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**‘Literary Critics Make Natural Detectives’ ?
Intertextuality and Intratextuality in
A. S. Byatt’s *Possession***



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Seventies and the Eighties Antonia Susan Byatt became a respected scholar and a critically appreciated writer, although her sister, the novelist Margaret Drabble, was at the time definitely more famous.

Then, in 1990, she published *Possession*, a novel that turned into an amazing best-seller, won her the Booker Prize and conquered even the United States market in spite of being a very 'bookish' book, rich in details about literary theories, embellished with nineteenth century-sounding poetry and complete with a full-scale reproduction of the whole exchange of Victorian letters.

Possession, like many unexpected best-sellers (Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, for instance), owes its success to a kind of multifaceted offer: some readers may simply enjoy the detective story element and follow the dense plot with sincere desire to 'know how it all ends'; some might relish the sarcastic representation of academic life or the parallel evolution of the two love stories developing between the two leading couples. Others will appreciate the literary aspect of the tale and admire Byatt's ability in mimicking the rhythms, the phrasing and the mind frame of Victorian poetry and prose. *Possession* can be appropriately defined in turn as a mystery, a love story, a parody, a comedy of manners, a social satire, and much more.

All these classifications are correct and seem to be present in the text at the same time, which can be interpreted as a sign of the postmodernist nature of the novel. The impossibility to pin down a work into a single category is indeed one of the strongest hints of postmodernism, together with the high level of self-reflection of the text and the focus on language.

The main postmodernist feature in the novel is, anyway, the use of intertextuality and intratextuality: Byatt spins a web of allusions inside and outside the text at the same time, both relating her fictional Victorian characters and their writings to real Victorian poets and crafting a subtle net of hints between the modern characters and the Victorian ones. While doing so, she succeeds in creating a coherent fictional universe in which everything seem to find eventually a place and an answer. At the end of the story, moreover, the reader feels like having actively taken

part to the quest for truth that drive the modern characters; just like them, the reader has learnt to read the Victorian texts looking for clues and, simultaneously, has begun to do the same with the novel itself.

It is also for this reason that the final *Postscript* comes as a shock; the reader, satisfied with a relatively happy ending and convinced of his status as a kind of literary critic and ‘natural detective’, has to face an ironic truth: after pages and pages stating the reliability of written texts, it is revealed that those texts were and have always been incomplete.

What is Byatt saying, then, about the power of words and the role of the author?

The aim of this work is to track down the most significant examples of intertextuality and intratextuality in the novel and to analyse the way they are featured, in order to better understand the way Byatt weaved her story and to answer to this question.

CHAPTER 1

A. S. BYATT AND POSTMODERNISM

CHAPTER 1 – A. S. BYATT AND POSTMODERNISM

1.1 A. S. Byatt's biography

A. S. Byatt was born Antonia Susan Drabble in 1936 in Sheffield, Lincolnshire. Both her parents loved books, music and art. Her father was a judge, her mother a teacher who gave up her job to stay at home and raise four children.

At the age of ten, Byatt was bed-ridden for weeks after developing an infection and spent her time reading Dickens, Tennyson, Austen and, on her mother's suggestion, Browning, an author she later came to consider 'one of the three great English love poets (the other two are Donne and Robert Graves).'

¹

In 1949 she was sent to a Quaker boarding school in York, an experience which she found quite hard because of her self-perceived social inadequacy. She often took shelter in the basement boiler room of the school, where she began writing: many details of her school experience were to become part of later writings, such as some of the short stories included in the collection *Sugar* or a crucial episode in her novel *The Children's Book*.

Like her parents and her siblings, one of which is the writer Margaret Drabble, Byatt went to Cambridge University (1957), where she attended F. R. Leavis's lessons: the famous critic's theories about the moral dimension of literature and the strength of language influenced deeply the young student, who was at the time trying to write her first novel.

In 1959 she married the economist Ian Byatt: they had two children, Antonia (1960) and Charles (1961). In 1962 Byatt began teaching part-time and in 1964 she published her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*. She was juggling writing, teaching and motherhood: she even began to write literary essays and reviews while doing talks and interviews for the BBC. In 1967 *The Game*, her second novel, begun in 1957, was published. In 1969 she divorced Ian Byatt and married Peter Duffy, with whom she had two daughters, Isabel (1970) and Miranda (1973). In 1972, her son Charles, then 11-year-old, was killed on his way home from school by a drunk driver.

¹ A. S. BYATT, *Passions of the Mind. Selected Writings*, New York: Vintage International, 1990, p. 21.

After this event, Byatt began teaching full-time at University College, where she would work until 1983, and in 1978 she published *The Virgin in Garden*, the first novel of a tetralogy which follows the life of Frederica Potter, a young woman who lives through the changing British society from the Fifties to the Seventies. The second novel in the series was *Still Life* (1985), for which Byatt won the British Silver Pen Award. After the collection of short stories *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987), she published her greatest best-seller to date, *Possession* (1990), which won the Booker Prize. She then wrote *Angels & Insects* (1992), short stories (*The Matisse Stories*, 1993, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eyes*, 1994, *Elementals*, 1998) and completed Frederica's quartet with *Babel Tower* (1997) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Byatt returned to the Victorian world telling its decay and its end in *The Children's Book* (2009), shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Her latest work of fiction is a retelling of Norse mythology in *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* (2011).

Among her critical and scholarly works there are studies on Iris Murdoch, *Degrees of freedom* (1965), as well as on Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Unruly Times* (1970); a collection of her critical essays, *Passions of the Mind*, was published in 1990, shortly after *Possession*.²

1.2 Cultural and literary influences

Byatt has always declared herself a 'non-belonger of schools'³ and it is generally recognised that her novels are hard for critics to label; at the same time, she has often acknowledged the importance and the influence on her work of many novelists, from George Eliot and Balzac to Proust and Iris Murdoch. Byatt sees Eliot, Balzac and Murdoch as models for realistic fiction, while Proust inspired her to try and 'include everything' in her writing.⁴

The range of her interests and of her readings anyway goes far beyond the fields of poetry and narrative, including subjects as different as science, entomology, zoology, pottery, visual art, but most of all she appears to have a fascination with language and its relationship with reality.

² K. COYNE KELLY, A. S. Byatt, Twayne's English Authors Series 529, New York: Twayne, 1996, pp. 1-7 and 9-12.

³ C. WALLHEAD, *The Old, the New and the Metaphor*, London: Minerva Press, 1999, p. X.

⁴ O. KENYON, 'A. S. Byatt: Fusing Tradition with Twentieth-Century Experimentation', in *Women Novelists Today: a Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties*, Brighton: Harvester, 1988, p. 55.

Byatt's view of this subject was certainly influenced by the Cambridge teaching of Franklin Raymond Leavis, whose critical stance created a new way of reading and understanding literature. Leavis urged students to focus more on the actual words written on the page and less on the biographical and historical details of an author's life: his method was text-bound and he strongly believed everything that mattered in a poem or in a novel had to be investigated through a close scrutiny of the language used by the author.⁵ Leavis's moral seriousness was focused on making English literature 'the centre of university studies and also of social morality.'⁶ The critic frequently asserted that literature represented life and texts were to be assessed according to the content and the author's moral position.⁷

In *Possession* Leavis appears when Blackadder (a not-so-secondary character) is introduced to the reader:

His father sent him to Downing College in Cambridge to study under F. R. Leavis. Leavis did to Blackadder what he did to serious students; he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to, or change it.⁸

In the introduction to the 1991 reissue of her first novel, Byatt also recalls the critic's 'moral ferocity which dismissed all literature but the greatest, which was great for *moral* reasons.'⁹ Leavis's New Criticism dominated the world of English studies until the 1960s, when its predominance was first challenged and then overthrown by the rise of structuralism and deconstructionism. While Byatt is familiar with the new critical approaches and cannot share Leavis's elitist consideration that only few critics were able to judge what's worth reading, she still believes in the moral power of language and in its ability to capture some kind of truth, as much as she feels the need to ponder on the nature and boundaries of language itself. Her interest in the

⁵ COYNE KELLY, pp. 5-7.

⁶ T. EAGLETON, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p. 27.

⁷ 'F. R. Leavis' in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/334127/F-R-Leavis> (visit.: 22 Feb., 2012)

⁸ A. S. BYATT, *Possession. A Romance*, London: Vintage, 1991, p. 27.

⁹ A. S. BYATT, *The Shadow of the Sun*, London: Vintage, 1991, p. X.

possibilities and the limits of what language can achieve, the way in which her writings reflect this problematic vision using metanarrative means and the self-reflexive nature of most of her works have led many critics to consider Byatt as a 'postmodern' author. But what does this exactly mean?

1.3 Postmodernism

Though it is not the aim of this work to provide a definition of Postmodernism, it is nonetheless to give a concise review of this erratic movement: 'Postmodernism' itself is a term whose exact definition critics still debate on, because, among other things, to mark it out would result in a violation of the postmodern premise that no absolute truths or definite terms exist. The word can be indeed used in reference to a wide range of subjects, from philosophy to architecture, and broadly speaking it is related to the feeling of the end of modernist ideals and values in a world ruled by capitalism and fragmentation. As Fredric Jameson wrote in 1991,

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the "crisis" of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s. As the word itself suggests, this break is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement (or to its ideological or aesthetic repudiation).¹⁰

Even though some critics set this break from modernity at the end of World War II, when the historian Arnold J. Toynbee named 'postmodernism' what he believed was a new historical cycle and the term began to appear also in architectural essays,¹¹ many others share Jameson's timeline and see the Sixties as the time of real changing, when 'postmodern' was used first as a derogatory term and then as a praise to the rising pop culture.¹² In the Seventies another American critic, Ihab Hassan, saw it as a positive development in the literary world and traced the story of its

¹⁰ F. JAMESON, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke UP, 1991, p. 1.

¹¹ R. CESERANI, *Raccontare il postmoderno*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997, p. 29, footnote n.3.

¹² CESERANI, pp. 28-31.

origins and transformations,¹³ going as far as creating a table of differences between Modernism and Postmodernism.¹⁴

The debate on Postmodernism has not stopped yet, indeed in recent years there have been important contributions to the subject, from Fredric Jameson's scolding judgment of Postmodernism as a product of loss of historical sense marking the victory of capitalism thinking¹⁵ to Linda Hutcheon's belief that postmodern cultural products can effectively criticise the postmodern world.¹⁶

An exhibition recently held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and called *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990* was advertised as 'the first in-depth survey of art, design and architecture of the 1970s and 1980s, examining one of the most contentious phenomena in recent art and design history,'¹⁷ the key word being, of course, 'contentious'. It is noteworthy that the exhibition, heralded by some intellectuals as a celebration of the end of Postmodernism,¹⁸ left out literature, the area in which it has been perhaps more daring and experimenting but also more difficult to pinpoint.

One can in fact wonder whether there are any common traits in postmodern works or what can be identified as 'postmodern' in a novel: metafictional writing, a self-conscious and self-reflexive narrative,¹⁹ playfulness with language, the use of irony, parody and pastiche,²⁰ experiments on the structure of the novel, the blurring of the boundaries between high and low cultural forms are all accepted as postmodern elements. They can be found in such works as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a novel which broke conventional narrative rules and experimented on the omniscient narrator's role, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, D. M. Thomas's

¹³ CESERANI, pp. 34-35.

¹⁴ I. HASSAN, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987.

¹⁵ JAMESON, pp. X-XII.

¹⁶ L. HUTCHEON, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 27.

¹⁷ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/p/past-exhibitions-and-displays-2011/> (visit.: 27 Feb., 2012).

¹⁸ E. DOCX, 'Postmodernism is dead', *Prospect* No. 18, July 20, 2011.

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/07/postmodernism-is-dead-va-exhibition-age-of-authenticism/> (visit.: 26 Feb., 2012).

¹⁹ P. WAUGH, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, London: Methuen, 1984, pp.23-24.

²⁰ JAMESON, pp. 16-18 and HUTCHEON, pp. 99-101.

The White Hotel, David Lodge's *Nice Work*, Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Thomas Pynchon's novels, J. L. Borges's *Ficciones* and many others.

Another prominent postmodern feature is intertextuality: the word was coined at the end of the Sixties by poststructuralist critic Julia Kristeva,²¹ who saw any literary text as the product not only of a single author but also of its relationships with other texts and with the structures of language. According to this definition, every text is somehow the absorption and the transformation of other texts: in Gerard Genette's words, every text is a palimpsest.²² However, there is still some debate among critics as to what really counts as intertextuality: for some critics the presence of common themes and ideas is already an intertextual moment; others argue that only a straight quotation counts as an intertextual evidence. This makes intertextuality one of the most fraught terms in literary criticism.

1.4 Byatt and Postmodernism

Many postmodern aspects appear in A. S. Byatt's novels, mainly in *Possession*, which was frequently reviewed as 'postmodern romance', 'postmodern gothic', 'postmodern literary thriller.'²³ In the novel Byatt moves swiftly from academic parody to pastiche of Victorian prose and poetry, from self-conscious narrative moments to mild experiments with focalization and point of view, while spinning a tale rich in allusions, quotations, direct and indirect hints to other texts and other authors, with links both inside and outside the text itself: *Possession* is therefore a novel which relies heavily on intertextuality, as it will be shown in chapter 3, and it seems to embody all the features of a postmodern work.

At the same time, however, Byatt often hints that her vision of Postmodernism is quite ironic and sometimes very critical. To begin with, the writer builds a realistic fiction that never questions

²¹ J. KRISTEVA, *Séméiotiké. Ricerche per una semanalisi*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978.

²² G. GENETTE, *Palimpsesti. La letteratura al secondo grado*, Einaudi: Torino, 1997.

²³ J. BUXTON, "'What's Love Got to Do With It?': Postmodernism and *Possession*", in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt. Imagining the Real*, ed. by A. Alfer and M. J. Noble, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001, pp.90-91.

its own fictionality, unlike Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and celebrates the 'power and delight of words.'²⁴ Moreover, the Victorian characters, who almost always talk to the reader only through their writings, appear to be much more lively and passionate than their present day counterparts. Byatt declared:

The dead are actually much more alive and vital than the living [...] The poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true, given that language always tells lies, that they become rather papery and are miserably aware of this.²⁵

Postmodernism has killed the 'Mystery'²⁶ that shaped passions in the past: as the plot thickens, the modern protagonists come to distrust the theories they have learned.

Besides, while the modern scholars' quest highlights that there is no such thing as a all-encompassing knowledge, the readers get to know really 'everything' thanks to a *Postscript* revealing an episode unknown to the contemporary characters as well as to most of the Victorian ones.

Finally, just before the spectacular ending, Byatt shows us the meek anti-hero, Roland, having a kind of epiphany; re-reading Ash's poetry, he feels he fully understands it for the very first time: 'Roland read, or reread, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire.'²⁷ He subsequently begins to write poems of his own and so the scholar becomes a poet: criticism is overpowered by the creative force of imagination.

Byatt clearly still believes in the ability of language to authentically capture human experience, which is not postmodern at all,²⁸ and is not ashamed of offering her readers a satisfying

²⁴ BYATT, *Possession*, p. 470.

²⁵ W. WACHTEL, "A. S. Byatt", in *Writers & Company*, Toronto: Knopf, 1993, pp. 82-83.

²⁶ BYATT, p. 267.

²⁷ BYATT, p. 472.

²⁸ BUXTON, pp. 100-101.

closure because 'coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable.'²⁹

²⁹ BYATT, p. 422.

CHAPTER 2

POSSESSION. A ROMANCE:

PLOT AND CHARACTERS

CHAPTER 2 – *POSSESSION. A ROMANCE*: PLOT AND CHARACTERS

2.1 *The plot*

Possession begins in 1986 with an unexpected discovery: **Professor Blackadder**, an eminent scholar who devoted all his academic life to study and edit the works of the Victorian poet **Randolph Henry Ash**, asks a member of his research team, **Roland Michell**, a quiet and insignificant young man, to look into Ash's copy of Vico's *Principij di Scienza Nuova* to see and find anything of interest. Leafing through the book, that appears untouched, Roland finds the drafts of a love letter by Ash to an unknown woman (clearly not his devoted wife, **Ellen Best**). Roland is shocked by his finding because Ash has always been known as a loyal and affectionate husband and also because the drafts show signs of a strong, raw emotion: 'It was this urgency above all that moved and shocked Roland.' (p. 27 of the novel)

Roland is immediately hit by the desire of knowing more and surprising even himself he deftly hides the drafts and take them home with him. Unable to confide in his unsympathetic girlfriend **Val**, he starts a personal investigation and quickly identifies the mysterious woman as **Christabel LaMotte**, a minor Victorian poet whose work, especially her epic *The Fairy Melusina*, has been rediscovered by the feminist movement which considers her a lesbian (she lived a very private life with a painter, **Blanche Glover**). **Fergus Wolff**, a brilliant and ambitious colleague, hearing that Roland is interested in LaMotte, advises him to talk to **Maud Bailey**, a successful scholar in the field of Women's Studies who has focused her deconstructionist and psychoanalytical research on LaMotte. Moreover, she is also a descendant of LaMotte through the poet's sister who married a Bailey. Roland and Maud meet and despite a cold reception on her part he can't help telling her about the letters: surprisingly, she seems to understand the impulse that drove him to take the drafts and after reading them she shares Roland's desire to 'know what happened next.' (p. 50)

Maud suggests a trip to Seal Court, the Lincolnshire mansion belonging to the Baileys where Christabel spent her last years; she doesn't know what to expect, though, as her family branch and the Lincolnshire one are not on speaking terms. Roland will unwittingly gain access to Seal Court

helping the frail and ancient **Lady Bailey**, who is on a wheelchair and gets stuck on a track. Her husband, **Sir George**, a brusque and guarded man, shows to Roland and Maud Christabel's bedroom: Maud, recalling one of Christabel's poems, is able to discover a stash of letters, the whole, secret correspondence between Ash and LaMotte.

Lord and Lady Bailey, who are in a difficult financial situation and would like to know whether the letters could be profitable, let Roland and Maud read and analyse them. The two scholars find in the correspondence the evidence of an adulterous liaison between the two poets, which culminated in a trip to Yorkshire, where the relationship was consummated, in 1859. It must be noted that according to critics and biographers Ash had undertaken the expedition on his own and purely for scientific purposes. The lovers' journey is then described from Ash's point of view in a chapter that is essentially an incursion in the Victorian past.

From this moment on, Roland and Maud will follow in the Victorian characters' footsteps, trying to match their information with textual evidence from poems and letters. They travel to Whitby and realise that both Ash's and LaMotte's work includes reference to the landscape and the folklore of Yorkshire. At the same time, they start to form a frail kind of relationship, based more on mutual respect than on attraction: they share a postmodern awareness of the disastrous effect deconstructionism has had on desire and love and they find they both believe 'that the best state is to be without desire.' (p. 267) Maud even reveals to Roland she had a unfortunate love affair with Fergus Wolff. As they get closer to each other, their quest becomes more and more puzzling and, at the same time, their secret is threatened: Fergus, gathering various hints, finds out about the letters and allies with **Mortimer Cropper**, Ash's American biographer and a avid collector of everything belonging to the poet. Cropper is on good terms with **Hildebrand Ash**, the poet's official inheritor, who would gladly sell him the letters if he had them.

As it turns out, after the Yorkshire trip Christabel fled to France, seeking shelter in the house of her cousin **Raoul de Kercoz**. This is revealed by the diary of Raoul's daughter, **Sabine**, a finding which Maud comes by thanks to her friend **Leonora Stern**, an assertive and outspoken American

scholar. Meanwhile, Maud, consulting Ellen Ash's unpublished diaries with the aid of their curator, **Beatrice Nest**, realises that Ellen was informed of her husband's infidelity by a distracted Blanche Glover, who subsequently committed suicide.

When Blackadder finds out what is going on, Roland and Maud quite dramatically leave for France, where they will be followed by an unlikely team formed by Leonora, Blackadder and Cropper; in Brittany they are able to read Sabine's diary and eventually they discover Christabel's secret: she had gone to France because she was pregnant but she fled also from that refuge when her time was due, so it is not clear what happened to the child. Maud, reading some scraps of poetry which were included in the diary and were clearly written by Christabel, is afraid that the child was stillborn or worse, a notion, it seems, that Ash himself held. In the meantime, Val, convinced that Roland has left her for Maud and finally aware of the fact that their relationship was already over, begins a love affair with a young and successful solicitor, **Euan MacIntyre**, who happens to know **Toby Byng**, Lord Bailey's solicitor.

When Roland and Maud come back to England, the events speed up: contacted by MacIntyre and Byng, Maud learns that according to Christabel's will, in which she left her copyrights to her niece **Maia Thomasine**, she could be the owner of the whole correspondence. Immediately after this surprising revelation, Maud and Roland are called by a frantic Beatrice Nest who overheard Cropper and Hildebrand Ash plotting to desecrate Randolph and Ellen's tomb: it is known that Ellen buried Randolph with a box in which she had put some personal objects, including letters, and the letters are what Cropper is after.

In a dramatic climax almost all the characters are assembled in a stormy night around a grave: Cropper is prevented from taking the box, but the group decides to open it anyway, hoping to find more answers. The box contains a lock of blonde hair, the picture of a young bride dressed in the late Victorian fashion and Christabel's last letter to Ash, a letter he didn't read because he was on his deathbed, as it is shown in another Victorian interlude, this time based on Ellen's point of view. It is revealed that Christabel's child was not dead; she gave birth to a girl, Maia Thomasine,

who was adopted by Christabel's sister and never knew her true parentage. As a result, Maud turns out to descend from both Ash and LaMotte. So the mystery is solved and apparently everything fits into place: Cropper is defeated, Val and Euan are going to get married, Roland is offered three different academic jobs and finds his poetic voice, Maud surrenders to her feelings for Roland.

Nevertheless, there's one last twist: a *Postscript*, once again set in the Victorian times, let the reader, and the reader only, discover that Ash knew he had a daughter and he even got to meet her; the blond lock in the box belonged to Maia, not to Christabel.

There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. (p. 508)

2.2 Plot structure and patterns

It is understandable even from a generic summary that Byatt structured and built her story on what could be defined as a basic level of intertextuality, the kind that refers to the choice of the narrative genre and the combination of traditional plot devices and structures. First of all, Byatt herself gives a metafictional hint to the reader¹ with the subtitle of the novel, *A Romance*, and the choice of the first opening epigraph, a quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*: in it the American writer defines romance as a genre which can employ fantastic elements and has a freedom in representing the truth that novels don't have. This was the starting point for Byatt, who therefore decided to 'include every conceivable version of romance.'² As a matter of fact, it is possible, using the patterns and the structures outlined by Northrop Frye³ and Vladimir Propp⁴ in their works, to detect in *Possession* many elements belonging to romance and fairy tales as well as ironic allusions to detective stories, gothic tales and modern 'romantic' fiction; the latter was openly acknowledged by Byatt ('I was writing a parody of Georgette

¹ COYNE KELLY, A. S. *Byatt*, pp. 91-92.

² J. NOAKES, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', in M. REYNOLDS and J. NOAKES, A. S. *Byatt. The Essential Guide*. London: Vintage, 2004, p. 11.

³ N. FRYE, *La scrittura secolare*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978.

⁴ V. J. PROPP, *Morfologia della fiaba*. Torino: Einaudi, 1972.

Heyer')⁵: let's just consider, for instance, the final love scene between Roland and Maud, which not only presents all the language stereotypes it would be possible to find in a Mills & Boon novel but also ironically underlines them in another metafictional moment:

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

Initially, there is the found manuscript theme, a plot device widely used in literature (from Ariosto and Cervantes to Poe, Manzoni, Eco and many others)⁶ as the source of the opening exposition of a story; moreover, it has been underlined that the description of the volume in which Roland finds the drafts in some way echoes another description, the one Robert Browning puts at the beginning of *The Ring and the Book*.⁷ Roland opens cautiously the copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova*:

The book was thick and black and covered with dust. Its boards were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time. Its spine was missing, or rather protruded from amongst the leaves like a bulky marker. It was bandaged about and about with dirty white tape, tied in a neat bow. (p. 1)

In the opening of *The Ring and the Book*, the poet relates how he found an old volume and bought it in Florence:

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I'the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers, - pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when heart beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since?

⁵NOAKES, p. 11.

⁶ R. MAXWELL, 'Manoscritti ritrovati, strane storie, metaromanzi', in *Il romanzo*, ed. by F. Moretti, Torino: Einaudi, 2003, pp. 237-260.

⁷ R. TODD, A. S. Byatt, Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997, pp. 24-25.

It is a significant detail since Browning, as it will be pointed out, is one of the main sources of inspiration for the character of Randolph Henry Ash.

In *Possession* the finding originates a transgression (the thefts of the letters) and causes the hero, although an unusual one as Roland, to leave his (relatively) safe academic world and go searching for a way to solve the mystery and redeem himself. The hero leaving his original setting is a typical feature of the quest narrative,⁸ the one Propp identifies as the situation in which the hero is compelled to leave his home:⁹ in this specific case Roland experiments ‘a change in fortunes or social contests’¹⁰ and must go and look for literary hints based on diaries, poems, letters, tales, etc.

Byatt, however, creates almost immediately a variation joining Roland’s forces to Maud’s, so that the quest will be undertaken by the two of them together, even if it can be stated that Roland is the real hero, a point that will be discussed later. At present, it must be pointed out that it is Roland, helping lady Bailey and thus gaining her gratitude, who opens the way to Seal Court and to the discovery of the whole correspondence (in Propp’s words, this would be a case of ‘test’ and ‘reward’).¹¹

The hero and his partner then undertake a difficult journey, a ‘descent’ to use Frye’s definition, which makes their life more and more difficult and isolated.¹² The quest is textual as much as geographical,¹³ with the modern characters tracking down the Victorian ones first to Yorkshire and then to Brittany. Just like in a fairy tale,¹⁴ Roland and Maud have to carry out a difficult task indeed: not only they painstakingly put together the hints given by the letters with other textual evidence (the poems, Ellen’s diary, Sabine’s *journal*), they also understand that all they ever knew about the two poets, all the writings produced after 1859, must be reassessed: in one more telling sign of metafiction, some important clues are hidden in Christabel’s own fairy tales, in

⁸P. CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, ‘Romance Forms in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*’, *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 8, 1995, p. 80

⁹ PROPP, p. 43.

¹⁰ FRYE, p. 106.

¹¹ PROPP, pp. 46-49.

¹² FRYE, p. 131.

¹³ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 82.

¹⁴ PROPP, p. 65.

which she shows deep narrative awareness playing with the expectations and the clichés typical of the genre, and in Gode's story, a perfect illustration of traditional folktale.

While fulfilling their task, Roland and Maud are sometimes helped and sometimes hindered by secondary characters: the Baileys, for instance, can be seen both as helpers and as obstacles; Beatrice Nest at first appears as an obstacle, but Maud's kindness will turn her into an helper (another instance of 'test' and 'reward'); yet while the story goes on there is the appearance of a real and powerful antagonist, Mortimer Cropper, who, as Roland himself realises in another moment of metafictional awareness, turns 'the Quest, a good romantic form, into Chase and Race, two other equally good ones.' (p. 425)

The expedition to Brittany is as a matter of fact a turning point in the story: the hunters of the chase become the prey, thus being subjected to a 'persecution.'¹⁵ Back to England, while all the loose ends of the plot begin to tie up, the hero's position becomes increasingly uncomfortable. Roland finds himself eventually deprived of anything he held dear, his job, his house, his girlfriend, his professional reputation: 'He felt marginal.' (p. 437)

Nevertheless, as the quest comes to a successful end Roland gives the stolen letters to Blackadder and is thus able to return to his original setting (the academic world) and to get his own reward: not only he learned a lot, he also got a job, fell in love and realised he could be a poet. It is a real and proper 'ascent'¹⁶ which is underlined by another typical romance device, the recognition, in this case the revelation of Maud's lineage.¹⁷ This important disclosure is achieved through a scene in which Byatt plays again with clichés: the grave digging during a stormy night is so blatantly 'gothic' that it becomes ironic, as it is underlined by a brief exchange between Euan MacIntyre and Cropper (p. 497):

'I've always wanted to say, "You are surrounded".'
'You said it very well,' said Cropper.

¹⁵ PROPP, p. 61.

¹⁶ FRYE, p. 138.

¹⁷ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 84.

All's well that ends well, then? Apparently, Byatt uses another traditional feature of romance¹⁸ and creates a 'happy ending' for the modern characters, but once again she ironically plays with it: the reader, by now convinced to have reached the end of the story, is promptly surprised by the writer with the *Postscript*.

This unexpected coda has two noteworthy effects: firstly, it underlines the difficulty of achieving a conclusion, something Roland is obsessed with since reading the drafts¹⁹ for the first time. Significantly, the letters were stashed in Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova*, a book about the circularity of history, a theory assessing the impossibility of a definitive ending.²⁰ The second effect of the *Postscript* is evident especially to the reader, who is allowed to discover something the modern characters don't and won't know: all in all, our heroes appear to have partly failed their quest, because they discovered many secrets but not this essential one; in spite of being sure that 'literary critics make natural detectives,' (p. 237) their competence as 'literary sleuths'²¹ proves to be inadequate and the reader realises that not everything can be deduced from the written texts Roland and Maud have been thoroughly scrutinizing during their search and on which the novel is built. Byatt, then, enjoys once more using irony in her treatment of clichés and stereotypes, 'happy ending' included.

2.3 The characters: parallelisms and reversals

While the intertextual inspiration for the single characters and their intratextual associations are to be examined in detail in the next chapters, the focus here will be yet again on the way Byatt employs ironically traditional narrative schemes: in this case she plays with her characters' roles and with the reader's expectations about them.

¹⁸ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 86.

¹⁹ J. L. CHEVALIER, 'Conclusion in *Possession*', in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt. Imagining the Real*, ed. by A. Alfer and M. J. Noble, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 107.

²⁰ COYNE KELLY, *A. S. Byatt*, p. 97.

²¹ C. WALSH, 'Postmodernist Reflections: A. S. Byatt's *Possession*', in *Theme Parks, Rain Forests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by R. Todd and L. Flora, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, p. 192.

To begin with, the writer links all the major characters in the story using a ‘mirroring technique’²² which relates the present to the Victorian past. As critics have underlined, anyway, it’s the Victorian sub-plot that really inform the twentieth-century plot;²³ while the tale unfolds, the reader realises that Roland and Maud, Randolph and Christabel are becoming more and more similar and their stories, apparently so different, have a lot in common, for instance the fact that both plotlines originate from a transgression: Roland steals some historical documents and acts against any academic notion of scholarly behaviour, Randolph goes against the moral conventions of his time and his own ethics. Both men subsequently put their reputation and their status at risk: both are silently unhappy in their official relationships²⁴. As for the female counterparts, at first Maud is reluctant to follow Roland on his quest, just as Christabel tries to reject Randolph’s entreaties of friendship: both women fiercely defend their privacy, but in the end both get involved in tangled plots which are to change their lives in a radical way. The Victorian characters uncannily influence the lives and choices of the twentieth-century ones, as if they were a sort of *Doppelgänger*²⁵, something Roland becomes aware of during the trip to Brittany:

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.²⁶

Byatt, anyway, likes to mix features and traits and so the parallelism between her characters’ acts and choices is contrasted and completed at the same time by a subtle reversal: Roland, judging from the plot patterns singled out in the previous paragraph, should be the ‘hero’ of the contemporary part of the novel, but he surely is an unusual one: he is no action man, on the contrary he is a quiet scholar, not even a particularly brilliant one, with languishing career hopes, a small

²² CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 80.

²³ B. LUNDEN, *(Re)educating the reader: fictional critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville’s Dr Copernicus, Coetzee’s Foe, and Byatt’s Possession*, Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1999, p. 93.

²⁴ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, *ibid.*

²⁵ J. NEUBAUER, ‘Uncanny pastiche: A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*’, in *Parodia, pastiche, mimetismo. Atti del convegno internazionale di letterature comparate, Venezia 13-15 ottobre 1993*, ed. by P. Mildonian, Roma: Bulzoni, 1997, p. 389.

²⁶ BYATT, p. 421.

man who feels often inadequate and out of place, and that is precisely what makes his first transgression all the more significant. It is worth mentioning that when the novel was going to be published in the US, Byatt was asked to enhance Roland's description in order to make him more appealing to the readers; this is the original passage (p. 11):

[...] he saw himself as a failure and felt vaguely responsible for this. He was a small man, with very soft, startling black hair and small regular features. Val called him Mole, which he disliked. He had never told her so.

Here is the same passage in the US edition:

[...] he saw himself as a failure and felt vaguely responsible for this. He was a compact, clearcut man, with precise features, a lot of very soft black hair, and thoughtful dark brown eyes. He had a look of wariness, which could change when he felt relaxed or happy, which was not often in these difficult days, into a smile of amused friendliness and pleasure which aroused feelings of warmth, and something more, in many women. He was generally unaware of these feelings, since he paid little attention to what people thought about him, which was part of his attraction. Val called him Mole, which he disliked. He had never told her so.²⁷

Clearly Roland was felt by the American publisher to be not charismatic or attractive enough to deserve his 'hero' status, but this is exactly the effect Byatt probably wanted to achieve, reversing not only usual expectations about the protagonist of a novel but also what are commonly perceived as fixed gender roles.²⁸ Actually the female protagonist, Maud, is everything Roland is not: she comes from a wealthy family, she is tall and strikingly beautiful, she has an established career and presents a self-confident and strong image of herself.

This gender subversion resurfaces subtly throughout the whole novel: at the beginning the modern couple of characters appears to be simply the reversed image of the Victorian one, as Ash was a critically acclaimed author, a successful poet loved by his public, a brilliant and attractive

²⁷ H. NOWAK, 'A. S. Byatt's Possession for British and American Readers', *Erfurt Electronic Studies in English* 8, 1997 (http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/artic97/nowak/8_97.html, visit.: 28 Aug., 2012)

²⁸ A. BRINK, *The Novel*. London: MacMillan Press, 1998, p. 303.

man with money and time to invest in his hobbies, while Christabel was considered a minor writer and had to struggle to get financial security in a world where unmarried women had few chances of living independently. In their relationship, then, at first he seems to be the dominant element, to the point that he is perceived as a threat to the self-sufficient life Christabel has built for herself and for Blanche, who, significantly, describes him in her diary as a 'Prowler.' (p. 46) However, while their friendship develops, the real creative force is revealed to be Christabel: she will write an epic poem, *The Fairy Melusina*, which is decidedly ahead of its time, and she will also influence deeply Randolph's production and style, shaping his poetry in subtle ways.²⁹ She turns out to be the dominant element even in the way she manages the love affair with Ash: she is determined to live it fully and then to return to her independence; not even the unwanted pregnancy will deter her from this purpose and she will refuse every further contact with Ash, partly in fear of losing the child but also in order to keep her own freedom. In a similar way, Roland, who in the beginning appears weaker and duller than Maud, turns out to be the 'hero' of the story, both in a traditional and in a postmodern meaning: he finds the letters and understands their importance, he has the audacity to steal them, he starts the quest firmly convinced that something happened between Ash and LaMotte, a belief Maud initially rejects, he saves Lady Bailey and gains access to Seal Court, he put his job and his private life at risk in the name of 'desire for knowledge.' (p. 82) His status as a 'hero' is confirmed by the final reward he gets, which is material, intellectual and emotional at the same time: he has new career prospects, he has discovered his own poetic voice, he finally helps Maud to recognise her feelings.³⁰ From this point of view, Roland's story is a real and proper *Bildungsroman*, at the end of which the protagonist is wiser and stronger. Yet Roland is a postmodern hero, aware of the fact that theoretical knowledge is somehow imprisoning him, and his main achievement lies in his ability to blend academic criticism and instinctual passion:³¹ he rediscovers emotions and desire and so does Maud.

²⁹ BRINK. p. 304.

³⁰ LUNDEN, p. 122.

³¹ LUNDEN, p. 113.

On a lesser note, the reversal of established gender roles can be found as well in the couple formed by Lord and Lady Bailey: she, even though crippled and frail, is the one who takes the most important decisions in the household.³²

In this inverted perspective, it must also be noted that Roland is trapped in a relationship in which his partner, Val, is the breadwinner, a clear sign of modernity which, nevertheless, mirrors once again the Victorian situation: Val decides to accept a ‘menial’ (p. 14) job as a free-lance secretary to help Roland pursue an academic career, just as Ash’s wife, Ellen, becomes his secretary and relieves him of any practical problem so that he can devote himself totally to poetry. Both women act as they do because they feel somehow superfluous:³³ Val failed academically and comes from a problematic background, so she tries desperately to keep her relationship with Roland going, even though there is scarce happiness in it, because it seems to her it is the only good thing she was able to achieve. Ellen, as once more only the reader gets to know (pp. 458-459), has never really been a wife in the true sense of the word: she was unable to consummate the marriage and she felt so guilty (and grateful for Ash’s silence and acceptance) that she decided to do everything she could to keep her husband comfortable (p. 459):

The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and titbits. She became his slave. Quivering at every word. *He had accepted her love.*

She had loved him for it.

He had loved her.

Further parallelisms show that more secondary characters can be linked between each other in various ways: Blanche Glover and Leonora Stern embody the ‘best friend’ character, they despise men and are firm believers in female solidarity and friendship, but both will be betrayed by their friends.³⁴ Christabel will quarrel with Blanche and leave her alone to go first to Yorkshire with Ash and then to Brittany, Maud will not reveal to Leonora what she found out about Christabel. It is

³² BRINK, p. 303.

³³ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 80.

³⁴ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, p. 81.

also quite obvious to the reader that both women feel for their friends much more than affection, something openly stated for Leonora and hinted more than once for Blanche. In contrast, the two characters' physical and psychological features are completely different and while Leonora forgives Maud for her betrayal, which after all is more about their professional relationship than their real friendship, Blanche gets to the point of committing suicide because her whole life project with Christabel is shattered and damaged beyond repair.

Similarly, Ellen Ash can be related not only to Val but also to Beatrice Nest, the curator of her diaries. Beatrice begins working on Ellen's writings because she has fallen in love with Ash's poetry; at first she is disappointed (p. 115):

Randolph read aloud to his wife daily, when they were in the same house. The young Beatrice Nest did try to imagine the dramatic effect of these readings, but was not helped by the vague adjectival enthusiasm of Ellen Ash. There was a sweetness, a blanket dutiful pleasure in her responses to things that Beatrice at first did not like.

Soon, however, Beatrice understands that Ellen wrote not to give information, on the contrary she wrote to 'baffle' (p. 220) and to protect fiercely her family's privacy: Beatrice ends up feeling protective towards Ellen, sharing her concern for secrecy, and just as Ellen did everything in her power to guard her secrets, Beatrice does what she can to defend Ellen's desires. At the beginning of the novel Beatrice has been working on the diaries for twenty-five years and has rejected any offer of help. Both Ellen and Beatrice then appear as keepers, guarding the private life of Randolph Henry Ash.

Another parallelism can be drawn between Professor Blackadder and Mortimer Cropper: they are both authorities in the field of Ash's studies, but their attitude towards their subject is radically different. They are alike because their lives and thoughts have been somehow taken over by Ash and they are aware of it:³⁵

³⁵ LUNDEN, p. 114.

There were times when Blackadder allowed himself to see clearly that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's work. (p. 29)

As for Cropper, Ash's biographer, he realises, while imagining to write an autobiography, that its highest moment would be the transcription of a letter written by Ash to his great-grandmother: after that, he wouldn't have much to say,

almost, he sometimes brushed the thought, as though he had no existence, no separate existence of his own after that first contact with the paper's electric rustle and the ink's energetic black looping. (p. 105)

The difference lies in the way they react to this awareness: Blackadder is stuck in the monumental task of editing Ash's works because he is a meticulous scholar who tries to be faithful to the text and to clarify every single point, thus writing footnotes on footnotes, 'ugly but necessary.' (p. 28) He is obsessed with Ash's writings, not with his life, unless it has influenced his work in any way: this kind of obsession can be easily found in the real academic world³⁶ and it's not presented as unusual or suspicious. In contrast, Cropper is obsessed with objects: he has been acquiring Ash's personal effects for a long time, he even stole some items and it looks like he's trying to 'possess the life of his subject'.³⁷ He is not a real scholar, he is a greedy collector whose interest in Ash is almost voyeuristic and necrophiliac:³⁸ he has no qualms about desecrating Ash's tomb, for instance, and he is clearly presented as the 'villain' of the story; remarkably, in his first appearance he is totally clad in black (ironically, though, he is also sitting on a lavatory). (p. 93)

If Cropper is considered as the antagonist, he can be related also to Fergus Wolff, a character whose name really says it all and who can be once again be linked to the image of the 'Prowler', the aggressive and disruptive male presence threatening female independence.³⁹

Fergus is also presented as the direct opposite of Roland: he is a brilliant, successful deconstructionist scholar, a charming man; he is even tall, blond and blue-eyed, but his smile is

³⁶ KELLY, p. 84.

³⁷ KELLY, p. 85.

³⁸ BUXTON, ' "What's Love Got to Do with It? Postmodernism and *Possession*', p. 92.

³⁹ KELLY, p. 84.

‘voracious’, his mouth ‘terribly full of strong, white teeth’. (p. 32) He had a brief fling with Maud but he is still after her, who appears partly annoyed, partly scared by his aggressive behaviour. Both Cropper and Wolff represent the worst kind of possessiveness,⁴⁰ the sort that leads to objectifying:⁴¹ Cropper sees Ash as a pile of relics to collect and stash away, Maud for Fergus is just a trophy. The villains, therefore, are bound to be defeated, while Roland, who stole the letters not out of greed but pushed by the instinctual need to know ‘the end of the story’ (p. 327), and Maud, who comes to share this need, will be rewarded in more than one way.

In conclusion, it must be underlined once more how subtly and cleverly Byatt plays throughout the whole novel with traditions and expectations, keeping a delicate balance between postmodern disenchantment and traditional faith in the power of words.

⁴⁰ BUXTON, *ibid.*

⁴¹ KELLY, p. 93.

CHAPTER 3
SOME INSTANCES OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN
POSSESSION

CHAPTER 3 – SOME INSTANCES OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN *POSSESSION*

As it was pointed out in the first chapter, intertextuality is a typical postmodern device and it is craftily employed by Byatt in *Possession*: the novel is so rich in allusions that the educated reader will somehow enjoy finding out references, while a more naïve one will nevertheless recognise some patterns (the detective story, for instance) or catch some hints.

3.1 *Characters and inspiration*

First of all, the main Victorian characters appear clearly as a combination of various, famous nineteenth-century poets or, in André Brink's words, 'behind each character seems to move the (almost spiritistic) shadow of a Predecessor'.¹ Randolph Henry Ash seems to be a sum of the most prominent writers of the Victorian age: he is evidently based on Robert Browning, whose poetic style and narrative techniques are uncannily echoed in the poems written into the novel; Crabb Robinson's diary description of Ash's collection *Gods, Men and Heroes* immediately recalls Browning's *Men and Women*, both for the subject and for the use of the dramatic monologue technique (p. 23):

Read several dramatic poems from Randolph Henry Ash's new book. I noted particularly those purporting to be spoken by Augustine of Hippo, the ninth-century Saxon monk, Gotteschalk, and 'Neighbour Pliable' from *Pilgrim's Progress* [...] It is difficult to know where to have Randolph Ash. I fear he will never become a popular poet [...] He convolutes and wreathes his melodies with such a forcing of rhyme and such a thicket of peculiar and ill-founded analogies, that his meaning is hard to discern.

Moreover, Ash's love letters bring to mind Browning's to Elizabeth Barrett, once more both in style and substance; here is part of one of the drafts discovered by Roland (p. 5):

Dear Madam,

Since our extraordinary conversation I have thought of nothing else. It has not often been given to me as a poet, it is perhaps not often given to human beings, to find such ready sympathy, such wit and judgement together. I write with a strong sense of the necessity of continuing our interesting talk [...] I feel, I know with a certainty that cannot be the result of folly or misapprehension, that you and I must speak again.

¹ BRINK, *The novel*, p. 294.

As a comparison, this is the beginning of the first letter ever written to Elizabeth Barrett by Robert Browning (January 1845):

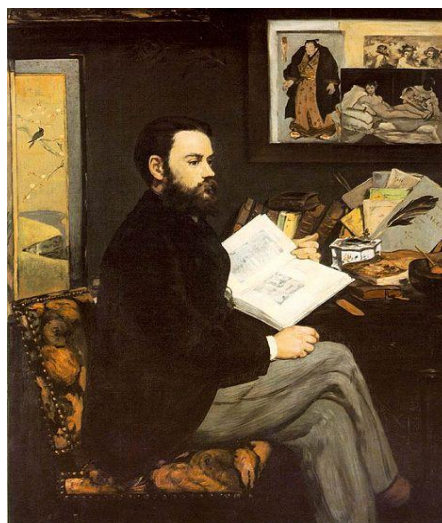
I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett, -- and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write, --whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius and there a graceful and natural end of the thing: since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me--for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration.²

The two letters share a deep urgency, a need to communicate that overcomes the order of thoughts and words.

Even Ash's physical appearance as seen in the pictures owned by Roland bears a striking similarity to some of Browning's images; Manet's portrait of Ash, which Roland himself recognises as having 'some things in common with his portrait of Zola' (p. 16), shows Ash as he was in 1867,

sitting at his desk [...] Manet's Ash was dark, powerful, with deepset eyes under a strong brow, a vigorous beard and a look of confident private amusement. He looked watchful and intelligent, not ready to move in a hurry.

Here are the two sources of this imaginary painting:



1. Edouard Manet, *Emile Zola*, 1868, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

² <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/ab-letters/id/1966/rec/1> (visit.: 18 Oct., 2012)



2. Michele Gordigiani, *Robert Browning*, 1858, National Portrait Gallery, London.

The portrait of Ash, painted by Watts in 1876,

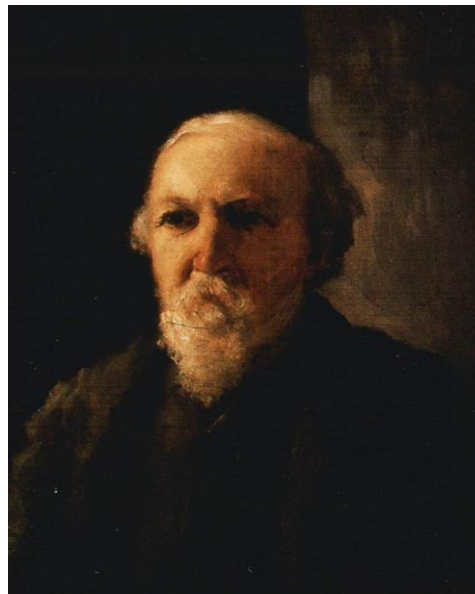
showed an older and more ethereal poet, his head rising, as is common in Watt's portraits, from a vague dark column of a body into a spiritual light [...] The important features in this image were the eyes, which were large and gleaming, and the beard, a riverful of silvers and creams, whites and blue-greys, channels and forks resembling da Vinci's turbulences, the apparent source of light. (p. 17)

This is Watts's portrait of Browning:



3. George Frederic Watts, *Robert Browning*, 1866, National Portrait Gallery, London.

The description, nevertheless, is much more fitting to another picture of Browning, painted by Ralph Curtis:



4. Ralph Curtis, *Robert Browning*, 1881, Armstrong Browning Library, Waco

Another straight reference to Browning is the use of some lines of his poem *Mr. Sludge, "the Medium"* as an epigraph to the whole book, alongside with Nathaniel Hawthorne; the poem shows Browning's skeptical attitude towards so-called paranormal activities and it was probably inspired by the attending of a séance in 1854: while his wife Elizabeth was deeply impressed by the experience, Browning was definitely more suspicious.³ This event is clearly recalled in Ash's 'Gaza exploit' (p. 391), when he attends a séance so that he can speak with Christabel and inquire about the child but he disrupts the gathering, convinced as he is that he is experimenting a fraud. Just like Browning, Ash is driven by this incident to write a scorching poem against spiritualism, *Mummy Possess*. Yet, there is a twist: in the novel the séance appears to be a truthful experience and the spirit talking through the medium could be easily identified with Blanche Glover; Christabel, and the reader with her, surely does recognise Blanche's allusions to her suicide (as it will be explained in chapter 4), while Ash utterly misunderstands the words and their meaning.

³ REYNOLDS and NOAKES, A. S. Byatt. *The Essential Guide*, p. 54.

Even the domestic trouble experienced by Ellen Ash when she has to deal with a pregnant maidservant, who eventually runs away, is partly related to a similar occurrence in the Brownings' household, which resulted in a very different ending because Robert and Elizabeth Browning decided to help mother and child and financially supported them.⁴

A further allusion to Browning could be found in the description of the Stant Collection at Robert Dale Owen University, New Mexico. The collection, which Cropper turned into a shrine replete of Ash's 'relics', can be easily compared to the one located at Baylor University, Texas, in the Armstrong Browning Library, which includes, as its web page claims, one third of the Brownings' private library and many of their 'private artifacts' such as Browning's writing desk and inkwell.⁵

The Ashes' trip to Vacluse after their marriage can be connected too to the Brownings, who travelled through France and 'made a pilgrimage to Vacluse'.⁶

On the other hand, Ash's illicit love affair with Christabel, whose father was French, can be likened to Wordsworth's liaison with the Frenchwoman Annette Vallon⁷, an event unveiled only in the 1920s due to the work of George McLean Harper on some previously ignored letters.⁸ The finding forced scholars to reassess their interpretation of many of the poet's writings, just as in the novel Ash's and La Motte's lives and works have to be revised in the light of their relationship. Ash and Ellen's unconsummated marriage, moreover, suggests to the reader an association with what famously happened to John Ruskin and, supposedly, to Thomas Carlyle.⁹

⁴ L. KILBRIDE, 'Byatt: Victorian Poets in Possession', in *Cambridge Authors*, <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/byatt-victorian-poets> (visit.: 18 Oct., 2012)

⁵ www.browninglibrary.org (visit.: 14 Nov., 2012).

⁶ REYNOLDS and NOAKES, pp. 53-54.

⁷ K. COYNE KELLY, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 81.

⁸ A. LEITCH, 'Harper, George McLean', in *A Princeton Companion*, http://etcweb.princeton.edu/CampusWWW/Companion/harper_george.html (visit.: 30 Oct., 2012).

⁹ COYNE KELLY, p. 82.

Finally, Ash's prose and poetry are often similar in rhythm and patterns to the writings of other famous Victorians such as Matthew Arnold, Alfred Tennyson, Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, who wrote the poem *The Garden of Proserpine*.¹⁰

Christabel LaMotte too, for her part, is a combination between some of the most significant female poets of the time, who are often connected by the difficulties they met trying to be poets and women in a time that didn't give them many opportunities of expression. Christabel share with all these writers a love or a need for isolation, as if female creativity could be only expressed by giving up society and refusing the traditional roles of wife and mother, and her story can be seen as a reversal of Elizabeth Barrett's life. Whereas Barrett decided, with Browning's encouragement, to give up her seclusion and was able to reconcile being a poet and being a woman (and it must be noted that while she lived she was positively more famous than her husband), Christabel will experiment a circular pattern: safe and comfortable in her remoteness, shared with Blanche, she will leave it and then, after paying a terrible price, ultimately she will return to a self-inflicted reclusion in order to be close to her daughter.

The need for isolation, as well as the desire of self-sufficiency, is a feature Christabel shares with other famous nineteenth-century writers, from Emily Dickinson to Christina Rossetti and Emily Bronte, and also with a fictional character, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. The fictional poems written by Christabel owe much to the style of both Rossetti and Dickinson: the blank verses, the use of dashes, punctuation and capital letters recall Dickinson's poems, while the use of repetition and paradox reminds the reader of Rossetti's style.¹¹ As for her physical appearance, if at first it can be mistaken for 'generic Victorian lady, specific shy poetess' (p. 38), it soon becomes clear that her conventional fair hair and green eyes are hinting to a more mysterious and complex nature, as we will see further.

¹⁰ REYNOLDS and NOAKES, pp. 42-43.

¹¹ L KILBRIDE, 'Byatt, Intertextuality and Possession: A Case Study', in *Cambridge Authors*, <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/byatt-victorian-poets> (visit.: 18 Oct., 2012).

The intertextual references for Ellen Ash are provided by the novel itself, when the narrator explains how Beatrice Nest got to work on Ellen's diaries: she had to publish something to gain scholarly credibility and a job and since it was out of question that, being a woman in the academic world of early 1940s, she could approach directly Ash's works, she was advised to 'compare the wifely qualities of Ellen Ash with those of Jane Carlyle, Lady Tennyson and Mrs. Humphry Ward' (p. 115). The comparison is quite ironic because, on the surface, Ellen seems the dullest of these 'helpmeets', with no particular talent of her own besides being a devoted wife, while at the end of the novel it will be disclosed that she had indeed a gift for writing and she expressed it in her diaries, compiled to offer an official account of Ash's life and to 'baffle' (p. 220) morbid curiosity in order to protect the privacy and the secrets she shared with her beloved Randolph. This protectiveness links her also to a character in another Byatt's novel, Caroline Severell, married to the writer Henry in *The Shadow of the Sun*.¹²

Modern characters, on the other hand, appear more generically intertextual because they are often not directly inspired by real-life people but rather embody different kinds of stereotypes. James Blackadder, for instance, is the epitome of all the scholars whose lives are taken hostage by the subject of their studies; Byatt recalls her first inspiration for the novel as it follows:

I used to watch Kathleen Coburn, the great Coleridge editor, walking round and round the circular catalogue in the British Museum library and I thought, 'Here is a woman who, as far as I can see, spends every waking moment, and a lot of the sleeping moments, of every day, thinking about Coleridge.' And then the word came into my mind, with the immediate sense of demonic possession. I thought, 'Does he possess her? Has this dead man taken over this living woman? or has she taken possession of him, because we read his thoughts as mediated by her?'¹³

Another kind of scholar is represented by Leonora Stern, who is so confident and zealous in her psychoanalytical interpretation of Christabel's work that she seems to be a parody of feminist criticism; her writing insists obsessively on sexual metaphors hidden in Christabel's work, so that the reader, aware of the fact that Christabel was not as repressed as Leonora believes her to be,

¹² COYNE KELLY, p. 82.

¹³ NOAKES, 'Interview with A. S. Byatt', p.12.

definitely see the American academic in a satirical way.¹⁴ In Yorkshire Roland, after reading some pages from Leonora's essay on *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte* (p. 246),

had a vision of the land they were to explore, covered with sucking human orifices and knotted body-hair. He did not like this vision [...] Sexuality was like thick smoked glass; everything took on the same blurred tint through it.

It must be underlined, moreover, that almost all of Leonora's interpretations of Christabel's poetry will turn out to be wrong and ideologically biased. The sharpest reproach to Leonora, unexpectedly, comes from Beatrice Nest in a conversation with Maud (p. 223):

A Professor Stern came. From Tallahassee. She wanted to know – to know – to find out about Ellen Ash's sexual relations – with him – or anyone. I told her there was nothing of that kind in this journal. She said there must be – in the metaphors – in the omissions. We were not taught to do scholarship by studying primarily what was omitted, Dr Bailey. No doubt you find me naïve.

Beatrice here represents good old-fashioned textual criticism as opposed to Leonora's hypersexualized psychoanalytical approach; the two women couldn't be more different, both in personality and intellectual approach, and it is surely significant that a decisive role in the plot will be played by Beatrice, who will turn into 'the avenging angel of the novel.'¹⁵

If Leonora is a parody of a certain kind of feminist criticism, Mortimer Cropper can surely be seen as a parody of a collector, as we pointed out in the previous chapter, and also as a degeneration of the role of biographer. When Maud reads for the first time Cropper's work on Ash, *The Great Ventriloquist*, she understands it immediately (p. 250):

Like many biographies, she judged, this was as much about its author as its subject, and she did not find Mortimer Cropper's company pleasant [...] 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.

¹⁴ BUXTON, ' "What's Love Got to Do with It?" Postmodernism and *Possession*', p. 92.

¹⁵ P. HENSHER, 'A. S. Byatt: The Art of Fiction CLXVIII', *Paris Review*, 43/159 (Fall 2001), p. 60.

Eventually, Cropper's theories on Ash's married life and his reconstruction of the poet's trip to Yorkshire will be proved as wrong as Leonora's assumptions on Christabel's sexuality; at the same time, his attempted thief of Ash's relics will be unsuccessful but he will accept defeat quite graciously.

Another negative character, Fergus Wolff, is, as it was said in the previous chapter, quite recognizable from the start as a villain thanks to his eloquent name and his physical features: his deceitfulness is underlined first by the stereotyped romance-like language¹⁶ he uses to seduce Maud ('You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen or dreamed about. I want you, I need you, can't you feel it, it's irresistible.' p. 57) and then by the passive-aggressive techniques he employs to subtly annoy her once their affair has ended.¹⁷ Fergus is, notably, one of the few characters who doesn't take part neither to the cemetery scene nor to the subsequent revelation and is thus confirmed in his status as a 'bad guy'; Roland, declaring his love to Maud, dismisses him with a definitive judgement: 'Fergus is a devourer.' (p. 507)

3.2 *Names and meanings*

Such complex characters are of course provided with significant names, which offer other interesting examples of intertextuality, starting with the protagonists:

Randolph Henry Ash: the poet's last name can obviously be linked to the tree, 'a common and magical tree', as Ash himself writes, 'because our Norse forefathers once believed it held the world together' (p. 95); the reference draws a parallel between the unifying power of Yggdrasil, the mythological cosmic tree, and the power of poetry, of written words which are able to re-create worlds, feelings and thoughts, blessing them with immortality.¹⁸ The name is once more linked to mythology when the reader learns that Ash wrote a long poem called *Ask to Embla*, the first man and the first woman, created from two trees according to Norse myths: Ask (or Askr) is the Norse

¹⁶ BUXTON, *ibid.*

¹⁷ COYNE KELLY, p. 84.

¹⁸ COYNE KELLY, p. 88.

name of the ash, therefore, while scholars are uncertain on the identification of the two characters, the reader is able to recognise Ash and Christabel in the two protagonists of the poem.¹⁹ ‘Ash’, on the other hand, is also what is left after a fire, an element often metaphorically connected to that other ancient metaphor that associates ‘love’ and ‘fire’, and in the relationship between Ash and Christabel ‘fire’, as we will see, is an omnipresent image.

Christabel LaMotte: her first name was chosen by her father, Isidore; he was a mythographer and an historian whose own name is an allusion to the great medieval compiler Isidore of Seville.²⁰ ‘Christabel’ is a straight reference to Coleridge’s unfinished poem and it seems to bring with it a negative foreboding; Christabel remembers (p. 179) that when she, still a child, met Coleridge, the poet commented on her name saying

‘It is a beautiful name and will I trust not be a name of ill omen’. Now this is all the Clue I have to the end of the poem of Christabel – that its heroine was destined for tribulation – which is not hard to see – though how she might obtain Happiness thereafter is harder, if not Impossible.

This poetic name, however, was also chosen by another father for his child: Christabel, Emmeline Pankhurst’s daughter, like her mother and her sister was a famous suffrage activist and an example of female autonomy and strength; she has something more in common with Byatt’s Christabel, as they both are deeply religious (Pankhurst later in her life became a Seventh Day Adventist and a preacher).²¹

‘LaMotte’, moreover, is connected with the themes of female creativity based on isolation and self-sufficiency: ‘Motte’ sounds like ‘moat’, a ditch surrounding fortifications and castles, while in French it means ‘mound’, a small hill on which castles were built,²² and Christabel refers to her need for remoteness as ‘my closed castle, behind my motte-and-bailey defences’ (p. 502). In Byatt’s words,

¹⁹ COYNE KELLY, *ibid.*

²⁰ COYNE KELLY, p. 87.

²¹ J. JOHNSON LEWIS, ‘Christabel Pankhurst’, in *Women’s History*, <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/pankhursts/ss/Christabel-Pankhurst.htm> (visit.: 20 Oct., 2012)

²² COYNE KELLY, p. 89.

I thought of the idea of a motte and bailey castle because I thought of Christabel thinking of herself as an impenetrable fortress. She's a virgin lady who lives by herself, and she can't be got, like the Lady of Shalott in her tower: Christabel is allowed to be a woman writer as long as she doesn't allow anyone to come into the defences of the motte and bailey castle.²³

It was only after creating her character's name that Byatt discovered an eerie coincidence: *Undine*, the story of a Melusine-like water spirit who marries a knight to gain a soul, was written in 1811 by German author Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué.²⁴

Finally, there is an assonance linking 'LaMotte' with 'Shalott',²⁵ a significant allusion to the widespread theme of female confinement/isolation in the novel, and Christabel compares herself to the Lady of Shalott in one of her letters to Ash (p. 187):

Think of me if you will as the Lady of Shalott – with a Narrower Wisdom – who chooses not the Gulp of outside Air and the chilly river-journey deathwards – but who chooses to watch diligently the bright colours of her Web – to ply an industrious shuttle – to make – something – to close the Shutters and the Peephole too.

Roland Michell: his first name is unequivocally heroic, with an immediate reference to the epic knight whose deeds were celebrated in the medieval *Chanson de Roland*; moreover, the name and the tower theme are associated in Browning's *Childe Roland to the dark tower came*, a poem about a difficult quest which puts to the test the hero ('childe' is a medieval term for 'youth of noble birth', almost a synonym for 'knight')²⁶ and whose title is taken from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (III.iv.185). 'Roland', then, is an appropriate name for a heroic character, so at the beginning the contrast between it and the personality of our protagonist seems even more strident. Nevertheless, as it was demonstrated in chapter 2, Roland really is the hero, albeit a postmodern one, and after overcoming many obstacles he successfully completes his quest.

²³ NOAKES, p. 16.

²⁴ NOAKES, p. 16.

²⁵ COYNE KELLY, p. 89.

²⁶ COYNE KELLY, *ibid.*

Maud Bailey: just as her ancestor Christabel, she has a literary name, derived from Tennyson's complex poem *Maud* (1855), a sad tale of unhappy love and death, which was analysed in depth by Byatt²⁷ and whose most famous part, anyway, is a kind of dreamy pastoral beginning with the verse 'Come into the garden, Maud'. Maud's name is then associated both to poetry and to the garden theme, another recurring topic in the novel. Moreover, Maud's university office is at the top of Tennyson Tower (p. 39) and Tennyson's verses from the poem are quoted to describe Maud's appearance: 'Icily regular, splendidly null'.²⁸ This 'arch-Victorian name'²⁹ also belongs to another literary character, Arthur Conan Doyle's Lady Maude in the novel *The White Company*: she's a young aristocrat who will marry the male protagonist only after he has proved himself as a knight. A further connection can be traced to Maud Gonne, the woman desperately loved by W. B. Yeats; at the beginning of their affair, Fergus quotes Yeats to Maud daring her to let her hair grow as she had cut it off in fear of not being taken seriously because of her good looks (p. 57). Her last name, Bailey, connects her even more to Christabel and focuses yet again on the isolation motif.

Ellen Best: her maiden name, at first seemingly so appropriate to a devoted, loyal and supportive wife, becomes quite ironic after the reader discovers the truth about her marriage to Ash.

Blanche Glover: her first name means 'white', a recurring colour in the novel, and her last name, linked to 'gloves', suggests something secret or hidden,³⁰ an allusion confirmed by Christabel's short poem about gloves (p. 306):

Gloves lie together
Limp and calm
Finger to finger
Palm to palm
With whitest tissue
To embalm
In these quiet cases
White hands creep
With supple stretchings

²⁷ A.S. BYATT, 'The Lyric Structure of Tennyson's *Maud*', in *The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations*, ed. by I. Armstrong, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1969, pp. 69-92.

²⁸ A. TENNYSON, *Maud. A Monodrama*, Part I, section ii.

²⁹ BRINK, *The novel*, p. 293.

³⁰ COYNE KELLY, p. 88.

Out of sleep
Fingers clasp fingers
Troth to keep

Blanche is maybe the only character whose physical appearance is never described, except for small details, and she is virtually invisible: her paintings have all but disappeared and she seems to have left no trace in history. As it was Remarked by Jackie Buxton, she is ‘the one Victorian character whose story is not told.’³¹ Roland and Maud discuss her ‘invisibility’(p. 130):

‘What did she really look like, Blanche?’

‘No one really knows for certain. I imagine her very pale, but that’s only because of the name.’

Blanche herself states in her suicide note that she is ‘superfluous’ (p. 308) and that she will follow Mary Wollstonecraft’s example (p. 309), meaning with this that she is going to throw herself into the Thames from Putney Bridge. To avoid floating, being seen and probably saved, as happened to Wollstonecraft, Blanche has sewn into her pockets some stones, an action that reminds the reader of another famous death by water, Virginia Woolf’s suicide.

Leonora Stern: this flamboyant character’s first name is indeed suitable to her dominating personality; ‘Leonora’, in fact, can derive from ‘leo’, Latin for ‘lion’. On the other hand, her last name seems paradoxical, because Leonora is many things but certainly not ‘stern’: here Byatt applies the rhetorical device of antiphrasis, when a word is used to mean the opposite of its usual sense.³² In the novel, anyway, it is also mentioned that her maiden name was ‘Champion’ (p. 310), a term somehow more fitting Leonora’s passionate dedication to her beliefs.

Beatrice Nest: another literary name, of course connected to Dante, whose *Vita Nuova* Ash used to read aloud to Ellen; Beatrice in Dante’s works became an ideal figure and the poet’s guide through the *Paradise*, the third and final part of the *Divina Commedia*, leading him to salvation.

³¹ BUXTON, p. 102.

³² COYNE KELLY, *ibid*.

The guiding role³³ is underlined by the original Latin form of the name, ‘Viatrix’ (‘traveller’)³⁴: as a matter of fact, it is indeed thank to Beatrice that Cropper’s plans are frustrated and Christabel’s final letter is saved from his looting. Her last name, ‘Nest’, which, incidentally, is assonant with ‘Best’, could be an allusion to her tiny office, a kind of defensive barrier, in the Ash Factory and also to her protective feelings towards Ellen’s journals and Ellen herself:

This life became important to her; a kind of defensiveness rose up in her when Blackadder suggested Ellen was not the most suitable partner for a man so intensely curious about all possible forms of life. She became aware of the mystery of privacy, which Ellen, for all her expansive ordinary eloquence, was protecting, it could be said. (p. 115)

[...]

She began to move things across her desk, a heavy wooden-handled knitting bag, several greying parcels of unopened books. There was a whole barbican of index boxes, thick with dust and scuffed with age, which she ruffled interminably, talking to herself. (p. 118)

Mortimer Cropper: the villain of the story has a name of French origin which means ‘dead sea, still water’; it is quite significant when related to theme of water, which in the novel is often connected to female characters and expressed in images of running water (fountains, waterfalls, ...). It must also be said that this name shares a common root, ‘Mor(t)’, (death), with other famous villains’ names, like Conan Doyle’s Moriarty.³⁵ Cropper is then identified with a negative force, maybe even death itself, a connection underlined by his morbid obsession with Ash’s relics and openly stated by Blackadder and Leonora; in Brittany, while they are watching him driving away in his damaged black Mercedes, they comment:

‘Horrid,’ said Leonora. ‘Sinister.’

‘Cropper is the Ankou,’ said Blackadder, with sudden wit.

‘Of course he is,’ said Leonora. ‘We should have known that.’

In Breton mythology, the Ankou is a personification of death and he collects the dead on his ‘bumpy cart’ (p. 352). Considering the analogy, it is even more significant that Cropper’s car plate reads ‘ANK 666’ (p. 319). The correspondence is strengthened by his last name: Cropper can be

³³ BRINK, *ibid*.

³⁴ REYNOLDS and NOAKES, p. 55.

³⁵ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, ‘Romance Forms in A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*’, p. 88, footnote nr. 5.

related to the verb ‘to crop’, which means ‘to cut off’, but another meaning of ‘crop’, referred to the plants which are collected at harvest time, links ‘Cropper’ with ‘reaper’, once more a term associated to death.

Fergus Wolff: his status as a villain, as it was said before, is explicitly shown by his last name. As for his first name, it could be connected to the Norse mythological character of Fenris, or Fenrir, son of Loki, a gigantic monster in the shape of a wolf.³⁶

Ariane Le Minier: a minor character whose role is indeed central in the developing of the plot, she has an almost obviously symbolic name. ‘Ariane’ evidently recalls the mythological ‘Ariadne’ and the reader is thus aware that the young French scholar will show Maud and Roland the right way to follow in their labyrinthine quest; moreover, ‘minier’ means ‘miner’ and underlines once more the character’s significance in unearthing the secrets of Christabel LaMotte.

Maia Thomasine Bailey: each of the two names of Ash and LaMotte’s illegitimate daughter have a resonance in the novel: ‘Thomasine’ is a straight reference made by Christabel to the Yorkshire trip where the child was conceived, while ‘Maia’ is a mythological name; as Ash tells the little girl, she ‘was the mother of Hermes, thief, artist and psychopomp’ (p. 509). She was also a minor goddess associated with spring, flowers and, generally, fertility: the name, then, is an allusion to the fact that the illicit relationship between the two poets has brought not only pain and devastation, but also a new life and creative inspiration to both of them.

3.3 Colours and elements

The importance of colours in the novel was recognised by Byatt herself: ‘I always colour-code my novels, it’s not peculiar to this one [...] It’s a novel that I always felt was really painted in primary colours. It was painted in very flat unnuanced primary colours. It was a bit heraldic.’³⁷

³⁶ COYNE KELLY, *ibid.*

³⁷ NOAKES, p. 14 and p. 16.

Actually, the palette used by the author appears quite rich in nuances and colours are used to describe and code places and character with a kind of sensual pleasure. Instead of ‘heraldic’, the colour-coding in *Possession* could be more correctly defined as Pre-Raphaelite, the style in which probably Blanche Glover painted (p. 312):

One of the marks of the finest Pre-Raphaelite work was, and still is, the exciting and disturbing power of its colour — very much the least naturalistic aspect of the new painting. The painters of the Brotherhood, and their associates, went beyond the frank record of the green trees and grasses, the bright pure hues of flowers, and reintroduced into painting ranges and relations of colour unused in European art since the Middle Ages — an alarming array of blues, greens, violets, purples, used not simply because they were there to be painted, but chosen for their powerful emotional effect.³⁸

It is probably not unintentional that the US edition of the novel has as a cover a Pre-Raphaelite painting, namely Edward Burne-Jones’ *The Beguiling of Merlin*. This painting was inspired by Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, a work which appears frequently in the novel:



5. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool

Some colours are given special relevance and acquire a symbolic meaning through their association with different characters throughout the novel: first of all, green is related both to Christabel and Maud; as Byatt said,

³⁸ R. WATKINSON, *Pre-Raphaelite Art and Design*, Greenwich: NY Graphic Society, 1970, p. 8.

Christabel goes with green because of the green of the serpent woman and the Lamia and the Ondine. And people get quite annoyed by it and keep writing to me, saying, ‘Why is she green?’, and I say, ‘But fairies are always green.’ I knew that when I read ballads when I was a little girl. The Fairy Queen appears to Tam Lin in green, and they go into a green hill.³⁹

Besides the ‘fairy’ reference, green is a colour traditionally associated with the power and fertility of nature and it seems that Byatt uses it to underline female creativity and its struggle to find a way to express itself in a male-dominated world. In Ash’s description of Christabel’s face, green is omnipresent and changeable, its hues ranging from trees to minerals and water (p. 277):

He studied the pale loops of hair on her temples. Their sleek silver-gold seemed to him to have in it a tinge, a hint of greenness, not the copper-green of decay, but a pale sap-green of vegetable life, streaked into the hair like the silvery bark of young trees, or green shadows in green tresses of young hay. And her eyes were green, glass-green, malachite green, the cloudy green of seawater perturbed and carrying a weight of sand.

In this portrayal Christabel appears truly as a creature that doesn’t belong completely to human condition, she resembles instead a Dryad, a spirit of the trees, and green is thus connected to the theme of double nature. The colour, as a matter of fact, is often linked in the novel to mythical double-natured women, probably in order to highlight even more the difficulty of reconciling female strength and ability with social expectations and patriarchal constrictions. Ash is partially able to understand it (pp. 277-278):

If he loved the face, which was not kind, it was because it was clear and quick and sharp. He saw, or he thought he saw, how those qualities had been disguised or overlaid by more conventional casts of expression – an assumed modesty, an expedient patience, a disdain masking itself as calm.

Green, finally, was a colour the Pre-Raphaelites loved to use in their paintings; such is the case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, interestingly, painted a *Proserpine* (another mythical woman whose story is recurring throughout the book) clad in green:

³⁹ NOAKES, pp. 14-15.



6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Proserpine*, 1874, Tate Britain, London

Another colour, blue, is often mentioned together with green. Blue has been usually related to the cult of the Virgin and to royalty, but also, since the Romantic age, to feelings of love and melancholy (Goethe's *Werther* wore a blue jacket which at the time readers copied throughout Europe);⁴⁰ Byatt, for her part, associates it with water and female elements:⁴¹ more to the point, it seems that blue is connected to women's freedom of expressing and living their sexuality. Different female characters are linked to running or open water and blue, as well as green, is frequently used in these descriptions. In the poem Christabel wrote about *The Fairy Melusina*, for instance, when Raimondin first meets Melusina, who is sitting on a rock in the middle of a water pool, the whole setting is accurately painted with hues of green, blue, white and gold, two other significant colours, as we will see (pp. 295-296):

This rock was covered with a vivid pelt
Of emerald mosses, maidenheads and mints
Dabbling dark crowns and sharply – scented stems
Amongst the water's peaks and freshening.
The pensil foliage tumbled down the crag
To join the pennywort and tormentil
That wound below and wove a living mat
Dark green, but sparked with gold and amethyst. [...]
She wore a shift of whitest silk, that stirred
with her song's breathing, and a girdle green
as emerald or wettest meadow-grass.
Her blue-veined feet played in the watery space

⁴⁰ M. PASTOUREAU, *Blu. Storia di un colore*, Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie, 2002, pp. 138-141.

⁴¹ NOAKES, p. 15.

Blue and water are connected again when Raimondin spies his wife through a peephole and finally sees her real nature, an episode which Ellen Ash reads with wonder and notes down in her diary (p. 121):

How lovely-white her skin her Lord well knew,
The tracery of blue veins across the snow...
But could not see the beauty in the sheen
Of argent scale and slate-blue coiling fin...

Water and female sexuality are also the focus of Christabel's poem *The Drowned City* about the legendary city of Is, inhabited by transparent women and ruled by a powerful sorceress, another free woman (pp. 133-134). Finally, the water theme reappears when Ash and Christabel spend their first night together in Yorkshire (p. 283):

It was like holding Proteus, he thought at one point, as though she was liquid moving through his grasping fingers, as though she was waves of the sea rising all round him. How many many men have had that thought, he told himself, in how many many places, how many climates, how many rooms and caves, all supposing themselves – no, knowing themselves – unique.

This passage, which reveals Ash's vain struggle to gain control of Christabel's essence, brings us to another consideration: while the main female characters are depicted in green and blue (and white), the male ones are painted with earth-tones such as black, brown or gray, as if colours underlined once more the contrast between the two sexes and their radical differences.⁴² While Ash and LaMotte are travelling to Yorkshire, he is described (pp. 273-274, emphasis added) having

a flowing head of very **dark brown** hair, almost **black** but with **russet** lights in its waves, and a glossy beard, a little **browner**, the colour of **horse-chestnuts**. [...] He had **black** brows, a little rough and craggy, under which very large **dark** eyes looked out at the world steadily enough, fearless but with something held in reserve.

⁴² S. DONDERSHINE, *Color and Identity in A. S. Byatt's Possession*, <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/jwss/mesher/annotations/possession/dondersh.html> (visit.: Nov. 7, 2012)

Christabel, on the other hand, is dressed in blue and white and she is ‘very **fair**, **pale-skinned**, with eyes, not unduly large, of a strange **green** colour which transmuted itself as the light varied.’ (p. 274, emphasis added)

In yet another parallel between past and present, Roland too is dark-haired, with ‘very soft, startling black hair and small regular features’ and Val calls him ‘Mole’ (p. 11), an earth-bound nickname. When he first meets Maud, who is completely dressed in green, he notices her blond brows and lashes and her ‘clean, milky skin’ (pp. 38-39).

Besides, while water, along with air, is identified as a feminine element, the masculine one is fire (and sometimes earth): Ash repeatedly associates Christabel to water creatures, calling her, among other things, ‘my selkie’ (p. 283); after their first kiss ‘in the watery sunshine, beneath the great trees’ (p. 192), once more a setting painted in blue, green and gold, she writes him a letter entirely built on the analogy between passion and flames, in which she foretells the effects their relationship will have on her life (pp. 194-195):

I cannot let you burn me up. I cannot. [...]

The core is my solitude. My solitude that is threatened, that you threaten, without which I am nothing – so how may honour, how may morality speak to me?

I read your mind, my dear Mr Ash. You will argue now for a monitored and carefully limited combustion – a fire-grate with bars and formal boundaries and brassy finials – ne progredietur ultra –

But I say – your glowing salamander is a Firedrake.

Ash, in his reply, points out that their embrace was a moment of perfect harmony between the natural elements, a moment in which even fire and water could join together, a concept he underlines comparing water dragons to Melusina (p. 196):

You feel – as I feel – elemental in this force. All creation rushed around us out there – earth, air, fire, water, and there we were, I beg you to remember, warm and human and safe, in the circle of the trees, in each other’s arms, under the arch of the sky. [...] Did you know, speaking of dragons as we were, and of conflagration and intemperate burning – that the Chinese dragon, who in Mandarin is Lung – is a creature not of the fiery, but exclusively of the watery elements? And thus a cousin of your mysterious Melusina in her marble tub?

Christabel is indeed right in fearing for her 'solitude', but the temporary joining of elements will nevertheless be fruitful, producing not only the inspiration for poetic works but also a child, Maia. Christabel will eventually admit it to Ash in her last letter: 'I owe you Melusina and Maia both, and I have paid no debts.' (p. 501)

The contrast between elements and its symbolic connection to the female/male conflict can be found also in the description of two important settings: Roland's workplace, a male-dominated environment, is the so-called Ash factory, 'hatched in the bowels' (p. 26) of the British Museum and openly compared to Dante's *Inferno*, while Maud works at Lincoln University, whose buildings are 'white-tiled towers.' (p. 39) Here there is once more a parallel and, at the same time, a clash between earth and air, male and female elements.

The third colour recurrently associated to female nature is white, which has always been traditionally linked to purity and secrecy; in some works of twentieth-century literature, though, it assumes a more intricate and mysterious meaning: in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, for instance, it is the colour of death and in Poe's *Gordon Pym* it is seen by the people living on the island of Tsalal as something horrible and strange, a symbol of otherness, not to mention the terrifying whiteness of the monstrous whale in Melville's *Moby Dick*.⁴³

Byatt conveys in her use of white almost all the symbolic meanings listed above: it denotes secrecy in the relationship between Blanche and Christabel, isolation and oddness in Christabel's desire to be alone so that she can be a woman poet in a men's world, purity and at the same time horror during the Ashes' disastrous wedding night, pain and death (apparently) in Christabel's poem about her 'spilt milk.' (p. 381)

The last recurring colour in the novel is yellow, or better, gold: it is regularly coupled, apparently in a stereotypical way, to hair, but once more Byatt plays with expectations and models:

The golden hair was sort of seeing how far I could push the symbolic golden hair I had read about as a child and which George Eliot uses without even thinking. George Eliot's Gwendolyn [in *Daniel Deronda*] is in

⁴³ M. COHEN, 'Il mare', in *Il romanzo*, ed. by Franco Moretti, Torino: Einaudi, 2003, pp. 438-439.

many ways behind Christabel. Gwendolyn has golden hair and resembles a snake and is always twisting her neck about like a snake. And then there's an extraordinary poem by Browning [*Gold Hair at Pornic*] about a buried woman whose golden hair comes tumbling out of the tomb when it opens up and in the hair are massive quantities of money which she's also hidden away because she's a miser, so you get gold coming out.⁴⁴

Byatt herself, then, underlines a link between gold as a colour and secrecy, but it is also connected, as blue was, to female sexuality (the snake imagery is strongly symbolic in this sense); Maud's hair, hidden and covered, allude to her issues in reconciling her feminist ideals with her looks; her relationship with Roland reaches a turning point when he persuades her to let her hair off (p. 272):

Her long neck bowed, she shook her head faster and faster, and Roland saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, the whirling mass, and Maud inside it saw a moving sea of gold lines, waving, and closed her eyes and saw scarlet blood.

3.4 Themes

3.4.1 Possession, dispossession, theft

The first and main theme is of course 'possession': somehow the whole novel can be read as a meditation on the different meanings of this word, as the reader is presented with different kinds of possession (economical, sexual, cultural, even spiritual): Byatt recalls how she thought of demonic possession watching Kathleen Coburn, the Coleridge editor, at work in the British Museum, and then she discovered that Coburn had actually carried away to Canada many of Coleridge's *Notebooks*:

That gave the idea of economic and financial possession. Of course, Henry James plays with the word 'possession' – 'great possessions in great houses' – owning *things*, and I realised that actual manuscripts are things which people fight for the possession of. [...] About five years after I'd thought of the title, I thought of the sexual meaning of the word 'possession', and I thought if it was looking for something, something like the Browning love letters, then you could have modern lovers looking for ancient lovers, and you would have a sort of plot that would almost make itself – which it did.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ NOAKES, p. 15.

⁴⁵ NOAKES, pp. 12-13.

Many characters throughout the story feel 'possessed' in one way or another; at the same time, many of them are ready to do everything to gain possess of someone or of something. The subject of 'possession' is anyway often related to its opposite, 'dispossession' or even 'theft': this is clearly announced from the start, as the first chapter of the novel opens with some lines from Ash's poem *The Garden of Proserpina*, where readers are introduced to 'the tricky hero Herakles' sneaking into the 'Hesperidean grove' (p. 1) to steal the golden fruits. This short excerpt of the poem, which will reappear in a remarkably longer version at the end of the novel and shares setting and characters with Tennyson's *The Hesperides*,⁴⁶ gives the reader various clues and references which are going to be analysed later, but underlines especially the mythical hero's theft of the fruits, which have been considered as a symbol of knowledge, wisdom, fertility, and so on. The myth is then connected with an unlawful appropriation of knowledge and this act of dispossession anticipates what Roland is going to do stealing the drafts;⁴⁷ at the same time, the hero breaking into the protected space of the garden could allude also to Ash 'invading' Christabel's life and dispossessing her not only of her maidenhood but also of her independence. Nevertheless, Hercules is bound to act as he does because he is fulfilling a task: he is seeking purification and forgiveness for killing his own wife and children while momentarily mad; similarly, Roland's mishaps, as it was stated in chapter 2, can be read as a path to maturity and self-confidence, while Ash pays a high price for his 'dispossession' but gains also new inspiration for his poetry.⁴⁸

It must also be recalled that Hercules was the only mythological hero who succeeded in bringing back someone from the dead (he fought Hades to bring back to life Alcestis, wife of his host Admetus): this rescue mirrors and inverts Proserpine's abduction by Hades himself⁴⁹ and both myths are linked to the idea of resurrection and regeneration: Ash's Proserpine is deemed by critics to be 'a Victorian reflection of religious doubt, a meditation on the myths of Resurrection.' (p. 3) Maud and Roland, as it was pointed out in chapter 2, can be considered as a modern version of

⁴⁶ COYNE KELLY, p. 94.

⁴⁷ J. L. CHEVALIER, 'Conclusion in *Possession*', p. 106.

⁴⁸ COYNE KELLY, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ TODD, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 25.

Christabel and Ash, reliving their acts and thoughts. The love story between the Victorian poets is thus ‘resurrected’ from secrecy, as well as the two poets themselves are ‘resurrected’ as real people, far from the stereotyped interpretations they have been subjected to.⁵⁰

3.4.2. *Women: isolation, metamorphosis, otherness*

As it was said before, isolation is a recurring theme in the novel: even if it is presented in different shapes (self-confinement, imprisonment, physical handicap), it has always to do with women, whether they are real, mythical or fictional.⁵¹ Isolation can sometimes be a choice for female characters, although not always a free one, but more frequently it is an imposition forced upon them: Christabel and Maud, in spite of living in two very different ages, both choose to be inaccessible so that they can fulfill their intellectual ambitions, but they are actually compelled to take this decision because of social or ideological restrictions; Beatrice is hindered by the patriarchal academic world of her youth and finally takes shelter behind her files, Lady Bailey is stuck on her wheelchair, Val feels cut off because of her academic failure and oppressed by financial difficulties, Ellen is trapped in her perfect wife role, which is built on lies. In the novel there are also repeated allusions and references to fictional or legendary paradigms of female isolation, from Rapunzel to Sleeping Beauty and the aforementioned Lady of Shalott, but the actual embodiment of this theme is Proserpine / Persephone, the first mythical woman to appear in the story and a recurring image throughout the whole text. The myth of Proserpine is of course related to the seasonal cycle and to concepts of death / regeneration / birth: she is the goddess of spring and the queen of the dead at the same time, a prisoner who is given temporary freedom but is bound to come back to her underworld realm, a character eternally suspended between light and darkness. In some variations of the myth, Proserpine falls in love with Hades and even wants to be abducted by him;⁵² she could then symbolise also female desire and its difficult fulfillment.

⁵⁰ BRINK, p. 295.

⁵¹ COYNE KELLY, p. 89.

⁵² R. CALASSO, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, Torino: Einaudi, 1988, pp. 238-239.

Another recurring theme is metamorphosis, which is deeply intertwined with the subject of female otherness; the text presents a postmodern large amount of allusions to double-natured women and almost all of them are linked to water and torn between the human world and their second, more animalistic element: there are selkies, mermaids, water-nixies, and so on.⁵³ There also witches, women marked as different and exiled from society because of their oddness.⁵⁴ They all represent both men's deepest fears when confronted with women's true personality and desires and the female quest for identity in a world that doesn't allow them to exist outside the accepted social boundaries. These women are self-sufficient and belong to their own dimension: they break common rules and therefore can only be perceived as different, strange, even monstrous. The metamorphosis is just a way to show concretely their otherness: in Yorkshire Ah tells Christabel that 'metamorphoses are our way of showing, in riddles, that we know we are part of the animal world.' (p. 280) The figure that sums up all this is, of course, Melusina, half woman and half snake or fish, a creature with great powers associated to fertility and crafts, 'the hearth-foundress and the destroying Demon,' (p. 179) in Christabel's words. Melusina embodies the impossibility to reconcile female needs with society conventions: she is eventually betrayed by her husband and turned permanently into a monster because there is no place for her, and women like her, in a patriarchal world.⁵⁵

3.4.3 *The garden: innocence, transgression, wisdom*

The Garden of Proserpina is important also because it introduces the theme of the Garden, represented both as a forbidden place and a place of pleasures, a *locus amoenus*: these depictions obviously recall the original Garden, Eden, and the theme can be related to primitive innocence, infraction of the rules, longing for the return to origins. Many gardens, real, fictional or legendary are mentioned in the novel and often become part of the plot; for instance, Roland and Val are denied the access to the little garden of their flat by his old landlady, Mrs Irving, who had not

⁵³ COYNE KELLY, p. 90.

⁵⁴ TODD, pp. 58-59.

⁵⁵ BRINK, pp. 291-292.

mentioned the ban while showing them the place in a scene (p. 17) in which the allusions to Hansel and Gretel are quite clear:⁵⁶

She had enticed them like an old witch, Val said, by talking volubly to them in the garden about the quietness of the place, giving them each a small, gold, furry apricot from the espaliered trees along the curving brick wall.

It is noteworthy that Mrs Irving offers them a ‘gold’ fruit, just like the ones Hercules steals from the Hesperides, and that the subsequent description of the garden is lyrically charged with adjectives and colours:

The garden was long, thin, bowery, with sunny spots of grass, surrounded by little box hedges, its air full of roses, swarthy damask, thick ivory, floating pink, its borders restraining fantastic striped and spotted lilies, curling bronze and gold, bold and hot and rich. And forbidden.

The inaccessible garden slowly becomes the embodiment of the wavering relationship between Val and Roland and, more generally, it is for Roland a reminder of his failure as a partner, as a scholar and as a man: he finally gains access to it at the end of his quest, once he has fulfilled his task and finally got enough self-confidence to realise he is a poet. The garden then comes to symbolize not only the reaching of knowledge and wisdom but also the power of creativity (pp. 474-475):

He thought there was no reason why he should not go out into the garden. [...] In his imagination, when he could not get into the garden, it had seemed a large space of breathing leaves and real earth. Now he was out, it seemed smaller, but still mysterious, because of the earth, in which things were growing. [...] Roland was not sure why he felt so happy. Was it the letters, was it Ash’s poem, was it the opening of his future, was it simply being alone, which was something he needed ferociously from time to time and lately had missed? [...] He had time to feel the strangeness of before and after; an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real.

Another image of a garden, although the scene is set in a meadow, is given by the location of the *Postscript* and offers a fairy-tale background for Ash’s reunion with his daughter: although

⁵⁶ TODD, p. 58.

its description could seem realistic, it is actually depicted as a *locus amoenus* in which Nature is in full, almost hyperbolic, bloom, a landscape so impossibly beautiful that the reader cannot help but associate it to Eden and to a primitive happiness (p. 508):

There was a meadow full of young hay, and all the summer flowers in great abundance. Blue cornflowers, scarlet poppies, gold buttercups, a veil of speedwells, an intricate carpet of daisies where the grass was shorter, scabious, yellow snapdragons, bacon and egg plant, pale milkmaids, purple heartsease, scarlet pimpernel and white shepherd's purse, and round this field a high bordering hedge of Queen Anne's lace and foxgloves, and above that dogroses, palely shining in a thorny hedge, honeysuckle all creamy and sweet-smelling, rambling threads of bryony and the dark stars of deadly nightshade. It was abundant, it seemed as though it must go on shining forever.

The intertextual connection for this description, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is openly acknowledged by Byatt herself:

And I am always seduced by putting *Paradise Lost* into the end of anything – so I put him [Ash] into a summer garden where all the flowers were improbably flowering at the same time, whereas they would have in fact flowered sequentially.⁵⁷

The novel then begins and ends with a garden, thus creating a circular structure: moreover, the connection is underlined by the fact that Ash quotes to his daughter (p. 510) the lines of *Paradise Lost* in which Milton, describing Eden, declares its beauty superior to

that fair field
Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world.⁵⁸

The text closes its circle, from the garden of dispossession and theft to the garden of innocence and life, and it offers to the reader full disclosure and a satisfying ending.

⁵⁷ NOAKES, p. 20.

⁵⁸ J. MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, IV, 268-272.

3.5 Authors, quotes, echoes

Possession is not only built on allusions and parallelisms but also rich in straight quotations or references to many authors, as it could be expected from a novel where most characters are scholars, poets, writers and, first of all, passionate readers. As a matter of fact, the main plot is built on the fictional intertextual references Maud and Roland find in the works of Ash and LaMotte once they begin searching for clues of the relationship between the two poets: after reading the correspondence, they believe Christabel went to Yorkshire with Ash, but there is no evidence. Roland then reveals to Maud his plan (pp. 236-237):

‘I did have certain wild ideas. I thought of going through the poems – his and hers – written about then – with the idea that they might reveal something [...] People’s minds do hook together [...] This is out of *Ask to Embla*. It possibly links that fountain to the one in the Song of Songs, as well. Listen:

We drank deep of the Fountain of Vauclose
And where the northern Force incessantly
Stirs the still pool. And shall those founts
Which freely flowed to meet our thirsts, be sealed?’

Maud said ‘Say that again.’

Roland said it again.

Maud said, ‘Have you ever really felt your hackles rise? Because I just have. Prickles all down my spine and at the roots of my hair. You listen to this. This is what Raimondin says to Melusine after he is told she knows he has looked at her in her marble bath and broken the prohibition:

Ah, Melusine, I have betrayed your faith.
Is there no remedy? Must we two part?
Shall our hearth’s ash grow pale, and shall these founts
Which freely flowed to meet our thirsts, be sealed?’

The trip to Yorkshire will prove Roland and Maud right: the setting and the language of *The Fairy Melusina* appears clearly to be inspired by Yorkshire landscape and speech, but intertextual links between Ash and LaMotte go even further because, as Roland points out, they influenced each other’s writing styles (pp. 264-265):

I will say though, I feel Melusina is very like some of Ash’s poems – The rest of her work isn’t at all. But Melusina sounds often as though he wrote it. To me. Not the subject matter. The style.

As for intertextual references outside the book, besides the aforementioned allusion in the initial description of the volume where Roland finds the drafts, there is only a straight quotation

from Browning in the novel and it is made by Ellen Ash, who wonders, in the light of scientific discoveries of her time, ‘And where may hide what came and loved our clay? as the Poet asked finely,’ (p. 223) the ‘Poet’ being Robert Browning in the *Epilogue* of his collection of poems *Dramatis Personae*.

Moreover, the fact that the book in question is Vico’s *Principj di Scienza Nuova* recalls the beginning of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend
of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to
Howth Castle and Environs.

Both Vico and Joyce are related to theme of recurrence and repetition⁵⁹ through which, as it was pointed out in chapter 2, the Victorian characters and their actions become more and more intertwined with the modern ones as the story unfolds.

Another indirect reference can be detected in the year in which the Victorian plot begins: Roland is able to date the drafts and therefore Ash and LaMotte’s first meeting in 1859, the same year in which Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published. Darwin’s work is not mentioned openly by the Victorian characters but its influence pervades Ash’s poetry and can be echoed by Christabel’s words in one of her letters to Randolph (pp. 165-166):

Doubt, doubt is endemic to our life in this world at this time. I do not Dispute your vision of our historical Situation – we are from the Source of Light – and we know things – that make a Simple Faith – hard to hold, hard to grasp, hard to wrestle.

Significantly, the only straight reference to Darwin is made by Roland: while staying at Seal Court and working with Maud on the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, he is ‘entranced’ by the floral decoration of the guest bathroom and compares it to ‘Charles Darwin’s tangled bank’, an allusion to the final paragraph of *The Origin of Species* (p. 148). Many other authors and texts, nevertheless,

⁵⁹ BRINK, pp. 295-296.

are openly quoted or alluded to by the characters themselves and it must be underlined that there is predominance not only of Victorian writers, as it could be expected, but also of seventeenth-century authors; they can be listed alphabetically as follows:

- **Aesop:** Sabine de Kercoz, finally realizing why Christabel came to Brittany, tries to get closer to her cousin, who briskly rejects her. Sabine then compares Christabel to ‘Aesop’s frozen serpent’ (p. 370): in one of Aesop’s *Fables*, *The Farmer and the Viper* (*Agricola et anguis*), a farmer is killed by the ungrateful snake he rescued from the snow.
- **Dante Alighieri:** the Italian poet is one of Ash’s favourite readings; as reported by Cropper, Ash firmly believed that Beatrice (and Petrarch’s Laura) was a real woman and not a mere allegory (p. 109). Ellen reports in her diary that Ash used to read her Dante’s sonnets in his *Vita Nuova*’ (p. 114).
- **Margery Allingham:** the detective-story element of the novel is consistently highlighted towards the end of the story, especially by Euan MacIntyre who compares the discovery of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence first to the happy ending of Shakespeare’s comedies (see below), than to the ‘unmasking at the end of a detective story’. He subsequently adds that he has always wanted to be the gentleman sleuth Albert Campion, Allingham’s most famous character.
- **Hans Christian Andersen:** *The Little Mermaid*, another double-natured female image, appears first in Whitby, when Maud realises her jet brooch probably was originally bought by Christabel (‘I took it because it reminded me of the Little Mermaid [...] and then lately of the Fairy Melusina, of course’, p. 260) and then in Sabine’s diary, when Christabel tells her cousin the story and explains the loss of the fishtail as a loss of freedom (pp. 373-374).
- **Aristotle:** Christabel reports how Jean d’Arras referred to the philosopher’s *Metaphysics* in the proem of *The Fairy Melusina* (p. 290); his literary theories are quoted by Christabel to Sabine and then by Sabine herself while musing on the passive role given to women in nineteenth-century society (pp. 339-340).

- **Jean d'Arras:** his 1392 *Roman de Mélusine* is obviously the main source of Christabel's poem, a fact she acknowledges openly in the proem quoting at length from 'John of Arras' (pp. 290-291).
- **Augustine:** Ash writes a dramatic monologue in the voice of the fifth-century saint and Christabel in one of the letters mentions his theological works against the heretic Pelage, probably alluding to *De gestis Pelagi* (p. 160).
- **Jane Austen:** there is an ironic reference to *Northanger Abbey* when Roland and Maud gain access to Christabel's bedroom at Seal Court (p. 82) and he is in fear of finding nothing more than a 'laundry list'. The irony lies in the reversal of the situation, as the two scholars will eventually find in the room, quite a gothic setting on its own, not an insignificant list but the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte.
- **Francis Bacon:** in Yorkshire Ash and Christabel discuss on the lack of time they are experiencing and she quotes the philosopher's *Essays* (p. 288).
- **Honoré de Balzac:** the French writer is first mentioned when Fergus Wolff's current research is described as 'writing a deconstructive account of Balzac's *Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu*', quite an ironic task since 'the challenge was to deconstruct something that had already deconstructed itself', as Fergus himself points out (p. 32). In Yorkshire Ash, before his first night with Christabel, remembers a cynical comment about desire and disgust (p. 282). Sabine in her diary describes her home and her family and refers to Balzac's opinion on women and to his descriptive techniques (pp. 340-341).
- **Pietro Bembo:** Ash's translation of the epitaph Bembo wrote for Rapahel was carved on the poet's headstone, as Cropper relates (p. 444).
- **The Bible:** Christabel frequently uses a religious imagery in her writing: she questions Ash about his poem on Lazarus and his portrayal (Luke 18: 38-42) of Martha and Mary (p. 167), then compares herself and Blanche to the two biblical sisters (p. 186); after all, Christabel's house is named Bethany; Martha and Mary are mentioned by Sabine de Kercoz, too, when

she confesses to Christabel her desire of being a writer (p. 344). When Ash writes to Christabel about his 'vision' of a dog in Richmond Park (p. 182), he says that 'the beast seemed to proclaim haughtily' the words 'Noli me tangere', which were spoken by Jesus to Mary Magdalene (John 20:17). Christabel relates the intensity of her blooming relationship with Ash to the furnace in which three young Jews were (Daniel 1-3) condemned to die by the Babylonian king (p. 195). Ash compares his unanswered letters (which were actually stolen by Blanche) to 'Noah's Ravens' (Genesis 8:7), with a double pun based on the rainy weather and on Christabel's address, Mount Ararat Road (p. 188). Interestingly, Ellen Ash too writes in her diary about Noah, trying to reconcile faith with her reading of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (pp. 222-223) and at the beginning of the novel Blackadder is said to have 'research assistants, in fluctuating number, whom he dispatched like Noah's doves and ravens into the libraries of the world.' (p. 28) In the proem of *The Fairy Melusina*, Christabel refers how 'John of Arras' (pp. 290-291) quoted King David (Psalms, 36:3) and St Paul (Colossians 1:16). Sabine has an uncomfortable dream (p. 379) hinting that she believes Christabel's child to be dead in which she sees the baby 'all swaddled and wrapped, like pictures of the hiding of Moses among the bulrushes' (Exodus 2:1-7). Ash takes part to a séance in which he exposes what he thinks to be a fraud and calls this event his 'Gaza exploit' (p. 391), a reference to Samson escaping an ambush in Gaza and then singlehandedly ripping up the gates of the city (Judges 16: 1-3).

- **Charlotte Bronte:** Sabine compares Christabel to Jane Eyre, 'so powerful, so passionate, so observant behind her sober exterior.' (p. 336).
- **Thomas Browne:** in one of his first letters to Christabel, Ash acknowledges he can talk to her freely and sincerely and quotes Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (p. 163-164) to underline he knows Christabel would not be 'pleased to be exempted from argument' by an appeal to her feminine and superior intuition.

- **John Bunyan:** Blanche underlines the pleasures of her independent life with Christabel comparing Richmond to Beulah, the land of heavenly joy, another garden actually, which the pilgrims reach in *Pilgrim's Progress* (p. 45). Ash replies to a letter about spiritualism from Cropper's great-grandmother with kind disbelief and points out that there is no easy way to try and retrieve 'the bloodless cries of the vanished', comparing the spiritualist 'shortcut' to 'Bunyan's Ignorance who found a path to Hell at the very gate of the City of Heaven' (p. 104), another reference to *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- **Lewis Carroll:** Mortimer Cropper compares Beatrice to 'the obstructive sheep in Alice Through the Looking-Glass', an association repeated twice (p. 98 and p. 112), which underlines Beatrice's marginality.
- **Samuel Taylor Coleridge:** one of the authors most frequently mentioned in the first letters between Ash and LaMotte; she remembers how she learned *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from her father (p. 173), Ash recalls his visit to Coleridge as a young poet (pp. 175-176) and Christabel relates her own meeting, when she was just a child, with the writer, who commented on her name (pp. 178-179). Ellen reads *The Fairy Melusina* and she is quite stricken by the scene in which Raimondin secretly watches Melusina in her 'siren' form, though she thinks it would have been best left to imagination, as Coleridge's description of Geraldine in *Christabel* (p. 121). Ellen, then, troubled by headaches which deprive her of sleep, remembers that 'Coleridge wrote of the pains of sleep' (p. 230). In her last letter to Ash, who is dying, Christabel compares their daughter to 'Coleridge's limber elf' in *Christabel* (p. 501) and tells him that Maia's son, Walter, is fond of poetry and has already learned *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (p. 503). Another reference, interestingly, is given by Fergus Wolff who says to Roland that Maud 'thicks men's blood with cold' (p. 34), almost a straight quotation from the ancient mariner's description of the 'Life-in-Death'.
- **Charles Dickens:** Cropper refers to the Victorian novelist's philanthropy while writing about Ash and nineteenth-century sexuality (p. 110); while Euan and Maud are discussing

legal propriety of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, Toby, Sir George's solicitor, warns Maud that a legal action could be financially wrecking and Val adds: 'Like *Bleak House*' (p. 436). Ellen writes in her diary, after her husband's death, that Ash was shocked by the way Dickens's desk had been ransacked 'for the most trivial memoranda' (p. 442). When Christabel's last letter to Ash is opened, the picture in the envelope, showing a bride, is ironically identified by Leonora as Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (p. 499)

- **John Donne:** Ash mentions reading Donne in the letter he writes to Christabel after their first kiss (p. 193); in a subsequent letter Christabel quotes *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, a poem which Ash himself will recite to Ellen on his deathbed (p. 449). Blackadder, while working on Ash's *Mummy Possest*, points out that the title comes from John Donne's *Love's Alchemy* (p. 299). Roland begins to write his lists of words, which eventually will turn into poetry, and includes in a list the word 'scattering' as used by Donne in *Air and Angels* (p. 431); a famous line ('one short sleep past, we shall wake eternally') from *Death be not Proud* is engraved on Ash's headstone (p. 444).
- **Michael Drayton:** while Ash is dying, Ellen finds an unfinished letter addressed to Christabel in which he asks for her forgiveness and inquires about the child; he also writes that he realises their love has been 'starved and stifled' but he believes the feeling is still alive and quotes Drayton's *Love's Farewell* (p. 456).
- **George Eliot:** it has been pointed out that while working on *Possession* Byatt was editing George Eliot's *Essays* and it appears that Ash and LaMotte's Yorkshire trip can be linked to Eliot and Lewes's excursions (especially their trip to Ilfracombe in 1856) and their studies of sea-anemones.⁶⁰ It has also been stated that while *Possession*'s 'presiding poetic genius' is Browning, the Victorian novelist Byatt resembles the most is George Eliot: '*Possession* presents a world as Eliot might have seen it, but through observant postmodernist eyes.'⁶¹

⁶⁰K. FLINT, 'Plotting the Victorians: Narrative, Post-modernism, and Contemporary Fiction', in *Writing and Victorianism*, ed. by J. B. Bullen, London and New York: Longman 1997, p. 298.

⁶¹ WALSH, 'Postmodernist Reflections: A.S. Byatt's *Possession*', p. 193.

Sabine alludes to the writer, whose presence in the London Library is imagined by Roland in the first pages of the novel (p. 2), while writing about her father (she mentions *Silas Marner*, p. 341). The character of the infanticide Hetty Sorrel from *Adam Bede* is associated by Maud to Christabel after reading Sabine's diary (p. 422).

- **Francis Scott Fitzgerald:** in Brittany Blackadder and Leonora Stern, while looking for Roland and Maud, take a walk by the ocean: she points out that on the other side of the ocean there are Nantucket and 'the soft, green breasts of the New World' (p. 419), a quotation from *The Great Gatsby*.
- **Sigmund Freud:** psychoanalytical interpretation haunts the modern characters of the novel and it is not surprising that the founder of psychoanalysis is mentioned more than once, not always in a positive way. Cropper explains the impressive amount of Ash's literary production during his long courtship of Ellen in terms of 'the theory of sublimation elaborated by Sigmund Freud' (p. 110). Maud tells Roland that she had 'a bad time' with Fergus, who used to lecture her on Freud's theories about *Penisneid*, prancing around naked and quoting from *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (*Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse*) 'at six in the morning' (pp. 270-271). This tale causes Roland and Maud to share a laugh for the first time. Maud tries to distract Leonora from Ariane Le Minier's letter consulting her about an essay on Medusa and the Freudian interpretation of Medusa's head as a 'castration-fantasy' (p. 315) in the essay *Medusa's Head* (*Das Medusenhaupt*). Finally, Maud is shown copying a passage of Freud on love and libido (p. 430), taken from *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (*Abriss von Psychoanalyse*). Cropper criticizes Ellen's 'prudery and squeamishness' that caused her to bury away a box full of 'invaluable evidence' (pp. 444-445) and quotes at length from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (*Totem und Tabu*).
- **Elizabeth Gaskell:** Roland and Maud travel to Yorkshire on the tracks of Ash and LaMotte: their hotel has no garden and the narrator relates how Elizabeth Gaskell, who visited Whitby in the same year in which Ash and Christabel did (1859) and used it as a background for

Sylvia's Lovers, at the beginning of the novel 'remarked that gardening was not a popular art in the North' (p. 242).

- **Johann Wolfgang Goethe:** the German author's most present work in the novel is *Faust*; Christabel, during the Yorkshire trip, quotes to Randolph (p. 288) Faust's pact with Mephistopheles to stop Time (I, 1700). During the séance (p. 396), someone, maybe Christabel herself, quotes Mephistopheles from *Faust* in German: 'Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint.' (I, 1338) On his deathbed, Ash recalls reading Goethe with Ellen (p. 451) and refers to the German poet's essay on *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (*Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären*). Gretchen is another example of 'innocent infanticide' associated by Maud to Christabel after reading Sabine's journal (p. 422) and Christabel herself in her last letter to Ash reveals that during his 'Gaza exploit' he misunderstood her words: 'I saw you thought I spoke to you as Gretchen might to Faust' (p. 500). When this last letter is finally opened, a photograph is also found in the envelope; the picture is damaged and stained: it shows a bride who Leonora immediately connects to *The Bride of Corinth* (*Die Braut von Korinth*), Goethe's poem on another double-natured woman, notably the first female vampire in modern literature (p. 498).
- **Philip and Edmund Gosse:** Mortimer Cropper in his biography of Ash comments the poet's collecting activities of specimens and fossils in Yorkshire with modern scorn towards such an environmentally destroying hobby. Creationist Philip Gosse's *Manual of Marine Zoology* 'was a sine qua non on such collecting expeditions', but Gosse's son, Edmund, in his memoir *Father and Son*, underlined that those expeditions 'violated' and devastated 'the exquisite product of centuries of natural selection' (p. 247). In Yorkshire Ash recalls Gosse's much ridiculed theories on Adam's navel (in *Onphalos*) while looking at Christabel's waist (p. 287).
- **Robert Graves:** Graves is the poet that marks the beginning and the end of Roland and Val's relationship; during the first times of their love story, Val recited to Roland Graves's

She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep (p. 12); when Roland is at Seal Court, working on the correspondence with Maud and slowly falling in love with her, he remembers the last lines of the poem but he is not able to recall when or where he heard them (p. 149), a forgetfulness that underscores the failure of the relationship. As soon as Val starts a liaison with Euan MacIntyre, she tells him another poem, always by Graves, *Sick Love*, thus sealing the conclusion of her story with Roland (p. 417).

- **George Herbert:** one of Christabel's favourite poets as declared by Christabel herself (p. 288). She quotes Herbert's *The Elixir* in a letter to Ash (p. 187) and then, writing to Cropper's great-grandmother, she mentions both *Denial* and *Faith* (p. 388).
- **Henry James:** in Yorkshire, Roland and Maud play a 'professional game of hooks and eyes' (pp. 252-253) starting from Ash's description of a sea anemone as a glove and Maud remembers James's words on Balzac, who 'wriggled his way into the constituted consciousness like fingers into a glove' (*French Poets and Novelists*); at Newmarket Euan explains to Val how horses are named and takes as an example a horse called The Reverberator, like Henry James's short novel on intrusive sensationalist journalism (p. 414).
- **John Keats:** another author who appears at the beginning and the end of a relationship, this time Ash and LaMotte's. In one of his first letters, Ash discusses his religious beliefs and quotes Keats twice, although he labels the famous lines from *Ode on a Grecian Urn* – 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty' – as a 'quibble' (pp. 168-169). In the *Postscript*, when Ash finally meets his daughter he gives her a message to deliver to her 'aunt' Christabel, in which he identifies her with the Belle Dame Sans Merci, but little Maia forgets it so Christabel will never know that Ash knew the truth (pp. 510-511).
- **Jacques Lacan:** Lacan, whose seminar on Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (and the subsequent debate with Derrida) is alluded throughout the novel,⁶² is also quoted at length when Maud,

⁶² B. LUNDEN, *(Re)educating the Reader*, pp. 95-96.

after an annoying letter by Fergus, reads Lacan's testimony about one of his patients and realises Fergus is jealous of Roland (pp. 140-141).

- **Charles Lyell:** the famous geologist and close friend of Charles Darwin is first mentioned in Ash's letters to Ellen from Yorkshire; he writes that the landscape made him think of 'Lyell's solid, patient yet inspired work on the raising of the hills and the carving of the valleys by ice' and claims he's been 'diligently reading at Lyell in my long evenings' (pp. 212-213). At home, meanwhile, Ellen too is reading Lyell's *Principles of Geology* 'in order to share with him [Ash] his enthusiasm for his study', but she finds herself 'charmed' as well as 'chilled by his idea of the aeons of inhuman time that went to the making of earth's crust' (pp. 232-233). As a matter of fact, Ash is reading the book on the train to Yorkshire (p. 274). While Ash is dying, Ellen ponders what to do with letters and documents and face, for once, 'the unspoken truth of things', which she associates to a passage from Lyell's principles on crystalline formations underneath 'the habitable surface' (p. 458). The whole passage becomes a metaphor for Ellen's marriage and for her efforts to present in the diaries a 'dull' and apparently insignificant account of conjugal life.
- **Thomas Malory:** *Le Morte d'Arthur* is a source of inspiration for many of Blanche's projected paintings; she considers as possible subjects 'the imprisoning of Merlin, maybe, by the damsel Nimue, or the solitary Maid of Astolat' (p. 45). Ash writes to Christabel that he pictures her at home reading aloud Malory (p. 177).
- **Harriet Martineau:** the first female sociologist is mentioned by Ellen who, writing her diary immediately after Ash's death, remarks how he hated 'the new vulgarity of *contemporary* biography'; she remembers 'being much struck with Harriet Martineau, in her autobiography, saying that to print private letters was a form of treachery' (p. 442).
- **Andrew Marvell:** his link to General Fairfax is one of the reasons why Roland and Val decide to take the Putney flat, as in the garden there is a 'high brick wall which dated from the civil War, and earlier still, which had formed one boundary of General Fairfax's lands'

(p. 18); the connection between Fairfax and Marvell is remembered once more by Roland at the end of the novel (p. 474). Ash quotes Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* to Christabel while they are staying in Yorkshire (p. 288).

- **Herman Melville:** Cropper quotes the first chapter of *Moby Dick* while trying to explain Ash's fascination with natural studies and sea life in the Yorkshire chapter of his biographical work (p. 251).
- **Jules Michelet:** Ash's poem on Swammerdam (pp. 202-209) is, according to Byatt herself, partially based on Michelet's *L'insecte*.⁶³ Ash's interest in natural history, dating from 1859, is considered by Roland as a 'part of a general intellectual movement at the time'; the French historian, who in the novel is a close friend of Ash's, decided to write four books on the four elements (p. 212). He is quoted at length by Cropper in his biographical work on Ash: describing Ash's trip to Yorkshire, Cropper transcribes a whole passage from Michelet's *La Mer*, just to conclude that Ash's interest in life and its organic forms was the symptom of 'a middle-life crisis' (pp. 249-250).
- **John Milton:** writing to Ellen from Yorkshire, Ash states that the landscape reminds him of *Paradise Lost*, especially of 'Milton's Satan, winging his black way throught the asphaltic fumes of Chaos' (p. 212); for her part, Ellen too makes a reference to *Paradise Lost* and writes in her diary that her four nieces and nephew, her sister Patience's children, could be compared to the fallen angels of the city of Pandemonium (p. 224). Sabine writes about Christabel and her father discussing the meaning of Christmas and Christabel explains how Milton (in the poem *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*) made 'the moment of Nativity the moment of the death of Nature' (p. 368). In her last letter to her lover, Christabel quotes *Samson Agonistes* three times: first she declares to be near the end 'in calm of mind all passions spent', then she associates Ash to the dragon and herself to the 'tame villatic fowl' and finally she wonders if they will 'survive and rise' from their ashes like the phoenix in

⁶³ COYNE KELLY, p. 95.

the poem (p. 502). As it was aforementioned, the novel ends with Ash quoting to his daughter the lines about Proserpina in *Paradise Lost* (p. 510).

- **Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué:** the German writer's *Undine* is mentioned only once, by Sabine, who compares it to the tales of the Brothers Grimm (p. 362).
- **Robert Dale Owen:** Owen and his father Robert Owen are mentioned in Cropper's imaginary autobiography. Cropper's great-grandparents moved to New Mexico to found a phalanstery, following Robert Owen's attempt to create an utopist community but it is significant that Robert Dale Owen is remembered by Cropper mainly for his book on spiritualism, *The Debatable Land Between This World and the Other* (p. 102).
- **Paracelsus:** while debating in the letters with Christabel about spiritualism, Ash mentions Paracelsus and quotes his *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus*, in which 'the Melusinas are daughters of kings, desperate through their sins. Satan bore them away and transformed them into spectres, into evil spirits' (pp. 171-172). The *Liber* is quoted also by Christabel in the proem of *The Fairy Melusina*.
- **Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch):** the Ashes went for their honeymoon to France and visited Vaucluse, where the Italian poet had lived for many years. In his biography, Cropper dwells at length on Ash's appreciation for Petrarch, quoting *Chiare, fresche e dolci acque* from the *Canzoniere*, and on possible similarities between the two poets (pp. 108-109). Vaucluse appears also in Ash's *Ask to Embla* poems (p. 237), which, as Cropper relates, were influenced by Petrarch's sonnets.
- **François Rabelais:** Fergus tells Roland about LaMotte and her work on Melusina, quoting Rabelais's definition of the fairy's fish tail as an 'andouille' (p. 33). Melusina appears in the *Fourth Book of Pantagruel*: she is connected to Poitou and is an ancestor of the 'hero' Pantagruel.
- **Friedrich Schleiermacher:** Christabel refers to the works of the so-called 'father of modern theology' when, in her first letter to Ash, she kindly rejects his request of calling on her

offering in exchange to write again on whatever subject he would choose, for instance ‘Schleiermacher’s Veil of Illusion.’ (p. 87) It is an allusion to the *Soliloquies (Monologen)*.

- **William Shakespeare:** Roland, staying at Seal Court, compares the profuse floral decoration of the guest bathroom (p. 148) to the flower bed in which Titania sleeps in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (II.i.255-260). Christabel’s fairy tale *The Threshold* has a Childe choosing one of three caskets made of gold, silver and lead (pp. 151-155), a scene which, though traditional, is easily associated with *The Merchant of Venice* (III.ii) In their first letters, Ash and LaMotte discuss about theology and they both mention *Macbeth* and *King Lear* (pp. 167-169). *Macbeth*, who ‘speaks of a sleep foregone’ (II.iv.32-37), appears in Ellen’s diary too when she first meets Blanche Glover while recovering from one of her headaches (p. 230). In a letter to Ellen (p. 263), Ash compares the Yorkshire air, ‘the moorland air’, to the air of Mont Blanc, ‘thin air, as Shakespeare said’ in *The Tempest* (IV.ii.149). Ash, waiting for his first night with Christabel, remembers some lines about love (III.ii.18-20) from *Troilus and Cressida* (p. 281). In Brittany Christabel explains to Sabine that her dog is called Dog Tray because of a line (III.vi.55) in *King Lear* (p. 352); then, on All Saints’ Day, when everyone has to tell a tale and Sabine asks her cousin what she will tell, Christabel replies quoting *Hamlet* (I.v.15): ‘I could a tale unfold’ (p. 353). When Blackadder appears on a TV programme and is asked to explain why Ash and LaMotte’s letters should be purchased at any rate, much to his own disgust he feels compelled to ‘sell’ Ash as ‘one of the great love poets in our language’ and presents Christabel as ‘Ash’s Dark Lady’ (pp. 403-404). After having dinner in Brittany with Cropper, Leonora and Blackadder are not favorably impressed with him and Blackadder comments that ‘Shakespeare foresaw him, writing that curse.’ (p. 429). It is a reference to the curse engraved on the poet’s tombstone⁶⁴:

⁶⁴ <http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/shakespeare.htm> (visit.: 30 Oct., 2012)

Good frend for Iesvs sake forbeare,	Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear,
To digg the dvst enclosed heare.	To dig the dust enclosed here.
Bleste be ye man yt spares thes stones,	Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cvrst be he yt moves my bones	And cursed be he that moves my bones

At the 'Mortlake conference', when almost all characters are reunited to decide how to contrast Cropper's plans of desecrating the Ashes' grave, Euan MacIntyre, unpredictably, quotes Shakespeare (pp. 482-483):

'And all's well that ends well,' said Euan. 'This feels like the ending of a Shakespearean comedy – who's the chappie that comes down on a swing at the end of *As You Like It*?'
'Hymen,' said Blackadder, smiling slightly.

- **Tobias Smollett:** his *Roderick Random* was one of Ash's first readings as a little boy and he remembers the ending of the novel, which alludes to the intercourse between the hero and the heroine, while waiting for his first night with Christabel in Yorkshire (p. 282).
- **Edmund Spenser:** Blanche describes in her diary a typical, quite day at home with Christabel; at the end of the day they read aloud *The Faerie Queene* (p. 45). Ellen As, commenting on her reading of *The Fairy Melusina*, compares the poem to a 'huge, intricately embroidered tapestry' and links this image to 'the tapestried hunts' in *The Faerie Queene* (p. 121).
- **Emanuel Swedenborg:** in Yorkshire Ash and LaMotte spend a day in 'a place called the Boggle Hole' (p. 286), surrounded by such sweet smelling and blossoming hedges of dog-roses and honeysuckle that Christabel is reminded of Swedenborg's courts of heaven as described in *Heaven and Hell (De Caelo et Ejus Mirabilibus et de Inferno, ex Auditis et Visis)*. Swedenborg's visions are mentioned by Christabel to Sabine in Brittany (p. 365).
- **Arthur Tennyson:** with Coleridge and Wordsworth, he is the most present nineteenth-century poet in the novel; Blanche relates in her diary the first meeting between Ash and LaMotte at Crabb Robinson's and expresses a negative opinion on Ash who 'lacks [...] the

lyrical flow and intensity of Alfred Tennyson (p. 44). Seeing the wolds of Lincolnshire for the first time, Roland remembers that Tennyson ‘grew up in one of their tight twisting valleys’ and recognises in the landscape ‘the cornfields of immortal Camelot’ described by the poet in *The Lady of Shalott* (p. 68). In a letter to his godchild Ash jokingly draws his ‘namesake, the mighty Ash’ and point out how, as observed by Tennyson, ash-buds are black (p. 95), a reference to *The Gardener’s Daughter*. Cropper, in his imaginary autobiography, quotes Tennyson’s *In memoriam* to describe his feeling when he was first allowed to touch a manuscript letter Ash had written to his great-grandmother (p. 103); Cropper then quotes Tennyson’s *In memoriam* again (p. 250) in the biography of Ash while writing about the ‘solitary’ Yorkshire trip during which he thinks the poet was having a ‘middle-life crisis’ and ‘saw that Nature was red in tooth and claw’ (actually, Ash was with Christabel and it was this relationship that changed his interests and somehow his style). The same, famous line is repeated and associated to herself by Leonora while considering her flashy make-up before a television broadcast (p. 403). In the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, they both write about *The Lady of Shalott* (pp. 187-188). Maud, asked about Roland by Leonora, ‘became like her namesake, icily regular, splendidly null’, a reference to Tennyson’s *Maud* (p. 316) which first Roland and then Maud herself associate to her looks at the end of the novel (pp. 505-506).

- **Simone Weil:** Maud looks at herself in a mirror and considers her ‘perfectly regular features’; she remembers Weil’s words from *Waiting for God*: ‘A beautiful woman looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not.’ (p. 57)
- **Donald Winnicott:** when Roland and Maud meet Ariane Le Minier, the two women get along immediately and discuss at length ‘liminality and the nature of Melusina’s monstrous form as a “transitional area”, in Winnicott’s terms’, with a reference to the psychoanalyst’s

theories presented in *Playing and Reality* (p. 334). Significantly, Roland appears to be quite marginal in the discussion.

- **Mary Wollstonecraft:** the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of the Women* is openly acknowledged by Blanche in her suicide note as the inspiration of the act she is going to commit (p. 308).
- **William Wordsworth:** another author whose quotations are widespread. A line from his poem *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* is quoted by Blackadder (p. 26); Blanche in her diary compares the quiet and frugal life she leads with Christabel to Wordsworth's (p. 45). The readers then learn from Ellen (p. 231) that Ash often quotes Wordsworth's definition of a poet ('A man speaking to men', from the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*). In Yorkshire, Ash writes in one of his letters to Ellen an excerpt of *Monastery in Old Bangor* from the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*; during the train journey to Yorkshire, Ash studies Christabel and underlines how different his attitude is from Wordsworth's in *The Solitary Reaper* (p. 277):

The poet had heard the enchanted singing, taken in exactly as much as he had needed for his own immortal verse, and had refused to hear more. He himself, he had discovered, was different. He was a poet greedy for information, for facts, for details [...] So now his love for this woman, known intimately and not at all, was voracious for information.

After reading Sabine's diary and the 'spilt milk' poem, which was clearly written by Christabel, Maud fears, as Sabine did, that Christabel could have done something terrible to the child and points out that Christabel at the time wrote on the theme of the 'innocent infanticide', such as the character of Martha Ray in Wordsworth's *The Thorn*, again from the *Lyrical Ballads* (p. 422).

- **Thomas Wyatt:** Ash writes to Christabel about his ride in Richmond Park and his 'vision' of a dog which reminded him of the hunting poems of Thomas Wyatt (p. 183).

- **William Butler Yeats**: besides the reference based on the name 'Maud', the Irish poet is quoted by Fergus Wolff; he dares Maud to let her grow her hair reciting *For Anne Gregory* (p. 57).

CHAPTER 4
SOME INSTANCES OF INTRATEXTUALITY IN
POSSESSION

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Possession is definitely a novel in which intertextuality is constantly used but it also relies strongly on internal references and echoes: while it can be true, as Chris Walsh pointed out, the ‘connections are traced avidly by readers within the book’,¹ it is also undeniable that sometimes only the ‘external’ reader is able to detect and fully understand them. While intertextuality underlines Byatt’s wide cultural background and imagery, intratextuality highlights her ability as a story-teller to create a complex and multi-layered plot which nonetheless turns out to be articulate and coherent.

4.1 *Characters and events: past and present*

As it was underlined in chapter 2, the characters are connected through a web of parallelisms and divergences which rely not only on their personal stories or their personalities but also on little details and mannerisms. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly accurately stated, ‘a major structuring device of *Possession* is the repetition of scene, action, phrase, object, color, and even personae,’² a technique the reader fully appreciates at the end of the book, when it is possible to see all the intratextual links in their context.

Some episodes, in particular, are so tightly connected that they create a deep narrative symmetry: the main example surely is Maud and Roland’s Yorkshire trip, which the novel presents *before* relating the ‘original’ trip; the effect is a distorted prospective because only *after* reading about the modern characters’ actions, words and thoughts the reader realises the Victorian characters somehow already anticipated them. There are many intratextual associations for this episode: even though Roland and Maud stay in a hotel which is not the one Ash chose, both establishments are run by women with a Viking look (p. 242 and p. 278) with the help of their daughters (p. 243 and p. 278). Both couples’ first meal at their hotels is ‘hugely plentiful’ (p. 243 and p. 279). When Roland and Maud, on their first day, go for a walk, the narrator underlines that ‘they paced well together, though they didn’t notice that; both were energetic striders,’ (p. 251)

¹ WALSH, ‘Postmodernist Reflections: A.S Byatt’s *Possession*’, p. 189.

² COYNE KELLY, A. S. *Byatt*, p. 89.

while Ash (p. 280) points out to Christabel: 'We walk well together [...] Our paces suit.' Roland and Maud, on Ash's tracks, visit a jet ornaments shop in Whitby: the poet sent to Ellen a brooch engraved with roses and composed a little poem about it (pp. 228-229), but in the shop Maud learns that the brooch she uses to fasten her headgear is an original Victorian piece. It is engraved with a mermaid and Maud, remembering how she found it in 'the family button box' (p. 260) and took it because it reminded her of the Little Mermaid and then of Melusina, realises the brooch could have been a gift from Ash to Christabel. The episode ends with Maud buying a 'Friendship' brooch for Leonora Stern (p. 261). The reader will find later that this gesture can eerily be associated with a reference in Blanche Glover's testament: Blanche leaves to Christabel a very similar 'Friendship' brooch, which the writer had probably given her after the Yorkshire trip (p. 308), and the intratextual link emphasizes that the relationship between Maud and Leonora has much in common with the one between Christabel and Blanche. Christabel tells Ash that Mrs Cammish, the landlady, called her 'a chilly mortal' (p. 285), the same definition Lady Bailey, whose mother was from Yorkshire, applies to Maud (p. 144) at Seal Court. On their first night in Yorkshire, Ash is amazed by Christabel's hair, 'so fine, so pale, so much' (p. 283), just like Roland at Seal Court, seeing Maud with her hair loose for the first time, notices that it is 'running all over her shoulders and neck' (p. 147). When Maud and Roland decide to 'take a day off' their quest and see 'something new' (p. 268), they choose to visit Boggle Hole because 'it's a nice word': a few pages later it is revealed that Ash's most cherished memory of the trip is a day spent in 'a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word' (p. 286), another detail only the reader is able to learn. It is at Boggle Hole that Christabel fills her picnic basket with 'many kind of rocks', delighted by their colours: she decides to take them home and to use them 'to prop doors and to weigh down the sheets' of her poem (p. 287); in her testament Blanche explains how she is not going to fail in taking her life by sewing into her pockets 'those large volcanic stones which MISS LAMOTTE had ranged upon her writing desk' (p. 308). The stones appear once more in the novel: during the séance, a supposed spirit (Blanche's?) talks through Hella Lees, the medium, saying

‘Remember the stones’ (p. 396) and ‘Whose were the stones?’ (p. 397) Christabel’s reaction makes clear she understands the words as a direct reproach and she tells Ash, who is inquiring about the child, that he has made a murderess of her (p. 457), meaning with this she feels she has driven Blanche to suicide. After reading the séance episode, moreover, the reader realises that Ash was talking about Christabel when he wrote to Cropper’s great-grandmother his critical letter on spiritualism: ‘I have known a good soul and a clear mind, quite unhinged by such meddling, and to no good end, indeed to a bad one.’ (p. 105) Furthermore, the whole episode could be resumed in the wise words uttered by Raoul de Kercoz while Sabine and Christabel are discussing spiritualism (p. 366): ‘One may conjure real daemons with drawing-room conjuring tricks.’

Another significant episode takes place at Seal Court, when Roland and Maud are forced to share a bathroom: Roland, wishing to make sure the bathroom is empty, kneels and ‘put his eye to the huge keyhole’ (p. 147); the reader is immediately reminded of Raimondin spying on Melusina, a scene which left a strong impression on Ellen Ash, as she wrote in her diary (p. 121). The two episodes are connected not only by the act in itself but also by its consequences: Raimondin sees Melusina in her real form, Roland sees for the first time Maud with her hair loose and uncovered. Melusina’s true nature is revealed to her husband just as Maud let Roland get a glimpse behind her usual detached façade (tellingly, he realises she is not ‘furious’ but ‘simply frightened’). The intratextual reference is reinforced by another quotation: when Maud suddenly opens the bathroom door and almost falls on Roland, he catches her and feels ‘the *kick* galvanic’ Ash describes in one of his poems, which is used as an epigraph in the chapter which relates Ash and Christabel’s trip to Yorkshire (p. 273). Earlier that same day, however, Roland unintentionally scares Maud in the winter garden: while she is looking into the frozen pond, he touches her arm and she feels ‘an unexpected electric shock’ (p. 142). Finally, when Maud, whose kimono appears to Roland ‘to be running with water’ in the half light, goes to her bedroom, the paragraph ends with the description of a ‘Chinese dragon’ printed on the back of her kimono ‘on aquamarine ground’ (pp. 147-148), an

image which will resurface in Ash's letters where he explains that Chinese dragons are creatures of the 'watery element' and compares them to Melusina (p. 196).

A noteworthy intratextual reference is given by the name 'Ash', a word the poet himself often uses in his works as a kind of code or pun: in the letter sneakily photocopied by Cropper the writer underlines the meanings associated to his 'namesake, the might Ash', the tree which, according to Norse mythology, 'held the world together' (p. 95). Norse myths appear again in Ash's *Ragnarök*, when the poet tells how two logs (an ash and an alder) were turned by the Ases into the first man, Ask, and the first woman, Embla (pp. 240-241); then, as it is quoted by Christabel in a letter (p. 194), when he describes the end of the world he writes about 'a rain – of Ash.' A further example of this internal recurrence is given by the few lines about the '*kick galvanic*' (p. 273):

And is love then more
Than the *kick galvanic*
Or the thundering roar
Of *Ash* volcanic
Belched from some crater
Of earth-fire within?

Christabel talks about 'ash-saplings' in *Melusina* and Ash used a 'sturdy ash-plant' as a walking stick (pp. 247 and 509). Finally, the poet mentions once more the 'World Ash' (p. 464), in the second, longer version of *The Garden of Proserpina* which is given towards the end of the novel.

After the discovery of the letters, Roland and Maud realise that the word appears in other texts and that in Christabel's works post 1859 'no use of the word "ash" may presumed to be innocent' (p. 485). As a matter of fact, when they find out that *The Fairy Melusina* and *Ask to Embla* have some lines in common (p. 237), it is in Christabel's poem that the word is significantly used: 'Shall our hearth's ash grow pale.' The reader, in addition, connects it also with Blanche, who wrote in her diary about a 'Prowler' (Ash) threatening the household and remarked:

In the old days they put mountain ash berries and a cast horseshoe over the lintel to frighten away the Fairy Folk. I shall nail some up now, to show, to prevent passage, if I may. (p. 46)

Another link between Ash and Blanche is created by the use of the 'glove' image: in one of his letters (p. 132), Ash writes to Christabel 'I shall feel my way into your thought – as a hand into a glove – to steal and twist your own metaphor and torture it cruelly', an image which acquires a dark undertone when the reader finds out that the metaphor was used by Christabel in a poem clearly alluding to Blanche, a poem placed at the opening of chapter 18, just before Blanche's chilling testament. Ash, moreover, used the image even in his scientific writings; as Roland point out, he also wrote a poem set in the Middle Ages and called *The Glove* and a passage in *Ragnarök* in which Thor unwittingly hides in a giant's glove (pp. 252-253).

As a final point, considering the secret Roland and Maud will unearth, there could also be an ironic intratextual allusion in the fact that one of their first meetings occurs in the Lincoln university coffee place plastered with posters advertising the Campus Crèche and the Pregnancy Advisory Service (p. 48). It is also noteworthy that in the coffee place there is a 'Feminist Revue' which promises to 'make your blood run cold', an expression similar to Fergus's description of Maud (p. 34).

4.2 Themes

Besides modern and Victorian characters mirroring each others with words and actions, it can be stated that a pervasive intratextuality is also proved by repetition and sometimes variation of basic themes in the novel.

4.2.1 Possession / dispossession / obsession

The word 'possession' plays obviously a main role in the text, starting from the title and spreading through the whole story with all its different meanings, as it was pointed out in chapter 3. The novel begins with a 'dispossession': first there is Hercules's mythical theft, then Roland's real

one (p. 1 and p. 8). A few pages later, Val introduces another nuance of ‘possession’, connected to an almost pathological obsession for what is no more: she cuts short Roland, who is going to tell her about the stolen drafts, with a dry remark (p. 19): ‘You have this thing about this dead man. Who had a thing about dead people.’ As soon as Maud and Roland discover the hidden letters at Seal Court, there is a contrast between the fact that apparently the Baileys legally possess the correspondence and Roland’s feelings: ‘I don’t know why I feel so *possessive* about the damned things. They’re not mine.’ (p. 91) Immediately after this passage, the readers are presented with Mortimer Cropper and his avid penchant for collecting and, of course, possessing Ash’s relics (pp. 92-106). The parallelism possession / obsession recurs again in Yorkshire, where Roland and Maud feel the need of visiting a place which is unrelated to their quest because they want to ‘take a day off *them*’ (p. 268). Obsession is present also when Ash and Christabel are travelling to Yorkshire: he finally has the chance of watching her closely after months of dreaming her and he is said to have been ‘possessed by the imagination of her’ for months (pp. 276-277); for her part, since the beginning of the correspondence Christabel tries to protect her independence and states proudly that ‘my Solitude is my Treasure’ (p. 137): she sends Ash a riddle about an egg, ‘an *eidolon* of my solitude and *self-possession*.’ (p. 502) Once they reach Yorkshire, ‘possession’ acquires a sexual nuance and significantly, before the first night together, Ash quotes to himself Balzac (p. 282): ‘Le dégoût, c’est voir juste. Après la possession, l’amour voit juste chez les hommes.’

The second section of the plot, concerning the aftermath of Ash and LaMotte’s relationship, opens (p. 299) with yet a different meaning of ‘possession’ as the reader sees Blackadder working on Ash’s *Mummy Possest*: spiritualism and haunting will play a significant role in this part of the novel, especially in the pages relating Ash’s ‘Gaza exploit’ and the séance he interrupted (pp. 390-391 and 393-398). Maud and Roland’s ‘escape’ to Brittany, nevertheless, highlights once more the ‘obsession’ theme (p. 332):

‘Oddly,’ said Maud, ‘if we were obsessed with each other, no one would think we were mad.’

‘Val thinks we are obsessed with each other. She even said it was healthier than being obsessed with Randolph Ash.’

Later on, Roland, realising that he and Maud are falling in love, wonders, as it was already said in chapter 2, if the Victorian poets they are investigating are somehow possessing him and Maud (p. 421):

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 a fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others.

The final part of the novel is focused mainly on the financial meaning of ‘possession’, with long discussions about the copyrights and the economical values of the letters in chapter 24 and 27; in the latter Euan MacIntyre underlines that Sir George Bailey has ‘*de facto possession* of the letters’ (p. 479), but the supernatural nuance of the word reappears when Ellen remembers Ash’s confession of his infidelity (p. 453):

‘For the last year perhaps I have been in love with another woman. I could say it was a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons. A kind of blinding. At first it was only letters – and then – in Yorkshire – I was not alone.’

Ash’s choice of words is, to say the least, revealing: the reader can detect, while Ellen cannot, that Ash is more or less consciously quoting from the letters: the theme of ‘daemonic possession’ appears in one of the first letters, where Ash compared himself to Macbeth (p. 167) and Christabel replied mentioning King James’s *Daemonologie* (p. 169); after their first kiss, Ash wrote that he wasn’t about to lie defining what had happened ‘a moment’s madness’ (p. 192) and Christabel answered while struck by an headache which was darkening her eyes (p. 194). It becomes even more noteworthy when the reader finds that during the courtship of Ellen he had used almost the same expressions (p. 460):

Dearest Ellen,

I cannot get out of my mind – as indeed, how should I wish to, whose most ardent desire is to be *possessed* entirely by the pure thought of you – I cannot get out of my mind the entire picture of you [...]

The idea recurs once more when Roland, at the ‘Mortlake conference’, has finally to explain how and why he took the drafts: ‘This was the moment of truth. Also the moment of dispossession, or perhaps the word was exorcism.’ (p. 480) Roland confesses: ‘I took them. I don’t know why. [...] I don’t know what possessed me to do it.’ (p. 482) Interestingly, when Maud discovers her true origins and Roland remarks she looks like Christabel and like Ash, she feels almost possessed by her ancestors (p. 505):

‘So I look like Randolph Henry Ash.’

Roland touched her face. ‘I would never have seen it. But yes. The same things. Here, at the corner of the eyebrow. There at the edge of the mouth. Now I have seen it, I shall always see it.’

‘I don’t quite like it. There’s something unnaturally determined about it all. Daemonic. I feel they have taken me over.’

Finally, when, after this dialogue, Roland and Maud reveal their mutual feelings, she confesses her fear of being treated ‘as a kind of *possession* [...] a property or an idol’ because of her good looks, which, by the by, is exactly the way Fergus Wolff treated her (p. 506).

4.2.2. Female images

The whole novel is rich in allusions and references to many different female images, whose roots range from myths to literary works, legends, fairy tales, and so on. Several ‘mythic and imaginary women’³ are linked to the main female characters: as different as they are, there are indeed similarities that allow for general categorizations.

4.2.2.1 Princesses

The ‘princess’ archetype is often used in *Possession* as an allusion to aloofness and distance: Maud’s university office is at the top of Tennyson tower, whose alternative name could have been

³ COYNE KELLY, p. 89.

‘Maid Marian’ (p. 39), and when Roland first meets her, he finds her cold and reserved (p. 40): ‘Her voice lacked warmth.’ Soon after this meeting, Roland reads Blanche’s diary in which Christabel is called ‘the Princess’ (pp. 44 and 45), thus inducing the reader to see an immediate connection between Maud and Christabel, both unattainable and apparently out of reach. The association is reinforced by Roland himself while is trying to get asleep on Maud’s sofa (p. 58):

There was an incapable sleeper somewhere in his mind, a sleeper bruised and tossing on heaped feather mattresses, the Real Princess, suffering the muffled peas. Blanche Glover called Christabel the Princess. Maud Bailey was a thin-skinned Princess. He was an intruder into their female fastness. Like Randolph Henry Ash.

He then reads one of Christabel’s *Tales for Innocents*, *The Glass Coffin* (pp. 58-67), in which the protagonist saves a beautiful princess sleeping in a glass casket, an obvious reference to Sleeping Beauty but with a twist (the story will be examined later on in this chapter). Yet there is another woman who compares herself to a princess: quite surprisingly Ellen, in her diary, remembers that as a young girl she read romances and dreamed to be ‘an unspotted Guenevere’ and, at the same time, ‘the author of the Tale.’ (p. 122) She bitterly remarks: ‘I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem, and now am neither, but the mistress of a very small household.’ In the ‘time capsule’ of Ash’s death (p. 460), Ellen remembers herself at eighteen, ‘a skin like ivory and long hair like silk. A princess.’ Her regret can be paired with Sabine’s feelings (p. 339), who as a child played at being Lancelot ‘before I learned I was only a woman and must content myself with being Elaine aux Mains Blanches.’ Both women realise that their ambitions, whatever they are, are hindered by social conventions; both find themselves relegated to the ‘princess’ role, which, interestingly, both identify with characters from the Arthurian legend. When Maud is forced by the bad weather to spend a night at Seal Court (p. 144), she is given a room with ‘a rather bulky mattress of horsehair and ticking [...] Roland [...] was reminded as once before of the Real Princess and the pea.’ In the correspondence, Christabel states she is not a ‘Princess in a thicket,’ (p. 87) but Ash alludes to a real princess, Elizabeth, imagining her hunting ‘in the days of her youth’ in Richmond Park (p.

183). Christabel and Randolph's bedroom in Yorkshire has 'a huge brass bed on which several feather mattresses lay majestically, as though separating a princess from a pea.' (p. 282) Mirroring once more the relationship between Blanche and Christabel, Leonora bids goodnight to Maud (p. 317) with the words 'Sweet dreams, Princess.' Sabine, mistaking her father's kindness towards Christabel, writes in her diary that Christabel acts 'like some princess.' (p. 372) Finally, when Ash meets his daughter in the *Postscript*, he calls her 'a May Queen.' (p. 509)

4.2.2.2 Prisoners

Another female paradigm, which is often associated to the 'princess' image, is the 'prisoner': whether the constrictions are physical or psychological, many female images are subjected to imprisonment or limitation.⁴

The first 'prisoner' the reader meets is Proserpina, a powerful and recurring myth in the novel; at the very beginning of the story Roland is reading Vico to find sources for Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina* and mentions Lord Leighton's painting on the subject (p. 3): 'Lord Leighton had painted her, distraught and floating, a golden figure in a tunnel of darkness.' 'A skewed print' of this same painting will be significantly seen on the wall of Christabel's room at Seal Court (p. 85).



7. Frederick Leighton, *The Return of Persephone*, c. 1891, City Art Gallery, Leeds

⁴ COYNE KELLY, *ibid.*

Proserpina and the scene depicted by Leighton are also unexpectedly linked to Val, Roland's unhappy girlfriend: Roland meets for the first time Euan MacIntyre when the solicitor takes home Val after work and he is struck by Euan's self-assurance (p. 125): 'There was something powerful about him, Pluto delivering Persephone at the gates of the underworld.' The reference, anyway, seems to be ironically reversed: Val is not coming back *from* the underworld, on the contrary she is coming back *into* her private underworld, both because the flat she shares with Roland is located in a basement and because their relationship is getting worse and worse. It must be added, moreover, that Euan looks like a very attractive Pluto (he is young, handsome and wealthy) and Roland is not jealous of him, indeed he almost hopes Euan will conquer Val so that he will not have the responsibility of ending the faltering relationship.

Other imaginary prisoners are Rapunzel closed in her tower in a short poem by Christabel (p. 35), Ash's *Incarcerated Sorceress* (p. 42), the princess sleeping in the locked glass coffin in Christabel's fairy-tale, although she seems 'peaceful' in her casket (p. 63), the Cumaean Sybil trapped but at the same time 'safe' in a jar in one of Christabel's poems (p. 54), the Lady of Shalott, mentioned more than once (pp. 187-188) in the correspondence (Ash even writes that he felt uneasy wondering in Richmond Park 'as though its woody plantations and green spaces were girdled with an unspoken spell of prohibition – as your cottage is – as Shalott was to the knights', p. 181) and the mermaid imprisoned in a 'hermetic jar' in Ash's *Swammerdam* (p. 204).

For many of these prisoners, anyway, confinement and self-sufficiency often overlap, giving to their status an ambiguous quality.

As for the 'real' women in the novel, the first and main example is Christabel herself, who keeps to her little domestic world in order to be free to write: she is confined but on her own terms and conditions, as she remarks to Ash in the letter where she compares herself to the Lady of Shalott (pp. 186-187); yet, when later in her life she chooses self-reclusion at Seal Court to stay close to her daughter, she feels she has become 'a hanger-on as I had never meant to be, of my

sister's good fortune.' (p. 500) Maud too, in her own way, is a prisoner of her looks and of her emotive coldness (p. 506): 'When I feel – anything – I go cold all over. I freeze - I can't – speak out. I'm – I'm – not good at relationships.' Lady Bailey is on a wheelchair and she is a kind of prisoner in her own house because of financial shortcomings. Beatrice Nest is, at first, isolated being a woman in a male academic world: 'We were dependent and excluded persons,' she confides to Maud (p. 220); later she takes early retirement and hides herself behind her index boxes, trapped in the seemingly eternal task of publishing Ellen's diaries. It could be argued that both Val and Blanche are prisoners of a life they can't stand anymore because of economic and emotive dependence. It is significant that the two women describe themselves with the same adjective: 'I'm a superfluous person,' Val regrets to Roland, believing he is having an affair with Maud (p. 218); in her suicide note Blanche writes 'It has indeed been borne in upon me that here I am a superfluous creature,' and only death will be able to rescue her from this captivity (p. 309). Blanche's marginality seems to be confirmed by the fact that every trace of her has vanished: her paintings are lost, there are no pictures of her and nobody really knows what she looked like. Roland and Maud deduce from the letters that she wore glasses (p. 130), an assumption which will be proved true only to the reader by Ellen's thoughts on Ash's deathbed (p. 454). All these characters, then, resent their confinement, which is often caused by prejudice or social conventions, and suffer all the more for it.

4.2.2.3 Double-natured / monstrous women

The third and perhaps more haunting paradigm in the text is the woman-monster or the woman-other, frequently a creature with a double nature or subjected to a physical transformation which underlines her weirdness. These women are often feared and loathed by men because of their oddness, but sometimes they are also gifted with great powers and abilities.

The main embodiment of this model is of course Melusina, whose contrasting aspects are underlined by Christabel herself in a letter to Ash (p. 174):

An Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and handy woman. Now there is an odd word – but no other seems to suffice – all she touched was well done – her palaces squarely built and the stones set rightly, her fields full of wholesome corn.

In Brittany Christabel tells Sabine she doesn't know what language to think in anymore and compares her double nationality to Melusina's double nature: 'I am like the Fairy Mélusine, the Sirens and the Mermaids, half-French, half-English and behind these languages the Breton and the Celt.' (p. 348) In time, Christabel, after experiencing love, loss and frustrated motherhood, will identify more and more with the subject of her poem; in her last letter to Ash she poignantly writes (p. 501):

I have been Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not.

This model is so widespread in the work that its relevance cannot be mistaken: in Christabel's own words, 'men saw women as double beings, enchantress and demons or innocent angels'. She notably states that the only literary form able to reconcile these two natures is Romance (p. 373). The novel offers many different examples of the archetype:

- the Sybil (p. 54) is not only a prisoner but also an odd creature 'bat-leather dry', gifted / cursed with the second sight and craving only death;
- Christabel compares herself not to 'a Princess in a thicket' but to 'a self-satisfied Spider in the centre of her shining Web' (p. 87), quite a surprising analogy, underlined by a subsequent reference to the mythological Arachne. The image stands for self-sufficiency and autonomy, but Christabel seems to forget that Arachne was turned into a spider as a punishment for her arrogance. Curiously, the spider analogy recurs later in the story and it is associated to Beatrice Nest: this time the image is totally negative because it is linked to the way people judge Beatrice only on the ground of patriarchal and chauvinistic stereotypes (p. 112); she is also compared to a white sheep and to

Fafnir, just because she is large, white-haired and quite shy. Beatrice, for her part, sadly points out to Maud the disadvantages of being an old woman in a male-dominated environment (p. 221):

We thought it was bad being young and – in some cases, not in mine – attractive – but it was worse when we grew older. There is an age at which, I profoundly believe, one becomes a *witch*, in such situations, Dr Bailey – through simple ageing – as always happened in history – and there are *witch-hunts*.

The witch, an archetype often linked to the loss of beauty and youth, turns up more than once: Roland's landlady, Mrs Irving, is called by Val (p. 17) 'an old witch' (she even owns an unspecified number of cats). Gode, Sabine's family servant, makes herb-stews and potions, knows legends and traditions and realises before anyone else that Christabel is pregnant: Sabine explicitly calls her 'a witch' (p. 346) In her one and only letter to Ellen, Christabel will write: 'I live in a Turret like an old Witch, and make verses nobody wants.' (p. 450)

- Another recurrent double-natured woman is the mermaid: Melusina herself is sometimes described as half-fish or half-serpent, even though she eventually turns into a dragon (p. 33); Cropper describes how Ash, during the trip to Vaucluse, perched Ellen 'like a presiding mermaid, or a water-goddess, on a throne-like white stone' (p. 109) and Ash on his deathbed fondly reminds to Ellen that she sat on the stone 'like a water-nixie' (p. 449), while she points out that she was afraid.. A mermaid appears in Ash's *Swammerdam* (p. 204) and then again on Maud's brooch, which she realises could have been Christabel's (p. 260). In Brittany Christabel tells Sabine the Little Mermaid's story and explains that the loss of the tail was the symbol of the mermaid's loss of freedom (pp. 373-374).

- Christabel compares French and British traditions and remarks that in France there are the *Dames Blanches*, 'white ladies – amongst whom Melusina might be numbered, in some of her aspects – for she appears – to warn of Death.' (p. 173)

- In Yorkshire Ash and Christabel talk about 'selkies' and 'seal-wives [...] women from the sea, who come for a time and then must leave' (p. 280) and Ash silently draws a comparison between

these seal-women and Christabel; at the beginning of their first night together, he will address her as ‘my selkie, my white lady.’ (p. 283)

- The poem of *The Fairy Melusina* is literally overloaded with references to creatures who are part women and part monsters: in the space of few lines, Christabel contrives to mention Medusa, who later will resurface in a conversation between Maud and Leonora (p. 315), Scylla, Hydra, sirens, the Sphinx and Echidna, who was half-woman and half-snake, white ladies, dryads and shape-changers (p. 292). The passage begins with the myth of Eros and Psyche, in which he was thought to be a monster and she eventually transforms into a goddess, an intratextual reference to the correspondence as Christabel, in one of her first letters to Ash, enclosed also two short poems on Metamorphosis and on Psyche, ‘that poor doubting Girl.’ (p. 161) The longer version of Ash’s *The Garden of Proserpina*, which was written after the end of his affair with Christabel and before she wrote *Melusina*, is similarly rich in allusions to odd female creatures and shares some of them with Christabel’s poem: Ash (p. 465) lists lamias, dryads, ‘melusines’ and, quoting himself from the correspondence, he includes also firedrakes; incidentally, one of these entities presides even over the climax of the novel in the churchyard cemetery, as the Hodershall Parish church has ‘unassuming tower and a weathercock in the shape of a flying dragon.’ (p. 487)

4.2.3 The garden: forbidden place, locus amoenus

As it was already pointed out in chapter 3, a great variety of gardens appear in the novel: more to the point the story begins and ends with or in a garden. This place, whether real or imaginary, is an all-pervading setting often linked to the two main couples, Ash and LaMotte in the past, Roland and Maud in the present, providing the background for the development of their relationships.

To begin with there is *The Garden of Proserpina*, the place of ‘dispossession and theft’ (p. 1) and the forbidden and desired garden of Roland and Val’s flat (pp. 17-18); this garden, the place of prohibition, will finally be entered by Roland at the end of his own self-assessing journey and

then will appear 'smaller, but still mysterious' (p. 474). Ash, in a letter, states that the Garden of Eden was ruled by 'the heavenly Wisdom' before Adam and Eve 'foolishly sinned' (p. 95). When Roland and Maud meet at Seal Court to work on the correspondence, they sit in the library, which is decorated with 'thickets of carved foliage' and stained-glass windows which fill with rich colours: 'Along the top of a window ran a luxuriating rose tree, bearing both white and red flowers and blood red fruit together.' (pp. 128-129) In the winter garden of Seal Court, completely covered by snow, Maud feels for the first time an 'unexpected electric shock' at Roland's touch (pp. 141-142). After Roland's experience of the '*kick galvanic*' and the embarrassing accident concerning the keyhole, he enters the bathroom, where both the basin and the lavatory are extravagantly adorned with 'a riotous abundance of English flowers [...] a bank in reverse, resembling Titania's if not Charles Darwin tangled bank.' (p. 148) Ash and Christabel eventually meet, after a long series of letters, in the meadows of Richmond Park, which will also be the background of their first kiss (pp. 190-193). Roland and Maud visit Boggle Hole, in Yorkshire, ignoring that Ash and Christabel went to the same place and for the same reason; both couples are surprised by the abundance of plants and flowers, which are described with a very similar phrasing: Maud and Roland 'walked down through flowering lanes [...] These roses were intricately and thickly entwined with rampant wild honeysuckle.' (p.268) Randolph and Christabel 'had come [...] down narrow lanes between tall hedges thick with dog-roses, intricately entwined with creamy honeysuckle.' (p. 286) Another garden is mentioned by Ash in a letter he sends to Ellen during their courtship, in which he remembers her, dressed in white with colourful flowers behind her. Even the churchyard in which Ellen and Randolph are buried is a garden, their grave 'in the shelter of a kind of grassy knoll, or mound, on which grew an ancient cedar and an even older yew.' (p. 489) The four-poster bed in which Maud and Roland declare their love for each other is 'hung about with William Morris golden lilies.' (p. 504) Finally, as it was aforementioned in chapter 3, in the *Postscript* Roland and his daughter meet in a spring meadow which resembles an enchanted place and the garden of Eden at the same time (p. 508).

4.2.4 Colours

Green, as it was already underlined in chapter 3, is one of the colours most frequently mentioned in the novel and it creates a significant link between Maud and Christabel. Since her first appearance Maud is persistently associated to the colour: she wears a ‘pine-green tunic over a pine-green skirt’ with ‘long softly white stockings inside long shining green shoes,’ she drives a green Beetle and she even smells of ‘something ferny and sharp.’ (pp. 38-39) Her house is dominated by white, the colour of secrecy and isolation, but the bathroom is a ‘chill green glassy place’ (p. 56). When Christabel is finally described (from Ash’s point of view), the reader notices that ‘her little feet [...] were encased in a gleaming pair of laced boots in emerald green leather’ and the narrator underlines the ‘strange green colour’ of her eyes (pp. 274-275), a detail which will be reported also by Sabine: ‘Her eyes are a strange pale green.’ (p. 343) While Roland and Maud are working on the letters in the library at Seal Court, the sun coming in through the stained glass windows plays with Maud’s pale skin and ‘her brow flowered green and gold.’ (p. 133) Christabel, too, appears in a kind of green light in Yorkshire, when Ash sees on her ‘a hint, there it was, of green again, from the reflection of a large glazed cache-pot containing a vigorous sword-leafed fern.’ (p. 283) Blanche’s diary is a ‘long green book’ (p. 43) and ‘scuffed green leather’ covers Maud’s first edition of Christabel’s *Tales for Innocents* (p. 51); the white roses Ellen gives to Ash during their courtship ‘at their heart are still green’ (p. 461): the colour is alluded to even at the end of the *Postscript*, when Ash asks Maia to tell her ‘aunt’ Christabel that he ‘will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new.’ (p. 510)

Other colours prominently featured in the text are white and blue: Melusina is a Dame Blanche, foretelling death (p. 33 and p. 173), her feet are ‘blue-veined’ (p. 296) and her fin ‘slate-blue’ (p. 121); Christabel wrote a lyric called *White Linen* (p. 36); Maud is dressed in green and white (p. 38), in her office she has blue furniture and blue and white mugs (p. 40) and in her house white is the dominant colour: in her ‘bright white’ living room even the carpet and the sofa are white (p. 51). Every time Maud thinks of her relationship with Fergus Wolff, she is tormented by

the image of a 'rumpled bed, its sheets pulled into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white,' (p. 56) a vision which reappears when she receives a letter from Fergus and later when she meets him in the Ash Factory (p. 138 and p. 235). Interestingly, Fergus always wears 'a white heavy sweater' (p. 32); in this case, white is surely given a negative connotation and as the story progresses Fergus's white clothes make him more and more ghoulish and threatening: he literally ambushes Maud in a corridor of the Ash Factory (p. 235) and manages to annoy even Blackadder: 'A whitish figure slid round the end of his desk. It was Fergus Wolff, who sat down uninvited on the desk corner, and looked down, uninvited, at Blackadder's work.' (p. 300) The white winter garden at Seal Court witnesses Maud and Roland first 'electric shock' (p. 142) and Maud is given by Lady Bailey a 'rather splendid peacock-blue kimono' (p. 145) when she is forced to stay for the night. Beatrice Nest is wrapped in 'powder-blue' wool and appears to Maud 'hugely vulnerable' (p. 220). In Yorkshire, Roland and Maud find they share the same desire for quietness and isolation, symbolically represented by the image of 'an empty bed in an empty room. White.' (p. 267) Their wish will be fulfilled in Brittany, where they get emotionally, but not sexually, closer (p. 424):

On days when the sea-mist closed them in a sudden milk-white cocoon with no perspective they lay lazily together all day behind heavy white lace curtains on the white bed, not stirring, not speaking.

Christabel, on the train to Yorkshire, wears an 'Indian shawl with marine-blue and peacock paisleys' and 'white kid gloves' (p. 274). When Ash enters their bedroom for the night, she is waiting on the bed in a 'high-necked white lawn nightdress [...] her face was white and sharp and slightly gleaming in the candle-light, like bone.' (p. 283) It is not clear whether Ash associates this white nightdress to the very similar one worn by Ellen on their catastrophic honeymoon, but the reader certainly does: Ellen's garment is white and embroidered, 'all spattered with lovers' knots and forget-me-nots and roses, white on white. A thin white animal, herself, trembling.' (p. 459) Book I of *The Fairy Melusina* shows the 'lady' dressed in a 'shift of whitest silk [...] and a girdle

green / as emerald or wettest meadow-grass.’ (p. 296) On the ferry to Brittany, while Maud is having a shower, Roland imagines her ‘invisible body [...] white as milk [...] He saw her ankles as she climbed the ladder, white and fine, in white cotton and an air of fern-scented powder and damp hair.’ (p. 333) In Christabel’s chilling poem on spilt milk the adjective ‘white’ recurs three times (p. 381). The only description of Blanche Glover is given through Ellen’s memories: Blanche appeared to Ellen as a ‘poor mad white-faced woman [...] Behind her steel-framed glasses she had very bright blue eyes, glassy blue. And reddish hair, and a few orange patches of freckling on the chalky skin.’ (p. 454) Ellen then remembers her trip to Vaucluse with Ash, when he perched her on a rock: she was wearing ‘pale blue poplin skirts’ (p. 459) When Ash at last meets his daughter, the child is wearing a ‘butcher-blue dress and a white pinafore.’ (p. 508)

4.3 The texts-within-the text

The main instance of intratextuality in the novel is obviously provided by the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, which the reader gets to know in its entirety while Roland and Maud, at least in a first moment, work separately on each author. In the text, anyway, letters, diaries, poems, tales, essays and other documents are interwoven in subtle ways, offering to the modern characters and to the readers clues and hints. Byatt displays an impressive mimetic ability in creating the nineteenth-century pastiches, a task which at first she thought she couldn’t handle:

[...] I thought, ‘I could do something like that...I could find a very obscure Victorian poet...’ But Dennis Enright said, ‘Go away, Antonia, and write them yourself.’ So I went home and started to see if I could. I wrote a little Christabel poem, sort of Emily Dickinsonish, and it worked. And I thought, ‘OK, I’ll try a bit of Tennysonian blank verse.’ That worked. Then I thought, ‘All right, I’ll put them in.’ Then they just wouldn’t stop happening [...] I grew up on Victorian poetry and my mother gave me Victorian poetry as a very small child [...] Those voices were always in my head. But they were never able to get out any more, because I was meant to be talking like Elizabeth Bowen.⁵

⁵ NOAKES, *Interview with A.S. Byatt*, pp. 17-19.

All these pastiches, it has been underlined,⁶ are as a matter of fact doubly contextualized, because they can be read both as a trail of hints leading to the discovery of the Ash-LaMotte's affair and as a journey to self-awareness for the modern characters.

4.3.1 *The epigraphs*

Almost every chapter presents as an introduction an imaginary Victorian text by Ash or LaMotte, mainly poems, and some chapters are entirely constituted by poems or part of them: such is the case of chapter 11, in which the readers are given a wide section of Ash's *Swammerdam*, chapter 16, which includes the *Proem* and the beginning of Book I of *The Fairy Melusine*, and chapter 21, featuring the initial part of Ash's *Mummy Possest*. These three examples are quite significant because they all appear at decisive moments (the disclosure of Ash and LaMotte's relationship, their trip to Yorkshire and the subsequent influence on their works, the mystery surrounding Christabel's child) and they somehow explain, anticipate or resume elements of the plot.

The other epigraphs, too, are designed to be part of the plot, to give clues about the content of each chapter and, at the same time, of the whole story, as Byatt confirmed in more than an occasion:

The poems are an integral part of the text [...] and were written where they come, as were the stories⁷. And I wrote all the poems thinking, none of these poems should exist without having a clue towards the modern story, as well as existing in the past as part of the story. So there is a lot of this kind of verbal flickering, which is, of course, at its very root – it's the nature of reading.⁸

Here is a complete list of the chapters and their prefatory texts in which the underlying connections will be highlighted:

⁶ NEUBAUER, *Uncanny Pastiche: A. S. Byatt's Possession*, pp. 384-385.

⁷ COYNE KELLY, p. 95.

⁸ NOAKES, p. 14.

- Chapter 1: Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina*, as it was already pointed out in chapter 3, introduces the theme of dispossession and theft, inviting the reader to see Roland as Hercules stealing the Hesperidean apples.
- Chapter 2 opens with a prose in which Ash defines a man as 'the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love, indifference and dislike' (p. 9), thus making way to a long and detailed description of Roland including his past, his ambitions, his relationship with Val, his personality.
- Chapter 3: Ash's lines from *Ragnarök* describe the 'dim place' (p. 22) at the root of the Cosmic Tree, an ironic anticipation of the underground Ash Factory, which, as it was aforementioned in chapter 3, is openly compared to Dante's *Inferno*. Fergus even calls it, sarcastically, 'Crematorium' (p. 235).
- Chapter 4: the first LaMotte's poem presented to the reader is, quite remarkably, about Rapunzel in her 'glassy Tower' (p. 34), an image of isolation and confinement that can be connected to the first appearance of Maud.
- Chapter 5: an excerpt from Ash's *The Incarcerated Sorceress* introduces the theme of the hidden treasure, but while the poem talks about 'pots of gold' (p. 68), Maud and Roland will find the Ash-LaMotte letters, a different kind of treasure, though priceless to them.
- Chapter 6: Ash's *The Great Collector*, a poem about a man obsessed with amassing antiquities, is an appropriate and ironic introduction to the character of Mortimer Cropper.
- Chapter 7 opens with a short poem by LaMotte on the sad fate of women, doomed 'To Drag a Long Life out / In a Dark Room' (p. 112), a description the reader finds perfectly suitable to Beatrice Nest's life and work.
- Chapter 8: another short poem by Christabel, about snow and a secret 'Delight', introduce Maud and Roland's staying at Seal Court to work on the correspondence; snow will compel Maud to sleep at the mansion and a subsequent embarrassing incident with Roland outside the communal bathroom will start 'the kick galvanic' (p. 147) between them.

- Chapter 9 is completely dedicated to one of Christabel's enigmatic and allusive fairy tales, *The Threshold*, which appears to relate both to Maud and Roland, as their relationship has definitely changed after Seal Court, and to Ash and LaMotte, whose letters are going to be shown the following chapter.
- Chapter 10, based entirely on the correspondence, which is given in chronological order and without comments, is actually introduced by the fairy tale in chapter 9: as a matter of fact, the letters can be seen as the development of a relationship which reaches a point of no return when Christabel accepts to go to Yorkshire with Ash, a decision with a fatal outcome for almost all the Victorian characters.
- Chapter 11 presents the reader with a long section from Ash's *Swammerdam*, the first poem he wrote under the influence of his feelings for Christabel and the documental evidence Blanche will use to give Ellen a proof of her husband's infidelity.
- Chapter 12: Christabel's poem about the warmth but, at the same time, the frailty of a house is first of all a straight reference to the fact that Roland and Maud go and visit Bethany House, where Christabel and Blanche lived together; it is also an allusion to the growing tension between Roland and Val, who is jealous of Maud and feels cut out, and a hint to go under the 'baffling' (p. 220) surface of Ellen's diary, in which the portrait of domestic bliss hides many secrets.
- Chapter 13 opens with a long passage from *Ragnarök* describing how the Ases created the first man and the first woman, Ask and Embla, who immediately understand they are made for each other; the text somehow anticipates the new level Maud and Roland will reach in their relationship while in Yorkshire.
- Chapter 14: one of Ash's love poems from *Ask to Embla* is easily connected to Roland and Maud's discovery of the influence of Yorkshire landscape both on Ash and LaMotte.
- Chapter 15: Ash's lines highlight the forceful but destructive power of love - 'And is love then more / Than the *kick* galvanic' (p. 273) – and sum up the urge that drove together Ash and LaMotte,

whose trip to Yorkshire is told in a ‘time capsule,’⁹ the first of the novel, an episode set entirely in the nineteenth century which will let the reader know Ash’s thoughts and feelings, though not Christabel’s, and will reveal secrets the modern character are unaware of or uncertain: Ash finds out that Christabel was a virgin but she was not sexually inexperienced, so the poet, and the reader with him, realises that she really was in a lesbian relationship with Blanche (pp. 284-285).

- Chapter 16 represents a kind of closure for the first section of the plot, the one which begins with Roland finding and stealing the drafts and ends with the reader being projected into the past and the effective consummation of the illicit affair between Ash and LaMotte; the whole chapter is made up of the *Proem* and part of Book I of Christabel’s *magnum opus*, *The Fairy Melusina*, a work which sums up, among other things, the effects the love story with Ash had on LaMotte’s life and poetic style.

- Chapter 17 has not a proper epigraph but presents the reader with Blackadder composing a footnote for Ash’s *Mummy Possess*. The text of the footnote explains Ash’s distaste for spiritualism and marks the beginning of the second section of the plot, concerning Christabel’s pregnancy and Ash’s attempt to know the fate of his child. The footnote is also perfunctory in showing the way Blackadder writes: he tries to depersonalize his style as much as possible (‘Much of his time was spent deciding whether or not to erase things. He usually did.’), as if he was almost trying to disappear behind the predominance of Ash and Ash’s work (p. 300).

- Chapter 18 begins with Christabel’s evocative poem on gloves: for the first time the reader gets to ‘hear’ Blanche’s voice through Maud re-reading her testament. The short poem, anyway, which modern critics read as an allusion to the existence of a lesbian bond between Blanche and Christabel, can also be connected to the appearance of Leonora Stern, whose relationship with Maud bears many similarities to the one between the two Victorian women.

- Chapter 19: a long extract from Christabel’s *The City of Is* opens the chapter in which Maud and Roland run away to Brittany to contact Ariane Le Minier and hints at Christabel’s feelings of guilt

⁹ BUXTON, ‘What’s Love Got to Do with It?’, p. 80.

and shame. Moreover, Dahud, the protagonist of the poem, links the epigraph to Sabine de Kercoz, who wrote a novel about a modern reincarnation of the beautiful but wicked queen and whose diary takes up most of the chapter.

- Chapter 20: another short poem by Christabel (p. 383) appears to be about ghosts ('Their remembrance haunts us') and provides an ambiguous reference to the events which followed the birth of Christabel's child and Blanche's suicide. Cropper and Blackadder, obviously working each one on his own, slowly put together the clues and find that Ash's 'Gaza exploit' during a séance was related to Christabel's presence at the event, while the reader realises that what Ash thought a fraud sounds eerily truthful.

- Chapter 21 gives us the literary result of Ash's 'Gaza exploit', the sarcastic poem against spiritualism *Mummy Possest*.

- Chapter 22, 23 and 24 have no epigraphs, probably because they are basically linking chapters, in which various loose ends of the plot begin to tie up.

- Chapter 25 opens with the 'official' tale of Ash's death from Ellen's journal and the 'official' biographical version by Cropper: both texts are designed to create a strong contrast with the second 'time capsule' of the novel, a narrative device that gives an insight of Ellen's thoughts and feelings and reveals to the reader, and to the reader only, 'unofficial' truths. The chapter discloses many secrets: Ash confessed to Ellen his infidelity, only to discover she already knew about it (p. 455); Ellen found from the draft of a letter Ash never sent that Christabel had given birth to his child; Ellen decided to get on and to ignore all this ('Let us not talk of it again. Randolph – it is not *between us*') because she felt guilty, as the marriage had never been consummated.

- Chapter 26: a longer and slightly different version of *The Garden of Proserpina* close the circle of the subplot related to Roland's *Bildungsroman*; the poem appears here as an hymn to creativity and imagination, which is quite significant as this is the chapter in which Roland not only finds academic success but also acknowledges to be a poet.

- Chapter 27 opens with a poem by Ash on the human necessity of knowing (p. 476): ‘We are driven / By endings as by hunger.’ The epigraph shows that the plot is going to reach its climax and then its conclusion: the chapter is dedicated to the ‘Mortlake conference’, in which a plan is outlined to prevent Cropper from stealing the letters buried in the Ashes’ tomb.
- Chapter 28 has no epigraph because the whole previous chapter somehow fulfils this role and the Postscript stands on its own.

4.3.2 *Christabel’s tales*

Besides many extracts from Christabel’s poetic work, the novel reproduces some of her tales which, as Richard Todd rightly argues¹⁰, should be labeled as ‘wonder tales’ rather than ‘fairy tales’ as the term is more generic and less restraining. Christabel writes to Ash that her *Tales Told in November* are her father’s legacy (p. 179), thus providing a link to her Breton roots. Her *Tales for Innocents*, whose title appears quite ironic, are instead ‘frightening tales derived from Grimm and Tieck, with an emphasis on animals and insubordination.’ (p. 52)

On the train to Lincoln and to his first meeting with Maud, Roland reads two books on Christabel LaMotte: the first, written in 1947, highlights Christabel’s ‘domestic mysticism’, praises her ‘restrained and delicate lyrics, products of a fine sensibility’ and states that ‘the grandiose and obscure epic poem, *The Fairy Melusina*, [...] is now deservedly forgotten.’ (pp. 36-37) The second book is a collection of feminist essays, published in 1977, in which Christabel is seen as ‘distraught and enraged’, a lesbian who couldn’t live freely her sexuality and a woman-poet hindered and oppressed by a patriarchal society (p. 37).

Interestingly, when Roland reads one of the *Tales for Innocents*, *The Glass Coffin*, fully reproduced (pp. 58-69), the reader realises something that neither the old-fashioned textual critics nor the feminist psychoanalytical scholars have pointed out: Christabel LaMotte is a very crafty storyteller and, far from being bland or delicate, she is, in Richard Todd’s words, ‘a writer who likes to disconcert, to let things jar, [...] a writer who sends her messages clothed in thickening

¹⁰ TODD, A. S. *Byatt*, pp. 39-40.

mystery.’¹¹ Both in *The Glass Coffin* and in *The Threshold*, another tale of which only the beginning is given (pp. 150-156), Christabel shows a great ability in playing with the wonder tale genre expectations and enjoys, from time to time, in subverting slightly the standards of her stories, for instance addressing her readers with ironic metatextual asides¹². In *The Threshold*, a story built on such stereotypical elements that the protagonist has not even a real name but is identified simply as the Childe (young knight), Christabel’s narrating voice provides its own critical commentary on the forced choices of the hero (p. 155):

And you know, and I know, do we not, dear children, that he must always choose this last, and the leaden casket, for wisdom in all tales tells us this, and the last sister is always the true choice, is she not? [...] But you must know now, that it turned out as it must turn out, must you not? Such is the power of necessity in tales.

The Glass Coffin is a version of a tale already recorded by the Grimms and can be read as a variation on the theme of Sleeping Beauty, but some important features are clearly subverted: the hero is not a dashing prince but a tailor, a little and ‘unremarkable man’ (p. 58) who is ‘half-loath to disturb’ (p. 63) the beautiful sleeper but is also aware that he is playing a standardized role: he awakens the sleeper and ‘because he knew this was what he must do, bent and kissed the perfect cheek.’ (p. 63) He is also ready to leave the ‘beautiful lady [...] alone and unwed’ (p. 66), quite an infraction to the rules of the genre. The tale appears then much more complex and layered than it could be expected and the fact that Christabel was working on it when she met Ash and began the correspondence (a detail provided by Blanche’s diary, p. 46) induces the reader to look for hints and allusions to Christabel’s life in the text. The lady closed in the casket ‘whole like a green ice egg’ can be easily identified with Christabel, who expresses to Ash her need for isolation and autonomy with the riddle of the egg (p. 137). The black artist who imprisoned her and silenced her brother through transformation should then be Ash and the tale, as Richard Todd points out, could be read

¹¹ TODD, p. 45.

¹² TODD, p. 44.

as a ‘kind of wish-fulfilment fantasy,’¹³ in which the disastrous effects of Ash’s presence on Christabel’s life, notably Blanche’s death, are magically removed. Yet, who would the tailor be? Christabel’s ambivalence (she yearned for self-possession but felt attracted and intrigued by Ash) and the psychoanalytical interpretations of Sleeping Beauty could justify the presence of a double role:¹⁴ Ash is both the black artist, the ‘Prowler’, and the tailor, the one who sets free a part of Christabel which was hidden and neglected.

Anyway, the reader quickly realises that there is another possible intratextual interpretation of this tale, because the story seems to fit perfectly also to the twentieth-century characters; Roland and the little tailor are described in a similar way: they both are apparently insignificant but an act of kindness will give them an unexpected reward (Roland gains access to Seal Court, the tailor gets the little key which will open the coffin).¹⁵ Maud and the sleeping lady have much more in common than the long, blond hair: Maud is imprisoned in her own casket of aloofness and emotional detachment (incidentally, the ‘green ice egg’ to which the coffin is compared reminds the reader of Maud’s bathroom, a ‘chill green glassy place’); she shares Christabel’s need for defences (‘I know how she felt about her unbroken egg.’ p. 506), she fears love because it is ‘a wrecker’ (p. 507) and she will finally trust Roland because he, just as the tailor is ready to give his princess her freedom, is willing not to disrupt or threaten her own spaces of independence. In this reading, the black artist is therefore identified with Mortimer Cropper,¹⁶ who is completely dressed in black on his first appearance in the novel (p. 93) and is obsessed by collecting Ash’s relics: ‘Cropper had visions of new glass cases containing treasures he’d only been allowed to look at reverently.’ (p. 304)

Christabel’s tales, ultimately, provide intratextual references that only the reader is able to fully understand, while creating at the same time an uncanny web of links between past and present.

¹³ TODD; *ibid*

¹⁴ H. E. MUNDLER, ‘Intratextual Passages: “The Glass Coffin” in the work of A. S. Byatt’, in *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines*, n. 11, Montpellier: Presses universitaires de Montpellier, 1997, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, *Romance Forms in A. S. Byatt’s Possession*, p. 81.

¹⁶ CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ, *ibid*.

4.3.3 *Gode's tale*

Another tale with intratextual links is told by Gode, the servant working in Sabine's household: Gode is not an educated woman but she is wise and handy; she knows all about traditions and superstitions and she can cure people with herbs. Significantly, she is the first to perceive Christabel's pregnancy and it is also hinted that she is able to contact the spirit world: at Toussaint, the beginning of November, the 'Black Month' (p. 352), the Bretons begin a long period of story-telling which goes on until Christmas and Sabine's father usually tells a tale every night. Sabine adds that Gode too tells tales, talking 'of the year's trafficking between this world and *that*, the other side of the threshold.' (p. 353)

The tale told by Gode belongs then to oral culture¹⁷ and Sabine herself underlines her father's failed attempts to transcribe some of Gode's tales because 'the life goes out of her words on the page, no matter how faithful he is.' (p. 355) Gode's story is ostensibly a ghost story in which much is unexplained and obscure to most of its audience, except for Christabel: Gode tells the tale of a young sailor and a miller's daughter; though it is never stated openly, the two become lovers and one night, while the sailor is away, the miller hears a noise in his barn and finds blood on the straw, but his daughter has no explanations to offer. When the sailor comes back, he finds the miller's daughter pale and distraught; she rejects him and he gets married to the smith's daughter. The miller's daughter, apparently following what looks like a 'tiny naked child dancing,' (p. 360) throws herself off a cliff and the sailor, after a terrible journey to the Baie des Trépassés, where the world of the living and the world of the dead cross, is to be tormented for many following years by 'the little thing, dancing,' (p. 362) until he finally dies. While Sabine completely misunderstands her father's and Christabel's reactions, the reader is able to grasp in the tale a deeper meaning which goes beyond the 'ghost story', an intratextual meaning which Christabel is well aware of.¹⁸ Like the miller's daughter, Christabel is experiencing an unwanted and secret pregnancy and she probably recognises herself and Ash in the protagonists of the story. The reader, anyway, is once more able to

¹⁷ TODD, p. 45.

¹⁸ TODD; p. 46.

detect other intratextual links: the infanticide which the story alludes to appears almost a foretelling: Sabine, her father, Gode and even Ash will believe that Christabel somehow got rid of her newborn child.¹⁹ Similarly, the ghost child seems to anticipate the theme of spiritualism and the way in which Christabel will seek comfort because she feels guilty of Blanche's suicide.

Gode's tale, therefore, gives both to the characters and to the reader a trail of clues and seems to uncannily foresee some crucial developments of the plot; as Richard Todd underlines,

The Baie des Trépassés, the place where world cross, takes on an extra hermeneutical significance whereby those two worlds can be identified as the world of past and present, of real historical characters and their would-be biographers, of fiction and reality.²⁰

¹⁹ TODD, p. 47.

²⁰ TODD, *ibid.*

CONCLUSION

Possession has been defined, among many other things, an embodiment of ‘virtuoso poetic ventriloquism’¹ and a ‘deft yet eclectic mix of genres, forms, and styles.’² These features may identify the novel as a typical postmodernist creation, an identification reinforced by its textual self-consciousness: the characters often comment not only on their choices and actions but also on the plot they are living and creating at the same time. Christabel, after discussing at length the nature of Romance with her cousin Sabine (p. 373) in her last letter to Randolph describes her hiding of their daughter as ‘a lie more appropriate to a Romance than to my previous quiet life’ (p. 500) and defines herself ‘a romancer,’ while Ash is a ‘true dramatist.’ (p. 501) Besides Roland’s musings on the ‘Quest’ turned into ‘Chase and Race’ (p. 425), there is a telling dialogue with Maud when they find out there are identical lines in Ash’s and LaMotte’s poetry (p. 238):

‘We need,’ said Roland, carefully, ‘to do this together. I know his work, and you know hers. If we were both in Yorkshire –’

‘This is all madness. We should tell Cropper and Blackadder and certainly Leonora and marshal our resources.’

‘Is this what you want?’

‘No. I want to – to – follow the path. I feel taken over by this. I want to know what happened, and I want to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn’t professional greed. It’s something more primitive.’

‘Narrative curiosity -’

As Jean-Louis Chevalier pointed out, ‘there is little need to comment on a text that does its own textual commentary so neatly.’³ This textual self-consciousness, nevertheless, and the widespread pastiches and parodies of Victorian letters, diaries, poems, etc., do not allow the reader to label the novel as postmodernist once and for all: Jackie Buxton underlined that throughout the novel there is a growing feeling of suspicion of ‘postmodernist sensibility’ and that ‘*Possession* is

¹ ALFER and NOBLE, ‘Introduction’, in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt. Imagining the Real*, ed. by A. Alfer and M. J. Noble, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001, p. 2.

² ALFER and NOBLE, p. 3.

³ CHEVALIER, ‘Conclusion in *Possession*’, p. 112.

first and foremost a “straight” narrative, a realistic fiction.’⁴ Actually, *Possession* appears to be as close to a Victorian novel as a contemporary text can be, rich in descriptions and details, provided with a complex but canonical system of characters and with a structured plot. Byatt declared:

I wouldn’t like to say that I believe I live in the past. I believe that both *Possession* and *Angels & Insects* are modern novels, written by a modern novelist, who is not trying to recreate the atmosphere of a Victorian novel, but only to hear the rhythms of one.⁵

As a result the pastiches, the parodies and the intertextual links Byatt created so appropriately for her story must not be read only as a sign of postmodernist playfulness, they are also a telling sign of the author’s faith in the power of language and a way to protest against the restrictions Byatt felt inflicted upon herself while she was becoming a novelist:

I grew up as a novelist in a world where I felt there were a very restricted number of possible voices, and I felt they were more restrictive than they were. I felt that women wrote personal novels about people’s feelings, and that you had to nuance people’s feelings [...] And I was actually bored to death by both of those things. I was actually interested in language. Being able to write in as many styles as this, for perfectly good and real reasons, was a tremendous release from feeling that you ought to write like Kingsley Amis, or John Braine, or somebody like that whose prose felt to me plonking and dreadfully limited. And I came to respect George Eliot who could write with many voices.⁶

She has also repeatedly stated that the ‘real’ plot is the Victorian one:

[...] an enormous amount of the plot was invented in order to keep the process of discovery going. I was never, to be truthful, as interested in the modern plot, except as a detective story. Or in the modern people’s emotions. When they made the film, I think they assumed – because they were Hollywood Americans – that the story is a story about the young modern lovers, whereas actually, almost all *readers* know that the story is an occluded story about the Victorian lovers, and the other two are there for finding out.⁷

⁴ BUXTON, “What’s Love Got to Do with It”, p. 98.

⁵ NOAKES, ‘Interview with A.S. Byatt’, p. 28.

⁶ NOAKES, p. 18.

⁷ NOAKES, p. 14.

Significantly, it is a feeling shared by Roland and Maud, who come to regret the loss of the 'Mystery' the Victorians were able to experiment (p. 267). The modern characters, educated and trained in poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories, cannot believe in something called 'Love' anymore, indeed all the 'looking-into' and the theoretical knowledge killed their desire and they long for isolation and remoteness. The passage can be clearly read as a stab to postmodernist theories which have deprived the twentieth-century people of spontaneity.⁸

If the Victorian plot is the one which really is alive with passions and feelings, it must also be underlined that for most of the novel the only access to the past is text-based: the poems, the diaries, the letters are the only way in which the modern characters can try to reach back to the past, but the development of the plot demonstrates that this is not enough, as Maud rightly points out (p. 89):

You know, if you read the collected letters of any writer – if you read her biography - you will always get a sense that there's something missing, something biographers don't have access to, the real thing, the crucial thing, the thing that really mattered to the poet herself.

The secrets Maud and Roland discover about Ash and LaMotte were indeed hinted at in their works, but only if one knew what to look for; in Maud's words, 'I suppose if it is no one has noticed it before because they weren't looking.' (p. 264) As a matter of fact, the characters who are most targeted with irony and sarcasm in the novel are Cropper and Leonora Stern, two outstanding examples of 'biographical (mis-)appropriation', to quote Richard Todd:⁹ they 'conscribe' the object of their study, projecting their fantasies and desires on it, and fail to detect other meanings than the ones they expect to find. It must be added, nevertheless, that also Roland and Maud, in the end, are proven wrong: they are not so good at being 'natural detectives' (p. 237) as they believe to be and there are secrets which will never be exposed.

⁸ BUXTON, p. 99.

⁹ TODD, A. S. *Byatt*, pp. 28-29.

The prominence of textuality and the importance of language, then, are once more an ambivalent sign which seems to point towards a postmodernist categorization of the novel but eventually reveals a different truth. Actually, while there are things the characters, both in the past and in the present, will never be able to discover, someone else is given complete knowledge and closure: the reader is able to relive the past not only through the documents, as the modern scholars are frustratingly compelled to do, but also through the intratextual links and the ‘transgressive time capsules’¹⁰ which give complete access to three crucial moments of the Victorian plot, providing information the modern scholars can barely speculate on. There are few moments in the text in which readers are allowed to look straight into the minds and lives of the Victorian characters through the eyes of a third person omniscient narrator: this happens three times in the whole novel and in every instance the reader gets to know details and secrets unknown to the modern characters. In addition to the *Postscript*, the narrator describes the Yorkshire trip, showing nevertheless only Ash’s thoughts and musings, and then this authorial voice gives voice to Ellen’s feelings while attending her husband’s deathbed. The readers are subsequently able to peer into the mind of the main characters, with the notable exception of Christabel’s thoughts: she is the only one whose point of view is never represented directly, she is always seen through the eyes of someone else and her true voice can be retrieved only from her writings. These ‘time capsules’ apparently break the narrative convention established by the author at the beginning of the novel, but Byatt justified this infraction reasserting the power of authorial decision:

And I think this is partly me saying ‘Look...with scholarship, you think you will get to the end of the quest and find out what this person was really like, and what they really felt, and actually the chances are that the most important moment of their life, or most important moments, are forever hidden’. So it was a theoretical matter of principle to tell people things that couldn’t be found out by scholars. In that sense I was also saying that a novel is better than a biography or that a novel does things a biography can’t do.¹¹

¹⁰ BUXTON, “‘What’s Love Got to Do with It?’”, p. 100.

¹¹ NOAKES, p. 20.

The *Postscript*, in particular, could be read as a proof of the strong postmodernist distrust of the written word, but on the other hand it confirms the author's authority, who manages to give the readers a satisfactory ending, both from a narrative and emotional point of view, something which is definitely not postmodern:

I knew I had cheated my hero, which was Randolph Henry Ash, because he was a good man and a clever man, and had he not really gone on looking until he found out whether he had a child or not, he wouldn't have actually been the man I invented.¹²

In short, though it is clear that Byatt has no qualms in employing some postmodernist devices in her writing, it is also evident that she doesn't share many of the typical postmodernist ideological stances, especially when it comes to the role of the author: while the biographer is limited by his subject and at the same time limits it because of misunderstanding and partial interpretations, the novelist has the privilege of freedom; as Richard Todd underlined,¹³

she can show the limitations of the public life, and she can illuminate as no one else can the private. This fact justifies her occasional omniscient intrusions into a world to which her scholars simply do not have access.

Another pivotal non – postmodernist moment is Roland's epiphany: re-reading *The Garden of Proserpina* he seems to understand it really for the first time and realises his own poetic ability. The passage is introduced by one of the most moving and eloquent celebrations of the pleasures of reading ever written and the whole episode can be read as a praise of imagination and creativity over criticism.¹⁴

Similarly, while intratextuality is used in the novel to create unexpected and significant connections between past and present, intertextuality appears not only a display of the author's knowledge and wit but also a declaration of love and respect to a whole literary tradition, to all the

¹² NOAKES, *ibid.*

¹³ TODD, p. 29.

¹⁴ BUXTON, p. 101.

poetry which shaped the imagery and the dreams of the past and which can still influence the present.

Possession, then, can be defined as a novel which, in spite of the postmodernist devices, beyond the detective story, the romance form and the ironic representation of academic life, conveys a 'traditional' message of trust in 'the power and delight of words' (p. 470):

And then I realised as I went on that I was actually trying, as university teacher and as writer, to say that poetry is more real than criticism. Poetry does more things at any given moment than any critical account of it. It is not a historical object. It isn't a theory, it is a *thing*.¹⁵

¹⁵ NOAKES, p. 17.

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