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Abstract

Demonstrates *Possession's* mythic elements, in particular, how the encounter between the fictitious Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash and his daughter Maia in the novel's Postscript constitutes Ash's confrontation with Slavoj Žižek's famous interpretation of the Lacanian Real. Building on Žižek, argues that Ash's encounter with the Real actually springs from and mediates grace. This reimagining of the Real is an integral element of myth and introduces the mythic into *Possession*, giving it the qualities of a Romance.

Additional Keywords

Byatt, A.S. *Possession*; Lacan, Jacques; Žižek, Slavoj; The Real, theory of; Myth; Romance (genre); Genre; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of eucatastrophe



THE ROMANCE AND THE REAL:
A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION: A ROMANCE*

JORDANA ASHDAN LONG

IN THE PENULTIMATE CHAPTER OF A.S. BYATT'S *Possession: A Romance*, the 1980s scholars-turned-literary-detectives Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, along with the motley and unconnected band of friends, foes, and rivals sucked into the orbit of their mystery, discover that the Victorian poets Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash had a child who survived to adulthood, and that this child was in fact Maud's great-great-grandmother. Based on the evidence, the searchers infer that Ash never knew of his child's survival, since his wife, Ellen, never gave him a final letter from Christabel explaining all. It seems that he went to his grave believing the child dead, perhaps even murdered by Christabel. While the modern-day scholars of the story conclude their search satisfied that they have uncovered the whole truth, Ash's apparent lack of knowledge leaves readers with a sense of irresolution. However, Byatt concludes the novel with a Postscript set in 1868. In it, through an omniscient narrator that appears at only three points in the novel, we find that Ash, walking out one day to try to reconcile with Christabel, met his daughter, Maia, recognized her for who she was, and gave her a verbal message for Christabel, which Maia forgot to deliver.

Whenever I read the Postscript, I start to cry. I wouldn't say that this reaction stems from any excessive sentimentality in the novel, nor yet (I hope) in myself. Indeed, I've never thought of myself as a person who cries easily; and Byatt could hardly be described as the sort of author who loads on emotional moments in order to provoke her readers to tears. My response, unvaried as it is, has caused me to question just what it is about this moment in this particular work that moves me so. (In reading other critics' reactions to this text, I find that the Postscript evokes strong responses from many, though not always of a weepy or even positive nature.) In examining the Postscript, its position in and emergence from the novel as a whole, and the visceral response it draws from readers, I conclude that the emotional power of the Postscript stems from Byatt's inclusion of a moment wherein Randolph Henry Ash confronts—or, rather, is confronted by—a truth that reformats his reality: the “sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” identified by Tolkien as a key element of his concept of the Eucatastrophe in “On Fairy-stories” (77). The idea of one's perception of reality being out of step with the truth leads into psychoanalytic territory; thus,

in defining, explicating, and applying this concept, I find it useful to incorporate Lacan's idea of the Real, as well as Slavoj Žižek's famous interpretation thereof. Lacan posits the Real as an overarching yet ungraspable truth which we glimpse in traumatic experiences that shake our belief in our own omniscience and agency. Žižek expands this idea to include breakings-through of the Real in non-traumatic circumstances, a perspective reminiscent of Tolkien's description of Eucatastrophe: "When the sudden 'turn' comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of the story, and lets a gleam come through" (76). I would like to build on these perspectives to introduce the idea that the Real is a vital component in the Romance, giving this genre its emotional resonance and cathartic power for readers. To do this, I will examine glimpses of the Real throughout *Possession*, and argue that the novel's categorization as a Romance comes down to the moment when, in meeting the Real, Ash finds peace. I suggest that this transmission of peace and fulfillment through confrontation with the Real is a characteristic of the Romance in this text unexamined by critics hitherto, with implications for our understanding of the genre.

That Byatt always intended *Possession* as something other than pure verisimilitude is hardly a secret: She subtitles the novel *A Romance*¹ and opens it with an excerpt from Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which Hawthorne describes the genre of Romance as adhering to the truth of the human experience, but claiming "a certain latitude" in the circumstances under which those truths are presented. Given the focus of the protagonists of *Possession* on the role of Romance, it is worth noting that, in this definition, Hawthorne explicitly characterizes Romance as tying together different eras, a critical element of the dual plotlines of *Possession*. Various characters in *Possession* muse self-consciously on how they feel the press of the Romance around their lives. During their correspondence, Ash writes to Christabel that, as "rational nineteenth-century beings," they "might leave the *coup de foudre* to the weavers of Romances" (211); years later, when they have come to grief, he says, "I feel I stand accused, also, by your actions, of having loved you at all, as though my love was an act of brutal forcing, as though I were a heartless ravisher out of some trumpery Romance" (495). In the letter he never receives,

¹ In discussing *Possession's* characteristics as a Romance, I do not mean to define it as "not a novel." This paper assumes a distinction between *Possession's* genre (novel) and a mode (Romance) which appears within it. As Barbara Fuchs argues, this allows us "to address the occurrence of romance within texts that are clearly classified as some other genre [...]. The instrumental notion of romance as a recurrent textual strategy allows us to recognize its many manifestations and transformations throughout literary history; it may well be our best chance to capture its protean nature [...]. [I]t also allows us to deconstruct the many oppositions set up by literary history, such as [...] romance versus novel" (9).

she also situates their story in that genre, describing her concealment of their daughter as “a lie [...] appropriate to a Romance” (543) and reflecting, “You will think [...] that a *romancer* such as I [...] would not be able to keep such a secret for nigh on thirty years [...] without bringing about some *peripeteia*, some *dénouement*, some secret hinting or open scene of revelation” (544-45). Roland, in love with Maud and despairing because of the difference in their fortunes and social status, thinks,

All *that* was the plot of a Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously; a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or other.

He supposed the Romance must give way to social realism, even if the aesthetic temper of the time was against it. (460)

Feeling their investigative idyll drawing to an end, as other scholars close in on them, Roland muses that his and Maud’s story has “changed from Quest, a good romantic form, into Chase and Race, two other equally valid ones” (460).

But what, in Byatt’s thinking or elsewhere, is Romance? And why does Byatt choose this form for *Possession*? In attempting to define and categorize the Romance, critics have approached it from a variety of theoretical perspectives, wielding a multiplicity of biases, *a priori*s, and assumptions, through lenses ranging from structuralism to deconstruction to Marxism and beyond (Onega and Ganteau 2). Before attacking the definition(s) of Romance, I find it useful to address its categorization: Is Romance a genre or a mode? *Per* Jean-Michel Ganteau:

Genres are supposed to correspond to texts based on the same canonical form (narrative, drama, poetry) or to be identified with classical ‘genres’: Platonic (lyrical, epic, dramatic) and Aristotelian (epic, tragedy, comedy). Modes, on the other hand, overflow the narrow frame of formal realisations. They tend to be less context-sensitive than genres, so that they often ignore the conventional boundaries of periods. (“Fantastic, but Truthful” 225)

John E. Stevens describes Romance first as a genre, then as “a series of related genres,” making a distinction between “the romantic *experiences*” and “the romantic *genres*” (16, italics Stevens’s), and ultimately defining Romance by its characterization “by conventions, motifs, archetypes, which have been created in order to express the experiences in their essential nature” (16). In contrast, Northrop Frye describes Romance as a mode, a concept that he delineates at length in two important texts, *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Secular Scripture: A*

Study of the Structure of Romance. Frye sees Romance as one of “four pregeneric elements of literature” which he calls “*mythoi* or generic plots” (*Anatomy* 162) and considers it “nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream” (186); he explains, “The romance, which deals with heroes, is intermediate between the novel, which deals with men, and the myth, which deals with gods” (306). Essentially, while genre is defined by the purposes of the text, mode has to do with the purposes of the characters and actions within the text: “genre reflects a conscious decision of the writer about the sort of thing she is writing” (Kincaid), but mode reflects “a conventional power of action assumed *about the chief characters* in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet *toward his audience* in thematic literature” (Frye, *Anatomy* 366, italics mine). Thus, while “genre” refers to categories into which similar texts can be organized,² “mode” has to do with literary conventions that recur across and within different genres. As a mode rather than a genre, the characteristics of Romance, as Barbara Fuchs observes, transcend “the specificities of genre and can be variously applied to verse or prose texts in a variety of historical settings” (Fuchs 5). Ganteau and Susana Omega explain that conceptualizing Romance as a mode “is a way of suggesting the iterability and ubiquity of romance, its urge to transcend groupings based on criteria such as period, form and theme and permeate texts of all types and generic labels” (2-3). Describing Romance as appearing within different genres rather than as a genre in itself (2), Fuchs explains,

[T]he term [Romance] describes a concatenation of both narratological elements and literary topoi, including idealization, the marvelous, narrative delay, wandering, and obscured identity that [...] both pose a quest and complicate it. I find this the most useful notion of romance because it accounts for the greatest number of instances, allowing us to address the occurrence of romance within texts that are clearly classified as some other genre and incorporating the hybridization and malleability that [...] are such key elements of romance. (9)

For these reasons, in interpreting *Possession*, I adhere to Ganteau's classification, following Frye, of Romance as a mode rather than a genre (“The Logic of Affect” 79); its subtle effects need not be tied to any particular era, style, or subject matter, and it is as at home in *Possession's* universities as in King Arthur's hall. Essentially, Romance as a mode is characterized by transcendent, otherworldly qualities appearing in the world as we know it. Ganteau helpfully elucidates:

² For this definition, I refer back to Aristotle's *Poetics* (52-3). As Frye notes, the concept of genre has not changed much from Aristotle (*Anatomy of Criticism* 13).

The themes most exploited by romance are mystery, love, the quest, the agon, and the past. Formally, romance is associated with emphatic closure [...]. [Romance] replaces the horizontal linear description of the phenomenal world by either more vertical probings into mystery (in the case of the Gothic) or elevations towards the transcendent (in religious romances). In other words, romance is concerned with things foreign, foreign in more than just the obvious sense of the term. The foreign (from the latin *fors, foris*) is what is outside the walls of the city, what escapes common experience. It is the realm of the other.

Accordingly, romance [...] prolongs investigation by probing zones that notoriously remain out of the reach of realistic narrative. ("Fantastic, but Truthful" 226-7)

Thus, as a Romance, *Possession* concerns itself with the transcendent appearing within the everyday. Similarly, the mode of Romance within *Possession* veils itself within the novel's generic qualities.

Because of its nature as a mode, the Romance resists definition, or at least, critics resist consensus in defining it; as Fuchs observes, "Critics disagree [...]. Yet, paradoxically, readers are often able to identify romance almost tacitly; they know it when they see it. My students call it 'that fairy-tale feeling'" (1-2). Romance can be absorbed into many genres; it is not, strictly speaking, fairy tale any more than it is an adventure, a love story, or a mystery, though it may hold aspects and moments of any of these. It is this flexibility which makes the Romance so useful for exploring stories in which the boundaries of style, genre, and even (meta)physical reality need not be clearly delineated. In the work that has been done on *Possession*, critics have sought to interpret the text based on various generic categorizations. However, in considering *Possession* as a Romance, the foundation for the lack of critical consensus on the novel's genre becomes apparent: as a mode, Romance can inform the various generic categories to which *Possession* has been ascribed, yet this explains, too, the difficulty in settling on any one genre for this novel.

It is its modal quality as a Romance that allows *Possession* to flourish within various generic frameworks, lending Romance's flavor of transcendence to different contexts by blending with each genre that appears without undermining that genre's conventions and purposes. While Becker interprets Byatt's subtitle as evidence of *Possession's* non-realism (19), I disagree with this. For all its escapist charms (Ganteau, "Fantastic, but Truthful" 227), the Romance is less unrealistic—misrepresenting reality to tell a pretty story—than hyper-realistic, pushing past the limits of life as we know it. In the Romance, the quest can lead to other worlds; love can overcome death; mystery can either be solved or else elevated to a level of magic that demands acceptance rather than mastery

of knowledge.³ The Romance offers opportunities to explore what characters—or readers—wish to be. We see this in *Possession*; Maud and Roland's impersonal quest for facts and knowledge leads to a revelation that transforms Maud's perspective of herself, while Ash's torment and need for reconciliation and closure lead to his epiphanic meeting with Maia.

This questioning of and questing through reality—the unconscious way in which such wishes are explored in *Possession*—turns me to the Lacanian Real. Lacan defines the Real as “that which appears in a lightning moment in the void of the verb ‘to be’” (“The Instance of the Letter” 458); if that isn't vague enough, he further explains, “The meaning which man has always given to the real is the following—it is something one always finds in the same place, whether or not one has been there. [...] The real is what keeps turning up where one expected it” (*Seminar II* 297). Interpreting Freud's dream of Irma's injection, Lacan elaborates,

There's an anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarises what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real, of the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*. (*Seminar II* 164)

In essence, the Real is that which pre-exists linguistic ordering and continues to exist outside of any order we try to impose on our experience. We encounter it in instances where our imposed order is revealed as useless or fraudulent, as in moments of horror, shock, or pain.⁴ Bruce Fink clarifies, “The real is perhaps best understood as *that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization” (25, italics Fink's), but the key to the Lacanian Real is bipartite: its lack of or resistance to symbolization, and the means by which we access it, which by definition must involve the destruction of any pretext that we are in charge of our lives. The Real resists symbolization because, in manifesting, it destroys symbols.

Because of this destructive character, Lacan associates the Real with trauma. The Real both appears through trauma and introduces trauma by appearing (Chapman). However, beyond the circumstances and means by

³ As Ganteau says, “[Romance] is meant to disclose alternative worlds, not to observe *this* world” (“Fantastic, but Truthful” 227).

⁴ Ganteau and Onega point out that “the central characteristic of trauma is the unknowability and inassimilability by the conscious mind of the event that has triggered the traumatic condition, so that trauma always has an element that remains *in excess of* representation and understanding” (7, emphasis in original).

which we access the Real lies the question of what, exactly, we are accessing. If the Real exists outside linguistic, symbolic, scheduled order, and we can only experience it in moments when the understanding we construct about our lives is stripped away, then the Real naturally takes on what Glyn Daly identifies as a “transcendental aspect” (par. 19). Transcendence is morally and emotionally neutral. As such, it cannot be labeled a horror or a blessing, though it carries a generally positive connotation and suggests enlightenment. Thus, if the Real bears a transcendental aspect, Lacan’s conflation of the Real with horror and trauma proves inadequate, warranting further exploration of the Real unattached to such negative experiences.

Žižek follows this step and breaks the Real into three categories, each of which is entwined and “mapped onto” the others (*Conversations* 69):

There are three modalities of the Real: the “real Real” (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object [...]), the “symbolic Real” (the real as consistency: the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like the quantum physics formulas which can no longer be translated back into—or related to—the everyday experience of our life-world), and the “imaginary Real” (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable “something” on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object). The Real is thus effectively all three dimensions at the same time [...]. (“Philosophy” par. 15)

Žižek’s second category, the symbolic Real, is Real simply in that it is truth beyond human comprehension; he corrals Lacan’s horror into the real Real. The imaginary Real, however, sheds all negative connotations and expresses only transcendence, otherworldliness, wonder. Žižek further qualifies the imaginary Real as even that which charms us in another person, that “mystical, tragic, whatever, dimension in him or her” which “is something that is Real, but at the same time totally elusive and fragile” (*Conversations* 69). So, for Žižek, the Real can exist in non-traumatic terms. Its understanding merely requires what Žižek calls a “transcendental a priori” (*Conversations* 65); we must assume that more exists than what we can perceive or control: “the Real as pure appearing” (Žižek, “Philosophy” par. 15).

This pure appearing does occur in *Possession*, as we shall discuss, but it has gone unnoticed in the past because critics generally focus on *Possession* as a postmodern novel rather than examining its transcendental themes.⁵ (For the

⁵ Irene Martyniuk defines the era of the postmodern narrative as revealing truth to be ultimately unknowable (265), and points to Byatt’s use of the double ending as an attempt to satisfy both the characters within her novel and her readership, albeit differently, as each is allowed different information (265), but at the same time, Martyniuk sees the

purposes of this study, I will define the postmodern novel as one which aims at verisimilitude by applying skepticism to assumptions, tropes, and generic conventions in literature.) In contrast to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a novel to which *Possession* is frequently compared, Byatt's Postscript strikes many critics as inauthentic, displaying too much authorial presence, destroying the realism of ambiguity in favor of a happy ending. Other critics read *Possession* as a deliberate strike against the conventions of the postmodern novel. Becker sees Byatt's departure from postmodernism as finding a new home in an old form: the gothic, with dashes of pulp fiction (20). While I agree that *Possession* incorporates gothic elements, I see this more in Jean-Michel Ganteau's terms of "tapping the powers of such genres or inflections as the Gothic [...], by problematising mimesis and by, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's terms, 'claim[ing] a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material'" ("The Logic of Affect" 79-80). Louisa Hadley comments, "Rather than expressing postmodern skepticism about the inaccessibility of the past, [...] Byatt's Postscript promises access to something more authentic, something that cannot be contained within texts" (190). The idea of something more authentic than the text, a means of accessing an extra-textual past, that objective reality exists whether we know it or not, is not standard postmodernism.⁶ Indeed, unlike *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with its deliberate double non-resolution, *Possession* gives us not one but two neatly tied-up endings. The reader winds up knowing more than all the characters put together.

However, as Byatt herself points out, her use of the omniscient narrator is not intended to offer anyone, character or reader, unlimited knowledge; the "much maligned" third-person narrator, as far as *Possession* is concerned, "does not pretend to be 'God'—simply the narrative voice, which knows what it does

Postscript as problematic, as it privileges readers over characters in the completion of their knowledge, and requires the *deus ex machina* assistance of an omniscient narrator in order to do so (278). (Thus, one might argue that Martyniuk sees *Possession* as not only a postmodern novel but a failed one, at that.) John O'Neill points to postmodernism in *Possession*'s double ending and what he identifies as its "ambiguous closure" and "attempt to reconcile differing temporal methodologies" (337). Dana Shiller sees a postmodern questioning of historical narratives in the Postscript's highlighting of what lack of documentation causes to be left out of histories (547), and relates Byatt's incorporation of various Victorian narrative techniques in *Possession* to Jameson's critique of postmodernism's "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (Jameson qtd. in Shiller 538).

⁶ Susanne Becker goes one better by stating that *Possession* actually marks the end of postmodernism (17). She, too, points to *Possession*'s preoccupation with "truth" and "origins," which, she reminds us, "are, like 'knowledge,' contradictory to postmodern thinking" (23), as situating the novel on the threshold between postmodernism and whatever comes next.

know" ("In the Grip of *Possession*" par. 14).⁷ It is worth noting that every narrator in every novel is, in fact, to some degree omniscient; narrative assumes omniscience in order to convey information about characters to the reader, whether it puts forth their thoughts and words or simply recounts their actions. Fowles's double ending, however ambiguous, still shapes reader interpretation through what it allows us to know.

Byatt has stated that she uses this breaking-in narrator at three points in *Possession* where the necessary information could not be conveyed any other way, because there is no way for the 1980s characters in her text to discover it (*On Histories* 56). Furthermore, she claims that she is not attempting to force an unequivocal happy ending out of her Postscript: "'Happy ever after' is, as Nooteboom said, a lie, a look in a mirror. Ordinary happiness is to be outside a story, full of curiosity, looking before and after" (*On Histories* 150). I would here complicate Byatt's disavowal of a happy ending for *Possession* by noting that, while its Epilogue does indeed incorporate the "ordinary happiness" of merely knowing what occurs in a story, the knowledge denied most of its characters—but gifted to Ash and to us as readers—provides not just ordinary happiness but "the Consolation of the Happy Ending" identified by Tolkien (75). While the 1980s characters of *Possession* experience happiness in their acquisition of knowledge, readers feel it and more as a deep, satisfying sense of rightness when we are allowed to know the little piece of information that is missing, the piece that only Ash discovered, the piece conveyed to him through no text and lost because it was never written down.

Byatt's assumption of a "reality that escapes our grasp" (Campbell 67), rather than reference to the non-existence of objective reality or even emphasis on the fragmented and flawed nature of knowledge, does disqualify *Possession* from easy categorization as a postmodern novel. And by conveying this information through the use of an omniscient narrator, and positing the use of that narrator and the transmission of that information to the reader as necessary, Byatt shifts her text away from categorization as a postmodern novel and into the realm of Romance. As Fuchs notes, the Romance "enshrines the notion of an essential identity that can be revealed by signs" (21). This expectation of revelation essential in the Romance stems from the interaction in that mode between the symbolic order and the Imaginary Real. We follow the expected development of the Romance so avidly because we know that the Real will break through.

Romance allows us to recognize the Real without trauma, in moments of transcendence where the supernatural Other appears and acts; the arrival of Athena or the fairy godmother penetrates the world of a Romance as effectively

⁷ O'Neill describes this narrator as more demiurge than divinity (339).

as a car wreck in our own experience thrusts us out of our symbolic order into the Real. In Romance, we acknowledge transcendence sidelong, and, in fact, we experience catharsis through this approach. Catharsis comes because Romance gives us a safe place to admit, whether we admit it or not, that, as Lacan posits, “unconsciously we all believe in God, in our immortality” (Žižek, *Conversations* 89-90). In Romance, we find the Real exactly where we expect it. Since the setting of the Romance adheres more closely than, say, myth to the real world as we know it, this lends a greater poignancy to our longing for the Real to manifest itself: We half-believe that it isn't actually there. At the same time, we yearn for the moment—by no means assured—when our doubt will be proved wrong. As Ganteau and Omega observe,

Romance would thus seem to be intrinsically suited to the evocation of that which escapes cognition, being a hyperbolic idiom bent on conveying that there is something in excess of representation [...]. As the mode of the tentative and the liminal [...] meant to explore boundaries [...] or ceaselessly and failingly probe at the limits of representation and understanding, romance [...] presents that there is something unrepresentable, inaccessible, inassimilable. (10)

Thus, the Romance is an appropriate vehicle for the preoccupations of *Possession*. The Victorian characters Ash and Christabel wrestle with the death of religion in their time and its replacement with new views of science and humanism; simultaneously, they struggle with the way their drives and desires tempt them to transgress the relational boundaries they have chosen for their lives. Ash and Christabel exist on many borders, and they know it. They frequently make reference to themselves as a sort of Adam and Eve in the garden; what new knowledge will evict them? Their religious and literary debates thus hold vital implications and applications for their lives. When Ash reflects on Ragnarök (the subject of one of his poems) or Christabel compares herself to the fairy Melusina (the subject of one of hers), they are not just engaging in idle chitchat, but deeply questioning their own placement in the grand story of the world . . . and whether, indeed, a grand story exists. Thus, their allusions to the Romance of their lives hold both hope and poignancy: hope that his doubts and her fears are wrong and that all is part of a larger scheme, the poignancy of the brokenness with which they are left at the end of their lives. Irony, too. For their story is a Romance.

Similarly, in the novel's 1980s setting, Roland and Maud contend with the limitations of their own zeitgeist. The heirs of Darwin and Freud, trained in the critical theories of the twentieth century, “Roland and Maud are able to theorise love, desire, the body, and the drives but the theories they have internalized—poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and

feminism—have alienated them [...] from emotion” (Becker 25). As he and Maud pursue the mystery of Ash and Christabel’s relationship, Roland begins to wonder whether their scholarly drive for complete knowledge has been replaced with a more personal investment in finding the end of the story:

Somewhere in the locked-away letters, Ash had referred to the plot of fate that seemed to hold or drive the dead lovers. Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others. (456)

Roland wonders whether he and Maud have begun patterning their own behavior after that of their Victorian predecessors, both intentionally and inadvertently. Even as he meditates on this possibility, Roland questions whether his academic training might be the cause of any perception of meaning in real life: “Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable” (456). And he reflects that this desire for coherence and closure might cause them to behave as though they were part of an unfolding, recognizably archetypal plot.

At the same time, it is only in participating in this plot, in recognizing that they are part of a Romance, that Roland and Maud are able to break free, at least a little, from the restrictions of their philosophy in order to pursue a life of their own, not one merely based on studying the lives and ideas of others. In her research, Maud echoes Christabel’s earlier cries for autonomy in her choice to “write about liminality. Thresholds. Bastions. Fortresses” (549), but this focus on the establishment and maintenance of borders makes it difficult for her to open those borders when love offers itself. For that matter, love is an archetype the 1980s characters have been taught to distrust. Declaring his feelings to Maud, Roland describes them as “All the things we—we grew up not believing in” (550). Discovery of Ash and Christabel’s *grande passion* gives Roland and Maud the opportunity to access their own hearts.

Roland may wonder whether coherence and closure are merely the arbitrary interpretations of wishful thinking, but the Romance of *Possession* decides firmly in favor of their existence. When the 1980s scholars discover the truth about Ash and Christabel’s child and Maud’s heritage, they identify and accept the resolution of the mystery they have been pursuing, quickly interpreting the story with Maud as its center as well as its heir:

Blackadder said, "How strange for you, Maud, to turn out to be descended from both—how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth—no, the truth—of your own origins." [...]

Maud said, "You know Ellen. Why do you think she put [Christabel's undelivered letter] in the box—with her own love-letters—" [...]

"For Maud," said Blackadder. "As it turns out. She preserved it, for Maud." (547)

For a bunch of postmodernists, this group pounces on "coherence and closure" with ravenous alacrity. Ganteau remarks on Romance's "revelatory power," which can both unite diverse perceptions and reframe the reader's understanding of the story ("The Logic of Affect" 89). This is certainly the case with Byatt's scholars, whose collective worldview slips readily into an acceptance of coherence at the merest hint of a controlling narrative. Such is the compelling nature of Romance: It plays on every desire that characters and readers may have to be part of a story, and evokes every hidden belief that this is already so.

As it happens, the 1980s characters are mostly right in their interpretation of the Victorian trail of clues, but they are wrong in one particular. Their misunderstanding of the lock of hair which they assume to be Christabel's but turns out to be Maia's is relatively unimportant for them—though it does ensure that the assumptions of much of Roland and Maud's future scholarly work will be incorrect—but it calls into question two important elements of the text. First, in a novel obsessed with the possession of knowledge, it casts doubt on whether mastery of reality through knowledge is even possible. Secondly, in a novel obsessed with whether objective reality either exists or is governed by a controlling, coherent narrative, it indicates that the answer to both is yes. In the Postscript, the reader is shown the *more* that exists, and (Byatt's demurrals of deity notwithstanding) by a narrator who sees the birds and flowers on the hillside as clearly as it observes the man and girl who meet there. Knowledge is not everything, suggests this Romance, but some people need to know some things, and the narrator is there to see that they do.

Again, this decision is deliberate on Byatt's part, and stems from her belief that an insistence on the unreliability of narrative impoverishes both art and the moral life (*Passions of the Mind* 17). Despite our assurance of failure, we still rely upon the idea that truth exists, and that we must attempt to access it; Byatt says, "We may be, as Browning said, born liars. But that idea itself is only wholly meaningful if we glimpse a possibility of truth and truthfulness for which we must strive, however, inevitably, partial our success must be" (*Passions of the Mind* 17). The conception of truth as objectively existent even if we can never wholly possess it is critical to understanding *Possession*, however it may contradict postmodernism's prevailing philosophy. The presence of the

Real in *Possession* indicates the failure of postmodernism to provide an adequate definition of reality. As a Romance, *Possession* shares both fairy tale's freedom in otherworldliness and its adherence to certain narrative rules (c.f. Vladimir Propp). This assumes the existence both of a reality whose rules must be obeyed, and of the marvelous.

Byatt resolves the problematic issue of *how* to demonstrate objective reality, in general, through her use of the twin narrative timeframes in her novel. The Victorian sections set up the reality that the later characters seek to access, while Byatt uses the omniscient narration sections to drop clues for the 1980s scholars of her text to discover—or not. As readers, we stand without, observing, mentally correcting, being corrected ourselves. In this way, we participate with the characters of *Possession* as they are seized with that “combination of longing and irretrievability that makes Romance such a successful representative strategy” (Boccardi 12); we glimpse, through the omniscient narrator, that for which they long and which they cannot retrieve, or can retrieve only in part. But, at the same time, we see the whole, or that there is a whole.

Thus, Byatt establishes a sense of a reality that transcends individual experience or comprehension through the interplay of her narrative frameworks. As I have discussed, the interaction between limited individual or group understanding and objective truth is an ongoing preoccupation of *Possession*. Byatt distills this theme in the Postscript. Here, Ash's discovery of his daughter represents the pivotal event of his life and the story, the instance where his understanding of everything that has happened and will happen—and ours—is refined and reformatted. It is here that *Possession's* nature as a Romance is most pronounced. For, while the Romance deals with that which cannot be empirically investigated rather than the everyday matters and features of the world we know (Ganteau, “Fantastic, but Truthful” 237), Romance also permits that unknown to breach the limitations of characters' investigative capacities, and to bestow knowledge upon them beyond their ability to access it, seek it, or even request it. So it is for Ash.

When Ash lies dying, his mind straying, he tells Ellen that his sleep takes him to other places, giving him entry to other worlds and (it turns out) to his past. She responds, “Yes, dear. We don't know much about our lives, really. About what we know” (491). He then attempts to tell her the most important thing he knows: “Summer fields—just in a—twinkling of an eyelid—I saw her. I should have—looked after her. How could I? I could only—hurt her— [...] In my watch. Her hair. Tell her” (491).

Ellen looks, finds the hair, and assumes, just as the twentieth-century scholars do when they see it in the box she places in Ash's grave, that it is Christabel's. In fact, it is the relic of Ash's meeting with Maia, the event that provides Ash with coherence and closure, though no other ever knows it: the

"emphatic closure" identified by Ganteau ("Fantastic, but Truthful" 226) as associated with the Romance. Just as Ellen hides the truth through omission in her journals, the gap in recorded history in *Possession* holds the locus of meaning for both the tale as a whole and Ash in particular (Shiffman 100).⁸ Beyond coherence and closure, Ash's discovery of his daughter becomes a focal point for his life; his experience echoes Christabel's reflections during their secret rendezvous in Yorkshire: "This is where I have always been coming to. Since my time began. And when I go away from here, this will be the midpoint, to which everything ran, before, and *from* which everything will run" (309). In Tolkien's terms, this is "the turn" which "reflects a glory backwards" (76). The events of the Postscript, returning to the Victorian timeframe after what we could assume to be the conclusion of the tale in the 1980s, remind us that not only does every narrative end still *in medias res* (Miller 4), with all the openness that this implies, but that Ash's meeting with Maia is his center into and from which the events of his life flow, and by which he will interpret his whole life.

This centrality gives the Postscript its pivotal quality in the story. John O'Neill describes the apocalyptic moment of ending in neo-Victorian fiction as one in which replenishment occurs, suffused with revelations of stasis and flux, death and rebirth, end and beginning (333). Maia's revelation provides *Possession's* conclusion with its apocalyptic character, and Ash with the replenishment he needs to move on. Though the inconclusiveness of his relationships with Christabel and their daughter continues to weigh on him, he is freed from the torment of ignorance about his child's fate. He sends Maia to Christabel with a message to this effect:

"Tell your aunt," he said, "that you met a poet, who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new." (555)

Maia forgets her message and never delivers it, gradually forgets her encounter with the poet, and never learns that he is her father and the woman she calls aunt is her true mother. And Christabel never learns of their meeting or Ash's forgiveness of her. This irresolution leads O'Neill to say, "This ending [...] undermines any sense of security we might feel" (338), a discomfort that appears to contradict Jane Campbell's assessment of the Postscript as "idyllic" and "delightfully satisfying" (67). The discomfort expressed by the first statement and the apparent sentimentality addressed in the second, I feel, are both in reaction to *Possession's* qualities of otherworldliness, its disclosure of

⁸ For Slavoj Žižek, it is worth noting, the Lacanian Real "has no positive-substantial consistency," and, itself, merely exists *as* a gap (Noys par. 20).

alternative worlds (Ganteau, "Fantastic, but Truthful" 227), the border the Romance points out between our conception of reality and the Real.

This liminality parallels the "leap of freedom" Byatt describes in readers when a character in a fairy tale is granted his or her wish; a freedom, she adds, that is always limited by a sense of fatedness, of inescapability, that the granting of the wish will change nothing (*Djinn* 259). For here, in the granting of his wish for knowledge, Ash experiences the paradox of the already and not-yet of Romance: the satisfaction of learning of his child's life, and the frustration that this information changes nothing in his circumstances or hers. All it can change is his heart. But that is all the change that Ash requires. The incursion of Romance into his life breaches the limitations of his ability to acquire understanding by his own efforts. He departs still limited, but completed by newfound coherence.

The Postscript is an exercise in knowing and not knowing, in catharsis and restraint. Ash meets Maia, but because Ellen withholds Christabel's final letter to him, he never learns what happens to his daughter after their meeting. No one else ever learns that they met. In this most profoundly emotional moment, Ash deliberately behaves matter-of-factly and calmly, so that Maia will not be disturbed or afraid. The narrative voice in this section sounds similarly detached; for all its wealth of detail regarding the natural setting, the narrative omniscience does not extend to the characters' emotional experiences. This rescues the Postscript from any tendency to the saccharine. The cathartic nature of this scene does not depend on violent displays of emotion; its power lies in its subtle evocation of Ash's—and readers'—longing for truth to be revealed, for all to be set right. In this way, the Epilogue provides the "turn" which, Tolkien writes, prompts in readers "a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality" (75-76), which certainly reflects my personal experience. Ganteau speaks of Romance's "epiphanic dimension," in which (in Alain Badiou's terms) an ethical event permits a previously unknown truth to emerge; the new truth is incorporated into the ethical narrative, which may then build to a new revelation ("The Logic of Affect" 90-1). Thus, truth within the Romance continuously reveals and renews itself.

This epiphanic dimension thus creates an environment in which Ash—with the reader—encounters truth, revising what he formerly believed to be true, destroying the interpretive framework by which he has lived, and plunging him into a reality beyond any story he has created about his life. The delicacy with which Byatt handles this event, the unemotional quality of the writing and report of Ash's reactions, situates the potentially traumatic experience of such a reversal and revision, instead, as catharsis and fulfillment of longings. What he has desired—possession of knowledge, Christabel's

innocence of murder, the life of his child, the ability to forgive—is bestowed upon him unexpectedly, in a moment that changes everything.

What is it, exactly, that Ash discovers? He learns the truth, but it is a truth that opposes what he has previously believed to be true—it is a truer truth, a truth-negating truth. It is a truth that breaks in a moment into his reality and which, even in his lost message to Christabel, he never articulates. Thus, it is a truth which remains unsymbolized, and which never moves into the realm of record to shape the laying-down and reception of knowledge.

When Ash meets his daughter, the Real pierces into his life. That which was beyond his understanding and remains beyond his articulation is revealed to him. His encounter with her is his moment of transcendence. He has doubted God; he has feared Christabel; he has chafed under the thought that his future holds such ignorance of his child's fate, lack of closure, and resultant bitterness. The reality that he thought he knew left little room for hope. The truth about Maia's existence was the gap in his knowledge. And the Real appeared in that gap.

But beyond the idea of Real-as-gap lies the idea of Real-as-impossible, the Real-as-inexplicable, unjustifiable, miraculous (Žižek, *Conversations* 165). Why should this meeting occur? Why should Ash recognize who she was? The events of the Postscript, accidental, unrecorded, and omnisciently-narrated as they are, suggest that for Byatt as for Žižek, “miracles happen and *that's* the Lacanian Real” (*Conversations* 165, italics Žižek's). Ash's confrontation with the Real is not traumatic. Instead, his encounter with the un-possessable offers him miraculous redemption: the “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” of Tolkien's *Eucatastrophe* (75). No wonder that he never writes it down. For to try to symbolize the Real would be to lose it.

Thus, Ash's encounter with the Real gives *Possession* its clear categorization as a Romance. The fulfillment and healing this encounter brings him comes not through symbolization but beyond or despite it. The breaking-through of the Real brings him peace, not trauma, and allows readers to access their own deep longing for transcendence, qualities inherent in the Romance as a mode and critical to *Possession: A Romance* in particular.

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