundaries by figuring Joanna as a cancer that has proliferated in all parts of the story: "Just as the redhead had planted a cancer in our lives, as its father had planted one in mine, as it had filled the forty-five square miles of Jersey with the ineradicable seed of its destruction, so gradually it managed to plant its cancer in Maman's side" (184). The cancer is related to the water metaphors in its disruptive ubiquity and incessant shapeshifting. This literal (within the text) and metaphorical cancer is present in all four of the narratives, constantly changing its form: in Joanna's first, childhood narrative it figures only as her Granny's slightly ominous limp, an image taken and elaborated in each of the following three narratives to become Florence's cancer. This tumour is an emblem of all the ills that their annual visits to the seaside are intended to wash away; a metaphor for Joanna's prodigious growth and later her sexuality; for Kitty's madness and finally, for Joanna, the cancer is Kitty herself. Each of these elements are also figured in water images, suggesting the curious paradox that water itself is contaminated as well as being the great purifier, taking us back to the dual nature of water identified by Illich. The messiness of these connections testifies to the novel's dissolution of narrative and metaphorical boundaries, insistently threatening the lighthouse isolation of each story as the surrounding waters encroach.

The circularity of the cancer metaphor reflects the novel's narrative structure, moving forwards in pursuit of Joanna's racing development but also back into memory, and ultimately closing in a circle with the return to Joanna's narrative voice ending the stories of all three women. The back-and-forth motion of this narrative, returning persistently to the same memories and finally coming back to its origin but in a new form, echoes the tides that mesmerise Kitty, Joanna and Florence as they stare out to sea on holiday in Selsey, and the unpredictable tides of circumstance that

cruelly overturn all their hopes. Adorno's recognition of the ineluctable return of the natural and its force of disruption in the work of art suggests a connection between Joanna herself and the narrative she constructs, a link forged by her challenging and ever-changing beauty:

Decomposition at the same time releases the immanent counterforce of art, its centrifugal force. — [sic] Ever less is the beautiful achieved in a particular, purified form; beauty is shifted to the dynamic totality of the work and thus, through heightened emancipation from the particularity, advances formalization at the same time that it melds particularity with the diffuse. (68-9)

It would seem that Kitty's quest to exist in a perfect form of static beauty is bound to fail, as the subjugated empirical materials from which an artwork is formed continue to assert their dynamic presence. Joanna is clearly representative of this principle, never entirely subdued by the violence inflicted on her by Kitty (the artistic principle). But does Joanna finally triumph? Her oceanic narrative, whose tides return to the same stories and rewrite them from another character's perspective in a continual challenge to a single, fixed interpretation, does indeed 'decompose' the fixity of Kitty's beauty as Adorno claims it must.

We last encounter Kitty restrained in a mental institution, her beauty gone but the flashing emeralds of her eyes still so powerful that she has to be kept in a separate room to avoid frightening the other patients (254). Yet Joanna still craves a reconciliation, or at least some kind of recognition, from her mother; she does not find it, refusing to repeat in her narrative the last words Kitty speaks to her, and which are sufficient to prompt Joanna to a suicide attempt. However, in this desire for reconnection with her mother as the symbol of beauty, Joanna's narrative streams into an integrated form, a whole. As Kitty loses her beauty Joanna discovers her own very different version, one of plenty and proliferation (especially in her ample hair and breasts), in the manner that Adorno claims

“beauty is shifted to the dynamic totality of the work” (68-9). The novel supports Adorno’s insistence that beauty still requires form to exist, in the way that the narrative, driven by water images and reflecting them in its tidal structure, finally coalesces into a circle that accepts its own closure — Joanna’s approaching death.

It does indeed appear that through her “heightened emancipation” (*ibid.*) from the fixed particularity of her mother’s beauty, Joanna has in her liberty circled back to the form of beauty she had rejected, through her narrative that “melds particularity with the diffuse” (*ibid.*). The inevitable progression of time becomes conflated in its fixed specificity with Kitty’s type of beauty, destroying Joanna’s sexual and natural chronology: “The clock has annihilated my darlings and broadcast all my old kisses to the muddy waves . . . It takes me back to Mother. Even its precision seems to be synchronised by the ruthless mechanism of her eyes” (258). It is the waves that take Joanna back to Kitty, the sea which she has herself imbued into her narrative as a shaping metaphor, but which remains influenced by Kitty, whose presence transforms the regularity of the tides into the ‘precision’ by which Kitty has always defined herself.

However, Joanna has a parting shot. The metaphor of cancer, with which Kitty has identified her daughter, is co-opted in the very last lines of the novel by Joanna into a final challenge to the fixed form of beauty. Joanna twists the metaphor to reimagine Kitty, through her emeralds, as the cancer:

I imagine the cold in my spine to be a perfect emerald that will shatter when I go . . . What would my whole life have been like if I could have seen you as a glittering jewel and that only, a flawless precious stone? Gems have no meaning . . . Emeralds and glass look much the same in this darkness. (260)

A formal symmetry is created in Joanna and Kitty’s picturing of each other as their own tumour, but in Adorno’s terms this imposition of form destroys

the living growth imaged in the cancer. Joanna's last line, conflating emeralds and the inferior glass, is an act of resistance to the all-encompassing tyranny of form, undermining the perfect particularity of Kitty's emeralds.

### **Soup, Ink, River: Dirty Water**

Adorno's elaboration of the tension between fixity and mutability in art bears a particular relevance to the postmodern techniques of intertextuality and the reimagining of traditions that continue to feature in much post-1980 writing — and especially neo-Victorian fiction, which refers to a notable trend of contemporary fiction set in the Victorian period. As Voigts-Virchow writes, “neo-Victorian appropriation destabilises complacent assumptions about the static, homogenous character of either the Victorian or the contemporary period” (113). In the case of Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*, the metaphorical binary upon which the Victorian ideal of (feminine) beauty is defined — clean/dirty, white/dark, contained/uncontained — is subverted and finally unravelled completely. Water is intricately bound up with this ideal in its traditional cultural role as cleanser and purifier, since “water, which has always been perceived as the feminine element of nature, in the nineteenth century was tied to a new ‘hygienic’ image of woman, which was itself a creation of the Victorian age. Only the late nineteenth century tied female nudity as a cultural symbol to the tap water of the bathroom” (Illich 1).

In the contemporary hands of Sarah Waters, this hygienically watery image of beauty is sullied by the pervasive presence of dirty water in the narrative, taking on the forms of soup, river water and ink. Adorno articulates the operation of this kind of modified metaphor: like the ever-growing Joanna, the dirty water of *Fingersmith* represents the “gravitational pull” (133) of “the amorphous” (*ibid.*) in the integrated work of art, a force which “increases the more thoroughly art is organised” (*ibid.*). However, this disruptive water becomes a structuring principle — “It is exclusively

the amorphous that makes the integration of the artwork possible" (ibid.) — which shapes Waters' narrative into a subverted binary reflecting the binary of feminine beauty which she destabilises. The twinned narratives of Sue and Maud initially reflect their own positioning on the binary of beauty (Maud is the white, clean beauty; Sue is dark, plain and unclean), but in their separate accounts of the same events this dichotomy begins to dissolve into shifting confusion. Ultimately, their divided narratives blur into an amorphous mass, as the protagonists strive to overcome their physical and metaphorical separation to be joined in their love.

The neo-Victorian narrative is itself already a reflection, a contemporary rewriting of the Victorian that may distort its subject, just as Maud's narrative, following and doubling Sue's, subverts the story that it reflects. Therefore, *Fingersmith*'s narrative assimilates the "Assumed, mistaken or secret identities [which] are stock plot features in Victorian novels" (Voigts-Virchow 118), and intensifies the blurring of distinctions thus created until the narrative itself seems to suffer a mistaken identity. Voigts-Virchow offers the theory that this "would propose neo-Victorianism as a kind of third space, not Victorian, not contemporary. The faux Victorian novel is a fascinating area of tension between the Victorian and the contemporary, a hybrid space of mimicry, camouflage and assertions of difference" (112). The hybrid nature of the neo-Victorian narrative is thus dissolved into a large undifferentiated space where categorical distinctions collapse. This concept is especially pertinent to *Fingersmith* considering that the metaphor of water is the agent of this dissolution, as it breaks down the carefully distinguished metaphors of its Victorian predecessors. Such reworking enacts the moment Adorno describes, "When artworks are viewed under the closest scrutiny, the most objectivated paintings metamorphose into a swarming mass and texts splinter into words. As soon as one imagines having a firm grasp on the details of an artwork, it dissolves into the indeterminate and undifferentiated, so mediated is it" (134).

Neo-Victorian fiction is itself a close scrutiny of Victorian fiction, and in its mediation of nineteenth-century texts it embodies the experience of splintering that Adorno describes as inevitable. Novels like *Fingersmith*, which as the author affirms takes the sensation fiction of the 1860s as its springboard (Armitt 2007 116), disrupt their Victorian narrative models with this close attention that plunges their narrative into the splintered and amorphous. Considering Adorno's consistent employment of watery metaphors (for example, the repetition of 'dissolves') to articulate this process, it is little surprise that the aptly named Waters also engages water as a driving force of narrative disruption. As in *Joanna*, these water images gather in a whirlpool around feminine beauty, in particular its dislocation from a single, fixed attribution to one character to become a floating signifier, and also beauty's role in the artistic imposition of form on to Adorno's "unformed nature" (133).

In her self-conscious position as neo-Victorian writer, Waters has no qualms about giving her characters Dickensian, descriptive names: Maud Lilly is so named to illustrate the lily-whiteness of her beauty, immediately placing her on the pretty side of the Victorian binary. We first see Maud from Sue's perspective, when the latter has come to serve as her maid in a scheme to marry Maud to Richard Rivers (a slippery character), despoil her, consign her to a madhouse and take her fortune. However, to Sue, with her "sharp" face (11) and "plain brown" hair (6), Maud shines like a "pearl" (142), and she falls in love. But while Sue slips easily over gendered sexual boundaries, Maud is contained, secluded within her uncle's house and the constricting version of femininity he has imposed on her. Trained to be quiet and fastidiously clean, with her hands always protected by white kid gloves, Maud is both attracted and disturbed by the dirty water that continually threatens to sully her beauty. Refusing to eat the eggs provided for her breakfast — symbols of generation and proliferating life — Maud will however consume the "Clear soup" (92) which Sue then orders, "Clear as you can make it" (*ibid.*). The repetition of clarity demonstrates Sue's assimilation of the clear-water image constructed

around Maud, perpetuating the sense that her white, “buttoned up” (66) beauty is constantly in danger of contamination. By willingly eating the soup, Maud also participates in this construction.

Water, then, is permissible to the clean, white beauty but only in a perfectly pure and contained form. Seeing that her white gloves “had got splashed” (92) by the soup, Maud is visibly disconcerted by the idea that “the water has a little fat in it” (*ibid.*), though Sue assures her that “It’s only water” (*ibid.*). This significant phrase is soon repeated, when Maud is made uneasy by the dirty river that runs past her uncle’s house: observing its changeability, she remarks that “In the autumn, it floods . . . and all the rushes are drowned. I don’t care for that” (93). Her implied fear of drowning in uncontaminated waters, ‘the amorphous’ as Adorno would term it, lies in contradiction to her subsequent resentment of the ice that will contain the river: “I think it is freezing already. Do you see how it struggles? It wants to flow, but the cold will still it” (*ibid.*). The water is already sending ripples of disturbance through the narrative, muddying the clarity of Maud’s characterisation with contradiction and uncertainty. How contained is she really? And does she wish to flow like the river, or be protected from its flooding mass?

Perhaps the key to Maud’s paradox — one we shall encounter again in *The Sea Lady* — lies in the nature of her construction as clean white Victorian beauty. Waters makes it explicit that this is a construction, portraying Maud, particularly through her own narrative, as having been shaped by her surroundings and her sinister uncle; an imposition of artistic form on unruly matter, it would seem. Not only buttoned up in gloves and corset, Maud’s very flesh seems to be carefully contained. Sue observes that “Her face was as smooth as wax” (76), implying Sue’s perception of her as an innocent, a *tabula rasa* for their mercenary scheme. However, despite the sculptural form of Maud’s face, “her voice [is] like water” (*ibid.*), suggesting again a desire for the freedom of fluidity. Later, a moment in Maud’s narrative presents a distorted reflection of this one, when she implicitly ascribes this construction of her — water contained by

wax — to the influence of her uncle's house. Mr Lilly's "particular mania" (194) is pornography, and he enlists his orphaned niece Maud to copy out, catalogue and read in company the pornographic texts he collects. In this scenario are planted the seeds of the metaphor of ink as dirty water; the books that populate this story are all morally tainted. It is to this corruption that Maud refers when she muses on "the darkness and the silence which fills my uncle's house like water or like wax" (ibid.).

The echoing of Sue's perception of Maud as water contained by wax turns this later statement into a suggestion that Maud has been formed in this way by the house, her environment. Swyngedouw in *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water* (2004) explains the physical and metaphorical interdependence of people and nature, through the network of social, commercial and symbolic processes which combine to form our unified conceptions of each. This idea offers particular illumination of the construction of Maud's character through her network of relationships with her surroundings: especially including water, as we shall see.

Every body and every thing is a cyborg, a mediator, part social, part natural, lacking discrete boundaries and internalizing the multiple contradictory relations that redefine and rework them. Take the example of urban water. Drinking tap water combines the circulation of productive, merchant and financial capital with the production of land rent and their associated class relations; the ecological transformation of hydrological complexes and the biochemical process of purification with the libidinous sensation and the physiological necessity of drinking fluids; the social regulation of access to water with images of clarity, cleanliness, health, and virginity. (18)

The cyborg is a reference to Donna Haraway's 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", a philosophical discussion of our interdependence with technology; Haraway's theories invite such extensions as Swyngedouw's,

as the concept of the cyborg is predicated on the dissolution of categorical ontological boundaries and on the fundamental hybridity of human life. Swyngedouw's argument is that as soon as humans begin to process nature — initially in agriculture but now in an enormous variety of ways — we are implicated in it and become part of it, our processes of involvement with it modifying our conceptions of ourselves and nature.

Swyngedouw's example of urban water, which undergoes many processes and transformations before becoming the clean, purified drinking water that was first established in the Victorian era, clearly implies through the associations of "cleanliness, health, and virginity" (Swyngedouw 18) how water is anthropomorphised and people are correspondingly made watery. The feminine beauty ideal built on the metaphor of clean(ed) water, noted by Illich as a Victorian creation arising coincidentally with the development of the bathroom (1), is established by Waters only for the purpose of immediately muddying it. In this she affirms Swyngedouw's claim for the permeability and instability of ontological boundaries; we are already bound up with water, and so Maud could not possibly escape contact with the soup and dirty river water as they are connected facets of both her surroundings and the symbol upon which her identity is built.

The muddying of the beauty metaphor appropriately, inevitably, spills over the narrative boundaries to influence the structure of the text. The plot, in which Maud is the innocent mark in the scheme carried out by Sue, Mr Rivers and Sue's adopted mother Mrs Sucksby to trick her out of her fortune and leave her in a lunatic asylum, is dissolved and distorted when it is reflected in Maud's narrative, which is twinned with Sue's. It is Waters' privilege as a contemporary writer that she can retrospectively undo the strict ontological distinctions underpinning Victorian writing. Adorno describes the ontological framework of the nineteenth-century artwork as an effort towards a fixity of form isolated from physical materials or processes: "During the nineteenth century aesthetic semblance was heightened to the point of phantasmagoria. Artworks effaced the traces of their production, probably because the victorious positivistic spirit

penetrated art to the degree that art aspired to be a fact and was ashamed of whatever revealed its compact immediateness as mediated" (135).

The subversion of this isolation of the artwork is evident in the anachronisms present in *Fingersmith*, observed by Voigts-Virchow in "the faux London lowlife slang of Waters's character narrators [which], therefore, appears as a curious mixture of historically contingent and contemporary, muddling notions of an indigenous and alien Victorian cant" (119). The self-conscious muddling of historical boundaries belies Llewellyn's claim that "this contemporary fragmentation of narrative structure at the level of the historical narrative has been mirrored in contemporary fiction's own attempt to return to the seeming security of coherency of narrative structures and textual order as represented by the nineteenth century" (28-9). Llewellyn does not seem to have read *Fingersmith* closely enough: the structuring principle of the entire narrative is, conversely, the muddling of 'coherency' and 'order' with no discernible nostalgia for the structures of the nineteenth century.

This is achieved primarily through the deconstruction of Maud's character as the white, innocent beauty. As the elaborate scheme unfolds it transpires that she is not its mark; Sue is, and further, she is not Maud Lilly — again, that is really Sue. The beauty binary upon which these two characters have been placed in opposition to each other begins to collapse when Maud and Sue challenge the distinction between them by having sex, fusing and confusing "the soft wet corners of our lips" (142). This dissolution becomes an active force in the narrative at the very end of Sue's first account, when instead of Maud being left at the madhouse, Sue is abandoned there under Maud's name and identity (174). Her assertion that she is Sue Smith<sup>5</sup>, the maid, only serves to confirm the claim that she is mad. When Sue realises she has been tricked, she looks back at Maud and the beauty that had predicated that slippery identity is gone, having come unfixed: "Her face was thin, her hair was dull" (*ibid.*). However, the hardness and fixity that had previously seemed to forcibly contain the

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<sup>5</sup> Sue's pseudonym as the maid. Her real name is actually Trinder — or so she thinks.

moving waters of Maud's 'real' self are now emphasised, as the deliberate construction of her persona becomes clear. While her "eyes were wild, with tears starting in them" (*ibid.*), these are fake; "beyond the tears, her gaze was hard. Hard as marble, hard as brass" (*ibid.*).

Water no longer functions as a coherent signifier of natural freedom constrained by violent artistic form. Instead, in Maud's artificial tears its significance has become contingent and subject to change, or 'volatilized' in Adorno's words: "Under micrological study, the particular — the artwork's vital element — is volatilized; its concretion vanishes. The process, which in each work takes objective shape, is opposed to its fixation as something to point to, and dissolves back from whence it came" (134). Under the scrutiny which neo-Victorian narratives apply to their nineteenth-century models, the particular images and the empirical matter from which they are formed — water in this case — become active and subversive in response to the shaping form of the artwork. Water rebels against a single metaphorical signification.

This subversion occurs again in the infiltration of ink (as dirty water) into Maud's character. It transpires that she was never innocent at all, never clean in a Victorian moral sense. She has spent most of her life reading and copying out pornographic texts, sulling her fingers and her soul with their filthy inscriptions. Sue was not teaching her the arts of love as she supposed, but had been manipulated into the role of seducer so as to be seduced into a loyalty to Maud. The narrative which Maud presents, after Sue's, is a mirror image, recounting a mercenary plot — the same plot as was recounted before — but in distorted, altered form. The places of Maud and Sue are reversed when the latter is left in the lunatic asylum; but when they are reversed a second time, with Sue identified as the child of rich Mrs Lilly, who sought shelter at Mrs Sucksby's, the real mother of Maud, Waters is not returning to the security of a neat Victorian structure as Llewellyn asserts. Rather, she is parodying this structure and the convolutions required to reach such a semblance of order.

In line with Swyngedouw's insistence on the inextricable interconnection of the elements of human existence, Adorno's description of the artwork's illusion of unity helps explain why Waters' self-conscious mockery of it is an important subversion. "No artwork is an undiminished unity; each must simulate it, and thus collides with itself" (138), a collision enacted by the narratives of Sue and Maud. The simulation of unity, evidenced by the too-neat plot reversals of *Fingersmith*, is unavoidable, since when "Confronted with an antagonistic reality, the aesthetic unity that is established in opposition to it immanently becomes a semblance" (ibid.). The impossibility of an integrated artistic unity is due to the elements — water here — which have been utilised to produce it; "The integration of artworks culminates in the semblance that their life is precisely that of their elements. However, the elements import the heterogeneous into artworks and their semblance becomes apocryphal" (ibid.). The twists and subversions of the water metaphors and the narrative driven by them are testament to the fundamental instability and fertility of water as an element, both physically and metaphorically. Any beauty predicated on water metaphors, therefore, must be equally slippery.

The slipperiness of beauty in *Fingersmith*, as well as in *Joanna* and *The Sea Lady*, demonstrates the potential of beauty as a socially destabilising force. Steiner writes that "Many people, fearing a pleasure they cannot control, have vilified beauty as a siren or a whore" (xxi), and the metaphorical connection of beauty with water shows how uncontrollable it can be. However, in *Fingersmith* Waters harnesses the mutable and subversive nature of her artistic elements, and concludes by embracing Sue and Maud within the dirty water that has flowed continually around and through them. Unable to forget Maud, Sue hunts her down in her (now deceased) uncle's house, with only two servants and the library of pornographic books for company. Maud is not only writing for her living, she is writing pornography, recording her subversive longing for Sue, "all the words for how I want you" (547). Despite her shock at this mode of

living, Sue can only gaze at Maud's face, on which her inky fingers have left "smudges of black" (ibid.):

I still could not bear it. I quickly reached and stopped her wrist; then wet my thumb and began to rub at the flesh of her brow. I did it, thinking only of the ink, and her white skin . . . She turned her head and put her mouth against my palm. Her lips were soft. The smudge stayed black upon her brow; and after all, I thought, it was only ink.

(547.)

The unstable image of Maud's clean, white beauty has returned to enthrall Sue, and it is the impulse to keep her beauty clean that prompts Sue to touch her, "thinking only of the ink, and her white skin" (ibid.). However, the physical softness of Maud's lips recalls Sue from her nascent reconstruction of Maud as an aesthetically fixed construction of beauty. This realisation allows her instead to redeem the dirtiness of the ink, and of Maud's watery beauty, by embracing the very mutability that makes water subversive and threatening. If water is constantly changing, then its physical and moral purity is not a fixed characteristic; waters are perpetually moving, mixing and washing dirt away. The black smudge that seems to besmirch Maud's beauty is, therefore, "only ink" (ibid.); which is itself, of course, "only water" (92-3).

Isobel Armstrong in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) expands on the subversive potential of beauty which is implied in Adorno's meditations on its instability and the inevitable return of its empirical elements. She is specifically responding to Terry Eagleton's discussion of the aesthetic as a bourgeois property in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), in which he assigns this political association to the aesthetic on the basis of its amorphous materiality. For Eagleton as for Adorno (though their articulation of this and their agendas are different), beauty transcends the messy material world: "Within the dense welter of our material life, with all its amorphous flux, certain objects stand out in a sort of perfection dimly

akin to reason, and these are known as the beautiful" (Eagleton 17). Although, like Adorno's violent imposition of artistic form on the material, the orderly 'perfection' Eagleton identifies is distinguished from matter by its kinship to reason, he considers this "kind of ideality" (ibid.) to "inform their sensuous existence from within" (ibid.), so that aesthetic beauty is a property of material entities, rather than having an abstract existence itself like Plato's Form of beauty. It is due to this physicality of beauty that Eagleton sees in it "the first stirrings of a primitive materialism" (13) which ultimately implicates the aesthetic with materialistic bourgeois ideology.

In Armstrong's reading, what is essentially "wrong with the aesthetic" (30) for Eagleton is its messy instability, its material nature, taking us back to the dirty water of *Fingersmith* that constantly threatens artistic form. She describes the aesthetic in distinctly watery (and Adornian) terms:

It is viscous enough as a concept already: the *process* of creation, the art object, the experience of its reception, the theorizing of it as concept and praxis — all these are comprehended in the term *aesthetic*. But for Eagleton the aesthetic is positively *runny*. It is both everywhere and nowhere. It secretly confounds the distinction between fact and value . . . It collapses sign and thing . . . It dissolves cognition and percept . . . (Armstrong 30-1 emphasis in text)

Armstrong's emphasis on viscosity, confounding, collapsing and dissolving cast the aesthetic in precisely the same role that water plays in the narrative of *Fingersmith*, although it is specifically beauty that figures in the novel. The consistence with which we have seen beauty and water figured in the same terms of instability, subversion and change suggests that they are essentially related on this level, and that their active combination in an artistic work has the potential to enact a substantial subversion of 'fixed' social traditions and artistic forms.

This is certainly an appropriate interpretation of *Fingersmith*, ending as it does with a lesbian couple reading and writing pornography while maintaining a loving relationship. Swyngedouw's conception of human-environment relationships, as a shifting set of processes and inextricable ontological interdependence, implies the scale on which water is an appropriate metaphor for human cultural productions: his model is "a process-based episteme in which nothing is ever fixed or, at best, fixity is the transient moment that can never be captured in its entirety as the flows perpetually destroy and create, combine, and separate" (21). Maud's beauty may rise out of the dirty water in moments of aesthetic perfection, but these moments are transitory, and are profoundly part of the waters from which they emerge. Only a conception of beauty which is predicated on the subversiveness and changeability of its material can therefore endure — a beauty which is attempted in *The Sea Lady*.

### **Siren on the Rocks**

Ailsa Kelman, the female protagonist of Margaret Drabble's 2006 novel *The Sea Lady*, is first introduced to us in her stately sixties, flirting her way through a party dressed like a mermaid "in silver sequinned scales" (1):

She had all at her command. She liked the random, promiscuous mingling, the screeches of false laughter, the dull murmur of platitude, the conviviality of strangers, the sparkle of bracelet and necklace, the clean flicker and colour and sheen of the female fabric . . . (9)

In this passage Drabble establishes the rippling watery style sustained throughout the novel, and which from the beginning is central to Ailsa's construction of her own ever-changing oceanic beauty. Drabble's short clauses with their repeated grammatical form — the waves of nouns and

their object complements — create a tidal rhythm always returning to Ailsa herself, who has them “at her command”. Further, the ‘sparkle’, ‘flicker’ and ‘sheen’ add a visual evocation of water to accentuate the rippling rhythm.

In accordance with the symbolic fertility that Eliade identifies as central to human perceptions of water as “germinative, containing the potentiality of all forms” (188), the promiscuity of the party that Ailsa enjoys so much is reflected in her own identity. Having chosen to present an academic award in a dress whose “bodice was close-fitting, and the metallic skirt clung to her solid hips” (1), Ailsa’s appearance is boldly sexual as well as distinctly watery; “She gleamed and rippled with smooth muscle, like a fish” (*ibid.*). Consciously harnessing the fascination of the mythical siren, her dress “flared out below the knees, concealing what might once have been her tail” (*ibid.*). The fact that this lengthy and seductive characterisation hinges entirely on a dress is significant in revealing the deliberately constructed nature of Ailsa’s beauty. This construction is affirmed throughout the novel, as in the figuration of her underwear as literally structuring: undressing after the event she “unhooked her white boned armour from her full soft breasts” (18). In restructuring her flesh, which is ample, supple and adaptable to different shapes, Ailsa exploits the fluidity of her body and identity to develop a magnetising and resilient beauty that is very clearly a work of art — in Adorno’s terms, an equilibrium of material and form.

This meeting of form and flesh is highly sexualised in the novel, a coupling which echoes the water symbolism observed by Illich in creation myths, where water “tends to stand for the original couple — more often than not for the twins who before creation lay in each other’s arms” (5). The “promiscuous mingling” (Drabble 9) of water so embraced by Ailsa is not an arbitrary or ineffable metaphor, but is one of its chemical properties: “Even H<sub>2</sub>O, that pregnant compound that emerged from the eighteenth-century laboratory of French chemist Antoine Lavoisier is shockingly promiscuous — it goes and bonds with practically everything once it

escapes the lab!" (Linton 4). The conjunction of the scientific and mythical perspectives is neatly paralleled in *The Sea Lady* by the relationship between the siren-like Ailsa and the marine biologist Humphrey Clark that forms the core of the narrative. Some reviewers (such as Rebecca Seal in The Observer, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2006) have regarded the relationship between controversial feminist Ailsa and conservative scientist Humphrey as unlikely, yet they are joined by the nature of their medium, water. Their attraction is described primarily in sexual terms, possessed as they are by the fertile promiscuity of the water which is their element; Humphrey studies it and dives frequently for his research, while Ailsa embodies it in her beauty and swims at every opportunity.

The metaphor of water functions as a structuring agent in *The Sea Lady* differently to the way it does in *Joanna*. While in de Terán's novel artistic form is aspired towards, doing violence to the natural which threatens it in return, Drabble's narrative is built around the desire to return to the fluidity and freedom of water, of nature. While Adorno's complex and multivalent arguments initially emphasise the violent imposition of form over material, he subsequently describes the retaliation and then co-operation of the material:

... those artworks that succeed rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence. This alone is the reconciling aspect of form. The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form. (65)

The notion of 'rescuing' the amorphous into form is an uncannily perfect description of the movements of Drabble's narrative. After the party at which we meet Ailsa, she employs a meditation technique to help her sleep which involves the narrativisation of herself, body and spirit, into water. With no sense of the amorphous as threatening, but rather finding a maternal comfort in "the dark sustaining waters of the womb" (19), Ailsa

sinks into a trance in which “the bones dissolve, the flesh melts away, the body dwindle, and the past liquefies” (ibid.). Echoing the ripples of the repeated clause structure in the passage describing the party (9), this watery prose again transforms Ailsa into a creature of the sea. The hope for liquefaction of the past evokes the metaphorical ability of water to purify the spirit, “Breaking up all forms, doing away with all the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating” (Eliade 194). In Ailsa’s meditation the natural, empirical element of water is sublimated into a spiritual sanctuary, an abstract space in which one can transcend the clutter and contingencies of life. This process operates in a similar manner to the process by which Adorno describes the artwork imposing form on matter in order to rise out of it. It seems odd to employ matter for the purpose of escaping it, but it is in fact essential to eliminate the threat of nature by transforming it into something different — otherwise, as Adorno has described and as we have seen in the fate of Kitty, nature will return with vehemence. This process will appear again in the final chapter of this thesis, Gold.

Therefore, in Drabble’s foregrounding of water as a physical substance, but one which governs the artistic form of the narrative, she enables its sublimation into a dynamic balance of opposites. Adorno writes, “Only when art’s other is sensed as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds” (7) that keep nature separated from the artwork, indicating the possibility of resolving the conflict of form and nature by sublimating nature entirely into the abstract. Here Adorno employs watery language himself to express these concepts (such as ‘dissolve’, one of many watery terms in *Aesthetic Theory*), as Drabble does throughout her novel. With the grammatical construction of the meditation passage structuring the text into a fluid, tidal form, and the impetus of the plot driving Ailsa and Humphrey back to their memories and mistakes together in order to absolve them, Drabble sublimates water into narrative form without entirely sacrificing the materiality of the water. Its wetness may only be invoked, but the

fluidity and amorphousness that constitute its physical form are still present in the movements of the text, and the beauty of Ailsa. Insofar as writing can aspire to the condition of water, this writing succeeds. Adorno too claims that aspects of the empirical must be assimilated and deployed by the artwork as form, so that “The synthesis achieved by means of the artwork is not simply forced on its elements; rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another” (9). The violence enacted in the meeting of form and material in *Joanna* is, it seems, not necessary here.

It is clear in Adorno’s writings, as well as the watery novels examined in this chapter, that the precarious equilibrium of form and matter cannot be other than transitory. The dynamic nature of the constitutive material of the artwork can only be fixed for a moment, which gives birth to beauty: “Every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye” (Adorno 7). Steiner offers a conception of beauty that broadly agrees with Adorno’s, describing its fluidity and fleeting crystallisation as essential to its nature as a process rather than an attribute. She writes, “Beauty is an unstable property because it is not a property at all” (xxi); instead, beauty “is the name of a particular interaction between two beings, a ‘self’ and an ‘Other’” (ibid.) in the aesthetic moment. With this distinction Steiner adds a human element that is appropriate to the sexuality and generation so structurally (and conceptually) vital to *The Sea Lady*, *Fingersmith* and *Joanna*. Once again, water shows itself to be a perfect embodiment of beauty: as Linton argues, water should be considered “primarily as a process rather than a thing . . . On this view, things such as H<sub>2</sub>O do not constitute the fundamental reality of water but, rather, are fixations that occur at the nexus of the water process and the social process of producing and representing scientific knowledge.” (4). The abstract and the concrete meet again here, in the chemical and social processes involving water, echoing Adorno’s depiction of the interaction between form and material. This interaction occurs again in *The Sea Lady*,

in two moments of fixation that briefly arrest the flux of the narrative with an image of perfect beauty.

It is with particular narrative self-consciousness that Drabble presents Humphrey and Ailsa's moment of "Perfect Happiness" (221), when they embody perfect beauty and are fully aware of it. This self-awareness, of both narrator and protagonists, is appropriate since the crystallisation of the otherwise restlessly rippling, changing narrative is a significant event that occurs only twice in the novel. At these moments the relationship between Humphrey and Ailsa which causes all the tumult of the story is briefly fixed, and the rest of the narrative washes round these isolated points as around Kitty's beloved La Corbière lighthouse in *Joanna*. In the first of these moments, Drabble emphasises both its transitory nature and its eternal fixity in memory (and by implication, in the text), employing water once again to express the instability of the medium in which the tableau floats:

Humphrey Clark and Ailsa Kelman have known Perfect Happiness. They have known it and named it. It has a place, and the place has a name. It is a memorable name. Their lives will flow outwards and onwards, bearing them helplessly away from this place and from each other, but here they are together, in this place and in this moment, and they lie calm and still, with the peace that comes from satisfied desire. (221)

The deliberate statement of location and naming fix this moment in discrete specificity, accounted for in both concrete and abstract terms. Drabble's blunt declaratives emphasise the act of fixation involved in creating this effect — "They have known it and named it" (*ibid.*) — while briefly halting the otherwise shifting, multi-clausal stream of the prose. This does not last long; as soon as the immortal (or almost) crystallisation of the moment has been established, it is washed away in the relentless wave of clauses describing the "flow outwards and onwards" (*ibid.*). It remains as a

memory but significantly in the present tense, simultaneously static and dynamic.

Drabble's self-conscious correlation of form and content emphasises the constructed nature of the moment of beauty, echoed in many instances of Ailsa's own structuring of her beautiful image. Adorno asserts the role of self-consciousness in art as vital, writing that "Artworks become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term — that is, as the appearance of an other — when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality" (105). Here he is discussing the aspiration of art to transcend the material from which it is made, and then to transcend itself, moving beyond its own form towards the 'something more' that is implied in the work (*ibid.*). In this statement the term 'pregnant' suggests the potential for generating something more, and it is precisely in the movement beyond the text, through the self-consciousness that implies an outside, that this transcendence is achieved. Equally, this 'something more' must be other to the artwork, and so the instant of appearance that characterises successful art is an appearance of an external other. Steiner's concept of beauty as an interaction with an other runs parallel to Adorno's here, suggesting the human embodiment of this process found in ancient metaphors of water as a coupling (Illich 5) and in the connection between Humphrey and Ailsa in *The Sea Lady*. This young, beautiful couple are in harmonious interaction with each other (as others) as well as their beautiful surroundings. The transcendence of the 'something more' is "known" (221) and "named" (*ibid.*), as they inhabit the isolated moment in the full knowledge that it is an isolated and significant moment of perfect beauty. Outside of this moment is necessarily implied the rest of the narrative, the rest of their lives which will act as the foil for this transcendent instant. Of course this ineffable 'something more' cannot be grasped; once this moment is over it will be the 'something more' to be ever after desired.

Perfect beauty and happiness are born of water. Humphrey and Ailsa "lie flat on their backs beneath the blue sky on the warm wooden deck of a large boat that rocks gently on the infantile blue waters" (221).

Their supine, inactive position, placed between the symmetry of blue sky and blue water, embodies the moment of balance between matter and form. For once, nature and its artistic representation have arranged themselves in peaceful harmony. The description of the sea's colour as 'infantile' foreshadows the soothing effect of its motion "like the movement of the waters of the womb" (*ibid.*) in Ailsa's later life. Recalling Ailsa's meditation technique, which consists of the aspiration to return to "the dark sustaining waters of the womb" (19), this moment represents a metaphorical fulfilment of that wish. In this novel, the mythical fertility of water produces beauty (Adorno's 'pregnant' artwork) and so this beauty is the 'something more' in which Ailsa and Humphrey briefly rejoice, having transcended their fleeting existence.

It is precisely their unwonted inertia, their fixity, that allows the beautiful surroundings to become a setting for their own beauty, a display case for the unified image they present. Doing nothing but sitting pretty, they are "in their sexual prime, and they know that they are beautiful. They are beautiful to each other and to any observing human eye" (222). In the second sentence is recalled the two interactions that are required to create this instant of appearance, the observation within the artwork of its other ("They are beautiful to each other" (*ibid.*)) and the observation of an audience outside the artwork. Here again is a nudge of self-consciousness, the external gaze which integrates the disparate parts of the artwork into a whole. Finally, to draw attention to their momentary inertia, their lazy sunbathing is cast as "paying tribute to the processes that have brought them together to this Aegean paradise" (*ibid.*).

Positioned as it is after we have met Humphrey and Ailsa in their solitary old age, we are all too aware that this moment of golden youth is fleeting. And although the imposition of artistic form, in the symmetry and fixity of the scene, suspends the free-flowing movement of the water-driven narrative, it is to this fixed moment that the characters, and the narrative itself, long to return. Adorno notes the paradox inherent in this desire, asserting that the "instant of appearance in artworks is indeed the

paradoxical unity or the balance between the vanishing and the preserved. Artworks are static as much as they are dynamic" (106). This is echoed in Swyngedouw's description of contemporary socio-natural existence as a "process-based episteme in which nothing is ever fixed or, at best, fixity is the transient moment that can never be captured in its entirety as the flows perpetually destroy and create, combine, and separate" (21); transient fixity is an essential part of the process, a notion which succeeds in reconciling the paradox of a work that is both static and dynamic. In the conscious crystallisation of Humphrey and Ailsa's memory as "Perfect Happiness" (221), given a title and painted in clear lines, this moment of beauty becomes the node of their failed relationship, a fixed point which they cannot destroy, ignore, or return to. Therefore, they have "frozen rather than killed off their connection" (324), exemplifying Adorno's insistence on the inescapability of the natural in the work of art — the water that characterises their relationship does not disappear, but is transformed into ice and glass.

Drabble achieves quite a remarkable reconciliation of this paradoxical desire for both the freedom of water and the eternal moment of beauty. Throughout the novel, Ailsa has hoped that "she may learn to swim freely once again, in the three dimensions she was born for, not live as if trapped in a flat and frozen pane of glass" (19). Humphrey has watched fish in aquariums, observing how some "are not aware of the glass . . . But others dash themselves against the glass" (28-9) and wished he could "hack his way out of his imprisoning self" (29) into "a new dimension" (*ibid.*). In these recurring images glass functions as the petrified form of water, just as sparkling and transparent, but entirely imprisoning; a violently imposed form, such as Kitty's emeralds in *Joanna*, that does not allow for the mutability of living matter.

This is not the eternity that will satisfy Humphrey and Ailsa, who need the water from which they are made to be freely moving, but in harmony with the rest of the elements involved. At the close of the novel, when after decades the former lovers have been brought back into contact

by the machinations of the semi-mysterious Public Orator (who both is and is not their childhood friend Sandy Clegg), Drabble orchestrates a grand reconciliation. Nature is co-opted by form to create a framing containment for the water that is nonetheless allowed to flow, as the protagonists are led by Sandy Clegg to a tidal pool “formed by an arc of rocks, which reaches across and encloses the little bay, forming an irregular circle. It is a bridge of natural rock, its breaches reinforced here and there by small artificial boulders of cement and aggregate” (338). Drabble is careful to emphasise both the natural aspect of the pool as well as its artificial formation, combining the two in the augmentation of the pool with a subtle patchwork of manmade materials.

Waiting for the rising tide to fill the pool, we are prepared for the past to be cleared away for Humphrey and Ailsa, as the narrator remarks, “It has been a journey of purification” (339). As they watch — the necessary observers who unify the artwork — the water “beyond the brink gathers and swells and rises” (*ibid.*), coming from a transcendent ‘beyond’ to absolve the watchers. Finally, the semi-natural containment is breached and “a solitary little spurt of seawater bravely splashes over . . . followed by a trickle, which becomes a stream, and then a little waterfall” (*ibid.*). In a neat escalation, carefully formed, the water driving the narrative is released. Significantly, the water is not escaping from the pool’s containment, but rushing into it; equally important is the certainty that it will only remain there briefly, for a moment, before flowing back out with the receding of the tide.

But external observation is not enough, and so Ailsa seizes the chance to “swim freely once again” (19), restructuring her now “sagging” (340) flesh one more time as she “squeezes herself clumsily” (*ibid.*) into a swimming costume and dives in. In the context of the narrative it is absolutely true that “the sea is in her blood, and her salt blood meets the salt water” (*ibid.*) since it is the oceanic metaphor that has constructed her character, and so it is vital that she jump in for the scene to be a full meeting of abstract form and concrete material in all its

manifestations. It is in Humphrey's observation that the absolution offered by the water in its temporary balance between chaos and order is achieved. In a realisation akin to Adorno's definition of art as both dynamic and static, Drabble bestows upon her character a second instant of transcendence:

... it comes to him that forgiveness need not be maintained in time. It may come in an instant, like grace. It need not endure. One may be redeemed in an instant . . . They have forgiven one another, for this instant, and that will suffice. (341)

## Chapter 3

### Ice

With the freezing of wild water into ice it may seem that we have left movement and instability behind, transported to a realm of static, perfect purity. This is not the case. Though it is water that has hardened into solid form, ice is still water, and it retains the dynamic characteristics of this substance. In *I May Be Some Time: Ice in the English Imagination* (1996) Spufford describes how the ice of the Arctic “is a conjurer, whose revelations come as tricks, the quickness of the air deceiving the eye” (88): he refers to the mirages created by a landscape of infinite whiteness in which the eye has no reference points and so it hallucinates them. The figuration of ice as beautiful but deceptive will be explored in detail in *The Snow Child* (2012) by Eowyn Ivey and *The Ice Queen* (2005) by Alice Hoffman, novels which are structured around a female figure whose cold, mysterious beauty is consistently expressed through metaphors of ice.

Another very recent novel, Alexi Zentner’s *Touch* (2011), also employs a metaphor of icy beauty in the memorable image it presents of the narrator’s father and sister arrested in the moment of their deaths, in a river that freezes the drowning pair just as their hands reach towards each other, almost touching. In this image the operations of the ice metaphor are clearly revealed, as the ice comes to represent an illusory preservation of human beauty. Motionless and perfectly preserved, the tableau in which father and child reach for each other can be seen “through the plate of frozen water covering them” (25) all winter. Yet though it comes to appear to the other characters as a sacred and eternal image, rendered tragically beautiful by the screen of crystalline ice, in the sudden thaw of spring their bodies are washed utterly away.

The metaphor of ice appears to transform human flesh into immortal artistic beauty, but this is always deceptive. A transformation does indeed

occur when human beauty assimilates icy qualities, but ice is itself neither a stable nor static substance and so an icy beauty is subject to sudden change or destruction. Pyne writes in *The Ice* (1986) that “Ice is a plastic art” (17), his study of artistic representations of the Antarctic consistently anthropomorphising ice in a similar movement to the contemporary novels studied here. Ice is also, for Pyne, a profoundly aesthetic substance characterised by unpredictable change, its “fabrics constantly reform, recrystallize, and reorganize” (12). Such change is inherent to ice because it is composed of water, subject to environmental influences that can reform its structure or melt it back into a liquid.

Therefore, we will have to wait for a further shift from nature towards artistic form, in glass, before we approach anything like immortal beauty; as an artificial substance formed of natural materials, glass as a metaphor for human beauty negotiates the boundary between nature and art. It is also a substance less vulnerable to change, and therefore more suitable to represent a human beauty immortalised in art. The glassy beauty central to a novel like A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* will also be shown to contain refined essences of fruit, water and ice within its enclosure, engaging with their metaphorical associations. In the meantime icy beauty, like the glaciers that shape the polar regions, offers mere glimpses of eternity which unexpectedly shift and destroy themselves in the “dynamic transformation of the ice” (Spufford 82).

Further, ice has been figured as a dangerous female beauty, as in Gillian Slovo’s 2004 novel *Ice Road*. Here, a cleaner aboard a Russian ship trapped by ice in the Arctic describes how the male crew are “bewitched” (9) by the ice: “courting them, offering herself up, and I saw them carried away by her scale and beauty” (*ibid.*), even while their lives are threatened by this “living, breathing, menacing thing. I have heard its crystals whisper in the air . . . I have even heard it scream” (40). This combination of magic and menace underlies the figure of ice as a metaphor for human beauty in each of the novels studied here, their authors drawing on the contradictory natural properties of ice, both static and dynamic like

Adorno's descriptions of artistic beauty (*Aesthetic Theory* 106). The fascination and terror of such blankness and unpredictability come to the fore in Ivey's *The Snow Child*, in which the Alaskan winter melds with the emotional landscape of the protagonists, whose childlessness and sense of emptiness prompt them to create a little girl out of snow; however, their beautiful icy creation will not stay still under their shaping hands. Equally, in *The Ice Queen* by Alice Hoffman, the protagonist who tries to keep herself as cold and contained as Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen finds her carefully constructed existence melting and rearranging beyond her control.

We have already observed in *The Sea Lady* the transitory nature of beauty, in which for an instant form and matter pause in equilibrium in the manner described by Adorno: "The instant of appearance in artworks is indeed the paradoxical unity or the balance between the vanishing and the preserved. Artworks are static as much as they are dynamic" (106). This instant of appearance is the brief emergence of beauty as the successful balance within the artwork of form and material. Moving on from the water metaphors that express this process so effectively, what has changed during the freezing process is that, in ice metaphors, form and material have more completely fused into one. The ambiguous substance emerging from this fusion, ice, is both static and dynamic in its fundamental nature. Unlike the closing image of Drabble's novel, in which the sea is partially contained by picturesque rocks, ice images do not require an external entity to contain the wildness of their water. The solidified water contains itself. In this elemental merging water achieves the total dissolution of boundaries toward which it so clearly strove in *Joanna* and *Fingersmith*, becoming both form and content.

*The Snow Child* and *The Ice Queen* illustrate how ice can infiltrate human flesh and transform its beauty into a cold and magical version of its former self, this new beauty harbouring a constant tension between the stasis of ice and the dynamism of the water that forms it. This is the tension which, according to Adorno, "those artworks that succeed" (65) can only

resolve by rescuing “over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence” (ibid.). Icy beauty, therefore, must somehow accommodate the restless movement of water since this is an intrinsic part of its own form. However, the dynamic nature of the natural material — in this case, both flesh and water — which ice attempts to subjugate under artistic form responds violently to its constraint. This creates a circle of tension: “The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form” (ibid.). Ice transforms flesh, giving it an artistic form that appears as a pale, chill beauty, but the violently restless nature of the water that creates ice can break through the boundaries of this form at any time.

### **Courting Death**

*The Snow Child* opens with its protagonist, Mabel, courting death by ice. Middle-aged and childless, she has moved to Alaska with her husband Jack in search of silence, away from the “neighbor children playfully hollering” (3) in reminder of her one stillborn child. Unable to face the darkness of her second Alaskan winter, Mabel walks down to the river, to the most “treacherous point” (6) of its frozen surface, hoping to fall through and drown in the roaring water beneath. This introduction of ice, hand in hand with death, is a recurring motif in both novels studied in this chapter, as well as *Touch*, in which the freezing of the river is the final seal of death. The nameless narrator of *The Ice Queen*, who wishes her mother to death on an icy night, becomes obsessed with the details of dying and even wishes herself into a closer acquaintance with the Reaper. Ice may be a transformative metaphor, turning fallible human flesh into an exquisite and diamond-hard perfection; nonetheless, the price of this transformation is high, as life cannot survive in such frozen conditions. *The Snow Child* and *The Ice Queen* engage with the fairy tale tradition to demonstrate this, each taking and transforming a well-known tale to explore the perilous magic of icy beauty.

Ivey's novel reworks the Russian tale of Snegurochka, the snow child, in which a little girl made of snow comes magically to life to delight — briefly — a childless old couple. Hoffman takes Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' as her source tale to see what happens when one invites the ice into oneself, striving for an impermeable beauty that becomes increasingly inhuman. The networks of ice metaphors that run through these two tales are expanded in the novels, which trace the processes of transformation and the negotiations with beauty and death that such icy metaphors entail. These networks crystallise around an icy beauty, a woman cold and elusive. This beauty is a paradox because she is too frozen — both literally and figuratively — to be alive in a human way, yet she appears as an image of human perfection. The hinge of this paradox turns on death: the icy and the human cannot be joined, as one will melt and the other will freeze, both destroyed.

*The Ice Queen* and *The Snow Child* develop the metaphor of icy beauty in a literary transformation of the original fairy tales, exploring the paradox that this metaphor presents. Jack Zipes considers the fairy tale as a form full of "emancipatory potential" (*Breaking the Magic Spell* ix) because of its transformative nature: in his introduction to *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* he writes, "If there is one 'constant' in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was also passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is *transformation* — to be sure, miraculous transformation" (xvii emphasis in text). The fact that Zipes can only identify — tentatively — one constant in the fairy tale demonstrates the dynamic nature of the form, which as he explains is constantly adapted to new social and literary contexts. Here Zipes offers a more positive diagnosis for the development of art and literature than Adorno, who emphasises the violence of imposing artistic form on the material world as an element of bourgeois ideology and its indoctrination.

The conflicting views of artistic form as either oppressive or radically empowering both hinge on the transformative quality of art: it changes what it touches, but the question of whether this change kills or

revives its object mirrors the paradox of the ice metaphors presented by Hoffman and Ivey. Ice transforms and preserves flesh in a beautiful form, but at the cost of warm human life — it is as “deceptive” (*Breaking the Magic Spell* ix) as Zipes describes the fairy tale, which he claims is capable of leading us on “a wild goose chase” (*ibid.*) after a perfect and ‘authentic’ tale that does not exist. There are only specific manifestations of the fairy tale which are under constant transformation, just as there are only manifestations of human beauty, and an abstract ideal of perfection such as Plato’s Form of beauty remains elusive. The tension between real and ideal will be further unravelled throughout this chapter as it is explored in Hoffman and Ivey’s contemporary rewritings of the fairy-tale image of icy beauty. This tension runs in parallel to the wider conflict articulated by Adorno and Zipes, in which the transformations enacted in and by artworks can be tools for suppression or subversion.

The fascination that this cold and deathly beauty inspires can be seen in Mabel, who although she cannot bear the onset of winter, “cold upon the valley like a coming death” (4), seeks solace in precisely this by choosing the coldest death of all in the frozen river. In this choice she imposes a form on the “Darkness so complete” (4-5) that the “days would run together” (*ibid.*), the void of the Alaskan winter that is too much like her own emptiness to be borne. In Mabel’s predicament the threat of nature described by Adorno is clearly embodied, expressing the need to impose upon nature the “image of beauty as that of a single and undifferentiated something” (67), the need to give form to the formless darkness. We shall see in the Gold chapter another couple struggling to survive in the hostile indifference of a vast wilderness — New Zealand in this case, in Rose Tremain’s *The Colour* — and in both novels a human beauty constructed out of the natural elements which oppose the characters, ice and gold, represents the only solution to “the fear of the overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature” (*ibid.*).

At first, Mabel can only conceive of imposing form on her surroundings by co-opting them to her purpose of suicide. Walking down to

the Wolverine River with this in mind, Mabel incorporates an element of iciness into herself, becoming “exhilarated and numb, chilled by the clarity of her purpose” (6). By channelling some of the properties of the wilderness into herself, and using these icy characteristics of precision and clarity to shape her intentions, she concentrates the menacing “undifferentiatedness” (Adorno 67) of nature into a contained “moment . . . of black-and-white precision” (*Snow Child* 6).

However, Mabel is relying on the predictability of the ice that forms the foundation of this moment. She thinks she knows the ice, but it is more “treacherous” (6) than she realises. The visibly “moving, dark turquoise water” (7) beneath the ice should remind Mabel of the unstable nature of ice’s constituent material, water, which is manifested in its changing state: “When she reached the river’s main channel . . . the ice was no longer brittle and white but instead black and pliant” (*ibid.*). Ice is not the static and immutable substance that it appears, but changes and shifts under Mabel’s feet just as Spufford describes the “violent fluidity of the ice” (81) in the Arctic, “With the glaciers calving their huge offspring along the coasts, and the sea-ice in motion . . . bobbing, capsizing, re-forming, carved into sculpture” (*ibid.*). It is significant that Spufford ascribes ‘fluidity’ to the ice, since its inherent wateriness is its most fundamental, yet most frequently forgotten attribute. Mabel is surprised when the ice thwarts her intentions; she had been counting on the treachery of its brittleness, but instead it is “pliant” (7) and “the ice gave slightly beneath her” (*ibid.*). Although she walks out to the point where the ice is known to be thinnest, unexpectedly “The ice bore her” (8). Mabel walks home and makes dinner.

Like *The Snow Child*, Alice Hoffman’s *The Ice Queen* establishes ice as the handmaiden of death from the very beginning of the narrative. The narrator, who is never named, recalls the night when as an eight-year-old she makes the kind of wish “that could change your life in an instant” (4). This is a crystallised instant slightly different from Adorno’s instant of appearance of the artwork, but nonetheless one in which disparate elements are drawn together in sudden shape, precise and perfect in its way,

just for a moment. Adorno emphasises that the way in which “Every artwork is an instant” (7) is due to its being “a cessation, a suspended moment of the process” (*ibid.*). ‘Process’ here refers to the workings of nature and art, as well as gesturing towards an abstract notion of process in general, which art resists in its imposition of form.

Ice appears to be just such a cessation of the processes of nature, the movements of water frozen into stillness and silence. However, as has become clear in the Water chapter, the idea of fixity depends on its opposite, and requires the presence of mutability in order to exist: “Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in its relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other” (3). A moment of fixity needs to be awash with movement in order to have any significance, just as the lighthouse in *Joanna* becomes meaningful for Kitty as an isolated fixture surrounded by sea. Ice embodies this paradox perfectly, providing an appearance of fixity predicated on the very water process it seems to be halting, though the process of freezing is continual; the creation of this image of eternal fixity is a process itself, and therefore must be transitory.

The movements of ice that form an illusory glimpse of eternity make it a highly appropriate metaphorical material with which to shape the wish that opens *The Ice Queen*. The narrator begins, “I made my wish in January, the season of ice” (4), in a fit of resentment against her mother for going out to celebrate her birthday, leaving the narrator and her older brother Ned at home. Since it is the kind of wish to change a life, the season of ice is an ideal time for it, a season of profound and unexpected change. Within the narrative, ice functions as a transformative metaphor that alters the nature of the surroundings: “The rain had frozen and was hitting against the corrugated green fiberglass roof. It sounded like a gun. Ice had slipped onto the floorboards and turned the wood to glass” (5-6). In likening the sound of the frozen rain to a gun it is turned into a herald of death: the operation of ice on wood, an organic and once-living substance, into smooth glass is not only another indicator of peril, as the porch becomes

dangerously slippery — it is also a precursor of further transformations, of the natural into the artificial.

Petulant, the narrator wishes aloud to her mother that “she would disappear right there, right then” (6), and the chill deathliness of ice is incorporated into the figure of her mother immediately: “My mother laughed and kissed me goodbye. Her kiss was clear and cold. Her complexion was pale, like snow” (*ibid.*). In her retrospective narrative, the narrator mocks her own failure to realise at this point that she is not the first and only ice queen — her mother was there before her, and the cold, silent woman that the narrator becomes is an echo of her predecessor. Her mother never reaches her birthday party, dying in a car accident for which the “police report blamed icy road conditions” (7). Of course, the narrator has made clear that the icy condition of her own wishing heart is to blame for her mother’s death, but ice is treacherous. Its arrested beauty is a vision of death, a glimpse of eternity. Adorno writes that “The affinity of all beauty with death has its nexus in the idea of pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished in it” (68). In imposing the artistic form of beauty on her mother, through the ice and snow metaphors, the narrator “subjugates” (*ibid.*) the human, living manifestation of her mother’s beauty under the art of ice, and so that human life must be “extinguished” (*ibid.*). However, the ice in her mother’s beauty is deceptive, betraying not her daughter’s coldness but her own frozen state in which, the narrator comes to understand decades later, her mother left that night intending not to come back: death was always in that icy kiss.

In precisely the same manner that Mabel imposes form and beauty on the ice that oppresses her by co-opting it into her suicide attempt, the narrator’s mother forms herself in an icy image with the shaping power of her cold intention, the narrative she has planned. Telling her story with the undisclosed knowledge of her mother’s suicide, the narrator embraces the illusory and changeable nature of ice in a way that she is unable to in her youth. Therefore, the ice images in this opening section of the story function in a dual, reflected form. On the surface, the iciness of the

evening, of the cruel wish, and of her mother's face create a sense of fixed inevitability, of fate that has cast blame irrevocably on the narrator. Probing deeper into this crystallised moment, however, the ice shifts under pressure from the retrospective knowledge that nothing of that evening was the way it appeared to the protagonist. The instant of the wish gains a formal symmetry, in the demise of one ice queen that prompts the creation of another, a mirror image.

Equally, the understanding that ice is a metaphor of transformation destabilises the fixity of the narrator's memory and incorporates the novel as a whole in this instant: Adorno writes that "The synthesis achieved by means of the artwork is not simply forced on its elements; rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another; thus the synthesis itself is a product of otherness" (9). The paradoxical fluidity which underlies the static appearance of ice is an expression of the communication between the elements of the artwork as described by Adorno, in which the instant of appearance, of art and beauty, emerges from the uneasy synthesis of opposites. A brief equilibrium is achieved in this moment, when the narrator's hidden knowledge of her mother's suicide is synthesised into her description of wishing her mother to death, and of becoming her mirror image, a second ice queen. The fusion of conflicting elements into form is effected by the metaphorical language of ice, which draws them together within its own paradoxical nature.

### **Tales of Ice and Terrible Beauty**

In keeping with the formal artistry of the narrator's wish, she continues to construct her story, and in the process herself, using the structural elements of the fairy-tale tradition. The figure of the ice queen is explicitly acknowledged by the narrator to have been adopted from Hans Christian Andersen's tale 'The Snow Queen', in which the child Kai<sup>6</sup> receives a splinter of the Devil's mirror in his heart, which then turns into

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<sup>6</sup> In most translations it is 'Kay', but this edition reverts to the Danish 'Kai' (trans. Diana Crone Frank and Jeffrey Frank, 2005).

“a lump of ice” (*The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen* 175). He abandons his close friend Gerda to pursue the ice that enchants him, becoming obsessed with the geometric beauty of the snowflakes and ice in the Snow Queen’s realm. He is especially enchanted by the Snow Queen herself, who is “delicate and beautiful but made of blinding, glimmering ice” (172). Both this strange, cold beauty and the motif of the icy heart are evoked by Hoffman in *The Ice Queen*, which traces the process suggested in Andersen’s tale in which a child unwittingly invites the ice into themselves, becoming colder and colder until they are barely human — an ice queen.

Taking advantage of the pliability of the ice which lies at the centre of this tale, Hoffman bends and modifies the traditional structure of Andersen’s tale to generate a dynamic equilibrium of beauty, balancing the conflicting elements of desire and danger provoked by the icy metaphors. This engagement with a previous artwork creates a new “balance between the vanishing and the preserved” (Adorno 106) in the reshaping of a borrowed structure, which is thereby both preserved and destabilised. In this the novel’s structure partakes in and mirrors the nature of icy beauty as both static and dynamic. This method of reworking fairy tale by simultaneously preserving and transforming its elements is advocated by Zipes, who describes the “original autonomous power” (*Magic Spell* xi) of fairy tales as the celebration of “humankind’s capacity to transform the mundane into the utopian as part of a communal project” (*ibid.*). This capacity has been subsumed under the kind of “repressive bureaucratic and administrative systems” (*ibid.*) condemned by Adorno, so that the fairy tale in the twentieth century functions “to compensate for the social injustices we encounter” (*ibid.*) with its transformative dream. Adorno regards art in general as operating in this manner, but Zipes offers the fairy tale as an example of how literary art may transform itself again. Late twentieth-century fiction engages increasingly in these kinds of transformative reworkings, and the fairy tale has often been its chosen vehicle, as in the postmodernist fiction of Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Robert Coover

and Donald Barthelme, and since 1980 by the novelists studied here: Power, Byatt, Hoffman, Ivey and Shaw, to name a few.

The Snow Queen or Ice Maiden of folkloric and fairy-tale tradition revived by Andersen and Hoffman is an embodiment of death. Lederer explains one of her early incarnations in his psychoanalytic study of Andersen's tale, *The Kiss of the Snow Queen* (1986): "In Norse mythology a goddess called Hel rules over Niflheim, or Niflhel, a cold and misty place whither go those dead who have died not in battle but by illness or old age. Niflheim is the Land of the Dead and Hel is the Queen of Death" (29). Hel is a cold beauty, whose embrace (whether depicted as metaphorical or literal) is lethal. Andersen's Snow Queen echoes this dangerous beauty in the two kisses she gives to Kai: at the first, "Her kiss was colder than ice . . . It was as if he was going to die — but only for a moment, and then it felt good" (175); at the second he "forgot all about Gerda, Grandmother, and everyone at home" (*ibid.*). Like the cold, snowy goodbye kiss given by the narrator's mother in Hoffman's novel, the Snow Queen's kiss has the effect of passing on her coldness to Kai. He no longer feels cold, but when Gerda eventually finds him he "had become quite blue with cold — almost black, in fact" (200). He is almost dead, spared only by the Snow Queen's refraining from giving him a third kiss: "'Now you won't get any more kisses,' she said, 'Because then my kisses would kill you'" (176). *The Ice Queen* develops the story of one kissed by the Snow Queen and her eventual redemption by a man of fire. Hoffman freezes Andersen's story in the moment before Kai's rescue, to explore in more detail the perilous attraction of icy beauty.

Hoffman's narrator echoes the sentiments of A. S. Byatt in her essay "Ice, Snow, Glass" (2000), in which she articulates her sense of something "secretly good, illicitly desirable" (*Histories and Stories* 155) in fairy-tale figures of icy beauty such as Andersen's Snow Queen and the girl who sits at the top of a glass mountain in Andrew Lang's 'The Glass Mountain', far above her hapless suitors. Such isolation and remote beauty is desired by the narrator of *The Ice Queen* strongly enough to narrate herself into

Andersen's fairy tale, becoming a figure of untoachable coldness herself. After her mother's death, she composes her own tale of ice which embodies the same paradox evident in Mabel's suicide attempt in *The Snow Child*, that of attempting to escape the perils of ice by making use of that very material. In her story a young girl, "treated cruelly, by fate, by her family, even by the weather" (8), gives up speaking and stands outside in the snow until "she was made of ice" (ibid.). Her transformation echoes that of her mother which she has just described, pale snow and ice infiltrating "her flesh, her bones, her blood" (ibid.) in the same way. It also invokes the state in which Gerda eventually finds Kai in the Snow Queen's castle in Andersen's tale; "so stiff and still that you would think he had frozen to death" (201).

Like Andersen's Snow Queen and Byatt's interpretation of icy beauty in fairy tales, in the tale told by Hoffman's narrator the freezing of a person renders her "like a diamond . . . so beautiful now that everyone wanted her" (Hoffman 8), ossified into a formal vision of beauty like the snowflakes with which Kai is obsessed: she becomes a work of art. Equally, like Mabel on the frozen river, the instant of freezing into art is also a handshake with death, enacting a conscious escape from the vicissitudes of living into inertia and near-oblivion. This is why "Nothing could hurt her anymore" (ibid.), because the capacity of ice to transform substances has turned her heart "a pale silver color . . . so hard nothing could shatter it" (ibid.). However, the ice queen's boast that nothing can shatter her heart implies the truth that the narrator's heart has already been shattered by her mother's death, and so the best she can hope for is to arrest the fragmentation of grief for as long as possible.

In an act of resistance to Adorno's emphasis on the transience of the 'instant' of beauty in art, the protagonist extends this moment for thirteen years, living as "queen of the ice" (ibid.). Nonetheless the static appearance of ice is always illusory, as Spufford reminds us of the Arctic "sea-ice in motion . . . bobbing, capsizing, re-forming" (81). The narrator's brother Ned reintroduces the movement of ice into the narrative, explaining the

paradox of the “Physiologically impossible” (8) ice queen: “In such low temperatures, her heart would actually freeze and then burst. She’d wind up melting herself with her own blood” (*ibid.*). The freezing process is incommensurable with human life, and so an icy human beauty would be doubly destroyed, her humanity frozen and her ice melted. Such a work of art is possible only for the briefest moment.

*The Snow Child* also expands on the implications of the presence of icy beauty in human life. Like the narrator of *The Ice Queen*, Ivey’s protagonists Jack and Mabel do not initially realise that they are enacting a fairy tale — but when they do, they are caught by the magic and propelled forward through the known narrative. Though the icy beauty they encounter is “fantastical and impossible” (Ivey 86), they remain in thrall to its bewitchment. Ivey includes the Russian fairy tale ‘Little Daughter of the Snow’ in the appendix to her novel, this version written by Arthur Ransome (*Old Peter’s Russian Tales*, 1916). In this framed narrative, the children Vanya and Maroosia are told the story of ‘Snegurochka’, the snow maiden who is formed from snow by a childless old man and woman, and who comes to life to delight them until the moment they seem not to care for her, when she melts away into water. The self-conscious artistry of the tale, in which the storytelling itself becomes part of the story, is an important component repeated in the old man and woman’s artistic creation of the snow child. The self-awareness of artistry is vital in revealing the dual existence of ice as both artistic object of beauty and unpredictable natural substance; such a beauty will inevitably change and disappear under its creator’s hands, and this is the concept at the core of both Ransome and Ivey’s narratives.

Ivey weaves this process of creation and loss into her narrative, which constructs its vision of icy beauty with as much deliberation as Jack and Mabel fashion their snow child. It begins with the uncharacteristic impulse of the couple, on the first snow of winter, to build a “little snow girl” (47). With Mabel “shaving away the snow and narrowing the outline” (44) to make a skirt, Ivey establishes the language of artistic

production in forming the ‘outline’ of her icy beauty. Jack continues the artistic construction with his pocketknife: “Sculpted in the snow were perfect, lovely eyes, a nose and small white lips. She even thought she could see cheekbones and a little chin” (*ibid.*). Mabel’s response, repeated twice in quick succession, is “She’s beautiful” (*ibid.*), and in the adoption of the feminine pronoun the snow child is coming to life already. The concept of perfect loveliness is elaborated throughout the narrative, particularly in the symmetry of snowflakes, which will come to act as a metaphor for the snow child herself, and in the sense of magical impossibility that continues to bind Ivey’s novel to its source tale: such perfect icy beauty is too good to last in the human world.

This ice is also deceptive, like that examined in *The Ice Queen* and in the opening of *The Snow Child* when Mabel attempts to co-opt it to her suicide attempt. Ice simply will not stay still, however static it may appear to be. When Jack wakes in the night after making the snow child, he sees through the window “a flicker” (47), and then “at the edge of the forest, he saw it again. A flash of blue and red” (*ibid.*). Zipes distinguishes “miraculous transformation” (*Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* xvii) as the one constant of the fairy-tale form, and such transformation is evident here, in the flicker and flash of the miraculous snow child that Jack sees. This is the moment of transformation in Ivey’s novel, centred around beauty and occurring at its advent as if beauty were a force for change, just as it is *The Ice Queen*, *Joanna*, *The Sea Lady*, *Fingersmith* and *Goblin Fruit*. Having been attributed perfect beauty by Mabel, the snow child is transformed into flesh — or an icy approximation of flesh. Transformation also occurs in a brief moment, the ‘instant of appearance’ by which Adorno characterises beauty, and accordingly the snow child appears in flickers and flashes. Zuidervaart unravels the paradoxes of Adorno’s theory, writing that, “As images, artworks are the duration of transience. As apparitions, they are instantaneous explosions of their objectified process” (196): therefore, works of art are suspended visions of the process of their own creation, but simultaneously explosions putting this process into effect.

The process of the snow child's creation is built initially on mere flickers, with the repetition of terms such as "glimpsed" (55), "glancing" (56), "slight" (47, 55) and "quick" (47, 55). Lüthi describes the fairy-tale narrative style as predicated on the repetition of key elements, which give symmetry to the tale while preserving its enigmatic nature, since these repeated elements are never expanded upon (51). Ivey borrows this fairy-tale technique in her repetition of flashes and glimpses, but the novel form in which she is working requires greater depth and detail than Lüthi attributes to the fairy tale. Therefore, in order to evolve her narrative into a full exploration of the icy beauty she has introduced, Ivey builds detail into the fleeting moments of appearance in a gradual disclosure of the snow child as a fully-developed character. This method of engagement with the fairy tale is employed by a number of contemporary writers, in particular Byatt and Shaw in their detailed elaborations of the glass coffin in *Possession* and Cinderella's slipper in *The Girl with Glass Feet*, and which will be examined in the next chapter.

However, there is further significance to this process of creation that involves its own suspension, and which is so clearly demonstrated by the fairy-tale form. Zuidervaart explains the implications of Adorno's claim for art: "As both process and instant, the artwork is social history, productively frozen into an imageless image, and receptively thawed in a mediated moment. In this moment, possibility appears to be actual" (196). Here, Zuidervaart appropriates Adorno's own repeated use of ice and water metaphors to describe the nature of art as freezing and thawing, metaphors whose natural, physical origin helps articulate Adorno's argument that artworks employ material from the empirical world and thus remain implicated in it. Art is not purely abstract, even if its workings render the material world abstract to an extent.

The importance of art's involvement with the external world is made clear by Zuidervaart's claim that in the experiencing of art "possibility appears to be actual" (*ibid.*), so when art is assimilated into human life it is "mediated" (*ibid.*), connected to the empirical world and

appearing to have an actual existence within it. In this way the artwork becomes part of “social history” (*ibid.*), acting through its audience. This may explain why art forms such as the literary fairy tale and twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction have consistently used water and ice metaphors for human beauty, because such metaphors mirror the engagement of people with art that is both fluid (in process) and frozen in a moment of stasis. As Zuidervaart states, “Experiencing art amounts to becoming aware of an immanent process in the instant when it is suspended” (*ibid.*). It is in this awareness that Zipes identifies the potential for social transformation within the literary transformations of image and convention in the fairy-tale form. If art can engage with human life, then the metamorphoses it presents can be extended into social change.

Jack and Mabel’s encounter with an apparently magical child made of snow is itself an intrusion of fairy tale into their empirical lives. Jack’s first glimpse of the snow child reveals only a “flash of blue and red” (47), but the second shows the “red scarf at the neck, and white hair trailing down the back” (*ibid.*) that they had given their snow child, and so these instants of appearance engage in a further process of narrative creation. Mabel’s experience repeats her husband’s, as she sees first “Blue fabric. Red fur” (55), which crystallises into “A child, slight and quick in a blue coat” (*ibid.*) and a red fox at her side. From initial colours, the snow girl is given shape, or a partial shape, flashes of detail such as scarf, hair, coat. She also leaves behind footprints, an apparent proof of her physical existence, yet they contain magic too: Jack is “unsettled” (50) when he realises that the child-sized footprints “began at the heap of snow and led only in one direction” (50-1), suggesting that the snow child they created has come to life and simply walked away. Equally, when the weather turns colder “the child’s tracks became edged in frost” (54), turning them into icy works of art which “trailed sparkling and delicate through Mabel’s thoughts, and left her feeling as if she had forgotten something” (*ibid.*).

The memory prompted in Mabel by the footprints is the fairy tale of ‘The Little Daughter of the Snow’, further implying that the child they have

glimpsed has leapt straight out of a book, an artistic creation come to life. Although Jack and Mabel attempt to explain the little girl's existence rationally, discussing whether any of the neighbouring families could be missing a child (57), and worrying about "a little girl alone outside in the freezing winter" (54), they are reluctant to give up the magic of their glimpsed snow child. The impossibility of the situation, in which a snowman comes alive, coupled with the apparent evidence to support it — footprints "exposed as truth in the cold light of day" (49) — prompt Jack and Mabel to regard the event separately from the rest of daily life, into which it simply does not fit.

Like Kitty's withdrawal from the physical world in *Joanna*, the beauty towards which Jack and Mabel reach transcends the everyday, and would not survive being dragged into it. Adorno expresses the self-sufficiency of art which requires such a separation:

Inherently every artwork desires identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and thus travestied . . . Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work's own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. (5)

The snow and ice which form the snow child are both physical and magical, of the material world but transcending it. The violent forcing of artistic form on empirical reality, in which the empirical must conform to the artwork's identity, takes the materials of ice and snow out of the physical world and into a fairy-tale realm of impossibility, where beauty breathes life into inanimate objects. Ivey's narrative foregrounds this paradox, sustaining its description of the everyday world that Jack and Mabel inhabit, while weaving into this world the glimpses and images of a magical snow child, who herself seems to have come from a story. Jack and

Mabel have little choice but to separate these two types of experience, and accept that they seem to have fallen halfway into a fairy tale.

### **Ice Boxes: Construction and Containment**

One central way in which Jack and Mabel maintain this precarious balance between the everyday world and the magical is by emphasising the artistic nature of the snow child, as a creation over which they should have some control. Mabel observes the snow child consciously as a picture, first in the memory of an illustration to the *Snegurochka* fairy tale recalling how “In one picture . . . a child reached with her mitten hands down to . . . the old man and woman who had formed her from snow” (54). Later, when she catches her first glimpse of the child, she likens the vision of flashing blue coat and red fox fur to “the flipping black-and-white pictures she had seen in a coin-operated illuminated box in New York City” (55). However, this picturesque red fox who accompanies the child as if it is her familiar disrupts Mabel’s containment of the snow child in pictures. At her first clear sighting of the snow child Mabel follows the “glancing blue eyes and small, impish face” (56), but reaching the spot she finds “a red fox where the child had been” (*ibid.*). Attempting to track the fox, Mabel is soon lost in a “tangle of child and fox footprints” (57), and it is this tangle of magical and animal elements that resists the couple’s attempts to characterise the child as an ideal of perfectly formed, icy beauty.

Their desire to contain her in a pure, otherworldly form expresses the “irresistibility of beauty” (68) as Adorno describes it, as “a sublimation of sexuality that extends into the highest artworks, [which] is exerted by their purity, their distance from materiality and any concern with effect” (*ibid.*). The concept of sublimated sexuality articulates the separation of art and beauty from the material world, an idea frequently emphasised by Adorno, and by Kitty in *Joanna* with her horrified rejection of sex. This is the same kind of horror experienced by Mabel, “transfixed” (56) when she discovers the fox where the snow child had

been, “eating some dead thing . . . blood spattered on the snow and smeared the fox’s muzzle” (*ibid.*). The conflation of the snow child and the fox, which heads away “along the girl’s path” when shooed by Mabel, imposes the brute materiality of the world in which the child appears to live, complete with the “silvery intestines, tiny bones, blood and feathers” (*ibid.*) that are unavoidably part of outdoor survival in an Alaskan winter.

It becomes increasingly important to Mabel especially that the snow girl exist as a magical beauty separate from such disgusting reminders of physical mortality; in this she diverges from Jack’s less squeamish fascination with the paradox that the snow girl presents. Initially his reaction is similar to his wife’s when, examining the child’s footprints, he finds a “dead snowshoe hare beside the doorstep” (49-50). Shocked by this intrusion of dead flesh into a mysterious fairy tale, he takes the time to ascertain that it had been killed by human means — “strangled, most likely with a thin snare” (50) — and then throws “the dead hare as far as he could into the trees” (*ibid.*). It only becomes clear to him later that the hare was an offering from the snow child, a realisation that increases his desire to unravel the paradox of the otherworldly but simultaneously animal child living wild in the woods, in contrast to Mabel’s determination to retain the fairy-tale purity of the snow girl’s image. Before this point, however, Jack dispatches the dead hare and then, not satisfied with the apparently magical transformation of his snow girl, he follows the footprints, observing that they “didn’t seem like the tracks of a lost child” (50), but in their “loops and turns” (*ibid.*) more like those of “a wild animal, a fox or ermine” (50-1). And indeed, the child’s tracks are “joined here and there by another, different set . . . Fox” (51): concluding that the fox does not seem to be stalking the child, Jack decides that it must be her companion.

Jack’s acceptance of the union between supernatural mystery and animal physicality enables him to understand and later communicate with the child more effectively than Mabel, as he comprehends the two-way synthesis which, as we have seen, Adorno posits as a key movement of art: “The synthesis achieved by means of the artwork is not simply forced on its

elements; rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another; thus the synthesis itself is a product of otherness" (9). The making of a snow child entails not merely the shaping of snow with love, but a fusion of physical material and abstract form in which both remain active, communicating with each other. The fox is an integral component of the image of the snow child because it keeps her material aspect dynamic, keeping the ice that forms her in the empirical realm so as to prevent her slipping entirely into fairy tale, becoming an abstract idea of beauty. This communication between opposing elements is what draws an artwork into a complete whole, maintaining the equilibrium of abstract and concrete, form and matter — this is "the reconciling aspect of form" (Adorno 65), and Jack's acceptance of the paradox underpinning it is the only thing that prevents the snow child from fading entirely from his and Mabel's lives.

Mabel is overwhelmed by the magic and beauty of the snow child, only at times able to consider her as a human child rather than a fairy tale. The snow that surrounds their isolated cabin itself comes to seem connected to the child, who appears immune to the cold and runs across snowdrifts as if weightless. In one instance she appears to Mabel framed perfectly by ice, when the steam from the basin freezes on the cabin window into "thick frost unfurled in feathers and swirls across the glass" (83). In a continuation of the image of the child's frosted footsteps, the frost on the window takes on an artistic aspect: "Lacy white vines grew in twists and loops, and icy flowers blossomed" (*ibid.*). The metaphorical growing of impossible, beautiful ice vines and flowers establishes a frame for the equally impossible and beautiful child, who is also presented as an artistic work created by Jack and Mabel. As Mabel watches, the frost covers the glass in patterns "like fine etching" (*ibid.*), and when she melts some of it away she sees her own creation looking back at her. Crying out to Jack, she describes "Her little face, right there in our window. She had fur all around her head, like a wild animal" (*ibid.*). Mabel's reference to the child's animal appearance once again activates the paradox of her magical and material

nature. However, reduced to a simile in a perfectly framed glimpse of beauty, the animal fur framing the child's face is rendered picturesque, far from the image of the fox devouring its prey.

Later, when Jack and Mabel have coaxed the child, who eventually discloses that her name is Faina, into their house for occasional meals, the girl sees Mabel's sketchpad. In the following passage, the narrative presents their dialogue embedded in the prose, without the quotation marks used in the rest of the novel. Their disembodied voices, melting into the description of Mabel drawing, acquire a dream-like quality reminiscent of the source tale, 'The Little Daughter of the Snow', with its concise narrative style and "depthless" (Lüthi 99) characters that Lüthi argues are typical of the fairy-tale form. In this and in her request to Mabel, "Could you draw a picture of me?" (121), Faina is abstracted more entirely into art, despite the intimacy that seems to develop between her and Mabel. In her role as artist Mabel poses the child by the window, "so the winter light shone on the side of her face and lit up her blond hair" (*ibid.*), and once presented to us in this portrait style, Faina "never complained or moved" (*ibid.*). As compensation for all the tantalising glimpses of the beautiful snow child, the narrative here slows down into stillness so that Mabel feels as if "With each stroke of the pencil . . . [she] caressed her cheek, stroked her hair" (*ibid.*). Her connection to Faina is through her beauty, and the act of transforming her into a work of art, piece by piece: "She drew the gentle curve of the child's cheekbones, the peaks of her small lips, the inquisitive arch of her blond eyebrows" (*ibid.*). Significantly, Mabel also focuses on trying to "capture the wildness" (*ibid.*) she still sees in the snow girl, but in doing so through the act of drawing her she is attempting to contain and reform her material nature into pure artistic form.

Having actively transformed Faina into a picture of the magical snow child that Mabel desires her to be — for then she would be their creation and their child — Mabel finds it increasingly difficult to distinguish material from metaphor when observing Faina. With her third person narrative that moves easily between Jack and Mabel's perspectives,

and only dips lightly into other characters' minds, Ivey is able to blur the distinction between actual events and a character's perception of them. So, when Faina asks Mabel if she can draw a snowflake, and then proceeds to catch one which "sat in the child's palm when it should have melted" (157), Ivey retains the possibility both that this is a magical child formed from snow, and also that Mabel may be deluded, narrating the magic into the moment herself. The narrative sustains this balance throughout the novel, never settling on either side and therefore keeping the paradox between Faina's material and magical nature dynamic.

Ivey's carefully balanced narrative demonstrates the kind of technique that produces successful artworks in Adorno's terms. According to Zuidervaart's interpretation, ideally "artistic form is a non-violent synthesis preserving divergent and contradictory impulses, sometimes even suspending itself for the sake of disparate content" (168). A suspension of this kind can be seen in *The Snow Child*'s lack of a neat explanatory ending; the narrative's refusal to explain to the apparently inexplicable acts as a continued disruption to its form, which can never quite draw to a close. However, it is precisely this that keeps the narrative dynamic, and gives it a semblance of life. The "non-violent synthesis" (*ibid.*) of opposing elements, the material and the magical beauty of Faina, is made flesh (and word) in Mabel's perception that "The child's blue eyes were wide and rimmed with frost" (157): since we are never given any indication as to whether such moments are magic or delusion, they remain suspended in a dynamic fusion of metaphor that melds ice and flesh into an impossible beauty.

However, even as Faina draws gradually closer to the couple and they get to know her as a real human child, their growing love for her causes them to continue attempting to contain her, to secure her in their lives. Each summer, the snow child disappears, leaving Jack and Mabel in uncertain hope of her return. Mabel acknowledges her inability to understand Faina's nature, deciding that "You did not have to understand miracles to believe in them" (204), but instead should "hold the little thing in your hands as long as you were able before it slipped like water between

your fingers" (ibid.). Here again, she likens Faina to a snowflake, beautiful but fleeting. And although she appears to accept the transitory nature of the child, her act of belief in this miracle serves as an act of containment, part of a process that ultimately, inevitably, leads to the final loss of Faina. During the first summer that the snow child is gone, Mabel makes her a coat, certain that she will be back to receive it. She intends the garment to be "sturdy and practical, but befitting a snow maiden" (ibid.), understanding like her husband that both aspects of Faina must be accommodated, but still taking on the active role of creator, shaping the child's nature into Mabel's own version of it — a version that clearly incorporates her desire to be both artist and mother. Accordingly, "Snowflakes, embroidered with white silk thread, would cascade down the front and back of the coat" (ibid.).

Each summer, Mabel makes a new coat for Faina, identical to the first with its white snowflakes, blue background and white fur trim, but each year larger to fit the child's very human growth. Almost without them realising it Faina grows into a woman, and while she retains her magical elusiveness she also falls in love with Garrett, the son of a neighbouring family. When Faina becomes pregnant the physical side of her nature is made visible in her swelling belly, her weight anchoring her to the ground so that she can no longer run like a sprite over snowdrifts. Clearly transformed from the fairy-tale snow child that she had been into "a tall, beautiful young woman" (350), Mabel is able to accept this aspect of Faina because the apparently inevitable ending of the *Snegurochka* tale, with the snow child melting away into nothing, now seems impossible. Instead Faina is rooted; "she had never seemed so substantial, so full of life" (ibid.).

However, Ivey presents two versions of this physicality, with Garrett's mother Esther offering a less idealised picture when she asks, "When she's saddled with a screaming brat and a sink full of dirty dishes, what then? Is she going to stick around long enough to be a wife and mother?" (343). Faina's habit of disappearing for days or weeks into the forest must come to an end, and the log cabin that Jack and Garrett build to

house the couple once they are married is symbolic of the snow child's containment. Once again, those enthralled by Faina's beauty wish to capture and shape it in a form of their own devising, whether a picture, a coat or a house.

The cabin, on the night of Garrett and Faina's wedding, illustrates the transitional state of Faina and her place in the narrative. It is unfinished, but to Mabel's eyes all the more lovely without a roof, "like a cathedral sculpted of trees and sky" (344). Faina is happy there, unworried by the cold — the house does not yet contain her, just as her pregnant body has not yet completely bound her to its flesh and the new life growing inside it. The wedding is a success. In Zuidervaart's words, "Adorno thinks of artistic form as an identity that makes the nonidentical less alien but lets it remain distinct" (168): the formative pressures that have transformed the alien little snow child into a wife and mother, part of the family, nonetheless maintain Faina's distinctness, the icy wildness and remote beauty that separates her from ordinary humans.

### **The Thaw**

The narrator of Hoffman's *Ice Queen* consciously chooses an icy existence as a protection against the messiness of human life in which she does not believe "that people got what they deserved" (11). As evidenced by the fairy tale she invents as a child to articulate her desires, to be transformed into ice is to become "so beautiful that everyone wanted her" (8) but so hard and impermeable that "Nothing could hurt her" (ibid.). But as we have seen, ice is the wrong substance in which to seek eternal stasis — at any point the uncontrollable dynamism of water may make itself known. And after the freeze comes the thaw: the second wish that the narrator makes, after thirteen years of cold, solitary living, demonstrates the unpredictability of the ice to which she has consigned herself. Driving through a thunderstorm with her brother Ned, she wishes that "lightning would strike me" (17). In *The Folktale*, Stith Thompson observes the

importance of wishes to the folk and fairy tale, in particular the binary of “wise and foolish wishes” (135). He writes that the details of these wishes “vary a good deal” (*ibid.*) in their numerous manifestations in tales across Europe, but “the idea is always the same, rewards and punishments” (*ibid.*). In *The Ice Queen*, the narrator’s second wish acts as a punishment for making the first — both of them in the tradition of the foolish wish outlined by Thompson — and she is indeed struck by lightning.

Since this is a novel explicitly engaging with the fairy tale, the potential for sudden change and transformation that lies in the narrator’s wish immediately erupts into being, presenting some evidence for Zipes’ identification of literary fairy tale form as a blueprint for social transformation. The implausible and the impossible routinely happen in the fairy tale, and sure enough, Hoffman’s narrator soon finds herself gazing out of the window at a ball in the sky that is “oddly bright” (20), and observing that “the flyswatter I was holding was edged in fire and that the fire was dripping down onto the floor” (21). Reminiscent of the icy metaphors in which Faina’s eyes are rimmed with frost in *The Snow Child*, or her face is haloed by ice patterns on a window, Hoffman’s narrator is suddenly shaped no longer by ice but by fire, which outlines her form and transforms it. That the fire is ‘dripping’ reminds us of what is happening to the ice in which she has metaphorically encased herself. Her wish comes true and she is struck by lightning: the ice queen starts to melt.

At least, she appears to melt. When the narrator wakes up in hospital, damaged but reluctantly alive, her icy defences are breached and she can now feel what it really means to be an ice queen. The lightning strike has made her unable to see the colour red, the colour of heat and passion, making her realise that “I had lost something before I’d known its worth” (23). As a result, “All I saw was ice; all I felt was the cold of my own ruined self” (22). At this point she does not fully understand that the loss of the colour red makes her feel “completely bereft” (23) of its metaphorical power — her observation that “Whatever had once been red was now cloudy and pale” (22) is in fact a description of the way she has

lived for the last thirteen years, since her mother's death. And where she had been numb to this before, completely iced over, the encroaching thaw emphasises that "Inside, my heart felt frozen" (23) and for the first time in years she cries, allowing her icy self to turn back into water, "sobbing" (ibid.). And so, feeling frozen, the narrator pursues heat. She goes searching for a man known as Lazarus Jones, who had reportedly been struck by lightning and lain dead for forty minutes before coming back to life in the morgue, his skin "sizzling" (49) and too hot to touch.

The heat of Lazarus Jones is presented in a surprising correspondence with the cold of the ice queen. Having tracked down the reclusive Jones, the narrator is struck by his appearance: "What no one had mentioned about Lazarus Jones was that he was beautiful" (54). Just like the ice queen in the narrator's childhood story, who is so beautiful that everyone comes "to talk to her. But she wouldn't answer" (8), Jones has become a legendary figure in the area, but none have managed to get close to him. His fiery beauty is just as much a defence from the rest of humanity as the ice queen's, and in him she meets her match. The connection between his fire and her ice is established in the narrator's description of Jones' beauty in comparison to her own. She remarks that "His eyes were dark, darker than mine" (54), and that "His hair was dark and . . . longer than mine" (ibid.). Importantly, Jones outdoes the narrator in these comparisons: she has come to see him precisely because he has gone further towards death than she has, and she cannot "begin anything that remotely resembled a life until I understood death" (55). The correlation of ice and death that we have observed throughout *The Snow Child* and *The Ice Queen* is challenged at this point, as the narrator attempts to overcome her fascinated fear of death and transform it into a fully lived life. Having lived in an icy approximation of death, unfeeling and uninvolved, Hoffman's narrator now pursues the burning beauty of Lazarus Jones to shock herself back into the human realm, and thus illuminating the workings behind her wish to be struck by lightning.

The meeting of fire and ice is necessarily violent, a collision. After her first meeting with Jones, the narrator finds that “where he’d grabbed my arm heat blisters had risen” (57) and where “he’d whispered to me, my ear was burning” (ibid.). The beginning of their affair is confrontational, as they each demonstrate the elemental powers given to them by the lightning: Jones breathes fire, setting alight a piece of paper, while the narrator wonders what she can offer him; “I had ice in my veins; I was colder and more distant than a dark, sunless planet” (84). When they kiss, it becomes clear to her that Jones has been craving ice, since the ice bath he was placed in after his lightning strike had saved his life “when he was burning up alive” (85). What he needs is a “cold woman like me” (ibid.) even though “the elements most drawn to each other are the ones that destroy each other” (ibid.).

This opposition of elements has a fairy-tale precedent in ‘The Snow-Daughter and the Fire-Son’ collected in Andrew Lang’s *Yellow Fairy Book* of 1894. Like *The Ice Queen*, this tale begins with a wish — like Jack and Mabel in *The Snow Child*, it is the wish of a couple to have a child. Here, a woman looks out of the window on a snowy day when she makes this wish, and when an icicle drops into her mouth she says to her husband, “Perhaps I shall give birth to a snow child now!” (206). Of course, her wish comes true and she gives birth to a Snow-daughter reminiscent of Ivey’s snow child. Like Faina, the Snow-daughter is “white as snow and as cold as ice” (ibid.) and “all summer she insisted on spending in the cellar, and in the winter she would sleep outside in the snow, and the colder it was the happier she seemed to be” (ibid.). The precariousness of this existence within extreme cold is made clear when the Fire-son is born, conceived by a stray ember from the fire: like Lazarus Jones, “He was as red as fire, and as hot to touch” (207). The two cannot go near each other, and when the Snow-daughter marries a king the Fire-son burns him to death, provoking a fight between the siblings “the like of which had never been seen on earth” (208). We are left with the inevitable outcome, watching “the Snow-daughter melting into water and the Fire-son burn to a cinder” (ibid.).

The brutal and irreconcilable opposition of fire and ice presented in Lang's tale looms over Hoffman's narrative with the narrator likening the attraction between them to that of "a sparrow to a hawk, a hawk to a sparrow" (ibid.). The fact that she does not specify who is the hawk and who is the sparrow makes clear that they are both equally dangerous and in danger themselves. This circularity is characteristic of the beauty presented in all the novels studied here: human beauty that is transformed by metaphor into art becomes bewitching, perilous, but also vulnerable in its transitional state.

Adorno employs the same grammatical uncertainty when discussing artistic beauty in *Aesthetic Theory*, arguing that "great artworks, as destructive works, have also retained the power to destroy in the authority of their success. Their radiance is dark; the beautiful permeates negativity, which appears to have mastered it" (66). In the latter sentence it is unclear whether negativity has mastered beauty or vice versa: they are locked in the same mutual attraction and destruction as Hoffman's narrator and Lazarus Jones. Adorno emphasises that artistic beauty arises out of the fear of undifferentiated, chaotic nature, with artistic form violently altering the nature of its empirical materials (67). A successful artwork must therefore be or have been powerfully violent, and so the beauty that emerges from this process is imbued with the negativity of the violence which gave birth to it. In 'The Snow-Daughter and the Fire-Son' the meeting of fire and ice is very much a battle, with each trying to overpower the other. These contrasting modes of beauty cannot subsist together, and so in Adornian style the artwork is structured around their violent opposition and mutual destruction.

And yet, as we have seen in the Water chapter and in *The Snow Child*, "those artworks that succeed rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence. This alone is the reconciling aspect of form" (65). The materiality of the fire and ice that are shaped by form into a narrative retains its power to disrupt that narrative form, to the benefit of the artwork. Adorno continues, "The violence done

to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form" (*ibid.*), arguing that the form of an artwork is equally shaped by the disruptions it incurs from its empirical source. The apparently inevitable destruction of the embodiments of both fire and ice, Hoffman's narrator and Lazarus Jones, in the manner of their fairy-tale predecessors is resisted by these organic forces.

The metaphorical beauty of fire and of ice develops into a collaboration that disrupts the conventional direction of their narrative. While the elemental meeting of Jones and the narrator is certainly a collision, its trajectory is not a straightforward one towards each other's destruction. Only a partial destruction is desired; of the artistic form that controls the characters through the metaphorical identification of each as a fiery or icy beauty. The narrator seeks a man of fire to melt the ice that has frozen her heart: Jones desires an icy woman to cool the heat that consumes him. Two people are thus presented, entirely overtaken by metaphors, who pursue their metaphorical counterpart to destroy the metaphor governing themselves in order to return to a more literal and ordinary humanity.

Although the narrator initially welcomed the ice into herself, taking refuge from feeling and uncertainty in the cold, impermeable metaphor of the ice queen, she finds after her lightning strike — an encounter with death — that she is more alive than she thought. The opposing metaphors of beauty, fire and ice, in fact express the same thing: beauty takes flesh out of the human realm and into that of art, rendering it strange and untouchable. The ice queen and the snow child cannot be accessed by human desire because they are too inhuman, their beauty is chiselled out of ice and would be melted by human touch, if it did not freeze the toucher to death first. Hoffman's narrator and Lazarus Jones attempt to negotiate this impasse so that she can be warmed just enough, and he cooled just enough, to be human again. The intensity of her relationship with Jones causes the narrator to wonder if "this was the other half of my death wish — half fire, half water" (86), when the two of them copulate in a bathtub of ice-cold water made necessary by his burning skin. However, it is for the strength of

this sensation, even to pain, that the narrator pursues Jones, remarking that “I wasn’t sure I had ever felt anything before” (*ibid.*).

The heat of Lazarus Jones serves to demonstrate the instability of the ice metaphor, constructed as it is out of water, an unpredictable substance which has been transformed. Ice may easily change its form again, especially when placed in contact with heat. The water in the bathtub illustrates the return of the “amorphous” (Adorno 65) to the rigid form imposed on the narrator and the narrative by the ice metaphor, a disruption of form by the same empirical substance which helped compose it. Water is frozen into ice, and by the machinations of the narrative is melted back into water, destabilising and reconstituting the narrative structure in accordance with the changeability of ice/water.

The heat of passion is the catalyst for a further transformation of icy beauty in both *The Ice Queen* and *The Snow Child*. After giving birth to a son, Faina in *The Snow Child* initially seems to embrace motherhood, appearing less icy and magical as she nurses her child. But when the snows come — the empirical element returning to the narrative — Faina is overwhelmed by the “warm, weighted life” (380) that Mabel now observes in her, and falls into a fever. The fire of her passionate relationship with Garrett is transformed into the dangerous fire of fever, threatening the construction of family life in which she is contained, as symbolised by the cabin. In her illness she is only placated by being taken out into the freezing snow, stating — without quotation marks, an uncertain and extraordinary figure again — “Out here, with the trees and the snow, I can breathe again” (373). Ultimately Mabel must face the ending of the Snegurochka fairy tale which she had so dreaded, in which the snow child melts into a puddle of water and is lost forever. Faina disappears: her blue coat, the signifier for Mabel’s attempts to shape and contain her, lies abandoned on the makeshift outdoor bed, with her nightgown “still buttoned inside” (374). As if having melted away entirely, Faina is gone.

In the narrative’s ultimate fidelity to the source tale, and in the withdrawing of icy beauty from the human world that tried to contain it, art

triumphs over the human in Ivey's novel. In her absence Faina fulfils the untouchable remoteness that had always characterised her beauty, and in disappearing from the narrative she is abstracted into a further perfection. In the epilogue, Jack finds Mabel's drawings of Faina along with the Snegurochka "illustration of the fairy-tale girl, half snow and half child" (380). Faina is conflated with her fairy-tale paradigm, herself now a purely artistic creation of "soft pencil marks" (*ibid.*). Hoffman's ice queen, on the other hand, chooses to relinquish beauty, leaving Lazarus Jones and withdrawing herself from both the fire and the ice, beautiful but perilous metaphors to which she had been in thrall. She is in agreement with Adorno's arguments regarding the threat posed by artistic beauty: "As if they feared that immortality would draw out their life blood, even the most seemingly neutral objects that art has sought to eternalize as beautiful radiate — entirely out of their materials — hardness, unassimilability, indeed ugliness" (66). The beauty of Andersen's Snow Queen to which she had aspired no longer appears attractive, but unnaturally hard and alien.

Nonetheless, in the contrasting conclusions of the two novels it becomes clear that artistic form and the 'amorphous' empirical element of art cannot be divided so that one is located in the ice metaphor and one in human flesh: in *The Snow Child* ice resolves into identification with the empirical, as Faina escapes constraint by the narrative of family life into the wild natural world. As *The Ice Queen* draws to a close, however, the metaphor of the ice queen and all the icy metaphorical language that accompanies it is presented as a rigidly structured artistic form which threatens the liberty of empirical human life. The evolution of this contrast demonstrates the dynamic nature of the artwork emphasised by Adorno, with the opposing forces of the artistic and the empirical helping to constitute each other as well as threatening and attempting to subsume them.

There is not, therefore, an absolute division between the artistic and the human — or the concrete and the abstract — although in all the novels studied in this thesis such a division is implied. Rather, the two are so

implicated in each other's existence and operations that they exist on a spectrum, with metaphor and all its linguistic and structural manifestations straddling the extremes of flesh and art. The metaphor of icy beauty is constructed from the physical substance of ice, appropriating its characteristics and associations of cold hardness coupled with danger and unpredictability. These qualities are projected on to the characters' human forms in a physical transformation from flesh to ice; however, this empirical ice is abstracted into linguistic imagery and used to create an artistic structure that functions in contradiction to the uncontrolled nature of its empirical existence. All the opposition and conflict between the human and the artistic that we have encountered in *The Snow Child* and *The Ice Queen* is internal, enacted in the ever-changing metaphor of icy beauty.

*The Ice Queen* ends with the human element in dominance, although it is through death — close accomplice of ice — that this is achieved. Having become, like Faina, overwhelmed by the heat of her passion for Lazarus Jones, the narrator abandons her death wishes and turns back to her family to recreate a life, only to find her brother Ned dying of cancer. In their contact with fire the ice metaphors that structure the narrative around cold, remote beauty and a life of unchanging routine are ultimately destabilised. The narrator's identity, carefully built on the measured relation of her emotionless thoughts and repetitive actions, is broken down and made fluid, melted back to water in the desire that Lazarus Jones incites. Her narrative and her self begin to pool around him, circling him as subject to the neglect of all else; "Throughout the summer the only thing I could think about was the road to Lazarus's" (88). Equally, when the narrator manages to escape this whirlpool, the changeless environment she had constructed around herself — living alone, dull job as a librarian, no friends — is destabilised and altered by Ned's impending death. As her practical counterpart, the scientist sceptical of her fairy tale-inspired belief in a cruel and disordered world, the loss of Ned unbalances one of the oppositions by which she had defined herself.

In the last part of the novel the ice metaphors disappear completely, replaced by an altered metaphorical lexis of water and air. On his last trip, to see the spectacular migration of thousands of monarch butterflies in Big Sur, the narrator describes her brother as looking “like a cloud” (203). The inhuman aspect of the ice metaphor that she had embodied is transferred to him, but without the cold hardness: Ned’s is a post-human softness, fading from life. However, Ned’s transformation does not subsume the human to the artistic, and thereby demonstrates that there is no clear distinction between the two. The cloud metaphor, developed as they discuss cloud types while on the aeroplane (200) and are caught in “a whirlwind of monarchs” (205) gives Ned’s death a soft, blurred beauty. The pain of the flesh is altered by these metaphors, as Ned says to his wife, “Everything has just changed a thousand times over” (*ibid.*). The pain of death that opens the novel, with their mother’s demise, occurs in “the season of ice” (4) and freezes the narrator into an imitative deathly beauty: Ned’s death has a warm, living beauty represented by the cloud of butterflies “sleepy, slow, whirling . . . exhausted and beautiful” (205).

After this final transformation the narrator rewrites her fairy tale of the girl who turns to ice for Ned’s daughter, born after he has died. This time, the girl “thought to climb over the mountain instead of standing in place and freezing” (207). On reaching the other side, “she started to melt; she left a blue river behind her” (208) in a dynamic version of the ice metaphor that accepts both the transformation inherent in ice and the transience of human flesh. Having now “counted thirty-two colors of ice, from indigo to scarlet” (210), it is evident that the narrator has expanded the icy model on which she had built herself to include all its inevitable and unknown metamorphoses, through all shapes and colours and back to water. Neither ice nor water are stable enough metaphors to completely transform human beauty into the immortality of art: even Faina, who melts back into the fairy tale from which she came, leaves behind a son whose living, changing life takes over the narrative from his mother’s cold beauty, which remains only in pictures and memories.

As we have seen in the metaphors of water and ice, constructed images of human beauty can be destabilised and reformed when the transformative capacity of such metaphors (and the fairy-tale form out of which they evolve) is harnessed in a fictional narrative. However, any reformulation of human beauty predicated on ice or water remains unstable and vulnerable to change. The following chapters, Glass and Gold, demonstrate the transformative potential of inorganic metaphors of beauty, and explore the question of how worthy and desirable the pursuit of absolute human perfection really is.

## Chapter 4

### Glass

Glass is a paradoxical substance. We can look right through it, but cannot touch what we see. It is equally contradictory on the molecular level, since the molten glass mixture of silica, lime and an alkali (such as soda or potash) flows freely until cooled, but as it solidifies the glass retains the “random molecular structure of a liquid” (Klein and Lloyd 9). While most solids have a “crystalline structure” (*ibid.*) that increases their durability, glass is built on shakier foundations. It may seem hard and impermeable, but it can be shattered in an instant. Blown glass objects are often adorned with tiny bubbles and swirling imprints, the “congealed residues of somebody else’s breath”, as Isobel Armstrong describes it in *Victorian Glassworlds* (4). Yet the image of a person behind glass, or someone possessed of a glassy beauty, does not convey humanity but rather a cold, preserved inhumanity. Warm flesh can take on a ghostly, unnatural sheen when viewed through a glass screen, and these properties make glass the perfect material to represent a chaste and unattainable type of human beauty. With glass, then, we can look but not touch.

Glass appears consistently as a fairy-tale motif, evoking a cold beauty so remote and untouchable that it seems not to be flesh at all, but a purely visual phenomenon. Whether it is a beautiful princess placed at the top of a glass mountain, the flawlessly smooth sides of which prove fatal to her suitors; or the glass castles that proliferate in seventeenth-century French fairy tales as luxurious prisons; the glass slippers, distaffs, axes and keys that represent sexual virtue and beauty; or perhaps most significantly, the glass coffin that confounds life and death in its exquisite display of a motionless body: evidently glass articulates some important aspects of human beauty. This may be the transformative power of glass as a metaphor

since it is itself a material of sublimation, changing from commonplace sand and ash into delicate, beautiful objects.

Contemporary novels *Ghostwalk* by Rebecca Stott (2007) and Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room* (2009) explicitly use glass as a metaphor for transformation: in *Ghostwalk* it is bound up with alchemy, turning base metals into gold and mortality to immortality; and for Mawer the 1930s glass, steel and concrete house of the title represents a break with tradition into a new world. Lüthi writes in *The European Folktale* that "The folktale transforms the world; it puts a spell on its elements and gives them a different form" (24). Beauty has a similar power, especially as a device in fairy tales, as when Cinderella is transformed from a ragged slave into a lovely princess, wealthy and adored — just by becoming beautiful. When she flees at midnight, it is the glass slipper she loses that comes to represent her superlative beauty, further transforming her into an object of pursuit. As both "medium and barrier" (Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds* 7), glass displays beauty and simultaneously protects it, making that beauty unattainable and therefore a prize to be sought.

This is the way that philosophy has viewed beauty ever since Plato proposed that beauty was itself separate from beautiful objects, and should be pursued as an abstract concept. The apprehension of beauty in itself as "a single form" (*Symposium* 41; 211b) supposedly brings greater wisdom and delight than the contemplation of transitory physical objects, however beautiful they may be. When glass is used in fiction as a metaphor for human beauty it visibly enacts this process of detachment, transforming warm, living flesh into a hard, transparent image of itself. Such an image of beauty becomes, in the two novels studied in this chapter, increasingly abstracted from the person who possesses it. Indeed, as the title of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) suggests, it becomes unclear whether the characters possess beauty, or beauty possesses them. The protagonist of Ali Shaw's 2009 novel *The Girl with Glass Feet* also becomes possessed by beauty, as her gradual transformation into glass renders her body strangely

beautiful in its transparent perfection, but no longer her own; her glass feet, “though gracefully shaped, were amputations” (187).

When glass appears as a metaphor for beauty in fairy tales or literature, it almost always connotes chastity, in accordance with the remoteness of glassy beauty from human contact, its separation even from its possessor. *The Girl with Glass Feet* and *Possession* challenge this tradition, exploring the chastity imposed on their protagonists by the glassy nature of their beauty, and their attempts to negotiate a space for human connection within or despite the glass encasing them. The fairy-tale tradition offers numerous examples of glass as a metaphor for chaste beauty — and often as a method of enforcing chastity as well. For instance, in the frame tale of the *Arabian Nights* a demon imprisons his wife in a glass case in order to keep her from cuckolding him. For the purposes of the narrative, there is no specific need for the case to be made of glass, but it serves as a metaphor for the motif of chastity: again, the concept that one can look at beauty but not touch (trans. Haddawy 12-13). The qualities evoked by glass are more explicitly utilised in Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's original fairy tale “Finette” (1695-98), which describes an anxious king leaving each of his three daughters with a glass distaff that will shatter if they compromise their virtue. It is significant that the story's full title includes the phrase “The Discreet Princess”: it is only by resisting the advances of a cunning and charming prince (to whom both her sisters succumb and bear children) that Finette keeps her magical distaff intact, and reaches a happy ending (*Beauties, Beasts and Enchantments* 77-92). Her sisters are cruelly punished and die.

Finette's discretion and chastity are conceptually bound up with the glass distaff, the central message being that virtue is as precious and easily shattered as glass. Virginity is also made visible by this metaphor, Finette literally carrying it around with her in the shape of an archetypal female instrument for spinning. The visibility of feminine virtue ties it in further with physical beauty: both are on display, and it is precisely this that incites their pursuit, yet all suitors must be resisted to preserve the fragile beauty/

virtue. The emphasis on chastity in connection with beauty has a clear precedent in Plato's *Symposium*, developed by philosophers such as Augustine and continuing to influence the aesthetics of Kant and his successors. The claim that physical beauty must be despised if one is to transcend it to higher objects of contemplation is illustrated in Alcibiades' drunken tirade against Socrates.

The young, handsome Alcibiades enters the symposium in a jealous rage at seeing Socrates sharing a couch with Agathon, another bright young thing. It is made clear that Socrates and Alcibiades are lovers, but although the younger man is smitten — “the moment he starts to speak . . . my heart starts leaping in my chest” (45; 215e) — he spitefully relates how Socrates rejected his sexual advances, even when all propriety had been observed. When he challenged Socrates for spurning his beauty, he says, the philosopher replied, “you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself” (47; 217c). Though Socrates is enamoured by the beauty of young men, he remains absolutely chaste since he sees their beauty as a trivial, transitory embodiment of ‘beauty in itself’, which is always in his mind. Referring to Alcibiades’ excessive pride, Stanley Rosen writes, “Alcibiades is the victim of a human mania where only a divine mania will do” — that is, the philosophical mania for abstract knowledge (283). For Socrates to satisfy his appetites upon physical beauty would degrade it from an image of transcendence to a messy, passing pleasure.

Denis Donoghue, like Byatt in *Possession*, is keen to keep Plato's aesthetics in contemporary discussion, since Plato's figuration of human beauty as the “paradigm [of] the beautiful, the true, and the good” (Donoghue 63) remains influential. One of the key problems of human beauty is that it has come to symbolise these superlative abstract values and so “made it more difficult to protect the beautiful person from being merely desired” (*ibid.*), in either sexual or abstract ways, their human individuality becoming peripheral. This is precisely the dilemma which

Byatt's protagonist Maud must negotiate, as shall be shown in the course of this chapter.

Plato's story of Alcibiades stresses that chastity is crucial to the attainment of beauty in two ways, since not only must beauty itself remain chaste and abstract, but anyone who wishes to possess it must actually refuse to gratify their desires. As we have seen in the Fruit chapter, Christian philosophers such as Augustine and his successors develop the Platonic dichotomy of concrete and abstract beauty to the extent that flesh becomes a metaphor for sin in general, whether that sin is a physical one like lust or a sin of the mind such as anger (*City of God* 548-9). Physicality becomes equated with sexuality, and with regard to beauty, sexuality is seen as base and corrupting, destroying the fragility and cold sublimity that makes beauty so appealing. True beauty, therefore, can only be abstract, and this applies to human beauty as much as to any other kind. Here we see a clear precedent for all the literary metaphors that work to sublimate human beauty out of the physical realm, so as to make it a morally acceptable object of desire. A fairy-tale example of this attitude towards beauty is provided by Giambattista Basile, who uses glass as both crime and punishment for the corruption of chastity in his tale "Green Meadow": a love-struck prince builds a crystal<sup>7</sup> tunnel from the palace to his beloved's bed, but when her envious sisters smash it he emerges thoroughly battered and chastened (*The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, trans. Canepa, originally published 1634-36 152-6).

### **Chaste Transformations**

Ali Shaw's *The Girl with Glass Feet* explores the process of transforming flesh into art, interrogating the metamorphoses of fairy tale tradition in a detailed novelistic context that rejects the simple inclusion of instantaneous magic. In a similar manner, *The Snow Child* maintains Faina's apparently magical nature within an everyday human context,

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<sup>7</sup> Seventeenth-century French fairy tales tend to favour crystal over glass, but their properties and purposes within the narrative are identical.

describing processes of natural growth and decay (particularly Faina's pregnancy and the killing of animals for food) which oppose the spontaneous fairy-tale magic that seems to bring a snow sculpture to life. In *The Girl with Glass Feet*, Shaw describes in relentless detail the visceral transformation of his protagonist Ida MacLaird into glass, from the feet up. Artistic, inorganic beauty fuses with flesh in an intricate and painful process with an inevitably fatal conclusion. Ida's human existence is threatened much more directly by her transformation into art than, for instance, that of Hoffman's narrator in *The Ice Queen*, because for Ida the metaphor for her beauty, glass, becomes terrifyingly literal.

Both *The Girl with Glass Feet* and *Possession* trace the workings of transformation through the metaphor of glass, itself a substance transformed from sand and ash into sparkling beauty. Shaw's novel focuses on the implications of imposing absolute artistic perfection on human flesh, viewing the change as a violent and hostile one to the human element, which becomes mere material for artistic form to play with. Such an Adornian presentation of the internal conflict within an artwork of form and material is challenged by *Possession*, if perhaps not profoundly undermined. Byatt's narrative negotiates this conflict into a productive balance, in which the glass metaphor is not escaped or abandoned in the way that Hoffman's narrator relinquishes ice to reclaim a more human life. Byatt's protagonist Maud remains a glassy beauty, but transforms the metaphor itself so as to live as both artwork and artist, maintaining an active human existence. Perhaps the stability of glass as substance and metaphor in comparison to water and ice may account for the malleability of the beauty it confers: if handled carefully, its shape can be changed without shattering.

Nonetheless, Maud's acceptance of the glass metaphor that encases her still relies on the idea of untouchable, abstract beauty as opposed to fleshly sexuality, in the old mode of Augustine's Christian philosophy. Maud posits the notion of "celibacy as the new volupté" (271), taking pleasure in the sense of transgression implied in the image of

voluptuousness, which is sinful precisely because of its physical sensuality. This “volupté” is itself sublimated here to construct a rarified pleasure that derives from sexuality at the same time that it denies it — a very similar pleasure to God’s beauty for Augustine — a disembodied “food of the soul” (*Confessions* 17). Maud’s sublimated pleasure also bears a resemblance to the pleasure enjoyed by Socrates in the *Symposium*, rejecting physical beauty so as to bask in its abstracted form. Glass metaphors for human beauty enact this paradox, but do so differently in the two novels explored here. In contrast to Maud’s abstract sexuality, *The Girl with Glass Feet* presents the onset of Ida’s glass beauty as an enforcement of chastity, through the increasing impossibility for Ida’s lover Midas to touch her sexually; the glass that painfully encroaches on her flesh and organs renders them hard and numb, no longer part of her.

When Ida and Midas meet, on the bleak island of St Hauda’s Land, Midas is himself already encased in glass: he views the world through his camera lens, transforming his surroundings into art, and is unable to connect physically or emotionally with other people. He wants to photograph Ida — not to know her — with her “skin and blonde hair . . . such pale shades they looked monochrome” (2). With Ida’s glass feet hidden in an oversized pair of boots “covered in laces and buckles like straitjackets” (3), Shaw establishes a metaphorical lexis of confinement that pervades the narrative as part of the overarching glass metaphor. Midas does not yet know that Ida’s paleness is the beginning of her transformation into glass, bleaching the tan and “roasted blonde” (5) colouring she used to have, in a prelude to total transparency.

Ida, however, is aware of this. Knowing that her body is effectively being abstracted from itself, turned into a cold, hard sculpture of the fleshly form it once had, Ida is hungry for human connection. On meeting Midas she startles him by offering him a seat with her, and having “shoved him playfully” (6) takes his precious camera from around his neck. This is the beginning of a parallel process in which Midas is drawn away from the abstract romance of his camera screen and engaged in a physical

connection with Ida that is threatened by her own metamorphosis into the colourless, untouched perfection that the photographer Midas had so admired. Ultimately Ida comes to embody precisely the kind of beauty that Midas had initially desired: monochrome, remote and abstracted into the stillness of an image. As in many fairy tales, however, he comes to regret the fulfilment of his wish.

The governing image of the text, Ida's glass feet, engages with fairy tale tradition as an interrogative development of Cinderella's glass slipper. The transformative capacity of glass, originating in the miraculous transformation by which glass is created from sand and ash, is echoed by the metamorphosis worked on Cinderella by her glass slippers, from a downtrodden servant to a beautiful princess. When Cinderella flees the ball, the slipper she leaves behind comes to represent her surpassing beauty, which is abstracted into this glass object. Ida's feet, in their fusion of flesh and glass, illustrate the sinister nature of the process undergone by Cinderella's beauty. Midas thinks on seeing Ida's feet that, "These were not real, flexible, treading toes, but a play of light that showed where toes had been" (132), making clear that Ida's physical feet are simply no longer there. Instead, her toes are abstracted into metaphor, "that half-world between memory and the present" (*ibid.*) which Midas compares to a photo negative, a transparent image that replaces the physical object it portrays. However, Shaw makes this process disturbingly visual and gradual, situating it physically in Ida's body rather than projecting it on to a substitute such as a slipper. In this way Shaw questions the sublimation of human beauty into an abstracted perfection that cannot actually be accommodated by a human body.

In Shaw's image of a girl with glass feet we also see a clear portrayal of Adorno's understanding of art as a violent imposition of form on empirical material. Ida's attempts to hold on to her flesh may be seen as the return of the "amorphous" empirical (Adorno 65) which is subsumed by artistic form. However, Adorno views the possibility of such a return as "the reconciling aspect of form" (*ibid.*), while there is nothing

reconciliatory about Ida's struggle against the glass that overwhelms her. Still, her flesh and the glass are not quite as oppositional as they appear, for while her flesh takes on a translucent sheen in imitation of the glass, the glass is correspondingly described as a growing substance, even though it is an artificial substance with no movement or feeling. Henry Fuwa, a reclusive biologist to whom Ida turns for help, responds to the suggestion that she cut the glass out with the statement, "It would only grow back" (110). When Midas sees Ida's feet for the second time he realises how the glass is spreading: "Ida's metatarsals, which he had witnessed half visible before, had now vanished in the crystal-clear bodies of her feet" (187). In this mutual absorption of each other's qualities, the glass and flesh in this novel enact the dynamic tension that Adorno identifies between form and material in the artwork, although as we have seen in *The Snow Child* and *The Ice Queen*, the two become so involved with each other that it becomes impossible to distinguish one element as form and the other as material. Their conflict and fusion generates the momentum that develops the metaphorical narrative further.

Enlisting the help of her mother's friend Carl and his eccentric former lover Emiliana, Ida embarks on an aggressive counter-attack on the glass — on the violent imposition of artistic form. Of course, this attempt is doomed to failure because her flesh and the glass are fundamentally intertwined, and no longer entirely distinguishable from each other. But as Zipes argues in his claim for the literary fairy tale as a form working towards utopian ends, the struggle itself is what is essential: "This does not mean that the liberating fairy tale must have a moral, doctrinaire resolution, but that, to be liberating, it must reflect a *process of struggle* against all types of suppression and authoritarianism" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 178, emphasis in text). Ida's struggle is the meaningful element in the narrative in this sense; whether she succeeds or not is less relevant than her struggle against suppression in presenting the possibility of transformation which, for Zipes, is central to a literary fairy tale such as this. The possibility of changing one's situation, he argues, can be

extrapolated from the fairy tale into social and political contexts and channelled into the drive for social improvement. In the case of Shaw's novel, it is beauty that is depicted as a force of suppression, and he does indeed present the possibility of fighting against the physical and psychological domination of a glassy beauty ideal. In this the novel appears to align itself with feminist discussions of beauty such as Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), but the connection is not sustained throughout the narrative since the emphatically social nature of beauty as a construction in Wolf's text is not addressed. Beauty remains magical in *The Girl with Glass Feet*, so although the novel correlates with Zipes' claim that the literary fairy tale can be employed to promote social transformation, it does not explicitly do so itself.

Since the glass is a growing substance, Ida and her helpers try to thwart it using its opposite number in the natural world: death. Emiliana had previously treated a girl whose belly was turning into glass, and whose father had discovered a dead bird with a glass tail; indicating that the glass does not continue spreading after death. Carl describes the plan, to "paralyse the flesh around the glass, turn it into a state half dead" (192) using jellyfish stings. This idea draws a clear distinction between the death implied in the transformation into glass, and a natural death. To turn into glass is to die, but to die into a beautiful, artificial form which presents a 'perfected' version of the subject's original form — perfected because the body is unblemished, unmoving and immortalised, like one of Midas' photographs or Mabel's drawings of Faina.

The concept of being "killed into art" was articulated by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* of 1979 (36). They focus on the Snow White fairy tale, and the motifs of the magic mirror and the glass coffin — glass metaphors for human beauty — to demonstrate their point. We will turn to the glass coffin now, to further examine how the inhumanity of a glassy beauty becomes connected with death of varying kinds. Expanding on the distinction between natural and unnatural deaths established in *The*

*Girl with Glass Feet*, Byatt's *Possession* interrogates the idea that to live in art means to die from the human world.

### **Lovely Corpses**

Post-1980 fiction continues to be intrigued by the cold, untouchable beauty represented by Snow White in her glass coffin, which has endured as an artistic and cultural icon for unattainable human perfection throughout fairy-tale tradition. My argument is centred around the idea of detachment, and how the containment and distancing of beauty from its perceivers effects its sublimation into an eternally preserved image. The glass coffin, which holds an apparently dead but beautiful body purely for the purpose of display (unlike the glass castle or mountain, whose princesses sit alive on their summits), is the culmination of the glass metaphor in sublimating human beauty into art. It is perhaps only succeeded by Shaw's conflation of the coffin with its inhabitant, as the glass metaphor is fully assimilated by the flesh it modifies. The operations of the glass metaphor cause beauty to become an abstract, two-dimensional entity that can be pursued with religious fervour or philosophically analysed at a safe distance. The glass coffin, retaining some distinction between glass and flesh and acting as a flat screen in front of the body, turns beauty into a picture.

This is made explicit in the Grimms' version of the tale, in which Snow White's coffin is placed on top of a hill in a deliberate effort by the grieving dwarves to elevate her status and extend her fame — they want as many people as possible to see and admire her beauty (*Annotated Brothers Grimm*, trans. Tatar 254). Further, the coffin is inscribed with gold writing that declares her name and heritage as the "daughter of a king" (ibid.), becoming highly reminiscent of a display case, as has been remarked by several critics including Elisabeth Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body* (100), to which we shall return. Bacchilega notes in *Postmodern Fairy Tales* that even before she is put in the glass coffin, Snow White adheres to the ideal of static, silent beauty because she "rarely has a voice of her own . . . In an

indirectly silencing move, her speech is reported and summarized" (35). Within the context of Bacchilega's feminist arguments, this implies that the narrative style used by the Grimms forces Snow White into compliance with a feminine standard of silent, thoughtless obedience governed by patriarchal desires. Presumably the glass coffin is then a metaphor for this enclosed silence, although this is not explicitly stated by Bacchilega.

Gilbert and Gubar, however, do make it explicit in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, although with a different emphasis. Theirs is a strongly feminist agenda, arguing that Snow White and her stepmother make use of the "transparent enclosures" (36) they are "locked" in (ibid.), not lying in passive silence as Bacchilega suggests but "wielding as weapons the tools patriarchy suggests that women use to kill themselves into art" (ibid.). This interpretation almost has a progressive feel to it; although the women use these 'tools' to try to kill each other, they are still actively using them. But what of beauty? Snow White's beauty is metaphorically connected to the glass coffin, through their shared characteristics of untouchable fragility, clarity, and exquisite delicacy of form and also through the necessity of their connection for the plot; it is only by encasing her beauty in glass that Snow White can be reified into an image of perfection. In criticism that has a political agenda, such as the feminism of Bacchilega, Bronfen, and Gilbert and Gubar, the diverse implications of the glass coffin image tend not to be fully unravelled, a phenomenon that we see again in critical treatments of *Possession*. I intend to examine more thoroughly the use of this metaphor in the novel and the process of turning an individual into art. Byatt shows that the possibilities of the glass coffin are much more multifaceted than a study like Gilbert and Gubar's would suggest.

Byatt offers a new Snow White in *Possession*, one who becomes an artist in her silence and stillness, reimagining the significance of her boundaries. A late twentieth-century Snow White in an elaborate and malleable tale may apply the understanding gained from second-wave feminism of the construction of gender roles to transform her glass coffin into something other than a prison. Marina Warner, citing Ted Hughes,

argues in *Fantastic Metamorphoses* that “metamorphosis often breaks out in moments of crisis” (16), and she extends this to claim that it is also “characteristic of metamorphic writing to appear in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilizations” (18). From a feminist standpoint at least, this has substantial relevance to the present, in which considerations of gender and beauty are in constant transition: it is high time, then, for a reincarnation of the glass coffin. And glass itself, after all, is a metaphor for fragility and metamorphosis: the potential has always been in it for the shattering of limits.

Zipes, in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, explains how the fairy tale form has become increasingly amenable to the kinds of transformations that are capable of spilling over into agitation for actual social change. This text illuminates how the reworking of a metaphor such as the glass coffin can provide a model and catalyst for wider changes in attitudes to beauty and gender.

The tendency is to break, shift, debunk, or rearrange the traditional motifs to liberate the reader from the contrived and programmed mode of literary reception. Transfiguration does not obliterate the recognizable features or values of the classical fairy tale but cancels their negativity by showing how a different aesthetic and social setting relativizes all values. To this extent the act of creative transfiguration by the author and the final artistic product as transfiguration are geared to make readers aware that civilization and life itself are processes which can be shaped to fulfill basic needs of the readers. Though the liberating and classical fairy tales may contain some of the same features and values, the emphasis placed on transfiguration as process, both as narrative form and substance, makes for a qualitative difference. (180)

The “contrived and programmed mode of literary reception” (*ibid.*) therefore becomes a metaphor for readers’ acceptance of equally

programmed social structures, and so the transformation of these in the literary fairy tale open up the possibility of a similar transformation beyond the text.

Byatt interrogates the historical development of the glass coffin as a model for human beauty in *Possession*. The beautiful academic Maud Bailey moves through a series of glassy rooms as the narrative explores the connection between her beauty and her unapproachable frigidity. The library at Lincoln University, where Maud works, is described as “a skeletal affair in a glass box, with brilliant doors opening in glass” (43), an image that directly associates, through the conjunction of ‘skeletal’ and ‘glass’, the concepts of death and display that are characteristic of the glass coffin motif. A different emphasis is created by the Women’s Archive at Lincoln, which is “housed in a high-walled fish-tank” (43) combining exposure with the exaggerated protection of the walls, and yet another is present in Maud’s optical-illusion bathroom: “a chill green glassy place, glittering with cleanliness, huge dark green stoppered jars on water-green thick glass shelves, a floor tiled in glass tiles into whose brief and illusory depths one might peer” (56). There is no warmth or humanity in these scenes, but rather a geometric precision of hard-angled boxes through which Maud is transferred, one after the other, to be carefully described in each tableau. Byatt depicts Maud in specific *pictures*, a series of glass cases closing into themselves — she moves from the large library to the segregated Women’s Archive, and then to her small, self-reflecting bathroom.

Maud herself exists in an aesthetic parallel with her glass coffins, mirroring their glassy aspects of coldness and hardness: she displays a “frigid voice” (48), a “censorious and supercilious gaze” (*ibid.*), and has the complexion of a statue; “She blushed. Red blood stained the ivory” (50). Conspicuous in her “excessive elegance” (48), Maud’s “perfectly regular features” (57) and lavish mane of “yellow hair” (*ibid.*) identify her as a typical fairy-tale beauty, the princess locked into her own image and kept there by the gaze of her many observers. Although this characterisation is routinely pointed out by criticism on *Possession*, Byatt’s intricate

development of the fairy-tale ideal of beauty has not been fully examined. Studies tend to focus on Byatt's engagement with the fairy-tale narrative form and the trope of solitude (in connection with the four protagonists — Maud, Roland and the Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte), but the theoretical and metaphorical implications of beauty in the novel have so far been glossed over by critics. Julian Gitzen is typical in citing as "Byatt's customary theme . . . the dilemma of the Byatt protagonist, who must balance emotional needs against the necessity for 'solitude' in which to create" (87).

In this interpretation critics are led by Byatt's own essay "Ice, Snow, Glass" (*Histories and Stories* 155) in which she describes her long-term appreciation of the solitude expressed in fairy-tale glass metaphors, her youthful perception of "something secretly good, illicitly desirable, about the ice-hills and glass barriers" (*ibid.*) that she explores in her fiction. Byatt is ambivalent about the position of the princess isolated in glass: although there is for her "something wonderful about being beautiful and shining and high up" (*ibid.*), this is inescapably combined with "the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art" (156). Maud and Christabel in *Possession* enact the difficulty of choosing between a working artistic life and the life of love and human connection that resolves itself into the role of wife and mother.

Critics of *Possession* tend to travel instantly from the glass metaphors to discussion of these issues, without analysing the actual operations and implications of the metaphors themselves. Jessica Tiffin notes several instances of glass in Byatt's other works but conspicuously omits the glass coffin in *Possession*. Her focus is on glass (and ice) as a metaphor for art and narrative, in which "meaning is thus captured in stasis" (1), but because her argument is concerned with Byatt's narrative form, she does not extend her analysis of glass metaphors to human beauty. Tiffin concludes her discussion of glass with the claim, "Ice and glass become a metaphor for art . . . and for intellectual distance" (117), with which I agree but would add that glassy beauty is also deeply entwined in

this metaphorical network. The construction of human beauty as itself a work of art, distant and untouchable, is crucial to Byatt's wider exploration of the necessary remoteness and even inhumanity of living an artistic life (as artwork or artist, or both).

The princess figure in her glass coffin possesses a very specific kind of beauty. She is white as snow, touched with blood-red and still as a corpse. These qualities are coded to represent her as completely idealised and inhumanly perfect as a picture. Midas in *The Girl with Glass Feet* illustrates this pursuit of immortal perfection in his obsession with photography: the glass of the camera lens takes the place of the glass coffin and a person is literally translated into an eternally preserved image. Edgar Allan Poe expresses this urge precisely in his claim that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1846 223). The prevalence and endurance of this deathly image of beauty is exemplified in cosmetic advertisements and women's magazines, who exhort their readers to emulate the pallid perfection of the Snow White ideal:

“ROSY CHEEKS . . . Skin clear as Alabaster . . .

LENNOX'S HARMLESS ARSENIC WAFERS”

(advertisement in *Home Chat*, 1900, Beetham and Boardman 91)

“VALAZE WHITENER hides discolorations, instantly bestows a snowy whiteness to the hands, arms, shoulders and throat. *Will not rub off.*”

(Helena Rubinstein cosmetic advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, 1926, Braithwaite et al 59)

“Blush in particular is softly powdered and applied low on the cheek for a flushed, porcelain effect.”

(*Vogue*, September 2009, 305)

As these extracts show, porcelain, alabaster and snowy whiteness are deeply persistent adjectives of beauty, revealing the tenacious presence of Snow White and her necrophiliac appeal. The function of the coffin is to separate its occupant from the human world into one of art and desire where alabaster whiteness can be sublimated into an ideal, in a remarkably similar motion to Plato's movement from beautiful bodies to beautiful ideas through chaste philosophical pursuit (*Symposium* 210a-212a). Although the Grimms' Snow White has become an icon for this pale beauty, she is part of a larger tradition that has been subsumed by the focus — particularly by Disney — on this single tale. Two centuries before the Grimms collected their tales, Basile included "The Little Slave Girl" in his collection *The Pentameron: The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones* (1634-6, trans. Canepa 195-8). In this story Lisa, a beautiful girl who was born of a rose petal, is apparently killed by a poisoned comb like the one that almost kills Snow White. Her mother encloses her "in seven crystal caskets, each contained within the other" (196), emphasising that although Lisa can still be seen, in death she cannot be reached. Like Snow White, she is not dead, but in this tale continues growing to womanhood, her glass coffins magically growing to accommodate her.

Another relation of the Grimms' tale is "The Stork's Daughter", in which an abandoned child raised by storks is almost killed by ogres, who place poisoned nails outside her door by which she is scratched. Her lifeless body is kept in a glass case, and she is eventually brought back to life by a prince (Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale* 246). In its various forms, this tradition offers a wish fulfilment that Plato would have scorned, taking beauty out of the coffin to be married. Of course, the fairy tale plot does not continue into the realities of wedlock: the glass coffin image serves to establish a highly memorable ideal of beauty as a prize to be sought, and the victory itself is as abstract as the goal.

It is important that glass is the material for this metaphor, for its impermeable hardness as well as its transparency: we must be able to see

the woman inside it. This may be a reason why the glass coffin has endured as a motif while its siblings, the gold and silver coffins which appear in some versions of the ‘Snow White’ tale type, have sunk from popular knowledge (Aarne 245). Gold and silver, in their opacity, act as substitutes for the precious beauty of the coffin’s occupant, which would render this invisible beauty too abstract, entirely dehumanised. Glass, however, perfectly preserves the image of the princess — but it is significantly her *image*. Seen through glass, her beauty is two-dimensional, and if touched the coffin provides a single smooth surface. In this way a person is made into a picture, separated from themselves into a purely visual realm.

### **The Eye of the Beholder**

If this model of beauty relies on its status as an image, untouchable and eternal, to exert its power, then it becomes necessary for it to be observed: Tatar remarks of fairy tales that “Descriptions of beauty often have embedded in them an astonished observer contemplating the sights” (*Enchanted Hunters* 82-3). In *Possession*, the observer through whom the reader is given a sighting of Maud is another academic, Roland Michell, a small, unobtrusive man and a mediocre scholar. He is directed to Maud in his quest to unravel the mystery of a possible affair between the Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, the latter poet being Maud’s area of expertise. Roland’s observation of Maud is coloured by his sense of inferiority, locked out as he is from her life and her charms. She is above Roland in several ways: she is upper-class whereas he is lower-middle-class, she is much taller than him, more intelligent and professionally successful, and more attractive. Small incidents mark their divergent status, such as Roland following Maud into the lift up to her office; “he was already clambering onto the pedestal she occupied when he lunged forward and up, almost too late” (40).

This perspective may not be that of a forceful, conquering hero, but instead it establishes Maud as entirely set apart, so unattainable as to

dismiss any thought of conquest. An interpretation in the mode of Luce Irigaray's seminal theory of the male gaze would claim that Roland's position as observer locates him as the figure of power, objectifying the passive Maud into "the beautiful object of contemplation" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 26). Because men are the socially dominant gender, their gaze has the executive power of approval or change, and so, Irigaray argues, female physical appearance has been constructed with male desires and demands in mind. However, Byatt's mistrust of French feminist theory is evident in her parodic treatment of Leonora Stern. Christien Franken claims that Leonora's character provides a vehicle for Byatt to specifically "ridicule" (89) the ideas of Irigaray.

Byatt's narrative also undermines the assertion that the male gaze corresponds to power since Roland is systematically disempowered in Maud's presence. Having to admit that he needs to cut their research short in order to catch the train home — he cannot afford to stay in a hotel — Roland is pressed into staying at Maud's flat. Intimidated by her affluence, intellect and beauty, it is he who remains passive, "as though he was in an art gallery or a surgeon's waiting-room" (51). In the presence of beauty which he can only observe, feeling vulnerable and entirely in Maud's power, Roland is under the fairy-tale spell of beauty that impels heroes to scale towers and cut through magical hedges, only he does not have the wherewithal to do so. It is an overwhelming and impossible prospect that Maud might be more to him than purely visual. Even when they are much better acquainted Roland thinks, "Maud was a beautiful woman such as he had no claim to possess" (424).

The fairy-tale plot structure of a beautiful person pursued by one enamoured by them is not significantly affected by the gender reversal effected in *Possession* — besides, there have always been tales of heroines undergoing trials for their good-looking prince, from Psyche's pursuit of her lost husband Cupid, taken from her when she breaks her promise and looks at his exquisite beauty, to d'Aulnoy's "Babiole" whose title character, turned into a monkey, persists in following her handsome beloved despite

his abhorrence of her form (*Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment* 438-58). Further, when she mistakenly thinks the prince has died, she takes a suicidal leap from a cloud but falls into an enormous glass bottle, imprisoned there by a wicked fairy so that the prince — who is beginning to appreciate Babiole's charms — cannot marry her (454). It is not so much a question of gender as of beauty itself, as Plato would say, and the pursuit of one so lovely that they are too good for human touch. Tatar reminds us in *Enchanted Hunters* that there are plenty of dazzlingly beautiful men in fairy tales, but Western tradition, influenced by Disney, has mostly dropped them (76).

However, it would be too simplistic to read Roland's position as a reversal of gender roles: Elizabeth Wanning Harries writes in “‘Ancient Forms’: Myth, Fairy Tale, and Narrative in A. S. Byatt’s Fiction” that for Byatt, “Simply to reverse the poles of a tale — to make the wicked stepmother the heroine, for example, or to rearrange the sexual economy — is to exchange a latent ‘message’ for another, more obvious one, or essentially, Byatt believes, to write propaganda” (ed. Benson 89). Increasing subtlety and complexity is characteristic of more recent fairy-tale fiction, and Harries is implicitly criticising writers such as Angela Carter, whose gender reversals in *The Bloody Chamber* of 1979 overtly served her feminist agenda.<sup>8</sup>

In work such as Harries' we see the recent move away from politically-motivated postmodernist fiction which, according to Steiner, inherited a disavowal of beauty from modernism. Steiner articulates the rejection of beauty through a fairy-tale metaphor: “In age-old fables about female beauty, the fair maiden creates hierarchy and competition . . . Modernists had nothing but contempt for this myth, which they considered an absurd overvaluation of women, and feminists excoriated it for reinforcing inequality, divisiveness, and patriarchal values” (*Venus in Exile* xix-xx). Useful as these sentiments may have been to the feminist cause, literary fiction is finding it necessary to re-evaluate what human beauty

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<sup>8</sup> As discussed by Lorna Sage in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (1994) and Sarah Gamble in *The Fiction of Angela Carter* (2001).

means now, and so post-1980 novels attempt to explore the technical workings and social influences of the fairy tale (and fairy-tale beauty), rather than using the form to serve a political or artistic agenda.

Byatt affirms in her essay collection *On Histories and Stories* that *Possession* is a rewriting of the Grimms' fairy tale 'The Glass Coffin', whose motifs she uses to articulate and probe the conflicted relationship between desire and virtue (151). As a metaphor for a remote, chaste beauty, the glass coffin is particularly useful to a novelistic study of beauty and desire because it comes with a narrative attached: that of a beautiful woman pursued by a desiring man. Vladimir Propp, in his structuralist classification of fairy-tale elements, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), describes the fairy-tale princess as "a sought-for person" (79). Byatt builds on this in her introduction to Tatar's translation of the Grimms' *Tales*, stating that "Princesses are virtually interchangeable" (xix); they are depthless figures that fulfil a narrative — and metaphorical — function, to be beautiful and pursued.

The activity of pursuit traverses the two elements of unattainability and desire that constitute the metaphor of the coffin, and expresses the impasse that arises when an untouchable beauty provokes the desire to be touched. Once satisfied, the essence of the beauty is destroyed, and so is desire. However, this fairy-tale trope is traditionally situated in the perspective of the pursuer, whose concern is the aesthetic quality of the woman they desire (such as the tailor in 'The Glass Coffin' which Byatt rewrites). The other side of the coin is the princess' isolation, which in Byatt's version is highly valued — indeed it is valued far above the beauty it confers upon her. For Ida in *The Girl with Glass Feet*, however, it is imperative that she is not isolated; her second mode of retaliation against the glass (the 'killing' of her surrounding flesh with jellyfish stings proving ineffective) is the assertion of her human physicality in her relationship with Midas.

Shaw places in juxtaposition the strange beauty of Ida's glass body and the beautiful sensations of touch: when she undresses Midas sees "a

patch of glass ahead of the rest of the transformation, set into her skin like a little window. It offered a view of crystallised bones like specimens in a jar" (244). While Ida's body parts are fetishised by their unwonted exposure in isolated 'windows', with the likeness to "specimens in a jar" (ibid.) Shaw makes clear the dehumanising and disturbing nature of the transformation, an effect that overrides the beauty of the image.

This quality is emphasised in the subsequent passage when Ida pulls Midas on top of her and he finds the image of her glass limbs is ousted from his mind by the "flurry" (ibid.) of tactile experiences: "The heat of lips; the feathery weight of her hair" (ibid.). However, their passion proves no match for the encroaching glass, as Midas' list of sensations ends with "The coldness of her knees. Her inflexible joints. The dead weight of her legs" (ibid.). The replacement of semi-colons with full stops conveys the loss of movement and momentum in their encounter, which itself congeals like Ida's flesh. Unlike ice, glass cannot be melted by the heat of passion. Their coitus is finally halted by the pain Ida feels, "like there are knives in my pelvis" (ibid.). The untouchable aura surrounding Snow White in her glass coffin (and her cold successor in *Possession*, Maud), is made alarmingly physical in Shaw's merciless questioning of what it really means to transform a person into metaphor in the pursuit of perfection.

### **The Tyranny of Metaphor**

As a manufactured substance glass is more stable than ice, which exists in a balance with environmental conditions that can alter its state in a short time, either transforming the shape of the ice or melting it back into water. As a metaphor for beauty, then, ice expresses a loveliness which is cold and hard but unstable, unpredictable. Glass is not subject to such radical changes though it is nonetheless a transformed substance — sand and ash morphing into clear glass under extreme heat — which is both hard and paradoxically fragile. In Ida's final metamorphosis into glass can be witnessed the dramatic suddenness of glass' creation, and its ruthless

opposition to the soft fallibility of human flesh. Glass proves to be a dangerous metaphor for human beauty, imposing artistic perfection at the cost of all humanity, and indeed life.

Ida's final change, on a boat out to sea with Midas, belies the gradual spread of glass that precedes it. The transformative force of glass becomes horrifyingly evident as Ida finds herself suddenly in the grip of fast, all-encompassing change. The perfect clarity of glass which makes it a favoured image of beauty manifests itself in the erasure of the details of Ida's individual humanity: "Her belly's surface was losing its details of moles and follicles" (285). Instead of existing as a body, Ida's "Flesh was receding, leaving a flat screen behind" (*ibid.*). The concept of glass beauty as a screen, which we will encounter again — but differently — in *Possession*, illustrates the capacity of the glass metaphor to render human beauty two-dimensional, an image made inaccessible by the glass screen before it. Human beauty recedes behind this screen just as Ida's life recedes from the body that is no longer her own.

Once again Ida resorts to human connection to combat the glass, although in this last, desperate kiss with Midas she knows it is only to die as humanly as possible. Shaw describes her transformation from Midas' perspective, already erasing Ida from the narrative as her change is described in tactile and visual terms by her lover. The language of her change becomes increasingly inorganic, in lexis evoking congelation: "Her lips were a fading clot" (286), with 'clot' becoming almost a visual term when paired with 'fading'. Ida's flesh is becoming two-dimensional, purely visual, as well as glassy. Newly formed glass congeals as it cools, and correspondingly, "The lenses of her eyes gelled" (*ibid.*). Metaphorical language is itself transformed throughout this section, which opens with, "They kissed with eyes locked on each other's" (*ibid.*). This locking is echoed in altered form when Ida's pupils "closed like locks" (*ibid.*), the verb that had expressed the connection between her and Midas now closing them off from each other.

At the beginning of this passage Ida's flesh is metaphorically mineralised, made inorganic as "Her soft skin leadened" (285), then becomes fully — and merely — metaphorical; "For a moment her head was a glaciated rose, then it was empty" (286). The articulation of Ida's final transformation into glass as mere emptiness is expressive of the total loss of Ida's human self in this change: she disappears utterly into metaphor and memory, as Faina does in *The Snow Child*. Once initiated the glass metaphor is inescapable, not bound by the natural laws of death and desire with which Ida tries to resist it. In this sense it is a much more stable metaphor than ice, governing the narrative with an unshakeable grip as the dominating figurative lexis. However, the sudden transformation which lies at the core of glass as a substance also influences its metaphorical operations, so that its exquisite and fragile clarity exhibits a remarkable strength to enclose and contain human individuals in glassy beauty. This quality is explicitly shown in the image of the glass coffin, which has endured through centuries of fairy tale and artistic tradition, and which dominates *Possession*. And although Byatt does not offer the possibility of escape from the glass coffin, she exploits the changeable, malleable aspects of glass to transform the metaphor into a new shape.

The novel form allows Byatt to explore the glass coffin from both sides, weighing up the price of beauty and the price of gratified desire with the minute specificity of extensive dialogue, detailed characterisation (devices not conventionally used in the fairy tale) and an omniscient third person narrator. Zipes makes clear how contemporary rewritings of fairy tale tap into the transformations which are traditionally an important element of the form (Lüthi 24), to transfigure a familiar tale into a socially relevant version:

[T]he fusion of traditional configurations with contemporary references within settings and plotlines unfamiliar to readers . . . Fantastic projections are used here to demonstrate the changeability of contemporary social relations, and the fusion brings together all

possible means for illuminating a concrete utopia. . . . In effect, both the narrative techniques of fusion and transfiguration are aimed at disturbing and jarring readers so that they lose their complacent attitude toward the status quo of society. (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 180)

In her introduction to the Grimms' tales Byatt explains how she has engaged with the developments of the fairy tale through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drawing on works which have helped establish the method of presenting "the changeability of contemporary social relations" (xxiv) through a realist reworking of traditional fairy-tale motifs. She describes several nineteenth-century realist novels as formal engagements with the fairy tale: "There is a layer of most nineteenth-century novels that is pulling with, or against, the fairy-tale paradigm. *Mansfield Park* is 'Cinderella'. *Middlemarch* contrasts the diligent and lazy daughters, the white and red of warmth and cold and pulls against the paradigm with gritty moral realism" (ibid.). This explains Byatt's choice of a broadly realist mode of writing and partly Victorian setting for *Possession*, as ideal for an assessment of how fairy-tale motifs have changed in contemporary times. Indeed, this "interplay of fairy tale and fact, of made-up worlds and fragments of history, has become characteristic of her work" (Wanning Harries 76).

The glass coffin is one way that fairy tales present beauty, abstracting it from the person who possesses it so that beauty is universalised into a metaphor, an image representing the ultimate object of desire, an excuse for a quest. Byatt's rewriting of 'The Glass Coffin', embedded in the narrative of *Possession* in the guise of a tale written by Christabel LaMotte, pushes its central image of the girl who lies motionless in her glass case into increasingly complex and loaded metaphors of beauty:

Have you remarked, where a fast-flowing stream comes to a little fall, how the racing water becomes glassy smooth and under it the long fine threads of the water-weed are drawn along in its still-seeming race, trembling a little, but stretched out in the flow? So under the surface of the thick glass lay a mass of long gold threads, filling in the whole cavity of the box with their turns and tumbles, so that at first the little tailor thought he had come upon a box full of spun gold, to make cloth of gold. But then between the fronds he saw a face, the most beautiful face he could have dreamed of or imagined, a still white face, with long gold lashes on pale cheeks, and a perfect pale mouth. (63)

It is the girl whose beauty evokes the images of a stream and then a mass of gold thread, but she herself does not make an appearance until after the metaphors representing her beauty have been elaborated. The reader is initially given non-human images of water, water-weed and gold thread with which to contemplate beauty, in the safe assumption that they are familiar enough with fairy tales to know that it is in fact a girl lying in the coffin, not water-weed. Human beauty is depicted through non-human imagery, severing the girl's beauty from the girl herself, so that her physical appearance becomes an independent entity.

This is done in stages: we are presented with “racing water” (*ibid.*) that resembles the glass of the coffin, our attention then brought to weeds in the water that tremble delicately in the flow. These are likened to “spun gold” (*ibid.*), threads of precious material that the tailor would have valued in themselves for their aesthetic and commercial value. The gold is then revealed to be hair, so lovely that it imitates gold; and only then, “between the fronds” (*ibid.*) that reach back to the water-weed image, does a face emerge. The preceding layers of beauty and preciousness have prepared in us the knowledge that this will be a face of exceptional beauty, and so Byatt does not need to waste words describing the features in detail: they are simply pale and perfect. Tatar explores the fairy-tale language of beauty in

*Enchanted Hunters*, noting how the lack of specific description in fairy tales of a beautiful character's features is replaced by "Luminosity, glitter, and sparkle" (75) which make it "actually easier" (*ibid.*) to imagine human beauty by evoking a general sense of lovely perfection, "awash in shimmering light" (*ibid.*). Her argument is drawn from Lüthi's insistence that an avoidance of detail renders an image clearer and more easily comprehended: "A detailed description lures us into the infinite and shows us the elusive depth of things. Mere naming, on the other hand, automatically transforms things into simple, motionless images" (25).

Describing a princess simply as 'beautiful', therefore, turns her into a clear, static image. This is emphasised by placing her, metaphorically or more literally, behind a glass screen. Abstraction draws us away from the small particularities of the human world, and into the grand realm of light and perfection. Tatar writes, "By drawing on a syntax of enchantment that conjures fluidity, ethereality, flimsiness, and transparency, writers turn solidity into resplendent airy lightness to produce miracles of linguistic transubstantiation" (80). It is not difficult to embody this description of perfect beauty in glass — that flimsy, transparent and ethereally beautiful substance that is transubstantiated from dust into a sparkling molten liquid that can be moulded into any shape, still retaining the molecular structure of a liquid in memory of its transformation.

The descriptive fleshing-out of images which is characteristic of the novel form gives Byatt the freedom to either remain in the vague sparkle of fairy tale convention, or to probe into the workings of the glass coffin in more detail. With this combination of techniques Byatt demonstrates how the glass metaphor can contain an individual within the realm of art, altering their appearance so as to project various qualities upon them and ultimately translating their features into an idea of abstract beauty itself. This is at the root of Maud's thought, on inspecting her reflection, that the "doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing" (57). When an object such as a glass coffin or a face, which can represent idealised notions of virtue, perfection or immortality, becomes the object of desire itself, that

object has become a fetish (Freud, *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis* 298–9). The glass coffin shows that physical beauty is frequently fetishised, as are specific aspects of it, whenever it is separated from its possessor and desired in itself.

Bronfen argues in *Over Her Dead Body* that this fetishisation is a way of eliminating the unpleasant idea of death by placing it in conjunction with feminine beauty, an investment we make in “images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate owing to our fear of dissolution and decay” (62). Bronfen specifically identifies Snow White’s body as a fetish, made so by its isolation in the glass coffin purely for the purpose of display, separated from the world of human life in a half-dead stasis. Having ameliorated the horror of death by associating it with a beautiful woman, we naturally focus on the more pleasant image of beauty, attempting gradually to push death out of the picture altogether. However, its air of putrefaction and terror continues to haunt the image of the beautiful woman to whom it was attached, and beauty becomes intrinsically deathly — pale and motionless, desirable but inaccessible, dangerous.

While there has been a great deal of psychoanalytic fairy-tale criticism following Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the narrow Freudian interpretations of many of these works are not pertinent to this project.<sup>9</sup> However, the concept of the fetish as applied in *Over Her Dead Body* offers considerable illumination of the glass coffin motif. The process of fetishisation can be considered in metaphorical terms as well as psychoanalytic, occurring in artworks rather than entirely in the mind. In fiction, for instance, the glass coffin not only facilitates the fetishistic idolisation of a body within the text, but the glass metaphor itself with all its associations of inaccessible perfection, pursuit and cadaverous beauty, can be developed into a complex motif that explores the relationships between desire, beauty and death. This is the task undertaken by

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<sup>9</sup> These works include Allan B. Chinen’s *In the Ever After: Fairy Tales and the Second Part of Life* (1989), Marie-Louise Von Franz’s *The Problems of the Feminine in Fairy Tales* (1976, revised in 1993 as *The Feminine in Fairy Tales*) and Steven Swann Jones’ *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination* (2009).

*Possession*. The process relies on human beauty functioning as a self-contained, two-dimensional entity that lies cold and remote for our contemplation. It has become fetishised when all the concepts it was meant to represent — such as death in Bronfen’s discussion — are entirely absorbed into the image and can no longer be separated from it, so that beauty becomes synonymous with death rather than merely acting as a figure for it.

Byatt’s strategy in *Possession* is to gradually adjust the layers of implication that enclose Maud in her glassy beauty by rewriting fairy-tale images of glass, one at a time. A passage in Irigaray’s *This Sex Which is Not One* suggests the way in which the glass coffin becomes a haven of isolation in beauty, by manipulating the observer’s gaze: “her body finds itself eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the ‘subject’” (26). However, by casting this ‘double movement’ only as a method of inciting male desire, Irigaray excludes the possibilities that she herself suggests in an earlier passage, discussing female autoeroticism. Arguing that women are always “in touch” (24) with themselves through their plethora of erogenous zones, Irigaray presents a self-reflexive female sexuality that can be protected by this distancing screen of ‘exhibition’ and ‘chaste retreat’. Unlike Byatt, however, she does not consider this a viable strategy, instead asking, “Will woman not be left with the impossible alternative between a defensive virginity, fiercely turned in upon itself, and a body open to penetration that no longer knows, in this ‘hole’ that constitutes its sex, the pleasure of its own touch?” (ibid.).

Byatt’s project in *Possession* is to answer this question with more optimism than Irigaray, finding for Maud a sexuality that preserves her solitude and intellectual activity without closing her off from connection with others. Criticism on *Possession* is often utopian in this way, occasionally becoming ecstatic in its admiration such as Deborah Denenholz Morse in her essay “Crossing Boundaries”, in which she describes the “sacred” (ed. Werlock 150-1) significance of Byatt’s language

as “the romantic avenue into paradise, a reimagined Eden” (*ibid.*). However, although Byatt’s critics discuss the themes of solitude and the female artist, the importance of beauty as a concept and a fairy-tale trope in developing these themes is neglected. The glass coffin which lies at the centre of the novel is nothing without the beauty of its inhabitant, and it is important that a reading of the novel does not simplify the coffin into a prison from which Maud is joyfully released. She does not break out of its images of glassy, clear beauty: she changes them.

The crystallisation of Maud’s beauty into a screen separated from her allows her — and importantly her admirer Roland — to contemplate this idealised beauty without really seeing Maud: her identity and perspective are anchored in other aspects of her personality. In this way her beauty does not force her into passivity, as Irigaray insists. Maud and Roland then also have the option of ignoring her beauty, putting it aside while they connect freely. It therefore becomes vital that Maud’s beauty does become metaphorical, an idealised image, instead of being something to resist, as it is to Maud when she shaves off her golden hair. With this feat Byatt exploits the well-documented shallowness of the fairy tale, whose characters, according to Lüthi, “lack an inner world of their own” (56) because fairy tales “extend the principle of depthlessness to the realm of psychology” (99). The genre’s two-dimensional descriptions of characters through primary colours and moral dichotomies are particularly amenable to the detachment of physical beauty from a person, as appearances become metaphors distinct from what they represent. Accordingly, Lewis C. Seifert in his essay “Marvelous Realities” remarks how these depthless fairy-tale characterisations “show the body to be a socially constructed unit of significance lacking an inherent essence” (ed. Canepa 142). For Byatt, viewing the body as a social construction presents the opportunity for reconstructing it.

Byatt shows how the flat simplicity of fairy-tale characters can be translated into a screen behind which a complex character in a novel can operate. Maud’s conflicting needs for both human connection and solitude

add depth to the depiction of her as a princess locked in a glass coffin — the fairy-tale images imply the contradictory desires with which Maud wrestles, but they do not explore them in detail. That is Byatt's innovation, using the psychological realism of her novelistic medium to write an "inherent essence" (Seifert 142) into the fairy-tale princess' character. Maud's custom-made glass case is formed by developing the image of the glass coffin into further images that open out from it, similar to the passage in 'The Glass Coffin' tale, when Byatt gradually travels towards the girl's beautiful face through the linked images of water, weed and gold thread.

For Maud, however, the process must be reversed so that she moves outwards from the glass coffin. An intimation of this possibility comes from Christabel LaMotte, with whom everything begins for Maud: LaMotte writes in her first letter to Ash that her seclusion is "not like a Princess in a thicket, by no means, but more like a very fat and self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web" (87). The conversion of the fairy-tale motif into an alternative with modified associations offers a door out of the glass coffin without shattering it. Therefore, once Byatt has established Maud in her set of glass boxes — the Lincoln library, the Women's Archive, her bathroom — she then gradually adapts these images until they are more reminiscent of fun-house mirrors, with a wide choice of reflections, than a circumscribed box.

At first the mystery of the Ash-LaMotte connection which drew the two academics together acts as an obstacle to their acquaintance, "like frosted glass between them, Roland and Maud" (87). It is not only Maud who lives in a glass coffin — the four protagonists are all connected but kept apart by a variety of invisible barriers such as time, propriety, previous commitments (Ash is married and Roland lives with his girlfriend Val) — and so the image of the coffin is refracted, opening to include all four of them while preserving their isolation. The development of the glass motif shows Byatt's awareness of the implications of the glass coffin on those outside it as well as in, but she does not position any of the characters as either passive victims or powerful intruders. The frosted glass image occurs

when Roland and Maud have just found the almost complete correspondence of Ash and LaMotte and have begun reading it. Initially their feeling that they are intruding on the privacy of the two lovers, and their contrasting remoteness with each other creates the awkwardness that Byatt expresses through the frosted glass, but as they read on Roland's observation of Maud slowly alters:

The stained glass worked to defamiliarise her. It divided her into cold, brightly coloured fires. One cheek moved in and out of a pool of grape-violet as she worked. Her brow flowered green and gold. Rose-red and berry-red stained her pale neck and chin and mouth. Eyelids were purple-shadowed. (133)

The colours of the stained glass work to modify and mystify Maud's appearance. Although this is certainly not the clear, rectangular glass coffin, the image nevertheless stays within the realms of fairy tale and literature: the colours all have their own associations, from the "green and gold" (ibid.) that represent nature at her most bountiful and lovely, to the darkness and decadence of purple and the two shades of red that always suggest blood, itself present in Snow White's blood-red lips. "Berry-red" (ibid.) takes us back to the forest where so many tales begin, and "Rose-red" (ibid.) is the name of Snow White's sister in some versions of the tale. The references to fruit, particularly in this woodland fairy-tale context, allude to the delicious but dangerous fruits in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, the work of another Victorian poet who lived in virginal seclusion.

The passage also reflects the "divided" (ibid.) nature of the image, with its short declarative sentences, each containing a single "brightly coloured fire" (ibid.). Retaining its key elements of fairy tale, self-containment and beauty, Maud's glass coffin has been enriched and refracted, entrancing Roland while still keeping him at bay. This means that Maud is not necessarily trapped inside one strict mode of beauty: her

attributes of cold distance and carved regularity can evoke other possibilities, if seen in the right light.

Maud and Roland's metaphorical meetings come closer and closer to real physical contact throughout the novel. An occasional touch, such as "an ankle overlapping an ankle" (424) builds their non-verbal, non-visual intimacy, until "One night they fell asleep, side by side, on Maud's bed, where they had been sharing a glass of Calvados. He slept curled against her back, a dark comma against her pale elegant phrase" (*ibid.*). It is significant that they are "sharing a glass" (*ibid.*), rather than a bottle with a glass each, implicitly enclosing them both in a single glass coffin motif, sequestered but comfortable. At this point Byatt writes from their mutual perspective, implicitly extending the "parody of ancient married agreement of 'we' or 'us'" (421) in which they have begun to converse. Byatt's use of the first person plural in their dialogue emphasises that the connection between Roland and Maud is not based on the dichotomy of perceiver and perceived, as it inevitably is with the original glass coffin. Instead, they quite deliberately avoid facing each other, either in sight or speech, but remain side by side: "They felt that in some way this stately peacefulness of unacknowledged contact gave them back their sense of their separate lives inside their separate skins" (424).

It is essential to Byatt's intentions that the glass coffin is not destroyed or lost in the attempt to fashion a flexible, individual metaphor for isolated beauty and artistry. The continuing presence of glass, in windows or glasses of liquor, maintain some of the central elements of the glass coffin motif, in particular solitude, inertia (changed to 'peacefulness') and visual, artistic beauty. These properties are no longer embodied simply by Maud's lovely, gazed-upon body, but by moments of beauty such as the pair sleeping back to back and the stained-glass windows transfiguring Maud as she works (not as she lies asleep like her ancestor, Snow White): these are captured by Byatt in carefully crafted linguistic images. In this way she demonstrates how the ability of glass to transform human beauty into an immortal image need not be a constrictive objectification as

feminists such as Irigaray and later Wolf and Butler would have it, but is an opportunity to create an original and adaptable work of art from skin and bone.

When human beauty is placed behind glass it is entirely changed, from a moving, breathing glory of flesh to a cold, two-dimensional screen, showing a lovely image which invites and yet prevents touch. This static preservation of beauty conjures thoughts of both death and immortality, a paradox that beguiles and disturbs. Glass elevates beauty to an ideal that is always just out of reach, and which can only retain its particular icy and enigmatic allure if it remains untouchable. Ever in pursuit, we push beauty into the realm of death so as to achieve an even more perfect unattainability, worshipping a corpse in what comes to seem like an absurd and dangerous obsession that negates the beauty of the living. But contemporary fiction tests the flexibility of the glass metaphor, proving that it can be reheated, made malleable, and blown into new shapes. Glass is by nature a material of transubstantiation, and writers like Shaw and Byatt reform the old glass castles and coffins into camera lenses and colour-saturated windows that refract the glass metaphor into a variety of forms.

Unlike ice, whose changes are dramatic and fundamental, glass provides a more stable articulation of human beauty by transforming it either in accordance with its own fiery creation or by refracting an image into a myriad of alternative possibilities. As the enduring image of the glass coffin implies, glass exerts an inescapable force of containment that neither Ida in *The Girl with Glass Feet* nor Maud in *Possession* can defeat: glass offers a screen or picture of perfect, immortal beauty that will not melt like ice, but which comes at the cost of human connection — unless, like Maud, one uses the transformative capacity of glass to alter its metaphorical imaging of human beauty in a way that does not subsume the human individual entirely. The threat of this suppression by artistic form continues to be explored in the next chapter through the metaphor of gold, which as an articulation of human beauty abstracts it even further, into an idea of

perfection so desirable that it becomes defined by this desire, transformed into a commodity.

## Chapter 5

### Gold

Gold is a metaphor *par excellence* for beauty. Like the ideals of perfect beauty we have examined, gold is a pure element, rare and therefore precious, and it is immortal yet at the same time yielding. Formed at the time of the world's own creation, the gold deposits in the seams of the earth are a single, unalloyed substance whose genesis will never be repeated. As such, the quantity of gold in existence is finite, and what we have on or in the earth now is all that there will ever be: Peter L. Bernstein asserts that there are only “125, 000 tons of it in existence” (*The Power of Gold* 19). It is largely this scarcity that makes gold so rare and so prized, since the time will come when there is no more to be found. But what there is, endures. Gold is immortal because it cannot really be destroyed: although it can erode, the traces that are rubbed or washed away do not disappear but are merely dispersed. This metal can only be transformed into other manifestations. And that is easy to do — despite being eternal, gold is soft and malleable, yielding to the goldsmith's little hammer with perfect willingness. So it is that gold can be made even more beautiful, capable of being shaped into almost any ornamental form. This is the standard to which any coveting the accolade of beauty must aspire, a standard more easily achieved by metal than by flesh.

Not only as a substance, but also as a metaphor gold is characterised by transformation. The desperate diggers of the Gold Rushes sought gold to facilitate the transformation of their lives, a single day's work occasionally — very occasionally — being enough to lift them from the squalor of the goldfields and the poverty that was often their only alternative, into a life of wealth and luxury with access to beautiful people, objects and places. It was the radiant beauty of their hopeful visions that prompted thousands to endure such danger and difficulty, and in this sense gold was a metaphor for

them, for the transformation of their circumstances. Similarly, the discipline of alchemy, dating back to at least the second century BC, was not for genuine alchemists the attempt simply to transform base metals into gold (Hessayon, *Gold Tried in the Fire* 343). This laboratory process, as desperate and dangerous as gold mining and with equally slim odds of success, was a metaphor for the transformation of the self. The alchemist wanted to turn his soul to ‘gold’, to perfect it.

Again, in Greek mythology, King Midas learns the peril of gold’s enticing beauty when the power of transformation takes over and ultimately destroys all that he values; Atalanta loses the race whose victory would have protected her virginity when she is distracted by Venus’ golden apples; and Croesus is killed by the gold that he adores when his enemies pour it, molten, down his throat (P. L. Bernstein 1). *The Power of Gold* concludes with the statement, “The most striking feature of this long history is that gold led most of the protagonists of the drama into the ditch” (372). Evidently, coming too close to gold is more than the human body and spirit can endure: they will submit to transformation under its power, but may not survive the process. We are not made for perfection.

Using gold as a metaphor for human beauty involves paradox as well as impossibility. It is by using a part of the earth that we attempt to transcend our natural limitations, infusing human beauty with gold so as to transform humanity into something more perfect. A natural substance used to transcend the natural: as will be seen in contemporary fiction, the natural world may retaliate against this, whether it be the landscape, gold itself or human flesh that rebels. It is this attempt to exploit and commodify the natural (human and landscape) that generates conflict in the novels studied here. Rose Tremain’s *The Colour* (2003), a Gold Rush novel set in 1860s New Zealand, traces transformation both for the worse, as the beautiful landscape is mangled by gold miners and mangles them in return, and for the better when a woman more respectful of the natural finds herself in a transcendently beautiful union of the flesh and the earth.

*Venus as a Boy* (2004) by Luke Sutherland establishes a standard of perfect beauty in its presentation of the natural environment and channels this standard into a reimagining of human beauty and its commodification. The transcendence beyond a commodified existence becomes visible when the protagonist finds his body gradually turning into gold in a reworking of the Midas myth. Post-1980 fiction demonstrates that it is possible to transcend the flaws and frustrations of the human state, but it requires one to fully accept the abstraction of beauty from the human who possesses it; this allows the individual to harness beauty's transformative power and, through metaphor, experience a moment of perfect beauty — which, transcendent by definition, could never be literal or physical anyway.

Beauty, and human beauty in particular, may have a transcendent element but it has also been characterised in very literal terms as a commodity. The physical, natural bodies of both humans and gold can be passed around in economic transactions just as easily as their beauty can be contemplated in the abstract. The paradox that arises from this dual nature of beauty forms the focus of this chapter, as it occurs in recent fiction which attempts to resolve these conflicts. Arthur Marwick, one of very few critics who address human beauty, positions himself within a highly practical understanding of beauty. In contemporary life, he observes, “we see that the received method of marketing products of every type is to associate them with a beautiful human being” (*Beauty in History*, 1988 13). This does not necessarily constitute commodification of the beautiful person (although involving them in a projected commodity exchange), but in an later work Marwick expands on this argument, asserting that this “is the modern view: beauty has market, not moral, value” (*IT: A History of Human Beauty*, 2004 212).

John Frow, in *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997), supports Marwick’s position by emphasising the aesthetic as a field of debate and ambiguity regarding commodification: “there are a number of areas of increasing uncertainty, including that of the aesthetic, especially in its growing integration into advertising and marketing” (145). Marwick’s

historical accounts provide a large collection of evidence for the commodification of human beauty, acknowledging the practical uses to which it has been put without sacrificing a more esoteric awareness of the fascination human beauty has exerted: “songs, sagas, poems speak to us directly across the centuries of the power and fascination of human beauty. Is it really believable that all that passion, all that joy, all that despair was lavished on what was merely a cultural construct?” (*IT* 222). Marwick assesses the pragmatic implications of his historical evidence rather than offering grand answers to this question, criticising those such as Elaine Scarry who attempt to do so<sup>10</sup>. For Marwick, the mystical fascination of human beauty does not preclude its operation as a commodity — indeed, this mystery constitutes an important part of its exchange value.

For Marx and his successors, it is no mysterious power of fascination that determines exchange value, but an abstracted calculation of human labour: how many hours of average human labour it takes to produce the commodity. His focus on the abstraction of the human from labour and product aligns his theory of commodities usefully with my argument regarding human beauty in literature as a separation or abstraction from the individual; Marx’s idea of ‘alienation’ illuminates my arguments in the context of human commodification. In *Capital*, Marx defines a commodity as “a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (125). This does not preclude the commodification of persons or their services which, as Appadurai argues, are a commodity especially demanded and produced in our “complex, postindustrial economies [in which] services are a dominant, even definitive, feature of the world of commodity exchange” (55). In relation to persons and services, Marx’s description of the commodification process still holds: he

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<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, when discussing Scarry’s 1999 work *On Beauty and Being Just*, Marwick is scornful of her impractical mysticisms: “This equation of copulation with artistic creation or the promulgation of legal systems is the sort of drivel, gift-wrapped in olde worldly terms like ‘begetting’, with which philosophers habitually confuse such issues as human beauty” (*IT* 10). Although Marwick distorts Scarry’s argument slightly in his summary — her “equation of copulation with artistic creation” (*ibid.*) is not nearly as direct as he implies — I wholly approve of his emphasis on the need for a more practical element to the philosophy of (human) beauty.

establishes his claim that “A use-value, or useful article . . . has value only because abstract human labour is objectified or materialized in it” (129).

Services may be seen as a perfect manifestation of this principle, since they are the precise calculation and sale of hours of human labour. However, the abstraction of human labour from its product (and the individual human labourer) in itself commodifies the individual who is thus defined, in the words of Lukács, “by the fact that his labour-power is his only possession” (*History and Class Consciousness* 92). The consequences of this for individuals and for society are made clear as Lukács continues, “His fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation” (*ibid.*). Returning to Marwick and his insistence on the commodified status of human beauty, it appears in this context that a beautiful person is doubly commodified: firstly, their beauty itself, as a service or an object for gratification, becomes commodified; and secondly, the individual as the ‘producer’ of this commodity suffers the alienation that Marx identifies, functioning as a mere cog in the capitalist machine of commodity production, a marketable number of hours of human labour and nothing more.

However, beauty resists this condition of alienation, retaining the promise of transcendence beyond the merely mechanical, as Marwick observes. The novels studied in this chapter present human beauty in a context of heightened commodification — primarily through the metaphor of gold, a substance of huge historical importance as a commodity — and equally present the attempt to transcend the moral taint of commodification by hijacking and modifying the very process of abstraction by which commodification occurs. Marx writes that “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value” (138). The commodity aspect of an

object (or person) is emphatically, and necessarily, detached from its physical body: its exchange value is a manufactured and abstract principle not intrinsically related to its physical existence.

The commodity value and the aesthetic value of beauty are therefore entirely discrete elements of the whole, and as we shall see shortly in the Kantian theory of the aesthetic, detachment and abstraction are also essential processes in the attribution of beauty to an object. In fact, according to Binsbergen and Geschiere, “*Kantian modern thought, thus, is the matrix of commodification, as much as commodification is the matrix of Kantian thought*” (34 emphasis in text). The theme of detachment thus assumes great importance, and it is by inverting and manipulating the various modes of internal separation inflicted upon it that human beauty, in post-1980 literature, detaches itself from the dehumanised and morally unsavoury process of commodification. Specifically, this is achieved by reidentifying human beauty with its natural, physical body, and the natural body of the earth through gold, an earthly product.

By metaphorically equating human beauty with the beauty of gold, the first link has been forged between the human and the earth. However, when gold functions in this metaphorical capacity, its history as a form of money illuminates the issues of exchange and commodification that often arise around beautiful objects or people. It is not an easy task for these novels, then, to resolve the paradox of the commodification and abstraction of human beauty through a connection to the earth via gold. On the other hand, the choice of gold makes all the problems of commodification distinctly visible, and therefore capable of being directly addressed.

P. L. Bernstein characterises the relationship between gold, beauty and commerce in terms of conflict: “The tension between gold as adornment and gold as money developed early in history and has continued up to the present time” (18). Gold, as will be seen in the novels that explore its workings, is an ideal metaphor for the paradox of beauty — is it only true beauty if it is self-sufficient, beautiful merely for the sake of it (adornment), or can it be turned to practical use (money or economic

exchange) without being corrupted? Iris Murdoch argues in *The Sovereignty of Good* that “Metaphors often carry a moral charge, which analysis in simpler and plainer terms is designed to remove” (77-8). The complexity of the gold metaphor testifies to this concern with morality, in its particularly knotty moral questions. Gold cannot be considered apart from its paradoxical features of corruption and purity, and it highlights with unique power the association of these qualities with human beauty.

### **The Golden Mirror**

Beauty, in Rose Tremain’s 2003 novel *The Colour*, appears as a rare and valuable pleasure in the otherwise bleak landscape of New Zealand’s South Island in the 1860s. Newlyweds Joseph and Harriet Blackstone, who attempt to establish a small farm in the almost entirely uninhabited wilderness of the Okuku river plains, name their cow ‘Beauty’, because “her eyes are like pools of amber and the curls on her head appear quite as though they had been set in curl-papers” (25). Harriet’s description of Beauty the cow is one of the first examples of the novel’s defining technique: the metaphorical binding of the human to the natural world, via beauty. Thus the significance of Beauty is the connection to the earth that she facilitates for Harriet, whose favourite task in her new life is milking Beauty and churning the milk into butter. Harriet involves herself in the natural cycles of the earth in which the grass Beauty munches becomes milk and then butter to feed the Blackstones:

Waiting for the butter gives me such excitement. The extraordinary change of colour! I think I have always been enthralled by any process by which one thing is transformed into something else. I can understand the obsession of the alchemists of the Ancient World. (26)

The suggested yellow colour of the butter is a premonitory echo of the gold associated with alchemy. Harriet's statement itself carries more than a hint of prophecy, as soon after she writes it Joseph finds gold in their creek and their lives are indeed transformed. Only a page later the omniscient third person narrator, at this point inhabiting Harriet's thoughts, recalls that in her previous life as a governess a particular ten-shilling note had never been "alchemised" (27) into the promised pair of gloves. Gold lies in wait in the narrative as it lies in the seams of the South Island earth, shortly to emerge in all its transformative power. However, once their primary connection to the earth is through gold, the purity of their previous relation to the earth through Beauty the cow is contaminated by self-interest and the desire for beauty as a highly valued commodity. Soon enough, these forces infect the presentation of the characters' physical appearances, and while Harriet develops into a beauty predicated on a staunch resistance to selfish exploitation, Joseph loses what attractiveness he had in proportion to his diminishing moral capacities.

Once he has joined the Gold Rush, Joseph's physical appearance decays in parallel with the landscape he is helping to destroy: at the well-dug goldfields of Kaniere, "The ground had a pocked and tousled look" (153) like the reflected face ravaged by disease and suffering that Joseph sees when, after months of mining, he observes "how strange he looked, how ill he had become" (360) with his hair "straggly and long" (324). He and the other miners are stripped of their flesh and their youth by malnutrition, just as the "scrub [is] uprooted and burned, the trees felled and stripped" (153). Significantly, it is this process of ravaging the landscape undertaken by the miners that causes the mirror-image destruction in themselves, as if in retribution. When humans attempt to commodify the land, each tearing off their own piece, the corruption and commodification extends to themselves: Will Sefton, for instance, a beautiful young boy whom Joseph encounters on his way to the Kokatahi goldfields, sells his sexual services to the miners in exchange for gold (he is entirely indifferent to any other form of payment).

In the Gold Rush environment, the ‘natural’ commodities of gold and sex are the only currency with real exchange value. In Marxist terms, this exchange value becomes an objective quality, separate from either the shining gold or the beautiful body of Will Sefton; but it does change their material existence. Marx writes of the commodity that in the “abstraction from its use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value” (128). Abstracting an exchange value from the use value alters the nature of the object, so that “All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished” (*ibid.*) in the encompassing force of exchange. The exchange value of a golden nugget or a human body may be separated from their physical existence, but they inevitably partake of the moral contamination and denaturalisation of the commodity form.

However far gold is commodified, though, it invariably retains its transcendent aesthetic quality in written accounts, just as Marwick noted that human beauty keeps its fascination even after extensive use as a marketing tool. Gold, a substance of the earth, is sought in order that the miners in their squalid tents and latrines may transcend their miserably earthly conditions. P. L. Bernstein agrees, the lyrical quality of his writing betraying his own susceptibility to gold’s allure: “The wonderful thing about gold”, he claims, is that despite “its achievements in its critical role as the prototype of wealth and money” gold has “never lost its poetic quality. It has always been both sacred and profane” (76). Even economic historians, it seems, cannot help but imbue their histories of gold with some of its lustre, and other examples of critical writing on gold will be seen to indulge in the same poeticisms. Meanwhile, it is precisely the exchange value of gold that elevates the substance itself from its earthly origins to make it an abstract facilitator of human dreams. Fairy tales such as ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Snow White’ show us how the value of their beauty is currency enough to lift them into wealth and splendour; *The Colour’s* Harriet will offer an alternative version of this, one in which the exchange values of gold and beauty interact in a modified way. Instead of exploiting

either gold or her own beauty she makes a pact with the natural world in response to its demands, greatly to her benefit.

Joseph's appreciation of the beauty of gold is inextricably connected to what it can do for him: "He found each and every particle of the gold astonishing and beautiful. It had come out of the mud and it was *his*, because he alone had seen it and recognised it for what it was" (74 emphasis in text). Harriet begins to understand "the 'gold fever' which has taken hold of Joseph" (302) when she discovers gold herself, and she writes to her father that, "gold, I now understand, is a substance truly fascinating in its allure. It's not merely the weight and shine of it that entrals us, but its infinite transformations, its power to become whatever we choose" (302). This transformative power is located in gold's exchange value, in all the things it can buy; the commodification of gold, then, is an integral part of its transcendent quality and its appeal, and at this point Tremain's narrative refrains from implying any cheapening or corrupting of gold's beauty as a consequence. Donald Dale Jackson records a historical parallel when he quotes Sergeant James Carson's reaction to the California Gold Rush:

Frenzy seized my soul: unbidden my legs performed some entirely new movements of polka steps. . . . Piles of gold rose before me at every step; castles of marble, dazzling the eye with their rich appliances; thousands of slaves bowing to my beck and call; myriads of fair virgins competing with each other for my love — were among the fancies of my fevered imagination. (*Gold Dust: The California Gold Rush and the Forty-Niners* 29)

In itself, the beauty of the gold has no actual literal value: it is not especially useful, it is simply beautiful. In the hands of people, however, this beauty immediately transforms into currency to buy other objects and alternative lives. This value relies, however, on the self-interest and desire for beauty that drives other people into an economy of exchange, in order to

obtain what they want. In her correlation of physical ugliness with moral corruption, Tremain draws a clear link between beauty and morality, but keeps them separate; their connection is manifested in the structure and detail of the narrative, the careful conjunction of images of human and natural beauty, or ugliness. Although there is a causal relationship between Joseph's destruction of the landscape, his moral decay and his physical dissolution, the connection remains metaphorical, symbolic and suggestive. This framework owes much of its structure and moral underpinning to the aesthetic philosophy of Kant, who also defines beauty through a series of connections predicated fundamentally on the discrete, separate existence of the entities that are joined.

### **The Kantian Separation**

Numerous philosophers have identified Kant's three *Critiques* (of *Pure Reason*, *Practical Reason* and of *Judgement*) as marking the beginning of 'modernity'. Binsbergen and Geschiere cite the phenomenological approach of Kant's *Critiques* as "the beginning and foundation of modern thought" (33) in their isolation of man from the surrounding world; "we are utterly incapable of knowing things as they really are. We can only know our mental representations of them. Yet there is the unmistakeable continuity between these representations, and reality". J. M. Bernstein in *The Fate of Art* (not to be confused with Peter L. Bernstein and *The Power of Gold*) traces the extension of this separation to the realm of the aesthetic, which in Kant is detached from those of "cognition and moral worth" (J. M. Bernstein 5). He claims, "it is Kant's third *Critique* that attempts to generate, to carve out and constitute, the domain of the aesthetic in its wholly modern signification" (ibid.).

The era of 'modern thought' is also, according to Lukács, the era of capitalism. This is not merely coincidental: the principle of categorical separation and rational abstraction that drives Kant's philosophy is equally the foundation of capitalist society, and in particular of the process of

commodification. The abstraction of an object's (or a person's) exchange value from the object's material or individual existence, determined by the objective calculation of the number of hours of human labour required to produce it, is entirely built on the premise that the world is made up of distinct categories whose relationships are based on exchange. It is due to the success of this philosophy that Lukács can identify "the commodity [as] the universal category of society as a whole" (86), and Binsbergen and Geschiere argue that the "concept of commodity has universalizing tendencies" (46), meaning that the commodifying attitude tends to take over more and more "spheres" of existence (ibid.). They then forcefully conclude that, "*Kantian modern thought, thus, is the matrix of commodification, as much as commodification is the matrix of Kantian thought*" (34 emphasis in text). The principle of separate spheres of existence (cognitive, moral, aesthetic) that essentially constitutes this structural link is also connected to my argument that human beauty in art entails a separation of beauty from the human individual, by abstracting human beauty into a separate sphere. In the metaphorical connection of gold to human beauty, the necessary implication of commodification (of person and beauty) becomes visible. The novels addressed here acknowledge this inevitable condition, but attempt to invert the principle of separation in order to protect beauty and the human individual from the corrupting, dehumanising association of commodification.

Although Kant's theory of the formation of aesthetic judgements bases the attribution of beauty on the perception of moral good in the object — "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good" (180; bk. 1 sec. 59) — a claim which is rarely made in the late twentieth or twenty-first century. J. M. Bernstein argues that beauty and morality have been forcibly separated in the post-Kantian, modern world: "The challenge is rather to think through what truth, morality and beauty (or its primary instance: art) are when what is denied is their categorial separation from one another — a separation, I shall argue, following Weber and Habermas, that is constitutive of modernity" (2). Iris Murdoch and Elaine Scarry are the most

notable defenders of a continuing link between beauty and goodness in recent philosophy, although both have received criticism for this position. Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*, published in 1970, is no longer very recent and has been superseded by critics such as Bernstein; Scarry, meanwhile, has come under serious fire (as we have seen, from critics like Marwick) for her highly problematic arguments in *Beauty and Being Just*. Donoghue's 2003 criticism of Scarry could also be applied to Murdoch, when he remarks, "It seems to me a poor defense of beauty to isolate it and then make it an instrument in the advance of other values" (172).

Kant, however, has remained a focus of study and debate. This may well be due to the complexity of his philosophy: it is not the case that beauty *is* or is inherently bound up with the morally good, but that it is the *symbol* of it — therefore beauty and moral goodness are discrete entities with a symbolic link. There is plenty of scope in this idea for continued interpretation of the relationship between beauty and morality. We have seen in previous chapters that a conception of beauty as something transcendent and abstract, reaching beyond earthly concerns, has endured consistently right up to contemporary studies of beauty and aesthetics. It is on this basis that Kirwan argues of the aesthetic theory expounded in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, that "it is noteworthy that, even as the secularization of thought once more appeared to gather momentum in the later nineteenth century, this form of aesthetics, which it would seem could hardly sustain itself without a commitment to something beyond the secular, nevertheless lost none of its hold. In the twentieth century it was kept alive in the continental tradition by such figures as Heidegger, Gadamer and Lyotard" (*The Aesthetic in Kant* 3).

It is this "something beyond the secular" (*ibid.*) that is still being sought in treatments of beauty, both critical and fictional — perhaps more ardently pursued now in response to the marketing and commodification of beauty observed by Marwick and Frow. J. M. Bernstein affirms Kirwan's claim in his study of Kant's successors (and critics), referring particularly to Heidegger, Derrida and Adorno, that "at least one significant strain of

modern thought has been seeking ways of (re)connecting the modern subject or self with an order beyond it" (8). Further supporting this trend towards the reunification of separated categories, Binsbergen and Geschiere insist that "*the general trend in 20th-century CE thought has been not to reaffirm, but to expose, criticise, and remedy such a separation between humankind and 'the things' as is taken for granted, celebrated even, in the concepts of 'commodity' and 'commodification'*" (34 emphasis in text).

One of the main strands of Luke Sutherland's *Venus as a Boy* establishes the protagonist D.'s standard of beauty within an almost Kantian framework of disinterestedness and the separation of spheres of existence, though these spheres are held in connection by the metaphor of gold. The varying manifestations and transformations of gold constitute a partial reunification of the spheres, which is pushed much further in later parts of the novel in a challenge to the Kantian worldview. What remains emphasised throughout the novel is the transcendent and transformative power of beauty (and love, as a related phenomenon). The novel employs gold in a metaphorical capacity to connect human beauty with that of the landscape, while keeping these beauties segregated from the vicissitudes of human relationships and from other uses of the land — interests, in Kantian terms. Kant defines interest in this context as follows: "The delight which we connect with the representation of the existence of an object is called interest. Such a delight, therefore, always involves a reference to the faculty of desire, either as its determining ground, or else as necessarily implicated with its determining ground" (36; bk. 1 sec. 2).

In *The Colour*, gold is firmly rooted in the earth, reluctant to leave it: in the Orkney and London scenes of *Venus as a Boy*, gold occurs in D.'s narrative (we never know his full name) as an indicator of his most precious moments of beauty and happiness, which are always embodied in his environment. In this sense, the landscape itself is almost metaphorical.

Introducing himself and his story<sup>11</sup>, D. remarks of Orkney that “once you’ve lived there and come away you never quite stop pining for the beauty and magic” (8). This beauty explicitly refers to the landscape of the islands, which remains separated from and “Regardless of the nastiness and violence and hate” encountered in the people (*ibid.*). The magic of Orkney is primarily concentrated in its light, and it is in D.’s descriptions of this that gold becomes a consistent feature. Whereas *The Colour* depicts gold as intransigently earthbound, Sutherland finds his gold in the sky — but this airy gold forges an equally strong connection between environment and characters. In a reflection on “just how deep Orkney went in me” (51-2), a metaphor expressing the significance of his connection to his homeland, D. particularly emphasises “*qualities of light*” (*ibid.* emphasis in text), which extend the metaphor into transcendent realms by implicitly filling D. himself with light. This golden light running through D.’s body ultimately becomes visible, when he turns to gold.

Returning to Orkney after almost twenty years away, D. observes “strips of red, yellow and gold along the horizon where the last of the sunlight seeped through. Classic Orkney” (136). The golden horizon makes frequent appearances in the novel, a metaphor for the idealised future life envisioned by the characters in this novel and in *The Colour*. In this description, near the end of the novel, the distant golden horizon is part of the experience of being in Orkney — not a call from afar to leave the islands. D. has recognised that the beauty is precisely in the distance of this ideal, and that he will never actually reach it as his destination. Kirwan in *Beauty* offers an explanation of this situation: “This is the fundamental oxymoron of beauty. It is the desire alone that endures and, in enduring, itself provides that which is its end — beauty” (122). Beauty is, in these terms, an unfulfilled and thereby self-fulfilling desire. For this reason Kirwan characterises beauty as “ateleological” (*ibid.*), aligning his theory

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<sup>11</sup> The narrative of *Venus as a Boy* is presented to us as a transcript, taken down by the writer ‘L. S.’ (Luke Sutherland is the obvious suggestion), who has been approached by Pascal, the lover of D. who is now on his deathbed. After his death, Pascal gives L. S. several minidiscs containing D.’s narration of his story. There is no admission by L. S. that any license has been taken with the transcription, and so, for consistence, I refer to the story as D.’s narrative, rather than Sutherland’s.

partially with Kant's emphasis on disinterestedness. The golden horizon is an absolute metaphor of separation: although D. figuratively establishes Orkney's gold light as a part of himself, its manifestation is external to him and unreachable.

Beauty is therefore abstracted from the material world — or at least, the attainable material world — in line with Kant's assertion that in making an aesthetic judgement we should not be “concerned with the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it on the basis of mere contemplation (intuition or reflection)” (36; bk. 1 sec. 2). The frequent recounts of “nastiness and violence and hate” (8) also associated with Orkney and with D. (as both victim and perpetrator) make it necessary for the island's beauty to be detached from the inhabitants, and even from the physical mass of the island itself; on the horizon the beauty is safe, as Kant would wish, from moral contamination.

The novels studied in this chapter show the relationship between beauty and morality to be contingent and man-made: the link may have become deeply entrenched, but Tremain and Sutherland demonstrate that it is open to deconstruction. The problem of the desirability and subsequent commodification of human beauty is articulated through the metaphor of gold, which shares these attributes. The novels' narrative treatments of this metaphor attempt to transcend the implied contamination of commodification, abstracting and purifying gold until its beauty is entirely detached from the interests which Kant banishes from his own conception of the beautiful. However, in these narratives beauty must first pass through the commodifying process which separates it from its material body. This abstraction is necessary for beauty to then continue to abstract itself from other associations. The urge towards the purification and transcendence of beauty above the base and earthly is still evident in post-1980 fiction, but we can no longer rely on assertions of intrinsic goodness. Instead, we have to build the scaffolding from which transcendence can take off, with metaphor and its manipulation within narrative as the primary materials. However, it must be remembered that gold is chemically pure, refusing to

bond with other elements: a certain degree of inherent purity is already present.

Harriet in *The Colour* and D. in *Venus as a Boy* find that neither beauty nor gold can be easily separated from their exchange value, and that this incurs moral compromises and difficulties. However, by exploiting the metaphorical process by which abstract beauty is joined to natural, earthly objects, they attempt to transcend the commodification of the beauty they possess. Both characters reconnect beauty to the earth through their use of metaphor in the narrative, with a definite moral intention. By establishing the environment as a pure and morally good origin of beauty, the beleaguered attribute of beauty is sheltered in the more general manifestation of the earth, which is not so entangled as the characters are in the economies of exchange governing the texts.

### **Natural Gold, Golden Nature**

In both *The Colour* and *Venus as a Boy* the connection of the human to the natural world, via beauty and gold, fluctuates between the literal and the metaphorical. In Tremain's novel, gold exists as a solid substance in the New Zealand earth and in the narrative, but its radiant and valuable beauty escapes the bonds of physicality to function metaphorically. Gold and beauty become almost synonymous, as a single shapeshifting metaphor for the dream of transcendence, the idealised future life. In literal terms, the future life that can be attained if only an individual can procure enough gold to buy themselves this dream. Less literally, the idealised life that might occur if one can find a perfect love. It is the discordance between these two aspirations that creates a moral difficulty: the 'purity' of self-sacrifice and freely giving to another are in conflict with the self-serving exchange economy of gold as money.

Kant distinguishes two types of beauty on this basis, and two types of aesthetic judgement. The interest present in an evaluation of gold as a commodity renders any consideration of its beauty impure — "Everyone

must allow that a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste" (36; bk. 1 sec. 2). Purity here can be interpreted as denoting both moral purity and the undiluted singularity of the judgement; both readings are suggested by Kant's usage of the term throughout the *Critique*. It is acceptable for an interest to arise *after* a pure aesthetic judgement has been made, such as the desire to own a beautiful object or merely to remain in its presence, but once an economy of exchange has been established in society, in which gold has a value, no judgement of gold's beauty can be pure.

Tremain attempts to redeem the beauty of gold by transforming it into a metaphor for a disinterested and aesthetic love between two people: once gold is bound up with this pure aesthetic judgement, its own beauty is detached from the taint of commerce. However, this redemption is only temporary, as her characters cannot survive without self-interest. In *The Colour*, the gold itself is an ever-present sprinkling of beauty in the narrative, insidious and beguiling. In all the open vastness of New Zealand the precious metal that takes over and transforms it almost invariably appears in tiny quantities, a "coarse dust" (268) or a few "grains" (271), always emphatically combined with the earth or rock from which it has come. Joseph Blackstone's initial find in his creek consists of "grey mud dusted with gold" (56), and later on his way to the Kokatahi goldfields he learns how the gold lies "on the blue-clay bottom" (153) of the rivers, elusive beneath the rushing waters. The miners' task is one of separation, removing the gold from the earth in which it has been embedded for millennia. This is a notoriously difficult task: "Although gold deposits are widespread, in one form or another, no one area has yielded its gold easily. Finding and producing gold demands immense effort relative to the amount of glittering yellow metal that makes its appearance at the end of the process" (P. L. Bernstein 9).

These small quantities of gold are most frequently measured in terms of the human hand: the Chinese vegetable seller Pao Yi finds a nugget "much larger than his thumb pad" (216) described again later as

measuring “about the length of his thumb” (248), while Joseph’s first discovery amounts to “a little mound of bright dust . . . the size of a man’s thumb-nail” (57). In this way the gold dug from the earth is connected to the people who dug it, implicating them in the tensions and moral paradoxes its beauty provokes. The gold also connects people to the earth itself via their digging hands, and for Harriet and Pao Yi it is this fundamental connection to the landscape that saves them from the vicious commodity culture of the Gold Rush.

Gold is the medium by which the narrative joins earth and man, and it is specifically the seductive beauty of the gold that effects this: it draws people to the earth, draws their hands deep into the soil, and leaves mud under their fingernails. Although Tremain does imply a degree of moral judgement on the miners who ravage the landscape in their pursuit of gold as riches, in these earlier descriptions of the beauty of gold and its apparent affinity with the human body she presents the characters’ appreciation of beauty as relatively uncorrupted. Before the gold has actually become a commodity, and is only radiant with beauty and promise, it is not morally problematic. The establishment of an original purity becomes crucial later in the novel, as a state to which gold and human beauty might return, through a reunion with the natural environment.

Tremain’s conjunction of human and natural beauty does not disrupt the broadly Kantian framework of the text’s morality, as it is predicated on a disinterestedness in human interactions with beauty. Further, Kant allows for a certain amount of pleasure in nature’s beauty; “I do maintain that to take an *immediate interest* in the beauty of *nature* (not merely to have taste in judging it) is always a mark of a good soul” (128; bk. 1 sec. 42 emphasis in text). However, his precepts are too strict to allow one to engage gold in a ‘pure’ aesthetic judgement since the implication of the personal interests it can satisfy is too deeply ingrained in the substance of gold, and its colour and shine fall under Kant’s category of ‘charms’ rather than true beauty, which is found in ‘form’ (*ibid.*).

Yet in both novels it is precisely this sense of possibility and transformation, based on the economic value of gold, wherein lies its beauty. Before gold is actually sought and used as a commodity, its commodity value (which, as Marx reminds us, is detached from the material object), lends the gold a metaphysical value as a non-specific facilitator of dreams. Both Tremain and Sutherland challenge Kant's narrow and rigid definition of beauty, by creating narratives that foreground experiences that abuse or exploit such strictures but remain explicitly beautiful and concerned with beauty. The rapture produced by gold can be presented as pure and uncorrupted by exploiting the principles of separation that govern Kant's doctrine and also the process of commodification associated with (and condemned by) it. The moral impurity attached to the commodification of gold is abstracted by Tremain from the gold itself, and presented as a human frailty not attributable to the substance used by them as a commodity. Moral judgement is reserved for those who actively engage in destruction and corruption in their quest for gold, as we see in Joseph's physical and mental ruin. The beauty of gold, however, remains its own.

Sutherland, however, employs sex in his challenge to the Kantian 'purity' of aesthetic judgements, as method of transcendence through beauty — and even, ultimately, through commodification. J. M. Bernstein interprets Kant's *Critique* as arguing the following:

. . . disinterestedness is, in a sense, measured against, and perhaps determined by, the powerful interests from which it withdraws. In withdrawing from sensuous interests, the very 'pathological' interests which moral reason requires us to withdraw from, the achievement of aesthetic disinterestedness is nearly as great, granting the diminished character of the 'sacrifice' involved, as the achievement of moral autonomy. The diminished character of the sacrifice of sensuous interests turns on the fact that aesthetic disinterestedness requires only the temporary 'bracketing' or

deferral of sensuous interests and not their wholesale abandonment.  
(25)

Taking Bernstein's interpretation further, Sutherland refuses to concede that beauty requires a withdrawal from sensuous interests, instead giving his protagonist the definitive power of both providing and receiving transcendent experiences of beauty through sex.

At various moments throughout the novel, D.'s narrative refers back to the golden horizon, evoking its most significant incarnation on Orkney's Bu Beach. As teenagers, D. and his first love Tracy are one night having sex in a small boat when a group of other youngsters push them out to sea. As the foundations of their relationship begin to dissolve in hostility, D.'s narrative is suffused first with darkness, and then with gold. Tracy herself becomes part of the landscape, with "her hair all halo, sky twinkling in the background" (54), one instance of many in which human and natural beauty are combined, becoming almost synonymous through their mutual infusion of gold. When she tells him finally that their relationship is over, the narrative switches entirely to description of the environment: "It was black all round. No stars. A gold strip glimmering on the horizon" (58). The hint of pathetic fallacy, in the total darkness, gives way to a strip of gold, which seems to act as some kind of consolation offered to the two of them by Orkney itself.

The gold strip turns out to be Bu Beach, one of Orkney's most beautiful spots, and this is the only time that D. comes close to reaching the golden horizon and the paradise it promises: "Whatever tension there'd been on the boat, Bu Beach drained it away" (58). The power of natural and human beauty, in conjunction, to detach D. and Tracy from all their practical and emotional interests presents a novel kind of disinterestedness, reminiscent of Murdoch's description of beauty as "an occasion for 'unselfing'" (*Sovereignty of Good* 84), in which we "clear our minds of selfish care" (ibid.). The whole of D.'s story revolves around this single image of perfect beauty, in which Tracy and Bu Beach are conflated in a

golden light, and this image functions as the pivot around which he can build an alternative articulation of beauty.

It is vital for Sutherland to connect the beauty of people and landscape not only through gold, but also with the infusion of sexuality. The two become inextricably combined in the gilded visions that D. and his partners can achieve during sex — “tunnels of light, orchards, and angels, always angels” (50) — and later when, through his gift of providing sexual transcendence, D. is given the ambivalent “reward” (145) of the transformation of his whole body into gold. Merely withdrawing from sensuality and its attendant problems of exploitation or commodification of individuals would not allow D. to fully transform these evils, as he ultimately does.

J. M. Bernstein articulates the same frustration at the narrowness of definitions of beauty such as Kant’s: “Once the capacity for the appreciation of beauty becomes essentially a moral virtue, then the autonomy, integrity, disinterestedness and impartiality of judgements of taste are destroyed” (28). In this he seems to suggest that there should be more separation of beauty and morality, although the terms he ascribes to beauty — integrity and disinterestedness in particular — have a distinctly moral flavour, at least in a Kantian context. The entanglement of beauty and morality is thus made even clearer, and it is worth noting that Kant specifically describes beauty as the symbol of the morally good; Salim Kemal observes in *Kant and Fine Art* (1986) that “it is more appropriate and fruitful to stress that beauty bears analogies with moral good” (16). Beauty is therefore something essentially different from morality, but related. As a result it is perfectly possible for Tremain and Sutherland to detach moral judgements from beauty, and to play with the symbolic relationships between them.

While *The Colour* embeds gold in its narrative in solid human hand-sized chunks, Sutherland draws the natural and the human together through metaphorical gold, in the descriptions of golden beauty that encompass everything in the scene. In Kantian terms, by infusing gold into the

landscape in metaphorical form (as light), Sutherland abstracts gold from its literal form and the empirical interests that inevitably arise from the contemplation of its beauty. Having purified gold in this way, using it as a natural, landscape-bound metaphor for semi-divine perfection, gold is sufficiently transcendent that Sutherland is able, later, to reincarnate it in physical form. When D. literally turns into gold, Sutherland presents him as a metaphor for perfection and purity detached from the commodification that had consumed his former beauty. Both D. and gold itself are transformed.

### **“It Shows Itself and Beckons”: Golden Girls**

Although the beauty of gold may invoke both materialistic and transcendent visions that draw people back to the landscape, it does not necessarily fulfil its promises. As a result, its lovely appearance takes on the hue of deception. Joseph in *The Colour* contemplates that gold is:

... as duplicitous as a girl. It shows itself and beckons. Within its first gleam lies the promise of more, much more, and so men go forward, cajoling the earth, breaking their backs and their hearts, but very often they're rewarded with nothing . . . (86)

Once again gold is metaphorically connected to human beauty, a comparison that holds particular significance for Joseph because he has fled England to escape the consequences of an act incited by just such a duplicitous beauty — in his view, at least. He remembers how in Norfolk once, “in the golden evening, he saw the girl, Rebecca” (113). The ‘golden’ evening again connects the characters to their natural environment in an echo of Sutherland’s Orkney, and in this case sets the scene for Joseph’s fatal desire, mirrored by his later desire for gold. He watches Rebecca flaunting her attractiveness, her “crooked teeth” (*ibid.*) that he finds so fascinating “all on display, luring him on” (*ibid.*), yet what Joseph considers

“the beauty of it” (ibid.) is not Rebecca’s face or body, but the fulfilment of his own interests: seeing “blood on the petticoat” (ibid.), he realises that he need not fear her becoming pregnant and can enjoy “*release without consequence*” (ibid. emphasis in text). Joseph specifically regards this as “a kind of contract” (235), situating their relations in an economy of exchange; she has advertised herself as pleasure without consequence, and Joseph considers this to be binding.

A Marxist conception of Rebecca’s exchange value is particularly illuminating, since it is precisely the abstraction of the human consequences from their sexual relations that Joseph considers “the beauty of it” (113). The abstraction of Rebecca’s (and to an extent Joseph’s) human individuality from their relations constitutes a new form of transformation in the gold metaphor; the evening is golden and Rebecca is beautiful to Joseph because she has been ascribed a use value (rather than an exchange value) that allows him to enjoy her without the intrusion of other interests and consequences. Marx observes the transformative power of commodification: “But even the product of labour has already been transformed in our hands. If we make abstraction from its use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value” (128). In the case of Joseph and Rebecca it is difficult to clearly identify a product, the transaction perhaps better characterised as one of services.

However, Rebecca herself has been transformed, but not quite in the manner Marx describes the transformation of products (she may be considered, along with products and services, as a commodity). Her use value is abstracted from her human individuality, but not from her ‘material’ existence, which remains bound to her sexual use value. The implication is that her physical sexuality is also abstracted from her individuality, since it is that which constitutes the use or service that she provides for Joseph. When it comes to human beauty, therefore, Marx’s assertion that in this commodification process “All [the commodity’s] sensuous characteristics are extinguished” does not apply (ibid.). Rebecca’s

sensuous characteristics are abstracted from her individuality as components of her use value, her detached beauty thus becoming highlighted and increased: this dehumanised ‘contract’ for Joseph “immediately became the thing that held him to her” (235). In refutation of Kant’s principle, the beauty that Joseph finds in this moment is precisely that which caters to his interests. However, this golden seduction is indeed duplicitous, since Rebecca eventually tells him that she is having his child. Joseph tricks her into an abortion which causes her death, and then flees to New Zealand only to be caught up in another frenzy of hopeless desire, in the Gold Rush.

The association of gold with women, via beauty, was characteristic of the California and Alaska Gold Rushes as well as those in New Zealand and Australia. In a goldfield, the beauty of women is not only duplicitous as the gold, it is also just as rare. J. S. Holliday writes in *The California Gold Rush Experience* (1983) that “For all that was shipped to California, the one import most wanted remained scarce — women” (354). Casinos and brothels in San Francisco exploited this consuming desire, and themselves “mined the miners” of their gold (413). Holliday continues:

Bedazzled and excited by life-size paintings of naked men and women ‘in almost every attitude’ and by the reality of women leaning on the bars, talking and laughing with the men, sitting at card tables, or walking about with trays of cigars hanging in front of bosoms partially, thrillingly exposed, the goldseekers would never forget San Francisco. (413)

It is significant that a historical work such as this chooses to conjure an elaborate linguistic image of the lure of the Gold Rush women, just as P. L. Bernstein’s lyrical descriptions of gold were noted earlier. Evoking bedazzlement, excitement and thrill, Holliday echoes descriptions of the miners’ feelings towards the gold they seek, transposing the same language on to their desire for feminine beauty. As Joseph notes of the gold in his

creek, “It shows itself and beckons” (86), just as Holliday’s San Francisco women display bosoms “partially, thrillingly exposed” (413). It is also worth recalling James Carson’s vision of “fair virgins competing with each other for my love” (Jackson 29), as part of the transformation made possible by the discovery of gold.

The implication of these representations of Gold Rush women is that their beauty is largely created by their scarcity, and the consequent force of male desire; a desperate desire inextricably connected to that which drives them to seek for gold. Further, women and gold are often conflated in Gold Rush writings, as in P. L. Bernstein’s observation that when the “first deposit of gold from California [arrived] at the U.S. Mint . . . it was greeted by one periodical as ‘the new mistress’” (223). As Carson’s dream of fair virgins demonstrates, the attainment of beautiful women is associated with the attainment of gold — there is a direct causal link, in which women are a result of riches. This link is maintained in *Venus as a Boy*, but while both human beauty (in this novel masculine and feminine) and gold are connected by their exchange value, here beautiful people are not attained by riches: they *are* riches. They are also, nonetheless, a commodity to be attained. Sutherland’s metaphorical gold, that we have seen to illuminate his landscapes as golden light, becomes increasingly fused with the golden beauty of the characters that D. desires. The people that he loves become golden themselves in his narrative through metaphor, mirroring the event of D. himself literally turning to gold. As the description of this key incident is related both at the very beginning and at the end of D.’s narrative, the gold-infused descriptions of other characters refer directly to D.’s transformation.

In both *Venus as a Boy* and *The Colour*, what turns people into gold is, very simply, love. Gold in its monetary form, however, turns people into objects. In London, D. ends up living and working in “a knocking shop” (82) populated by drag queens and their ex-Nazi pimp Radu. D. is happy to wear drag for work, and in this guise he calls himself “Désirée. It means *longed for*” (90 emphasis in text). But although D., whose most

striking characteristic is his gift of providing immense sexual pleasure, is constantly longed for by his clients, he does not find the love for which he searches. He does, however, make money: “we snared our fair share of gold” (92). But money is not the central commodity in these transactions; more desperately desired is beauty. D. remarks that “money’s no substitute for beauty and money’ll get you anything” (*ibid.*), implying that beauty is the ultimate object of desire — money is only sought in order to attain contact with human beauty. D.’s remarkable ability to induce visions and life-altering epiphanies in his sexual partners is described by his friend Colm as a “gift [which] if I used it for good — would make me worth my weight in gold” (94-5).

D. does indeed use his gift for good, to an extent redeeming the daily act of selling his body by transcending the transaction: “just as lovely is the fright of their lives these folk get when you turn the tables, and suddenly you’re no longer a salaried sex slave but a force of nature . . . The *rush* when you flood them with love and their eyes mist over with this beautiful confusion” (94 emphasis in text). Murdoch observes that in the *Symposium* “Plato allowed to the beauty of the lovely boy an awakening power which he denied to the beauty of nature or of art” (88): it is just such an awakening power that D. possesses, but in Sutherland’s framework this awakening is connected to nature, rather than constituting a denial of it. Further, Frow puts forward the claim that “the commodity form has the potential to be enabling and productive as well as to be limiting and destructive. Historically it has almost always been both of these things at the same time, and the balance of gain and loss has rarely been easy to draw” (138). D.’s commodified person, strangely, enables him to mount a resistance to the dehumanised transaction of sexual services by foregrounding its absurdity, making the economic structure visible and then deconstructing it. By returning himself and his clients to nature through the elemental “force” (94) of his love (we have seen how nature and love are inextricably joined in the novel), the economic exchange on which their encounter is based simply dissolves. D. is giving them an experience of

beauty for free, and so it is no longer an artificially contrived exchange but a natural act.

In this way D. tries to return to the golden horizon of Orkney, his standard of the natural in which love connects people and earth in a moment of perfect beauty. The beauty of D.'s body and the experiences he creates are the qualities that establish his value, which is measured in gold (or money). Therefore, gold is subordinate to beauty until the two are metaphorically confounded in the narrative and become synonymous. However, this is not fully realised in D.'s recollection of his exploitation as a prostitute. The elevation of gold above the cheapening and corruption of its economic manifestation requires a more transcendent force: true and mutual love.

The experience of beauty as an “unselfing” for Murdoch (84) and a “decentering” for Scarry (112) is amplified in the experience of love in *Venus as a Boy*. D.'s first experience of such transcendence is intimately bound up with the sky, prefiguring the way in which the golden horizon and the stars are central to his rapture with Tracy on Bu Beach. In this earlier episode, however, the beautiful person himself comes from the sky. D. is situated at one of the highest points in his Orkney landscape, “Flying kites on Ward Hill” (28). Connected to the sky by his kite, he sees “what I thought was another sun: this flaming wheel in the sky over Widewall, coming right at me” (ibid.). In alchemical texts “the Sun was synonymous with gold” (Hessayon 71), signifying its radiance, importance to humanity, and its potential for facilitating transcendence. Sutherland employs his metaphorical sun in very much the same way, as “the shooting star turned out to be a man with my twenty-eight-foot kite tail caught in his feet” (ibid.) and this man provides exactly that radiance, significance and transcendence for the twelve-year-old D. The stranger is already imbued with the golden Orkney light, rendering him magical to D., and when he lands with his red parachute covering them both and says “My name is Engel” (ibid.) — the German for ‘angel’ — the spell is complete. Tracy later echoes the young Dane in her golden beauty: D. introduces her to us

as “sixteen, bleached-blonde hair and skin-tight Wranglers, all Norse godlike, with kind of hawkish features” (46). Together, Engel and Tracy establish the transcendent power of golden beauty, characterised by the gold Orkney light, for which D. continues to search once he has left the islands.

The only place in which he has any success is London. But although D. can bring his clients to tears — “I’d a guy go mute for half an hour and swear . . . that all Heaven had opened before him” (92) — he does not find the love he is looking for until the streets of Soho are bombed and he returns to the house to find that “sitting at the table was this... [sic] angel. A double-take made the wings and halo disappear, but the glow stayed put: one of the darkest days of my life suddenly *drenched* in sunlight (97 emphasis in text). The halo and the golden sunlight are indicators of love and perfect beauty in D.’s narrative, and this angel, a transsexual called Wendy, is the direct descendent of Engel and Tracy with “the whiteness of her skin, and all the blonde” (ibid.). From this point on, the narrative is once more imbued with golden light; before Wendy enters the London narrative, the only gold mentioned is in the form of money. In the human beauty which is both a cause and a signifier of love for D., gold is elevated above its earthly solidity into pure light, illuminating the sky.

Sutherland integrates the gold of the landscape even more intimately with the gold of Wendy’s beauty, when she and D. share their first kiss. Her angelic incarnation is again evoked: “Wendy flew at me, arms spread, the coat opened” (111), and this time she is almost the angel of death as in her longed-for touch D. experiences “something like being struck by lightning, your whole life passing before you and then everything after; a long luxurious look at Paradise” (ibid.). The suggestion that such ecstasy is not for this life, but the one after, becomes explicit at the end of the novel with D.’s suicide attempt and subsequent meditations on death. The golden horizon, in the remote distance, begins to re-emerge at this point in the narrative, hinting at the impossibility of D.’s truly reaching paradise through Wendy. Nonetheless, in this first kiss D. is surrounded by gold and

is certainly awarded another taste of perfection such as he felt on Bu Beach: “I kept my eyes open when she kissed me, saw every single city light turn gold; meteor showers over Chelsea and Pimlico” (*ibid.*). D.’s narrative has already established Wendy’s beauty as consisting primarily of her golden blonde radiance, and as this beauty transforms into love it spills its gold over into the landscape so that Wendy herself is almost lost in it. The golden light blurs the distinction between human and environment, creating a completeness and perfection of beauty that forms the crux of the novel.

Harriet in *The Colour* also achieves such completion through a love which generates an intimate connection between her and the land. This connection is, of course, forged by gold, which transforms her into a beauty inhabiting a beautiful world. For more than half the novel, Harriet’s appearance is only rarely described, and never with reference to beauty. The narrator, through Joseph’s eyes, describes her in the simplest manner: “She was tall and her hair was brown” (4). When she joins him at the goldfields of Kaniere, however, Joseph reassesses his perception of her:

He couldn’t bear to hold his gaze on her for long. She looked too plain in the cold morning light, her hair too short, her nose too long, her skin too weathered by her days out on the farm and by the salt sea winds.

He wondered if he’d ever found her beautiful, but couldn’t remember whether he had or not. (257)

Tremain’s description of Harriet here remains resolutely straightforward and unadorned, consisting of simple clauses repetitively framed around negative comparatives — too short, too long. However, just a few pages later we are offered a perception of Harriet different to Joseph’s. The other miners, staring at this “curiosity: a woman at Kokatahi” (263), do not see the plain farming wife that Joseph does, but rather “this tall, almost beautiful wife of his, with her defiant look and her cropped hair” (*ibid.*). On her approach to the goldfields, Harriet has already undergone a swift

transformation from absolute non-beauty to an encouraging almost-beauty. Her appearance itself has not necessarily changed; rather, the narrative has transformed her by shifting perspective from her unappreciative husband to the gold-digging men who are, as we know, hungry for a female presence.

Later, walking upriver to escape the squalor of the Kokatahi diggings, Harriet is surprised by the purity and beauty of her surroundings, emphasised by the orderly garden of the vegetable-seller, Chen Pao Yi. In a strikingly similar narrative move to those of Sutherland, her first sight of this garden is illuminated by golden light: “She had to . . . shield her eyes against the sun — which had lit up the garden on the other side of the river like a bright lamp lighting a darkened stage” (266). On the banks of the river, she finds nuggets of gold offering themselves up to her: she has found herself in an unexpected paradise. Just as for D. in *Venus as a Boy*, what this utopia needs to illuminate its qualities is love. And, when a surge of melted mountain snow floods the river to sweep away the hideousness of the Kokatahi goldfields, Harriet is saved from drowning by Pao Yi. In the cave he has made into a home, they fall in love.

In the darkest recess of the cave, Pao Yi and Harriet smoke opium and make love, allowing themselves to sink into total animality: in her visions Harriet finds herself transformed, “as a bird she lay on her lover’s body and covered him with her wings and she felt him rise up in her as though he were growing there” (347). When they wake, they see that “This cave is made of gold” (348). Only when they have surrendered their human selves to the pure force of elemental desire do the elements of the earth offer their treasures to them. Pao Yi realises that “the yellow light he’d seen in opium reveries and which he’d thought had been made by the candle flame, had been a golden light” (348). Just as in *Venus as a Boy* their love has caused their environment to transcend its earthly incarnation, transforming it into pure golden light.

However, they are also aware that if they break their pact of mutual respect with the landscape, if they “decided to steal that light” (*ibid.*) — dig the gold out of the cave — it would become earthly and commodified once

more. In Kant's terminology, they would no longer be participating in a pure aesthetic judgement; interest would have intruded. The golden spell encompassing both humans and environment would be broken and "they would have to part" (ibid.), since the corresponding pure aesthetic judgement of each other, on which their love is built, would be contaminated. The metaphor of the golden light, which both signifies and is an essential part of their paradisal love, must remain intact; it must remain metaphorical or the magic (the same magic that D. finds in Orkney, where earth and human love are joined) will be corrupted. Gold can only be perfect when its physical temptations, corruptions and commodification have been transcended. Beauty is moral for Tremain, but only within the exchange economy that people have constructed around gold. By connecting beauty to morality in a natural context, it can be attributed other values than those of commerce, from which it is then isolated.

### **A Solid Gold Metaphor**

The description of D.'s body turning to gold straddles the beginning and the end of his narrative in *Venus as a Boy*. All the events that occur in between — loves found and lost, despair, abuse, moments of utter beauty and a suicide attempt — are gilded with the presence of this defining incident, the gold metaphor becoming physical in D.'s body gives meaning to the memoir it frames. D. makes this explicit in his introductory section, addressing "anyone who's been looking for proof of meaning, or a grand design, or *divinity* — I'd say to you, look no further than me" (7-8 emphasis in text). D.'s opening statement, "Maybe this'll be my resurrection" (4), may refer to his transformation or to the inscription of it in text — or probably both, since in turning to gold D. is translated into a textual metaphor for resurrection and affirmation through transcendent beauty. It is an apotheosis into meaning through the conversion of exploitation and sadness into pure beauty.

This process is echoed throughout the memoir that follows, as we have seen in the episode at Bu Beach where the demise of D.'s relationship with Tracy is transformed through the golden beauty of Orkney into a moment of poignant natural perfection, and in D.'s transcendence of the commodification of his prostituted body into a "force of nature" (94) filling his clients with unexpected love. The transformative power of these scenes is driven by the initial transformation of D. into gold, which establishes the paradigm of conversion and transcendence through beauty.

D.'s miraculous golden body functions metaphorically in relation to several other parts of the text. The core of the metaphor consists in the detachment of D. from his own physical body, which is necessary in order for him to transcend the failures of his life. He describes waking up "the Morning After the Night Before" (4) — the morning after he overdosed on pills and alcohol and jumped off the Millennium Bridge — and spitting into the sink "these wee nuggets" of gold (ibid.). With his retrospective knowledge of the transformation that follows, D. observes that "what I spat out that morning was *me*" (ibid. emphasis in text). The process of turning to gold begins, therefore, with D.'s body voiding part of itself, and it continues with the increasing alienation of D. from his physical body. As he dictates the opening of his narrative, at this point almost entirely made of gold, he says that "My arms and legs have got all stiff. Breathing's getting harder. Talking's agony" (ibid.); his body is slowly petrifying into a golden statue which he can no longer control or live in. He observes a little later, "I'm going to die soon, no doubt" (7). The transformation of his physical body into a substance so totally inhuman necessitates the complete detachment of his spirit or consciousness from that body.

However, this is only a metaphorical — though also physical — representation of something that has already happened. D. connects his suicide attempt to the time when "the hormone pills I was forced to take made nothing of me" (6). His pimp, Radu, forced him into the early stages of a sex change as a punishment for trying to run away with Wendy. As a result of the hormones, D. claims, "My body died: insides collapsing,

stomach cramps, vomiting, aching bones" (ibid.), and having become "this man with an unwanted woman's body" (ibid.) he found he "didn't want to be with myself" (ibid.). Just as, in the Marxist view, the worker becomes alienated from their labour and its product, their identity constituted purely of the hours they work at an anonymous task, D. becomes alienated from the body which no longer feels like his — because it is a her — and is unable to employ that body as an elemental vehicle for love. In this alienation, D.'s commodification is complete, and he surrenders himself totally to the sale: "I stopped using a condom. Caught hepatitis B. My visions disappeared. . . . I had everyone call me Désirée. No exceptions" (138). In exclusively using his drag queen prostitute name, D. has labelled his identity as such, and erased the former self which he feels no longer exists.

Finally, in order to separate himself completely from the commodified alien body he inhabits, D. then attempts suicide. The subsequent events, in which D. transforms into a rigid, golden and self-destructive object of beauty echo this earlier alienation from the self, but with a transcendent sense of meaning, as D. becomes a physical manifestation of all the golden visions he has given his sexual partners and experienced himself: "folk are suddenly saying how beautiful my voice sounds" (142). Appropriately, D.'s interpretation of this is a selfless one, having become detached from all the 'self' he previously had. He draws his narrative to a close with the thought that, "My reward is the understanding that, for those I've touched, knowledge of *me* is knowledge of the divine" (145 emphasis in text).

In positing his golden self as a metaphor for the divine, D. has, like Harriet and Pao Yi in *The Colour*, overwhelmed the commodity aspect of gold (and human beauty) with its contradictory associations of eternity, perfection and transcendence. The moral problems relating to the commodification of gold have been detached from the substance by the same process of abstraction that, in the Marxist conception, produce commodification in the first place. By separating golden beauty from the

human individual who displays it, and reidentifying that beauty with the natural environment from which the gold was originally extracted, Tremain and Sutherland manipulate the Kantian and capitalist principle of categorical separation. The commodity sphere is fully acknowledged, but golden beauty harnesses its own transformative powers — the mysterious fascination so often ascribed to it — and floods the commodifying process with love. The alienation denounced by Marx and his followers is thus ameliorated into a benign separation: golden beauty now resides in the natural landscape, where money is a very minor force. The intangible fascination of golden beauty turns out to a very substantial power after all.

As a metaphor for human beauty, gold has been shown to be an effective vehicle for the transformation of human beauty itself in the contemporary novels studied here. I have chosen to end with gold because in its sublimation and abstraction of human beauty from the human body it brings us full circle back to the natural, to the earth and the flesh. In this manner Tremain and Sutherland offer a renewed conception of beauty as a meaningful object of study, accepting both its fleshly and its idealised manifestations; a reformulation of human beauty that has been variously proposed by each of the novels analysed in this thesis. The tension between these two aspects of beauty endures, but has proved fruitful for post-1980 novelists as a driving force for fictional narrative. Contemporary explorations of concrete and abstract human beauty negotiate the paradoxes that emerge in this field, presenting a consistent attempt to redeem and revive our fascination with human beauty — which has never, in fact, gone away.

## **Conclusion**

Having traced the progress of human beauty in post-1980 anglophone fiction from the fleshiness of fruit metaphors, through the destabilising dissolution of water, to the gradual petrification and abstraction of ice, glass and gold, it has become clear that the urge to turn human beauty into art is a vital concern of many recent novels. I have found that the desire to preserve transient human beauty in art remains as strong as ever, undiminished in the continuing preoccupation with images of immortalised beauty such as Snow White in her glass coffin. The remarkable endurance of these fairy-tale images of beauty — Cinderella's glass slipper, the Snow Queen and snow child, along with the Midas myth and golden apples of Greek mythology — shows that magical transformations retain their allure at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The idea of transfiguring the human and ordinary into eternally sparkling perfection continues to motivate literary production, supporting Adorno's claim for the inescapable "affirmative essence" (*Aesthetic Theory* 2) of art which persists even when employed for the negative uses identified by Adorno and Zipes, in the reinscription of oppressive social values. However, beauty's potential as a driving force for the disruption of such values, and their utopian reimagining, has also been demonstrated.

In each of the novels examined here, the miraculous transformations of human beauty have been presented with ambivalence, always questioning the motives, processes and consequences of the quest for immortal perfection. In particular, the texts explore the implications of conflating the artist and the beautiful work of art in the same character, as we have seen most clearly in *Possession*, *The Sea Lady*, *The Ice Queen* and *Venus as a Boy*. As Patricia Waugh has observed, this self-conscious focus on artists has arisen with notable prominence in post-1980 fiction, and directly addresses the postmodernist conception of individual identity as a discursive construction, exploring the "self-fictionalization" (*Metafiction*

118) that this entails. Therefore, artist characters in the novels studied here convert their own beauty into metaphor, translating it into an artistic form that functions separately from them. But this extreme self-detachment can be overwhelming to the point of destruction, as in *The Ice Queen* and *Venus as a Boy*; it can also be liberating, as Maud in *Possession*, Ailsa in *The Sea Lady*, Sue and Maud in *Fingersmith* all employ the metaphorical flexibility of their beauty — its capacity to be transformed — to rewrite their identities. Those whose beauty is turned into art through metaphor by another character fare less well: in *Goblin Fruit*, *The Girl with Glass Feet* and *The Snow Child* beautiful characters find themselves forced into an artistic form, a metaphorical refiguration of their beauty, with all the violence identified by Adorno in this process which subsumes their human individuality.

In the process of transmutation from flesh to art we see the ancient dichotomy of concrete and abstract beauty, and the apparent irreconcilability of the two. Since Plato's *Symposium*, aesthetic philosophers such as Augustine and Kant have reinforced this divide, assigning clear moral values to the two types of beauty: abstract beauty is pure and good, while the concrete beauty of the flesh is dangerous, sinful, corrupted and corrupting. This divide has been shown to endure in contemporary fiction and criticism, though not without challenge. The obvious underlying dilemma of sexuality, its enticement and its prohibition, has been thoroughly addressed by post-1980 fiction, which operates in a context permissive enough to allow full exploration of this theme. In every novel analysed here the sublime purity of a person's beauty has collided with the sexual desire it incites, as well as the beautiful person's own desires. In *Goblin Fruit*, *Fingersmith* and *The Snow Child* in particular the impossibility of preserving the chastity associated with 'pure', abstract beauty has been portrayed, with only beauty's death or the disappearance into art offering a way to resist the flesh (Faina in *The Snow Child* vanishing into the woods, remaining only in pictures).

Adorno's reconsideration of the divide between abstract and concrete beauty, in which he argues that these two facets of beauty (and of the artwork) engage in antagonistic negotiation rather than existing in entirely separate spheres, has been influential to contemporary discussions of beauty. In the wake of Adorno's destabilisation of the boundary between concrete and abstract, contemporary fiction and theory have continued to place the flesh and the idea of beauty in dialogue with each other, and even to fuse them together. J. M. Bernstein characterises these recent discussions of beauty and art as "Post-aesthetic philosophies of art" (4) because they "employ art in order to challenge truth-only cognition" (*ibid.*), referring to the Kantian categorisation of the aesthetic as non-cognitive and therefore incapable of imparting 'truth'. This promising new 'post-aesthetic' approach is manifest in the work of Steiner, Kirwan and Donoghue in their analyses of contemporary attitudes to beauty and contemporary artworks in a historicised context, examining specific instances of beauty in conjunction with earlier aesthetic theories — in a similar manner to this thesis — but with a degree of distance that facilitates the deep interrogation of these philosophical systems as well as the formulation of alternative approaches to beauty. Nonetheless, these contemporary discussions continue to be substantially formed of analysis of previous philosophers, most often Kant, rather than offering a genuinely new theory of beauty. Still, their new perspective is valuable in working towards a more fundamental reconception of beauty.

Even in contemporary theory and criticism, however, human beauty remains a peripheral subject. In the work of Scarry, Dutton, Kirwan and Steiner it is the beauty of nature and art that is explored from this new perspective, while Donoghue offers little more than the acknowledgement that it has been "difficult to go beyond the flesh" (64) in the study of human beauty: he does not attempt to reconcile the physical and ideal aspects of human beauty himself. Marwick's pragmatic historical examination of human beauty presents a useful foray into this field, but the purely historical specificity of his approach permits little opportunity for asking

philosophical questions, or indeed for investigating the connection between human beauty and its representation in artworks which this thesis has shown to be fundamental to our conception of human beauty itself. Similarly, the feminist projects of Butler, Wolf, Bronfen, Grosz, Brand and others have been vital in bringing the theorisation of human beauty to wider attention, but have done so within a narrow political agenda from which it is difficult to extrapolate. Nonetheless, it is time to make the attempt, and the broader the range of approaches to human beauty, the better.

The preoccupation with the transformation and rewriting of beauty has been shown in this thesis to indicate a distinct trend in post-1980 fiction, and one which enacts a notable move away from the approaches and techniques of fiction regarded as postmodernist. It is only from the retrospective position of the twenty-first century that postmodernism can reasonably be viewed as a “periodizing description” (Smyth 9), with of course the awareness that this periodisation is not definitive. Features such as metafiction, fragmentation and intertextuality that are associated with postmodernist fiction are not limited to the late twentieth century. The same caution must be exercised in any discussion of contemporary fiction: by nature this is a constantly changing scene and so “a critic of the contemporary lives in the midst of staggering evanescence and blind gambles” (Dipple 3). Tew’s assertion, in a similar vein, that academic criticism of post-1980 fiction must “reflect a contemporary culture that is aware that both the national and the intellectual landscape undergoes constant transformation” (2), suggests the necessity for criticism to be flexible, taking account of the constantly changing spectrum of concerns within fiction.

However, beauty is emerging as a significant subject through which the range of contemporary concerns identified by Childs (in both culture and fiction) can be explored: “issues of ethnicity and sexuality, gender and the body, history and memory” (275). Further, the texts which engage beauty in this manner “seek through the very act of writing to deconstruct and reinterpret” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2) the themes they interrogate.

Herein lies the key shift in post-1980 fiction away from postmodernism: its agenda is reconstructive, focused on reforming concepts such as beauty anew, rather than merely deconstructing them. Many more critical works will be required to fully analyse the role of beauty as a medium for interrogating these issues in post-1980 fiction, but meanwhile this thesis adds to the growing number of voices speaking of beauty.

In the novels studied in this work, no reconciliation between concrete and abstract beauty is offered as such, although some tentative compromises feature in *Goblin Fruit*, *Possession*, *Fingersmith*, *Joanna*, *The Ice Queen* and *Venus as a Boy*. The first three novels portray a female artist using metaphor to manipulate her beauty so as to refigure her own appearance and sexuality, satisfying her desires without guilt. The latter three texts present an acceptance of death as a way to bridge the gap between concrete and abstract. In dying, a transition is made from the fleshly body to an esoteric essence which parallels the transformation of human beauty into art. Further, the threat of annihilation to the individual by the imposition of artistic form, articulated by Adorno, implies an intrinsic relation between the two processes. The ubiquitous Snow White again provides a perfect example of this: her transition to apparent death is simultaneously a transition into art, displayed as she is in a glass coffin.

Post-1980 fiction seeks to rewrite the aestheticisation of death, locating human beauty precisely in its fleeting mortal nature rather than in its unnatural preservation — the butterflies that accompany Ned's death in *The Ice Queen* are a metaphor for this. Unstable metaphors for human beauty such as water and ice help writers to break down conventional paradigms of beauty and their moral attributions, rewriting them into a celebration of the changeable human state and revealing “an optimism about the possibility of human relationship and human agency which is rarely articulated in the ‘classic’ postmodernist texts” (Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 169). This observation refers to one of Drabble’s novels that

precedes *The Sea Lady*, and offers a prescient characterisation of post-1980 fiction more generally.

A key conclusion drawn from the novels studied here is that the concept of self-inscription is central to post-1980 fiction. These texts present an exhortation to employ the transformative powers of beauty and metaphor to fashion an existence for oneself, before someone else does it for you. It would be fascinating to see the directions in which studies focused on gender, race, postcoloniality or socio-political interpretation could take this concept, and I have refrained from exploring these angles here because they each deserve a study of their own. This thesis has been kept within specific boundaries so as not to lose sight of human beauty amid other concerns more appropriate to the fields mentioned above. Equally, it has been important to analyse the texts closely in their individual workings, following their development of a particular vision of beauty rather than imposing an interpretation upon them.

What this exploration has revealed is that post-1980 novels are profoundly concerned with the paradox of human beauty, its irresistible fascination and the danger inherent in pursuing it. The contradictory desires that beauty invokes — sensual desire for the exquisite flesh, spiritual desire for the abstract perfection — are also unravelled in these novels, which attempt to resolve the conflict between abstract and concrete in order to construct a version of human beauty that integrates both aspects. Living with beauty, it seems, is not easy, but each novel insists that it is worth the trouble. Until now, academic criticism has shown some reluctance in engaging with this subject, but the transformation has undeniably begun. It could be the start of something beautiful.

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