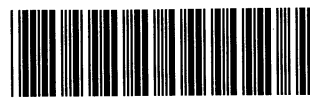


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BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Call Number:

Title: English studies in Canada.
 ISSN: 0317-0802
 Imprint: Downsview, Ont., University of Toronto Press. 1975 9999
 Article: Buxton, "What's Love Got to Do with It?": Postmodernism and Possession"
 Volume: 22
 Number: 2
 Date: 19960601
 Pages: 199-219
 Verified: EBSCO:MLA International BibliographyWorldCat Desc: v.Type: Serial

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he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's [sic] most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another. (Ginsberg 263-64)

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"WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?"
POSTMODERNISM AND POSSESSION

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The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony. . . . But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.

Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* 67-68

THE year 1990 saw the publication of an academic novel that became "a surprise best-seller"; within three months it had carried off the Booker Prize and the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Award. By mid-January 1991 it was into its eighth print run and was being lauded as the season's runaway success. The book was *Possession*, a title that uncannily prophesied its readerly effect. Unabashedly subtitled *A Romance*, *Possession* concerns the illicit passion of two Victorian poets, and the contemporary scholars who discover, and subsequently map, their relationship. As weighty as any of its Victorian antecedents, *Possession* encompasses two centuries and a good many of the generic forms of literary history. In more than five hundred pages, the reader is presented with substantial examples of memoirs, fairy tales, academic essays, diaries and journals, public and private correspondence, and, of course, poetry—over sixteen hundred lines of it, in fact. Clearly, *Possession* is no ordinary novel. Reviewers were unanimous in their praise, and virtually unanimous in their implicit or explicit tagging

of the novel as postmodernist. Highly forthcoming in their approval, they were less forthcoming in outlining the reasons for this postmodern classification. Perhaps this is so self-evident as not to require explanation? Even the most cursory of surveys of literature on the subject, however, shows that "postmodernism" is by no means an uncontested category; indeed, to claim that "postmodernism" is problematic is almost a satiric understatement of the case. No doubt, if questioned, these reviewers' responses to the question of what postmodernism is would run the length of the definitive spectrum. What is more interesting to me is the repeated descriptive attribution to *Possession* of that single term. Thus it is not my intention to throw another definition of postmodernism into the theoretical arena (although that will probably be inevitable); rather, I want to examine those aspects of the novel that may have led to its categorization as postmodern, and the political and aesthetic consequences of that critical understanding. My concern is less with what postmodernism is, than with what its proponents and detractors claim that it does. How might the debate settle on and around *Possession*, and, more important, how does *Possession* quite self-consciously activate this debate? What's love got to do with it? Everything, it seems.

While reviewers applaud *Possession* as a virtuoso performance of academic erudition, nineteenth-century ventriloquism, comedy, passion, and narrative allure, they are divided with respect to an explicit identification of its literary placement. Drawing attention to *Possession*'s generic pastiche, its self-conscious interrogation of literary and historical Truth, and a plot that resembles a corridor of mirrors, many critics employ the language of postmodernism, if not the label itself. To Ann Hulbert, for example, Byatt "mixes up styles, genres, voices in good postmodern manner" to produce "old-fashioned mystery, comedy, and romance tricked out in newfangled, self-reflexive style" (47). Others are more definite in their categorization, although some confusion remains as to what kind of postmodern tag best classifies the text. *Possession* is variously cast as "postmodern romance" (D'Evelyn 13), "postmodern gothic" (Heron 90), or as belonging to "that genre of ingenious books" known as "postmodern literary thrillers" (Thurman 151). What is perhaps most strikingly common to all these responses is the reliance on comparative texts with which to illustrate the argument. Interestingly enough, the names that crop up with extraordinary regularity are those most often cited in postmodern literary criticism: Nabokov, Borges, Fowles, Eco, D.M. Thomas, and David Lodge.

Defining Postmodernism

Although these reviewers (myself included) deploy the term "postmodernism" in a literary context, it is by no means clear to what postmodernism we are referring, or, more correctly, to whose. Whether constituted in literary,

artistic, architectural, social, political, economic, or epistemological terms, postmodernism boasts no lack of commentators. Given the broad range of contributions to the debate—and it is a debate—"postmodernism" might best be thought of in the plural rather than the singular. Postmodernism has been variously identified with an incredulity toward master narratives (Lyotard); the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson); the simulacrum (Baudrillard); the closing of the gap between high and low culture (Fiedler); an impulse toward (self-transcendent) silence (Hassan); suspensive irony as opposed to modernist disjunctive irony (Wilde); an ontological dominant rather than modernism's epistemological dominant (McHale); literature against itself (Graff); complicity and critique, self-reflexivity and historicity (Hutcheon). An exhaustive list? It is only a partial one. Within this plurality, two distinct usages can be discerned: on the one hand a postmodernism understood as a literary or artistic manifestation within cultural practice, and on the other a postmodernism understood as a socio-economic, epistemological condition. It is with the former that I am concerned, but the latter requires brief comment before I can proceed.

Informed by post-structuralist theory, Lyotard, Jameson, and Baudrillard consider postmodernism an inescapable fact of contemporary life. For Lyotard, postmodernism is the episteme of our era; the postmodern condition is the condition of *all* knowledge: scientific, cultural, aesthetic, philosophical, and economic. Nor do Jameson and Baudrillard regard the critical and cultural realms as distinct, but their postmodernism is presented as a global consequence of multinational capitalism. Asserting the loss of a historical consciousness (Jameson), and of the real (Baudrillard), they argue that the postmodern era has witnessed the commodification of representation itself. Culture and signification are no longer subordinate to the realm of economic activity; they are its quintessential expression. Neither theorist could be described as overjoyed in the face of this cultural explosion: Baudrillard sees only the panic-stricken production of the hyperreal (*Simulations* 13), while Jameson proclaims the impossibility of separating culture from anything else (48). It is also presumably impossible to separate postmodern theory from the phenomenon it seeks to elucidate. Herein lies the paradox at the heart of the postmodern condition. Is not cultural criticism by its own definition a cultural product, and therefore a part of the terrain it claims to map? While I find their ideas theoretically provocative, and their description of some postmodern characteristics of contemporary aesthetic production useful, ultimately their periodization of postmodernism into one ineluctable global era leaves me suspicious of the utility of their particular formulations.

If Jameson et al. engage the issue of postmodernism in the interests of formulating a cultural critique, then the remaining theorists can be broadly categorized by their concern with postmodernism as cultural practice. For

them, postmodernism is constituted by its relation to modernism rather than to modernity. The nature of that relationship, however, gives rise to much disagreement. It would be pointless to rehearse those debates here when Hans Bertens has provided such a comprehensive survey of the field. Of more interest to me is the political and aesthetic problems that they raise. Apologists for postmodernism emphasize its separation from the modernist project. They claim that literary modernism represents an elitist aesthetic of extreme artistry wholly removed from worldly concerns and the vulgar productions of mass culture. While modernists recognized a decentred, fragmented world, their quest for adequate ways to represent it went hand in hand with a desire to transcend it. In contrast, postmodernists, although no less artful, revel in the loss of formal order, accepting the incoherent, random nature of experience. Wilde marks this shift when he comments that in postmodernism "a world in need of mending is superseded by one beyond repair" (131). Although the split may perhaps be justified by a distinction between informing sensibilities, the fact remains that the *techniques* of postmodernist literature can be just as easily discerned in the works of so-called high modernism. Indeed, modernism seems to have acquired its salient features and driving force only in the wake of an anxiously influenced movement that takes its place. Noting the alacrity with which postmodernism has been taken up by literary critics, Steven Connor points to an affirmative agenda behind the modernist/postmodernist antagonism: "It even seems that the urge to identify and celebrate the category of the postmodern has been so strong as to produce by back-formation a collective agreement about what modernism was, in order to have something to react against" (105).

Andreas Huyssen sees another kind of critical involvement in the production of postmodernism. He suggests that the postmodernists were initially reacting not against modernism *per se*, but against a certain construction of high modernism propounded by the *New Critics* (242). The latter's reverence for the well-wrought urn of modernist literature veiled an elitist mastery of mystified texts accessible only to the correctly educated and artistically sensitive critic. Huyssen's suggestion raises two troublesome aspects of postmodern literary criticism: the assumed homology between postmodernism and post-structuralism, and, subtly connected, an unacknowledged elitism both of object and of critical endeavour. If modernism bred *New Criticism*, then contemporary literary criticism seems to operate on the tacit understanding that postmodernism is merely the artistic expression of post-structuralist theory. Obviously, many of the concerns of contemporary fiction and contemporary theory are shared ones, but the relationship must be argued, not merely assumed. I want to return to this relationship in the context of my argument for the constructed nature of postmodernism; for the moment, let me say that postmodernist fiction enacts a double bind that

post-structuralist theory — by its theoretical nature — has managed to cover over or ignore: fiction tells stories (even if those stories foreground their own fictiveness), constructs characters (no matter how fragmented or illusory), and weaves a plot, (even if that plot is plotless). *Even a representation that self-consciously acknowledges its own production is still nevertheless a representation.*

Thab Hassan, the self-appointed advertiser for postmodernism in the 1970s, was the first to imbricate post-structuralism with postmodernism. Although Hassan claims in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* that "the postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism" (139), in his 1982 postface he confidently presents a list of modern/postmodern oppositions. Hassan does not admit it, but the attributes of postmodernism are clearly valorized in comparison with those of modernism in a positive characterization of both theory and method. If the *New Critical* construction of modernism required the sophisticated exegesis of their own critical methods, then Hassan's postmodernism clearly requires the interpretative skills of a literary philosopher, the explanatory power of the intrepid metacritic. When the implications of Hassan's privileging of the postmodern episteme are considered alongside the avowed difficulty of some postmodernist texts, then postmodernism acquires the same critical aura of mystification so decried in the *New Critics'* view of modernism. It is an implicit elitism that pervades the postmodern field. Thus, even the tongue-in-cheek contribution by Umberto Eco with which I prefaced this paper exhibits this tendency: the postmodern attitude can only be recognized by "a very cultivated woman." And presumably it can only be demonstrated by a very cultivated man.

What should by now be clear is that postmodernism is not so much a quantifiable literary phenomenon as a constructed one, reflecting the ideological interests of those who theorize it. Thus, for those critics schooled in post-structuralism, and therefore suspicious of any notion of stable identity or epistemological certainty, postmodernist texts represent the perfect object on which to practise their literary skills. I am not attacking theoretically informed critics here, merely pointing out the inevitable investments involved in any critical practice. Just as Brian McHale's ontological postmodernism reflects his interest in how we understand ourselves in relation to the worlds we inhabit, so Linda Hutcheon's parodic, duplicitous postmodernism reflects her interest in the ways by which we can critique those dominant understandings. Even when critics cite the same authors of the postmodern, they are still at odds over whether all or only some of their texts "truly" represent a postmodernist sensibility. But perhaps I have been too critically divisive and misleading. Despite their differing agendas and examples, postmodern theorists *have* constructed a field that can be labelled postmodern. I do not believe that anyone would disagree that postmodernism exhibits or

embodies the following: parody, irony, indeterminacy, and a self-conscious questioning of traditional borders and the a priori of subjectivity, Truth, History, and narratology. (And if the contention is raised that these are also the hallmarks of modernism, then the answer surely lies in the matter of degree. Postmodernist works are *more* self-conscious, *more* self-reflexive, *more* interrogative than their modernist counterparts.) How then can these general postmodernist characteristics inform an examination of *Possession*?

A Postmodern "Possession" of the Past

Possession opens in the London Library, where Roland Michell, a rather dull English postgraduate, is researching the work of the famous Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash. His discovery—and subsequent theft—of two passionate letters by Ash to an unknown woman constitutes the basis of the mystery that drives the novel. Certain clues in Ash's letters lead Roland to the lesser known Victorian poet, Christabel LaMotte, and the contemporary feminist scholar whose work concerns her: Maud Bailey. Together, Roland and Maud track down yet more letters, which confirm an unsuspected romance between the married Ash and the reclusive LaMotte, and in the process they establish one of their own. They are both aided and hounded in their quest by a bevy of rival academics eager to discover the full story of the Victorian poets' liaison. In the weaving of this intricate, heavily literary plot, Byatt mercilessly parodies contemporary academia, employs a pastiche of styles and forms, and exploits the popular narrative models of romance, gothic, and detective fiction. By mixing ontological worlds in an epistemological quest, she self-consciously plays with the competing meanings of both "possession" and "romance." *Possession* also exhibits a postmodern obsession with "the question of how we can come to know the past today" (Hutcheon 47). The American academic, Mortimer Cropper, seeks to own the past by accumulating its material artifacts; Beatrice Nest seeks to protect the past by guarding its inhabitants' privacy; Roland and Maud's method is not that of biographical pilgrimage, but the discovery of the past through its textual monuments, "the twists and turns of [its] syntax" (25).² Their endeavours raise the novel's implicit questions: is the past the possession of scholars or blood descendants, of those who physically hold its remnants, or of those who "truly care" about their meanings? *Possession* is thus an academic novel in both senses of the word.

Byatt is not only intimately acquainted with the nineteenth-century world of letters, but also with the trends and discourses that characterize late twentieth-century academia, and her parodic representations of various scholarly types can be very amusing. There is Beatrice Nest, the reluctant

editor of Ash's wife's journals, and the victim of changing critical interests, as described by James Blackadder, Roland's graduate supervisor:

Poor old Beatrice began by wanting to show how self-denying and supportive Ellen Ash was and she messed around looking up every recipe for gooseberry jam . . . for *twenty five years*, can you believe it, and woke up to find that no one wanted self-denial and dedication any more, they wanted proof that Ellen was raging with rebellion and pain and untapped talent. (36)

There is Blackadder himself, the footnote-fettered editor of Ash's poetry and plays, and the victim of his New Critical mentor's pedagogic ministrations: "Leavis did to Blackadder what he did to serious students: he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to or change it" (32). There is Maud's fellow psychoanalytic feminist critic, Leonora Stern, an exuberant bisexual whose "loud" personality is in total contrast to Maud's reserved English coolness. For Byatt, Leonora is the epitome of the new feminist criticism, insisting as she does on seeing everything LaMotte wrote as a metaphor for feminine sexuality.³ Byatt's imitation of this kind of enquiry is so exaggerated that it only confirms Leonora's satiric status:

When I last wrote I mentioned I might write something on water and milk and amniotic fluid in Melusina — why is water always seen as the female? . . . I could extend it to the Drowned City — With special reference to non-genital imagery for female sexuality — we need to get away from the cunt as well as from the phallus — the drowned women in the city might represent the totality of the female body as an erogenous zone if the circumambient fluid were seen as an undifferentiated eroticism, and this might be possible to connect to the erotic totality of the woman/dragon stirring the waters of the large marble bath, or submerging her person in it as LaM. tellingly describes her. (154)

Given this kind of intensely intellectualized sexuality, Maud's comment to Roland on the meaning of their shared desire for a clean white bed in an empty room is indeed telling: "Maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists" (291).

Byatt reserves her most biting satire for the academic representatives of sexual and material possessiveness: Fergus Wolf and Mortimer Cropper. A child of post-structuralism, Fergus engages in some convolutedly erudite scholarship. When he first appears in the novel his current textual project faces him with "the challenge" of "deconstruct[ing] something that had apparently already deconstructed itself" (37). His lupine insincerity is indicated by the Harlequin Romance-like language with which he lures Maud to his bed: "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen or

dreamed about. I want you, I need you, can't you feel it, it's irresistible" (64). Cropper exemplifies the personal scholarly stake in the construction of one's literary object, and his biography of Ash bears the marks of his own self-aggrandizement (268). His interest in Ash is implicitly necrophiliac and ghoulish; he wants to imprison his artifacts in the airless glass mausoleum of the Stant Collection, and his grave-robbing expedition pulsates with sexual undertones (535-36). Not only is Cropper quite literally a pornographic voyeur, but he is also symbolically one. Lacking the time required to win access to the correspondence by means of his chequebook, he laments the lost chance to subject those letters to the erotic embrace of his "black box" desire (415). The most telling indictment of Cropper, however, is the locale in which he is first found furtively photographing Ash memorabilia. A lengthy description of his environs builds to an image of his enthroned activities. Cropper is presented—not to put too fine a point on it—on the *cropper*. In contrast to Cropper's interest in dead relics is Roland and Maud's shared sense of the vitality of the poets' textualized passion: "They were alive," declares Roland, in an attempt to explain his theft of the letters (56). Before long, Maud too is infected by the sense of urgency in the relationship between two long-dead poets whose work, they agree, "stayed alive, when [we'd] been taught and examined everything else" (62).

It is therefore highly appropriate that *Possession* begins with a description of a book at once funereal and alive: a book concerned with seeking "historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend" (5), with finding fact in fiction. Certainly, *Possession* is a detective story, but it is a detective story concerned with reading. The novel is bursting with addressors and addressees, textual authors and consumers, and fictions within fictions. Its detectives are literary analysts, but these intrepid textual sleuths are not dealing with the cause and effect rationalization of a recent event (customarily a murder), but with a "crime scene" from which they are distanced by a century or more. Roland and Maud's "case" is primarily historiographic in nature; by means of historical and fictional documents they not only reconstructively track their "villains," but they also rewrite literary history. Thus, to rework a term of Hutcheon's, the novel is a historiographic (defensive) metafiction, one in which "possession" acts as both arche and telos, question and solution. Although the possibility of a death is implicitly raised (that of the poets' child), the mystery resides not in the conventional detection of the perpetrators of a murder, but rather in tracing the trajectory of the crime itself: passion. In this inversion of the genre, the criminals—Ash and LaMotte—are discovered at the outset, the narrative progression is in detecting the exact details of their illicit exploits.⁴

On the Ash/LaMotte trail, all of the contemporary scholars' analytical skills are brought to the fore. Increasingly they discover interconnections

in the Victorians' poetry that provide fresh evidence of their liaison, hardly surprising, since "literary critics make natural detectives" (258). Just as Maud is led to the original correspondence by a supposedly insignificant poem of LaMotte's, so a seemingly casual reference in her longer poem, *Melusina*, begins to read "like a classic literary clue" (258). It is a self-conscious choice on Byatt's part, and a relationship on which she is quite willing to comment:

I felt I could write a literary detective story that needn't be quite so papyry [as Eco's *Name of the Rose*], because once I'd written the poetry the scholars were actually doing the kind of detection that one really does with poems, which is finding out their meaning . . . what the poet was really concentrating on. The poems I wrote contain various clues to the detective-story plot. (Interview 81)

Although Maud and Roland are generally successful in their use of a poetic treasure map, not all of the clues that they discover lead to the correct interpretation. LaMotte's painfully Dickinsonian poem on the subject of split milk is a case in point (411-13). It is understandable that they conclude that the poet's child was still-born in the light of such lines as "It came all so still / The little Thing — / And would not stay — / Our Questioning —." So, although Byatt introduces some helpful clues, she is clearly not averse to the introduction of a red herring either. What is perhaps the most subversive inflection to the conventional object of detection is the revelation of Maud's direct genealogical descent from the woman she has been investigating. When she realizes that the myth of her own origins is a maternally centred one, her earlier comment acquires a retrospective irony: "You know the theory that the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel—everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?" (258).

Possession is full of such self-reflexive comments on the fictive nature of readerly—and writerly—constructs. Indeed the novel is prefaced with an authorizing statement of deception. One aspect of the novel's subtitle is outlined in the epigraph by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Instead of a mimetic fiction of "minute fidelity" to the "ordinary course of man's experience," we will presumably be presented with a created truth "of the writer's own choosing," offered by way of the latitude inherent in the romance form. The second epigraph from Browning's "Mr Sludge 'the Medium'" promises even more postmodernist delights. The satirical tone of the poem arises from the self-confessed suggestion that Sludge's abilities are rooted in sleight of hand rather than in authentic spiritual communication with the world of the dead. This medium-conjuror argues, however, that his trade is simply that of all (literary) artists; he offers the pleasurable fruits of the past by means of a few useful falsehoods. Quoting the common exclamations of admiration for

the production of "such solid fabric out of air," Sludge exposes their unacknowledged implications in a more accurate restatement: "How many lies did it require to make/ The portly truth you here present us with?" Thus Sludge's preface contains both an implicit proclamation of the constructiveness of the fiction that follows, and multi-layered ironies surrounding its own "authorizing" status. Presumably the "helpful lies" of Robert Browning and Emily Dickinson inform the "portly truths" of Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. And this is only the beginning of Byatt's manipulation of the notions of "truth" and "fiction."

The Subject of (Literary) History

Possession contains many self-conscious moments, either in references to other fictions, or in implicit or explicit postmodern gestures. Just as Roland is indeed the "childe" of his poet-mentor, so it is no accident that Maud, often described as "icily regular, splendidly null," and emotionally sequestered like "The Lady of Shalott," is housed atop Tennyson Tower (45). By Byatt's own admission, Eco's *Name of the Rose* inspired the writing of *Possession*, and the novel is strewn with allusions to the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Browning, Donne, and Herbert, and the novels of Dickens, Woolf, and Eliot. The most important postmodernist hat-tipping is to John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman*, another text that considers the Victorian age alongside (and through) the contemporary one. When chapter fifteen opens with "The man and the woman sat opposite each other in the railway carriage" (297), the reader might presume that the couple are Roland and Maud returning from their Yorkshire expedition. In fact, it is Randolph and Christabel embarking on *theirs*. In an unusual break from the twentieth-century locale in which the story has been conducted to this point, Byatt presents an omniscient time capsule: the crucial tryst—"elopement" by the two Victorians. Or is it omniscient? The poets are introduced through the speculations of a "hypothetical observer" who studiously documents their appearance and demeanor in an attempt to discern their relationship (298). Implicitly, the reader (and the writer) is that observer, projected into the novel as a fellow traveller. Although certainly not as emphatically authorial as John Fowles's intrusion, the situation, description, and tone of this episode echos Fowles's embodied entrance into his own fiction. If the revelation of the consummation of Ash and LaMotte's relationship is a knowing one, then the consummation of their modern-day counterparts' relationship is an equally self-conscious one: "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" (550; emphasis added).⁵

The twentieth-century scholars' activities are marked by an awareness of their contemporary condition, that they are studying art in an "age of mechanical reproduction." So, when Roland and Maud visit Bethany, the scupulously restored former home of LaMotte and Blanche Glover, they are unable to distinguish the real from its referent. Maud refers to the house as a "simulacrum," while Roland comments that "it would have looked older. When it was younger." Both recognize it as "a postmodern quotation" (230). Similarly, Cropper's carefully orchestrated and illustrated lectorial is indicative of his perverse admiration for the hyperreal. The finale of his high-tech (self-)performance is "a product of his passion": a hologram of Ash's snuff box "floating in the church like a miraculously levitated object" (417). In an effort to foil the self-interested scheme behind Cropper's scandalous *exposé*, Blackadder and Leonora employ an equally public medium: they appear on national television to defend and *to sell* their poets to the masses. Leonora's pep-talk with Blackadder prior to going on air is a hilarious comment on the perceived philistinism of contemporary appetites:

"I guess we've got *three minutes* to make out the importance of all this stuff to the great greedy public and that don't include illustrations. No, you've got to make out your Mr Ash to be the sexiest property in town. You've got to get them by the balls, Professor. Make 'em cry. . . . One thing you'll get said in the time, and that's your lot, Professor."

"I see that. Mm. One thing—"

"One *sexy* thing, Professor." (434-35)

But *is* it philistinism, or merely a comment on the novel's own narrative strategies? In *Possession*, Victorian poets (and poetry) are presented as "the sexiest property in town." Glossily packaged as a romance, *Possession* has been sold to "the great greedy public," and what's more *that public has bought it*.

If the novel calls into question such notions as originality and truth, then the idea of an authentic, centred, Cartesian self is also given a postmodern twist. While Mortimer Cropper's ubiquitous appearances in his lectures and writings on Ash suggest an over-inflated sense of self, there is a very Freudian point in his self-examinations beyond which he will not go (118). Blackadder's subjectivity is so inextricable from that of his subject that even he questions his own originality. Blackadder is not the only one to be *subjected* to the influence of the Victorians. After reading Blanche Glover's account of "the prowler" at her and Christabel's door, Roland groups Maud in their seclusion and likens himself to Randolph Ash, "an intruder into their female fastnesses" (65). Maud's self-possession—her Christabel-like fear of love as a loss of freedom—reveals a highly personal stake in the preservation of a poetic subject uncontaminated by romantic assignments: "Part of her was still dismayed that Christabel LaMotte should have given in to whatever

urgings or promptings Ash may have used. She preferred her own original vision of proud and particular independence, as Christabel, in the letters, had given some reason to think she did herself" (268). It is her own sense of self that she protects. But Maud and Roland are too well educated to support anything as romantic as the notion of a coherent self: "Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for a surruration of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial" (273). An "old-fashioned textual critic" Roland may feel, but he is nevertheless fully "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject" (56, 13). Consequently, he has "learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this" (459).⁶

Their subjectivities, however, become increasingly intertwined with those of Ash and LaMotte, as the gulf between the past and the present rapidly diminishes with the novel's progression. As the Hawthorne epigraph promises, this romance "connect[s] a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us." That bygone time constantly interrupts the present diegesis of the novel as Byatt weaves the contemporary and the historical into one immediate textual present. The borders between then and now, fiction and reality, are continually undermined. LaMotte and Ash—two fictional characters—are given historical weight through their interaction with non-fictional figures: Coleridge, Crabbe, Ruskin, Manet, and Watts, while Maud and Roland are "filled out" through reference to the poetic fictions of Tennyson and Browning. The former instance is what one may expect of the historical novel; the irony lies in the question of accessibility. With two notable exceptions, the world of Ash and LaMotte is a wholly removed one, only accessible through its surviving documents, yet it is presented as more vital and immediate than the constrained world that Roland and Maud (and we) occupy. The sterility of their existence is blatantly indicated by the nature of Roland and Val's love-making. Completely unstimulated by Val's declarations of love and desire, Roland can only achieve an erection by contemplating an image which is "half-fantasy, half-photogravure," an image of Ellen Ash (141). When Maud and Roland join forces, however, their relationship is increasingly charged with the galvanic kick of Victorian passion. The text seems to suggest that Victorian fictions are somehow dictating contemporary realities. There is one other crucial postmodernist gesture in the relationship between these two interconnected worlds: the conclusion of Maud and Roland's historiographic journey. Armed with every piece of

documentation they are ever likely to gain, the scholars assume that they have discovered the truth that lies at the heart of the lovers' tragic relationship, and firmly established the ownership of the locket of hair stowed in Ash's pocket watch. That they are utterly wrong in their interpretation only ironically underscores the constructed, fallible nature of the historical enterprise, and the impossibility of discovering any ultimate Truth.

It is the pursuit of this "truth" that constitutes the investigative plot that drives the novel, but detective fiction is not the only narrative model in operation in the text. Romance, in both its "high" and "low" forms, is the "significant other" in evidence in *Possession's* complex plot structure. Neither model, however, has a consistent priority. Thus the quest form of Roland and Maud's discreet private-eye sleuthing transmutes into the classic stampede of an academic "cops and robbers." LaMotte and Ash's passion may bear the hallmarks of tragic romance, but the moderns experience a conclusion not unlike that of Shakespearean comedy, a conventional ending of which they are quite cognizant (524). The Ash-LaMotte romance is also all-consuming in more ways than one; as Maud and Roland map its progression, it progressively maps them. Expressing a desire to see "something new," something "without layers of meaning," Roland proposes a picnic at the Bogle Hole: "Perhaps we could take a day off from them, get out of their story, go and look at something for ourselves" (291).⁷ They may not know it, but we discover in the following chapter that it is a part of the poets' story, for Ash and LaMotte also visited the beach on a similarly perfect day a century before (311). Clearly, there is no escape: Maud and Roland are imprisoned in a plot that both is, and is not, their own. It is an observation that Roland himself makes late in the novel. Recognizing that he is in "a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously" (460), he feels the frightening attraction of that narrative model: "Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (456). Roland's pleasure stems from his participation in a "postmodernist mirror-game"; his dread stems from his belief that the game has "got out of hand" (456). To act in accordance with this narrative compulsion is somehow to compromise or to surrender one's integrity. Roland dispassionately theorizes:

"Falling in love," characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover's history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot. Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite may be true. Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. (456)

Consolation, however, is at hand. They may be plot-entrapped, but at least that plot is of a safely variable nature: "In any case, since Blackadder and Leonora and Cropper had come, it had changed from Quest, a good romantic form, into Chase and Race, two other equally valid ones" (460).

Byatt's Pursuit of Postmodernism

But how postmodernist is *Possession*, really? Is the relationship between the past and the present an instance of postmodernist intertextuality or "merely" the result of a well-crafted fiction? Is the novel truly self-reflexive, or simply self-conscious? Is there a difference? I would argue that there is. While Maud and Roland exhibit a scholarly postmodernist sensibility, the text itself exhibits a strong suspicion of that epistemic condition, even a condemnation of it. For all its postmodern gestures, *Possession* is first and foremost a "straight" narrative, a realistic fiction. Although Fergus Wolff and Beatrice Nest may recall Dickensian characters; although Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash echo Emily Dickinson and Robert Browning; although Roland and Maud seem to be reincarnations of their respective poets, these allusions are implicit rather than explicitly metafictional ones. The contemporary scholars might reflect on their theoretically unstable subjectivity, their textualized status as a nexus of competing discursive formations, but they do so as fully rounded fictional characters. Never once in the novel is their fictionality, or the fictionality of either temporal locale, called into question. *Possession* is in many ways a Victorian novel, for it replicates the realism of its forebears in capturing the nineteenth-century ethos. In another sense, *Possession* is a nineteenth-century novel because that is where its real passion—and its author's passion—lies. One world is obviously given ideological priority in this text, and it is the Victorian one, this literary Golden Age from which the present one is construed as a falling away. In comparison to the engaged Victorian poets, the contemporary academics appear not only anemic, but also decidedly repressed. A comment of Byatt's is indeed illuminating in this respect:

This is part of the whole joke of the novel: the dead are actually much more alive and vital than the living. . . . The poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true, given that language always tells lies, that they become rather papyery and are miserably aware of this, and this is part of the comedy. (Interview 82, 83)

In *Possession*, Byatt honours the Victorians, but she also unashamedly celebrates romance in both its "high" and "vulgar" forms. Part of Maud and Roland's problem is their very unwillingness to become passionately involved, and not just in a romantic sense. These emotional incapacities,

it is suggested, are the result of their education: a sexualized knowledge so devoid of passion that it has only produced a kind of sexual exhaustion. Here is the omniscient narrator on the paradoxical nature of this all-too-knowing age:

They were children of a time and culture that mistrusted love, "in love," romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing: they knew about phallosocracy and penisoid, punctuation, puncturing and penetration, about polymorphous and polysemous perversity, orality, good and bad breasts, clitoral tumescence, vesicle persecution, the fluids, the solids, the metaphors for these, the systems of desire and damage, infantile greed and oppression and transgression, the iconography of the cervix and the imagery of the expanding and contracting Body, desired, attacked, consumed, feared. (458)

Faced with such distrustful knowledge, Roland and Maud conduct their burrowing romance in silence. As the academics' relationship strengthens, however, their faith in the theories in which they have been trained wavers. Alone together at Thomason Foss, they make some personal admissions that are most informative. Maud muses on the frequency with which sexuality is identified in and by our culture, and continues:

We know all sorts of other things, too—about how there isn't a unitary ego—how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things—and I suppose we *believe* that? . . . We never say the word Love, do we—we know it's a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic Love—so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them. (290)

Roland agrees. Responding, he mourns the loss of "Mystery" in such knowledge, and suggests the destructive nature of such investigations: "And desire, that we look into so carefully—I think that all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire" (290). Since this discussion informs their professed longing for a clean white bed—a moment of connection between the two scholars—then I suspect a strong authorial investment in these "revolutionary" revelations (see also note 6). Byatt, it seems, is using postmodernism—or, at least, post-structuralism—against itself.⁸

According to Hutcheon, postmodern fiction makes explicit the conventionally veiled processes of narrative representation; historiographic metafiction foregrounds the textual—and, therefore, constructed—nature of the means by which we approach the past, today. The modern scholars' access to the past is certainly documentary in nature. The Victorians are tracked "like any other dead soul" (37) through bio/bibliographical texts and surviving archival material. The only way that *they* can know history is through its

inscription. While the conclusions reached by the grouped academics at the end of *Possession* (retrospectively) underline the impossibility of any totalizing knowledge, the reader's experience is exactly the opposite. Transgressing the boundaries of historical knowledge, the true facts are proffered in an omniscient authorial *deus ex machina*. "There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace," we are told at the beginning of the postscript; "*This is how it was*" (552; emphasis added). We discover that Ash did meet his daughter, and that the lock of hair in his pocket watch is not Christabel's but hers. Essentially, we are presented with privileged information about events that Roland et al. will never know.⁹ The postscript is clearly a playful sideswipe at postmodern historicism, for it concerns things that "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" (552). What Byatt presents here is not a textual construction, but a living human being, a materiality as opposed to a discursive trace. Maia Thomazine Bailey is something of the past that is not "merely" an inscription, but is emphatically corporeal, an undeniable product of her parents' (literary) liaison.

Although Maud and Roland's interest in the outcome of the poets' affair is somewhat voyeuristic, it is mitigated by the intention that informs it (and the romance that their investigation breeds). In contrast to their rival academics, it is implied that only Roland and Maud can make the effort to imaginatively "know" how Ash and LaMotte felt. Their will to knowledge stems not from professional greed, but from "something more primitive": "narrative curiosity" (259). Presumably, their obsession with discovering the truth becomes the reader's obsession as well. And in the three "transgressive" time capsules that punctuate the novel, our narrative curiosity is satisfied. "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable," thinks Roland in the midst of his postmodernist musings (456). Implicitly, the conclusion to *Possession* is therefore an unfashionable one. Poignant though it may be, the ending is fundamentally a happy one: Ash meets his daughter in an idyllic summer setting, and she repeatedly asserts that she is "extraordinarily" content (554). Byatt herself is an enthusiastic advocate for the plenitude offered by traditional forms. Referring to a contemporary "narrative hunger," she defends both the well-made plot and the satisfactions of all-encompassing narrative closure:

I haven't used the plot naïvely. . . . But it has given me intense pleasure. I love those Victorian novels in which, when you come to the end, you're told the whole history of every character from the end of the story until their dying day. I love that kind of thing, it makes me very happy. I don't see why we shouldn't have it: it's not wicked, as we were told in the sixties,

it's just pleasant. Everybody knows it's fiction, but then everybody knows the whole thing is fiction. (Interview 88)

Given the authorial investment in Roland's emerging poetic sensibility, Byatt is also an advocate of traditional conceptions of readerly and writerly practice (not to mention a Romantic conception of the Imagination). On his return from Brittany, Roland begins to make lists of words, words that resist "arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory" (467). He subsequently learns that Ash's artistic message is a crucial one: the "important thing" is "the language of poetry" (513). Roland's realization is accompanied by the narrator's self-conscious meditation on the intense pleasures of reading. Proclaiming the visceral nature of this involvement, the narrator invokes a readerly erotics of "acute sensuous alertness" (511). A variety of reading strategies is outlined—formalist, structuralist, subjective, etc.—but "impersonal readings" constitute the privileged form (512). T.S. Eliot is alive and well, it seems. Rereading Ash's poem, Roland experiences this impersonality, and the result is akin to that of a modernist epiphany. A deconstructionist, Roland has been trained in the theories of linguistic indeterminacy: "He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself" (513). His altered interest is therefore an implicit indictment of the centrality of that post-structuralist tenet. It is also significantly focused on the death mask image of the man who inspired it, Randolph Ash: "He could and could not say that the mask and the man were dead. *What had happened to him was that the ways in which it could be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not*" (513; emphasis added). Roland's aesthetic narrative "reward," then, suggests the ideological component to Byatt's project: a rejection of criticism—or at least certain kinds of criticism—in favour of an outright celebration of the creative poetic sensibility, of the imagination, and, most important, of the "power and delight of words" (511).

A Postmodern Seduction?

What then is Byatt's relationship to postmodernism, considering the modernist-inflected concerns that dominate the latter half of the novel? And is there not in that very question an unacknowledged criterion of postmodernist commitment? Undoubtedly there is. But it seems to me that postmodernist usage need not necessarily indicate a wholesale celebration of postmodernism per se. Of all the constructions of postmodernism outlined, it is Hutcheon's that I find most compelling, since it maintains a relational tension between aestheticism and ideological critique, an acknowledgement of the political impulse that unites aesthetic characteristics with worldly

concerns. Moreover, although *The Politics of Postmodernism* does not broach the subject of self-referential critique, the text does suggest the possibility of a postmodernist challenge to postmodernism itself (see note 8). I take Hutcheon's political impulse to mean a politics of *resistance*. *Possession*, however, is hardly a subversive text; indeed its ideology is a heterosexual, humanist one. We can know everything, the novel seems to imply, but Byatt remains (coyly?) silent on the exact details of the purportedly lesbian nature of Blanche Glover's relationship with Christabel LaMotte. Blanche is the one Victorian character whose story is *not* told. If Blackadder and Beatrice Nest are the protective, custodial "parents" of the Victorian poets, then Roland and Maud are the poets' heirs. Roland, however, becomes the aesthetic, creative heir to Randolph Ash, while Maud remains "merely" the biological heir to Christabel LaMotte. There is also, of course, the privileging of the romantic world of the Victorians, a priority that leads one reviewer to wonder "if there is not a repressed Byatt, more robustly reactionary than she knows, longing to burst out and declare that traditional country life is best, and the modern world is scruffy and smutty, and what a girl needs is a strong, handsome man to look after her" (Jenkins 214). I believe that Jenkins is tonally accurate in this comment, but not quite contentially correct: I fail to see where, exactly, he finds a celebration of country life in the novel; the modern world is not smutty, but deprived of romance; and LaMotte's independent, feminist perspective is too sympathetically drawn to make of her a witting romantic heroine. Nevertheless, *Possession* does reflect the ideology of the conventional romance narrative: Roland meets Maud, they court, kiss, make love, and presumably live happily ever after. But *is* Love the "suspect ideological construct" that Maud perceives it to be? Obviously not for Byatt, who makes it clear that Roland and Maud's romance is a productive, liberating affair.

No doubt the criticism could be levelled that I have offered an overly simplistic reading of postmodernist theories, but it is a critique that is in part enacted in this essay. Responding to reviewers' designations, I have attempted to outline those aspects of the novel that could be considered to be postmodernist. *Possession's* postmodernism in one light, however, is its modernism in another; the construction is a critical, interpretative one rather than a given of the text. Perhaps, then, postmodernism is best considered as a style; there are discernible characteristics of postmodernism, but because those characteristics are historically non-specific — Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is an example — postmodernism is a literary device rather than an inevitable product of postmodernity. If *Possession* is a postmodernist text, then it is one that is deeply suspicious of "postmodernism" whether it is construed as an aesthetic practice or as a historical condition. *Possession* may not celebrate the postmodern, but what it *does* do as a literary text is seduce

the reader into the consumption of Victorian poetry (or its simulacrum!). Outside the academy — and even within it — it is unlikely that "the average reader" would encounter as much poetry in one year as *Possession* presents in one sitting. (Of course, I am acutely aware of the canonical elitism of such an observation, but that is, I think, an undeniable aspect of Byatt's project.) While it could be argued that readers could quite easily skip over "the words that don't reach to the edge of the page," they cannot avoid the generic levels of textual discourse that the novel presents. "Possession," as both title and concept, quite literally describes the text's allure. Solicited by an initial suggestion of illicit love, the reader's attention is maintained by the lure of a soluble romantic mystery. *Possession* may not, à la Roland Barthes, shift bliss to the sumptuous ranks of the signifier, but on one level it does present something of an erotics of reading (albeit a heterosexually inflected one), a readerly seduction that Barthes refers to as "the pleasure of the text." I suspect that *Possession* will ultimately be denied access to the canon of postmodernist texts for the very reasons outlined: the novel offers modernist ideology in postmodernist guise. What is most interesting is that, at this historical moment, *Possession* is deemed to inhabit the postmodernist category; it is an identification that only supports my contention that postmodernism is more of a constructed "reality" than a quantifiable materiality.

NOTES

- 1 And is not Lyotard's a metanarrative on the demise of metanarratives? In an illuminating discussion of Jameson's theoretical positionality, Bennett makes a similar observation: "Like any self-reflexive art . . . the discourse of the oppositional wrapping-up of 'postmodernism' as a 'period' is always in varying degrees complicit with what it opposes" (258).
- 2 Roland has "never been much interested in Randolph Henry Ash's vanished body" (24), while Maud feels a positive discomfort at physical proximity to her distant ancestor: "I very rarely feel any curiosity about Christabel's life—it's funny—I even feel a sort of squeamishness about things she might have touched, or places she might have been—it's the *language* that matters, isn't it, it's what went on in her mind—" (62). Of course, their cerebral responses are ironically telling in terms of subsequent events.
- 3 It is a view that is undermined by the discovery that Christabel's landscape has a geographic rather than a metaphysical basis: her Yorkshire wanderings over the period of her affair with Ash.
- 4 In this respect, it could also be argued that Byatt's generic inversion is, in fact, twofold. As the narrative progresses it appears that Ash and LaMotte—the supposed criminals—increasingly become the victims of the contemporary detectives' quest for the truth.
- 5 The combination of coy Harlequin Romance phrasing and an admittedly archaic usage leads me to suspect that Byatt's tone can only be a tongue-in-cheek one, here. It is indeed ironically appropriate that, in a text so concerned with romance, this is the final—and only—use of "possession" in a sexual sense.

- 6 It must be acknowledged that Byatt introduces a negative tenor to both these self-conceptions; an issue that I want to address in the latter half of this paper. Each self-construction bears the seeds of its deconstruction. Maud's textualized subjectivity is problematized by her subsequent musings on materiality and history: "There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist" (273); Roland's "learned" sense of self is something that he is content with. *Mostly*.
- 7 Even at this point, however, there is an implicit allusion to the Victorians' presence in the intertextual transposition of Charles Smithson from the *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. When they arrive at the beach, there is a fossil-collecting young man "with a hammer and a sack . . . busy chipping away at the rock-face" (292).
- 8 Considering Hutcheon's identification of postmodernism as complicity with, and critique of, dominant ideologies and narrative modes, I wonder if she would characterize *Possession* as *doubly* metatextual? Does its complicity and critique of postmodernism itself make it *post*-postmodern?
- 9 It could be argued that this information is essential in establishing the partiality of the moderns' knowledge, and therefore is part of a postmodernist comment on the impossibility of attaining (historical) Truth. But an undeniable (and paradoxical) consequence of this narrative necessity is that the truth is *not* withheld from the reader.

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