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POSSESSED BY DESIRE: A. S BYATT'S *POSSESSION* AND ITS LOCATION IN POSTMODERNISM

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ABSTRACT

This research report explores A. S Byatt's ambivalent relationship to postmodernism through a critical engagement with two of her recent novels, *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale.* Both use the techniques, while simultaneously constituting a critique, of postmodernism. The novels challenge postmodernism, indicating Byatt's misgivings about the continuing suitability of this mode of literary representation. *Possession* is examined in detail, while *The Biographer's Tale* is used to provide a backdrop to the discussion of Byatt's viewpoints. *Possession* is a pastiche of styles, incorporating some of Byatt's favourite literary forms. Postmodernism allows this experimentation but disregards qualities the author values highly, such as a celebration of traditional literature and the emotional affectiveness of history. *Possession* considers the positive and negative aspects of the literary movement. This thesis examines Byatt's negotiation with postmodernism and the contribution of her critical attitude towards the success of *Possession*.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature by course work and research report in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Susan Margaret Arthur

16th day of July, 2008

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

A. S Byatt's ambivalent relationship to postmodernism is evident in two of her most recent novels, *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*. The novels critically engage with postmodernism's strengths and weaknesses, as Byatt sees them. This study considers her ideas about postmodernism as portrayed in the novels and a selection of her critical essays. It examines how her sceptical mindset has contributed to the creation of a complex and successful novel, *Possession*. The study focuses on this novel and uses *The Biographer's Tale* as an informative backdrop to the discussion. The latter builds on some similar themes, and although it was written after *Possession*, provides a useful background to Byatt's concerns about postmodernism.

Possession is foremost a love story and a detective story, set primarily in a university environment. It is also one of Byatt's most successful works. It won her the prestigious Booker prize in 1990 and has been made into a film, but it is also studied in an academic environment. Perhaps one of the secrets of its popularity is that it finds a balance between Byatt's characteristic erudition and more playful, popular modes of fiction. Indeed, it is the only novel she has intentionally "written to be liked" (Byatt quoted in Jeffers 136).

Possession's main characters are the scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, who are investigating a secret love affair between two nineteenth–century poets, Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte[1]. The love affair has remained undiscovered until Roland chances on a copy of an unfinished letter written by Randolph in the London library,

[1] For the sake of clarity, this thesis sometimes refers to these characters as "the scholars" and "the poets".

which sets him on an exciting journey of discovery. Roland and Maud are postmodern, poststructuralist scholars and their theoretical mindsets are continually satirised throughout the novel. *Possession* challenges postmodernism through a satire of these characters who are afraid to embrace life. Ironically, in the process of discovering the secret love affair they become so involved in the story that they begin to embrace what postmodernism undermines – they begin to invest personally in the importance of history, they forget the principle that there is no such thing as an error-free text, and they fall in love, even though they see love as a "suspect ideological construct" (*Possession* 323). The metanarratives that they view, in theory, as flawed, begin to hold meaning for them. Investigating the secret affair allows them to suspend their disbelief. Similarly, although it acknowledges that our understanding of the past is textual, the novel's focus is on a rich past that has many gifts for the present. In *Possession*, Byatt is more interested in exploring the ways that we have to tell the story of the past than emphasising that our knowledge of the past can only be partial.

Possession is an experimental pastiche of a variety of literary forms that can be used to narrate the past. It is simultaneously romantic and realist, while it includes poems, diary entries, letters and fairy stories, all adding to the rich tapestry of the narrative. The novel uses many traditional and newer forms; theoretically based academic writing as well as popular, lighter writing. The novel is postmodern in its embrace of experimentation, but it is also something too complex to be wholly captured by this limiting term. With its commitment to traditional literature and its insistence on more traditional values, such as the power and meaning of narratives, it is not completely postmodern. Byatt's intelligent writing resists categorisation: she calls herself a "self–conscious realist" (*Passions* xv). In *Possession*, Byatt returns to a world of romance

and passion that allows resolutions not countenanced by postmodern theory. She balances her ambivalent attitude towards postmodernism and her love of traditional literature to create a novel that is expressive of her individual consciousness. The in-between space that she negotiates provides a fertile ground for creativity, out of which comes a rich novel that is extraordinarily inventive. This research paper will consider Byatt's influences, looking at how different literary forms are used to challenge postmodernism.

Considering Byatt's misgivings surrounding postmodernism is important because of her suggestion that this type of literature is becoming increasingly academic and dry. Her essay, "Reading, Writing, Studying", considers that the growing intellectualism in fiction came about as a result of the rise of the "professional" reader – readers who will study the work at university level. The essay considers the merits of the increasingly academic orientation of fiction, which, Byatt implies, has forgotten its primary purpose – to create pleasure for readers and authors ("Introduction" xiii). She remains sceptical, considering what is being sacrificed. Byatt seems concerned that postmodern fiction is too abstracted, too theory-based, to be enjoyed by the larger reading public. Her own writing suggests a move into a "post-post" (Perloff 208) age that speaks more of humanism than theoretical dryness. Her views, as presented in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*, represent a sceptical counter-current to the postmodern "theoretically knowing" (*Possession* 501) age. *Possession* strikes a balance: it's important to look at how Byatt balances the enjoyable and the more serious, to critically examine the trends in fiction and ask what it is as the reading public really wants, and if that is currently being offered. Drawing on a number of articles written about *Possession* that discuss the novel's postmodernism, this paper

will develop these ideas further. Based on an examination of *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*, it argues that Byatt is not simply a postmodernist author.

Numerous writers, in commenting on *Possession*, have commented on Byatt's experimentation with postmodernism, as well as considering the novel's treatment of history and traditional forms of literature. Papers I have reviewed that discuss Byatt's recent work all remark on its postmodernism, while some argue that as a writer she cannot be solely identified as a postmodernist (Poznar, Shinn, Shiller, Martyniuk, Morgan). She is rather a "Victorian postmodernist" (Levenson quoted in Hanson 453), and *Possession* is seen as a "neo Victorian novel" (Shiller). Many articles discuss how Byatt's work draws attention to the limitations of postmodern thought. Hansson's paper focuses on Byatt's use of metaphor in *The Conjugal Angel* as a signifier of its postmodernism, although the novel is set in Victorian times. For Hansson, Byatt's work is experimental, yet it still "signals its own postmodernity through devices like fluctuating narrative perspectives, paradox, ambiguity, and self reflexivity" (453).

Shinn discusses how *Possession* blends a variety of styles and types to create what she terms a "meronymic" (164) novel – one that encompasses seeming contradictions but blends them in a seamless way. Her article emphasises Byatt's experimental use of traditional and modern forms as well as realism and romance. Shiller, Poznar, Martyniuk and Morgan consider how, in *Possession*, Byatt creates a literary work that moves away from postmodernism, discussing her use of romance and history. Shiller focuses on issues surrounding the representation of history. She explores how the novel draws our attention to the difficulty of discovering the truth about the past, by

privileging its readers with several pieces of information that elude the characters. The readers become aware of the politics of recording history, and the ways this makes official accounts inaccurate because of what they omit.

Martyniuk notes how *Possession* shows Byatt's commitment to finding 'hard truth', despite her awareness that this is an elusive concept. *Possession*'s postscript offers a fragment of hard truth and closes the book in a definite, matter - of - fact way. The device of an omniscient narrator – a mode alien to postmodernism – allows the whole story of the past to be told. Martyniuk quotes Byatt, who justifies her use of third person narrator because she feels the idea of partial truth is only meaningful if "we glimpse a possibility of truth and truthfulness for which we must strive, however inevitably partial our success must be." It is the process of reaching back into and retelling history that interests Byatt, while *Possession* makes clear that what we know as history is more about how we interpret events than the events themselves.

Poznar examines how Byatt may "express a consciousness that is both Victorian and postmodern and create a fictional structure emanating from both". Byatt's ideas draw from two eras, which she pays homage to, although she seems more indebted to Victorianism in *Possession*. This study will build on these discussions and consider in more detail Byatt's attitude toward postmodernism, using history, love, the stylistic techniques and the multiple meanings behind the title *Possession* to explore this.

This report begins by looking at the different literary techniques that are used in *Possession*, the novel's genesis in Byatt's mind and her intentions with regard to it.

It considers her background, literary influences, and thoughts on postmodernism. The complexities of meaning in the title *Possession* capture the essence of the key relationships in the novel, particularly the love relationships and the link between the past and the present. Chapter three looks at the satirical treatment of the postmodern present through its comparison to the past. Following this is an examination of the portrayal and treatment of history in *Possession* – it is a novel that discloses secrets that escape being recorded in traditional histories. The report goes on to consider the complex nature of Christabel and Randolph's relationship and the imagery associated with it that is indicative of a negotiation that happens between them. The tension in their relationship is comparable to the tension that exists for Byatt in her choice of literary mode. Noting the negotiations that take place in *Possession* between popular literary forms and writing that speaks to the academic audience, this report considers how successful Byatt was in meeting her intentions to create a novel that will be enjoyed.

At the close of the paper I have formed a clearer understanding of Byatt's complex relationship to postmodernism, having considered her ideas as they are portrayed in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*. I conclude that *Possession* is an exercise in balance, where Byatt negotiates her complex set of ideals to create an excellent novel from this position of ambivalence. The study contributes to an understanding of *Possession* and of Byatt as a writer. It begins to form ideas about emerging fiction in a 'post-post' age that steps beyond postmodernism, as Byatt's ideas suggest.

2. **A BACKGROUND TO BYATT'S WRITING**

The novelist's obligation is "to invent the possibility of a book in a world he sees as not yet fully named. He does this both within a convention, the convention of the novel, and against it; he repeats but also remakes the form; he exercises options in a particular historical and cultural situation, but keeps attempting, afresh, to distil this as a signed and personal authenticity" (Bradbury 12).

This chapter considers how Byatt has created *Possession* from within the conventions of postmodernism, but also pushes against those conventions to produce a novel that is expressive of her individuality. Her critical essays, selected from the book *Passions of the Mind*, provide a viewpoint on her thoughts on the craft of writing, with reference to literary movements such as postmodernism, realism and fairy stories. These essays provide a background to her intentions with regard to *Possession*, and also show what went into the making of this novel. The chapter introduces some of the literary techniques and themes of *Possession*, outlining Byatt's commitment to traditional forms of literature. It explores the idea of *Possession* as a mediation between differences: past and present, romance and realism, postmodernism and tradition. *The Biographer's Tale* is also discussed to expand on Byatt's ideas about postmodernism.

2.1. **The making of a novel and a writer: a brilliant literary mind**

Possession is an attempt to capture a "narrative shape that would explore the continuities and discontinuities between the forms of nineteenth and twentieth century

art and thought" (Byatt, *Passions* xvii). The novel creates a parallel between these two centuries, not only through its characters but also by experimenting with literary movements that are used to narrate the past and the present. *Possession* shows off Byatt's encyclopaedic knowledge of literary history and her skill as a writer as she explores the possibilities that each technique offers. Writing her novel, she thought, "why not pull out all the stops" (Byatt qtd. in Jeffers 136); evidently relishing the chance to create a work that includes some of her favourite literary styles: fairy tales and myth, romance and realism.

Possession weaves a complex set of relationships between the past and the present, the old and the new. It explores the bonds between living and dead minds, unravelling these connections through its central metaphor of possession. The novel's genesis began with the title, when Byatt watched Coburn, a famous Coleridge scholar, at work, and thought: "does he possess her, or does she possess him?" ("Introduction" xi). Byatt began with a pale canvas of ideas that became more lurid as she explored the implicit connotations of the title. Dimensions of passion, jealousy and imaginary worlds were added (xii-xiv); each layer working together to produce a coherent, satisfying whole, like the composition of an oil painting that takes shape with each coat of paint. The extra dimensions added lively shades to the grey, cobwebby palimpsest of the original *noveau roman* of the novel's first conception (xi). Without these multiple elements, the form of the postmodern novel is pale and drained of colour. *Possession* becomes exciting and intriguing due to its Gothic romantic plot that balances out its cerebral qualities.

Possession uses different modes to tell the story of the present and the past as it explores the continuities and discontinuities between them. The present is narrated in a series of broken, awkward dialogues, while Roland and Maud's inner thoughts are dominated by theories that concern even their private lives. Roland considers his definition of self: he "had learnt 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" (502). With their shadowy, abstract conception of identity, it takes a real effort for them to connect on any meaningful level with others. The *Times Literary Supplement*'s review of *Possession* describes these passages as some of the weakest in the novel, disliking their 'forced' quality (Jenkyns 213). The hesitant, dry dialogues between Maud and Roland are humorously flat and lifeless in comparison to the passionate exchanges between the Victorian lovers. These dull passages in an otherwise vibrant and exciting novel are self-consciously dull: Byatt is drawing attention to the potential weaknesses of postmodern self-reflexivity. [2] Humorously, Fergus Wolff comments on his latest project of literary theory (the "right" field (19)): "the challenge was to deconstruct something that had apparently already deconstructed itself" (39). *Possession* draws attention to what Byatt regards as the absurdity and futility of poststructuralist academic enterprise.

In contrast, the past is a rich world of epic poems and passionate love letters, while its characters come to life for the reader to know and love them in a way that the postmodern scholars do not. The letters and poems "loom" ("Introduction" xiii) over the text, becoming the more real things in a text that is otherwise a patchwork, echoing pastiche. The scholars come to act as a lens through which to see the rich

[2] She is also negotiating her own sensibilities, where she must balance her academic mode of thinking and writing against her intention to produce a lighter, more pleasurable novel.

world of the past, remaining ‘flat’, sometimes two-dimensional characters whose personalities fail to captivate (Jenkyns 213). The text sympathetically portrays Roland, who is largely an outsider and a failure (in material terms) at the start of the text, but reaches some level of success by the time the story ends. Yet Roland’s textually nuanced reading of himself influences every aspect of his characterisation, so that he only really comes to life through the discovery of the past.

Possession is an exploration of the ways things have changed and stayed the same. The novel openly affiliates itself with the romantic movement through its subtitle and is redolent with symbolism that harks back to a time of medieval Arthurian romance. Seal Court is an imposing Gothic castle, from a distance seen as “a turret, a battlement, white in the gloom” (86), that conceals a hidden treasure within its fortresses that the knight and his lady must rescue. The word “Bailey” in Middle English means the outer wall of a castle (OED 81); Sir George Bailey protects the treasure in his fortress from the prying eyes of those whom he may perceive to be ‘dragons’. Romantic forms are used to narrate the past and the present, placing side by side the modern-day and the Hawthornian historical romance narratives to create a form of literary “hybrid” (Hansson 452).

Fictional “hybrids” such as this that fuse the postmodern, the conventional and the traditional “destabilise our interpretations of traditional works, and… manage both to reread their tradition and revitalise its twentieth century appearance” (452). The motifs of the early beginnings of medieval romance - the knight on his chivalric quest, escapism, exile, return and adventure - are repeated throughout romantic fiction as they remake themselves in new forms (Saunders 2). Byatt plays with these motifs in

Possession to locate her characters in a textual tradition[3], while the novel makes use of the common postmodern motif of the quest, illustrating the thread of continuity between past and present. The novel draws parallels between the lives of the characters who share a love of words and many of the same thoughts and themes that preoccupy their minds. In a postmodern age, little has changed for women who still have to fight to retain their dignity and sense of autonomy. The scholars are drawn to the poets out of admiration and something else that is personally shared. The 'theme' of Christabel's life and poetry was a need to retain her sense of self-possession and live autonomously away from the shadow of male authority. The novel's women share this concern, linking them across the centuries. Maud adopts Christabel's fierce desire to live "circumscribed and self-communing" (102-103) but shies away from willingness to risk, wanting instead to protect herself from any intrusion from the outside world.

Morgan sees one of Byatt's influences as the neo-romantic literary movement that created a world between modern and postmodern sensibilities (508). Morgan explains that the movement allowed the mediation of an in-between space that was indebted to both the romantic and the real world (508). In *Possession* Byatt creates a novel that transcends realism but also owes much to it. The novel's fairy tales mediate a space of playful ambiguity, acting as a celebration of the lasting worlds of myth but including self-conscious reflection on the politics of narrative. Fairy tales and myth are universal literary modes where stories can be told and retold without growing tired. The pleasure of retelling an old tale in a new form is to pay tribute to the endless life

[3] Roland's namesake is the Childe Rolande in Browning's poem, *Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower came*. The name Maud is steeped in nineteenth century literature: Maud Gonne was an inspiration for many of W.B. Yeats's love poems. Alfred, Lord Tennyson published a volume of poetry *Maud and other poems* in 1855.

fairy tales can have, deriving force from their "endless repeatability" (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 132). They can be told, as they are by Christabel, with an arch-Victorian voice that warns its readers of what will happen, or in a postmodern way that gives the original version a slight twist. These old stories are "shape shifters" (123) with the endless ability to adapt and remake themselves. For Byatt the pleasure in rewriting old tales is in contributing to their continuity (131). In fairy tales, past and present modes of narration can run alongside one other.

In *Possession*, Gode's tale celebrates the oral storytelling tradition and captures a typical nineteenth century motif in literature of the innocent infanticide, but at the same time acts as a hidden clue in the postmodern framework of *Possession*. The tale is told in a "new-old form" (3), serving a dual purpose. Byatt sought to emulate the "simple horror" ("Fairy stories" 3) of Eliot's recounting of the lost child in *Adam Bede* when she wrote Gode's tale. She admired Eliot's capacity to take a realist experience and develop it into a novelistic scene that transmitted all of the emotions inherent in giving birth to a child (3). The events surrounding Christabel's pregnancy are distilled through the young Sabine's voice, so that the reader can only guess at Christabel's true feelings. That the reader is never directly told what happened only enforces the shock she will feel when she realises that Christabel is pregnant. Similarly, *Adam Bede* only reveals the truth about Hetty's pregnancy when she is alone in the fields and about to give birth. But Byatt gives the motif of innocent infanticide a twist. Without any further information, Roland and Maud can only guess that Christabel killed her child by referring to the textual suggestions of the nineteenth century literary motif and Christabel's 'spilt milk' poem (*Possession* 454-455). These are red herrings; false clues that lead the scholars astray. The incident highlights an

erroneous assumption that is based on the strength of a text. It emphasises the limits of knowledge available in a text, while *Possession* problematises the notion that historical knowledge is only available through its textual traces.

In *Possession*'s postscript, Byatt creates a touchingly humane ending to her work. The simplicity of tone recalls Eliot's influence, while it is "hauntingly reminiscent of George Eliot's final assessment of Dorothea's life" (Shiller). It harks back to traditional literature, undermining postmodernism but at the same time fitting into the novel's overall postmodern framework. The device of an omniscient narrator is at once postmodern and not postmodern. Byatt is able to emulate Eliot's tone while making use of the romantic mode of authorial intrusion in a way that incorporates her postmodern consciousness.

Possession's elements of romance run concurrently to its realism, while it explores a middle ground between the two forms. The overall 'narrative shape' of *Possession* allows it to encompass the fragmented traditions of style that it attempts to reunite (Shinn 164). Shinn explores the early continuities between romance and realism, which shifted apart as the traditions matured (164). Byatt grew up reading fairy stories and mythology, and their rich world generated the impulse in her to write. However, she felt that she *should* write in a realist mode. Ultimately, though, she believes that great novels "always draw on both ways of telling, both ways of seeing" (Byatt, "Fairy Stories" 1). As a result, *Possession* is a blend of romance and realism; it mixes hard fact and surreal ideality, offering both ways of understanding the world and juxtaposing them. Hawthorne described the romance as "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the fairy-land, where the Actual and the

Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (qtd. in Henelly 461).

In *Possession*, Byatt manages to work from within the temperament of her time while creating a novel that has the mark of her authenticity and individualism. She began studying in the 1950s and writing in between lectures on the literary greats of the past ("Reading, Writing, Studying" 4). The crucial crossroads in post-war fiction stimulated a group of novels produced around the 1970s that was profoundly ambivalent in its approach to certain ideas. The temperament showed paths pointing away from realism, while many still had faith in the future of the realistic novel and respected that tradition. At the same time, they were aware of the difficulties of writing as a realist in a changing climate. Byatt's essay considers a group of novels whose description could easily be applied to her own work. The novels show

> a formal need to comment on their fictiveness combined with a strong sense of the value of a habitable imagined world, a sense that models, literature and 'the tradition' are ambiguous and problematic goods combined with a profound nostalgia for, rather than rejection of, the great works of the past (*Passions* 161).

The novels negotiated an awareness of some need for experimental attitudes with their authors' commitment to realism and tradition. Considering different sensibilities and ideas surrounding 'experiment' and 'realism' respectively, Byatt concludes that the criticisms from each 'side' in the 1970s debate are reductive and inadequate, making "wholesale advocacy, or rejection, of particular periods and writers, as models, so unhelpful" (*Passions* 153). Better, rather, is to find a balance between the two. She

identifies a symbiotic relationship between them, arguing that postmodern gimmicks often disguise a simple realist prose (157).

In his essay "The Myth of Postmodernist Breakthrough", Graff traces the development of ideas that influenced the postmodern movement through the ages of literature. To call postmodernism a breakthrough, he argues, is to place too much distance between current authors and their predecessors. Rather, he prefers to conceive of postmodernism as the "logical culmination" of the ideas of modernism and romanticism (Bradbury 219). Graff reminds us that it is not only recently that literature has been telling its readers how little it actually means (219). In the context of a society where there is a general disregard for values and standards, literature and art that follow the same ideas are not stepping away from the mould (249). Our ideas of what 'experimental' is in the context of art, he argues, needs a revolution. Radicalism in art turns its back on humanism (Bradbury 250), while Byatt attempts to salvage empathy and understanding in her work.

In *Possession,* Byatt writes with the perspective of a contemporary author who is knowledgeable of the current cultural situation and the state of the novel, surveying the map of literary history to explore old movements with a new consciousness. *Possession* resurrects past traditions as it considers them from a critical postmodern outlook, restoring their appearance in new literature in a manner that simultaneously fits into and challenges the novel's postmodern framework.

Byatt's commitment to literary modes of the past remains unwavering, even in a postmodern era that claims to have moved toward a more sophisticated approach to

literary composition. Many argue that we live in a world where reality has become unreal, leaving the novel form inadequate to represent events that we no longer understand (Bradbury 87). B. S. Johnson admires Joyce for having the foresight to open the first Irish cinema (152), believing that this shows he recognised that the advent of this new medium meant the novel could no longer claim to reproduce reality as effectively. Joyce adapted the form of the novel accordingly, shifting its focus from a medium to tell stories to an innovative exploration of new ways of telling stories (152). In the face of these arguments, Byatt still strongly identifies with the realist movement, regarding George Eliot as one of her literary heroines. Writing *Possession*, Byatt returned to masters of traditional literature for inspiration: Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti as models for the nineteenth century poets, and George Eliot[4]. Byatt admires Eliot's "moral realism" (*Passions* 74) that sought always to capture "distinct, vivid ideas" (75), but also helped her readers to get closer to the minds and feelings of her characters. Byatt has always been preoccupied with the problem of the real and how to describe it, and continues to defend its techniques because "it leaves space for thinking minds as well as feeling bodies" (*Passions* xv), though she knows it is increasingly seen as irrelevant.

Another of Byatt's literary heroines, Iris Murdoch, felt the same allegiance to realism in a climate that called for a change of direction in British fiction. Her essay "Against Dryness" argues for a return to realistic description, though it was no longer considered the best mode of expression at that time (*Passions* 148). Yet Murdoch recognises that it was not possible simply to resurrect the traditions of the past unaltered, but argues that it is important to learn from and incorporate them into new

[4] Byatt edited a book of Eliot's essays that was published in the same year as *Possession.* She remarked that her criticism and her creative work are inter-texts to one another - they are "like points on a circle" (*Passions* xv).

work. From Murdoch, Byatt learnt the possibilities of producing experimental versions of realism.

"Against Dryness" emphasises the need for "the hard idea of truth" rather than "the facile idea of sincerity" (Byatt, *Passions* 17). Byatt carries this impulse through in *Possession* and explores ways that make it possible to access the truth, though her capacity to do so may be limited. In contrast, the postmodern writer B. S. Johnson has an obsession with truth-telling that concerns itself with facts, while he rages that "telling stories is telling lies" (Bradbury 160). Instead he argues that the author must search for innovative expressions of style. Johnson explores these things by using such devices as punching holes in the pages of his books so that the reader can see what is coming. He argues that to rely on the simple curiosity of the reader to know 'what happens next' is to admit the failure of the novelist, who in that case would have no faith in the skill of his or her style or its ability to capture the imagination of his or her reader (154). Byatt argues that his manifesto "reduces his subject matter to a carefully structured autobiography" (*Passions* 159), making him the case of "a born writer, part paralysed, part humiliated, part impelled, part sustained, by an absurd and inadequate theory" (160). She feels that Johnson's poorly thought-through rhetoric pales in comparison to Murdoch's clearly argued prose that supports the idea of truth-telling. Murdoch uses art to reach for truth in a reality that is other than ourselves; Johnson bans stories from fiction, dismissing them as 'lies' and takes up, instead, "impersonal" story telling. Visible through Johnson's gimmicks is a "plain, good, unfussy, derivative realist prose" (157).

Evidently, Byatt has little respect for Johnson's claims to innovation. *Possession* intrigues readers with its story, drawing them in by playing on their desire to know what happens next. And contrary to Johnson's idea, this does not compromise the skill or exceptional style of the work, but rather highlights it. Byatt shows a clear regard for a sustaining narrative that will involve readers and educate their sensibilities, creating for them a new world in which to escape. She has both a strong commitment to the power of the story as well as an experimental attitude to form. Byatt avoids being limited to a single inadequate theory, summing up her approach: "My temperament is agnostic, and I am a non-believer and non-belonger to schools of thought" (*Passions* xiv). This attitude gives her a critical distance that allows her to evaluate theories and form her own brand of philosophy that is evident in her fiction.

Murdoch argues that "it is the function of the writer to write the best book he knows how to write" (Bradbury 23). In *Possession*, Byatt has used every tool available to her to create the best novel she could have produced, experimenting with forms and techniques in a way that is expressive of her individuality.

2.2. **Some misgivings surrounding postmodernism**

In an essay on the changing nature of fiction, Byatt considers the effect of expanding university curricula on the production of fiction. She remarks that studies of literature only began to feature in earnest on curricula with the Leavis generation, making it a relatively new discipline ("Reading, Writing, Studying" 4). This resulted in an increasing number of "professional" (4) readers, which in turn affected the kind of novels authors wrote and publishers accepted. Byatt suggests that the intellectualism of postmodern novels arose partly from this new market of readers. With some scepticism, she notes that the inclusion of an author's work on a teaching syllabus could ensure its survival. Byatt asks, "How much has the new postmodernist interest in seductive narrative forms to do with theories of narrative and how much with a desire to write saleable books and speak to a *whole*, non-specialist readership?" (7). She discusses the fine line that an author negotiates between being too specifically intellectual and appealing to the 'university readership' market, and appealing to the general reading public. Byatt is not wholly convinced of the merits of the growing intellectualism in fiction. Her own work has been accused of being overly cerebral, but in *Possession*, it is argued that she "heals herself" (Adams).

While Byatt reflects on the general position of fiction, she is considering her own place as a writer, where readers are diminishing in favour of other, faster pleasures. In today's competitive environment, an academic market presents a ready-made, sizeable audience of 'professional' readers - an audience for a certain kind of fiction that has the right components to become a 'set text'. Her own response to some of her work's status as 'set text' is mixed: on the one hand, the idea of writing for a reader

who will look for the subtleties of the work and can be expected to understand references to past literature is appreciated; while on the other hand there exists a pressure to engage with certain 'politically correct' issues, such as feminism ("Reading, Writing, Studying" 5).

In *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas is wary of the direction his increasingly "impassioned" text is taking, and asks, "What sort of piece of writing is it, for what purpose, for which reader?" But he concludes, "I may be passionate or dispassionate as I choose, since this document has no importance anyway" (141). Phineas must acknowledge the futility of his enterprise but at the same time goes on writing. He asks the crucial question endemic to any author's composition: who will my audience be? Byatt writes *The Biographer's Tale* with a professional audience in mind, aiming comments at them that satirise the existence of such an audience while providing plenty for such groups to discuss. Phineas produces a text that is self-reflexively aware of the problems inherent in producing a text that no one will read. His comments humorously point out the text's dullness that he (and Byatt) knows would only be understood and appreciated by a certain group of readers. "Get a life!" (103), Byatt seems to be telling her post-structuralist, psychoanalytically- minded readers.

Possession and *The Biographer's Tale* dramatise some of Byatt's misgivings with postmodern literary theory and the current state of literature, questioning whether postmodernism can really keep a reader (whether professional or casual) interested and engaged and, if so, for how long. In *Possession*, Byatt touches on a sharp irony that undermines a major premiss of postmodernism, pinpointing some of the problems surrounding its arguments. But she writes in a way that offers a solution, ultimately

"speak(ing) fiction's ability to encompass contradictory theoretical stances that theory itself may not resolve" (Poznar).

The creation of postmodernism involved the "dissolution of every kind of totalising narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation" (Connor 9). Influential thinkers such as Darwin and Freud contributed to a mood of uncertainty that led to the undermining of grand narratives and ultimately their dissolution. Julia Kristeva described writing as a postmodernist as "writing-as-experience-of- limits" (qtd. in Hutcheon, *Poetics* 8) - the limits of knowledge, truth, history and narrative certainty, authority and power. The author is no longer the all-knowing God-like figure over a text; instead, self-reflexive metanarratives that reflect endlessly on themselves are created; these narratives involve the reader in the process of making the book his or her own. Hutcheon argues that postmodern works are "narcissistic" ("Introduction" 14) in that they are self-obsessed to the point of destruction. *Possession* challenges the limits of postmodernism by reinvesting grand narratives with meaning and showing the value of striving at least to reach for what we know may be partial. The novel's characters desire the unattainable, but have to learn not to let this awareness cripple their search. Byatt reclaims her position of creative authority over the text in its final touches and in doing so provides her readers with one of the primary gifts of fiction: the pleasure of a defined ending. She believes that to accept the idea that all narratives are partial fictions is to remove interest and power from art and moral life (*Passions* 17). Byatt implies that it is an artist's duty to contribute to the consumer's moral education. *Possession*'s postscript provides the reader with a piece of narrative that is given as the truth. Byatt's straightforward narration leaves no leeway to question whether the

event really happened. She says about her text *Sugar* that she "tried" to be truthful when writing it, though "texts today are overtly fictive and about fictiveness" (18). *Sugar* was written in "defiance" of postmodernism's questioning of the existence of truth. To back up her argument further, Byatt comments on the accuracy of the translation of this story into French, which to her showed "that the ideas of truthfulness and accuracy also have their validity" (18). The force of her comments implies that she is reactionary. Byatt's attitude towards the idea of truth-telling is violent.

Byatt's disillusionment with postmodernism is partly shared. As she pointed out the lack of radical innovation in Johnson's writing, others have argued that the revolutionary claims of postmodernism are overstated. There have been theoretical musings that postmodernism is dead; while there have been discussions about possible new directions where fiction may be progressing (Perloff 208). In an essay on the history of postmodernism, Perloff quotes Charles Alteri's essay that begins:

> I think Postmodernism is now dead as a theoretical concept and, more important, as a way of developing cultural frameworks influencing how we shape theoretical concepts (230).

The essay traces the development of the term from the 1970s until the present day. Perloff notes the shifts in the descriptions of it, from the first "utopian" phase where it "involved a romantic faith in the open-endedness of literary and artistic discourse, in the ability of these discourses to transform themselves". Postmodernism was still imbued with the belief that it offered a "cutting edge" (183). She argues that Jean-Francois Lyotard's influential essay "The Postmodern Condition" shifted the

definition of the concept to something more broadly cultural, rather than focusing on the literary world. She remarks on how influential Frederic Jameson's "Cultural Logic" essay has been, noting that all articles following his work continue to use his terms. Perloff notes a shift in postmodern discourse after Jameson's influential essay from the idea of 'openness' to 'depthlesness' (186), following on from Jameson's negative pointers about "the waning of affect" (Jameson 10). Attempts to define postmodernism brought increasing lists and prescriptions that pronounced on it, resulting in a somewhat reductive analysis that took away from the ideas of freedom and openness that are its foundation. Stephen Connor pinpoints the problem:

> What is striking is precisely the degree of consensus in postmodernist discourse that there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative announcements of the disappearance of final authority, and the promotion and recirculation of a total and comprehensive narrative of a cultural condition in which totality is no longer thinkable (Perloff 9-10).

Perloff's essay shows "doubt about the ability of the postmodern idea to generate new vitality in art, overwhelmed as it is now by theory and theorisers" (Larrissy 2). Taking into account arguments about the death of postmodernism, she ultimately suggests that we have moved into a 'post-post' age that is one step beyond it. The writers and artists of this 'post-post' age are increasingly disillusioned with the concepts of postmodernism in its complexities, complicating art to the extent that it is removed from the purpose of entertainment. Postmodern art increasingly becomes cerebral, demanding an intellectual rather than emotional response. Interpretation today has become a reactionary act that is the "revenge of the intellect upon art and the world" (Sontag, "Against Interpretation" 7), impoverishing art by implying that the work is

not good enough; it must be something more. Interpretation is a "violation" of art, turning it merely into "an article for use" (10). Sontag argues that in our culture of excess we need to recover our senses so that we can feel more, responding to the basics of an artwork and the purity of its emotion, so that it is more real to us (14).

Considering the 'structurality' of structure, Jacques Derrida argues that there is always a centre within that structure that will serve to organise, but also "limit what we might call the *play* of the structure" (278). The destabilisation that exists in postmodernism ensures the lack of a centre, which allows a freedom to play with and experience the flexibility of a thought pattern that has no structure. Postmodernism is free of modernism's angst, too young to remember a stable context where grand narratives were not questioned (Eagleton 66). In *Possession,* however, Byatt points out that the jouissance of a postmodern text may not always translate into a pleasurable reading or writing experience. Hassan criticises postmodern fictions':

> tendency to dehumanize the very values it seeks to create; its propensity to displace the affective powers of literature (its pathos) and so to overwhelm poesis with remorseless irony; above all, its rancid or mucid prose, which deadens the reader's pleasure ("The Critical Scene" 270).

Byatt reminds us that "art does not exist for politics, or for instruction- it exists primarily for pleasure, or it is nothing" ("Introduction" xiii) - pleasure for both the reader and the creator. And if postmodern art is increasingly weighted with theory, it becomes simply cerebral, a battle of ideas - boring, and precisely what Byatt wants to avoid in her fiction ("Author statement"). Art can, and does, have more functions than to entertain, yet that is its first duty, Byatt believes.

2.3. ***The Biographer's Tale*: An introduction to some themes in *Possession***

The Biographer's Tale was published ten years after *Possession*. It echoes many of the same concerns as the earlier book, as if Byatt had not quite finished with that set of ideas yet. The book's main character is a young scholar who has become disenchanted with poststructuralist thought and begins to become a literary detective, and along the way has an affair with a descendant of the person he is studying. The novel not only concerns itself with a similar plot, but has many of the same themes, as *Possession*. *The Biographer's Tale* is a useful introduction to the earlier novel's concerns about postmodernism. It is a postmodern novel that is a satire on itself, drawing attention to the potential for the lack of human interest in this mode of fiction.

The novel's main character, Phineas G. Nanson, abandons postmodern literary theory to adopt the "despised" (5) academic pursuit of biography. His new project involves him in a frustrated search for clues about the life of a biographer (Scholes Destry-Scholes), about whom very little information is available. Phineas's search is framed as a detective story, presenting the reader with a mystery that could possibly be solved by following the textual clues. The novel reproduces three sections of primary sources unaltered, "exactly as (Phineas) found them" (35). The sources span fifty-eight pages of text, lacking any system of organisation so that they make little sense. And at the end of this, Byatt, tongue-in-cheek, has Phineas comment: "I wasn't sure what to make of these odd pieces of writing" (96). The problem is that the clues are neither very interesting, nor do they lead anywhere. As Phineas proceeds with his study, it becomes clear that many of the details have been "romanced" (112) - and perhaps for

good reason: out of the necessity of keeping the reader interested. Phineas finds the search rather unglamorous: on a visit to the home where Destry-Scholes grew up, he finds an ordinary red box of a house, shattering his fantasy of a 'posh' place "where an imaginative boy might play.. with gables and dormer windows" (31). He leaves the house disappointed, having met another dead-end. It appears that a whole life has been lost; having slipped through the cracks of what recorded it. In *Possession* Cropper jokes that the biographer leaves a shadow over his work (458), yet Destry-Scholes's shadow is barely traceable; his personality is made visible only in (rare) comments such as, "change this silly metaphor, SD-S" (*Biographer's Tale* 26). Not having much else to go on, this small find excites Phineas tremendously.

Phineas becomes increasingly disillusioned with his quest that leads nowhere. After reams of dead-end clues, the novel subsequently becomes more interesting as Phineas follows the advice of Ormerod Goode and starts to 'get a life' (103) – he has relationships with two women at the same time and finds a job in a bizarre travel agency. Elements of conflict, romance and mystery are introduced and the banal nature of everyday life becomes more fantastic as fantasy is confused with reality. He eventually abandons his futile academic enterprise and becomes something "useful" (257), taking up pollination ecology and tourism. When he discontinues his studies, he is released from all sense of structure and limitations and can embrace the pleasure of life, love, and writing for writing's sake. Phineas becomes "addicted to forbidden words, words critical theorists can't use and writers can" (250).

The Biographer's Tale argues for a return to humanism and human interest, drawing the reader two pictures of postmodern fiction - one that is dull but extremely clever;

the other that is alive with action and human conflict (but still clever). The novel shows that postmodernism's endless questions can be rather dreary, and that readers need at least some semblance of an answer to keep their interest. The work shows the reader how much more compelling real life is than simply representations of theories about life. It asserts its humanism on a mode of fiction that is changing; it shows, to become more cerebral, arid and impersonal, arguing instead for the preservation of the novel as an investigation of personality and the colour of life.

Possession and *The Biographer's Tale* ask what it is the professional reader is really looking for in a postmodern novel. The novels suggest lively characters are more compelling than reams of theoretical discussion - there is "nothing like a gamble and a bit of action" (*Possession* 489). *Possession* gives more concession to the reader's desire for a pleasurable experience - almost all the loose ends of the story are resolved, the characters find the evidence they are looking for and are able to make sense of it, while the reader is not expected to process the clues exactly as the characters do. The two novels question the ability of postmodern fiction to continue to generate the interest of readers while it remains dominated by theory.

Noting that *Biographer's Tale* was written after *Possession*, it is possible to question Byatt's integrity and belief in her ideas about postmodern fiction. If she wanted to satirise the overly cerebral quality of postmodern novels, she could have written a clever, satisfying novel that does not resort to being overly cerebral itself. *The Biographer's Tale* suggests that a tension exists for Byatt – she professes the need for more light–hearted elements in postmodern literature, yet she continues to want to write intellectually challenging work that can incorporate her vast variety of interests.

In a review of Byatt's latest novel, *The Whistling Women*, published in 2002, Adams scathingly accuses her of being a "melodramatic pedant" and her work of a "collapse into costumed melodrama" that is barely disguised by her erudition. Adams is unimpressed by the sheer bulk of information in Byatt's writing that she feels is unintelligible and written only to show off, rather than to serve the reader. After *Possession*, Byatt returned to her characteristic academic style of writing, despite her suggestion that fiction in general needs to move away from this. It appears she 'relapses' into her old habits, when *The Biographer's Tale* particularly points to the weakness of those habits. *Possession* indulges Byatt as well as the reader, while the rest of her novels appear to indulge only Byatt. She expressed the intention for *Possession* to be a novel that was liked. How much she succeeds in this must be viewed with some critical distance.

3. ***POSSESSION:*** **THE ENERGIES AND COMPLEXITIES OF MEANING IN THE TEXT**

This chapter considers the complexities of meaning in the title *Possession*. The word 'possession' acts as a metaphor that encompasses the themes of love, desire, knowledge, ownership and jealousy that surround Randolph and Christabel's love affair. Their relationship captures the dynamics of the wider set of relationships in the novel, including that between characters past and present. The second part of the chapter goes on to explore this connection between historical and present time. It looks at the postmodern characters' loss of vitality and interest in life that is restored through the discovery of the past. *Possession* shows that the theories of postmodernism have contributed to their inert lives, crippling their minds so that they are unable to experience any pleasure because they regard it, critically, as suspect. They must draw their energy from the past to revitalise their lives. It is through the continuous comparison of the characters past and present that *Possession* acutely satirises their postmodern frame of mind, and, by extension, the dullness of postmodern fiction.

3.1. **Possessing *Possession*: an introduction to the complexities of meaning**

Possession is a tissue of repetitious phrases and words that serve to draw a complex set of connections between the present and the past. The central motif of 'possession' orders these links and captures in a single word the intricacies of the novel's relationships. The title intrigues with its possibilities of meaning, qualified by its subtitle *a romance*. The battles to possess, and the conflicts intrinsic to this, work as

the central theme in the text's relationships - between characters in a traditional romance, between characters past and present, between text and reader. In the relationships, the key to success is to locate a balance between the desire to possess and the need to maintain autonomy. Those in relationships must undergo a negotiation, much as Byatt negotiates her ambivalences toward postmodernism. The word possession captures the powerful pull of a past that is more vital and alive than the present, which satirises the scholars' postmodernism.

To possess completely is to know, to understand and to have power. A possession is an object - but to *become* possessed by something (a desire, a person), is for that thing to have power over you. Christabel tries to resist Randolph because she fears the loss of her self-possession and solitude. Yet Ash's desire to love her completely begins to possess him, so that he is unable to think of anything else. To possess would be to make Christabel into an object to be controlled, and true love cannot make an object of what it desires. Christabel composes a riddle of an egg as a metaphor for her self-possession. The egg's hard shell protects its fragile centre "with life in the middle of it" (*Possession* 161). To reach out too soon to touch it is to risk crushing this outer wall, spilling the liquid so that it becomes a watery mass that cannot be grasped. Christabel warns Randolph: "Think what you would have in your hand if you put forth your Giant strength and crushed the solid stone. Something slippery and cold and unthinkably disagreeable" (162). The hard stone protecting the egg's liquid mass acts also as a metaphor for her virginity, which, if broken prematurely, would damage her. Christabel is ambivalent, needing to remain true to herself, her values, her feminist attitude and her chosen way of life with Blanche - yet desire acts as a pulling force on her, and she cannot deny what she feels. She fears the metaphorical flame -

the fire of their passion - will burn her and consume her until she is left only as a pile of ashes and "lifeless dust" (237).

Randolph and Christabel are unable to resist their desire to know one another; they are caught up in their passion that they give in to out of "necessity" (334). Their desire for each other inspires a similar force of emotion in the investigators of their lives, for whom the "*thought of perhaps never knowing*" (579) (emphasis in original) is unbearable. The correspondence intrigues because they are only beginnings without endings (26), and these fragments of information awaken a desire that is recognised as "more fundamental even than sex" (97). Narrative curiosity is seen as old-fashioned and "primitive" (290) yet it begins to possess the scholars, taking over their rational minds.

Roland and Maud are desperate to know about the past because to know is to possess – an antidote to their feeling of <u>being</u> possessed by the past. Roland feels a complicated sense of ownership over the letters that he finds that relates to the life of the words. What excites him is the living, breathing quality of the words that, he feels, connects him to something personal of Ash's. His impulsive theft, driven by a desire (not wholly motivated by academic greed) to discover the secret on his own, ensures that he is in possession of the letters. At the same time, he feels that the story belongs to Ash, and to read his intensely private correspondence with Christabel is to trespass on a corner of his world.

As the narrative unfolds, the reader begins to share in the desperate desire for knowledge. Yet though he or she strives to possess the text, it teasingly resists being

fully understood (Jeffers 136). The history that the scholars want desperately to know finally eludes their possession just as the text moves away from the reader's grasp.

To keep a reader interested requires the writer's skill: in *Possession*, Byatt 'seduces' the reader into a text that is meta-critically aware of itself by masquerading as a traditional romance (Jeffers 136). *Possession*'s intriguing clues are scattered throughout its letters, poems and diary entries. Unlike *The Biographer's Tale*, the clues encourage the readers to immerse themselves in the unfolding narrative. Roland and Maud recklessly abandon their homes and their work, so the readers may find themselves voraciously consuming the text at the expense of a good night's rest. Christopher Hope commented on his reading experience:

> I haven't read anything in an age I've enjoyed so much. Nor have I sat into the small hours turning the pages of a manuscript in execrable computer print, with such risk to my eyes… because I simply had to get to the end of it (reproduced on *Possession*'s back cover).

To become completely possessed may inspire outlandish, potentially damaging actions that become demonic. The demonic elements of 'possession' relate to the realm of the unreal and the fantastic. In a world of nineteenth century feminism and spiritualism, possession has a double meaning relating to the empowerment of women and the embrace of their individualism[5] as well as spiritual connotations. An

[5] Spiritualism offered a way for women in the nineteenth century to invoke their independence and to find employment in a realm that was not dominated by men. The profession allowed women to utilise what were thought of as " 'feminine' qualities of passivity , receptiveness, lack of 'reason' " (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* 104). It offered an opportunity for adventure and escape into a world of the unknown.

important clue unfolds in Hella Lees's séance, when she is apparently possessed by the spirit of Blanche. The terrible voice calls out "remember the stones" (471), tormenting Christabel who is possessed by guilty feelings surrounding Blanche's death, particularly as the stones she used to aid her drowning were those that Christabel had brought back from her illicit trip to Yorkshire. Christabel is possessed by pain and guilt for what happened to Blanche and is daily punished because her child does not love her. In disturbing imagery, she captures how her guilt for the fate of the dead begins to sup up her life force: seeing them walking in the snow, she bids the lost souls stay where she can meet them:

> And your sharp fingers
> Featly might pick
> Flesh from my moist bones
> Touch at the quick-
>
> My warm your cold's food-
> your chill breath my air
> When our white mouths meet
> It mingles – there – (457).

The desire to possess drives Cropper to rob Ash's grave (which he enacts with a fierce determination, as if he has been possessed by something other than himself), while his presence is often suggestively evil. In Brittany, angry and frustrated, he attacks his large plate of seafood with "a claw-cracker and serpent-tongued pick" (507), extracting every possible morsel from the shells. He is unwilling to admit the possibility of failure but insists with menacing certainty, at Blackadder's suggestion

that the poets rest in peace: “I shall find out” (507). Cropper’s possession of the objects of the past gives him a false sense of power, as if these conquests help him to own the past, while his greed destroys the life of what he seeks to possess (Jenkyns 213). His various thefts have achieved near mythical status amongst his peers (*Possession* 573): he is certainly capable of stealing to get what he wants. However, the true substance of the past still eludes him.

The grave robbery is one of the key moments of dispossession in the text, prefigured by Ash’s *Garden of Proserpina* poem that begins the novel. The poem’s tale of the “tricksy hero Herakles’s .. dispossession and the theft” (3) makes use of imagery that is used throughout the text. The poem cues in Roland’s uncharacteristic robbery of the letters, which he steals because he felt possessed by some almost demonic desire. The moment that he dispossesses himself of them is also an “exorcism” (569). The imagery of an Edenic garden with a treasure that is guarded by a fiery dragon recurs throughout the text, and particularly during the grave robbery (Henelly 455). Above the churchyard is a weathervane in the shape of a dragon (*Possession* 576) that “moved a little, this way, that way, creaking, desisting, catching a desultory air movement” (584), ominously warning of what is about to happen. The trees form teeth-like hedges as they fall in the force of the storm, trapping Cropper so that he can go neither forward nor backward.

The text concludes with several ‘dispossessions’: Roland hands back the letters that he stole; Cropper must hand over the box from the grave, while Maud surrenders her attachment to her autonomy, so that Roland is able to “enter(ed) and (take) possession of all her white coolness” (601). And it is only after this series of dispossessions that

the postscript is offered. This knowledge eludes the scholars, who are finally unable to possess the past. The text suggests that, for all the scholars' desperate actions to discover the past, the key to possession is dispossession (Jenkyns 214). To understand the past it is best to let it work in its own mysterious way.

The technique of omniscient narrator in the postscript is a key point in the novel's negotiation with postmodernism. The extent of meaning in the word possession crystallises the novel's themes, asserting the autonomy of the text and the lover in a way that finally reclaims the author's power, challenging postmodernism.

3.2. **A lost vitality: The present as endless recycling of the past**

Possession satirises the dull ennui of the postmodern present in contrast to the vibrancy of history. It is haunted by the ghosts of the past, filled with texts and clues that evoke the richness of a world gone by. The novel explores the complex interlinking of the lives of those past and present, desiring to "connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (Hawthorne qtd. in Byatt, "Introduction" xiii). The ghosts of the past fill the minds of the present day characters with the rhythms of their world, dominating not only their thoughts but their actions so that they begin to be possessed by the past in a way that is "unnaturally determined" (*Possession* 598). Roland is able to trace the outline of Ash's face in Maud, who begins to feel demonically possessed by the spirit of her ancestors, as if they have taken her over (598). The *Baie de Tréspassés* in Brittany is a meeting place, a threshold, between this world and the next where the living can magically cohabit with the dead (425). *Possession* creates a liminal land between the present and the past, blurring the distinction between the two and allowing the reader to inhabit a world where he or she is offered access to the past from the viewpoint of the present.

The scholars' obsession with the past is personal and professional, but it is also morbid and ironic, as if the past were sucking the life-blood away from the marrow of their bones in a reversal of normality. In a vividly ghostly image, Byatt captures the deathly fading of our reality in comparison to the bright vitality of the past. Driving away from Seal Court, Maud thinks about Christabel riding in a pony cart down the very same roads. She watches her surroundings, imagining the old dying trees as they once were, "dancing, golden-green, in a bright spring a hundred years ago, flexible

saplings, tossed and resilient". The things around her now seem suddenly to be not the solid things, but "the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past" (160). The trees today are sickly and dying, killed off by the slow drip of acid rain; our world is cracked and decaying with the false wisdom of its age. The rich world of the past is seductively real in a postmodern world that sees everything as eroded.

A strong web of connection builds up between the scholars and the historical poets. The common denominator in the scholars' lives is their shared commitment to, and identification with, Ash and La Motte. The effect of this is that their thoughts are an endless recycling of someone else's; their lives are an eternal subordination to others. However the scholars are content with the pursuit of the traces of the past - Blackadder reflects on the "pleasant subordination" (35); Roland enjoys "his knowledge of the movements of Ash's mind, stalked through the twists and turns of his syntax, suddenly sharp and clear in an unexpected epithet" (26). Mortimer Cropper gets a perverse thrill from the conquest of building up his collection of Ash's belongings. He feels a personal connection to Ash through the private possession of his pocket watch, about which his emotions were "violent", believing "that it had been meant to come to him, that he had and held something of R. H. Ash. It ticked near his heart" (460). The scholars' romance with the nineteenth century and obsession with preserving the past is a backlash against the acid decay of their own society.

The connection with the past dominates every aspect of their lives, even their identities, which are integrally connected to Ash and La Motte. It defines who they

are; as Maud reflects: “Christabel, defending Christabel, redefined and alarmed Maud” (161). The novel celebrates a past that fostered great men and women whose life and work continues to inspire. Blackadder, considering what it would have been like to follow another career, cannot conceive of a life without Ash’s ideas: “What would knowledge be, collected for its own sake, for his own sake, that was, for James Blackadder, with no reference to the pickings, digestion, and leavings of Randolph Henry Ash?” (35).The scholars make do with leftovers of knowledge; thoughts already ruminated on, so that anything they produce is a simple regurgitation of the old. However, they are greedy for any scraps of knowledge that they come across.

Tracking the poets’ journey through life involves literally treading in their footsteps (the trips to Yorkshire and Brittany) as well as a metaphorical tracing of the movements of their minds. This is pleasurable for the scholars but at the same time, the continual awareness that they are travelling the paths that have been trod before them is debilitating. All thoughts of the possibilities of creating, or thinking about, something that is entirely original have been discounted; they are all too aware of the twentieth century maxim that there are no new ideas, only new ways of presenting them: “Were these thoughts original, Maud wondered, and decided almost inevitably not; all the possible thoughts about literary subjectivity had recently and strenuously been explored” (304). And there appears to be little that is original left: “Roland had ceased to be surprised that an English Department was sponsoring the study of French books. There seemed to be nothing else nowadays” (39). What strikes the reader about the post-structuralist texts is their predictability. Phineas gives poststructuralism up because his seminars were “repetitive in the extreme”. He finds the same “lures and deceptions beneath” (*Biographer’s Tale* 1), regardless of the text being studied.

That their lives are following the patterns of the past is reinforced by the tissue of repetitious phrases linking present and historical time. The novel encourages a reading of the postmodern characters in terms of their parallel with the past, so that their dull lives pale in comparison to the story of Randolph and Christabel's affair. Their reluctance to enter into any relationships is satirically contrasted against the earlier lovers' passion. The postmodern scholars exist to study the past, steeping themselves in its great traditions. But the parallel intertext with the characters in the past enriches the reading of the postmodern scholars. Their tired lives feed off the energy and vivacity of history. *Possession* enacts the paradox of its central 'joke': that the dead are more alive than the living (Byatt qtd. in Sorenson).

The level of connection with Christabel and Randolph is intimately personal. Having spent their professional lives in the company of the poets, the connections they make with them dominate their personal lives. Maud's impulse to study Christabel's poetry comes from a poem she read when she was "very small" (63) - she has spent her life admiring Christabel's work. The two women are both "chilly mortal(s)" (*Possession* 169, 346) who can be brusque and 'cold' in manner when they feel their solitude or autonomy threatened. Leonora and Blanche have the same terms of endearment for the two, "princess" (54, 382), while Ellen thinks of her younger, nubile self as "a princess" (545). The fairytale motifs of ice, snow, water and glass are used to capture the theme of Christabel's, Maud's and Ellen's concern with their autonomy. In *The Glass Coffin*, a Grimm's fairy tale rewritten in *Possession*, the young woman is liberated from her glass prison that she is trapped in because of her wish to be independent. A young tailor, who wants only to be able to practise his craft and make

an honest living, rescues her from her state of half-sleep. The barriers of glass symbolise the loneliness of feminine autonomy and cleverness, and the fear of sacrificing life for the sake of art (*On Histories and Stories* 157). In a traditional fairy tale, the knight rescues the lady and the two will live happily ever after. In *Possession*'s retelling, the lady is rescued from her state of sleep by a craftsman who is content to go on doing his work while she is freed to live the life she has chosen for herself. To go on working is a necessity for Christabel, which she communicates with urgency to Randolph:

> this need is like the Spider's need who carries before her a huge Burden of Silk which she *must spin out* - the silk is her life, her home, her safety - her food and her drink too… she *Must* - or die of surfeit - do you understand me? (*Possession* 218).

Similar to the young lady rescued, Christabel chooses solitude and a life with Blanche for the sake of her independence and her art. Her solitude is necessary to preserve her life of creativity; she fears her relationship with Randolph will threaten this essence of her being. With time, the princess Christabel becomes "an old witch in a turret" (593), trapped in a tower and consumed with guilt and shame.

The theme of Christabel's life echoes in Maud's feminist scholarship and her life. She writes about "Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses" (600) as she builds up the walls of her defences, her surname 'Bailey' symbolic of her need to protect herself. Her commitment to work and to Christabel <u>becomes</u> her life: anything else interferes. Her difficulty with others frustrates her: "why could she do nothing with ease and grace except work alone, inside these walls and curtains, her bright safe box?" (161). The walls Maud has built around her protect her solitude, while her cold demeanour is a

reaction against any feeling she might have for others: “When I feel – anything - I go cold all over. I freeze. I can’t - speak out.” (599). In the Bailey’s icy library Maud suddenly becomes animated and assured - “As though the cold brought out her proper life, as though she were at home in it” (152). Her bathroom is “a chill green glassy place, glittering with cleanness.. a shimmering shower curtain like a glass waterfall.. the window, full of watery lights” (66). In the fairytale-like place and in the comfort of coldness, Maud is the “Princess on her glass hill” (503), where she closes herself off from the complications of real life. Maud has a fantastical identity that allows her to escape, at least some of the time, to a world of her own design. Doing this means she is protected, but also shows that she has lost her energy and vitality and would rather retreat than participate fully in life.

Having spent years in the company of Ellen Ash’s thoughts, Beatrice Nest begins to become like her. After “an initial period of clear observation and detached personal judgement.. she became implicated, began to share Ellen’s long days of prostration in darkened rooms, to worry about the effect of mildew on damask roses long withered” (136). The texts that she reads dominate her life, so that she becomes inseparable from their distant author. Those who think of her think only in terms of her relationship to Ellen, who was in her lifetime continually thought of only as a wife, a daughter, or a sister. Having supported Randolph, Ellen feels, is “a very small virtue to claim, a very negative achievement to hand my whole life on” (145).

Beatrice feels defensive of Ellen, as though she exists to protect her from ‘ghouls’ and ‘vultures’ who might expose her to ridicule. The years have made her possessive of Ellen’s journal, considered almost to be her property, which partly contributes to her

reluctance to produce an edition. Beatrice's office is described as an "inner room.. a small cavern constructed of filing cabinets…almost bricked in by the boxes containing the diary and correspondence of Ellen Ash" (33). She notices Ellen's protection of herself through her evasive diary entries and walls herself in with these diaries, building a safe space in which to live. Beatrice is trapped in a box, condemned to live life contained, bricked into a solitary room that she found herself in because she was pushed there by men's expectations. Her office becomes a different kind of turret where she is condemned, she believes by age, to become a witch (271).

Byatt's feminist ideals are displayed in the text's empathy for these isolated women whose doom is: "To Drag a Long Life out/ In a Dark Room" (132). In her days of headache, Ellen lies very still, "suspended almost as Snow White lay maybe, in the glass casket, alive but out of the weather, breathing but motionless" (282). Her life's potential and her youthful wishes of wanting to be "a Poet and a Poem" (144) are wasted as she lives a kind of half-life, trapped in the glass in a state of stasis. The essence of her, and Beatrice's, tragedy is her inaction. Christabel chooses a life with Blanche to avoid this fate.

The continuous comparison with the past forces the narrative into a tightly constricted plot-coil that condemns the scholars to follow the pattern of the past always, like Maud's hair that is perpetually tightened in knots and put away under a turban. Her hair is symbolic of her sensuality, controlled because of her innate fear of being treated as a possession by men attracted to her looks (599). But on their visit to Boggle Hole, a moment that they think is an escape from the story of Randolph and Christabel but ironically is not, Roland convinces her to let it out. Like the poets, they

choose to visit the place because of the unusual name and thus the trip only serves as another link between them. The experience, at least, is an opportunity for personal discussion: “they took no books” (325). Letting out her hair loosens something in Maud as well as Roland; it is a moment of understanding between them that allows their relationship to develop. Maud feels safe enough to relax in his company and release her sensuality, although the erotic connection between them is teasingly spun out, culminating in their seduction only at the novel’s end. Maud understands that Roland is not “making a pass. You know that… I know you will know I’m telling the truth.” (330) The moment is a release; the “self- reflexive, inturned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil” (499) is let out and allowed to breathe, have a life and move toward a conclusive, pleasurable ending. Maud prefers to keep to herself, however the novel forces her to reach out to others and relax in their company, symbolised by her letting her hair go. Her struggle is akin to Byatt’s struggle to balance the need satisfy her erudite mind and the intention to create a novel that is entertaining. Roland and Maud are encouraged to live out their own destiny – only fully letting go of their need for self-possession in the final pages of the text, however - and *Possession*’s plot moves toward a happy ending rather than simply remaining trapped in the limiting game of mirrors and reflections.

Postmodernism sees everything as a text. The postmodern characters are embedded in a textual tradition so that even their sense of self is textual. In the novel Roland and Maud’s lives become texts trapped in a simulacrum. The details of the lives they refer back to are lost and unrecoverable, blurring any clear definition of who they essentially are. What is most important is often hidden by the “mystery of privacy” (137). Roland’s textually nuanced reading of himself leads him to realise that he and

Maud are trapped in the plot of a Romance; “a vulgar and high Romance simultaneously” (503). The textual references place him in a medieval type romance as well as a popular twentieth century romance. On the first visit to Seal Court, he rescues Lady Bailey who is stuck on the hill in her wheelchair. She says to her husband, “I have had an adventure and been rescued by a knight” (87). They read others in terms of textual references too, seeing Sir George as “a caricature… Such people, in his and Val’s world, were not quite real but still walked the earth. Maud too saw him as a type” (88). He feels distanced from Maud because of “an outdated English social system of class” (503) that places him out of her 'league'. Romance is recognised as an overriding narrative that “combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot” (499). To behave as though they were in a plot of a romance “would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with” (500). It is important for the couple to be able to negotiate a relationship on their own terms, rather than becoming intimate simply because they are following the pattern of the past. They have a need to maintain a sense of “separate lives in their separate skins” (502) to distance themselves from the past as well as from each other. In the text’s final moments, when they do share a moment of intimacy, they have first acknowledged that they love each other, albeit begrudgingly: “It isn’t convenient” (600).

To find themselves in situations they have only read about is at times pleasurable and exciting. At the end of the novel, the group of scholars are in the plot of an Albert Campion detective story, complete with buried treasure and villain. Euan relishes creating the plan to catch Cropper in the act of robbing Ash’s grave. Afterwards he reflects: “I’ve always wanted to say, ‘You are surrounded’ ” (589), and in this story,

he is given the opportunity to become Albert Campion. In *Possession* Byatt celebrates the pleasure of writing parodies of the childhood stories she grew up reading ("Introduction" xiii), as well as pointing out the excruciating seriousness of postmodernism.

For Maud and Roland, it is easier to live life through the lens of literature and experience pleasure vicariously. Val sees Roland's obsession as marginally unhealthy: it is "this thing about this dead man" (*Possession* 24-25) that removes him from the real world of commerce and "menial" concerns (25). The "theoretically knowing" (501) scholars lack any kind of practical knowledge to help them in the real world. Their commitment to the past acts as an antidote to their exhausted culture that is worn out from its endless repetition of the past. Finding that they both long for empty white beds, a blank state devoid of desire, Maud remarks: "maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists" (324). The beds are symbolic of their attempt to circumvent desire, but their worrying vision is suggestive of the grave and even of death (Shinn 167). That this is preferable to a full life, even if it brings with it emotional tangling and complications, is disturbing. Their vision of escape is symptomatic of, and a reaction against, their previous bad relationships. When Maud thinks of her relationship with Fergus, she imagines a "huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled up into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white" (67). Fergus has broken the core outer shell of Maud's solitude, soiling the clear whiteness with the turbulence of their relationship. This bed is the antithesis of what Maud and Roland long for: instead of clean and crisp, it is sordid and dirty. Similarly, Roland's first association with the Putney flat and his life with Val is unpleasant disorder. He remembers "a cat-pissed ceiling.. a room with no

view" (66) and, met with Maud's tidy bathroom, he compares it to his own that is "full of old underwear, open pots of eyepaint, dangling shirts and stockings, sticky bottles of hair conditioner and tubes of shaving foam" (67). He and Maud both desire white beds because they are clean and free of this literal and metaphorical mess that currently clutters their lives. Roland particularly relishes the chance to sleep in a space where he can stretch out, rather than keeping stiffly to himself on a corner of a mattress shared with Val. But to be without the stains is also to risk being without excitement, vitality and passion - living an empty life with a clean slate that nothing and no one can write on.

Maud similarly associates "the whole tenor and endeavour of twentieth-century scholarship" (272) with the image of a dirty white bed. When everything is considered available as a subject for analysis, even love, nothing is the sole reserve of leisure time and there is no escape except to retreat into a blank state. The impulse to analyse is triggered automatically in Maud, who, arriving at Beatrice's house, begins to study a photograph of Ash semiotically. As she reflects, "It's exhausting. When everything's a deliberate political stance. Even if it's interesting" (329). Roland and Maud see love as "a suspect ideological construct" (323) and are practically incapable of communicating any feelings for one another, and when they do have feelings, they retreat into a mode of analysis that discounts them as suspect. "In revenge" (501), the postmodern culture is full of the language of sexual theories that removes the mystery of desire (324). There is a certain naïvety and "powerlessness" (308) about the tendency to view everything through the lens of sexuality. To analyse is to contain and to make something manageable. Roland and Maud's theories place barriers between them because of their innate fear of intimacy. Their previous relationships

were messy and complicated, Fergus threatening Maud's orderly and fastidiously neat "bright, safe box" (161), Val and Roland staying together out of convenience rather than any real affection for each other. Their lovemaking is often a matter of "will and calculation, not desire" (150).

Possession critiques the scholars' tendency to over-analyse. The professional reader is encouraged to read this novel as a 'set text' and engage with its historical literary references; however the reader is also meant to enjoy the process. As the "only novel written to be liked" (Byatt qtd. in Jeffers 136), Byatt created the novel with the intention of creating pleasure in her readers. In analysing a text of pleasure, Barthes realises that it his own individuality that he encounters (62), making it impossible to completely analyse what it is that makes a text enjoyable - it is experiential and personal. The pleasure of a text is unpredictable, a "friable pleasure, split by mood, habit, circumstance" (52). *Possession* appears to encourage its own analysis but finally resists it.

Stepping away from academia and theoretical analysis, *Possession* encourages reader and character to return to a more human world. The novel does not allow the scholars to remain distanced from life; rather it throws them into a world of scandal, passion and excitement and forces them to negotiate with these things, drawing them out of their secluded academic lives. Doing this, Byatt attempts to create a balance in an unbalanced world, where, despite postmodernism's claim to playfulness, it does not create much joy in the lives of those who take its theories seriously. The discovery of the past enables the scholars to embrace the present and live a more fulfilled life.

4. ***POSSESSION'S*** **HISTORY AS CHALLENGING POSTMODERNISM**

Possession is a fictional historical narrative. The poets' history is discovered by the characters through textual evidence. However, Byatt is aware that this cannot offer the full picture of the past. Byatt's work shows her commitment to truth and to the meaningfulness of history by using more than just textual evidence to tell the story of the past. *Possession* privileges readers with information unavailable to the novel's characters through the device of the third person narrator. Through a discussion of the postscript and other moments when the omniscient narrator is used, this chapter considers how *Possession* challenges Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). It examines how *Possession* restores the value of the past by showing the profound pleasure that can be had from knowing the whole story – something that is possible only in fiction. Byatt accepts the postmodern idea that history is elusive, yet she still finds a way to capture the full story of the past, managing to negotiate her respect for tradition with a postmodern principle. She creates a text that is and is not postmodern.

4.1. **Challenging postmodern theory: Reclaiming the value of the past**

Possession challenges postmodernist theories' devaluation of the metanarratives of history and truth, negotiating a space that reclaims the significance of these things in people's lives. *Possession*'s present is invigorated by the past that it mirrors. Being in touch with the passion and emotion of the past allows the scholars to connect with these qualities in themselves. The present is both "utterly emplotted by the past, and immeasurably enriched by it" (Shiller). The past has many gifts for the scholars; it

facilitates a renewed sense of vigour and purpose, it restores the capacity for empathy and remodels a previously hopeless future.

The discovery of the past is a journey toward origins: Maud discovers the truth of her bloodline while the others learn more about the poets they emulate, and at the same time deepen their understanding of their own lives. Roland's journey is principally one of self-discovery. At the beginning of the novel, he defines himself in terms of others - Blackadder, Ash and his girlfriend Val (*Possession* 13). He is a kind of anti-hero - not particularly strong, successful or dashing but rather small and 'mole'-ish[6]. But during the course of the book, he becomes the chivalric hero - a knight who rescues damsels in distress. At the novel's conclusion, he has found a measure of professional and personal success and is liberated from his previous sense of failure. He is released from his imprisonment in the sour cat-piss stained flat, and before he leaves, he walks into the forbidden garden that is a symbol of the "opening of the future" (562). Importantly the Quest for the truth about Ash's affair facilitates the discovery of a poetic voice "he didn't yet know, but which was his own" (563) - derived partly from Ash's influence but still his own. The past offers Roland a better understanding of the present and a greater hope for the future. It is "from the Past (that) Byatt recalls for us the passion of life" (Shinn 182). Roland and Maud regain their passion in more senses than one, rediscovering the pleasures of love and life. The past is needed to inspire passion in Roland, when early in the text he thinks of the image of a Victorian woman in order to arouse himself (150).

[6] Val calls him "mole" on account of his "small regular features" (14).

Possession reaffirms the relevance of the past, reinforcing the need to retell it as a story that demands empathy (Scanlan 503). The story of the past is emotionally affective and affecting and the scholars and readers are encouraged to connect with the historical characters on a personal, rather than an academic, level. Maud empathises with Christabel in her pain and loneliness, immensely worried by her 'spilt milk' poem that suggests she had given birth to a stillborn child (*Possession* 454), and able to imagine how she must have felt on hearing the news of Blanche's suicide. Beatrice weeps with distress at the thought that Randolph never knew about his daughter. Their ability to empathise brings out their personalities, drawing them out of their two-dimensional characterisation so that they come alive. Through the past their capacity for feeling, that has been partly suppressed by postmodern thought, is reconnected.

Postmodernism considers history a human construct, and promotes an awareness of the power politics that shape our records of the past so that this is ever-present in a postmodern retelling of that past (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16). Postmodernism believes that it is not possible to tell the truth about history because what is recorded is never free from human interference. History is seen as a text - and *Possession*'s history is only available to the scholars through the texts they manage to find. The novel is acutely aware of the proposition that there is no such thing as an error-free text (*Possession* 31), and by implication, that our grasp of the past can never be without mistakes[7]. Byatt takes into account the ideas about the limits of knowing about the past and still

[7] A number of phrases in the novel are erroneously cross-referenced, quite obviously on purpose. For example, Maud mistakenly quotes Blanche's suicide note as saying she was a "superfluous person" (265). A few pages later, Val refers to herself in the same way. Yet in the real note Blanche describes herself as a "superfluous creature" (372).

manages to evoke a picture that is “redemptive” (Shiller). The importance of the past is redeemed and restored.

Possession challenges Jameson’s concerns about the devaluation of history. He argues that postmodern historicism and its “random cannibalisation of the styles of the past” (18) utilises history as a subject merely to be mined for comparisons to our world today, creating a gap between representations of the past and the actual lived reality of that past. History becomes merely a ‘text’ (18) and the novel that uses it in this way becomes indifferent to its importance, so that “we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (25). History is replaced by history, when we are denied access to the valuable lessons of our past because we focus on what we cannot come to know. Jameson is concerned that postmodern novels are more concerned with what Shiller terms the “look and feel”, rather than the substance of, the past. Some argue that the use of traumatic events like the Holocaust as a fictional subject risks trivialising the horror and emotional trauma that are undeniably part of the experience of those events, as it emphasises the relativity of truth, blurring the line between fiction and hard facts (McHale 95-96).

While its subject is a fictional (rather than a factual) history, and is all too aware of the state of history as text, *Possession* is still concerned with retrieving the complete substance of the past. The novel regards the past as important rather than trivialising it. Contrary to Jameson’s concerns, *Possession* captures the rhythms of its characters’ daily lives, reaching to the heart of what is most important to them. It captures the truth of its characters’ emotions rather than simply the appearance of them, and it

treats the great men and women of the past with respect. The novel's project is to retrieve parts of its characters' lives that have so far escaped the notice of those who study them. The discovery of the love letters allows them to unravel a key event in the lives of the poets that was shrouded in secrecy and was therefore absent in the official records of their lives. The novel refutes Jameson's concerns about postmodern historiography by closing the gap between the lived reality of the past and what is recorded (Shiller). Uncovering the letters allows the scholars to get closer to the reality of the past, while the intrusion of the omniscient narrator gives the readers an even clearer view. Readers criticised Byatt for the use of this particularly 'un-postmodern' device ("Introduction" xv), yet her commitment to her characters and creating an emotionally affective story is more important than strict adherence to a particular convention. The novel's past is aware of its partiality but does not emphasise this over its worth. As a result, the story is evocative, while it harnesses the valuable lessons of the past. *Possession* "demonstrates that acknowledging that we can only know the past through its textual traces does not mean that historical events are irretrievable, or not worth retrieving" (Shiller).

The subject of history has been popular in postmodern novels because it foregrounds many of the issues that postmodernism concerns itself with: it presents the opportunity to test the relationship between fiction and truth, narrative and fact. And without a historical context, it is difficult to interrogate the present. Historical subjects are partly unknowable - there are limited facts and resources about their lives that provide a framework for discovery, and the rest is left to be filled out by the imagination. Byatt's work has explored this space between fact and creativity in previous novels based on 'actual' histories. *The Conjugal Angel* rewrote Emily

Tennyson's story from a revisionist and feminist impulse, as the details of her life were largely excluded from any records (*On Histories and Stories* 104). As a novelist rather than a biographer, Byatt "felt a strong inclination to stop with the information (she) had" to allow "space for the kind of female consciousness (she) needed" (105). Her imagination needed freedom to explore her unique voice and create the version she wanted to write. Christabel writes in her last letter to Randolph: "All History is hard facts - and something else - passion and colour lent by men" (*Possession* 592). Byatt's imagination allows her to lend bright colours to her narrative. The details of Randolph and Christabel's journey to Yorkshire were never recorded in any texts, but her imaginative reconstruction is an important piece of the unfolding narrative. It is the imagination that allows knowledge of the past (Morgan 517), and the process of recreation that is interesting[8]. It is only through fiction that we can explore the silences - the true fabric of others' lives. Hayden White regards all history as narratives, and explores the choices historians make in the writing of it, comparing this process to that of a novelist (*Interpretation* 160). There are facts in fiction; and fiction in facts - the genres blur into one another. Randolph sees his skill in the ability to tell "such truth as in me lies, with aid of such fiction as I acknowledge mine" (*Possession* 200). His poem about Lazarus is a fictive account of an actual event, but he sees his art, as Keats did, as presenting a "truth of Imagination" (201). "When I write I *know*," (201) Randolph impresses on Christabel.

[8] Salman Rushdie makes the same argument about the process of writing his novel *Midnight's Children*. He noticed that there were several mistakes in his chronology of India's history, but rather than correcting them so that his work was a completely accurate representation, he became interested in the process of remembering and retelling. He speaks about memory's own special kind of truth that "creates its own reality" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 211). His novel is the narration of a personal history, rather than a factual history, as experienced by Saleem Sinai.

Some of Ash's poems meditate on the meaning and worth of history. Roland unpacks the origin of Proserpine: "Vico had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend.. his Proserpine was the corn, the origin of commerce and community" (5). Ash's Proserpine has something to do with, Blackadder theorised, a personification of history itself. In Ash's letter, written to Cropper's ancestor, he writes, "a lifetime's study will not make accessible to us more than a fragment of our own ancestral past, let alone the aeons before our race was formed. But that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on" (123). Byatt notes a similar impulse in Robert Browning's work, her model for Ash. She explains that although his work *The Ring and the Book* uses ten different descriptions of the same event, the technique differs from the postmodern writers who work from the same premiss but use their texts as an allegory for the process of writing. Byatt explains that instead of using the technique to show the relativity of truth, "Browning . . . appears to be insisting on the need to pursue and determine truth as far as possible, even with all our shortcomings and fallibility amply acknowledged and demonstrated" (*Passions* 35).

Already in the 19th century, there is an awareness of the partial nature of our knowledge of the past, but the philosophy is to continue to strive for this knowledge because of its value. Byatt shares this impulse and tries to reclaim it in a postmodern time. Similarly, Ash expresses some of the despair men and women suffered in the Victorian age that the contemporary characters feel only more keenly. In a letter to Christabel, Randolph writes, "we live in an old world - a tired world - a world that has gone on piling up speculation and observations until truths that might have been graspable.. are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest" (195). Despite this, his impulse to strive to reach truth remains. This inclination has been diluted in Maud and

Roland who have been well trained in poststructuralist thought, yet it is re-awakened as an almost primitive force in them. Roland and Maud recognise their hunger for knowledge as "primitive" (92) and basic, an elemental force. They experience their desire as an almost physical reaction. Maud feels "prickles all down (her) spine and at the roots of (her) hair" (289) when she makes a textual connection between Ash's *Ask to Embla* and Christabel's *Melusina*. They both experience a kind of electric shock at each other's touch, what Ash described as the "kick galvanic" and Roland experiences as a "stunning blow" (173). At the start of the novel, they have isolated and removed themselves from desire. But they slowly succumb, first in the search for knowledge - more basic than the desire for sex - and then progressing to another level, the desire for one another. One of the reasons that the discovery of the letters is so exciting is that they are completely new - no one has even suspected anything like an affair between an apparently lesbian woman and a happily married man, let alone written about it and analysed it repeatedly. The discovery of something new in the past is an antidote to the paralysis of their postmodern despair.

The novel's retelling of history embodies Byatt's conflicted relationship to postmodernism, aware of our limited access to it but also expressive of a deep commitment to the value in its retelling.

4.2. **Omissions: Traditional histories cannot tell secrets**

Possession explores not only what goes unrecorded by official histories but the reasons for this. The characters' secrets are available for representation in fictional texts, but cannot be recorded in the factual versions of their lives. The events and emotions that are too powerful, painful or overwhelming to be written or spoken of have escaped traditional records in *Possession*. Outsiders who may have born witness to these things may not have been able to interpret their significance: as Roland and Maud are aware, there are clues available, but if you aren't "looking carefully", they are "nothing" (52). Only a discerning reader can piece together the fragmented narratives. The scholars' search is limited to textual evidence, yet the readers are offered privileged glimpses of the characters' interior consciousness and of the significant events in their lives that aid in the understanding of the text as a whole. Fiction and the imagination have the power to capture those things that have no place in a history textbook.

4.3. **Reclaiming truth: *Possession*'s Postscript**

The most significant secret that *Possession* discloses is in the postscript. Randolph's meeting is an example of the "things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that .. such things had never been" (*Possession* 603). The postscript offers the reader a fragment of 'hard truth', without room for argument about whether or not it happened. In contrast to the narration of the trip to Yorkshire, this information is specifically denoted as 'fact' rather than 'fiction'; it is not presented as something embellished by the author's

imagination. Byatt is matter-of-fact in her telling: “this is how it was” (603). This authoritative tone is matched by her sensitivity that masterfully captures a moment of great significance in an understated way. *Possession*’s ending reminds us of the small, seemingly random acts that fill the texture of a life, yet slip past the notice of those who create official histories. For Randolph, at least, this small event was one of the most significant of his life. The writing is so simple yet the reader is able to understand the moment’s significance without its being spelt out: “there they sat on a hummock and talked, in a cloud of butterflies, as he remembered it with absolute clarity, and she remembered it more and more vaguely, as the century ran on” (604).

The postscript closes the novel with a non-negotiable finality that reminds the reader who has control over the creative process. It is ironic, but also realistic, that the scholars (in ‘real’ life) miss this important information, and finally misread the last of the novel’s textual clues. This endorses Byatt’s view of biography as “shadow play” (“Introduction” xv) - what really matters eludes the scholars, finally underlining their naïvety because they, too, think they have the end of the story.

Possession’s postscript tells the “hard” truth (*Passions* 17) - but the idea of truth in a novel is problematic. In a postmodern novel, it is more difficult. However, for Byatt, the idea of fragmented, ungraspable truth is only meaningful “if we glimpse a possibility of truth and truthfulness for which we must strive, however inevitably partial our success must be” (17). But what does it mean to tell the truth in a novel? The world she has created in *Possession* is not real: as a novelist, she can no more tell the truth in her work than she can lie (Eagleton 89). Essentially, though, this does not matter: what is produced is a kind of “imaginative” or “metaphorical” truth - true

because it happens in the novelist's mind as he or she writes - as opposed to a literal or absolute truth (Bradbury 134). Novels do not exist to provide the reader with factual evidence, but to "mobilise such facts as part of a moral pattern" (Eagleton 90). For Byatt, delving into the historical past of *Possession* was an attempt to capture the atmospheric feeling of another era, rather than accurately recording the facts of it (*On Histories and Stories* 39). And she again emulated Eliot, who she admires for recreating truths of feeling rather than theory in order to help others to see life through the medium of art (*Passions* 43).

Johnson prescribes that to tell the truth, a novel should mirror the chaos of life. He proposes that it misrepresents reality to tell stories that have neat ends because life is random (Bradbury 160), while novelists should focus on experimenting with new styles and forms that will accommodate life's disorder rather than simply aim to tell a story. Yet he acknowledges that he paradoxically goes on living as if there is order in the world, eating dinner and then waking up to have breakfast, despite believing that the world is chaotic (157).

What his manifesto fails to take into account is the need for people to create order in their own lives. Life may be chaotic but we tell ourselves stories to try to make sense of it; we need to find narratives for our lives while we seek to adjust them according to some set of values. Eagleton argues that it is necessary "to have some sense of your life as a narrative, in order to judge whether it is going well or not" (127). The 'moral truth' behind Byatt's "intelligent, ingenious, and humane" (Jenkyns 214) ending carries the message of the possibilities in fiction to offer coherence and closure. Arguably, the postscript is one of the most affective moments of the novel, showing

that Byatt defies Jameson's concerns about the "waning of affect" (10) in postmodern fiction.

In *Possession*, Roland and Maud long to escape from the pressures of their everyday lives. The story fulfils their wish - they even run away together to Brittany in an atmosphere of heady excitement. The unfolding narrative of Randolph and Christabel's liaison enables them to live out their fantasy of the white beds, while they are able to get away from the cut-throat academic environment. Similarly, the reader will look to fiction to be able to inhabit another world, if only for a short time. In *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas, having abandoned poststructuralist thought, considers that:

> the true literary fanatic, the primeval reader, is looking for anything but a mirror- for an escape route, for an expanding horizon, for unimaginable monstrosities and incomprehensible (strictly) beauties. Also for meaning, for making sense of things, always with the proviso that complete sense cannot probably be made (99-100).

Implied is that the 'primeval' reader looks to connect on a personal level with a work of fiction in order to try to make sense of life. Knowing that complete sense cannot be made does not stop the reader from striving to reach for it. Fiction allows us to make sense of the world, Sontag argues, partly by providing us with a whole picture of events outside of ourselves ("At the same time" 13). The novel permits us a luxury denied in real life, "to come to a full stop that is not death and discover exactly where we are in relation to the events" (13). Sontag sees the primary function of the fiction writer as that of a moral agent, a storyteller who will dramatise problems in order to educate the sensibilities of the reader. By engaging with characters and circumstances

outside of ourselves, we are given the opportunity to expand our world-picture and, possibly, to escape into a fantasy, like Roland and Maud. Through literature, we can "rediscover a sense of the density of our lives" (Bradbury 30).

Byatt's use of the omniscient narrator risks being unfashionable because it endorses a narrative technique that "has been much maligned in the recent past" ("Introduction" xv), but it enables her to celebrate the pleasure of a defined ending that contributes to the readers' understanding of the text. In contrast, the 'reader-written', or typically postmodern, text eschews the narrative mode of authorial intrusion because it discounts the notion of authority. Sontag argues against the supposed freedom of the 'hypertext's' ability to remove the reader from "the tyranny of the line" ("At the Same Time" 11). The superficial 'freedom' of a text without boundaries and with a story of the reader's devising only is so unappealing for Sontag that "it's easy to see that it could only have been an intervention of *academic* literary criticism" (12). Sontag implies that such a text is removed from the functional world of readers and writers, existing only in a distant, theoretically dominated academic world of 'professional' rather than 'primeval' readers. The novel of the future, Sontag envisions, will have no story - a profoundly unappealing idea (12). She argues that the enrichment of this experience is compromised in an era where the reader is invited to co-author a text, which denies one of the key pleasures of reading: the pleasure of fiction "is precisely that it moves to an ending" (13). *Possession* encourages the 'professional' reader to rediscover the enjoyment of a entering into a fantasy world that is clearly defined, and to suspend his or her judgement surrounding the mode of omniscient narrator.

However, *Possession*'s closure is not altogether complete, as Christabel will never know that Randolph knows about their child. Christabel's namesake comes from an unfinished draft of a poem by Coleridge (*Possession* 211), and the story explores her story with justice and empathy. Like all tales, Randolph reflects, Coleridge's "teases so, for it is like the very best tales, impossible to predict how it may *come out* - and yet it must - but we shall never know - its secret sleeps with its lethargic and inconsequential author" (211). Ultimately, power lies with the author.

The moral education of the reader in *Possession* is a profoundly pleasurable experience; it is deeply satisfying to know that Randolph has met his daughter. Despite current opposition to storytelling, we remain 'narrative beings', with beginnings, middles and endings (Byatt, *On Histories and stories* 132). Byatt notes that when writing *Possession* she had the need to feel more and analyse less, in order to tell the tale more mysteriously (131). She implies that she had to return to a more emotional, intuitive way of writing, rather than becoming too cerebral or intellectual. Byatt sees "narrative discovery" ("Introduction" xiii) as a key pleasure of fiction. The pleasures of the unfolding narrative and the story are simple, yet fundamental, a return to the basics of creating art.

Byatt's emotional connectedness in the process of writing ensures that *Possession* is a moving, sensitively written text. She restores the postmodern text with the humanity that it sometimes lacks. Similarly, E. L. Doctorow's novel, *City of God*, although postmodern, is aware of our humanity in a way that challenges the effects of

postmodern thought on meaning in our lives[9]. *Possession* invites the reader on an intuitive journey as well as a cerebral one.

The postscript's playful closure negotiates the quandary of Byatt's ambivalences toward postmodernism. Using the traditional mode of romance through the third-person narrative voice, Byatt offers us truth but continues to draw attention to the limits of finding that truth in real life, acknowledging a postmodern idea but simultaneously showing the readers the value of a truthful, defined ending. *Possession* as romance "transcends its own postmodern aspect" (Morgan 517).

[9] *City of God* is postmodern, yet points beyond its limits. It is a novel without any clear ordering principle, made up of a pastiche of different texts, plots and voices that all mesh into one another. The text's main character is a disillusioned priest, Thomas Pemberton, who is struggling with his faith in a world where the Big Bang is accepted as reality- as fact. Pemberton finds a new spiritual home in Evolutionary Judaism- a group that re-looks at religious tradition, accepting that much of the Bible and the Torah are flawed. They acknowledge flaws in their faith, yet still find meaning in worshipping God. The novel reclaims the meaning of history by investing a reconstructed Holocaust text with inestimable meaning for its characters. The fragment of narrative that involves the Holocaust is not an accurate historical document, but a flawed retelling, a fiction within a fiction based on a reality; this doesn't remove its significance or emotionally affective qualities. Doctorow suggests that even though we live in a postmodern age, 'big' concepts such as love, God, and history still hold meaning for people.

4.4. **A trapped woman: The hidden truth of Ellen Ash's shame**

Possession makes use of the omniscient narrator to give the reader access, in a fictional text, to what cannot be known in an historical text. One question that remains a mystery until late in the text is the reason Randolph feels his affair will not hurt Ellen (*Possession* 242), posing questions about the nature of their relationship. Byatt's choice to allow her readers insight into Ellen's consciousness, again through the device of an omniscient narrator, allows them to understand her more closely. By being given access to the truth of her unconsummated marriage through her eyes rather than Randolph's, Byatt treats her with greater sensitivity so that the reader is able to become a sympathetic witness to the true thoughts of a lonely, unfulfilled woman who is possessed by a secret. This empathy with the character is facilitated through the all-knowing voice, which challenges the postmodern emphasis on the death of the author by showing the value of using such a device.

Ellen's relationship with Randolph is characterised by silences; the true locus of meaning and the fact that holds the most power over her life is located in an omission. The traditional version of history recorded the Ash's as a loving, happy couple, giving no one reason to suspect the truth of Ellen's shame that she is unable to share. She cannot even disclose the painful, festering secret of their private lives in what should be the most private of spaces, her journal, because she is very aware that it is not safe from prying eyes. She writes her entries as though she was aware of the possibility of an outside reader (Martyniuk), knowing that one day it will be read by those who are interested in her husband. The need to protect Randolph's reputation is strong, but just as powerful is the desire to protect herself from ever having to face up to the painful

truth of her own inadequacy. Her journal is not her confessional, it rather carries a "carefully edited, carefully strained.. truth" that was "both a defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures" (*Possession* 547). As Beatrice notes, "She wants you to know and not to know" (575).

Ellen does not write in any detail about Blanche's visit to her but rather fills up the pages with household business and reports on her personal health. After she finds out about her husband's affair she forces herself to carry on as normal, her journal dismissing Blanche as "my importunate visitor", and the matter about which she came to see her is "wholly cleared up" (281). Though Ellen knows about Randolph's affair, she chooses not to confront him. Even when he confesses to her, she shuts him off - she does not want to hear any more. Remembering the incident much later when Ash has died, she feels "profoundly implicated in not knowing, in silence, in avoidance" (539) - the two devices that helped her cope but ensure that she remains haunted by the unspoken long after the event.

Sexuality in herself and others is beyond her conception and beyond words. Passages in her journal that approach the subject of Bertha's pregnancy or her own shortcomings are crossed out illegibly. She cannot even remember in words, rather her brain short-circuits so that her honeymoon is a series of images in her mind. Ellen is trapped in her silence, never having spoken to anyone about what happened, not even her husband. She cannot respond to Christabel's letter, as there is nothing she feels she can say that will convey "the truth of the way it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silences that extended before and after it, always the silences" (536).

She is acutely aware of the failure of language to encompass the things that are too large to describe and at the limits of her comprehension.

Randolph at least has an outlet for his sexuality, while Ellen is possessed by the terror, the shame and the guilt of her secret. They both experience the wordlessness and the prohibition surrounding sexuality. Ellen can only (barely) allude to her discomfort in her journal through a "flittering and flickering behind all that solid.. *panelling*" (269). The omniscient narrator allows Byatt to close the gap between the lived experience of the past and its official record. The use of this God-like voice draws the readers closer to the emotionally affective truth of her life.

Lyotard argues that the power of our faculty to conceive overshadows the powerlessness of our abilities of presentation (79). He welcomes different modes that will experiment with and open up new ways to present what we can envision. All that we can imagine cannot be encompassed, written down or recorded, in our art and our history. The ethical responsibility of postmodern art as he sees it is to strive to present and impart a strong sense of what is unpresentable. Experimentation with new forms and ideas can aid this goal- the task is "not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (81). Imaginative knowledge is a vital tool that allows the exploration of that which lies on the boundaries of the limits of our presentation. *Possession* carries out the task of presenting the unpresentable, telling us a truth that falls through the gaps of our ability to present.

By telling us the truth, Byatt's text highlights that we must continue to strive to present it, even though we may know that it is remains out of our reach. The device of

omniscient narrator in significant places in the text allows Byatt's text to present what challenges the limits of presentation. The truth of the affair and Ellen's sexual terror are both conceivable but simultaneously beyond words or comprehension. Randolph's final unsent letter to Christabel cannot be sent because it "has passed the limit of possible communication" (*Possession* 541). The hints and traces that the poets leave behind in their writing allude to what they are unable to represent fully. The illegible passages in Ellen's journal suggest that all is not well, at least making us aware of her unhappiness, discomfort and lack of self- worth. Cropper wonders about Ash's sexuality, considering his long courtship with Ellen and his capacity to remain chaste in this time. The autobiography also pinpoints Ash's mid-life crisis by noticing a change in the subject of his poetry. Later Roland uses this fact as a clue to build up his ideas about the love affair. Cropper's theorising leads him away from the truth rather than closer to it, and he concludes that much of his ideas are merely speculation, which cannot help him get closer to the feelings and thoughts of the couple. Despite Cropper's attempts to encompass the whole of Ash's life, he firstly misses the truth of his love affair and secondly cannot venture into the "mystery of privacy" (137). The imagination allows Byatt to present the reader with what is for the nineteenth century characters unpresentable and what is consequently unavailable to the scholars.

With its textual absence, Ellen's secret particularly eludes Beatrice who "was not taught to do scholarship by studying primarily what was omitted" (271). At the Mortlake conference, Beatrice is barely aware of the tensions, the omissions and the silences between her colleagues. Her character is redeemed because she is the one who discovers the plot to rob Ash's grave. This partly removes her from being simply

a helpless, old-fashioned woman and places her once again in the circle of respect of her colleagues.

Of the many changes that Roland undergoes in the novel, not least is the softening of his post-structuralist mindset. Alone in his Putney flat, he considers his life and the journey he has taken during the course of the text:

> He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself. He thought about the death mask. 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 (560-561).

What Byatt has shown in *Possession* is that she finds it more enjoyable to explore the ways that allow her to present the unpresentable than to focus on the impossibility of representation.

Postmodernism is an art of unrest, of questions rather than answers or resolution. We can only begin to ask the questions that make any answers at least possible (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 231). *Possession* presents us with possibilities of answers, but simultaneously draws attention to the limits of attaining those possibilities in real life.

5. **TENSIONS IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

This chapter considers how *Possession* works both as a traditional love story and as a postmodern allegory of reading, and looks at how Byatt negotiates these two modes. Randolph and Christabel's relationship acts as an allegory for the wider relationships in the text – between reader and text and writer and text as comparable to the lover and the beloved. The two poets must carve out a space for their relationship that does not threaten either of them, and they must negotiate their desire to know one another, which can quickly translate into the need for control, so that it reaches a point of balance. The chapter looks at how they do this, examining the underlying tension that exists in this process as comparable to the tension the reader experiences when wanting to know what happens in the text. Byatt's writing of *Possession* was an exercise in balance, and the process of achieving this creates some difficulty in her mind, testing her real commitment to creating literature that is not wholly cerebral.

5.1. **Knowledge, possession and desire: an allegory of reading**

Possession both is and is not a postmodern text. It playfully engages with typical postmodern conventions, working with them to step outside their boundaries. *Possession*'s romance can be read at the level of traditional love story but also at the level of meta-text, as an allegory for the relationship between reading and writing (Jeffers 135). That a postmodern novel should place more emphasis on foregrounding this relationship rather than producing a good story is unappealing to Byatt (*Passions* 161). Her novel works with the idea that postmodernism offers 'readerly' rather than 'writerly' texts. The imagery used to describe Randolph and Christabel's love affair is

of negotiation and balance, comparable to the readers' negotiation of their relationship with the text.

Possession is critically aware of its status as text. Characteristic of a postmodern novel, it invites the readers in as co-authors to share in the processes of detection: they piece together information as the scholars do, and are encouraged to recognise the pleasures of narrative discovery. Ariane Le Minier acknowledges the simple satisfaction of literary detection when she gives Sabine's journal to Maud: "I made up my mind not to tell you much of its content, as I wished you, perhaps a little childishly, to have the narrative shock and pleasure that I had from discovering it" (*Possession* 452). The slow unravelling of clues enables the reader to become the armchair detective, which is exciting but also at times frustrating - Sabine takes time to understand the reason for Christabel's visit, and the clue is hidden amongst long passages of her thoughts on writing and life. This places the readers on tenterhooks, driving them to continue because they long to know what happened. Readers desire to know the text, to possess it, by completely understanding it. The novel negotiates this desire by seemingly offering the readers narrative closure, yet it simultaneously resists its own possession. As a fictional history, *Possession* makes clear what a historical text cannot offer, and what a fictional text can. *Possession* provides the readers with what appears to be a complete picture of knowledge. Yet the text only offers the illusion of possession (Jeffers 146) because the story reclaims the authority of its author while celebrating the independent life of its characters. The novel plays the game of inviting the readers to co-author the text but finally withdraws this offer, setting clear boundaries between author's voice and readers' will to direct the story.

The metaphors of possession, knowledge and desire slip in and out of one another, interchangeably working together in the lovers' romances and the readers' romance with the text. At the heart of the novel is the love story that unfolds as Randolph and Christabel slowly seduce one another. But as their relationship progresses, Christabel resists, frightened of becoming a possession and being obsessed by emotions that take control of her reason. The lovers must negotiate a space for themselves that does not threaten her innermost need for solitude. Similarly, readers must negotiate their possession of the text that is comparable to the beloved: it is the thing outside of themselves that they desire to know. To 'own' the text, to possess it, is to remove its autonomy - Byatt's text steps away from the readers' control because there is a vital piece of the puzzle that they will never be able to discover without the help of the author. Byatt's postscript suggests the idea of the independent life and existence of her story, beyond either her or the readers' control. In the process of writing, for an author to love her characters is to delight in their independence (McHale 227).

Christabel and Randolph's relationship sustains itself as a passionate romance but simultaneously acts as an allegory for the interactions between reader and text. The process of the lovers' seduction is comparable to the creation of desire in the readers as they are seduced into the story. The reader "desires to possess the white page of the text - to come to 'know' the text - much as a lover comes to 'know' her beloved" (Jeffers 135). Love and desire are in the processes of reading and writing. The romantic relationship acts as an allegory, characterising "the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other" (McHale 227).

In *Possession*, words are an important part of the process of love. An author communicates her love for the world she creates through words. The romance starts with words; Christabel and Randolph's relationship begins and grows in the intimate space of the letters that becomes an exchange between two equal minds. The privacy of the white page allows them the freedom to share their true thoughts, developing a bond between them that is a communion of souls. The words carry a force that compensates for the lack of physical touch - Randolph is reluctant to complete a letter to Christabel, for "as long as I write to you, I have the illusion that we are *in touch*" (*Possession* 240). It is words that produce and sustain desire (Jeffers 139).

Similarly, the reader's desire to know, to trace the narrative, is created by words. The novel reflects on reading and writing as essentially intimate: "Think of this - that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other" (*Possession* 558). The white page of the text is the site where desire is created - it is the white page that allows intimacy. The letters, Roland realises, were written for one specific reader, to the exclusion of all others, which gives him the feeling of trespassing on Ash's private thoughts. But he appreciates the "ferocious vitality" (11) of these words that seem to have a living, breathing quality. *Possession* celebrates the power of language at the same time that it is aware of the failure of words to carry painful experiences. For Roland and Maud, the pleasure of reading these passionate letters is to share in the highly charged emotions that produced them.

The scholars and the poets have a sensual attachment to the life of words, allowing them to gain pleasure from reading that is comparable to sexual pleasure. Reading in the novel reaches an intense pitch:

> where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy. And yet, natures such as Roland's are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently and steadily alive (557-558).

Words create in Randolph and Christabel the desire to know, which leads on to their sexual union. The reading pleasure is distanced in nature from sexual, or experiential, pleasure, yet words have a power to titillate desire that is comparable to, if not better than, more carnal pleasures. For Roland and Maud, reading allows them to avoid the messy consequences of sexual desire but still experience a similar pleasure.

Randolph reflects, "to be human is to desire to know what may be known by any means" (245). As their love affair progresses, knowledge begins to stand in as metaphor for desire (Jeffers 139). Words communicate knowledge, but only to a certain extent. Their 'papery' knowledge of one another is distinct from a 'real' knowledge that they explore when they are together in Yorkshire, then "known intimately and not at all" (386). In the train, Randolph is engaged in "observing the ways in which she resembled, or differed from, the woman he dreamed, or reached for in sleep, or would fight for" (335). It is curious that Christabel is now actually sitting across from him when for so long he was "possessed by the imagination of her" (335). He is confused by their shyness and politeness with one another, feeling that she is "more mysterious in (her) presence" (233). Randolph makes it his business to study every part of Christabel's face to read her, as if he can learn her like a book, longing to trace the memory of every inch of her face in his mind to last for perpetuity. To

know someone is to be able to ‘read’ them (Jeffers 140), and Randolph is greedy to read all the information available. Yet Christabel knows that they will not ever be able to read one another completely. At times, what they imagined would be so is correct, yet in others, it is not:

> ‘We walk well together,’ he told her. ‘Our paces suit.’
>
> ‘I imagined it would be so.’
>
> ‘And I. We know each other very well in some ways.’
>
> ‘And in others, not at all.’
>
> ‘That can be remedied.’
>
> ‘Not wholly,” she said, moving away again.’ (339)

Similarly, the reader's desire to know the text - to possess it - cannot wholly be fulfilled through the reading of words. In a text, something will always be omitted. As the connection between Roland and Maud develops, they negotiate their desire in silences and in clear white spaces. They do not speak about what happens because “speech, the kind of speech they knew, would have undone it” (502) - they remain unwilling to ‘read’ their experience, resisting locating themselves in a textual tradition. In the moments before their sexual union, Randolph can find no words for his desires: “he thought of his hopes and expectations and the absence of language for most of them” (341). What he thinks of instead is literature, a lens through which to see his desire. In the moment of their passion, words collapse and what stands in as a metaphor for desire is white. Randolph calls out to Christabel, the “selkie, my white lady” who is “white in the dark” (343). What eludes his knowledge, what cannot be

catalogued, is “the quickness of her and the mystery, the whiteness of her, which was part of her extreme magnetism” (335).

The reader’s desire is located in the white space where there are no words. The mystery of the story lies in these spaces - what can only be surmised and imagined, and where the reader is free to think out the possibilities of what the text suggests (Jeffers 138). To reach the last page of the text is for the process of desire to end. Yet part of the pleasure of fiction is the hope of finding the end of the story (Barthes 10). Pleasure is located in this hope; in the game of desire, it is the fleeting glimpse of a flash of skin that seduces and leaves much to the imagination (9). As readers and lovers, we want the process and play of desire to continue - once it has been satiated, there is nothing to strive for and the teasing eroticism no longer entices. It is the intermittence that is erotic, the possibility of seeing the sexual organ or finding the end of the story that keeps up the game of desire (10). The finality of *Possession*’s postscript leaves no room for ambiguity, creating a defined ending that no longer allows the play of the reader’s imagination and ends the processes of desire between the reader and the text. Randolph writes, “I have always supposed (poetry) to be a cry of unsatisfied love - my dear - and so it may be indeed - for satisfaction may surfeit it and so it may die” (*Possession* 155). Unsatisfied love is the muse and the inspiration - it is the game of desire that creates longing. A satiated lover will lose interest and so love may die. Randolph writes in a final, unsent letter to Christabel that love needs air to breathe, and without their communication, his love for her is stifled (540).

Desire is created and sustained by the teasing hope that the mystery may be solved, and ended when there is a solution. *Possession* keeps up the game of desire by

enticing the readers into the illusion of possession. The novel's ending suggests that they are at one with the text - but that moment is fleeting, soon ending when they turn the page and close the book. *Possession* culminates with Roland and Maud finally giving in to the growing desire between them, when Roland "entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries" (601). The language of sexuality is comparable to a love affair between text and readers, who may feel at times to be 'at one' without boundaries, caught up in a space of knowing and complete understanding with a full picture of the novel's world (Jeffers 147). But Roland and Maud will not stay together - the reader is already aware that they will be going their separate ways. This fleeting moment of feeling will soon pass, as the moment of the readers' connection with the whole of the text, without boundaries, flickers and fades in an instant. That Roland and Maud only reluctantly admit their love for each other in the final pages of the text shows the difficulties they experience in embracing the newness and renewed vitality that the discovery of the past has given them. This is akin to Byatt's difficulty with including more light-hearted and popular modes of fiction in her work without resorting to endless reflections on the process in an academic manner. *Possession* works toward finding a balance, but Byatt struggles with reaching this.

The readers' desire to possess the text is a negotiation of the text's independent life and the readers' will to know the story, comparable to the lovers' negotiation of their passion. Christabel and Randolph must work around their opposite natures to create a space for themselves where they are comfortable with one another. Randolph must negotiate his desire to know and possess Christabel with her need to remain autonomous. She is the selkie, like a seal-woman who comes from the sea and must

then leave (339). Randolph realises “he could not say to her, you will not leave me, like the seal wives. Because she could and must” (340). Their love affair is a play on the elemental images of fire and water that are continuously associated with the couple. As opposites, Christabel’s water and Ash’s fire must work together to find a middle ground of harmony. But the force of their passion is turbulent; it is the “private electric storm” (339) that disrupts the pattern of their world. Randolph’s desire to know Christabel is negated by her watery persona that slips away from him so that he cannot grasp her even in their closest moments - she is impossible to possess. He reflects on the nights of passion they spend together: “It was like holding Proteus, he thought at one point, as though she was liquid moving through his grasping fingers, as though she was waves of the sea rising all around him” (343). Just as Proteus, the sea-God, is able to change form, so Randolph thinks he can hold down Christabel, she slips away and changes, so that to know her is to try to grasp her many different faces. But this also means she can adapt for him - her watery elements can mingle with the fire.

Christabel fears Ash’s metaphorical fire that has the potential to destroy her. As the coals in a fire will be burned up, so in the wake of surrender to his passion Christabel will gradually be destroyed and consumed (239). But Randolph calls her his “Phoenix” (244), knowing that she has the power to rise transformed from the ashes, and that fire has the ability to remake her. He wishes to “see (her) brighten and flare as (she) were wont” (244), knowing that fire is also symbolic of her opinions, a fiery life of a lively mind, part of her self-possession. He is intent on reassuring her that “she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings” (338). He values her independence that brings with it a fierceness of

passion and mind-set that does not belong to him, not wishing to consume her wholly. And he, too, feels possessed by the idea of her (336), completely preoccupied with his love- he confesses to Ellen: “I could say it was a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons. A kind of blinding” (537).

Water is not always soothing and restorative; like Ash’s fire, it too can become stormy and destructive. Liquid acts as a metaphor for the sexual act, capturing the swirling movement and the dampness of their passion. A sea in stormy waters swells powerfully, placing all who sail on it at its mercy. Christabel and Randolph are swept away by the tide of their passion, having surrendered to it completely. In Christabel’s poem *The City of Is*, the female lover bewitches her beloved while a terrible storm rages around them. They do not escape the city while they can and they are certain to drown in the massive tidal wave that rages around them (397-398).

In their brief time together at Yorkshire, the lovers learn to negotiate a space for their love where it is nourished and not destroyed by their separate natures. In the private space where all the elements are in balance they are at home and contented: reflecting on a walk through the park, Randolph recalls that “all creation rushed around us out there - earth, air, fire, water, and there we were, I beg you to remember, warm and human and *safe*” (239). Away from the judging eyes of the world and surrounded by nature, they are able to be just themselves and nourish their intimacy. Christabel realises that Ash’s fire need not be destructive; rather it may feed her essence and her creativity as their passion is an elemental, earthy force. Watching the Thomasine waterfall, the sunlight hits the fountain and the light and the water create the illusion of flickering flames:

Three elements combined to make the fourth

The sunlight made a pattern, through the air

…

The water and the light together made

On the grey walls and roof of the dank cave

A show of leaping flames, of creeping spires

Of tongues of light that licked the granite ledge

Cunningly flickered up along each cleft

Making…

A fire which heated not, nor singed, nor fed

On things material, but self-renewed

Burnt on the cold stones not to be consumed

And not consuming, made of light and stone

A fountain of cold fire (322-323) (emphasis mine).

This fire is not destructive; it is able to burn without destroying its fuel. Nor will the water put out this fire. The combination of all the elements in harmony allows the creation of something beautiful. Randolph and Christabel's opposite natures balance to create a unity of souls. Randolph has relinquished his desire to possess for the sake of Christabel's need for self-possession. When their relationship is balanced, possession cannot, and need not, be achieved. Lover and text remain autonomous, not to be controlled by the other. The reader who desires to possess the text will be met with something slippery and fleeting. He or she is involved in the process of co-writing the text, but ultimately does not direct the story that has its independent life.

6. **CONCLUSION**

In *Possession*, Byatt creates a novel that negotiates her ambivalences toward postmodernism. *Possession* is expressive of a consciousness that emanates from both Victorian and contemporary literature and mediates a middle ground between the two. Byatt is an individualist who remains committed to the traditions of the past and to restoring the colour of the Victorian world, even though these things are old-fashioned. The novel is an exercise in balance; Byatt blends her characteristic erudition with the novel's passion and dry humour, poetry mingles with prose, romance contrasts with realism and the past looms over the present world.

Possession embraces postmodernism's capacity for experimentation but treads carefully around its values. Although the novel is aware of the difficulties of discovering history and the postmodern theories about our limits of knowledge, it still endorses the value of striving for that past. What Byatt shows is that she is more interested in exploring the ways that history can be told than the ways it cannot. In *Possession*, history is no longer an endless simulacrum of meaningless images but a partly recoverable text that has valuable lessons for those who are open to them.

Possession's excavation of the past is concerned with reaching to the substance, rather than being content with the surface, of that past. It restores the value of historical knowledge by showing the better life the scholars enjoy because they are in touch with that knowledge. A fictional history, the novel is able to disclose secrets that are not available through official records, encouraging an empathetic connection with the

historical characters. *Possession* celebrates the capacity of fiction to offer hard truth, expressing Byatt's commitment to reclaiming meta-narratives.

With touches of irony, *Possession* satirises the dullness of its postmodern characters' lives, particularly compared to their Victorian counterparts - the dead who are far more alive than the living. The scholars are invigorated by the study of the past. As they learn more, they become possessed by a desire for knowledge that is fundamental and so strong that it undercuts their postmodern mindsets. They suspend their scepticism as they reach for knowledge and history.

Juxtaposing the campus novel genre and the genres of medieval, modern and nineteenth century romance, *Possession* explores the possibilities of these fictional styles. The novel is at times self-consciously tedious, pointing to the dullness of postmodern fiction that is dominated by theory and theoretical stances. The novel restores a balance of humanism into a mode of fiction that is becoming increasingly intellectual. *Possession* is not simply about battles of ideas, but rather about the life of people whose worlds revolve around words, reading, writing and history. *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* question the possibility of a 'readable' novel in a postmodern age, asking the professional reader what it is they are looking for in a work of fiction.

Possession is a meronymic novel that blends contradictions in styles and types to offer a coherent, pleasing whole. It provides the readers with closure that eludes them in real life, using romance that allows more than one happy ending. Justice is meted out to the characters, where the 'bad guys' get their come-uppance, and the 'good

guys' find the treasure they have been searching for. Although this is distinctly unrealistic, it is pleasurable for both reader and character to achieve this kind of closure. The resolution the postscript provides fulfils the readers' curiosity to know what happens. It brings the novel to an ending, offering a fragment of hard truth that is immensely satisfying and pleasurable for the readers as well as emotionally affective. *Possession* plays with the idea that "the pleasure of fiction is narrative discovery" ("Introduction" xiii), inviting the reader to travel on the journey of discovery and allowing them to know all. *Possession* offers the reader balance in an unbalanced world, celebrating the capacity of a fictional text to offer closure and the pleasures of happy endings. The novel offers readers and characters an opportunity to escape into a world outside of themselves.

Possession is intelligent, sensitive and humane, revelling in the pleasures of character, story, history and truth. Byatt has created a fine work out of the fertile ground of her ambivalences.

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