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# Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics: Investigating Ambiguous Critical Identities in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*

Ann Marie Adams

Discussions of how A. S. Byatt "possesses" readers of her most famous fiction generally center on the multiple pleasures the text affords. At once a Romance (and romance), mystery, campus novel, pastiche, critical disquisition, and satire, the work is often lauded for being able to make a very academic story appeal to a wide readership. According to Kathleen Coyne Kelly, even academic readers are offered a variety of responses and approaches: "Byatt constructed *Possession: A Romance* so that the reader can shift between a number of critical perspectives—historical, textual, psychoanalytical, New Critical, structuralist, deconstructive, new historicist" (79). The work, which frequently engages in larger debates on higher education in general and English Studies in particular, seems to offer readers struggling with what Michael Bérubé coins "the employment of English" the best of all possible worlds—a place where reading for "pleasure" and reading for critical cachet (and "gain") are one and the same.

As various commentators have intimated, the overt polyphony of the text, and its formal as well as thematic focus on reading in/and various modes, effects a sort of "birth of the reader," or a fictive space within which readers and readerly practices are foregrounded. What critics have been less likely to recognize, though, is how this seemingly liberatory work actively constrains the narrative pleasures it affords. In many ways, the "shifting" construction Kelly sees operating in the text only allows for limited, and in most cases very directed, critical movement that is explicitly guided by overt narrative asides as well as by convenient plotting conventions. This prescribed movement does lead to the ideologically conservative ending(s) that Louise Yelin and Monica Flegel deconstruct in their excellent essays on Byatt's latent politics,<sup>1</sup> but the movement they chart is best understood as inherently circular rather than teleological. More specifically, the *entire* narrative eschews "the academic wilderness" (Yelin 40) by "urg[ing] us to leave behind critical readings and embrace reading for enjoyment" (Flegel 429). Through consistently distancing her modern, academic protagonists from the contemporary literary theories

they purportedly espouse, Byatt is able to fashion an ostensibly fluid text (filled with the multiple pleasures to which Kelly refers) that narratively reinforces what Roland Barthes would term the "readerly" qualities of a "classical" work. In other words, Byatt's purposefully ambiguous delineation of her central protagonists' critical identities allows her to create a narrative that subtly yet explicitly rejects all reading practices save those she enjoins upon her reader throughout the resolution of her literary mystery.

The "readerly" implications of Byatt's seemingly non-traditional narrative have not been fully explored, I believe, because the numerous critics of the novel tend to assume, rather straightforwardly, that Roland and Maud are contemporary-minded critics whose critical methodologies are necessarily recalibrated by the literary mystery that possesses them. In fact, almost all commentators take the novel at its word and dutifully report that Roland is trained in post-structuralist theory and Maud is a Lacanian critic. Even a perceptive scholar like Jackie Buxton, who persuasively argues that *Possession* can not be considered "postmodern" if its postmodernity is predicated on an "assumed homology" with post-structuralist theory,<sup>2</sup> assumes that Maud and Roland are theoretically savvy critics who must overcome their post-structuralist approaches to literature. Despite the fact that all are forced to acknowledge that Roland is both "old fashioned" and "textual" in his approach to literature, these scholars nonetheless agree with Bo Lunden that the novel "reeducates" both Roland and Maud, moving them toward the reading practices advocated at the close of the narrative.<sup>3</sup> While the novel does make reference to the literary training of its central critics, and while it does effect a narrative of "transformation" in one of the many "ends" of the tale, these references and this narrative are as purposefully ambiguous as the descriptions of the "perfect reading" Flegel critiques in her essay. In fact, I would argue that the novel's contradictory representation of its central characters' critical methodologies is the primary force behind the narrative "seduction" Yelin and Flegel explore, because this ambiguity obscures the ways in which Roland and Maud (and the "actual" reader who necessarily follows the textual clues disclosed by the fictional critics) are constructed (and constrained) as "enchanted readers" from the beginning.

Admittedly, evidence of and for the central modern character's (Roland's) singular and purportedly non-contradictory critical identity comes early in the novel. At the start of the second chapter, Roland muses on Randolph Henry Ash's humanism. In a brief passage of free and indirect discourse that is quickly attributed (or "directed") to Roland in the next sentence, the narrative voice suggests that Ash's description of what man "is" could have been reconfigured or rewritten in a variety of ways to arrive at "the same satisfactory evasive metaphor" (13). This

thought occurs to Roland, the narrator argues, because the Ash scholar has been "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject" (13). Further evidence, or, more correctly, corroboration, comes at the close of the novel when Roland thinks "partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (456).

While these two instances are widely cited as adequate evidence (indeed, self-evident proof) of Roland's "post-structuralist" credentials, the full import of each passage troubles such easy readings and classifications. For example, the first passage may do much to demonstrate Roland's own sense of distance from the great Victorian poet (Ash lived in an age where he could glorify the power and potential of "man"—Roland does not), but it does little to articulate why Roland would be poring over Ash's *exact* definition in order to understand the individual "genius" of Ash's *Ragnarok*. A scholar who is later described as being "possessed of [Ash's] characteristic habits of syntax and stress," or able to "leap ahead and hear the rhythm of the unread" (144) as he reads the work of the great poet, can hardly be said to be indifferent to the specific language that Ash uses to construct a metaphor. He may be working in an age that, according to the novel, decontextualizes language from the speaking (or writing) subject, but his single-minded devotion to the *particular* contours of Ash's verse and thought betray how "out-of-time" Roland's approach to literature is, even if his beliefs about himself and his own place in the universe are in line with "modern" thinking. The second passage is even more explicitly undermined by information and characterizations that come after it. In the mixture of interior monologue, free and indirect discourse, and straight narration that follows Roland's "partially pleasing" postmodernist thought, Roland (and the narrator) recognizes that a "self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil" necessarily leads to a decidedly "unfashionable" end—"coherence and closure" (456). With this assertion, Roland, who subsequently realizes that his fear of emplotment or repeating patterns is not precisely postmodernist (as he tells Maud, Ash and LaMotte were also "plotted" in the narratives they wove), actually negates the purported pleasure that had aroused his thought in the first place.

In an irony worthy of the text, the omniscient narrator may tell the reader that Roland is not a character for "Romantic self-assertion," but that same narrative voice demonstrates how the insights Roland gleans at the end of the quest circle back, like Coleridge's ouroboros, to the beginning.<sup>4</sup> Re-reading *The Golden Apples*, the work he was annotating when he got Ash's copy of Vico from the library (the selfsame Vico that housed the unfinished letters that began the quest), Roland finally realizes how

Ash's voice, the ideas of Vico, and the influence of LaMotte all work together to create a powerful aesthetic and intellectual experience.<sup>5</sup> As the omniscient narrator (rather heavy-handedly) notes in a general disquisition on the pleasures of reading that precedes Roland's epiphany:

Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact. [. . .] In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge. (512)

Roland's re-reading of Ash's verse, we are led to believe, is just such a sensory experience. The novelty or "newness" of Roland's epiphanic reading, informed by his clandestine investigation with Maud Bailey and his decided break with the excesses of literary scholarship, was, in a sense, "already known" from the start of the novel, always and already predicated on the literary echoes and insights that he had recognized enough in his "dutiful" readings to research in the British library. The "closure" of this narrative, the ending of Roland's circular quest, is thus effected through recognition. It is Roland's cognizance of the import of the poem, his understanding of the words that were already there on the page, that brings about resolution.

Of course, Roland's epiphany at the close of the narrative does involve a rethinking of criticism. As the narrator asserts, "What had happened to him was that the ways in which [things] could be said had become more interesting than the idea that [they] could not" (513). This statement is generally interpreted as Roland's rejection of "the post-structuralist positions on language, authorship, and identity" that deny the concrete attachment of signifiers to signifieds (Holmes 330)—in other words, as a rejection of his post-structuralist literary training. While the assertion could refer to an overarching critique of post-structuralist positions throughout the novel,<sup>6</sup> the statement, if assumed to be Roland's reaction against his own formal literary education, does not actually reference post-structuralist theory at all, but the critical influence of James Blackadder. Blackadder, the reader remembers, is the textually oriented scholar Roland completed his degree under and the employer for whom he still works. It is Roland's somewhat oedipal relationship with Blackadder that gives the reader the primary context within which to understand the modern critic's desire to explore the ways in which things "*could* be said": unlike his mentor, caught up in his own constraints of rigid scholarship and creatively crippled by the critical legacy of F. R. Leavis, Roland is no longer concerned with hydra-like footnotes that engulf the text and ago-

nizing over what cannot be included in a scholarly edition. Instead, Roland is now concerned with how poetry and poetic language can be produced.

Barring various assertions that Roland was trained in post-structuralism, there is no real textual evidence to suggest that such training has had any real impact on the ways that Roland thinks about literature.<sup>7</sup> The titles of his scholarly work, *History, Historians and Poetry? A Study of the Presentation of Historical 'Evidence' in the Poems of Randolph Henry Ash* (his dissertation) and "Line by Line" (a study of Ash's "vocabulary" he sends out with job applications), all but underscore his empirical temper as well as his concern with collecting citations that corroborate the "evidence" he finds within the confines of the poems. As his time in libraries and with rare manuscripts makes clear, Roland's method of doing research is not reading up on theories or other secondary materials for the study of literature (save the biography of Ash by Cropper), but investigating *primary* texts in order to decode textual clues. Roland's lack of a specialization in approaches that are termed "theory," in fact, is part of what costs him a job at his old university. When both Roland and Fergus Wolff apply for the same position, the position goes to the dynamic Wolff because "Fergus was also in the right field, *which was literary theory*" (18, emphasis added). Further, this lack of (seeming) "intellectual sophistication" is what allows both Fergus and the initially cool Maud to see that Roland is in a "different class" as a scholar. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, Roland's "old-fashioned scholarship, the decoding of citational references in Ashs [sic] poetry, lets him fail in the midst of an academic landscape interested almost exclusively in modish theoretical brilliance" (124).

This, of course, is not to say that post-structuralism has had no impact on Roland as a character. Quite significantly, assertions of Roland's post-structuralist training always precede explicit comparisons between the modern scholars and the Victorian poets. These comparisons may be offered by the narrator or by the modern characters themselves, but they always demonstrate how "modern" beliefs in the "decentered" self have distanced contemporary people from great Victorian intellectuals, who had faith in ideas, words, and themselves. For example, the very first assertion of Roland's training serves as a way to distance the critic from the great artist. As the narrative makes clear, it "mattered to Randolph Ash what a man was" (12). The same cannot be said of Roland because Roland is living in an age critical of humanism: "If he had been asked what Roland Michell was, he would have had to give a very different answer" (13).

This different answer, the narrative notes again and again, is a function of the different times within which each man lives. As Byatt asserts in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, the "poor moderns are always asking

themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true [. . .] that they become rather papery and are miserably aware of this" (83). Roland, who lives in an age of skepticism typified by post-structuralist criticism, can hardly have the same sense of "self" as the Victorian poet that he admires. In other words, the contemporary characters are necessarily less "real" than their Victorian predecessors, the narrative suggests, because their cultural beliefs deny them a sense of autonomy and individuality. According to Maud, the substantial "value" the Victorians placed upon themselves, a value that allowed them to glory in the power and potential of human thought, reason, and progress, eventually changed into a "horrible oversimplification," or the modern belief that everything is an illusion fabricated and maintained by unconscious human desires (277). To paraphrase this assertion in terms of the latent Arnoldian discourse Louise Yelin finds in the work, the "expansive" self-discovery of the Victorians leads to the creative flowering of poetry, whereas the "contracted" self-involvement of the moderns (where, Roland notes, "Everything relates to *us* and so we're imprisoned in ourselves—we can't see *things*" [276]) only allows for inferior criticism that is not serving its proper "function."

While the text may show Roland's sense of self-worth is determined by his age, it does not demonstrate that his scholarship unthinkingly recapitulates the cultural "truths" about him. Roland may recognize (and lament) his distance from the Victorians, but, following in the footsteps of Henry James, he goes out of his way to give the artist his *donnée*. A scholar of an age that believed in embodied truths, Roland attempts to imagine those truths and to think as the Victorians did in order to understand the great work that they produced. Nowhere is this distinction between his personal life and his scholarly understanding more clear than in his musings on romance and love affairs. Roland's response to his quiet movement toward intimacy and connection with Maud is deeply inflected by theories of the "decentered self." As the narrator remarks:

Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his "self" as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this. He had no desire for any strenuous Romantic self-assertion. Nor did he desire to know *who* Maud essentially was. But he wondered, much of the time, what their mute pleasure in each other might lead to, anything or nothing, would it just go, as it had just come, or would it change, could it change? (459)

Such abstract theorizations are not to be found in his discussion of Ash and LaMotte's affair. As he notes early in the novel, what first drew him

to the letter, and encouraged his unlikely theft of it, was the decided agitation of Ash's writing—the very strenuous Romantic self-assertion of Ash he wanted to understand. While he and Maud dream complacently of their clean white beds and rest from the exhaustiveness of overt politicization, they nonetheless respond to and register the passion they find evidenced in the correspondence. Rather than deconstruct this passion and articulate it in terms of contemporary mores and preoccupations, the modern scholars attempt to understand it in its context and see how and why their own beliefs about romance and love have changed. As Flegel notes, Roland and Maud's literary quest encourages them "to make imaginative and intuitive leaps in order to solve the problems before them, and these leaps illuminate their own lacks" (425).

The fact that both Maud and Roland are required to make the same leaps is, of course, significant, for it helps to demonstrate how ambivalent and "obscure" even the critical identity of the "theoretical" scholar (Maud) is. Despite her espousal of Lacanian criticism and her work on the wildly evocative topic of liminality, Maud's scholarly practices do not seem to be very far removed from those of Roland. Like Roland, she works with primary texts and manuscripts, and she too has filing cards filled with cross-references and citations. When Sir George Bailey only gives Roland and Maud a limited time to review the recovered letters, she pragmatically insists that they each read only the correspondence that relates to their particular poet so that they can halve their workload. The fact that scholars, who are reading separate letters and scanning editions of their respective poets' work for reference, can so easily piece the story together from their incomplete correspondence betrays a commonality in critical approach just as surely as it gestures toward a "meeting of minds" in the dialogic letters.

Even before the full correspondence is found, and extended conversations about the ills of contemporary scholarship allow them to see their sympathy with one another, the narrative makes a point of echoing ideas and beliefs in descriptions of and dialogues from the scholars. For example, Maud, after becoming just as uncharacteristically "possessed" by Ash's unaddressed letters, suggests that she and Roland go to Seal Court (the residence where LaMotte lived out her final days) to see what they can find. Trying to account for her own unexpected desire to know, Maud states: "I very rarely feel any curiosity about Christabel's life—it's funny—I even feel a sort of squeamishness about things she might have touched, or places she might have been—it's the *language* that matters, isn't it, it's what went on in her mind" (62). This speech mirrors the description of Roland's earlier dismay at his own interest:

Roland had never been much interested in Randolph Henry Ash's vanished body; he did not spend time visiting his house in Russell Street, or



sitting where he had sat, on stone garden seats; that was Cropper's style. What Roland liked was 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. But these dead letters troubled him, physically even, because they were only beginnings. (24-25)

Perhaps even more importantly, Roland and Maud are able to discover the relationship between Ash and LaMotte because they have done so much "old-fashioned" textual work with the poems. Roland, for example, knows to go find Ash's copy of Vico because his careful (if too often "dutiful") reading of *The Golden Apples* showed him the importance of Vico's thoughts on Ash's work. Maud is able to find the hidden letters because she is so familiar with LaMotte's cryptic verse; indeed, she has memorized it. Finally, the contemporary critics recognize that Ash and LaMotte were on the expedition together in the North because textual evidence in the poets' respective works proves it. Not only do they discover similar lines in poems composed at the time of the journey, they also decide that descriptions within the poems point directly and unproblematically back to the physical phenomena they themselves have witnessed on their own outing (thus securing the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, at least as far as Victorian representation in verse is concerned). After looking at the effects of the light in a cave at the Thomason Foss, Maud quotes from the beginning of *Melusina* and decisively contends, "She came here with him." Roland, forced to admit that it isn't actual proof, that "if the sun hadn't struck out when it did [he] wouldn't have seen it," nonetheless exclaims, "But it is proof, to me" (290).

Reading over passages like this, a reader just may forget that Maud is, according to the text, a highly sophisticated psychoanalytic critic who specializes in the theories of Lacan. This training, though, does surface in the narrative, most particularly in her response to Mortimer Cropper's biography of Ash. After reading an excerpt where Cropper himself tries to psychoanalyze Ash, "Maud decided she intuited something terrible about Cropper's imagination from all this. He had a peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography: the desire to cut his subject down to size" (272). This particular intuition leads naturally, the text implies, to Maud's theoretical meditations on the "general ambiguity of the word 'subject'":

Was Ash subject to Cropper's research methods and laws of thought? Whose subjectivity was being studied? Who was the subject of the sentences of the text, and how did Cropper and Ash fit into Lacan's perception that the grammatical subject of a statement differs from the subject, the "I," who is the object discussed by the statement? (272-73)

Quite tellingly, the narrative forestalls any potential answering of these questions, citing the exhausted nature of the line of inquiry as justification

for the lack of resolution: "Were these thoughts original, Maud wondered, and decided almost necessarily not, all the possible thoughts about literary subjectivity had recently and strenuously been explored" (273).

Given the fact that Maud herself has "explored" the "subjectivity" of LaMotte (most particularly, how the "subject" of LaMotte's poetry is figured in terms of liminality), this passage has more than its fair share of irony. On the one hand, the text wants to juxtapose Maud with the other critics who use psychoanalytical models incorrectly (Cropper, Fergus Wolff, Leonora Stern); on the other, it subtly suggests that Maud's own work may have been guilty of such oversimplifications.<sup>8</sup> This tension is perhaps best articulated in Maud's relationship with Leonora, an imposing character who is seen to exert undue influence on Maud and Maud's thinking until the scholar has a "meeting of the minds" with Roland. For example, Leonora's letter to Maud offering unsolicited help and scholarly advice humorously positions the "knowing" Maud in relation to the ignorant but well-meaning Leonora. Leonora's almost condescending request that Maud be more "rigorous" in her "exploration of LaMotte's lesbian sexuality as the empowering force behind her work" is significantly received after Maud has discovered the letters and read of LaMotte's decidedly heterosexual affair (154). Yet Leonora's advice and promptings are not without their merits. When Maud receives the letter from Leonora (and one from Fergus Wolff), the critic is still pondering LaMotte's "alarming" use of the metaphor of an egg to define her "liminal" space. Hence, before she even opens Leonora's letter, Maud is revising and extending her "thinking about liminality and the dissolution of boundaries" (154). Leonora's remarks about LaMotte's sexuality as "an empowering force behind her work" are also somewhat prescient. Leonora may still erroneously believe that LaMotte is a lesbian, but she does perceptively notice a lacuna within Maud's thoughts that Maud herself will only come to acknowledge later: her reluctance to understand how eroticized encounters and passionate connections (not inviolate self-sufficiency) inform LaMotte's work.

The lacuna within Maud's thinking is mirrored textually by the aporia of her psychoanalytic approach. Maud may psychoanalyze Cropper and explore the ways in which Lacanian theories could illuminate his writing, but she is reluctant to cast LaMotte or Ash within the cultural truths of her own age. In fact, once she enters into the narrative, references to her previous scholarship are quite literally overwritten by the "imaginative leaps" she takes with Roland, leaps which require her to think past the critical preoccupations of her era. As she admits to Roland:

We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too—about how there isn't a unitary ego—how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things—and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are

driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it's a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic Love—so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love—themselves—that what they did mattered— (290)

This passage not only underscores Maud's espousal of the effort of the "imagination" Roland endorses, it also articulates Maud's increasing wariness of the theoretical methodology she has used to make a name for herself as a scholar. Maud's particular query, "I suppose we *believe* that?," suggests that the post-structuralist approach she and Roland find unsuitable for the Victorians may even lack usefulness for the modern characters.

While the narrative *suggests* that Maud has undergone some sort of critical transformation, it does little to *demonstrate* how Maud's thinking has fully changed. Her disavowals of contemporary scholarship are more pronounced as the novel progresses, but the reader, who is offered none of Maud's primary scholarship or even any extended articulations of her earlier theories, has no way of understanding the extent of this purported shift. When Roland and Maud first meet, Maud tells Roland that she wrote "a paper on Victorian women's imagination of space" that explored women writers' "paradoxical" fears of both agoraphobia and claustrophobia (61), and this remains the only "full" explanation of Maud's work in the novel. In fact, the silencing of Maud's critical voice becomes more important than the articulation of it. Before Roland meets Maud, he gets a collection of essays on LaMotte out of the library, a collection that showcases an important article by Maud. Despite the fact that he knows "he should tackle this [article] first," Roland reads around Maud's contribution (43). While the parodic nature of Fergus Wolff and Leonora Stern's letters to Maud may render their evidentiary status somewhat dubious, it is still significant that the scholars' requests for further clarification on Maud's theories of liminality are ignored. Ariane Le Minier (the scholar who is working with Sabine de Kercoz's journal) is able to get Maud to explain her scholarship more fully, but the reader is only told of this "enlightening" discussion rather than shown the substance of the conversation. Finally, Maud may be forced to tell Leonora about a paper idea concerned "with Melusina and Medusa and Freud's idea that the Medusa-head was a castration-fantasy," but this half-formed thought is only offered to "distract" Leonora from discovering the full import of Le Minier's discoveries (342). As a result, the reader is never sure of what Maud's initial theoretical position is, let alone how the quest has reshaped her particular psychoanalytic methodology. All the reader can be sure of is that Maud, like Roland, is a perceptive, textually bound critic who is predisposed to be "possessed" by the letters.

Like the structuring "central contradictions" Christien Franken finds in Byatt's critical work, the novel is formally riven by an inherent ambivalence.<sup>9</sup> The work implies that there is such a thing as "good" critical readings (Roland and Maud's perceptive textual sleuthing and leaps of "imagination"), yet it shows that critical methodology to be literally unrepresentable. Roland himself may briefly wonder how Maud can proclaim herself to be "psychoanalytic without being *personal*" (230), but her espousal of contradictory beliefs is mirrored in his own. Just as Maud can explore the "condition" of women's inner desires and still be a "textual scholar" who "deplore[s] the modern feminist attitude to private lives" (230), Roland, the man who began the quest in order to uncover a hidden part of Ash's life, can proclaim that he is "an old-fashioned textual critic, not a biographer" (56). In fact, the only way in which each critic can redress the misprisions and omissions of the scholarly work about them is to delve into the biographical excesses they had tried to avoid.<sup>10</sup> It is only after they uncover the hidden lives of the Victorians that they can demonstrate that LaMotte is not a lesbian and that Ash's love poems are responding to another poet. This (perhaps unintended) irony is even reflected in the narrative voice itself, which advocates "disinterested" and "impersonal" readings while it demonstrates that "enchanted" readings can only occur when some of the personal is known.

Rather than resolve these inherent contradictions in the end, the novel abandons all pretense of referring to its modern protagonists' scholarship and sets a romanticized view of creative production in place of this critical impasse. This "creative" substitution does, in the words of Flegel, help to effect a "fairy tale ending," but this "happily ever after" offers its "negative enchantment" (what Flegel terms its rendering of the "unethical" into the pleasing and "seductive") though *disenchantment*. As Iona and Peter Opie note in their introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales*, the "happy endings" of tales like "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," or "Snow White" do not bring about an essential change to the characters; they merely foreground inherent natures. As a result, "transformation is not an actual transformation but a disenchantment, the breaking of a spell. In each case we are aware that the person was always noble, that the magic has wrought no change in the person's soul, only in his or her outward form" (17). Roland, the reader remembers, was always a good textual reader, always the person most "alive" to the power of poetry. "Modish theoretical brilliance," as Bronfen puts it, may have eclipsed his skills, but his success at the end of the narrative is rendered a function of his previously overlooked textual ability. Just as Cinderella's prince must recognize his future wife in the guise of a scullery maid for the spell to be broken, so Roland's "dry spell" on the job market must be broken by job offers that recognize his inherent worth before the full import of his findings

are made public. (This makes the consistent praise of "Line by Line" in all the acceptance letters significant.) In other words, Byatt's "fairy tale" text shows us how Roland is rewarded for "enchanted reading" long before he has his seeming epiphany—and, even more importantly, how the very (dispiriting) experience of "enchantment" allows Roland to become "cognisant of" what his "essential" nature already knew—that it is the "language of poetry" that matters (513).

Like Roland's, Maud's "reward" involves a valorization of the creative, but her "reward" is an inheritance, not an inspiration.<sup>11</sup> Discovered to be the descendent of Ash and LaMotte's illegitimate child, Maud becomes the "possessor" of the letters, and she literally and figuratively comes to realize the importance of her poetic "father." In this way, Maud too has been "disenchanted," shown to be whom and what she was from the beginning. Quite interestingly, though, Maud's disenchantment strips away her protective covering as well as her "superior" critical position. As Flegel notes, Maud moves from being Roland's academic superior, to his equal, to finally a "possession" that must be taken care of by Roland. This reversal recapitulates and naturalizes particularly pernicious gender roles while it serves to domesticate and subordinate criticism (in the person of Maud) to the "power" of the creative (the poetically inspired Roland). In her first sexual encounter with Roland, Maud is not recognized by Roland as her "self" or as an important feminist critic (as Roland tells Maud, her attachment to literary theory and feminism is part of what affected his "manly pride" and made him want to avoid falling in love with her), but as a descendant of the great poetic genius, Randolph Henry Ash. For Roland, her critical identity is effaced by her creative connections.<sup>12</sup>

The "creative" triumph of the final, sexual encounter between Roland and Maud is strikingly forecast in an earlier episode. Shortly before Roland's epiphany and the actual disinterment that secures Maud's "legacy," Maud and Roland are sitting quietly in her office, working. Maud, who has transcribed a "useful passage of Freud for her paper on metaphor," finds that her thoughts refuse to congeal (466). Much of this refusal comes from the nature of the quote (which is about subjectivity and love), and from her concomitant awareness of Roland's physical presence, which is itself the "object" of her own "transferred libido": "If he went out of the room it would be grey and empty. If he did *not* go out of it, how could she concentrate?" (467). Roland, who is represented as being aware of Maud's conflicting thoughts, sits "writing lists of words *that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory*" (467, emphasis added). On the one hand, the silent exchange demonstrates the affection and intimacy that each scholar has (unsuccessfully) tried to avoid; on the other, it symbolically represents the triumph of the creative over the critical: Roland's creative writing is literally canceling

out Maud's critical paper. If he were to leave, she would have no object to study; if he were to stay, his very presence would (and does) resist her ability to theorize.

This sexualized encounter visibly manifests what Yelin considers to be the ultimate mystification of *Possession*—its "creative" *possession* of the Victorian period. According to Yelin, Byatt

locates Victorianists—those in her novel and those of us 'outside' its pages—in a critical wilderness from which we cannot escape. But at the same time, she makes at least implicit claim to possess Victorian secrets known or knowable by no one else. [. . .] Indeed, in a return of the Arnoldian repressed, she holds out a promise that poets—or novelists?—if not critics, might someday cease wandering and leave the academic wilderness behind. (40)

In this way, Roland, the reborn creative writer who "possesses" the "creative" in Maud (her relation to Ash), not the critical (her theory and feminism), is but a textual manifestation of Byatt herself, who has used fictive "lies" (representations of Ellen Ash's burned journals and the recording of the transient moment of the epilogue) to get at what Mr. Sludge refers to as "portly truth" (or the knowledge that the contemporary critics will never have).<sup>13</sup>

Significantly enough, Byatt's privileging of the "actual" reader (who is granted knowledge that even the most thorough and rigorous of critics in the novel will never possess) does little to bring about the "birth of the reader," in Roland Barthes' sense of the term. The densely metafictional text may appear to be (and indeed has been read as) "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 256), but overt narrative asides, as well as the very plot conventions of the mystery, offer a way to navigate, understand, and indeed manage the polyphony of the text. The "ventriloquized" voices that seemingly afford such diverse and diffuse pleasure are carefully staggered throughout the work, placed in such a way as to systematically lay bare and resolve the central enigma. Even passages and poems that are seemingly left to stand on their own (such as Ash's poem on Swammerdam) are picked up later on and recast, by the principal characters, within the unfolding mystery. Again and again, passages and remarks are openly interpreted for the "actual" reader by the primary critics, and these ("correct") interpretations are narratively validated by the contemporary conclusion to the tale, which decisively proves Roland and Maud's theories. Perhaps even more importantly, Roland and Maud's theories (or "readings") overtly reinforce the idea that there is a "single, 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" to literature (Barthes 256), as seen in Maud's decoding of LaMotte's poem on dolls (which uncovers the hidden correspondence between the poets at Seal Court), or in Roland's

prescient understanding of *Ask to Embla* (which does turn out to be Ash's poetic "conversation" with LaMotte). As Byatt tellingly admits in her interview with Wachtel, Roland and Maud "were actually doing the kind of detection that one really does with poems, which is finding out their meaning, the real feeling behind them, what the poet was really concentrating on" (81). Through "detecting" what the poet "was really concentrating on," Roland and Maud (and the "actual" reader who follows their lead) discover the affair that served as a subtext for so much of the Victorians' poetry. In this way, the resolution of the mystery is effected through "correct" literary interpretation, or a recapitulation of the "theological" approach to literature that Barthes decries.

Like Barthes, Byatt does advocate the "death" of the critic (particularly in Roland's disavowal of his previous ventures), but unlike Barthes, Byatt does not set the critic up in her novel as an analogue to the Author (whose message the critic is purportedly proselytizing). If anything, *Possession* figures contemporary critics and criticism (critics and criticism rarely represented as genuinely textual or New Critical) as an impediment to the singular "message" of the Author that Barthes wishes so much to overcome. The work's concern with the generative power of language, and with the potentially deceptive nature of metaphors, may seem to ally it with Barthes' conception of the scriptor, or the linguistically determined writer who is "born simultaneously with the text" (255), but the novel's focus on the nature of language is an attempt to render language more, rather than less, fixed and stable. Characters who attempt to destabilize language, or who, in the best "writerly" fashion, seek to produce the text as they read, fare very ill in this text. *Possession* may be filled with "born" readers and "dead" authors, but the valuation the "classic" text places on each is in direct opposition to that of Barthes. Roland's "rebirth" at the end (his recognition of what he always knew) comes only when he displaces himself (admitting no "privileged communication" between Ash and himself) and lays prostrate before the genius of Ash. Likewise, Maud's "rebirth" only occurs when she puts aside personal prejudices and preferences and is able to recognize the importance of Ash. "Good" readers, in Byatt's work, are necessarily subordinate to, and humbly aware of, the "genius" of the writer—a point that is reinforced from the beginning of the novel through the end.

Both Yelin and Flegel are right to note that the conclusion of *Possession*, with its focus on closure and seeming transcendence of critical anxiety, affords a particularly "seductive" and ideologically laden pleasure to academic readers. Most of the power of the work, though, comes through how effectively it has encoded, indeed naturalized, its "Edenic" and "readerly" beliefs right from the beginning. A reader who is encouraged to "abandon the academic wilderness" by the pat conclusion has

already been primed by the quest itself, which significantly moves away from the basement of a library and the tower of a university to "field" research and open air readings. In fact, the very (uncritical and non-liberatory) method of reading that is advocated in the end of the modern narrative is actually the reading strategy that both Roland and Maud—and "actual" readers, led by Byatt's prompting and clues—use in order to solve the mystery. In order to fully understand the ways in which Byatt "possesses" readers in this "readerly" work, we need to come to grips with what she assumes is "*always known*"—that "perfect readings" necessarily obscure and obfuscate critical analysis.

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### Notes

1. For Yelin, the lack of political and politicized criticism in a text ostensibly all about the varieties of contemporary criticism helps to bring about the conservative ending that recasts a Thatcherite version of Victorianism: "Not only heterosexual romance but also culture, or cultural change—specifically the work of the woman-manly Ash—is made possible, Byatt seems to be suggesting, by money and by a suppression of homoeroticism or a redirection of women's desire from women to men" (39). Flegel, who focuses on how the fairy-tale conventions in the novel bring about a "happily ever after" where gender and class issues are elided in a celebration of pure reading, contends "that it is naïve, and unethical, to see the kind of reading that Byatt offers as happy. To return to an Edenic state of reading, we must first believe that such a state truly existed and that it was always open to all readers of every class, gender, and race" (430).
2. Buxton resists this endemic homology in her (re)classification because the novel itself works against and critiques postmodern thought by putting "modernist ideology in postmodernist guise" (217).
3. According to Lunden, "the main characters, Roland and Maud, are forced to take into account a number of different theories which make them consider and re-consider their own critical paradigms until they finally realize the futility of their own theoretical undertaking. This realization, Roland's and Maud's education on the intellectual level, can be said to be part of the novel's explicit critique of contemporary theory" (92).
4. Interestingly enough, this tale of Victorian poets registers a wide array of English literature. Maureen Sabine, in "'Thou art the best of mee': A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Literary Possession of Donne," argues that the novel is informed by the metaphysical poets, and there are obvious gestures toward Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in the text. Byatt's Victorians, in fact, are consciously represented as great admirers of the Romantics, an admiration they share with their creator, who wrote *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time*.
5. Ash's copy of Vico does more than just hold onto an unaddressed letter. As Ivana Djordjevic notes in "In the Footsteps of Giambattista Vico: Patterns of Signification in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*," the theories of Vico provide a structuring principle for the novel.
6. Frederick M. Holmes, Bo Lunden, Sabine Hotho-Jackson, and Jackie Buxton all



note the ways in which the novel critiques contemporary literary theory and narrative forms.

7. The dissonance between Roland's "identity" or "identification" as a critic and his actual practice may appear to be part of *Possession's* general satire of academic life—a comic rendering of the disconnect between what critics espouse and what they do. Initially, such a reading seems plausible, yet it does not account for the ways in which Roland is labeled by the narrative voice itself. In direct speech, Roland strenuously avows that he is a "textual critic" (the admittedly nebulous reading strategy he uses throughout the quest) while overt exposition and omniscient narration grant him a post-structuralist pedigree. As a result, Roland's post-structuralist pedigree appears to be more of a narrative imposition than a form of character self-delusion. Leonora's "lesbian" identity is part of the general satire of academic life; Roland and Maud's (mis)identifications are something else altogether.

8. The potential complicity of Maud's scholarship is gestured to in her relationship with Roland. She begins as the "expert" scholar, but she has to be reeducated by the letters of LaMotte and Ash as well as by Roland himself. In particular, Roland has to help Maud see the ways in which her feminist approach has caused her to misread and misrepresent the work of Ash.

9. As Christien Franken argues in a thorough study of Byatt's criticism, Byatt's paradoxical embrace and critical rejection of both Leavisism and the post-structuralist and feminist theories that were to follow the Leavisite revolution make it "impossible to place Byatt's work in one category: the labels that are used to name types of criticism such as 'humanist,' 'post-structuralist' and 'feminist' are reductive in this context" (197).

10. Byatt's most recent novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, immerses itself even more fully in this theoretical morass. In order to escape the reductive and politicized literary scholarship about him, Phineas G. Nanson, a disgruntled graduate student, decides to study a great Victorian biographer. In fact, he vows to write a biography of the great biographer. The more research he completes, though, the more he discovers how elusive his subject is. In many ways, his very quest underscores the validity and importance of the theories he has come to reject. Nanson's answer is quite literally to leave the academy.

11. Both Tatjana Jukic and Kelly A. Marsh discuss the ways in which the "inheritance plot" functions as a neo-Victorian narrative device in *Possession*.

12. As Jackie Buxton notes, Roland only seems able to have sexual intercourse when he conjures Elizabeth Ash (as he does when he makes love to Val) or Randolph Henry Ash (as he does with Maud). This necrophilic subtext creates interesting parallels with Byatt's later novella, "The Conjugal Angel" (collected in *Angels and Insects*).

13. Commentator after commentator has read Byatt's invocation of "Mr Sludge, 'the Medium'" (in an epigraph to the novel) as a manifestation of the text's "post-modernity"—in other words, as a (post-structuralist) recognition that cultural "truths" are fictions. While the quote does indeed question the nature of "truth," it does not register the text's, or Byatt's, capitulation to contemporary theory. As Byatt notes in "'Sugar'/'Le Sucre,'" "Browning himself believed it was possible, indeed imperative, to tell the truth, that there was such a thing as 'truth' that could be sorted out from all the intricate meshes of thought and opinion and partiality that make up our account of things. This makes him profoundly unfashionable now, however fashionable his narrative method of telling, retelling, making and remaking may initially seem to be" (16). Byatt makes this point even more

clearly in her celebratory essay, "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art": "Sludge too comes into that circle of artists who give life and form to fictive truths" ("Robert" 53). Likewise, Byatt's own narrative method, which seems to "fashionably" fall into Linda Hutcheon's designation of historiographic metafiction, is itself "unfashionable." Not only does it offer closure, its decidedly valedictory approach to metafiction upholds rather traditional notions of literary historiography.

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