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Postmodernism's Happy Ending:

Possession!

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Possession, A. S. Byatt's fifth novel,¹ was published in 1990, and it immediately became a literary event. In the autumn of that year it won the prestigious Booker Prize. Just as remarkable was its instant success not only with intellectuals but also with a popular audience. It is a book that—in form, themes, and in its famously multi-layered parallel plots—bridges different worlds: the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, High Poetry and pulp fiction, art and love, to name only the most obvious ones. But, more importantly, I think, it also bridges the different intellectual climates of the two last decades of this last century: the emancipatory, seriously academic and theory-conscious nineteen-eighties and the emotionalised, nostalgic, millennium-ridden nineties. Provocatively speaking, *Possession* marks the end of postmodernism, or, at least, the threshold between postmodern thought and new forms of more realist representation.² One secret of *Possession*'s success is that it rewrites a subgenre of the novel that like no other has thrived on the connectedness of extremes: the gothic.

For two hundred years now, gothic novels have attracted intellectual and popular audiences alike. The gothic novel, which originated in the sixties of the eighteenth century, is still pertinent and popular in the present media age. The gothic has even experienced a revival, a revival that is related to the two most powerful political and aesthetic movements of our age: feminism and postmodernism. This might be so because it shares with them a radical scepticism about the humanist assumptions of classical realism that Jean-François Lyotard has called "master narratives:" History, Meaning, Truth, and Knowledge.³ The gothic, of course, has from the first proudly

¹ A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (1990; London: Vintage, 1991). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this edition.

² These new explorations of realism have been anticipated most strongly by the English "self-conscious realism" that A. S. Byatt has long been a part of, but also by post-colonial practices within postmodernism.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984). For a recent overview of the parallels between postmodernism and gothicism see Allan Lloyd Smith, "Postmodernism/Gothicism," *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996) 6-18; for their relatedness to feminist politics see my "Postmodern Feminine Horror Fictions," *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, 71-80; especially 71-73. Similarly, Theo

celebrated its profound anti-realism. One of its most effective narrative strategies, both for its popularity and for its attack on classical realism's "master narratives," has always been what I call "excess:" excess in moral terms but also as transgression of the real, the natural and the rational. Of course, in the gothic world, anything can happen: its excessive emotional experiences of desire, terror and pleasure become liberatory reading experiences.

The gothic's emancipatory potential has been most pronounced in its feminine form: always popular with a female audience, writers as different as Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft have written gothic novels in order to address, attack and exceed women's very real enclosure in patriarchal power structures. In the contemporary literary scene, such feminine gothic excess has engendered a wide range of postmodern fiction and thus participated in politicising postmodern culture.⁴ A. S. Byatt went a step further. This essay explores how she uses feminine gothic excess in a novel that signals an important cultural shift beyond postmodernism before the millennium.

It is significant that in this novel Byatt writes in a "feminine" guise. She has called herself

an older and more individualistic feminist. . . . [I] find myself very ambivalent about being taught on courses about "women's discourse," and worry about being read by a generation that has read all the minor female writers of the eighteenth century, but not Proust, Mann, not Virgil and Racine.⁵

She has often refused to be categorised as a feminist: "I am a non-believer and a non-belonger to schools of thought."⁶ Beate Neumeier has explored Byatt's development of a female vision and concludes: "[I]t is only in *Possession*, her acclaimed novel about critical constructions of the past,

D'haen has argued "for the fantastic in postmodern literature as the counter-axial counterpart of present-day forms of (social) realism in opposition to poststructuralist/aesthetic postmodernism." See Theo D'haen, "Postmodern Gothic," *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 283-94; 289.

⁴ The writers I have in mind are as different as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Aritha van Herk in Canada; Angela Carter, Beryl Bainbridge and Fay Weldon in Britain, and Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison and Siri Hustvedt in the US. See my *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999).

⁵ Byatt, "Reading, Writing, Studying," *Critical Quarterly* 35.4 (1993): 3-7; 5.

⁶ Byatt, *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) 2.

that Byatt's female vision finally seems to find a female voice."⁷ I think that *Possession* is in many ways a powerful novel because it is so feminine.⁸

Recent criticism of Byatt is contradictory. Todd describes her as a realist with a "fantastic vein,"⁹ Kelly argues that she has moved "from an 'innocent' realism to a more knowing postmodern vision,"¹⁰ Buxton problematises the postmodern category because "[*Possession*] offers modernist ideology in postmodern guise"¹¹—just to outline the range of opinions. The most convincing readings of *Possession* emphasise that Byatt's "earlier interest in discussing theoretical ideas within the realm of realism emerges here with her more recent interest in forms of fabulation, namely in romance, ghost story and fairy tale."¹² While social realism is Byatt's predominant frame of reference, she self-consciously problematises the style and genre of her novel based on the different fields of expertise as a writer of fiction and non-fiction, a literary critic, jury member, and teacher, who calls herself a "self-conscious realist."¹³ In *Possession: A Romance* the subtitle suggests that we read her voluminous novel as "not realistic," while the first epitaph is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous celebration of the romance's "latitude" and its liberating powers in contrast to the novel's painstaking fidelity to ordinary experience. Hawthorne himself applied the term, as well as the literary form, to gothic novels, and Byatt follows suit:

The man and the woman sat opposite each other in the railway carriage. They had an appearance of quiet decorum; both had books open on their knees, to which they turned when the motion of the carriage permitted. He was indeed leaning lazily back into his corner. . . . She had her eyes for the most part cast demurely down at her book, though she would occasionally raise a pointed chin. . . .

⁷ Beate Neumeier, "Female Visions: The Fiction of A. S. Byatt," (*Sub*)*Versions of Realism: Recent Women's Fiction in Britain*, ed. Irmgard Maassen and Anna Maria Stuby, *Anglistik & Englischunterricht* 60 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997) 11-25; 22.

⁸ I use the term "feminine" to refer to the cultural constructions of gender, as opposed to "female," which refers to biological sex, and "feminist," which refers to the related political actions and aims. See Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Blackwell, 1989) 117-32.

⁹ See Richard Todd, *A. S. Byatt* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997) 74-7.

¹⁰ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *A. S. Byatt* (New York: Twayne, 1996) ix.

¹¹ Jackie Buxton, "'What's Love Got To Do With It?' Postmodernism and *Possession*," *English Studies in Canada* 22.2 (1996): 199-219; 217.

¹² Neumeier 18.

¹³ Byatt, *Passions of the Mind* 4.

An observer might have speculated for some time as to whether they were travelling together or separately. (273)

This could be the opening of a nineteenth-century romance, or of a gothic romance, or even of a Mills and Boon paperback. However, it does not open *Possession* but marks the very centre of its plot. The travellers are Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, two fictitious Victorian poets, and the quoted scene reveals their illicit romance, despite his marriage and her assumed lesbianism. Their romance is the subject of research by two academics of the nineteen-eighties: Roland Michell, a despairing Ash-scholar, and Maud Bailey, an expert in LaMotte. As these two—and with them *Possession*'s readers—voraciously consume diaries, letters, biographies, LaMotte's gothic *Melusina* and her fairy tales, Ash's poems and other official and private, literary and historical writings, their own story gradually turns into a romance—albeit one of ironic contortions.

As if this was not enough intertextuality, this contemporary romance plot develops amidst another collection of contemporary genres—from TV-interviews to faxes and other electronic communication. There is also an abundance of related narratives about other academics: the patriarchal Ash-specialist Blackadder, the frustrated “woman scholar” Beatrice Nest, the flamboyant Americans Mortimer Cropper, a confessed Ash-fetishist, and Leonora Stern, whose poststructuralist-feminist criticism celebrates LaMotte. These are only the most striking characters in Byatt's collection of eccentric academics. Her abundance of literary characters and narrative forms provides a perfectly “excessive” setting for an excessive plot covering two centuries, large estates and sublime landscapes, buried letters, concealing veils, adultery, a tragic suicide, an invalid with an important key, an illegitimate child who (alive or murdered?) haunts the last part of the novel, and an apocalyptic graveyard-scene. All that for the possession of a secret event that really happened.

Read this way, *Possession* perfectly exemplifies the gothic form. But Byatt, of course, depicts the genre with a narrative excess of her own. As has been suggested, her intertextual plot mixes gothic forms—from classical gothic novels to pulp fiction—with other forms of writing, thus drawing attention to the multitude of possibilities between gothic, historic, fantastic and realistic representation. An analysis of the gothic's position at the centre of that narrative abundance is illuminating. If one of the driving forces of the narrative is to uncover what really happened between Ash and LaMotte—then why is the solution the plot of a gothic romance?

In some ways this narrative play with the expectations of realism and gothicism is a parodic—and postmodern—move. As Linda Hutcheon

argues, parody can be used not only to ridicule, but also to defer—as a form that “repeats with critical difference”—a backgrounded text while trans-textualising it. According to her definition, “many parodies today do not ridicule the backgrounded texts but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny.”¹⁴ She shows parody to be a prominent strategy in postmodernism's critique of the “master narratives.” In this sense, Byatt uses parody in *Possession* to repeat the big questions about reality, history, knowledge and even origins—and then to defer the answers to them by shifting into the ambiguous realm of gothicism.

“I want to—to—follow the—path. I feel taken over by this. I want to know what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out” (238), says Maud to Randolph at a moment when they notice that their pursuit of the Ash-LaMotte-affair “isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive” (238). Possession of knowledge is one of the driving forces in the novel: Maud seeks to find out the fate of Christabel LaMotte—for whom she searches, in the first part of the book, for the “hypothetical ghost” (251). Her life-story is gradually pieced together through her poetry, her letters to Ash, his letters to her, Ash's wife's diary and her reading of LaMotte's gothic *Fairy Melusina*, her French cousin Sabine's writing exercises, contemporary feminist criticism of her work—and, most parodically—the omniscient narrator's occasional intrusions that mock all of these academic uncoveries. Thus, LaMotte's narrative comes to occupy the very centre of the novel. Ash's fragmented letters to her, which Roland steals from the library, suggest his fascination with her own poetic designs (5) and mark the beginning of a lovers' discourse that elegantly parodies the Victorian gothic classics (for example the famous dialogues between Rochester and Jane Eyre, where he raves about her ethereal elusiveness while she emphasises her physical presence and, by extension, her sexuality).

In a further intertextualising move, Christabel describes herself continuously in metaphors of weaving. For example, in her first letter to Ash, she writes:

I live circumscribed and self-communing—'tis best so—
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. . . . Arachne is a lady I am greatly sym-
pathetic to, an honest craftswoman, who makes perfect
patterns, but is a little inclined to take unorthodox snaps at
visiting and trespassing strangers. . . . The Spider in the

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 57.

poem however, is not my Silken Self, but an altogether more Savage and businesslike sister. (87)

Not surprisingly, in this novel of abundance and excess, the spider imagery characterises Christabel in manifold dimensions: she uses it to present herself as the fabricator of a poetic web (her art) and also as a woman who works very hard to fabricate her own life. Her last letter to Ash displays her reflection on whether or not she has ruined her chance of becoming a great poet by destroying the protection of that web by having an affair with him (502). The parodic allusion to Tennyson's "Lady of Shallott" is here extended to the gothic image of the Spider Woman. Following Radcliffe's anti-heroine Laurentini and Wollstonecraft's feminist heroine Maria, the "sexual woman" has figured as a tragic temptress in feminine gothic writing. In a sharp attack on the common idealisation of the *femme fatale*, feminine gothic form has always viewed her demise with sympathy—the best-known example might be Jane Eyre's compassion for Bertha Mason's horrific fate in her husband's house.¹⁵ Thus, the life-story of Christabel LaMotte is further interwoven with the web of feminine gothic writing. Feminine gothic texts—or textures, as the spider metaphor suggests—are typically "interrogative:" their surface romance plot of love and sex is questioned by a subplot of female desire, creativity and art.¹⁶ Thus, they avoid the closure as well as the morality of classical realism; and they rather poignantly confront and joyfully, or viciously, narrate the pleasures and horrors of women's lives. In this sense, Christabel's life-story exceeds the postmodern parody—in a gothic story—of the reality of women's lives in the nineteenth century.

Byatt's own parodic conception of interwoven life-stories highlights this play between the gothic heroine and the nineteenth-century artist. "I have been Melusina these thirty years" (501), writes Christabel as an old woman, after experiencing love, anger, and horror. The story of how she has her and Ash's daughter in Brittany is the most gothic episode of her life's plot. Significantly, this almost mythic, pan-European gothic narrative becomes entirely convincing. It is embedded in a scenario of nineteenth-century family arrangements that parodically "repeats" but subverts the well-known clichés. These arrangements include the famous and adulterous

¹⁵ See Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 35-54, and Carola Hilmes, *Die Femme Fatale: Ein Weiblichkeitstypus in der nachromantischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1990). Place and Hilmes show the spider woman and the related *femme fatale* figures to be masculine constructs of women's sexuality as tempting and deadly.

¹⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1980) 92.

poet Ash, pampered by an "Angel in the House," his wife Ellen, who, ironically, not only knows everything but preserves it for future generations; the jealous younger writer Sabine de Kerosz in Brittany and the tragic "lesbian blue-stocking," Blanche Glover, Christabel's partner in the project of living as self-sufficient artists—and maybe lovers—in a hostile society.¹⁷ Blanche's Wollstonecraftian suicide, as well as Christabel's own eventual compromise to live a life she never wanted conclude the scenario.¹⁸

Such recognition of women's reality is poignantly extended into the present as Maud, in a decisive and typically gothic twist, meets with her own family history by discovering that LaMotte is her great-great-great-grandmother: ". . . how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth—no the truth—of your own origins" (503), one of her formerly competing and now sympathising colleagues comments. Of course, "truth" and "origins" are, like "knowledge," contradictory to postmodern thinking. However, this twist of the plot is the appropriate response to Maud's "primitive"—and not only scholarly—desire to know. The uncovering of her matrilineal tradition is another reverential parody of gothic romance conventions: the classical gothic heroine finds both her mother and her love. However, here the parody gives way to an illuminating perspective on contemporary culture and its pronounced need for answers. Byatt's contemporary romance plot in *Possession* is structured by this desire to know. Contemporary readers are complicit in that desire, as the book's success clearly demonstrates. Following Maud's and Roland's plot thus brings us to my introductory proposition that *Possession* marks the threshold between postmodernism's endless deferrals and a new form of realism.

A striking fantasy connects these two enlightened modern scholars of literature and theory:

"Sometimes I feel," said Roland carefully, "that the best state is to be without desire. When I really look at myself—"

"If you have a self—"

¹⁷ Todd has shown that all these female figures represent marginalised women that are typical in Byatt's character scheme (56). However, I would like to emphasise that although they seem to gravitate around Ash, their place in the plot is at the centre: a narrative move that attacks exactly those patriarchal power structures for this marginalisation.

¹⁸ The subject of women writers has always been important in Byatt's work; her own personal comment is striking: "Literature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female." See Juliet A. Dusinberre, "A. S. Byatt," *Women Writers Talking*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983) 181-95; 186.

"At my life, at the way it is—what I really want is to—have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in an empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked . . ."

"I know what you mean. . . . That's what I think about when I'm alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White." (267)

Fountain has shown that Byatt's imagery here exhibits nostalgia in the sense of "a desire for an absence of desire." He attributes this nostalgia to the majority of subject positions in the novel: "the disillusioned subject longs for non-existence or complete 'satisfaction' . . . the result is a static nostalgia."¹⁹

Whereas Ash's and LaMotte's unconditional love is driven by powerful desires and, especially in LaMotte's case, very legitimate fears of loss, their contemporary counterparts deprive their lives of such emotional drama. Roland, always at the bottom of academic hierarchies, moves from one live-burial (in the mausoleum of the library) to another (his windowless basement apartment) at the beginning of the novel. The illegitimate possession of Ash's letters seems to be his only chance to break this cycle. Maud is a successful scholar but is stalked by her playboy colleague Fergus Wolff and her American rival, the literary critic Leonora Stern. Their research on the two nineteenth-century poets leads Maud and Roland into a quest for the past, for history—and, ultimately, for love. Byatt narrates this contemporary quest as a type of nostalgia, as she herself has defined it; as a state that we turn to at the end of the century: "Where we fear the chaos of the contemporary, with its bombs at airports and other uncontrollable threats, we turn to a nostalgia for a past that suggests order and familiarity."²⁰ Significantly, hers is not the well-kept Jane-Austen-garden of self-control that has become one of Hollywood's latest successes,²¹ but the wilderness of gothicism. Nostal-

¹⁹ J. Stephen Fountain, "Ashes to Ashes: Kristeva's *Jouissance*, Altizer's *Apocalypse*, Byatt's *Possession* and 'The Dream of Rood,'" *Literature and Theology* 8.2 (1994): 193-208; 203.

²⁰ "Interview with A. S. Byatt," *Metropolis*, arte, 20 April 1995.

²¹ The revival of Jane Austen in British TV-series, the recording of her sheet music, and, most importantly, the movie adaptations of most of her novels, reached its peak with the international box-office and Oscar success of Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1996). Emma Thompson, who wrote the (Oscar-winning) screen-play, reflected on the phenomenon: "I think of Jane Austen's stories as absolutely contemporary because her limited settings are full of emotions and connections that still pertain today" (TV-interview at the Berlin Film Festival, 1996).

gia in this sense points to more than just fatigue with postmodernism's infinite deferrals.

The nostalgia-fantasy is first apparent in Yorkshire, where Roland and Maud are led by intuition rather than logic. Here, in that literary and gothically most overdetermined of English landscapes, the paradoxes of their quest become obvious. For are these two nostalgics not, despite their fatigue, driven by their desire to know? Accordingly, right after expressing that sterile, intellectual, bodiless fantasy that they share, Roland suggests that they go to a place that has nothing to do with their research:

I wondered—perhaps we could take a day off from *them*, get out of their story, go and look at something for ourselves. . . . I just want to look at something, with interest, and without layers of meaning. Something new. (268)

This "new place" is described by "abundance . . . growth . . . banks of gleaming scented life" (268), and it brings them closer to the Ash-LaMotte-romance than all their research. The scene is a parodic "repetition" of the other couple's erotic experience: responding to Roland's insistence to "let it out" (271), Maud opens her braids and lets her long hair flow freely. This, again, is a gothic moment, for as Roland "saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, the whirling mass . . . Maud inside it saw a moving sea of gold lines, waving, and closed her eyes and saw scarlet blood" (272). The gothicism here intensifies a moment of intimacy and liberation between the two that seems suspended between nostalgia for the past and promise of the future.

"What's love got to do with it," asks Jackie Buxton in her reading of *Possession* as "postmodern seduction," and she appropriately answers: "everything, it seems."²² Indeed, Roland and Maud are able to theorise love, desire, the body, and the drives but the theories they have internalised—poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and feminism—have alienated them so much from emotion that they "have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them [Ash and LaMotte]" (267). Structurally, this realisation links their shared fantasy of nostalgia to the Ash-LaMotte-romance that follows in the next chapter. It is a self-reflexive idea that runs through the novel's texture like one of Christabel's "silk threads." Accordingly, late in the book, Roland finds himself caught in the web of romance:

Maud was a beautiful woman such as he had no claim to possess. She had a secure job and an international reputa-

²² Buxton 200.

tion. Moreover, in some dark and outdated English social system of class . . . Maud was County, and he was urban lower-middle-class. . . . All that was the plot of a Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another. (425)

However, while he recalls the class and propriety considerations that in the gothic classics defer the happy ending, love and sex are deferred in his own plot because he and Maud know too much. Thus, Byatt's late twentieth-century romance plot works through an important paradox: knowledge defers the emotional happy ending, while the desire for knowledge that motivates the plot nevertheless works to liberate these emotions. Byatt's complex narrative in this sense not only illuminates a particular emotional vacuum in intellectual postmodern culture (an issue to which I will return at the end of this essay), but—by insisting on the desire to possess—anticipates the desires of a new decade at the end of the century.

The pleasures of reading *Possession* are related to the sense we have that we actually possess something at the end of the novel. This effect comes about first, and most obviously, in the final sex scene that—appropriately—parodies both the struggles and the blissful defeat of postmodern strategies:

[V]ery slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph. (507)

However, this moment of *jouissance*, as one critic has called it,²³ could not have been reached without the most dramatic gothic excess in the novel: Mortimer Cropper's robbing of Ash's grave on a dark and stormy night. Cropper's own desire to know is like that of a necrophiliac's. He pursues the black box that Ellen Ash had reportedly placed on top of her husband's coffin. Traces of his compulsive desire accumulate throughout the novel. When he finally starts digging—with the help of the just as adequately named Hildebrand Ash—the scene poignantly reverberates with metaphors of potency and transgression. Appropriately, an apocalyptic storm ends the

²³ Fountain 205.

scene and closes the grave forever—but not before Cropper actually secures the box. He then has to be rescued by his British competitors who, although shocked, have let him do the dirty work:

Waiting for him was a dark figure with a flashlight, whose beam was swung in his direction.

"Professor Cropper?" said this being, in a clear, authoritative male voice. "Are you all right?"

"I seem to be trapped by trees."

"We can get you out, I expect. Have you got the box?"

"What box?" said Cropper.

"Yes, he has," said Hildebrand, "Oh, get us out of here, this is ghastly. . . ."

Cropper spun around, and the beam of the other's flashlight revealed, peering through the branches, like bizarre flowers of fruit, wet and white, Roland Michell, Maud Bailey, Leonora Stern, James Blackadder, and with streaming white woolly hair descended, like some witch or prophetess, a transfigured Beatrice Nest. (496)

This gothic scenario transports us into another plot that has, throughout the novel, explored the underside of the academics' nostalgia and their "primitive" desire to know: their craving for excitement, their clandestine voyeurism and sensationalism. After all, their quest for the secret love of two people is also a quest for illicit sex, for child murder, and for other excesses. Byatt suggests this throughout the novel, as, for example, when Maud realises that they know so much and feel so little. She muses about her "generation that has learned to see sex everywhere" (266):

They were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, "in love," romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. (423)

Possession thus presents an acute image of the postmodern situation, an image that anticipates nineteen-nineties' developments in terms of both academic and popular culture. "What we really like to do is watch," writes Henry Louis Gates about America in the nineteen-nineties:

Today, we know more about what people do in bed—not to maintain trains, planes, and automobiles—than ever before. Lawrence may have been right in saying that peeping, prying and imagining are activities that go back to Adam and Eve, but, like so many pursuits, they have since

been professionalized. The culture of tabloidism is a social covenant between exhibitionism and voyeurism, which means that *Schaulust* is now a sustainable career choice. Secrets, it sometimes seems, are going the way of the spotted owl. (1997, 118)

The culture Gates outlines is much larger than America: the tabloid and media culture of soap operas and public confession shows like "Oprah Winfrey," of reality-TV and of hyped and "hip" courtroom dramas like O. J. Simpson's trial. It is also a visual culture that made Princess Diana an icon of female suffering and survival, a star of the media age who bridged the gap between her own "Royal" dysfunctional marriage and eating disorders and those of many modern women. Just as both confessional interviews and the incessant publication of indiscreet images obliterate privacy, the borders between the media narrative of a life as soap opera and that life itself were obliterated: the princess's life and death became a soap opera. The whole trajectory of celebrity, tragedy, and media imagery made Diana's story very much suited to the nineteen-nineties.²⁴ It exemplified a global culture whose visual power and emotional necessities were anticipated by the gothicism in *Possession's* exploration of desiring, deferring and nevertheless possessing.

In academic culture of the nineteen-nineties, postmodern strategies and ideas like infinite deferral are increasingly questioned. Feminist critics who in the nineteen-eighties were preoccupied with construction and performance of gender have started to ask questions that Judith Butler sums up in the following terms: "If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is a text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything matter in or for poststructuralism?"²⁵ Butler's study *Bodies that Matter* and her argument for the materialisation of sex²⁶ signify the recent

²⁴ Significantly, her death (on 31 August 1997 in Paris) was both related to the media (on the chase for yet another indiscreet and therefore all the more pleasurable and profitable picture) and related by the media with the globally televised funeral as a cathartic event for millions; at the same time, after her fatal accident, public emotion was a celebrated necessity. Both Salman Rushdie's reflection "Crash" (*The New Yorker* 15 September 1997: 68-69) and Carol Gilligan's *New York Times* essay "For Many Women, Gazing At Diana Was Gazing Within" (9 September 1997: C4) situate Diana's story within this contemporary trajectory.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 28.

²⁶ Butler sums up Gianni Vattimo's argument that "lost matter must be reformulated in order for poststructuralism to give way to a project of greater ethical and political value" (27, 28) and sets out to replace the poststructuralist idea that everything is culturally constructed by "a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixture and surface we call matter" (9). Her question is no longer "how is gender constituted as and

developments in both the critical and a larger cultural discourse that *Possession* so joyfully anticipates.

Indeed, poststructuralist thinkers themselves now strongly pursue visions of materialising. A good example is the 1997 issue of *Grand Street* 62 entitled *Identity*: the issue displays an impressive collection of very contemporary and very international textual and visual self-presentations that read like postcolonial manifestos or pragmatic answers to the theoretical deferrals of subjectivity.²⁷

At the same time, it is significant that not only critics of postmodernism pursue their "rediscovery of values"²⁸ more strongly than ever but also that in the nineteen-nineties postmodern theorists come to explore—theoretically as well as emphatically—emotions. The essays in *Emotion in Postmodernism*²⁹ display the wide range of viewpoints and attitudes towards emotions in postmodern thinking. I agree with the view that suggests that postmodernism is primarily an intellectual movement. Its basic strategies of deferring and de-familiarising seem to provoke intellectual pleasures, rather than the emotional ones that, as we face the twenty-first century, are becoming more pronounced within public culture. In my title, I playfully suggest that *Possession* is postmodernism's happy ending: it offers a re-assessment of the desire to possess something (something material, something emotional) beyond the intellectual pleasures of playful deferral. Byatt's own parodic voice in the novel suggests this: "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (422).

through a certain interpretation of sex" but "through what regulatory norms is sex itself materialized?" (10).

²⁷ Unpretentious and powerful at the same time, *Grand Street* 62 presents fiction by young Europeans like the German writer Marcel Beyer and the Irish author Robert McLiam Wilson, side by side with recent artwork by Shirin Neshat and Robert Rauschenberg, a report from Baghdad by Nuha Al-Radi, and essays by Edward W. Said and Marcello Mastroianni. It fills the problematic concept of "identity" with new possibilities.

²⁸ See Hugh Mercer Cutler, *Rediscovering Values: Coming to Terms With Postmodernism* (London: Sharpe, 1997). Cutler blames the "inverted consciousness" for the "devolution of high culture into cultural pluralism" (12) and argues for the rediscovery of values: "values are real and a part of the 'real world' independent of the one who makes value judgements. This is the view of 'axiological realism'" (36).

²⁹ See Linda Nicholson, "Emotion in Postmodern Public Spaces," *Emotion in Postmodernism*, ed. Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997) 1-23. Linda Nicholson makes clear, speaking of American culture in her essay, that there has been a "therapeutic turn" in the twentieth century that has allowed for the thought "I feel" and that helped to articulate the differences in class, race and gender that politicized the radical sixties and seventies (18).

They are, in short, a gothic experience. Byatt ends *Possession* with a scene of gothic sublime that, just like the most intense moments of her novel, is suspended between nostalgia and desire:

There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.

Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was. (508)

She then narrates the fairy-tale like encounter of Ash and his daughter. It is an enchanted scene that the writer, Byatt, shares with us, the readers, in a complicity that excludes the characters in the novel. Its fantastic dimension recalls the most powerful feminine gothic happy endings. Like them, it both undercuts classical realist closure and enforces the pleasurable reading-effect of possessing . . . a secret. Placed in a past that is so strongly connected with the present, this ending suggests infinite possibilities, a future with the promise of something unknown. The happy ending of a romance is, after all, the beginning of a new story. What if *Possession* really was the happy ending of postmodernism?

Fantasy and Realism in Emma Tennant's *Wild Nights and Queen of Stones*

SUSANNE SCHMID

Emma Tennant's novels combine feminism, fantasy and satirical social observation all of which are often features of "realist" texts. One of her central concerns is the distinction between and the melting of illusion and reality. Like other postmodern writers, Tennant does not adhere to the binary opposition of fact versus fiction, or fantasy versus realism. Her texts present different realisms and realities, flights of fancy and imagination, but also various stages of delusion. Tennant's books are frequently concerned with "mystical or supernatural states and happenings."¹ She sees herself in the tradition of science fiction writers:

It was only in 1972 that the way in, for me as a writer, came about. This was through reading—and meeting—science fiction writers, another "foreign" breed, if you like, in the land of realism and gentle social comment: a breed prepared to show social criticism through fable and allegory, a strong side of SF writing—and an invaluable one for writers and readers conscious of a sense of dispossession and alienation from the mainstream of life in a rich, complacent West.²

Like other writers of science fiction, Tennant uses myth and allegory for didactic purposes, not only to articulate the "dispossession and alienation" of twentieth-century life, but also to stress the importance of the imagination. She aims to produce writing that has a vivid and interesting surface structure that attracts the reader's attention:

Like Silenus's box, as described by Rabelais, a real work of art should—or could—be "gaudy and vulgar on the outside (a box with a painted harlot on the lid, for example), but inside, once opened, would reveal the gem of truth, the philosopher's stone."³ This "gem of truth" is a didactically conveyed truth, presented through science fiction elements, allegories, and myths, all of which constitute the "gaudy" surface. It is the

¹ Emma Tennant, "Emma Tennant 1937 - " *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, vol. 9, ed. Mark Zadrony (Detroit: Gale, 1989) 289-295; 292.

² Tennant 291.

³ Tennant.