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Author(s): Adrienne Shiffman

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“Burn what they should not see”:
The Private Journal as Public Text in
A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*

Adrienne Shiffman
McMaster University

What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds & ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, & find that the collection had sorted itself & redefined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, & yet steady, tranquil, composed with the aloofness of a work of art.

Virginia Woolf, 20 April 1919¹

This is the book in which I shall make myself into a true writer. . . . I began this writing task at the suggestion of my cousin, the poet, Christabel LaMotte, who said something that struck me most forcibly. “A writer only becomes a true writer by practising his craft, by experimenting constantly with language, as a great artist may experiment with clay or oils until the medium becomes second nature, to be moulded however the artist may desire.”

From the opening entry of the journal of Sabine de Kercoz, *Possession*²

Diaries³ serve as testimonials to individual female lives and constitute a literary tradition of female serial writing.⁴ Marlene Kadar locates the diary within the larger autobiographical genre of “life writing”: a “kind of writing about the ‘self’ or the ‘individual’ that favors autobiography, but includes letters, diaries, journals and (even) biography.”⁵ In other words, “life writing” is a way of approaching autobiographical literature that calls attention to the limitations of the term “autobiography.” Suzanne Bunkers questions the autobiographical tradition in its inherent exclusion of women and proposes the reexamination of the conventional male heroic paradigm that has formed the basis for the generic boundaries of autobiography. She argues, “the hero’s quest is not always the central framework for the autobiographer’s story, particularly not when the autobiographer is female and when she writes her story in the form of a diary or journal.”⁶ Hence, a reexamination and reappropriation of the diary as a literary form⁷

locates it on the borderline or threshold of autobiography; while the diary is an autobiographical act of writing the self, it simultaneously subverts the conventions of the traditional male-centered genre.

Similarly to Bunkers, Harriet Blodgett does not see the diary as a complacent “silent text” but rather as the subversive product of voicing one’s self:

diary keeping has been practiced so extensively by women because it has been possible for them and gratifying to them. The diary, by its nature as a genre of personal record, by the opportunity it offers the diarist to record what is important to her, and by the daily time that it claims for itself, counters the patriarchal attack on female identity and self-worth. A diary is an act of language that, by speaking of one’s self, sustains one’s sense of being a self, with an autonomous and significant identity.⁸

Because the female self has been traditionally defined in relation to a dominant other, women’s life writing—in the form of the female diary—has been pushed into the literary margins.⁹ But, as Blodgett notes, the self-pre-occupation of the female diarist directly contradicts and, in a sense, undermines the absence of autonomy expected of the feminine role. The woman who “writes herself” both deconstructs and reconstructs womanhood: by publicizing herself—choosing to valorize certain details of her life by recording them in written form—she challenges the dominant cultural construction of femininity as passive or muted.

Lynn Z. Bloom divides the diary into two sub-genres: the “truly private diary” and the “public private diary.”¹⁰ The former is distinguished from the latter in its minimalism; such a private diary efficiently records day-to-day occurrences, exhibits neither foreshadowing nor retrospection, and contains no superfluous information. This truly private diary, in fact, lacks sufficient detail to render it self-coherent and cannot stand alone; no reader outside the author’s immediate circle could decipher the diary without extratextual information. Bloom, however, recognizes that such superficially private writing can easily become unmistakably public documents intended for external readership:

it is the audience hovering at the edge of the page that for the sophisticated diarist facilitates the work’s ultimate focus, providing the impetus either for the initial writing or for transforming what might have been casual, fragmented jottings into a more carefully crafted, contextually coherent work. . . . Then like . . . Shakespearean soliloquies, they [the diaries] are spoken to the world. (p. 23)

Because this suggestion of external readership entails the possibility of self-censorship, Bloom argues that “for a professional writer, there are no private writings” (p. 24). Indeed, any diarist who does not personally destroy her work must be aware of the existence of a possible audience, present or

future, and will construct her text accordingly. Hence, the emergence of the public private diary. Public private documents are free-standing, self-contained, and self-explanatory texts, artfully shaped to accommodate an audience; such texts constitute a literary occasion that has an intrinsic appeal for a reader.¹¹ The existence of an audience, real or implied, almost dislocates the self, the central voice of the diary, as she is transformed from a subject into an object for external consumption. The importance of the audience in what has been traditionally regarded as a private genre, therefore, cannot be overstated: as Margo Culley says,

the presence of a sense of audience . . . has a crucial influence over what is said and how it is said. . . . it shapes the selection and arrangement of detail within the journal and determines more than anything else the kind of self-construction the diarist presents.¹²

During an interview with Richard Todd, author A. S. Byatt asserts, “of course all autobiography is fiction.”¹³ Likewise, Culley argues in specific reference to the diary, “as invaluable as women’s life-records are as historical sources containing a kind of ‘truth’ about women’s lives not found in other places, we must remember that diaries and journals are texts, that is, verbal constructs.”¹⁴ As both Byatt and Culley suggest, the diary—resting on the generic borderline of autobiography—is indeed fiction; and the possibility of external readership solidifies its position as such.

In her novel *Possession*, Byatt presents a fictional reconstruction of a nineteenth-century female diary in the journal of Ellen Ash, and, in doing so, she exposes the genre as a textual construct. In other words, Byatt reveals the diary as fiction in her creation of a fictional diary. The use of Byatt’s “fictional” journal as opposed to a “documentary” journal in an exploration of the genre locates fictionality at the forefront. Embedded within the complex intricacies of *Possession*’s plot, Ellen’s journal exploits the way in which diaries can be constructed like any other writing. The boundaries between diarist and author, ordinary and extraordinary, private and public conflate, and the female diarist ultimately emerges as a powerful literary talent.

Although the intrigue of Byatt’s Victorian plot revolves around the romance between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, Ellen’s journal becomes a crucial source of detail pertaining to this affair. The journal is in the process of being edited by Beatrice Nest, an admirer of R. H. Ash, both of the man and his poems. Despite her initial desire to pursue Ash’s *Ask to Embla* for her doctoral dissertation, Beatrice’s supervisor, Professor Bengt Bengtsson, assigns her a more “suitable undertaking—something certainly new, modestly useful, manageable and related to Ash”—editing Ellen Ash’s journal (p. 114). Beatrice, the inadequate female scholar within a patriarchal institution, is offered the “suitable” task

of working with the inadequate female text. This apparently “natural” relationship fostered between Beatrice Nest and Ellen Ash is essentially a manifestation of the dominant discourse that devalues the female diary as a literary form. Like Professor Bengtsson, Randolph Ash expert Blackadder claims that Ellen’s journal is only valuable to feminist scholars who deliberately resist interest in the more highly esteemed work of the male poet:

All they want is to read Ellen’s endless journal once our friend in there has actually managed to bring it to the light of day. They think Randolph Ash suppressed Ellen’s writing and fed off her imagination. They’d have a hard time proving that, I think, if they were interested in proof, which I’m not sure they are. They *know* what there is to find before they’ve seen it. All they’ve got to go on is that she spent a lot of time lying on the sofa, and that’s hardly unusual for a lady in her time and circumstances. Their real problem—and Beatrice’s—is that Ellen Ash is *dull*. (p. 31)

For Blackadder, the dailiness of Ellen’s journal—its “dullness,” predictability, and domesticity—provides ample evidence of its unimportance and, hence, its marginalization. Such criteria, however, merely reflect the cultural binary that valorizes extraordinary over ordinary, event over non-event, masculine over feminine; in other words, Blackadder’s comment is a modern extension of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres.

Yet, in their dismissal of Ellen’s journal, both Bengtsson and Blackadder fail to consider the text outside the generic boundaries of women’s “private” writing. Only Beatrice sees beyond the superficial “dullness” of the diary:

“Why do you think she wrote the journal, Dr. Nest? In order to have someone to talk to? As an examination of conscience? Out of a sense of duty? Why?”

“I do have a theory. It’s far-fetched, I think.”

“What is your theory?”

“I think she wrote it to baffle. Yes. To baffle.”

They stared at each other. Maud said, “To baffle whom? His biographers?”

“Just to baffle.”(pp. 219-20)

As Beatrice suspects, Ellen Ash constructs her journal with a deliberate intention: to baffle. The significant issue raised in Beatrice’s theory, however, is not for whom Ellen writes, but rather that she writes for anyone at all. Her awareness of a possible readership, present or future, determines both the journal’s subject matter and its approach and consequently calls into question the whole status of the diary as a private literary construct.

In her journal, Ellen Ash writes herself as the ideal embodiment of Victorian femininity, overtly aware of the necessary element of female inferiority that lies at the center of this ideal: “I can never say enough in praise of Randolph’s unvarying goodness and forbearance with my feeble-

ness and inadequacies" (p. 115). Beatrice notes that this statement, or a variation upon it, recurs in the journal "like the regular tolling of a bell" (p. 115). For Blackadder, such a statement and its careless, repetitive inclusion in the journal is precisely why Ellen Ash's diary appears to be so "dull"; she writes and rewrites the obvious. Indeed, her journal is abundant with domestic detail, the banal aspects of the everyday: her decision whether or not to wash the upper curtains as well as the lower ones (p. 222); her excitement at surprising Randolph with a home "newly gleaming and radiant" (p. 226); her crisis over flaws in two of the crystal teardrops (p. 226); her daily headaches and struggles with sleep (p. 230). Her diary seems to offer no more than redundant insight into the daily routine of a domestic woman—wife and "helpmeet" to the literary genius of Randolph Henry Ash.

But as she spends an increasing amount of time with the journal, Beatrice senses subtle subversion in the diarist's writing:

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*. And then I got to think—I was being led on—to imagine the flittering and flickering things—and that really it was all just as stolid and dull as anything. I thought I was making it all up, that she could have said something interesting—how shall I put it—intriguing—once in a while—but she *absolutely wasn't going to*. (p. 220)

The "panelling" that conceals the "flittering and flickering" of Ellen Ash recalls the House and its inhabitants described in Christabel's poem at the opening of the chapter: "We walk with lowered eyelids there / And silent go—behind the blinds / Yet hearts may tap like loaded bombs . . . And walls break outwards—with a rush—" (p. 210). Indeed, like the poem's speechless, sheltered women who lower their eyelids in inferiority, Ellen writes herself as the Victorian ideal—a "nice dull woman"; she is the silent, solid panelling of the domestic House. Yet at the same time, she is a "loaded bomb," "flittering and flickering" beneath her self-constructed subjectivity. Beatrice's certainty that Ellen "absolutely wasn't going to" reveal anything "intriguing" suggests an intentional orchestration on behalf of the diarist; her perfected, feminine domesticity is exposed as a deliberately manufactured and, hence, fictional construct.

Ellen's careful process of selection and omission in the design of her journal illustrates her familiarity with the cultural ideology of separate, gendered spheres as well as her subversive deconstruction of it. After finishing LaMotte's *Melusina*, Ellen writes in her journal:

. . . What shall I say of it? It is truly original, although the general public may have trouble in recognising its genius, because it makes no concession to vulgar frailties of imagination, and because its virtues are so far removed in some

ways at least from those expected of the weaker sex. . . . How shall I characterise it? It is like a huge, intricately embroidered tapestry in a shadowed stone hall. . . . Fine patches of gold stand out in the gloom, sunlight and starlight, the sparkle of jewels or human hair or serpents' scales. . . . All the elements are in perpetual motion, fire consuming, water running, air alive and the earth turning. . . .

. . . Miss LaMotte tells abundantly, though her description might be a little *strong* for some stomachs, especially maidenly English ones, who will be looking for fairy winsomeness. (pp. 120-21)

In Ellen's praise of LaMotte's poetic "genius," she recognizes LaMotte's deviance from the cultural expectations of womanhood. By exposing this deviance, Ellen exploits her own awareness of the constructed nature of the notion of woman as the "weaker sex." Ellen locates herself, as reader, outside the collective majority of the "general public" who perpetuate such ideological constructions; she places herself instead in the position of a learned literary critic, astutely sensitive to poetic talent. Moreover, she does not view herself as a "typical English maiden" in search of feminine delicacy and frailty, but rather as a perceptive consumer of LaMotte's lavish and overwhelming detail.

Bunkers observes that feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Jane Marcus, and Alice Walker have explored the notion of women's "private" writings as analogous to women's sewing, weaving, piecing, quilting, and gardening. Such activities, like diary and journal writing, are all delicate forms of skilled labor

that function to preserve the fabric of women's experiences, regardless of whether the artistry of the creator's work is visible. . . .

. . . This does not mean, however, that selection, shaping, stitching, and structuring have played no role in the creation of such texts. On the contrary, many are so skillfully "invisibly mended" that only a very close reading can reveal what Showalter has called "ragged edges"—those bits and pieces that defy tidy inclusion in standard literary schema.¹⁵

This analogy that Bunkers describes applies to Ellen's writing on several levels. First, in her journal, Ellen compares LaMotte's *Melusina* to an "intricately embroidered tapestry." While she highlights the genuine artistry and linguistic talent of the poet in this comparison, Ellen observes that, like the "invisible mending" behind much of women's skilled labor, LaMotte's "genius" will undoubtedly remain unrecognized by the "general public." On another level, Ellen's description of *Melusina* calls attention to the way in which the poem's "ragged edges" indeed "defy tidy inclusion"; the elements remain in "perpetual motion"—"consuming," "running," and "turning"—so that earth, air, fire, and water imagistically collide in overabundance. Yet her reference to "perpetual motion" not only implicates the four

natural elements but also the elements of the poem itself. Ultimately, *Melusina* emerges in the journal as an elusive, uncontainable, boundless text. Bunker's analogy further reveals Ellen's journal, an example of women's "private" writing, as a work of "invisible mending" in and of itself. Like quilting, sewing, or gardening, her writing is a delicate process of selection and shaping that serves to construct a fictional persona, a version of the self that Ellen, the diarist, wishes to project.¹⁶

Beatrice cannot deny a sense of Ellen's "systematic omission" (p. 221) recurring throughout the diary. After receiving a brooch and poem from her traveling husband, the enamored Ellen transcribes the verse into her journal and affirms their mutual love: "~~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" (p. 229). Yet, while the statement attempts to confirm stability and affection between husband and wife, its idealism is tarnished by the lingering qualification, "despite all." The phrase exists in a state of liminality; simultaneously included and omitted, it hovers between presence and absence. Indeed, the opening "paradox" of Randolph's poem calls attention to the diarist's paradoxical "visible omission." The crossed-out words essentially suggest an act of self-editing on the part of the diarist in order to create the fiction of the perfect marriage. Ellen's practice of "systematic omission" occurs again in her journal after she receives a letter from a "mysterious and urgent lady"—Blanche Glover—who desires to meet with her (p. 230). Ellen mentions in her journal the receipt of two letters from this woman as well as her initial refusal of a visit, but she concludes the episode with an unsettling abruptness and elusiveness: "My importunate visitor came and we talked some time. That matter is now I hope quite at an end and wholly cleared up" (p. 231). While this abrupt statement appears to enforce a sense of closure, "that matter" remains entirely ambiguous and, hence, unresolved. Although no words are visibly omitted from the text, the vagueness with which she describes the discussion suggests a deliberate minimalist construction. Only much later, outside the context of Ellen's journal, does the reader learn that during this chat with her "importunate visitor," Ellen becomes aware of the intimacy between her husband and Christabel. Like the crossed-out "despite all," Ellen's evasive account of her mysterious visitor creates a notable gap in the text. This gap suggests the way in which her journal is a fictional product of self-conscious selection and intentional shaping.

In *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender notes that in a male-dominated world, language is a means of classifying and ordering—a means of manipulating reality. She further argues, "one of our fundamental rules for making sense of our male-dominated world is—predictably—that the male rep-

resents the positive while the female, necessarily then, represents the negative.”¹⁷ The gaps in the journal of Ellen Ash can be seen as sites of emptiness, absence, or, to use Spender’s terminology, female negativity. In a phallogentric order, such gaps are void of all meaning and power. For Ellen, however, a gap in her text is the locus of meaning.

In details offered by the narrator, the reader eventually learns that Ellen and Randolph’s mutual affection does indeed persist *despite all*—particularly despite the lack of sexual intimacy between them. The narrator recounts for the reader their honeymoon:

A thin, white animal, herself, trembling.

A complex thing, the naked male, curly hairs and shining wet, at once bovine and dolphin-like, its scent feral and overwhelming.

A large hand, held out in kindness, not once, but many times, slapped away, pushed away, slapped away.

A running creature, crouching and cowering in the corner of the room, its teeth chattering, its veins clamped in spasms, its breath shallow and fluttering. Herself.

A respite, generously agreed, glasses of golden wine, a few days of Edenic picnics, a laughing woman perched on a rock in pale blue poplin skirts, a handsome man in his whiskers, lifting her, quoting Petrarch.

An attempt. A hand not pushed away. Tendons like steel, teeth in pain, clenched, clenched. . . .

When did he begin to know that however gentle he was, however patient, it was no good, it would never be any good? . . .

The eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made it up to him, his abstinence. . . . *He had accepted her love.* (p. 459)

Randolph’s wooing of Ellen is described in the language of conventional romance: the scene is figured as an idyllic or “Edenic” paradise; the male “lifts” aggressively while the female “perches” passively; he is the Petrarchan sonneteer and she is the objectified beloved. Nevertheless, Ellen refuses his sexual advances, resists penetration, and remains “Herself.” The romantic ritual ultimately fails, and Ellen and Randolph never consummate their marriage.

In her “private” writing, Ellen writes herself as the feminine ideal, entirely subservient to the dominance of her husband. She refers to Randolph as the “Master” of the house (p. 224); she likens her husband linguistically to a godlike figure in her reference to “how very busy *He* is” (p. 229, emphasis mine); she trivializes female domestic matters as belonging to her “sphere of influence” (p. 227). Yet the gap in her “private” writing—the space created by the included omission of “despite all”—exploits this feminine self as a fictional construction. Ellen’s autonomous self—“Herself”—exists in this gap. As Luce Irigaray writes, female sexuality has been conceptualized on the basis of masculine definitions, and, conse-

quently, women exist in a simultaneous state of “lack” and “desire”; women do not have but desperately want the male penis, the only sexual organ of recognized value in a phallogentric system.¹⁸ Ellen, however, disrupts this phallogentric order when she refuses sexual penetration. Her “hole” is a “whole”: it is presence not absence, power not powerlessness, meaning not nonmeaning. Thus, much like the textual gaps in her journal, Ellen’s physiological gap, her vagina, is a site of subversion of the dominant patriarchal discourse.¹⁹

Such acts of “systematic omission” inevitably presuppose the anticipation of a readership. As Beatrice reveals to Maud Bailey (a contemporary critic of LaMotte), “I think she knew it might be read. . . . She knew he was a great poet and she must have known they would come—the scavengers—sooner or later if she didn’t burn it. *And she didn’t burn it*” (p. 219, emphasis mine). Beatrice’s comment can be viewed as a specific reference to Ellen’s journal entry on 25 November 1889, immediately following the death of her husband:

When he was lying there he said, “Burn what they should not see,” and I said, “Yes,” I promised. . . . He said often to me, burn what is alive for us with the life of our memory, and let no one else make idle curios or lies of it. . . . I have made a fire here, and burned some things. I shall burn more. He shall not be picked by vultures.

There are things I cannot burn. Nor ever I think look at again. There are things here that are not mine, that I could not be a party to burning. And there are our dear letters, from all those foolish years of separation. What can I do? I cannot leave them to be buried with me. Trust may be betrayed. I shall lay these things to rest with him now, to await my coming. Let the earth take them. (pp. 442-43)

Ellen’s entry seems to support Beatrice’s suspicions directly. While she confesses to burning some of Randolph’s belongings, she appears to make a self-conscious effort to include in her journal the precise location of the letters she does not destroy. So in her orchestrated decisions to bury the letters with the body of Randolph and to insert this information into the text of her diary, Ellen does not prevent the attack of the “vultures” but simply delays it. Just prior to their discovery of the letters, the “vultures” are depicted in conversation:

“I do wonder,” said Blackadder, “what is or was in that box.”

“And for whom it was put there,” said Maud.

“She leads you on and *baffles* you,” said Beatrice. “She wants you to know and not to know. *She took care to write down that the box was there. And she buried it.*” (p. 485, emphasis mine)

Indeed, the details of Ellen’s “private” writing seem to anticipate an external audience. Moreover, as Beatrice highlights, Ellen does not burn her

diary. Any writer who does not personally destroy her own “private” work must foresee the possibility of a readership and writes herself and her text accordingly.

In 1921, Katherine Mansfield wrote in her journal, “I don’t mean that any eye but mine should read this. This is—*really private*.”²⁰ But unlike Mansfield’s diary, Ellen’s “private” writing is intended for public eyes:

She put more coal and more pieces of wood on the fire, and made a brave little blaze, by the side of which she sat down to manufacture the carefully edited, the carefully *strained* (the metaphor was one of jelly-making) truth of her journal. She would decide later what to do with *that*. It was both a defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures.

And why were the letters so carefully put up then, in their sealed enclosure? Could she read them, where she was going, could he? This last house was no house, why not leave them open to the things that tunnelled in the clay, the mites and blind worms, things that chewed with invisible mouths, and cleansed and annihilated?

I want them to have a *sort of duration*, she said to herself. A demi-eternity. And if the ghouls dig them up again?

Then justice will perhaps be done to *her* when I am not here to see it. . . .

I am in your hands. (pp. 461-62)

As the narrator describes this, the “truth” of Ellen’s journal is both “carefully edited” and “carefully strained,” a “manufacture[d]” product of the diarist. The depiction of Ellen constructing this text next to a blazing fire emphasizes her deliberate decision not to destroy it. Like the preserved letters, her journal will undoubtedly have a “sort of duration.” The final phrase of this excerpt, “I am in your hands,” mirrors the conclusion of Christabel’s letter to Ellen Ash in which she begs Ellen to pass onto her husband a personal letter she has written him. The phrase is repeated here, after the reader learns that Ellen conceals the letter from Randolph and, instead, buries it alongside her own bundle of love letters. The repetition of the phrase, however, draws attention to the immense power of Ellen Ash. Ellen self-consciously constructs her journal as “bait” for the “vultures” and “ghouls,” knowing that they will most certainly dig up her own letters to Randolph and, in turn, discover Christabel’s. So, in addition to Christabel, each of the scholarly “vultures”—Blackadder, Cropper, Maud, Beatrice, Leonora, Roland—remains entirely in Ellen’s hands.

Despite the volumes of journals Ellen produces throughout her lifetime, scholars such as Blackadder, Cropper, Roland, and Maud all seem to enforce an unequal and gendered difference between Ellen’s writerly identity and that of her husband. Randolph, not Ellen, is the Writer of the couple. Her “private” journal writing is regarded merely as an extension of her “private” domestic role; in his work *The Great Ventriloquist*, Cropper asserts

authoritatively, “Ellen Ash shared her generation’s prudery and squeamishness about the publication of private papers” (p. 444). Ellen herself articulates her inferior literary status in an entry made after reading LaMotte’s *Melusina*:

My recent reading has caused me for some reason to remember myself as I was when a young girl, reading high Romances and seeing myself simultaneously as the object of all knights’ devotion—an unspotted Guenevere—and as the author of the Tale. *I wanted to be a Poet and a Poem*, and now am neither, but the mistress of a very small household. (p. 122, emphasis mine)

This desire to be both poet and poem, author and text, is essentially the desire to be both subject and object. Although here she views herself as neither, Ellen later reveals that, as a woman, she will always be the poem, the object of the male subject’s gaze. Indeed, the marriage between Randolph and Ellen is enacted as a split between poet and poem, subject and object: in his letters from abroad and in his Petrarchan recitals, Randolph continually shapes his wife into verse.

Yet the anticipation of an external audience for her journal creates a split in the self of the diary so that Ellen is simultaneously the subject who constructs and the object who is (or who will be) consumed. Felicity A. Nussbaum recognizes a need to redefine the concept of the narrative consciousness in autobiographical texts and cites as particularly useful Emile Benveniste’s distinction between the “I” who speaks and the “I” who is spoken:

For Benveniste, language constructs subjectivity, and in turn subjectivity writes language: “I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. . . . It is in and through language that an individual constitutes himself as a *subject*, the *I*, who is uttering the present instance of the discourse,” between the agent of speech and the subject engendered in discourse, speaking and spoken. . . . The split subject, then, allows for the recognition that the “I” who is writing is distinct from the “I” who is written about.²¹

In her anticipation of a readership, Ellen collapses the generic boundaries of the female diary: the “private” journal becomes a public text. In the process, Ellen demonstrates herself as Benveniste’s split subject: the “I” who writes the diary is quite distinct from the “I” who emerges in the text. Ultimately, Ellen Ash is both private and public, subject and object, poet and poem, and, as such, she baffles.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Harriet Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days: English Women's Private Diaries* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 6.

² A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (1990; London: Vintage, 1991), p. 335. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Throughout this essay, I use the terms "diary" and "journal" interchangeably. As Judy Simons writes in *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), "although strictly speaking, 'diary' can be used as a generic term to cover both a daily record of engagements and more intimate writing, while 'journal' tends to refer more specifically to a personal chronicle, writers themselves do not always keep to such nice distinctions" (p. 7).

⁴ This article deals specifically with the female diarist and consequently raises the critical question of whether or not the diary is a characteristically female literary form. While for reasons of space and clarity I do not address this issue directly, I feel that it deserves brief mention.

Rebecca Hogan considers this topic in "Engendered Autobiographies: The Diary as a Feminine Form," in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, ed. Shirley Neuman (London: Frank Cass, 1991), pp. 95-107. Hogan argues that while "male" and "female" indicate biological differences, it is possible to describe a writing strategy or literary form as "feminine" or "masculine" regardless of the sex of its practitioner or author. Throughout the nineteenth century, those aspects of culture associated with the private became the domain of women; the image of a life of personal reflection and devotion was increasingly intertwined with the image of the private sphere, women's sphere. The original nonpublic, nonliterary nature of the diary was, therefore, considered an appropriate form of female writing. As nineteenth-century women were discouraged from writing for the public, the female diary became a manifestation of the paradoxical notion of writing to remain unread—the silent text. Hence, Hogan posits, "if we see 'feminine' as a cultural signifier, standing in for the historically determined social construction of feminine behavior, psychological characteristics, and the like, then the diary is a feminine form" (p. 99).

Valerie Raoul approaches this issue from a different perspective in her examination of the history of the French journal *intime* in "Women and Diaries: Gender and Genre," *MOSAIC: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 22, No. 3 (1989), 57-65. She notes a tradition of male writers in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France who adopted the persona of a female voice and created fictional "diary novels," commonly titled *Journal d'une jeune femme* (p. 59). This literary trend demanded those who participated to question whether or not a "female" style of writing exists. Raoul observes a consistent style among these journals distinguished by such elements as the use of suspension marks, rhetorical questions, exclamations, parentheses, short sentences, abrupt cutoffs, and gaps due to erasures or omitted pages, and she concludes, "it is a style not actually typical of writing by women, but associated with diary writing, whatever the sex of the diarist. It is therefore determined by genre rather than by gender" (p. 62).

⁵ Marlene Kadar, "Coming to Terms: Life Writing—From Genre to Critical

Practice,” in *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 5.

⁶ Suzanne L. Bunkers, “What Do Women Really Mean? Thoughts on Women’s Diaries and Lives,” in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 215.

⁷ As a literary form, one of the diary’s essential properties is its dailiness; the banal aspects of everyday life tend to take over in women’s diary writing so that an event or a nonevent may be considered worthy of inclusion and comment (Raoul, p. 61). The diary is further distinguished by its flexibility. The cast of characters shifts constantly, the intrigue is random, and the end of the text is entirely unpredictable. Entries are made by a writer living chiefly in the moment and expressing her immediate self rather than, as in traditional autobiography or memoirs, recalling a past or preferred self.

⁸ Blodgett, p. 5.

⁹ Raoul, p. 59.

¹⁰ See Lynn Z. Bloom, “‘I Write for Myself and Strangers’: Private Diaries as Public Documents,” in *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries*, ed. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), pp. 23-37. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ Blodgett, p. 7.

¹² Margo Culley, “Introduction to *A Day at a Time: Diary Literature of American Women from 1764-1985*,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory—A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 218. Blodgett posits that the “reality” presented in the female diary is further influenced by the fact that self-consciousness has been historically demanded of women. Despite variations in historical circumstances, themes and attitudes—particularly a reliance on domestic details—recur in English women’s diaries because so much of their history has been lived under the assumption of separate spheres for male and female. As a result, women are self-conscious about the image they construct and likely to inhibit their self-expression in their diaries. Ultimately, the nature of the female diary has depended upon the cultural preconditions for its composing. Blodgett writes, “women’s status, their burden of restricted and inauthentic language, their lack of privacy—have clogged the pen of the female diarist and made her more likely to be circumspect than spontaneous and more often reticent than communicative” (p. 62). Thus, the female diary does not provide a sense of historical and indisputable truth because of the subjective version of reality it presents; rather, the diary offers insights into a woman’s perception of herself and her context, and their combined representability.

¹³ Richard Todd, “The Retrieval of Unheard Voices in British Postmodernist Fiction: A. S. Byatt and Marina Warner,” in *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-) Colonial, and the (Post-) Feminist*, Postmodern Studies 8, ed. Theo D’haen and Hans Bertens (Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B. V., 1994), p. 100.

¹⁴ Culley, p. 217.

¹⁵ Bunkers, pp. 216-17.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Ellen is figured as a “weaver” in the text. The narrator describes her next to her dying husband, “She sat beside him, weaving their hair together,

pinning it to a band of black silk" (p. 452).

¹⁷ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 2.

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 23.

¹⁹ I do not suggest that Ellen and Randolph's love for each other is merely a façade, but rather I argue the exact opposite. The narrator describes Ellen as thinking of Christabel as, in one sense, Randolph's "true wife, Mother, at least briefly, of his child" (p. 460). Here, wifedom is equated with motherhood and, of course, sexual intimacy. Both Randolph and Ellen, however, insist throughout the text, "we have been happy," and the description of their honeymoon affirms a sense of mutual adoration: "She had loved him *for it*. He had loved her" (p. 459, emphasis mine). This phrase suggests that the very lack of sexual intimacy between Randolph and Ellen is a significant element of their love for each other. In keeping their affection nonsexual (not partaking in intercourse), Ellen in fact rewrites her position as wife in the discourse of marriage.

²⁰ Quoted in Simons, p. 2.

²¹ Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 31-32.