

Love and Art Strike Back

— A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

Tine Engel Mogensen

*Thus I descended from the first and came / Into the second ring, of lesser space / And greater pain, that goads to wailing shame. [...] I learnt this tortuous torment was to try / The sensual sinners who subject the reason / Beneath their lusts; their doom is in the sky. [...] And then I turned to one of them and said: / 'Francesca, how your torment makes me weep; / In grief and pity for you these tears I shed. / But tell me, in the time where sweet sighs sweep, / By what event and methods love had turned / To all these dubious desires so strong and deep.' / 'There is no greater pain,' she said and yearned, / 'Than to recall a time of happiness / When wretched. – This your master has discerned. / But, if you wish to know the first success / And root of all our love, then I will be / Like somebody who weeps and tells no less. / One day, to pass the time, we read to see / How love constrained Sir Lancelot; alone, / And free from all suspicion, there were we. / Several times the reading changed our tone / And colour, drove our eyes to meet; just one / Defeated us, one moment on its own. / When we had come to where the kiss was won / From such a lover with that fondest smile, / What he, who never goes from me, had done / Was tremblingly to kiss my mouth. – The style / A Galeotto, and he who wrote it. That day / We read no further.'*¹

The Divine Comedy thus instructs its own reader that reading is a far from harmless activity; that it can lead to anything, even straight to perdition: Francesca and Paolo were caught up in the plot of the book they were reading – the famous romance of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere – and ended up in the circle of carnal sinners in Hell. Things do not go quite as wrong for the protagonists in A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning *Possession: A Romance* (1990),² Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, but the novel does deal with reading, love, desire and perdition in countless variations, combinations and interactions. This delightful novel about a handful of bookish people, poets and literary critics, is also quite relevant to the subject of aesthetic experience and art, in that it treats directly of the relationship between theory of

¹ From Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Hell* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1996), Canto V; in a terza rima translation by Peter Dale.

² A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage edition, 1991).

literature, literature itself and the aesthetic experience of literature – especially in relation to the important transformation of the two main characters in the book. *Possession* didactically lets the reader benefit from the protagonists' experience and insights and reminds us that there are other things in life besides intellectual pursuits – and to never forget the pleasure of reading. Thus, as frivolously *Star Wars*-like as the title of this paper may be, it is nevertheless quite adequate in expressing what takes place in the book. *Possession* turns out to be an enactment of the conflicts between a number of powerful – and quite classic – extremes, which, in the aesthetic experience of the reader, it overcomes and transcends.

Anatomy *versus* Romance

Possession's primary and most fundamental dichotomy is to be found on the level of literary form. In fact, one of the most important things one has to consider when dealing with Byatt's novel is why it is called *Possession: A Romance*. As I shall demonstrate, the book reads more like a realistic novel or even an *anatomy* at first. According to Northrop Frye, the anatomy handles abstract ideas and theories in a digressive style crammed with encyclopedic knowledge; it is a sharp and humourous analysis or *dissection* of certain mental attitudes or diseases of the intellect, of "maddened pedantry", and its characters are therefore merely caricatures.³ In short, the anatomist, "dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon".⁴ On this occasion, however, I am not going to elaborate thoroughly on the romance as a genre and its quite complex and problematic relationship with the novel or the anatomy, but I will try to show how the different genres "struggle" within the book.

The main story of *Possession* takes place in 1986. Our not particularly heroic hero, Roland Michell, who is a textual critic said to be "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject", is looking for new material concerning the work of the

³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 309.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 311.

Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash. By some fortunate chance, in one of the poet's own books Roland finds two letters never before recovered from Ash to an unnamed woman. On an impulse, Roland takes the letters with him and starts out on a quest for Ash's unknown woman, who turns out to be a Victorian poetess called Christabel LaMotte. This discovery leads Roland to Maud Bailey, who is a LaMotte expert – and a psychoanalytic feminist. The two scholars engage in the unravelling of the connections between the two Victorians, which we follow mainly through their correspondence, and it turns out that the two poets had a love affair. While Roland and Maud are investigating the Victorian romance, the relationship between them evolves as well, and they eventually fall in love.

In a summary like this, the romance stands out quite clearly: we have *The Great Quest, fortunate chances, impulses, desire* and of course *Love*. Nevertheless, when you start reading *Possession*, you have the distinct feeling that you are reading a realistic novel – or even an anatomy. Not only are there innumerable encyclopaedic references to persons, places, books, myths, geology, spiritualism, history and so on; in this respect, the reader of Byatt's novels all too well recognises the description of Roland's "not uncommon sensation of his own huge ignorance, a grey mist, in which floated or could be discerned odd glimpses of solid objects, odd bits of glitter of domes or shadows of roofs in the gloom".⁵ But the *setting* of the story is also strangely recognisable: we are introduced to a number of poor literary scholars dragging through a fanatically one-eyed and miserable existence, many of them living only through their research subjects – they are simply obsessed by them, and thus do not have an identity of their own. This is clearly seen in the description of Roland's boss, Professor Blackadder: "There were times when Blackadder allowed himself to see clearly that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's work."⁶ Roland also thinks of himself in terms of other people: either Ash, or

⁵ Byatt, *Possession*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

Blackadder, or his girlfriend Val, with whom he lives in a dull and uninspired relationship in a flat that stinks of cat piss. The description of Roland and Val's life together incidentally reads like pure social realism.

There is no romance in the air when Roland and Maud first meet either. As the narrator tells us: "They were children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, 'in love', romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing."⁷ Both Roland and Maud are actually quite emotionally chilled; both have been hurt in a relationship and now completely suppress their emotions, desires and intuitions. They have sublimated it all into their work and their purely theoretical sophistication and awareness, of which we get many convincing examples in the book. Even if Roland actually *likes* reading Ash's work and has a special relationship with the poet, it is still an intellectual experience and relationship; for instance, it is said, "What Roland liked was his *knowledge* of the movements of Ash's *mind*...."⁸

Intellectual Barbarism *versus* Poetic Wisdom: Vico

Roland and Maud are true disillusioned postmodernist ironists – or *intellectual barbarians*, as Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) would have said. I shall very briefly introduce some of the main concepts of this Italian philosopher, his book *The New Science* (1725, 1744) being one of the most important direct and indirect intertextual sources of *Possession*;⁹ in fact, it is in Ash's own copy of Vico that Roland finds the letters to LaMotte, and that is *not* a coincidence.

According to Vico's historical philosophy in *The New Science*, man and history are closely connected and develop simultaneously. And since history is always the

⁷ Ibid., 423.

⁸ Ibid., 20 (my emphasis).

⁹ In "Gone Ashley: Essay om poetiske litteraturhistorier efter Vico. Joyce, Byatt, Racine" (in *Ny poetik – Tidsskrift for litteraturvidenskab*, No. 6, Copenhagen 1996), Jørn Erslev Andersen briefly outlines what he calls Byatt's "cool recycling" in *Possession* of Vico's *New Science* and its ideas.

result of human will and human actions, it gives a far more accurate knowledge of mankind than the natural sciences: only if we realise our historical context and learn about the past are we able to understand ourselves. In order to find the principles for historical and social change, Vico goes back to the earliest times and the first men, who, according to him, “were all robust sense and vigorous imagination”.¹⁰ In the *poetic wisdom* of their myths he finds the basic principles for the creation of culture and society, and thus the basic principles for the common nature of nations. According to Vico, all nations are destined to follow the same eternal laws in their rise, progress, maturity, decadence and dissolution. His idea of the *ideal eternal history* is based upon three ages, each with its own kind of language, arts, skills, laws and government: 1) the age of the gods, in which man believes he lives under divine government; 2) the age of the heroes, in which the gods are still in control, but in the shape of man, i.e., as “sons of gods”, heroes or supermen (!), and 3) the age of men, in which all men recognise themselves as equal and in which they create society together under democratic forms. The historical course of a nation through these three ages is called a *corso*. “The age of men” is the height of every nation, with democracy, freedom for all, justice, reason, mildness, tolerance and relaxed manners. There is, however, a limit to just how perfect and complete society and man can get. At a certain point culture exhausts its creative potential; the nation enters the phase that Vico calls “the barbarism of reflection”, a phase of degeneration and dissolution. In this intellectual barbarism, thought becomes abstract and self-sufficient and is no longer deeply rooted in social life. It only produces meaningless ornamentation (allegories) or piles up empirical facts, hereby causing splits and social disintegration. Imagination is replaced by spitefulness, empty wit and irony, which in turn lead to extreme loneliness, lies, deceit and so forth. What happens is that, since abstract principles cannot control the innate egoism of the individual, selfishness takes over, and everything collapses. It is then necessary to start afresh from the age of the gods in a *ricorso*, which is not an exact repetition of the *corso*, but a rotation on another level, so to speak: something new is created on the

¹⁰ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), §375.

ruins of the old and with the memory of the old. As Vico puts it: "The nations mean to dissolve themselves, and their remnants flee for safety to the wilderness, whence, like the phoenix, they rise again."¹¹

Vico uses the history of Rome as the prototype of a *corso*; the *ricorso* that begins after the fall of the Roman Empire is the European Middle Ages, and the new "age of men" thus becomes Vico's own eighteenth-century Europe. But Vico already sees signs of the "barbarism of reflection" everywhere in his own age, incarnated in the method of Descartes (1596-1650). The one-sided cultivation or even worship of the intellectual skills of man (*barbaric Cartesian reason*, to use Vico's own words) has destroyed the creative and artistic skills of man. It is an age of alienation, loneliness, abstraction and egoism.

The Hegemony of Rationality: Ash and LaMotte

Vico wrote in the eighteenth century, but as I have already pointed out, it is quite easy to recognise the state of "barbarism of reflection" in the description of Roland and Maud's post-modern society as well. And needless to say, there is no room for romance in a world like that. Therefore, when reading *Possession: A Romance*, we tend to look for the romance of the title elsewhere: in the relationship between the two Victorians. And here we do actually find love at first sight, the passionate correspondence, the lovers' few stolen moments together – and the consummation of the relationship on a very romantic trip to Yorkshire. But romance is not easy for the Victorians either. In a letter to LaMotte, Ash writes in quite Vico-like terms:

The truth is [...] that we live in an *old* world – a tired world – a world that has gone on piling up speculation and observations until truths that might have been graspable in the bright Dayspring of human morning [...] are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest, by thick horny growths over that clear vision – as moulting serpents, before they burst forth with their new flexible-brilliant skins, are blinded by the crust of their old one.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §1108.

¹² Byatt, *Possession*, 164.

The Victorians’ world is also a world of intellectual barbarism, and the two poets lament the state of things, but are also marked by it: they are rational, analytical, ironic and extremely self-conscious, and they desperately try to resist the romance. Ash writes to LaMotte in despair, “...for I most certainly love you and *in all ways possible to man* and most fiercely. It is a love for which there is no place in this world – a love my diminished reason tells me can and will do neither of us any good [...]. We are rational 19th century beings, we might leave the *coup de foudre* to the weavers of Romances...”¹³ But they give in. Anyway, after the trip to Yorkshire reason takes over again: LaMotte is pregnant, but as Ash cannot leave his wife, she must give the child to her sister, and she then drags on a miserable existence for the rest of her life; in her own words, just like “an old witch in a turret”.¹⁴ Here we have an example of pure *Victorian* social realism!

The Hegemony of Sexuality: Roland and Maud

Roland and Maud do not realise the similarities between the Victorians’ situation and their own. On a trip to Yorkshire in the footsteps of the Victorians, they start questioning their *own* time and its culture, not least the centrality of sexuality. Roland brings up the subject, and later Maud ponders on the difference between the Victorians and themselves:

They must have been – in an extreme state. I was thinking last night – about what you said about our generation and sex. We see it everywhere. As you say. We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too – about how there isn’t a unitary ego – how we’re made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things – and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can’t see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we – we know it’s a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love – so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in [...] Love – themselves – that what they did mattered...¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 193.

¹⁴ Ibid., 500.

¹⁵ Ibid., 267.

Maud not only ignores that the Victorians did *not* have easy access to Romantic Love, she also seems to ignore that she and Roland are about to enter a similar “extreme state”; that the pragmatic novel of her life has already been seriously “infected” by romance. Both of the scholars nevertheless soon start to realise it: “Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that *he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others.* [...] Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable.”¹⁶ This passage clearly echoes an earlier one in the book, where Roland and Maud have finally gained access to the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, only to disagree on the working method: Maud wants each of them to concentrate on the poet that particularly interests them, while Roland originally had

a vision, which he now saw was ridiculous and romantic, of *their two heads bent together over the manuscripts, following the story, sharing, he had supposed, the emotion.* He pointed out that by Maud’s system they would lose any sense of the development of the narrative and Maud retorted robustly that they lived in a time which valued narrative uncertainty...¹⁷

This first time Maud’s rational method wins, but the easily recognisable reference to Paolo and Francesca’s reading scene quoted at the beginning of this paper still plays with a certain hope in the reader – with expectations as to the plot, as to Roland and Maud’s fate. Although Maud pleads for narrative uncertainty, the two scholars are already caught up in this old story of reading and love, participating in a complex structure with many references, reflections and imitations. Because coherence and closure *are* enchantingly desirable, deeply human desires, Roland and Maud suddenly seem destined to fulfil the Victorians’ story. And since the two scholars are

¹⁶ Ibid., 421 (my emphasis).

¹⁷ Ibid., 129 (my emphasis).

practically incompatible in “the real world”, come from different social classes, lead very different lives, and so on, Roland suddenly realises what kind of plot he and Maud have been written into:

the plot of a Romance. He was in a 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 another. He supposed the Romance must give way to social realism, even if the aesthetic temper of the time was against it.¹⁸

Again, *Possession* obviously teases the reader. For a while we actually have the feeling that we are reading a romance; we *almost* start to expect a happy, romantic ending. But at the same time, as children of the same time and culture as Roland, with the same scepticism as him, we do not really dare to believe in such an ending nowadays. Our literary education tells us that we are not “allowed” to read this kind of romantic love story in an intelligent contemporary novel. *Possession* knows its readers and takes advantage of this knowledge. It plays with us. Social realism does not take over, but it is shown just how fragile the romance actually is; we are told how Roland and Maud “took to silence. They touched each other without comment and without progression. [...] Speech, the kind of speech they knew, would have undone it”.¹⁹ Instead, they create a silent language of their own: “He slept curled against her back, a dark comma against her pale elegant phrase.”²⁰

A New Language

At the same time another language is born in Roland, a counter-language to the language of intellectual barbarism, or rather a primitive language that starts all over again: “He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of

¹⁸ Ibid., 425. The statement that “the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world” can be seen in the work of a large number of modern critics – e.g., Denis de Rougemont, *L’amour et l’Occident*, 1956 (Paris: Bibliothèque 10/18 – Plon, 1972), Octavio Paz, *The double flame: Love and eroticism*, 1993 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), or Kai Aalbæk-Nielsen, *I tidens ånd 1-3* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1999-2001).

¹⁹ Ibid., 423-24.

²⁰ Ibid., 424.

literary criticism or theory. He had hopes [...] of writing poems, but so far had got no further than lists. These were, however, compulsive and desperately important”.²¹ On these lists are words like “blood”, “clay”, “coal”, “hair”, “fur”, “isinglass”, “scarab”, “arrow”, “water”, “sky”, and so on – you get the picture. Words like “link”, “branch”, and “root” are of course rejected, as they point back to the other, “barbaric” discourse – literary theory.

At this point in the novel, a new voice is heard: the narrator has detached herself from the characters and interferes philosophically, saying, “Vocabularies are crossing circles and loops. We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or to be confined by”.²² Roland’s search for a new language can thus be seen as the first step on his road to find, or to (re)define, his own identity.

The relationship between our two scholars is however far from equal; Roland feels inferior to Maud, marginal even, like a parasite of her “cool” existence: “Roland looked at her with love and despair. He had nothing in the world but Maud – no home, no job, no future – and these very negatives made it impossible that Maud would go on taking him seriously or desiring his presence.”²³ He decides to spend a night alone in his old flat in order to rethink his life, which is an important turning point. Back in the flat he finds job offers from three foreign universities – probably due to the massive publicity concerning the secret correspondence between Ash and LaMotte. And he realises that in pursuing the letters, he himself has changed focus from Ash’s *work* to his *life*, and that he has in a way lost the intellectual bonds he used to have with the poet. He thinks about how it all started – and this gives him the happy inspiration to reread Ash. It is a very special reading experience with far-reaching consequences:

Now and then there are readings which make the hairs on the neck [...] 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 – readings when the knowledge that

²¹ Ibid., 431.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 432.

we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge.²⁴

Roland's former intellectual experience of Ash's work has now receded in favour of a powerful *sensuous experience*. Suddenly, he intuitively sees or even *feels* all the connections, between Ash and Vico, language and things: "He heard Vico saying that the first men were poets and the first words were names that were also things, and he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless *lists* [. . .], and saw what they were", namely: "the language of poetry".²⁵ And this twentieth-century scholar who has always been taught that "language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself"²⁶ now has a completely different experience: "What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more important to him than the idea that it could not."²⁷ Words gush from him, connect themselves to things – and become poetry: "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."²⁸

The Happy Ending

Roland's development from occupying himself with theory – i.e., sterile intellectual skills – to creating art (literature) of course brings us back to Vico and his cyclical understanding of history. Roland's story represents the transition between a *corso* and a *ricorso*: his quest, the unravelling of the Victorian love affair, shakes him up, inspires him and prepares him for his final metamorphosis from intellectually barbarised scholar to poet – i.e., a poetic, creative being. As suggested above, this metamorphosis takes place through his rereading of Ash: an aesthetic experience of the most sensuous

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 471-72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 473.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 475.

kind, where Roland understands that not only is it possible to say something again – it is also possible to *love* again. He is reborn, with his own voice: his recovered identity.

A similar transformation can be seen with Maud, but I shall not go any further into her case on this occasion. Suffice it to say that she is the first one to actually say *the* words, which – just like Roland’s “new”, poetic words – can only be said after the breakdown of intellectual barbarism and the return of the poetic-mythical age. She says: “I love you. I think I’d rather I didn’t.” And Roland answers: “I love you. It isn’t convenient. Not now I’ve acquired a future. But that’s how it is. In the worst way. All the things we – we grew up not believing in. Total obsession, night and day.”²⁹

So, much to her surprise, the reader does end up with a very happy, romantic ending. Maud and Roland fulfil the romance that Ash and LaMotte were forced to give up 130 years earlier. In her last letter to Ash, LaMotte writes: “Did we not – did *you* not flame, and I catch fire? Shall we survive and rise from our ashes? Like Milton’s Phoenix?”³⁰ And she and Ash do actually rise again in the shape of Roland and Maud. To underline this point, the narrator lets the reader know that everything has in fact started afresh with Roland and Maud’s final emotional and bodily union: “In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. [. . .] It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful.”³¹

The ending’s note of pathos is of course striking. However, the last pages of the book are not untouched by irony either. Thus the “it isn’t convenient” when Roland tells Maud that he loves her functions as an ironical marker which points to the dichotomy between reason and love enacted in *Possession* – a jestingly “rational” voice which is, however, immediately driven away by the romantic discourse. A parallel example is seen when the narrator self-consciously comments on her own writing in the middle of the otherwise quite romantic description of Roland and Maud’s final intercourse: “... Roland finally, *to use an outdated phrase*, entered and took possession of all her white coolness....”³² This mixture of irony and pathos is

²⁹ Ibid., 506.

³⁰ Ibid., 502.

³¹ Ibid., 507.

³² Ibid. (*my emphasis*).

quite typical for *Possession*, and below I shall turn to some considerations of the nature of the relationship between pathos and irony in the book. In other words: if we look at the recent history of aesthetics, what are we to make of this reintroduction of romantic love, romance and pathos in *Possession*?

Pathos and Irony

Whenever the combination of the reintroduction of old forms and irony is mentioned, postmodernism springs to mind. In the postmodernist manifesto *Postscript to The name of the Rose* (1983), Umberto Eco describes how the modernist avant-garde's destruction of the past ultimately leads to silence, and how the postmodernist answer to the destruction of the past must then be to *revisit* the past and the old forms, but with irony, not innocently. Eco's example is well-known: he states that, in the age of lost innocence, it is only possible for a man to say "I love you madly" to a woman if he uses quotation marks, and says: "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." As Eco concludes, "Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony.... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love".³³ No doubt *Possession* can be read as a "typical" postmodern novel in many ways, for it is an extremely self-conscious, meta-fictional text. Still, in my opinion the ironic elements of the text do not make it entirely ironic: as opposed to Eco's case, there are no superior quotation marks when Roland and Maud exchange their "I love you"s;³⁴ nor, for that matter, when Roland is reborn as a poet. The pathos of the text is not undermined by its irony, or rather: a certain amount of pathos is left, which stands out in itself, as itself.

To replace the postmodern idea of irony as a "global vision", something automatically unstable and uncontrollable, Wayne C. Booth has suggested a "smaller"

³³ Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 67.

³⁴ Their exchange hereby mirrors the *everyday experience* which Eco seems to ignore in his theory: that "I love you" remains one of the most powerful statements in the lives of most of us, regardless of its 'overconsumption' by popular culture, and that most normal lovers would never accept the Cartland wrapping à la Eco, let alone "with pleasure play the game of irony" themselves, in the important exchange situation.

irony: irony as a local, temporary effect that communicates a specific message and does not necessarily undermine the whole text.³⁵ In this way irony and pathos can easily coexist within a book. Along these lines, Morten Kyndrup's notion of paramodern representation is interesting. The paramodern representation has as its basic condition the modernist experience of absence and of the impossibility of representation. But unlike the postmodern work of art, the paramodern work of art does not feel that it has to keep *exposing* the breakdown and ironically point to its own status as fiction, and thus it opens up for new possibilities of representation. In a way it becomes possible to *say* something again, to create a new cohesion on the ruins of the old one. And it becomes possible to reintroduce pathos: not the classical, grandiose and "naïve" one, but a small, self-conscious "pathos" that can nevertheless function as "real" pathos.³⁶

So, what is the nature and status of pathos in *Possession*? As the conspicuous disagreement between its critics demonstrates, this is not a simple question. My own position is nevertheless quite clear: for *Possession*'s pathos is no doubt a self-conscious one in the sense that Byatt knows exactly what she is doing. This is especially seen in the subtle and well-considered use of Vico's ideas as an underlying structure. But I also think that the pathos is extremely important in *Possession* and should be taken quite seriously. In this sense it is a book with a mission. To clarify the nature of this mission, I will ally myself with the Swedish scholar Bo Lundén, who has written a thesis partly about *Possession* on what he calls the *(re)education* of readers.³⁷

³⁵ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1974).

³⁶ For Kyndrup's considerations about the paramodern representation, see "Kunstens betingelser: Pathos, paramoderne, palimpsest?" in Morten Kyndrup, *Riften og sløret* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), and "Paramoderne pathos?" in *Patos?*, eds. Birgit Eriksson and Niels Lehmann (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998).

³⁷ Bo Lundén, *(Re)educating the Reader: Fictional Critiques of Poststructuralism in Banville's Dr Copernicus, Goetzee's Foe, and Byatt's Possession* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Gothenburg Studies in English, 1999).

A Sentimental Education

As I have tried to demonstrate, *Possession* is highly informed by all sorts of knowledge, not least theory in general and poststructuralist thinking in particular. In this sense one might say that Byatt seeks to *educate* her readers – she flirts with our knowledge, challenges us, shows us the range of the intellectual mode. But at the same time, and little by little, *Possession* also shows us that there are things in life that cannot be accounted for by this kind of knowledge, or understood intellectually at all. As Lundén puts it, Byatt wants to (re)educate the reader by foregrounding an *unintellectual residue*: the emotional, the spiritual, the mystical, the affective and the intuitive.

The residue can be seen everywhere in *Possession*, but of course most of all in the description of how Roland and Maud, influenced by the Victorian plot, regain little by little their lost emotional innocence. *Possession* obviously wants the reader to identify with the two main characters; we are meant to involve ourselves in the story, experience how intellectual thinking fails and the residue takes over, and react not only intellectually, but also *affectively*, to the book – simply let ourselves go, just like Roland in his final, intuitive reading of Ash. As Lundén also points out, this is the didactic or heuristic aspect of *Possession*: when reading the book with affective and aesthetic pleasure, we should intuitively understand that there are alternatives to the intellectual mode of knowing – for instance imagination, empathy, intuition and love.

For a literary scholar like myself, this is extremely refreshing. It is perhaps not possible for *Possession* to restore the “happy ignorance” of our naïve, pre-theory reading experiences, but in my opinion the book does give an intense pleasure of reading, thus reminding the reader of the things that theory cannot account for – again, following Lundén: the emotional, spiritual, mystical, affective and intuitive.

Strangely enough, these things are also typical for *the romance* as a genre. To return to the question asked in the beginning, *this* is why Byatt has chosen to call her novel “a Romance”. She has actually taken the romance form quite seriously. But *Possession* is also a new kind of romance, or more than a romance, because of its parallel *intellectual* instruction or education of the reader. As the critic Harry Levin has

pointed out, "Literature, left to itself, is in danger of going dead; like language, it must be kept alive by assimilating new elements and recharging old ones".³⁸ This is exactly what Byatt has done: by reintroducing an old form of literature like the romance and combining it with elements from, for instance, the anatomy and the postmodern novel, she has created something new. If we use Vico's terms, *Possession* can be seen as a novel that has come out on the other side of intellectual barbarism. Without forgetting about the literary experiences that have been made in the meanwhile, it starts anew, daring to tell a great love story that is both old-fashioned and very modern. It could seem that nowadays we do not have to choose between either irony or pathos, intellectual knowledge or the "residue" – for instance: these elements can all be there at the same time, and they should all be taken seriously.

In this paper, I have shown how *Possession* plays two sides off against each other. The combatants are, among others, *realistic novel/anatomy* and *romance*; *intellectual experience* and *sensuous experience*; *literary theory* and *literature (art/creation)*; *reason* and *love*; *irony* and *pathos*; *intellectual knowledge* and *residue*. Surely, *Possession* does advocate the right sides of the above contrasting pairs – because it is necessary to draw the modern reader's attention to this more or less forgotten side of life, and of literature. This is the "Love and Art Strike Back" part of it. But in the reader's aesthetic experience of *Possession*, *both sides* are included. The reader is at once intellectually and emotionally stimulated, educated and (re)educated. In this way *Possession* does overcome and transcend the extremes; it does not suspend or annul them, but it *contains* them all.

³⁸ Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 51.