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Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 442-471

Published by: [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209028>

Accessed: 17/10/2011 16:34

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Pleasures: Reading (in) A. S. Byatt’s
Possession: A Romance

Any novel is a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions.

J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*

No “thesis” on the pleasure of the text is possible; barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short. *Eppure si gaude!* And yet, against and in spite of everything, the text gives me bliss.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

A.

S. Byatt’s Booker Prize–winning novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990) tells the interrelated stories of two contemporary Victorian critics and two Victorian poets. The relatively unknown scholar Roland Michell and the more well-known Maud Bailey discover secret love letters between the two poets, the well-known, Browningsque Randolph Ash and the relatively unknown, Dickinsonian Christabel LaMotte. Through this correspondence, the post-moderns research and reprise the developing Victorian relationship, developing a corresponding relationship between themselves, one intimately “driven” by the Victorians’ “plot or fate” (456). *Possession*, in fact, teases its reader with such “repeating patterns” of major and minor motifs, which, in turn, produce a variety of textual pleasures. Significantly, it even repeats the metatextual phrase “repeating patterns,” as if to emphasize its various values.

Feminist scholar Maud's golden hair, for instance, is "so structured into repeating patterns" that it provokes the textual scholar Roland to be viscerally "moved—not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity" (295). When Maud later cites the "ancient taboo on seeing childbirth," including "versions of the Melusina myth," as a possible context for the mysterious disappearance of Christabel's illegitimate child, Roland again repeats "Repeating patterns. Again" (457). Footnote 27 to Mortimer Cropper's biography of Ash compares the poet's penned epistolary borders of ash trees to the "repeating pattern" in William Morris's floral designs (482). Significantly, though, the first time the phrase occurs it erases (even sacrifices) itself, since "no discernible repeating pattern" is traceable in the bathroom sink's suggestive floral design at Christabel's former home, Seal Court, where Maud and Roland discover the correspondence (164).

Repeating patterns, in fact, provide an endless series of textual metonymies: *patterns* themselves suggest previous repetitions even before *repeating* repeats them again. They seem, in part, a function of the metaphysical and metatextual quest for origins that motivates characters in and readers of *Possession* alike, what Roland terms the infinitely "regressive nature of the [reading] pleasure, a *mise-en-abîme* even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*" (511). A different function of the tail-eating plot, however, dispenses with origins and devotes itself to the enigmatic "end of the story." Even if the plot becomes some "self-reflexive, inturned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that . . . has got out of hand" (456), Maud insists that "[w]e need the end of the story" for satisfying closure (541). As Elisabeth Bronfen relevantly suggests in her reading of the "two contradictory impulses" driving romance plots like *Possession's*, endings originally satisfied "the desire for coherence and ethically meaningful closure and the knowledge of the internal difference of repetition and language that we can never be divorced from as long as we remain in the realm of representation" (121). In any event, Byatt's text repeatedly stresses various kinds of reading "pleasure":

There are readings—of the same text—that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect . . . There are personal readings, which snatch for personal meanings . . . 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.

Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark.

(511–12)

What we also see in Byatt's repeating patterns, however, are examples of the two different "readings of the world" that Gilles Deleuze has emphasized: "one [reading] invites us to think difference from the standpoint of a previous similitude or identity; whereas the other invites us to think similitude and even identity as the product of a deep disparity" (261). In *Fiction and Repetition*, J. Hillis Miller finds these principles of identity and contradiction, "the human habit of seeing likes in unlikes and the demystification of this habit" (14), as always already informing all fiction: "[E]ach form of repetition inevitably calls up the other as its shadow companion. You cannot have one without the other, though each subverts the other" (16). In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes similarly sees the two "antipathetic codes" of conformity and deformity repeatedly complicating every reading act as he explores the liminal seam, *seme*, and *seem* between them: "Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed" (6). These two basic modes of human perception or grounds of knowledge appear more obviously, though, as the principles of *comparison* and *contrast* (Jacques Derrida's *différance*) which, as Miller implies, inform fiction in general. For example, in *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding cites the heuristic principle "of contrast," which presumes a prior comparison and "which runs through all the works of the creation," as "open[ing] a new vein of knowledge" (161); and in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Charles Dickens further insists, "Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast" (493). Discussing her novel *Still Life*—in terms of Paul Ricoeur's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's takes on "the relation of

words to things”—Byatt herself analyzes “the doubleness of a metaphor that is both mimetic and an exploration of the relation between identity and difference” (“Still Life” 13,9). In *Possession*, it even seems appropriate that 1859, “the lost year of LaMotte’s life” (423), when she disappears to have her child, recalls the Victorian *annus mirabilis* when *The Origin of Species* was published. Like Byatt’s repeating patterns, Charles Darwin’s principles of identity, difference, and variability—(oedipal) endogamy and exogamy—relevantly govern species’ survival strength and sexual compatibility between individuals.

Byatt also differently mimes and mines the “intense pleasure of reading” through her primary reader and her primary reader-identification character Roland Michell, who is well aware of both Barthes’ structuralist and deconstructive reading pleasures. He is likewise aware of the overlapping differences between cognitive and visceral pleasures, another reading category and one significantly linked with beginnings and endings and sameness and difference:

[N]atures such as Roland’s are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive. (What an amazing word “heady” is, *en passant*, suggesting both acute sensuous alertness and its opposite, the pleasure of the brain as opposed to the viscera—though each is implicated in the other, as we know very well, with both, when they are working.)

(511)

Kathleen Coyne Kelly has generally noted that “[r]ather than a description of reading, *Possession* . . . is an *enactment* of reading” (95). My related purpose here is to explore the motif of “repeating patterns,” especially its specific relation to reading (in) *Possession*, and, more problematically, to suggest some of the cognitive and visceral pleasures of what Byatt calls “Greedy reading” (Introduction xiii).

In an interview, Byatt has further stressed the intertextual and extratextual references that complement and complicate contextual repeating patterns for her reading community, female and male, academic and nonacademic readers alike: “It’s absolutely true . . . my books are thick with the presence of other books, but I feel that out there in the world there must be other people who read as passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and the world” (“A. S. Byatt” 77–78).

And yet her professional familiarity with “[m]odern theories of reading,” like those of “Roland Barthes” (84), and her dramatized practice of such theories in *Possession* create a double bind for any critical reading of Byatt’s realist romance. As Monica Flegel puts it, although “much” of *Possession* may be “directed towards an academic audience” (426), still, “Byatt ultimately criticizes critical readings” for being too distant from the Real (whether Lacanian or otherwise) and thus potentially too self-defensive, if not finally self-destructive. Indeed, any self-awareness that all such readings are always already metareadings distances critical readers dangerously far from the “lived” experience of the text and dangerously close to what Maud confesses to her co-conspiratorial critic Roland: “Maybe we’re symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists” (291). Consequently, “post-Derridean strategies of non-interpretation” (432)—or even theoretical gestures like the above “always already”—risk the same kind of self-incrimination and exposure that Roland and Maud suffer within the text and that no critical reading of *Possession* can possibly avoid. Only with this anxiety of scholarly influence—as well as Byatt’s repeatedly confessed antics of “play[ing] serious games” with readers (“Forefathers” 48)—ever in view can one proceed with the appropriate care and carelessness to “read” *Possession*.¹

Repeating patterns in the text range from the apparently simple to the subtly complex. Two pages apart, for example, Roland’s dissatisfied girlfriend Val (in direct discourse) and Christabel’s dissatisfied partner Blanche (indirectly in her recollected suicide note) each calls herself a “superfluous person” (236, 238), which not only expresses yet another same-sex similarity between the Victorians and moderns but also implies more suggestive, opposite-sex likenesses between the minor scholar Roland and the minor poet

1. Maureen Sabine puts the problem differently: “In granting Michell the insight that he is implicated in the system that new critical theories taught him only to doubt, Byatt redefines literary studies as one in which the exercise of interiority and inward reflection is vital.” After relating this insight to feminism, she continues, “Byatt [also] satirizes the academic politics of radical reading which prides itself on ‘counteracting an ideological system that uses aestheticism or spirituality to conceal politically oppressive tactics’ [Harvey and Maus, “Introduction,” *Soliciting Interpretation*] but which has itself been tempted to use theory as a tool of personal power dispossessing those who try to read literature in spirit, in beauty and in truth” (130).

Christabel.² Even this apparently clear, repeated pattern, however, is complicated because Maud's citation of Blanche's suicide note (itself "cited" one hundred pages later) is erroneous: Blanche had "actually" called herself "*a superfluous creature*" (335). Seemingly an innocent slip, this corrupt citation not only implicates Maud herself in comparisons with both Val and Blanche but may also reflect her unconscious attempt to raise herself above Blanche's merely creature level of "superfluous" or neglected existence to a more human level. And this latter level self-consciously protests (too much?) that, like Christabel's "riddle of the egg," the "eidolon of [her] solitude and self-possession" (545), or Melusina's related "self-sufficient female sexuality" (39), it prizes *superfluity*—isolated autonomy—more than it requires the altruism, if not alterity, of interpersonal relationships. Val's (drowned) "creature" level of neglect, on the other hand, links her with the repeated series of mermaids in the text, like Vivien/Ninian, the Lady of the Lake, featured in Blanche's painting *Merlin and Vivian*. The erroneous citation finally repeats a pattern of corrupt transcriptions "cited" early in *Possession*: "Roland knew that statistically he was almost bound to have corrupted this text [Crabb Robinson's journal] in some way, if only by inadequate transcription. . . . There was never an error-free text, [the corrupt] Cropper said" (30). In other words, the quest for origins, whether in life or in literature, is always already incomplete, corrupt, and thus a kind of parasitic serial killer.³

2. After first noting this repeated pattern of the "superfluous person," I read Richard Todd's brief citation of the same pattern, which pertinently discovers both likeness and difference: "What apparently proves fatal to Blanche thus proves enabling to Val [because it 'actually *liberated* Val into a relationship with Euan McIntyre']. Yet the apparent absoluteness of the contrast may also conceal a parallel between the two cases, linked as they are by the striking verbal echo of 'superfluosness'" (107).

3. One of the more ludic instances of corrupted source-hunting involves Cropper's citing his own "article on the subject" of Blackadder's "mis-identification" of Mrs. Eckleburg in Ash's *Mummy Possest* as his (Cropper's) great-grandmother: "'A case of mis-identification' (*PMLA*, LXXI, Winter 1959, pp. 174-80), to which I refer the curious" (115). Curious myself, I checked this obviously misidentified source and discovered that volume 71 of *PMLA* appeared not in 1959 but in 1956. In that year, the cited pages do include, partially, an article on Ash's contemporaries "Dickens and Lewes" and one titled "Faust's Pact with the Devil" (which could unmistakably identify and indict the Faustian Cropper or any present Faustian scholar led on such a wild-goose chase and "case of mis-identification").

(Apparently) even more explicitly, the text cues the similarity between its two modern Victorian scholars when they spend the night at Seal Court, since Roland “moved down into [the sheets’] clean whiteness, scissoring his legs like a swimmer” (268), and five pages later Maud “got into bed, and, with the same scissoring movement as Roland next door, swam down under the white sheets” (273). In a literary romance, such cues normally suggest that although opposites attract, hidden likenesses just as surely herald eventual *liking* and ultimate loving. And so early on, the reader can revel in this romance promise of the (postponed) gratification of his or her erotic wish-fulfillment at the same time that the text combines and complicates Deleuze’s two “readings of the world,” here involving both the irruption and *interruptus* of figurative coitus.⁴ To complicate things further, their beds’ similarly “clean whiteness” unobtrusively previews Maud and Roland’s repeated criterion for desirable difference or self-autonomy as mutual “devotee[s] of white and solitary beds” (344), while their common downward dive into the sheets anticipates all the different earth-diver myths in *Possession*—like those of Proserpina, Psyche, and Melusina—besides prefiguring their eventual sexual union under these same sheets.

In fact, key words such as *words, read, possession, original, prohibition, myth, history, truth, meaning, language, names, voice, uncanny, freedom, time, shape, space, place, privacy, Victorian, Romance, and imagination*, and related (often barely distinguishable) key motifs such as *key, casket, box, garden, tree, ash, dragon, letters, gifts, metamorphosis, resurrection, glass, green, white, gold, wolf, hands, gloves, dust, witch, mermaid, men, women, threshold, margin, border, water, fountain, bath, wind, egg, butterfly, spider, web, thread, hair, mirror, princess, ghost, silence, circle, and stone* constitute some of the repeated patterns that inform and enrich the reading process of *Possession*.⁵ It proves im-

4. Not until long after writing “irruption and *interruptus*” did I realize that the phrase, which I originally considered original, probably had as its origin Byatt’s “The irruption, or interruption [of Maud and Roland’s Brittany respite], occurred at the Baie des Trépassés” (452).

5. Readings of *Possession* invariably cite parallels between the Victorian and (post)-modern pairs of lovers, but Victoria Sanchez’s commentary is most relevant to my own here, since she traces repeated folkloric and fairy-tale motifs—such as water, glass, and mirrors—linking the generations.

possible to isolate any of these intricately interrelated concepts, but for the sake of concision and clarity, we can focus on four: *possession*, *stone*, *garden*, and *Romance*. At the same time, we must realize that the text performatively directs and prohibits such a reading when it reprises Roland's own self-defining "lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory. . . . Vocabularies are crossing circles and loops. We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or to be confined by" (467). These "lists of words" later "arranged themselves into poems" (515) of self-making when Roland climactically takes possession of "the walled garden of fruit and flowers" (22), the Romance *hortus conclusus* of his own flat and of his own imagination. Again, the self-identifying reader seems to be the terrier chasing its own tale here, doubling the pleasure, doubling the fun, and doubling the self-reflections in this fictional hall of distorting mirror images as, for example, I cite Byatt citing Maud as "[s]he cited Cropper citing Ash" (274). Indeed, as Maud remarks of Christabel's poem *Melusina*, "I've been rereading. No use of the word 'ash' [or any other from the above list] may be presumed to be innocent" (527).

Several critical readers have mentioned the text's reprise of its title. Thelma J. Shinn, for example, links "possession" with Barthes's "'prince of signifiers'": "this one word captures the perspective of the novel and orders its 'recurring web of metaphors'" (172), while Lucile Desblanche notes *Possession's* "underlying concern with the nature of possession [which] winds its theme through the variations of dependency in love, repression of passion, professional rivalry, supernatural powers and the obsession of biographers and academic writers with the object of their study" (89). Neither critical reading, however, covers all of the implied values of *possession*. For example, like the phrase "repeating patterns," the word initially occurs in negative form in the epigraph to the first chapter, an excerpt from Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina*: "the tricky hero, Herakles, / Came to his dispossession and the theft" (3). In this sense, Hercules' theft of the golden fruit in the garden of the Hesperides (to which we will return) anticipates Roland's theft of the drafts of Ash's original letter from the leaves of Giambattista Vico's account of this same Edenic myth. The Hesperides, the London Library, and, proleptically, the legal copyright holder Maud

are all dispossessed of their property, just as Roland, now resembling the trickster-thief Hercules, is dispossessed of his previously law-abiding selfhood during his liminal initiation into anti-structural outlawry. He thus enters Christabel and Maud's realm of self-transformative border crossings: Maud's major publication is *Marginal Beings and Liminal Poetry* (61); and Christabel not only pens the metatextual "The Threshold," but her native Brittany "is full of the mythology of crossing-places and thresholds" (411).

And yet for all this, Roland cannot become liminally whole until he self-sacrificially makes restitution, achieves mythic at-onement, and (doubly) dispossesses himself of the beloved love letters, the garden's forbidden fruit. As Byatt remarks of Proust's narrator, who desires to make up for lost time like Scheherazade, "he has learned that one can only remake what one loves by renouncing it" ("Greatest Story" 169). For Roland, this "moment of dispossession" or "exorcism" also becomes his "moment of truth" when he "handed the letters to Blackadder," one of the previous guardian serpents or dragons, "who could be seen to be unable to resist reading them then and there, to turn the paper lovingly, possessively" (522, 524). Thus *possession* can imply "a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons" (492), as Ash describes his love for Christabel to his wife Ellen; or it can suggest a kind of divine (or divinely aesthetic) inspiration, the serial affiliation of which proves difficult to trace. For example, Christabel inspires Ash's *Mummy Possesst* as much, or more, than the inspiring lines cited from Donne's "Love's Alchemy," "Hope not for minde in women; at their best/Sweetnesse and wit, they are but *Mummy*, Possesst." This (incomplete) source in turn inspires various misreadings (like Cropper's—Ash uses "his title to castigate the 'intuitive female' actions of his speaker" [325]) until Roland and Maud's more inspired and informed strong reading.⁶ In this sense, though possession conventionally constitutes nine-tenths of the law while "the manuscripts of the letters" are "in the possession of Sir George Bailey," still, as the solicitor Euan MacIntyre argues, the law can deconstruct its own conventions and "can prove," through tracing authentic affiliation, that Maud "is the legal owner" (540).

6. See Sabine's reading of Donne's considerable influence on *Possession*.

Then again, Maud, like Roland, will dispossess herself of the letters and sacrifice them to her college's Women's Studies Resource Centre, even though she remains possessed by her self-discovered affiliation with LaMotte and Ash: "Daemonic. I feel they have taken me over" (548). As Blackadder climactically puts it (joining realist with romance "truth"), "How strange for you, Maud, to turn out to be descended from both—how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth—no, the truth—of your own origins" (547). Ultimately, though, Maud is also able to value the alterity of others and dispossess herself of the fixed, self-defensive idea that "People treat you as a kind of *possession*" (549). This moment paradoxically occurs at the same time that her participation mystique with Christabel's own desired "self-possession, her autonomy," is most empathetic and self-insightful: "I feel as she did. I keep my defences up because I must go on *doing my work*. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy." In fact, after Maud pleads with Roland to respect her own "self-possession," her *hortus conclusus* or figurative virginity belt, his deferred response and responsiveness (plus Maud's "pleasure and triumph") may match the reader's own response to the "romance" and its postponement of erotic satisfaction—depending on the degree of perceived irony here:

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.

(550–51)

Byatt is also a practicing literary critic, and in a recent collection of essays, *On Histories and Stories*, she imitates her art in *Possession* by repeatedly tracing one or another "repeating pattern" (29) between and within various texts, including her own. In fact, she not only suggests that "[e]ven as a child I was entranced by . . . [fictional] patterning" ("Ice, Snow, Glass" 152), but citing a passage from Italo Calvino which repeats some of *Possession's* patterns, she also addresses the impact of such patterning on readers: "To call

the infinity of the repetitions of the stories, in the same sentence, tentacles and spider-web is to suggest that the tales are traps, the endless labyrinths closed" (146). This essay, "Old Tales, New Forms," focuses on mythic "pattern-making" (142); and Byatt relevantly suggests that "Myths, like organic life, are shape-shifters, metamorphic, endlessly reconstituted and reformed. . . . A myth derives force from its endless repeatability" (125, 132). She notes further, "I have myself become increasingly interested" in writing "intricately layered and mythic" narratives; and her craft of fiction has developed from "pervasive and metamorphic metaphors as ways of patterning and thinking out a text" to such mythic narratives. In *Possession*, though, she "felt a need to *feel and analyse less*, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously. The real interest of this to a writer is partly in the intricacies of the choice of words from line to line" ("Old Tales" 130–31).

Two such intricately patterned word choices in *Possession* are *stone* and *garden*, both of which possess considerable mythic force that, in fact, coalesces when Roland rereads Vico's account of the Hesperidean Garden: "Roland read, or reread, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire" (512) and therefore, appropriately, the self-incinerating origin of volcanic *Ash*.

In an essay on Robert Browning, Byatt notes the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, "the mineralogist who saw a life in stones" ("Robert Browning" 53); and stones initially appear in *Possession's* epigraph from Browning's "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" who becomes, like Byatt herself, the "scribe / You pay and praise for putting life in stones" (2). Thereafter, "stony forms of life, living forms in stone" (311), chiasmatically crisscross the text in what Ash calls the "*stony metaphor*," placing under erasure any simplistic creed that builds its faith on (head)stones (like Ash's own) which gravely mark permanence and eternal rest. Indeed, when Ash contemplates "*the reformation of fossil remains into elegant articles*" of Victorian art such as Ellen's (or Christabel's or Blanche's) talismanic jet brooch or the transformed "*ferny stone leaves of primitive cyads*," it confirms his aesthetic belief in the "*persistent shape-shifting life of things long-dead but not vanished*" (278–79 [letters are transcribed in italics]). And so Ash's chosen Browningsque art form of the dramatic monologue conjures stone-dead revenants. That is, like the wind-buffed sea-

wall in Brittany, it “sings, a stony song” (366) and revives fossilized “*past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives [function] as warnings, as examples [of] the life of the past persisting in us*” (116).⁷ For Ash’s wife Ellen, the “most beautiful passage from Sir Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*” analogously addresses the “Plutonian theory of the formation of rocks” (497). Thus as a kind of literary philosopher’s stone, Lyell’s passage converts base geology into one of many transcendent “myths of resurrection” (5) and rites of passage for the reader. In all these versions, both Victorian art and science can resurrect the past and soothe the crisis of faith so symptomatic of that age and so crucial a topic in *Possession*.

In much the same way, Byatt’s own repeating patterns of romance imagery and her historically scientific research reanimate the Victorian past for contemporary readers. When at the central seance scene a “voice spoke through Mrs. Lees saying ‘Remember the stones’” (428), though, it also suggests that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Victorian science or art. Put as a question, did the dead and buried Blanche Glover actually speak through Mrs. Hella Lees to taunt Christabel with both her alleged infidelity and the haunting memory of Blanche’s suicide? Her drowning was appropriately effected through the deadweight of “*those large volcanic stones*” Christabel brought back from her illicit “honeymoon” trip with Ash. After emphasizing the stones in her suicide note, Blanche’s very next sentences even seem to foretell her return: “*I do not believe that Death is the end. We have heard many marvels at the spiritual meetings of Mrs Lees and had ocular testimony of the painless survival of the departed, in a fairer world, on the other side*” (335). On the other hand, was Mrs. Lees’s autobiographical account in *The Shadowy Portal* a remembered fancy, a projection of her diseased necromantic imagination, or her deliberate deception (re)constructed to counter the dubunking art of Ash’s *Mummy Possesst* and its own invocation of “stones of fire” ([438] which phrase later becomes Roland’s [or is it Byatt’s] featured “stony metaphor”)? Like so many passages in *Possession*, “You could read [this] either way” (513). But if Mrs. Lees’s remark was

7. Byatt herself has admitted to being similarly “haunted by Browning’s images of his own historical poems as acts of *resurrection*” (“Forefathers” 45).

deliberate, how could she have known about the stones—through the “newspaper report” or (published?) “transcription of the inquest”? And how could she have also known about Blanche’s intention in using these specific stones, much less their telltale history and Christabel’s alleged infidelity to Blanche? Such questions suggest that repeating patterns not only help to answer textual questions, they also question textual answers. They conceal as much as they reveal, since every repeated clue cues a new mystery and every patterned recovery of that past seems to cover over that past again.

When stony metaphors become more insistently mythic, their multiplying mysteries invariably reflect repeated ways that the past haunts the present, as in Ash’s reference to “*a mythical story which accounts for the standing stones*” at Whitby (277). This tale “*of a stone circle, such as Stonehenge,*” inspires his imagination because it documents “*the liveliness of ancient Gods in comparatively modern times*” (278). In Brittany, Christabel encounters similar “Standing Stones” and debates the ultimately indeterminate “meanings of their myths and legends”—especially of one particular “menhir”—with Sabine, her father, and her (deceased) grandfather, who believed “the church spire was only this ancient stone in a metamorphic form” (380). Sabine’s father, on the other hand, posits that “the Stone is a male symbol, a phallos” or herm from a May Day ritual, a “relic of ancient sacrifice, perhaps Druidic,” in which a “fallen” maiden becomes “a kind of sacrificial scapegoat.” Pregnant Christabel suggestively concludes, “So the girl who stumbles in the [ritualistic] dance is also the Fallen Woman and the others stone her.” Already jealous Sabine, however, (innocently?) corrects Christabel, distinguishing between past and present practices: “Not stone, . . . not now, only blows with the hands or feet,” to which Christabel ironically responds, “those are not the most cruel” (381).

Through such touchstone clues, the reader clearly suspects Christabel’s pregnancy though may miss the contextual mythic issue of female autonomy conflicting with male authority. This conflict obviously spans generations, besides spanning the mysterious triple-goddess relationships between maiden, mother, and crone—the three repeated *princesses*, Maud, Christabel, and Ellen. In fact, the first-time reader hasn’t yet experienced Maud’s later

linking such Brittany monoliths with “a dolmen,” a stony “female form” connected with “all sorts of taboos about not touching the earth, not letting the stones *fall* to the earth” (453), and thus also linked with the matriarchal Drowned City of Is’s Queen Dahud and other earth-diving hybrids. On first reading, “May Day” may seem to be an even more “innocent” reference; on second, it clearly prefigures the “hot May Day” nine years later when Ash finally meets his elusive daughter “May” or “Maia” and makes her a “crown for a May Queen” (552–54), like Proserpina.

This ultimate romance garden image in *Possession*, uncannily linked with stones, recalls the nineteenth century’s repeated compulsion to connect flowers and tombstones, gardens and graves, Genesis and Apocalypse, and thus womblike origins and tomblike endings. Like Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Garden of Proserpine,” the opening excerpt from Ash’s *Garden of Proserpina* links gardens and graves; but more significantly, it begins the repeated romance pattern of garden mythology which so dominates *Possession* as it dominated Byatt’s earlier *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and later *Morpho Eugenia* (1992). Indeed, Byatt has acknowledged that mythic gardens have “haunted” her “reading patterns” and her subsequent fiction since she first envisioned Eliot’s poetry as her personal “lost paradise,” then relevantly researched the “examination of the yew trees” in Victorian poetry, and finally began her (unfinished) dissertation which attempted to trace how “the unfallen world of the spirit was embodied in exquisite [garden] images of the fallen world of the body” (“Introduction” xiv–xv).

We have already noted how Roland’s initial theft of the letters re-creates “the tricky hero Herakles [’]” theft of the Hesperidean golden fruit in Ash’s *The Garden of Proserpina*, which Roland had been rereading and attempting to retrace in Vico’s different version of this same garden scenario. It also merges, however, with Maia’s son Hermes’ (“thief, artist and psychopomp” [553]) theft of Apollo’s golden cattle in Arcady and thus also with Ash’s “theft” of Maia’s golden curl in the Postscript, as well as with Odin’s retrieval of the magical stone runes from under the dragon-guarded Great World Ash in *The Elder Edda*. In fact, details from this latter garden myth, such as “the sturdy *ash-plant*” or “Wotan-stave,” become “part of [Ash’s] personal mythology, a solid metaphoric ex-

tension of his Self" (268), both in his life and in his Norse poems *Ragnarök* and *Ask to Embla*. And *Possession's* characters are often acutely aware of their mutual (but overlapping and contradictory) reconstructed role-playing of these myths. For example, Christabel's last letter to Ash, which Cropper steals from his grave guarded by a dragon yew tree with "a huge gaping white mouth" and "a huge scaly barrier" of hedges (538–39), identifies Ash himself as the ambiguously despoiling/protecting "Dragon" in her life: "I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth. But since that might not be—and is granted to almost none—I thank God for you—if there must be a Dragon—that He was You" (546).

Detecting these three mythic garden thefts—and their connections not only with Eden but also with Randolph, Christabel, Maud, and Roland—becomes a primary reading task in *Possession*. One could argue, in fact, that reader identification with Roland (as reader) suggests that the act of interpretive reading itself entails a metaphorical theft of "meaning" from the pristine text, which meaning must then be dispossessed (like Roland's letters) for it to retain any *real* meaning in life, that is, for it to preserve life-enhancing textual pleasure.

As implied above, the gardens of Hercules, Odin, and Hermes all also link with Eden—both after and "before Adam and Eve foolishly sinned in the garden" (106)—in their emphases on "some kind of" prelapsarian and postlapsarian "integrity" (456). In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," William Butler Yeats posits that only paradise lost can be regained: "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent," while in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," Robert Frost seems, conversely, to say that since "Nature's first green is gold / Her hardest hue to hold," inevitably "Eden [must sink] to grief." And yet an autumnal (and alchemical) *viriditas* of eternally returning green gold may accompany the fall and fortunately regain the archetypal orchard's vernal ore. Indeed, the green and gold repeatedly associated with Christabel and Maud promise as much just as surely as Christabel sees "*Milton's Phoenix*" promising that "*we survive and rise from our ashes*" (546). Solitary *white* beds, on the other hand, invariably become blanched sepulchers like the incestuous sheets of the albino Eugenia Alabaster in Byatt's next novel, *Morpho Eugenia*, or the several snow palaces she specifically relates

to the “ice-maiden” Christabel and her artistic autonomy in “Ice, Snow, Glass”: “the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame round things” (156).

As we have heard, Christabel (a self-proclaimed dragon like Melusina), ultimately condones, even celebrates, the serpentine dragon in her garden—Randolph Ash, who both deflowers and defends her “*difference, [her] otherness*” (206). Thus like (or unlike) her namesake, Christabel may be humanized by a demon lover, and this transformation can be read both interpersonally and intrapsychically, that is, as a kind of “Parthenogenesis” recalling Richard Owen’s Victorian study of “the reproduction of creatures by cell fission rather than by sexual congress” (270). The affiliated Maud, likewise marked by the “Chinese dragon” on her kimono (160), also appears rejuvenated in a pre-postlapsarian sense following her previously self-forbidden lovemaking with Roland: “In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples” (551). After abortive attempts to submit to Randolph on their honeymoon, Ellen Ash, differently, agrees to a “respite, . . . a few days of Edenic picnics” and “glasses of golden wine” (498). Ellen’s rest, however, leads only to qualified recovery, since its *hortus conclusus* is followed by “the locked gateway” of more sexual panic; and so her golden fruit remains forbidden for a lifetime. Ellen’s body may remain whole, but her soul, “Herself,” has unfortunately fallen. After such unspoken gnosis from the tree of life, Ellen finds self-forgiveness to be impossible, for her “terrible love” and “life” have “been built round a lie” (498, 496).

The Hesperidean garden, popularized by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, repeats similar (and different) patterns in the text, as Ash simultaneously plays the despoiling Hercules and the defending Dragon, as well as the overseeing Father Hesper. Intrapsychically, the Hesperides Sisters themselves suggest the “microcosmic drama” of Ash’s internal muses (271); interpersonally, they personify the “real” sisterhood networking Christabel, Ellen, and even Maud, Leonora, and Beatrice Nest, whom Ash variously inspires and even helps conspire for his (and their own mutual) protection.

And Byatt is well aware that Samuel Taylor Coleridge invokes the tail-eating dragon or serpent as an intrapsychic “image . . . for the Imagination” (“Sugar” 15) which reconciles such opposing figures and forces. In a different, cultural sense, just as the newcomer Hercules attempted to violate the *unus mundus* of antiquity, so, too, the purloining postmoderns variously attempt to violate what Byatt considers to be the unified sensibilities of the Victorians: “For the Victorians, everything was part of one thing: science, religion, philosophy, economics, politics, women, fiction, poetry. They didn’t compartmentalize” (qtd. in Stout 14).

Odin’s invasion of the grove of the Great World Ash “Igdrasil, the Tree of Existence” (Carlyle 257), popularized in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, likewise figures prominently in *Possession*, especially in Ash’s riddling *The Garden of Proserpina*. Indeed, Thomas Carlyle reminds his Victorian audience that in Norse mythology Odin is the original “inventor of Letters” (264), the magical runes bathing in the Well of Life beneath Igdrasil and guarded by the dragon Nidhogg, a Firedrake (as Christabel repeatedly terms Ash [213]). Similarly, Ash’s letters become the putative origin of *Possession*; and just as “Odin . . . taught with his runes and his rhymes” (265), so Ash teaches different generations differently with his teasing verses: “Since riddles are the order of our day / Come here, my love, and I will tell thee one” (503). And Ash’s meaning, the “great mystery of a Life and Universe” (Carlyle 266), provides a recurring riddle of ouroboric metamorphoses, again resembling “the Great World-serpent, which, tail in mouth, girds and keeps-up the whole created world” (274). Conversely, Carlyle’s praise of Odin as the “origin of Norse Mythology”—“he first has made Life alive!” (259)—is not unlike Ash’s praise of Christabel: “you are a manifestation of [the original divine organism’s] secret perfection. You are the life of things” (310). The (about-to-be-stolen) runes bathing in the Well of Life even recall the Sabbath prohibition on seeing Melusina bathing (as hybrid dragon), that is, on violating feminine space and autonomy. Melusina’s voyeuristic husband Raimondin, “the original knight” (38), disobeyed this taboo much like both Randolph and Roland. Blanche’s journal accuses “Peeping Tom” Randolph of “put[ting] his eye to the nick or cranny in our walls [of sisterhood at Bethany] and peer[ing] shamelessly in” (53); and the

“knight” Roland indeed “rescued” (84) Lady Bailey but also “put his eye to the huge keyhole” (162) of the floral Bailey bathroom and (shamelessly) saw Maud in her dragon kimono.

If the garden imagery suggests literal affiliation between Christabel/Eve and her great-great-granddaughter Maud, it also suggests figurative affiliation between Randolph/Adam and his similarly intrusive descendant Roland. A “Sir Rowland Michaels” (481) even serves as pallbearer at Randolph’s funeral in the country churchyard in November 1889, just as the “knight” Roland Michell guards Randolph’s grave in that same churchyard almost exactly a century later—more “Repeating patterns. Again.” But when Roland returns to the beginning at the end to “read, or re-read, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire,” he becomes precursor Ash’s *ephebe* or poetic descendant who also authentically “hear[s] Ash’s voice” and his “language moving around, weaving its own patterns” (512). He thereby inherits Ash’s unified sensibility in an intrapsychic sense, since “the words” become “one, the tree, the woman, the water, the grass, the snake and the golden apples. He had always seen these aspects as part of himself, of Roland Michell, he had lived with them” (513). This poetic vision and voicing also allow Roland, parthenogenetically, to create a green thought in a green shade by actively violating the prohibition on entering *his own* (inner) garden, “originally” Fairfax’s Putney estate, which was also Andrew Marvell’s because “Marvell had been Fairfax’s secretary and had written poems in Fairfax’s garden” (515).

The 1868 postscript’s Maia-Hermes garden scene (with its added Demeter-Persephone implications) reinforces and renews these repeating patterns. It further provides *Possession’s* reader with the ultimate romance peep into original omniscience, one prohibited by realist fiction, and suggests the original autobiographical thrust of Ash’s *The Garden of Proserpina*. That is, beyond the knowledge of any character except Ash, the reader finally knows that the golden curl inside his watch, Ash’s ability to transcend time beyond his verse, belongs to his daughter Maia and not to his lover Christabel. And the reader likewise learns that although this central garden poem may be addressed to Christabel, it provides a kind of ur-text for understanding Ash’s entire life, including his

unknown meeting with Maia, if not for metatextually clarifying the mythic interrelationships in Byatt's entire romance: "So all was more and more distinct, and all / Was intertwined and serpentine, and / Parts of one whole" (505–6). Because the Postscript directly follows the "green smell" and "bitten apples" of Roland and Maud's lovemaking at the end of the prior chapter, its myth of eternal return even figuratively suggests that May becomes *their* divine love child or, at least, the revealed offspring of their creative detective efforts. Since only the romance reader learns that Randolph, the hermetic trickster, finally found his daughter Maia, however, this romance coda or tailpiece also implies that all such characters are themselves intrapsychic components of each reader (as Vico's characters had been for the reading Roland). As Ash reveals of Proserpina's garden, "We see it and we make it, oh my dear. / People the place with creatures of our mind" (505).

Further, Hermes' connections are especially suggestive. Hermes' talismanic *herm* or "stone phalli" and his magical ability to "foretell the future from the dance of pebbles in a basin of water" relevantly link stones with his Promethean theft of Apollo's golden cattle. Like Randolph and Roland with their thefts of gold (including Maud's unbinding her golden locks for Roland), Hermes "went looking for [the] adventure" of self-fulfillment in Arcady. As trickster, Hermes displaces origins in crafting wooden hooves and fitting them backwards on the cattle so that Apollo's logical attempts to trace the original theft lead him only further away from his solar treasure. Like Odin, Randolph, and Roland, Hermes is associated with "the composition of the Alphabet" as well as "the invent[ion] of bucolic poetry." And his ultimate role as psychopompic "conductor of souls to the Underworld" (Graves 63–67) relevantly links Hermes with endings as well as beginnings. Moreover, it connects him with the earth-diver plot of Proserpina/May, which prefigures not only Christabel and Maud's reenactment of the Melusina myth but also Blanche's drowning, Roland's crucial basement descents, and the climactic removal to Ash's tomb. Still, the sad, "realistic" result of hermetic foretelling occurs after Ash asks May to tell Christabel "you met a poet, . . . who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb

her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new." The text's final sentence then reveals that their daughter "forgot the message, which was never delivered" (555).

Such a momentous epistolary deferral problematizes the celebrated contentions of both Jacques Lacan and Derrida, since (like Ash's postal gift of *Swammerdam* to Christabel, which Blanche purloins, and Christabel's final letter to Randolph, which Ellen conceals) this message is *not* delivered to its intended addressee, though its disrupted postal itinerary does reach the ultimate addressee, the postmodern reader.⁸ Indeed, then, as we are repeatedly told of Maia/Proserpina herself, the romance message remains hanging in suspenseful liminality—more realistically "swinging to and fro" (553) on the garden gate than Euan's idealized description of the near-end of *Possession*: "all's well that ends well . . . This feels like the ending of a Shakespearean comedy—who's the chappie [Hymen] that comes down on a swing at the end of *As You Like It*?" (524). In this sense, Maia's final personification of *romance* mood swings seems closer to Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous definition from *The Scarlet Letter* (rather than that from *The House of the Seven Gables*, which introduces *Possession*): "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (46). It's not just that *May* suggests Hawthorne's own problematic subjunctive *may*, it's also that her other names, *Thomasine* and *Maia* (which Ash interrogates), likewise imply qualifying *doubt* and *illusion* within romance's yin-yang structure. Exploring the patterned problematics of Byatt's romance structure and its related reading pleasures takes up the remainder of this essay.

As the *Romance of the Rose* relevantly illustrates, the literary romance preoccupies itself with repeating patterns of garden motifs; and Northrop Frye even finds that the vertical swings of "the Proserpine solution" enact romance's self-defining, seasonal modalities—that is, living "half of each year in the lower world and half

8. The locus classicus of this debate is, of course, the collection *The Purloined Poe*. For epistolary readings of *Possession*, see Desblache and Herman (especially 529–39), and Elisabeth Bronfen's sporadic but insightful discussion of messages and destinations (131–33).

above, revolving with the cycle of nature" (86–87).⁹ Opposing the more realist and allegedly masculinist art of Ash (and the social realism written by many Victorian women in America), Christabel somewhat differently believes that "in Romance," like that of the hybrid Melusina, "women's two natures"—at least the double natures of "demons or innocent angels" projected upon them by men—"can be reconciled." In *reality*, then, "Romance is a land where women can be free to express their true natures" (404). Post-modern Roland, on the other hand, who "had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems," rejects the egotistical sublime of masculinist, "strenuous Romantic self-assertion" and rather sees "'self'" as *maya*, "an illusion." Accordingly, his retro, if not Victorian, star-crossed and class-conflicted love for Maud and their related romance "quest" for the truth of the love letters situate him ambiguously in a double "Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously"; "a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or other." In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt suggests that everyone "see[s] in the passing of the seasons an image of himself" (151); but like many critical readers, Roland further thinks of life's seasons as literary genres and so naturally "supposed" that someday his "Romance must give way to social realism, even if the aesthetic temper of the time was against it" (460).

Possession's paradoxical point here seems to be not merely that its "romance" Postscript is as nonresolving as its "social realism" ending, because the former leaves Ash with the illusory consolation that Christabel knows he knows about their child and the latter leaves Maud and Roland with the problematical promise that their long-distance relationship will be resolved. It is even more that the uncontrollable, marginalized genre of romance cyclically becomes life's controlling trope in a number of comparative and contrasting ways. One, as Hawthorne implied, involves the Janus-faced initiatory motifs of betwixt-and-between liminality (border crossings, guardians, ambig-

9. For relevant romance (and fairy-tale) readings of *Possession*, see Flegel and Sanchez. Again, Bronfen's "postmodern" reading also includes "romance" insights involving textual pleasures.

uous neophyte status, antistructure, subjunctivity, sacral symbols, and life-affirming gnosis), which so inform Christabel's poetry, Maud's criticism, Brittany's mythology, and Roland's rite of passage.

A related and compulsively repeated romance pattern involves the familiar motifs of the uncanny or *unheimlich* (homeliness, doubles, magic, primitive and infantile fears of death, castration anxiety, the omnipotence of thought).¹⁰ Little romance wonder, then, that Ash's correspondence with Christabel provokes "that *in me which has never addressed any private creature, [but] feels at home with you. I say 'at home'—what extraordinary folly—when you take pleasure in making me feel most unheimlich, as the Germans have it, least of all at home*" (146). Ash's reading of Christabel's Melusina myth also relevantly reveals "contradictory elements" of "both wild and strange . . . [and] the life of households" (193), while his own idiosyncratic "mighty Ash" myth similarly centers on both the "common and magical tree" which "held the world together, rooted in the underworld and touching Heaven" (106). Doubling such strangely familiar, dreadful pleasure for *Possession's* reader, Roland uncannily dreams of his Melusinian meeting with Maud in her dragon kimono: "a dream of great violence and beauty which went back in part to his primitive infant fear of something coming up the lavatory bend and striking at him" (165). And as if omnipotently interpreting Roland's dream of impotence or the "male terror of the subjection of passion," Christabel uncannily reads the comparable Vivian-Merlin relationship as a double-voiced "tale of female emulation of male power—she wanted not him but his magic—until she found that magic served only to enslave *him*—and then, where was she, with all her skills?" (384).

The interpersonal and intrapsychic implications of such romance patterns are also repeated in *Possession's* unusual (per)version of the family romance. Surely, the text in no way suggests that Ash's figurative rape of his daughter's golden lock violates "the tabu against incest" (39), the secret, central transgression in Byatt's other Victorian garden romance, *Morpho Eugenia*. Still, oedipal patterns do animate academia in the suggested sibling rivalry between Roland and

10. Byatt has even written an essay titled "The Omnipotence of Thought: Frazer, Freud and Post-Modernist Fiction." More generally, Bronfen notes the relevance "of those psychic moments that provoke a sense of the uncanny" (134) in *Possession*.

Fergus Wolff and their early shared antipathy toward their professorial patriarch Blackadder. And Ash's companionate marriage and the academic/class tensions involving sameness and difference, endogamy and exogamy, which plague Roland and Maud's relationship, just as surely incorporate family-romance motifs. Further, an intrapsychic plot involving patterns of parthenogenesis, or self-fertilization, and ouroboric or tail-eating psychogenesis develops among the four major characters figured in the various gardens, suggesting "image[s] of the essential androgyny of the creative mind" (39). For example, Roland's and Randolph's different self-discovery processes are suggested by Erich Neumann's intrapsychic leads in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*: "The hero's fight is always concerned with the threat to the spiritual, masculine principle from the uroboric dragon, and with the danger of being swallowed by the maternal unconscious" (160). Neumann's Jungian reading of Psyche's labors—and the matching travail of Persephone/Kore—in *Amor and Psyche* similarly clarifies Maud's and Christabel's (if not Ellen's) struggles with autonomy-alterity tensions, especially since both women identify with these mythic models: "Seen from the standpoint of the matriarchal world, every marriage is a rape of Kore, the virginal bloom, by Hades, the ravishing, earthly aspect of the hostile male. . . . every marriage is an exposure on the mountain's summit in mortal loneliness, and a waiting for the male monster, to whom the bride is surrendered" (62).

Ultimately, though, related patterns of aesthetic (and critical) inbreeding, that is, creative and self-creative affiliations among and between the generations, seem to dominate the text's quest for origins. Byatt's insightful chapters on literary "fathers," "forefathers," and "ancestors" in *On Histories and Stories* trace her own literary affiliations. And her moving account of the "fictional" effect of her parents' affections and afflictions ("A. S. Byatt" 88–89) and sporadic references to a literary rivalry with her novelist-sister Margaret Drabble ("Fathers" 9) also attest to the author's aesthetic stake in family matters. In *Possession*, Roland's "familiarisation with Christabel LaMotte" (265) is first impeded by his reading Leonora Stern's Lacanian reading of Christabel's "water-serpent" Melusina, "a complete being, capable of generating life, or meanings, on her

own, without need for external help," that is, "a product of female auto-erotic fantasies of generation without copulation" (267). Maud is similarly conflicted by Cropper's account of Ash's experiments on parthenogenetic "hydras and plumed worms which could be got to bud new heads and segments all from the same tail, in a process known as gemmation" (270–71).

Gradually, though, both readers are creatively inspired by their different-sex Victorian counterparts, as both begin to relive and revise their relationship. Maud values both Christabel *and* Ash because both "valued themselves, they loved themselves and attended to their natures" (277); Roland learns to value Christabel's verse and even discovers intertextual cross-fertilization: "*Melusina* is very like some of Ash's poems. . . . [It] sounds often as though he wrote it" (288). Maud reluctantly agrees: "I don't want to think that. But I do see what you mean." It may even be that when Roland critically sacrifices his literary forefather to become a poet himself, he grows more like Christabel. As she was fertilized by Ash, so too his newly developing poetic voice, first heard in Marvell's garden, has sprung from Ash's: "He could hear, or feel, or even almost see the patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own" (515). Maud's oedipal case is much more complex because she self-discovers that, genetically, she "is descended from both" (547): Christabel and Ash together are her great-great-great-grandparents. During this self-discovery process, Maud must discard her earlier condemnation of Ash's "cosmic masculinity" and radically revise her misreading of *Mummy Possesst* as a "nasty anti-feminist poem" (48). She even learns to admire the voice of Ash's *Ask to Embla* poems: "They're good. He wasn't talking to himself. He was talking to *her*—Embla—Christabel or—Most love poetry is only talking to itself. I like those poems" (290). In fact, and like Roland, through such double voicing Maud finally recovers her true voice and discovers her real likeness: "I look like Randolph Henry Ash" (548), which ultimately makes her *like* Roland even more.

Which also returns us to the cognitive and visceral pleasures of reading (in) *Possession*. Barthes's opening caveat that "no 'thesis' on the pleasure of the text is possible; barely an inspection (an in-

trospection) that falls short" insists initially that we can only describe, not critically diagnose, these pleasures and, secondly, that any such "description" approaches, but never attains, the sort of self-discovery we just witnessed with Roland and Maud, because reading pleasures are so subjectively personal. Nonetheless, inspecting these pleasures through "repeating patterns" in *Possession* does provide some focused measure of objectivity and so warrants some brief, general conclusions. Admittedly, however, these conclusions appear more valid for cognitive than for visceral pleasure, though the latter variety may be more valid for introspection and self-discovery than the former kind, whatever "modern theories of the incoherent self" the reader entertains (513).

Playing a kind of armchair detective in *Possession* certainly produces cognitive reading pleasure, which Euan relates to "the unmasking at the end of a detective story" (524) and which Maud self-ironically (and paraphrasing discussions of "Oedipal pleasure" in *The Pleasure of the Text* 10, 47) links to the archetypal quest for paternal origins: "Literary critics make natural detectives . . . You know the theory that the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel—everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret" (258). Sorting through "clues" or "keys" in the text can produce a reading as variously reductive as Leonora Stern's *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of La-Motte*, Christabel's father's *Mythologies*, a "kind of fashionable search for the Key to All Mythologies" (35), or (and less like George Eliot's Casaubon) Roland and Maud's postmodernist search for the Foucauldian order of things, the single thread braiding together the beginning and end of the letters: "connections proliferate apparently at random, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, which would, of course, being a good postmodernist principle, require the aleatory or the multivalent or the 'free,' but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some—to what?—end" (456).

Two conclusions seem warranted here. First, like their sacrifice of the clean, white bed, the postmodern critics must sacrifice the purely cognitive pleasure of armchair detection, of merely "read[ing] intelligently" (510), and enter the messy arena of life and love. Only there can they discover the actual truth rather than the ironic, *characteristic*

truth that “‘Falling in love,’ characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot” (456). Secondly, the same principle applies extratextually to postmodern readers’ search for clues, including the present search, which might coherently connect repeating patterns in the text. Again, “[w]e are [critically] defined by the lines we choose to cross or to be confined by” (467).

This sacrifice of one’s self-protective sanctuary, sanctity, and even sanity, as Christabel’s “Glass Coffin,” “Metamorphosis,” and egg riddle suggest, provides the same sense of satisfying romance structure and order that Carlyle reveals in *Sartor Resartus* when Teufelsdröckh awakens in “The Everlasting Yea” to “a new Heaven and a new Earth”: “The first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (*Selbstödtung*), had been happily accomplished” (141). Maud implies as much when she evaluates her and Roland’s obsessive search for repeating patterns of glove imagery in LaMotte and Ash: “Do you never have the sense that our metaphors *eat up* our world? I mean of course everything connects and connects—all the time—and I suppose one studies—I study—literature because all these connections seem both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously powerful—as though we held a clue to the true nature of things” (275–76). In an almost carnivalesque “sense” of near chaos theory, it seems crucial that when they finally discover the stony clues linking Christabel with Randolph’s holiday in Yorkshire, Maud and Roland have packed “a simple lunch” for their own holiday at Boggle Hole but “took no books” (291–92). In fact, the telltale stones first distinguish themselves individually but then (fortunately) “fall back into the mass-pattern, or random distribution, as new ones replaced them” (293).

In other words, like Roland’s dispossession of the letters, the swarming facts of life require deregulation of any alleged regulatory first principles, literary or otherwise. In *Morpho Eugenia*, Adamson repeatedly attempts to “devise an organizing principle,” variously based on the *designs* of Natural Selection, Divine Providence, and even aesthetics; but invariably some real-life “plethora of beetles or a sudden plague of frogs” (29) frustrates his efforts to impose order. And yet, for all this, there lives the dearest freshness deep down in the nature of repeating patterns. In fact, these patterns

provide intimations of aesthetic immortality in the same way that Byatt sees the never ending, always beginning tale of Scheherazade's tales as providing absolution from the common "sentence of death" by allowing readers "to remember the past, speculate about beginnings, and imagine the ending" ("Greatest Story" 166–67).¹¹

Visceral pleasure proves finally more difficult to inspect, especially using rational discourse, both because it seems so subjectively irrational and because its implied *jouissance*, whether appearing as desire or dread, always already disseminates some amorphous amalgam—some repeated pattern of hopes *and* fears—of dreadful pleasure. And yet after rereading Ash's intellectually demanding *The Garden of Proserpina*, Roland finds great visceral (*not* vicarious) satisfaction in reflecting that "It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex" (510). Indeed, this bliss comes in spite of (or is it, really, because of?) the fact that writers "do not habitually elaborate on the . . . intense pleasure of reading" (510–11).¹² Perhaps, then, only metaphors, like Roland's in those yet-to-be-written poems, can ever approach, much less approximate, this pleasure, since, again, he simultaneously hears poetic "language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single writer or reader" (512). Ash's untitled poem, the epigraph to the next chapter, suggests as much when it challenges readers to dwell in possibility and liberate themselves from their "bright chain of curiosity" (517). This chain forges absolute "links" between beginnings and endings, "Which is become our fetter. So it drags / Us through our time." In other poetic terms, Christabel's real-life equivalent Emily Dickinson's poem on the enthralling, painful plea-

11. The otherwise defenseless teenager Marcus in *The Virgin in the Garden* mechanically projects geometric repeated patterns on his chaotic world to convert it to eternal verities and thereby arrest death. When traumatized at the butcher shop, for example, he reassembles dismembered meat—"half a carcass of beef," "a row of pale pig corpses and stiffly extended lambs"—into an immutable "repeating pattern" (94, 93). Marcus's patterns, however, betray life rather than aesthetically blessing it. On the other hand, his sister Stephanie's repeated lists of "unrelated objects, soliciting precise memory" (like Roland's and Byatt's own lists) invariably represent the dismembered "details of" some "pattern" (110, 109) which the imagination re-members and thereby renews. For, as Byatt earlier insisted, "Lists are a form of power" (70).

12. Jackie Buxton notes "readerly erotics" (215) in *Possession*.

sure of reading one's "Individual" romance in order to discover one's personal or "Novel" truth approaches closer, perhaps, to the paradoxical patterns repeated in Byatt's own "true" *Romance*:

No Romance sold unto
 Could so enthrall a Man
 As the perusal of
 His Individual One—
 'Tis Fiction's—to dilute to Plausibility
 Our Novel—when 'tis small enough
 To Credit—"Tisn't true!

(669)¹³

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13. After "finishing" this essay, I received a serendipitous flyer from Youth Media International Ltd., which promoted Neil LaBute's film version of *Possession* and included the "Reproducible Master" of a detailed "free study guide to the new film"—"Repeating Patterns. Again."

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