

Byatt versus Bloom

or Poetic Influence – a Case of Anxiety or Desire?

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Much present-day fiction as well as literary theory are marked by authorial struggle against the illusions of meaning inherent in any formal and ideological arrangement; the philosophical premise for this fight is essentially the ancient argument that ‘art is lies,’ only on a new basis of ‘nada’. To get rid of art as truth, textual strategies are adopted that expose deceptive certainties, and narratives contain clues for their own deconstruction. An absence of meaning may be signaled through deliberate formlessness, while another strategy underscores the quixotic implications of the former solution by a rhetorically mannered style so blatantly artificial that no one is cheated into taking this for a language of truth.

That today’s ideologists have replaced *presence* by *absence* does not alter the metaphysical orientation of their inquiry. And one certainly witnesses a recurrence of interest in the elementary conditions of mankind – ontological, epistemological, ethical – unparalleled since the seventeenth century, when the Christian God began to be displaced from man’s world, and words like “good” or “evil” fell out of polite discourse. At present the explanation of man’s metaphysical condition that satisfies the world (Willey 1953: 9-13), and certainly most academics, seems to be a vision of ineluctable absurdity with absence breathing man uncannily down the neck (pardon the personification[!]). Any number of novelists are pleased to contemplate and explore this condition; and since the charge of metaphysical absence, if it is allowed to have any, is negative, evoking anxiety or fear, writers and film makers dealing in horror or in such types of crime as elude Freudian or sociological rationalization (Michaëlis 1996), enjoy unprecedented success as they borrow the deformities and freaks of the Gothic tradition to give unshapely representation to the amorphous.

Apart from such often grimly satisfied scrutiny, elitist or popular, one finds a countercurrent of writers who explore the possibility that literary form may, in fact, carry legitimate meaning. These are writers of romance – some self-professed, others given away as such by their (often long) episodic narrative structures, comedic endings, and subject matter – namely the quest for self, often motivated by love. Typical and self-identified romancer is Antonia Byatt, whose *Possession* (1990) depicts the progress of characters in search of themselves in a modern world that promises little romance: individual identity is a false or elusive construction (Byatt 1990: 251, cf. 10, 425, 473; words are fossils – a dead language encrusted in dead values, its metaphors concealing more than they reveal (ibid.: 251, cf. “our metaphors eat up our world,” ibid.: 253-4); it is a world of people forced to assemble make-shift, never very satisfactory, identities by

means of parasitical scholarship on surrogate selves; the setting, which consistently with the romance mode is symbolic rather than realistic, and amusingly overlaid with rich Dantesque allusion, makes it clear that the milieu of scholars – both at home and work – are types of Hell, dead-end, repetitious, a new comma moved amounting to the hope that aggravates the sufferings of Sisyphus. The characters, in short, confront a world of loss, fragmentation, disillusionment, and tired convention, while happiness is reserved for those content to be nothing but masks: elderly scholars have power in virtue of their full possession of their canonized precursor; the up-to-date dazzler of this world, however, is the dynamic deconstructionist Fergus Woolf, himself a shape-shifter and master impersonator. Fergus, as a successful mosaic of brilliantly reflective bits of mirror images is set over and against what must, according to generic logic, be the real hero, the bungling, but suitably named, hero, Roland, who almost literally cannot collect himself or gather his wits, let alone get his act together.

But of course not even young Fergus Woolf cannot be the hero of a romance, a mode that excludes not on disillusioned elderly plodders but also deft opportunists to focus instead upon idealists – or more modestly, on the uncertain seekers, those reluctant heroes of this world who must always under the glare of realistic assessment appear pathetic blunderers, whether modern Byatt's Roland, Renaissance Cervantes' Don Quixote, or medieval Chretien's Percival. The ideal of *Possession* is the hard-won wholeness ('integrity') sought and found by Roland as the very opposite of the bric-à-brac personality of Wolf on the one hand, and, on the other, the belated parasitism performed by Blackadder and Cropper.

Roland's development is effected through the two staples of romance, *love and adventure*, complementary external embodiments of things that *move* people: *motion* expresses in passionate action the *emotion* that its agent passionately suffers.

However, the initial drive towards action is a text from the past, a letter through which the past becomes a relay-point in Roland's quest for a self as well as the motivating impulse behind the bewildered knight's sallying forth into the 'wilderness'.

Roland, literary historian, critic, and biographer, painstakingly correlates life records with interpretation. Always seeking support for interpretation in objective historical documentation, he nevertheless always seems to bump into his own image (ibid.: 10), a doubly frustrating experience: It blurs historical clarity and is only personally satisfying insofar as Roland hardly knows who he might be if not a meeting-point for alien impulses new and old, social and literary. Roland's situation cogently explores the quixotic dilemma of recent generations of historians or literary scholars who, brought up to respect exactitude and objectivism, have increasingly found that the image of the past is determined by the subjectivity of the inquirer – or, to reproduce today's state-of-the-art jargon – the past is 'invented' or 'constructed'.

Possession, however, being a romance, dwells only preliminarily upon the frustrations of the academic endeavour to highlight its miraculous side, for as Roland discovers, it is less interesting to dwell upon the impossibility of saying anything for certain than upon the things that may after all be said (ibid.: 473). The past is, indeed, over and irrecoverable, but rather than dwell upon the quixotic attempt to recreate it in

an objective form, Byatt points to two truly miraculous facts: we may bring the past to life; *and* the activity of doing so may have a tremendous impact upon the present.

Two epigraphs signal that the past in the present is Byatt's true romantic theme. Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of Seven Gables* vividly suggests that the problem with time is not the past, but the present that is always "flitting away from us" (ibid.: Epigraph 1); apparently, the present can only be understood if indirectly contemplated through its relation to the past. Browning indicates in Byatt's other epigraph that any continuum established between a dead past and a never-to-be-captured present may – or indeed must – be false. Mr. Sludge, the spiritualist medium, self-proclaimed confidence trickster, cleverly implicates the poet and the historian in his activities, and the modern critic and historian, however demurely committed to honesty, must plead guilty: manipulation unites the crook and the scientist. Thus both Browning and Hawthorne address the way "air" is transformed into "solid fabric", "fog" into "fire", as the "past" is made "our world" – all out of deep needs in the present (ibid.: Epigraph 2).

Byatt exposes this fraudulent activity, but also displays it from its most attractive side: even as the seer creates the seen and is in turn created by it, so the dead text, 'exhumed' from the archives, brings the postmodern living dead to life the moment desiccated, brittle paper – "bandaged about and about" (ibid.: 3) stirs into Phoenix-like rebirth: "The librarian tiptoed away to telephone: whilst he was gone, the dead leaves continued a kind of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release." (ibid.: 10).

Roland's moment reverses the temporal direction of a traditional historical inquiry, defining significance by the past's relation to the now rather than by its effective separation from it; from something whose truth depends on its being objectified, the past becomes useful and relevant in so far as it has meaning in the present. Even as living people bring to life dead Ash's and LaMotte's old letters – "tied about and about, like a mummy" as they are (ibid.: 84) – so the stirring of old letters effects a stirring in Roland's emotions and, indeed, in his body: "Roland felt ... [p]rimary elation – a kind of vision of the bundle of letters come to rustling life like some huge warm eagle stirring." (ibid.: 124).

The thought of the warm feathers of his letter-eagle "produce[s] a stirring" (ibid.: 126) – a stirring that enables Roland to go through with sexual intercourse otherwise perfectly uninviting: The past awakens the present; the mental image stirs the body.

In discussing the encounter between present reader and old text, the scholar Paul Zumthor calls to his aid romance language of the medieval knight adoring the inaccessible lady, always pursued, but never fully possessed. For Zumthor this pursuit is truly a miracle, and along with love, or indeed as a form of it, a miracle tied to secular experience. The alien, fragmented, unknown text is a mysterious lady, and for him, as for Roland, erotically enticing:

It is through erudition that the discovery of otherness must pass. And from otherness comes the pleasure; there is pleasure only in the Other, a concrete, historical Other. Pleasure carries a trace of history; if my object is a loved woman, history is there in the very fact that she exists, *hic et nunc*. If the object is a

medieval text, I must come to know its body; but that body will be uncovered for me only after my information is as complete as it can be. (Zumthor 1986: 81)

Byatt fictionalizes Zumthor's claim that academics are involved in an essentially romantic endeavour as they struggle to possess the past. Roland's excitement is admittedly especially great for the discovered text being a fragment, unfinished, indefinite, open; but it is not that resolutely postmodern construction, the indeterminate text, for it has drive, an urge that demands that we find out the truth about what was going on: the text's teleological direction is mysterious, but unmistakably there, and as Roland perceives that it is written not for the generic reader, but for a specific though unknown person, his curiosity sparks into active inquiry. And so the quest – or the chase (for romance and detective thriller touch here [Byatt 1990: 425]) – is on.

In one sense, *Possession* is a romance about the love and momentous effects of the phenomenon of *reading* (with one key passage furnishing the key to this interpretation [ibid.: 470 ff.]), and of the academic endeavour itself as paradoxical creator of meanings where none can be proved true, as harmonizer of discontinuous realities, as historically determined transcendence of the historical. Against authors who write about writing as labyrinthine solipsism, Byatt writes about reading as a social act of self-creation, as anxiety over the strangeness of an object of study transforms into desire to possess it; filling holes and mysteries in a separate, enigmatic other (the 'beloved' text), the reader's personality expands to accommodate the intriguing otherness. Thus, love *and* old books are the book's two central tropes for the urgent unknown that calls, and therefore moves, people.

Byatt depicts devoted reading and love as two modes of transcendence in the secular dimension. Their effect is at once both personal/private and social/public; a sense of individual integrity is established at the very moment when the lover-reader's social position is consolidated: when Roland finally gets to make love to his Maud, he is also offered three prestigious academic positions. Once more, *Possession* confirms its affiliation with romance, where the maturity signaled by a successful quest is rewarded with a princess or a Round Table seat. These external projections of personal and social power are compatible, or even symbolically identical, achievements in romance; whereas the Gothic romance, for instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, identifies the simultaneous presence of an instinct towards social fulfilment and the drive towards individuation as an ineluctably tragic paradox of human nature.

Roland wins jobs and love – and finds his proper identity as a poet. Byatt suggests that the self is satisfactorily established at the very moment when emancipation from the past takes place – thus setting the past free as a dynamic potential unleashed from the inhibitory backward projection of the modern self. At the end of *Possession*, Roland, self-possessed, possesses the past in a new way; a new Eden is discovered as the old is seen in a new way and a new language is found. The new language consists of the old words – apple, serpent – but these suddenly come alive where before they cluttered both perception and understanding in the "predictive familiarity" (ibid.: 130) of Roland's "subjected imagination" (ibid.: 469). As the words have mysteriously gained their pristine meaning, Roland has gained a position from which traditional meanings can be

viewed as “other”; the old meanings are indeed prior in time, embedded in the poet’s sources, but they are no longer the ancestral legacy that crushes creativity under a burden of sacred, inviolable originals. Thus, in becoming a poet, Roland reverses time: his word becomes the original, while his sources are subsumed and newly created as meaningful precursors of himself. Tradition has been conquered through tradition; peace, fulfillment, and a dynamic relation between self and the other have been won, replacing restlessness, inferiority complexes and a rigorously maintained false persona.

The pattern of Roland’s personal development is remarkably similar to that of the Christian myth of progress towards redemption through temporal hardship (Frye 1975), although the romance offers redemption here and now, even as the epiphanic discovery (“salvation”) of Byatt’s story must also be understood in temporal terms as an emancipation from the power structures inherent in the language, societal roles, and literature that have stalled rather than facilitated the self.

A similar redemption pattern does, indeed, seem characteristic of traditional accounts of *poetic* self-discovery such as Roland’s. Authors have often discussed their discovery of a poetic self as a liberation from tradition: the precursors remain significant, but stop standing in the way of new personal achievement: Geoffrey Chaucer grapples long with his beloved “olde books” before he finds their “newe thynges” in himself, freeing him to write his own and make his masters *his* past, superseded though beloved (*Legend of Good Women*, F 25; *House of Fame*, 1887; Chaucer 1987); Dante interiorizes Virgil and later in a sense even God to become a perfect poet of Beatrice (Bloom 1994: 76-104); and Milton – as (again) eloquently demonstrated by Harold Bloom, who draws for the purpose upon Nietzschean and Jewish kabbalistic hermeneutical traditions (Bloom 1975: Introduction; 1987: 101) – has “transumed” all those voices of tradition, to the extent of even becoming the original of his own original, Moses (Bloom 1987: 93).

Bloom uses the word “transumption” to denote a renewal of tradition by the “strong poet”, who ruins “sacred truths” in an act of “misprision” (Bloom 1997: “Introduction”; cf. Bloom 1987). He accounts for the way his visionary poet turns history upside down: historically a “belated poet”, the poet-prophet responds to the anxiety of influence by making himself the original of his own sources and influences. Undoubtedly Roland’s development can be discussed in these terms – Roland significantly thinks of himself as “a latecomer” (Byatt: 10) – and Bloom’s ghost hovers as an obtrusive presence in Byatt’s universe.

However, Byatt choice of the romance – though admittedly a heuristic rather than philosophically authoritative device – proposes a revision of Bloom’s model of anxiety. Bloom’s model is founded in a Freudian myth of specifically male anxiety, by which an Oedipal relation subsists between ‘father’ and ‘son’, ‘precursor’ and ‘ephebe’. To discover his voice, the son has to become the father of his father, i.e. to gain priority and authority over his father, now become secondary and preparatory, as he leads up to true fulfillment in the son; the father’s achievements, then, are seen as paving the way for the son’s superior work. The original master loses his status as the origin of the ephebe’s work as the latter’s work proves truly original.

The ethos of romance, which traces personal change towards maturity/fulfillment to love and is often seen as a feminine genre (as Byatt's *Christabel* points out (373), offers an alternative model to Bloom's male-centred and ethically negative model for conceptualizing the continuity and change that we call a tradition.

Reconstructing the 'anxiety of influence'

As a 'self-conscious' romance – i.e. a romance announced as such in the subtitle and packed with meta-literary implications and echoes of the romance tradition, *Possession* follows the romance template to the T by showing knight(like) people moving across space on a quest motivated by desire. They desire to know the unknown, embodied in a set of old texts as well as in other people, both as enigmatic and threatening as any dragon or marvel. But the urge to know drives them forward, and in the process they are opened up to new possibilities and new fulfilments.

All Byatt's characters are, wish to be even more, or wish they were, self-sufficient. Even the book's successful scholars are depicted as recluses within their various worlds. In romances, spaces are symbolical analogues and tokens of character, so self-sufficiency translates, in spatial terms, into enclosed spaces. For instance, inhibited Roland's small basement flat recalls the equally murky subterranean establishment under British Museum, the Hades or Inferno-like Ash Factory. Like Roland's flat, the Ash Factory is haunted by cats, a natural presence that suggests life, but is neither pleasant nor welcome in a place devoted to "this dead man, who had a thing about dead people" (ibid.: 19). The Ash Factory produces endless Ash scholarship, suggesting a stale, though complacent, industry of Ashes to Ashes. Blackadder knows every one of his thoughts have already been thought by Ash – and likes it. Roland's "predictive familiarity" (ibid.: 130) with Ash feels comfortable. In a corner of this Hell 'nests' Beatrice Nest, who is imaginatively brilliant, but, born into the wrong time and context, she is subjected to the male regime of traditional philology – her seclusion is structural, not desired. Beatrice's counterpart in more modern academia, the redbrick or glass/aluminum university career feminist Maud is hugely successful, but turns out to be another product of her environment (feminist lesbian poststructuralist theory) rather than an autonomous agent. Her perfection is defensive: her flat is minimalist and white, her dress restrained, and her glorious coils of blond hair are kept hidden and tightly bound (like those mummies, and similarly awaiting their release).

With Roland's discovery, the scholars become surrounded by evidence that contradicts the foundational truths of their scholarly reputations (for instance, tracing Ash's genius to romantic inspiration by his wife and LaMotte's power to her lesbian partner). As already noted, the histories now threatening to become mere stories cause the scholars to respond with discomfort, resistance, and resentment. But also with an outgoing desire to know the unknown: Docile Roland is possessed with a curiosity that makes him steal the discovered letter because he sees it as 'his' (cf. the concept of election in romance, which makes each knight say, 'this is my quest'). Subsequently, his research takes him into new and dangerous lands such as the alien university environ-

ment of feminist, new university scholarship, as well as to conservative country seats, frozen discomfort and a genuine surrounding wilderness, which also disturbs Maud out of *her* self-possession (ibid.: 133, 136). The metaphors of hermetically contained eggs with undisturbed interiors used to describe the desired security of the protagonists now give way to a concern with a set of mythical figures, evolutionary metaphors, and constructions that resist precise modern conceptualization and, indeed, expose metaphors of closed wholeness as merely evasive and escapist: The scholar's quest, now anxious rather than assured, seeks something multiple, hybrid, and ongoing, not simple, unified, and complete. Even the constant recourse to Freudian constructions (discussed ibid.: 253), or, for the feminists, the more feminist-accommodating updating of Freud by e.g. Lacan (parodied ibid.: 244-6), fail to capture the past, as its elusively alien, and occasionally fabricated, enigmas unravel themselves. The past has recourse to evolutionary speculation and mythical hermeneutics for its answers, and the questions themselves are pre-modern, resisting the psychoanalytic back-formations of later readers. Confronted with a suddenly unresponsive past, the scholars must learn to imagine it as baffled readers of pre-Freudian love letters, precisely the kind of discourse modern academe both scorns and, as they find, fail to comprehend. Thus, they find that their own personalities have been "fake" personae (and persona means, originally, mask), self-defensive bastions against a genuine personality – nicely, but deceptively, supported by the postmodern hypothesis that identity as such is a false construction.

Growth requires demolition of the old walls before new construction can take place. Having left their comfort zone (or, in the metaphorical parlance of the book, their eggs having been broken and whipped up), the scholars are ready for genuinely new knowledge, about Ash/LaMotte and about themselves. Even if there may not be an identity, one may be built in the course of finding what you desire, for the quest replaces aimless wandering ('errare' as in being confused/wrong [*errare humanum est*]) with purposeful, directed wandering (*errare* as in knight 'errant', a roaming, but not aimless wanderer): As a person who desires another and is possessed with possessing the other, you discover the quest which is properly yours, and your wandering is given direction and experienced as meaningful. And so the bastions come down, for as the self moves towards the other, it also becomes permeable, open. Thus, a two-way flow is effected between the knight and the beloved (truth or person), and a new identity comes into being.

To repeat: What the protagonists discover is that desire directs the individual itinerary in a purposeful manner that is experienced as meaningful. The process draws them out to hover between opposite poles of experience suggested by a series of words (relating to love, identity, and derivation) whose meanings encompass opposite ends of a semantic spectrum: Love possesses the lover to the degree that, thus possessed, he wishes to possess the beloved. The subject studying a subject is imaginatively subjected to his subject; the origin leads up to its successor, whose power renders him the true original artist.

Distant as she is in thought and time, and her thought pertaining to her specific historical situation, nineteenth-century poet LaMotte turns out, nevertheless, to interpret and clarify for the modern scholars their longing for secure isolation. As a nineteenth-century woman writer, she must protect the specifically female characteristics of her

talent by conscious withdrawal from the male sphere. She explains to Ash in her letters how she, and her partner, Blanche Glover, depend upon their egg-like existence (or “circumscribed little independence” [ibid.: 159]), and how despite the admitted limitations of their seclusion, they cherish its value in a context where it offers the only opportunity for a female creativity that is truly free (ibid.: 180).

The letters exchanged between Ash and LaMotte express a constant anxiety about potential invasion of the female sphere (e.g. ibid.: 177, 185), but LaMotte also effectively resists even the imaginative invasion of her respondent, who consistently misinterprets the female writer’s silences or evasions, and who finds his mind in chaos when he discovers the true state of things (ibid.: 190).

The delighted modern feminist response this might be expected trigger is precluded, however, since LaMotte’s ‘egg’ turns out in the end to have been broken by male intrusion freely, though regretfully, accepted; even as the greatness of LaMotte’s subsequent epic achievement turns out to have required breaking that safe egg and leaving the virginal tower. Only breaking out – however painful – frees the true force of independent womanhood – traditionally depicted in negative images and hybrid monstrosities – to express itself.

The Fairy Melusina, and all the oral folk and fairy tales of a pre-modern era from which she is generated, turn out to explore the enigma of the feminine in a man-dominated world. Against the fiery and dry creatures of erect maleness, Melusina is akin to water dragons, mermaids, and selkies (seal women), all quasi-personifications of the female force in nature, and the landscapes associated with her are a watery kingdom, beneath the water or liminal areas and bogholes adjacent to water, marshes and soggy flatlands, whose phenomena invert those of the male sphere. Their shapes are lithe, dynamic, shapeshifting, uncanny, and their integrity safeguarded by their oblique or hidden existence: when her husband, breaking a ban of prohibition, spies upon Melusina and sees that in her full, unedited beauty she has a fishtail, the marriage is broken and disaster and destruction follow. Invisibility, and an alternately incomplete or distorted image of her nature (“her fishtail was her freedom” [ibid.: p. 374]), was the price of Melusinas fertile and creative freedom and her ability to mate with a human male.

With the new discoveries, all previous scholarly confidence with regards to theory, literary history, and poetic interpretation is destroyed, and with it the false personalities sustained by the false constructions. Reality, far from having a nice shapely form, changes and shifts (in a way reminiscent of the above-mentioned imaginative upheaval Ash experiences when confronted with Christabel’s difference from his imagined forms).

However, the discoveries, by throwing down conventional walls of prejudice, prove liberating. And while LaMotte’s analysis of her situation relates to her own historical position as a woman in a male-defined environment of science and poetry, her analysis of the security of her ‘egg’ and the necessity of breaking it and enter a wider threatening, but creatively stimulating world, easily extends to the historical situation of the modern scholars, although their walls are different from hers (as LaMotte points out in one story, conventions assert themselves, but change happens over time: “... one day we will write it otherwise” (ibid.: 155, cf. 350).

A century later, such change has happened: The women of the modern world do well, often better than the men, and feminism is an accepted theoretical break-through.

Despite her academic success, however, Maud's assured posture turns out to be defensive rather than truly expressive of a workable identity. To play her part, she represses much, and her personal break-through comes when she literally lets down her hair, thus symbolically becoming a sensuous woman in addition, rather than in contrast, to being a clever one. The hair with its snake-like coils recalls the many references to womanhood as characterized by water and associated with selkies, water dragons, mermaids, etc. All these are symbolic of the 'free' femininity that Byatt seeks to define through her narrative, and more discursively, through ventriloquizing her nineteenth-century heroine Christabel. In her new state – barriers broken down and new discoveries destabilizing her in a way that demands new construction – brilliant *and* sensuous Maud, as beautiful as a water dragon (*ibid.*: 148), comes to an understanding with Roland, who in turn rescues himself from being the modest, rather timid and docile follower and Ash-clone to find himself as a poet and respected academic.

The final idyll is so fraught with metapoetic and mythical echoes that Byatt's heuristic aim is clearly signaled, but the idyll does, nonetheless, follow the logic of the romance and needs to be construed as such. Byatt seems to make the point that the late-twentieth-century equality of the sexes furnishes a platform where traditionally suppressed feminine values and qualities may be extended so as to encompass the human world as such, i.e. be valid for men as well as women, as these exist in modernity, whose postmodern stage is often conceptualized in feminine (and even romance/fantasy) terms.

To sum up how this works: The tradition (Ash) is received and creatively transformed by Roland only when he relinquishes his supposed certainty about Ash to acknowledge that Ash is different from what he thought. In his letters, Ash addresses someone special, not Roland, a contemporary readership, or posterity, and this provokes a new, unfamiliar reading, one less controlled by expectation. The curiosity thus awakened opens Roland's imagination to Ash's difference, and to his own voice in its difference. Roland comes alive as himself, and the "dead man. Who had this thing about dead people" (*ibid.*: 19), comes back to life, too. Simultaneously, Roland's expectations about Maud's alien, rather frightening set-up (at first held in place by his constant 'I thought so' responses) are shaken: feminism is not really silly, Maud not really aloof, himself not really a wimp. In fact, both scholars find themselves on a quest where new knowledge breeds new constructions in a constantly changing chain of discoveries and consequent revisions, and in each, a new more comprehensive identity is formed that remains open to influence from outside, once the egg-shell has been opened into the fluid space between the self and the other. The openness precludes rigid interpretations, but compensates for the discomfort by offering a constantly changing, live world of others, things, and words. Here, the dynamics of selfhood and creativity are again linked to the specifically feminine ethos. When Ash was defining what he found significant about his poetry, he anticipates Byatt's postmodern construction (*ibid.*: 184, 256), as does Christabel's definitions of traditional oral story-telling (*ibid.*: 350). What Byatt finally seeks to capture in her definition of treasured legacies from the past, and the

process by which these remain relevant, is a sense that life demands change; and change demands that life dies to cede place to the new: On the last page of the romance, Maud and Roland finally make love: and, completed and fulfilled, they sense a smell of death in the air: tradition is continuity and change, beginnings are also ends. The changeability of the feminine ethos is extended to encompass an entire attitude to life, love, and tradition.

Thus, Byatt's *Possession* suggests a revision of Bloom's conceptualization of the literary tradition as a series of Freudian oedipally motivated patricides. Byatt proposes that love is a better metaphor for the process: Desire opens up a person to influence from outside in a process which is painful, but inevitable. Self-defensive mechanisms that render the past legacy a false mirror corroborating the present are dismantled; and the opening out of the personality seeking the desired completion in the other and possessively eager to possess the other, expands the ego in a process that is fluid and capable of continuous revision; a revision that, in turn, is experienced as meaningful, because desire directs the seeker in a purposeful way. In place of Bloom's anxiety, misprision and transumption, Byatt explains the workings of tradition in terms of the romance as a vehicle of an ethos of femininity as capable of combining postmodernity's deconstructionist shapeshifting with love's constructionist direction.

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