11
Memorial Novels: the English Renaissance and the Victorian Age

Two epochs of British cultural memory claim prominent positions in the intertextual depositories of Byatt’s fiction: the English Renaissance and the Victorian Age. Much of the cultural data inscribed into the intertextual depository of Byatt’s tetralogy refers to the English Renaissance, whilst the Victorian Age features strongly in her two biographic metafictions. As I have argued in Chapter 8, Byatt’s tetralogy conceptualizes the figures of Shakespeare and Elizabeth I as the two prevailing cultural paradigms that determine Frederica’s search for her identity. As outlined in Chapter 9, the novels represent literary texts of the English Renaissance as cultural texts which form Frederica’s identity. Furthermore, the Elizabethan Age – which is part of the wider historical and cultural context of the English Renaissance – features prominently in The Virgin in the Garden, since the novel alludes to Elizabethan history (e.g. VG, p.130, pp.171–2, p.321, p.376) and discusses elements of English Renaissance culture such as the cult of Elizabeth I (VG, pp.132–3, pp.180–1), colour symbolism in Renaissance clothing (VG, pp.144–5), and Renaissance visual art (VG, pp.186–7). What is more, The Virgin in the Garden is set in the years 1952–1953 and witnesses the accession of Elizabeth II. To honour this occasion, the local grandee of Frederica’s home town, Matthew Crowe, organizes a festival which culminates in the staging of Alexander Wedderburn’s verse drama Astraea. Glorifying the reign of Elizabeth I as the English ‘Golden Age’ (VG, p.85), Crowe intends both festival and play to celebrate what he conceives of as the beginning of a new Renaissance heralded by the young queen’s coronation (VG, pp.83–6). Thus, the novel mirrors the English zeitgeist of the early
1950s and the contemporary hopes for a second Elizabethan Age to begin with the queen’s accession.¹ As a historical novel, *The Virgin in the Garden* depicts Britain after the Second World War trying to re-establish links to the sixteenth-century ‘Golden Age’ of national strength and glory in order to redefine British national identity and the country’s role in the world (Schuhmann, 1990, p.24, p.39).²

However, *The Virgin in the Garden* and the other three texts in Byatt’s tetralogy are more than historical novels. In fact, they function as what I call *memorial novels*, since they both activate and contribute to British cultural memory by having their representations of twentieth-century British society depend on their explorations of the cultural past. Byatt’s memorial novels negotiate several cultural concepts which have been ascribed to the Renaissance. It goes without saying that the English Renaissance is not to be confused in either its historical or its cultural settings with the continental Renaissance, which began in Italy.³ However, the ideas and concepts which originated in Italy also affected other European countries, when the Italian Renaissance spread through Western Europe. The cultural concepts of Renaissance humanism influenced English humanism, as Mary Thomas Crane explains: ‘English humanism was, at least in the beginning, closely linked to Italy’ (Crane, 2002).⁴ Thus, Renaissance humanism forms part not only of the British history of ideas, but also of British cultural memory, in which the English Renaissance and, in particular, the Elizabethan Age claim a prominent position as an epoch of growing international power, internal peace, and flourishing arts.⁵

Byatt’s tetralogy includes a large number of references to what the Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt defined as the ideals of Renaissance humanism. One of the subplots in the tetralogy revolves around the foundation of the North Yorkshire University.⁶ This university is committed to the Renaissance ideal of the ‘complete man’ (*VG*, p.20; *SL*, p.903). In his highly influential study *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Burckhardt praised the ‘complete man’ – ‘l’uomo universale’, as he calls him (Burckhardt, 1951, p.84) – for having combined comprehensive learning with the practice of the arts or professions, thereby reconciling theory and practice (Burckhardt, 1951, pp.85–7; Gadol, 2009, p.437). Burckhardt’s analysis of the Renaissance as the cradle of modernity has long been identified as a retrospective construction of the nineteenth century (Davies, 1997,