

“Literary Critics Make Natural Detectives” – Or Do They? Detection and Interpretation in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*

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Abstract: This paper explores the themes of detection and interpretation in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession. A Romance*, which, I argue, are interconnected in two ways. Firstly, the plot centres around an investigation conducted by a pair of academics, who exercise their skills as literary critics to piece together the story of two Victorian poets. Secondly, the novel’s structure, specifically the inclusion of the pseudo-Victorian intertexts the scholars use as evidence, offers the reader an opportunity to become an armchair detective and perform the interpretive work undertaken by the modern-day characters. Even so, this article aims to demonstrate that *Possession* actively resists this detective-like approach to literature. Byatt’s critics prove blundering sleuths, relying on lucky coincidence and intuitive apprehension more than reasoning and critical insight, and the conclusions they arrive at turn out to be partially misguided. Furthermore, a close-reading of the pseudo-Victorian intertexts challenges the assumption that literature offers an unproblematic window into its author’s life and feelings, which the investigation tacitly relies on. The article contends that despite the writerly games *Possession* plays with its audience, it ultimately favours a non-academic approach to reading as opposed to one that takes the text apart in search for meaning.

Keywords: A. S. Byatt, detection, literary criticism, historiographic metafiction, neo-Victorianism

A. S. Byatt’s *Possession. A Romance* is a story of literary investigation and discovery, relating the efforts of two modern-day scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, to uncover the details of a relationship between nineteenth-century poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. This quest for knowledge takes the pair on an adventure through old country estates, Yorkshire beaches and a graveyard, where the dead are disturbed to yield their secrets and satisfy the desire for narrative closure. Through a combination of marvellous feats

of detection and canny readings of various texts, the venture reaches a satisfactory, though partial, conclusion. “Literary critics make natural detectives,” Maud remarks in the early stages of the investigation (Byatt 1991, 238), and *Possession* entertains this notion in two ways: on the level of plot and through its formal construction. Overcome by “some violent emotion of curiosity” (Byatt 1991, 82), Roland and Maud step into the role of sleuths; but even though their search takes place outside of the conventional academic milieu of libraries and archives, the clues they uncover are either textual or substantiated by textual evidence, requiring them to mobilise their skills as critics. Significantly, the texts they discover and interpret to reconstruct the (hi)story of Ash and LaMotte are included in the body of the novel, which makes the process of reading *Possession* “an exciting detective game” (Mitchell 2010, 103): the reader, too, is invited to become an armchair detective and perform the interpretive work undertaken by the modern-day characters.

Yet even if Byatt’s critics turn into sleuths with little effort, their investigative skills ultimately leave something to be desired. Moreover, their discoveries owe more to lucky coincidence and intuitive apprehension than astute critical insight, which will be demonstrated in the first part of this article. Although the scholars succeed in establishing key facts about the Victorian poets – namely, that they had a brief relationship and a daughter, Maia, whose existence Christabel concealed from her lover – their interpretation proves only partially accurate since they assume Ash never learned about the child; what they do not (and cannot ever) know is that he and Maia met. An account of this encounter is supplied in the Postscript by what Byatt terms the “Victorian ‘omniscient’ third-person” narrator (Byatt 1995, 17), whose presence in the novel highlights the gap between history and its retrospective narrativisation, the shape of which is inevitably determined by the existence (or accessibility) of evidence. *Possession*’s concern with the question of how the past can come to be known in the present makes it possible to read it in line with Linda Hutcheon’s concept of “historiographic metafiction.”¹ Hutcheon coins this term in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* to designate texts that “lay claim to historical events and personages” and “rethink and rework the forms and contents of the past” on the grounds of their “self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (Hutcheon 1988, 5). In *Possession*, this is done in two ways: through the interplay of two

1 For a reading of *Possession* as historiographic metafiction, see for instance: Wells 2022, Walsh 2000.

narrative timelines, whereby the twentieth-century characters seek to discover the events disclosed to the reader by the Victorian narrator, and by undermining the reliability of the various forms of writing that Roland and Maud rely on as evidence throughout their quest. Thus, in the second part of this article, I will argue that while the critics’ findings tacitly depend on the assumption that texts can be read as an accurate reflection of historical events or the writer’s feelings and attitudes,² *Possession* actively resists such an approach by complicating the pseudo-Victorian intertexts’ relationship to the reality they are called upon to convey. Furthermore, the novel is suspicious of the sort of reading it both illustrates and invites, whereby texts are mined for clues intended to produce meaning; in other words, the sort of scholarly efforts at interpretation exemplified by the two fictional critics and encouraged by the text’s narrative structure.³ My aim is therefore to challenge Maud’s hypothesis and analyse the complex relationship *Possession* establishes between detection and interpretation by drawing on Hutcheon’s insights to contextualise the discussion. I am not, however, seeking to either prove or disprove the novel’s postmodernist credentials; the theoretical underpinnings of this article are merely to reflect the fact that *Possession* is steeped in the intellectual discourses of the 1980s, and if it exemplifies a brand of postmodernism, it is one that is very much of its time.⁴

Hunting “hypothetical ghost[s]” – Roland and Maud’s detective quest

Possession opens in the London Library, where Roland accidentally finds two letters written by Ash to an anonymous “Madam” in the poet’s copy of *Principi di Scienza Nuova* (Byatt 1991, 5). This momentous discovery, which eventually makes it necessary to “reassess everything” (Byatt 1991, 485) that has been taken

2 In this way, the investigation is to a large extent underpinned by the Romantic theory of authorship, which saw literature as expressive of the author’s consciousness.

3 For the purposes of this article, I take “literary criticism” to mean the particular brand exemplified by Roland and Maud both throughout their investigation and in their scholarly work, which Ann Marie Adams defines as “investigating primary texts in order to decode textual clues” (Adams 2003, 111). For an in-depth analysis of Roland and Maud’s critical identities, see Adams 2003.

4 Recently, Matthias Stephan challenged Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernism by arguing that her analysis belies “ties to a, perhaps unconscious, modernist structure driving” it (Stephan 2019, 31). Therefore, reading *Possession* as historiographic metafiction does not necessarily mean it is postmodern in terms that would be acceptable to present-day critics, which supports Jackie Buxton’s “contention that postmodernism is more of a constructed ‘reality’ than a quantifiable materiality” (Buxton 2001, 217).

for granted about both Ash and his recipient, Christabel LaMotte, is, therefore, a stroke of sheer luck – a pattern that will recur throughout the novel insofar as many of the findings that drive the investigation forward should never come to light under ordinary circumstances. The aura of implausibility surrounding these discoveries corresponds to Byatt’s choice of genre: as the epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne announces, *Possession* is a “Romance in the broader generic sense,” and as such opts “for a symbolic rather than mimetic mode of representation” (Wells 2002, 671), releasing the author from the obligation to aim, in Hawthorne’s words, “at a very minute fidelity, not only to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” (Byatt 1991). The subsequent discovery of the full correspondence between Ash and LaMotte illustrates this particularly well, for there is not much that is ordinary about it. The event takes place in Christabel’s old room in Seal Court, the Bailey household in Lincolnshire. As Roland and Maud are having a look around, Maud, prompted by the sight of Christabel’s old dolls, recites one of her poems, “a kind of incantation”:

Dolly keeps a Secret
Safer than a Friend
[...]
Could Dolly tell of us?
Her wax lips are sealed.
Much has she meditated
Much – ah – concealed (Byatt 1991, 82).

Interpreting the poem to mean that the dolls are, indeed, hiding something, Maud is rewarded for her shrewd reading with a package containing letters by both Ash and LaMotte. When Sir George Bailey questions her how she knew “to go for the dolls’ bed,” she replies: “I didn’t know. I just thought of the poem, standing there, and then it seemed clear. It was sheer luck” (Byatt 1991, 84). The correspondence is therefore recovered as if by a miracle, and the word “incantation” used to describe Maud’s recitation of the poem enhances the mystical aura surrounding the discovery. It takes more than a competent scholar: even with her extensive knowledge of LaMotte, Maud could not have interpreted the poem in this way in any other context: she needs to be in Christabel’s room, in a particular frame of mind, and aided by a flash of sudden inspiration for the magic to happen. Elizabeth Bronfen goes as far as to read Maud’s insight as guided by the “spectral influence”

of LaMotte (Bronfen 1996, 132), an interpretation that does not seem at all far-fetched given the Gothic atmosphere of this scene (Bentley 2018, 146).⁵ This crucial instance in the narrative is therefore framed in a way that creates an impression of otherworldliness around the recovery of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence.

The same is true of the subsequent discovery Roland and Maud make, which is considerably less substantial than a pile of letters. When the two scholars go on a research trip to Yorkshire in the hopes of hunting down the “hypothetical ghost” of Christabel who may have accompanied Ash on his journey there (Byatt 1991, 251), the proof they find is hardly proof at all. The evidence they gather is Maud’s Victorian brooch which may have been bought by Ash for Christabel, or by Christabel herself, and begins to “look different” in the shop Roland and Maud visit, coloured by the possibility of being a part of the other storyline, as well as the overall impression of Yorkshire which Roland identifies as an influence on LaMotte’s “The Fairy Melusina”:

[i]t’s full of local words from here, gills and riggs and ling. The air is from here. Like in his letter. She talks about the air like summer colts playing on the moors. That’s a Yorkshire saying. (Byatt 1991, 264)

Despite the lack of concrete evidence, Maud confidently declares she “feel[s] certain” that Christabel did come to Yorkshire with Ash. What finally settles the question for both researchers is the most ephemeral discovery of all, a “curious natural phenomenon” of sunlight reflected off a pool of water inside a cavern, “a kind of visionary structure of non-existent fires and non-solid networks of thread inside it,” which Maud relates to the beginning of “Melusina”:

Three elements combined to make the fourth
[...]
A show of leaping flames, of creeping spires
Of tongues of light that licked the granite ledge. (Byatt 1991, 266)

5 It is worth noting that Seal Court meets all the criteria of a Gothic setting, defined by Jerrold E. Hogle as an “antiquated space” which hides “some secrets from the past that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise” (Hogle 2002, 2) – such as a stack of previously unread letters written by two poets who are referred to as “possessing” the modern-day characters (Byatt 1991, 486).

The use of the words “non-existent” and “non-solid” in the description of the phenomenon highlights its transitory, almost otherworldly nature, which Roland then remarks on, once again drawing attention to the importance of luck in his and Maud’s detective endeavour: “[e]ven this isn’t proof. And if the sun hadn’t struck out when it did I wouldn’t have seen it. But it is proof, to me” (Byatt 1991, 266). Thus, the certainty the two scholars gain is extremely precarious and thoroughly subjective, predicated as it is on a serendipitous coincidence and a personal hunch.

As it turns out, their intuition is impeccable: in the following chapter, the narration unexpectedly shifts to the nineteenth-century timeline and recounts Ash and LaMotte’s sojourn in Yorkshire, providing the reader with confirmation for what the modern-day characters can only assume based on proof which, as Maud herself admits, will not “stand up” (Byatt 1991, 264). In this case, the Victorian narrator is an extension of Roland and Maud’s reconstruction of Ash and LaMotte’s romance, validating the critics’ suppositions, which would otherwise seem like a flight of scholarly fancy. This makes it possible to read this section, as Ashman Long does, as “set[ting] up the reality that the later characters seek to access” (Ashman Long 2018, 159). For the critic, the “interplay of narrative frameworks” in *Possession* and “the assumption of ‘a reality that escapes our grasp’” underpinning it confirms that the text is, as its subtitle announces, a Romance, and not a postmodern novel (Ashman Long 2018, 155, 158). However, I would argue that this conclusion does not necessarily follow as long as we accept Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodernism, or, more specifically, of the relationship between history as events in the past and history as a narrative recounting these events. Hutcheon affirms that “in arguing that history does not exist except as text,” postmodernism “does not stupidly and ‘gleefully’ deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality” (Hutcheon 1988, 16). This is certainly true for Byatt’s fictive scholars, though not for her readers, who are offered privileged, unmediated insight into the past in the nineteenth-century sections of the novel. The question *Possession* poses is, therefore, not whether the past has an ontological reality, but, to quote Hutcheon again, “how can we know that past today – and what can we know of it?” (Hutcheon 1988, 92). At this point in the novel, Roland and Maud’s suppositions about Ash and LaMotte’s budding romance – unfounded as they may seem – are consistent with what the readers are told happened in the Victorian timeline; the tension between the two comes to the fore further

on in the Postscript. Before considering the ending of the novel in more detail, however, it is necessary to see how the scholars arrive at the end of their quest for knowledge.

The last piece of the puzzle, which makes possible the great denouement and (supposed) narrative closure, is exhumed with Ash’s body. Consumed by “the thought of perhaps never knowing” the contents of the mysterious box that Ellen Ash buried with her husband, Mortimer Cropper, aided by Hildebrand Ash, desecrates Randolph Henry’s grave and recovers the box, which contains, among other things, the letter Christabel wrote to give Ash “at least – the facts” about their daughter (Byatt 1991, 489–9). Unlike the “evidence” found in Yorkshire, the letter can hardly be contested, and yet it is very much like the correspondence found in Christabel’s room insofar as it should never have come to light under ordinary circumstances – raiding graves is, after all, hardly a viable manner of conducting research. Another parallel between the two scenes is to be found in their Gothic undertones, here taken to a caricatural extreme: as Bentley points out, “[i]n this scene the use of pathetic fallacy is so overdone as to parody the Gothic style” (Bentley 2018, 146). A short passage will suffice to demonstrate this stylistic excess:

A kind of dull howling and whistling began, and then a chorus of groans and creaking sighs, the trees, protesting. [...] The wind moved in the graveyard like a creature from another dimension, trapped and screaming. (Byatt 1991, 494)

Not only does nature express vociferous opposition to Cropper’s sacrilegious deed, but it also proves instrumental in capturing the villain: the falling trees block Cropper’s escape, trapping him at the site of the crime until the heroes catch him red-handed (Byatt 1991, 494). At the close of the investigation, we once again seem to enter the realm of the supernatural, which underscores the improbability of the scene.

There are therefore two contradictory impulses at play in the detective plot. On the one hand, a providential hand seems to guide Roland and Maud in their investigation, creating fortuitous circumstances and offering flashes of insight, as if the past was trying to make itself known. This, I would argue, erodes their agency as detective-critics. On the other hand, because the discovery of the evidence – be it material or immaterial, incontrovertible or dubious

– is so unorthodox and improbable, there is a sense that it could have very easily been lost altogether. Although the scholars are satisfied with the resolution Christabel’s letter provides, the fact that the novel insistently plants clues where no one would expect to find them inevitably raises the question of what else might be out there that the modern-day characters have missed. This is addressed in the Postscript when the narrator remarks:

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. Two people met on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was. (Byatt 1991, 508)

The two people are Randolph Henry Ash and his daughter, Maia, also known as May. Considering how carefully Byatt names her characters,⁶ this can hardly be a coincidence: May can also mean “may,” expressing the possibility of an alternative story – the unrecorded meeting of Ash and Maia – which the Postscript supplies. Previously, the omniscient narration was used to legitimise Roland and Maud’s suspicions, to give the reader proof for their far-fetched conclusions. In this instance, the Victorian voice, asserting the unquestionable truth of the episode it recounts (“This is how it was”), unsettles the complacency of the modern-day characters by furnishing the reader with knowledge that the “critics and scholars cannot discover” (Byatt 1995, 17). Guided in their interpretation by the contents of Christabel’s final letter to Ash, in which she mistakenly assumes that he is oblivious to his daughter’s existence, the scholars naturally infer that the hair in Ash’s watch, which he cuts during his encounter with Maia, belongs to Christabel, and it never occurs to them to question this conclusion; in the end, they put too much faith in the words on the page, and this time their intuition proves fallible. Thus,

6 As Jackie Buxton observes, “[j]ust as Roland is indeed the childe of his poet-mentor, so it is no accident that Maud, often described as “icily regular, splendidly null’ and emotionally sequestered like ‘The Lady of Shalott’ is housed atop Tennyson Tower” (Buxton 2001, 94). Roland’s name may also refer to Roland the hero of the medieval *chanson de geste* seeing as he is likened to a knight by Lady Bailey and his pursuits are referred to as a “quest for knowledge” (Byatt 1991, 74, 4). Maud’s surname, Bailey, also resonates with her withdrawn personality, as does that of Christabel; this comes into sharp relief in the latter’s final letter to Ash when she speaks about her “motte-and-bailey defences” (Byatt 1991, 502), which establishes a symbolic lineage between the two women, on top of their blood relation.

the Postscript highlights the limitations inherent in the scholars’ investigative efforts, showing that “while events did occur in the real empirical past” – in this case, the nineteenth-century timeline – they can only be known “through their discursive inscription” (Hutcheon 1988, 97). Where no such inscription exists, as in the case of Ash’s meeting with Maia, the historical record will inevitably fall short. Although the reader is allowed a glimpse into History, it remains partially obscured for Roland and Maud, and the version of events they produce and accept as historically true is inevitably “a human construct” (Hutcheon 1988, 16) – restricted by the accessibility of evidence and somewhat misguided. In the harsh words of Chris Walsh, “as literary sleuths they are all failures” (Walsh 2000, 193).

Texts as clues – the unreliability of the written word

An attentive reader should not be surprised by the fact that the critics ultimately find themselves duped by the very medium they so thoroughly rely on. One of the paradoxes of *Possession* is that while astute (or perhaps inspired) readings allow the present-day characters to discover much about the past, the texts they use to do so are notoriously unreliable. As Hutcheon points out, “the epistemological question of how we know the past,” which was the subject of the first part of this article, is linked to “the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past” (Hutcheon 1988, 122), which is what the following pages will analyse.

In the case of Christabel’s final letter, the scholars’ mistake is to assume that the version of events she relays to Ash is the only possible one. This is a clumsy oversight considering that, beginning with Ash’s note to LaMotte that sets the plot in motion, the private correspondence included in the novel demonstrates that “not even first-hand information is any guarantee of truth” (Hansson 2003, 362) – it cannot even be trusted to reliably convey the writer’s feelings. The two versions of Ash’s letter to Christabel which Roland stumbles upon reveal the gap between what the poet wants to say and what he dares to put down on paper seeing as the first draft is marked by a sense of urgency that the second one takes great pains to conceal. Thus, the “extraordinary” conversation between Ash and Christabel becomes merely “pleasant and unexpected,” and the poet’s “strong sense of the necessity of continuing out ~~intere~~ talk” is rephrased as a deferential inquiry: “Is there any way in which it can be resumed, more privately and at more leisure?” (Byatt 1991, 5). These revisions point to a reality beyond the written word, which the letter approximates, but cannot be depended on to capture.

The reliability of texts as evidence is further complicated by the journals present in the narrative – one written by Ellen Ash, the other by Christabel’s cousin, Sabine De Kercoz. Ellen’s journal explores the blurred line between public and private and, according to Adrienne Shiffman, indicates that the diary should be generically labelled as fiction given “the possibility of external readership” (Shiffman 2001, 95). Beatrice Nest, the editor of Ellen’s journal, has a “far-fetched” theory about Ash’s wife – that she wrote it “to baffle” her potential audience:

When I started on it, I thought, what a nice dull woman. And then I got the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid – oh, I think of it as *panelling*. (Byatt 1991, 202)

The crossed-out passages in Ellen’s journal are a visual representation of Beatrice’s panelling, allowing a glimpse of an underlying layer of meaning even as they conceal it. Relating the reception of a gift from Ash, a brooch from Whitby and a poem, Ellen records:

I transcribe the poem here, for it is worth more to me than the lovely gift itself. ~~Despite all~~ We have been so happy in our life together, even our separations contribute to the trust and deep affection that is between us. (Byatt 1991, 299)

The crossed-out phrase exists “in a state of liminality; simultaneously included and omitted, it hovers between presence and absence,” indicating “an act of self-editing on the part of the diarist in order to create the fiction of the perfect marriage” (Shiffman 2001, 99). It also creates a possibility for another story, one which characteristically comes to light in a chapter recounted by the Victorian narrator towards the end of the novel, in which Ellen’s devotion to Ash is revealed to be an act of compensation for the fact that she denied him the physical consummation of marriage (Byatt 1991, 459). The complex dynamic of guilt and dependence that “~~despite all~~” points to is therefore disclosed to the reader but inaccessible to the modern-day cast of *Possession*. By straining “the truth of her journal” in this contradictory way, Ellen makes it “a defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures” (Byatt 1991, 462) and effectively gains the upper hand over her anticipated readers by pre-emptively frustrating their attempts at reading her narrative as a straightforward account of the facts.

The fictive potential of a private journal, as well as its relationship to a potential audience, is explored further through Sabine de Kercoz. An aspiring writer, Sabine is encouraged by Christabel to learn her craft through practice, a task she duly takes on. Yet already in the first entry, she stumbles upon a problem:

Am I writing this for Christabel to see, as a kind of *devoir* [...] or even as a kind of intimate letter, for her to read alone, in moments of contemplation and withdrawal? Or am I writing it privately to myself, in an attempt to be wholly truthful with myself, for the sake of truth alone? (Byatt 1991, 336)

For Sabine, writing for an audience precludes absolute transparency, and though she ultimately settles for the latter, the possibility of a readership haunts the pages as, in a later entry, she remarks: “Also I am afraid that [the journal] might be read, by accident, and misconstrued,” a fear which prompts her to temporarily give up writing (Byatt 1991, 371). Much like the journal of Ellen Ash, then, the veracity of Sabine’s account is tainted by the audience she anticipates.

The journal’s relationship to reality is further complicated by Sabine’s excessive subjectivity. This may seem like a redundant observation – after all, a diarist can hardly avoid filtering the events they record through their feelings – but Byatt amplifies Sabine’s inability to extricate the facts from her highly emotional interpretation, as if to highlight the danger inherent in the genre. Christabel arrives on the De Kercoz doorstep to seek shelter during her pregnancy, yet for months Sabine remains, in her own words, “blind” to her cousin’s condition, too preoccupied with the perceived threat that Christabel seems to pose to Sabine’s relationship with her father (Byatt 1991, 371). The way in which jealousy quite literally distorts her perception of Christabel is made clear in this passage:

They [Christabel and Mr De Kercoz] sit at the table and exchange metaphysical theories and I sit there like a shape-changing witch, swelling with rage and shrinking with shame, and they see nothing. And *she* changes in my sight. I hate her smooth pale head [...], as though she was some sort of serpent. (Byatt 1991, 366)

In the context of the modern-day characters’ quest for knowledge, Sabine’s journal constitutes invaluable evidence, filling the gap in the historical record

of Christabel's life and revealing the existence of a child no one had previously even expected. And yet Byatt shrouds this revelation in a narrative that persistently draws attention to its own limitations as far as its status as evidence is concerned. Moreover, owing to its limited perspective, the journal tells only a fraction of the story, raising more questions than it answers: "What became of the child? [...] How had Ash and LaMotte parted? Did Ash know of the possible child?" (Byatt 1991, 422).

In the absence of clues, Maud searches for them in two poems written by Sabine, interpreting one of them "to mean that the child had been born dead," and the other "to be an evidence of a terrible guilt, on Christabel's part, at the fate, whatever it was, of the infant" (Byatt 1991, 422). Maud's conclusion about the child's untimely demise proves to be wrong, yet this does not necessarily invalidate her reading of Sabine's poem, for, similarly to the journal, it only reflects Sabine's perception of reality, and she strongly hints at her conviction of the child's passing (Byatt 1991, 378). Thus, even if Maud is correct in deciphering the author's meaning, she still falls prey to Sabine's misrepresentation of events. In this way, *Possession* suggests that an "accurate" decoding of authorial intent might not necessarily result in an accurate reconstruction of the historical record and, additionally, raises the question of how to read and interpret texts, which I will return to shortly.

As previously mentioned, many of the literary works that help Roland and Maud unravel the mystery are included in the narrative, making it possible for the reader to interpret them for themselves. Initially, the relationship between the pseudo-Victorian intertexts and the narrative seems rather straightforward: the poems are frequently used as proleptic epigraphs anticipating narrative developments. The opening chapter of the novel, for instance, begins with a poem by Ash in which "the tricky hero Heracles / Came to his dispossession and the theft" (Byatt 1991, 1), foreshadowing Roland's theft of Ash's letter from the London Library. Likewise, Chapter 4 is prefaced with a poem by LaMotte in which she depicts Rapunzel, locked up in a "glassy Tower," letting down her golden hair for the "foul Old One," who climbs up, sending "Pain [...] shrilling / Through every strand!" (Byatt 1991, 35). LaMotte's description of Rapunzel prefigures Maud, who is introduced as living "at the top of Tennyson Tower" (Byatt 1991, 39) and is distinguished by her hair, which, like that of LaMotte's Rapunzel, is linked to anguish, though mental rather than physical. Maud's blond mane undermines her credibility as a feminist scholar, which prompts her

to shear it; she only grows it back at the suggestion of an exploitative lover and then decides to wear it hidden away under a turban, “a kind of captive creature,” Roland thinks in a later chapter (Byatt 1991, 272), a phrase which once again echoes the image of the imprisoned Rapunzel. As these two examples demonstrate, *Possession* draws meaningful connections between the Victorian texts and the present-day narrative: by having the former illuminate aspects of the latter, the novel encourages viewing them as useful interpretive clues, which corresponds to the way literature is used in the detective plot.

This approach is nevertheless complicated by the introduction of Ash’s “Mummy Possest,” a poem based on Robert Browning’s “Mr Sludge, ‘The Medium,’” which is used as one of the epigraphs to the novel. The similarities between the two texts are telling. Browning’s poem “has usually been read as a scathing attack on Spiritualism” (Helfield 2006, 7); accordingly, on account of writing “Mummy Possest,” Ash was, according to his fictitious contemporary, “taken by the general public as a champion of reason against knavery” in the spiritualist controversy (Byatt 1991, 398). Yet just as Browning’s attitude towards spiritualism wasn’t necessarily quite as condemnatory as critical consensus would have it (Helfield 2006, 7), so in *Possession* there are two contradictory accounts of a seance which Ash attended: one fictionalised by the poet himself in “Mummy Possest,” the other given by Mrs Lees, a medium who witnessed Ash’s comportment during the event and declares it “far from that” of a “detached observer” which he then sought to present himself as (Byatt 1991, 398). These conflicting versions of events – one which sees “Mummy Possest,” and by extension Ash, as a virulent critic of the fraudulent practices of mediums, and the other that belies this image – cast doubt on the straightforward equation of the poem with the historical reality it responds to (which was a necessary condition throughout Maud and Roland’s quest), and, consequently, highlights the potential issues that arise from using literary texts as a window onto their creators’ attitudes or the past more broadly.

There is another significant analogy between Browning’s poem and “Mummy Possest,” which explicitly raises the question of the veracity of literary texts. In the excerpt from Browning that Byatt chooses as an epigraph, the speaker draws a parallel between the deceitful Mr Sludge and poets, who use lies to arrive at “portly truth.” As Helfield notes, Browning suggests an affinity between the medium and the artist in a number of his dramatic monologues: “[b]oth, for example, are characterized as potentially fraudulent, for both fabricate the

subjects they purport to objectively represent” (Helfield 2006, 7). The same sentiment is echoed in “Mummy Possesst,” a dramatic monologue delivered by a female medium, who defends her trickery thus:

You call these spirit *mises en scène* a lie
 I call it artfulness, or simply Art
 A Tale, a Story, that may hide a Truth
 As wonder-tales do, even in the Best Book
 [...]

 Through medium of language the great Poets
 Keep constant the Ideal, as Beatrice
 Speaks to us still, though Dante’s flesh is dust
 So through the Medium of this poor flesh
 [...] the sublimest Souls
 Make themselves known to those who sit and wait. (Byatt 1991,
 408-9)

The argument here is that even though spirit manifestations may be carefully contrived, they hint at a deeper truth – the existence of the spirit world – in the same way that poets use fictional storytelling to communicate what Browning terms “portly truth.” In *Possession*, this view of poetry is not limited to Ash’s fictitious medium: Christabel also expresses a desire to “write a Fairy Epic, [...] not grounded in historical truth, but in poetic and imaginative truth [...], where the soul is free from the restraints of history and fact” (Byatt 1991, 373). If we accept the idea of poetic truth as viable,⁷ then the equivalence of poets with mediums can be read as validating the latter rather than discrediting the former: indeed, this is how Helfield interprets it in the context of Browning’s poetry, suggesting that in Browning’s texts, “both [poets and mediums] are at times genuinely capable of capturing the spirit of the dead and making it manifest to others” (Helfield 2006, 7). Conversely, if we start from the premise that spiritualism is nothing but chicanery, what follows is the inevitable conclusion that poetry is a meaningless string of falsehoods. “Mummy

7 Peter Lamarque argues that we should, suggesting that “there is no disagreement” about the fact that there is “some connection” between truth and literature; the debate as he sees it rather hinges on the question whether or not truth is “a criterion of literary value” (Lamarque 2015, 367).

Possest” does not resolve this dilemma, and neither does the novel as a whole. The inclusion of this particular poem nevertheless forces us to think about the cognitive value of literary texts and, by extension, reconsider the assumptions about their usefulness as a clue in a detective quest which we (as well as Roland and Maud) have hitherto relied on.

Significantly, the Browning-Ash parallel established by “Mummy Possest” can be extended to include Byatt, too, insofar as mediums, poets and *Possession* all bring back the dead. In one of the letters to his wife, Ash declares that “[i]f there is a subject that is my own, my dear Ellen, as a writer I mean, it is the persistent shape-shifting life of things long-dead but not vanished” (Byatt 1991, 256, 104). In this way, his goals are not unlike those of *Possession*; and if we are indeed encouraged to draw a parallel between Ash’s poetic endeavours and the novel as a whole, how does that affect our reading of it? Anticipating the reader’s attempts at interpretation, the narrator offers this metafictional passage:

There are readings – of the same text – that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect, [...] and for a time do not hear golden or apples. There are personal readings, that snatch for personal meanings, I am full of love, or disgust, or fear, I scan for love, or disgust, or fear. There are – believe it – impersonal readings – where the mind’s eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind’s ear hears them sing and sing. (Byatt 1991, 472)

As Kate Mitchell notes, Byatt “posit[s] the existence of an ideal reader,” whom Roland comes to embody when he “reads not searching for allusions to other texts, nor hunting for hints about Ash’s life, but enjoying a reading in which he can again hear the language sing,” engaging with the text “both intellectually and emotionally” (Mitchell 2010, 102–3). Thus, the reading that *Possession* itself seems to favour is that which privileges simply the sound of the words and the pleasure they bring rather than any meaning that can be extracted from them; in other words, the kind of reading that stands in opposition to literary criticism. In this way, as Ann Marie Adams argues, the novel “rejects all reading practices save those [Byatt] enjoins upon her reader,” which she characterises as “uncritical and non-liberatory” – or “readerly” to use Roland Barthes’ terminology (Adams 2003, 108, 121). This retreat into the readerly introduces an insoluble

tension in the novel, which has hitherto enticed its readers into the very mode of reading it now dismisses. Thus, *Possession* ends on a paradoxical note creating that can be read as profoundly postmodern in Hutcheon's understanding of postmodernism as "a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest" (Hutcheon 1988, 106).

Conclusion

Possession is a multifaceted, complex novel that, to borrow Hutcheon's terms, addresses the epistemological question of how we can know the past, and interrogates the ontological status of its traces in the present. It is also a text about the triumphs and pitfalls of reading and interpretation. Byatt dramatizes these concerns by making the novel a detective game about literary investigation. Yet despite Maud's assertion that "literary critics make natural detectives," she and Roland prove fumbling sleuths at best: whatever success they enjoy by the end of the novel is largely due to a combination of luck and impeccable intuition. The marvellous coincidences and flashes of insight that drive their investigation forward suggest "a controlling, coherent narrative" (Ashman Long 2018, 158), a "plot or fate" the existence of which Roland contemplates "partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread" (Byatt 1991, 421). Byatt deals the final blow to the scholars' credibility as detectives with the inclusion of the Postscript, whereby she allows the reader to gain the upper hand over the present-day characters by offering them privileged insight into the Victorian timeline. In this way, *Possession* asserts the existence of the past that the characters' conclusions can be measured against and, in the case of the Postscript, found wanting. Thus, the novel corresponds to Hutcheon's understanding of the relationship between historical events and their inscription in the present as always discursively constructed.

This brings us to the textual traces on the basis of which the scholars reconstruct their version of events, and which the readers are encouraged to read and interpret for themselves: the pseudo-Victorian intertexts included in the novel. Regardless of what type of discourse they typify – be it correspondence, a private journal or poetry – as clues in the detective plot, they challenge "the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation" (Hutcheon 1988, 92). Moreover, *Possession* undermines the sort of reading that Roland and Maud perform throughout their

investigation, which treats literary texts as a mystery to be unravelled. This rejection of the impulse to “map and dissect” is surprising in a novel that lends itself particularly well to precisely this mode of reading. Throughout *Possession*, the “connections [that] proliferate apparently at random” (Byatt 1991, 421) suggest an intricate design which entices the reader to follow it in the hopes of cracking the novel’s code only to have their efforts be rendered meaningless with a passage that contends that the ideal reader ought to be compelled by the beauty of language. Not only do literary critics not make natural detectives in *Possession* – they don’t even make particularly good readers. The tension this fragment produces in relation to the rest of the novel can nevertheless be seen as an example of the paradox that, for Hutcheon, defines postmodernism.

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