

## A. S. Byatt's "Half-Resurrection" in *Possession: A Romance*

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"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."

If, as this opening sentence of L. P. Hartley's novel states, the past is another country and people in that time are foreigners to us, then how can we in the present access the past and its people? This addresses one of the major concerns in postmodernism about the relationship between history and fiction: is it possible to retrieve the past in narrative fiction? Byatt repeatedly asks this question in her fifth novel *Possession: A Romance* (1990), which follows two modern literary scholars searching various extant texts to learn about a hitherto unsuspected relationship between two Victorian poets. The book is written as a polyphonic narrative consisting of private correspondences, journals, works of poetry and literary criticism and biographies. The plot proceeds with the modern scholars constructing a narrative of the Victorian past through the texts they read and by doing this the textuality of the past is constantly brought before us.

*Possession* can thus be considered to be one of the examples of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," one type of postmodern fiction which self-consciously foregrounds the fictivity of its representation of the past. She maintains that historiographic metafiction questions the validity of the long held distinction between history and fiction.

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. [...] They also show that both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past. The "real" referent of their language once existed; but it is only accessible to us today in textualized form. (93)

History can never be faithful or neutral to the reality of the past, for the narrated past is inevitably a cultural and linguistic product of the present. As a result, the criticism of postmodern fiction, it seems, has most often looked at the represented past as a reflection of current social and literary concerns.

This paper explores Byatt's historical vision in the context of postmodernism as delineated above. I shall argue that in *Possession*, while acknowledging the postmodern emphasis on the irretrievability of the past, Byatt creates a strong sense of continuity with the past and establishes

an imaginative communication with the past literary tradition. This is different from the postmodern ironic distancing of the past as a mirror merely reflecting present literary concerns. Most importantly, Byatt's historical vision seems to be inspired by her profound regard for literary and moral values that the Victorian age and its literary tradition represent to her. This includes a writer's strong interest in human beings and respect for the uniqueness and profundity of each individual. Ultimately, in her negotiation with postmodernism, the Victorian past is redeemed from dead textuality not to "reality" but to "the real." So are the Victorian characters redeemed from a fragmented textual construct to "real" human beings with imagined immediacy and integrity. I will call this strategic retrieval of the past "half-resurrection."

In fact, this "half-ness" of her historical representation has often been discussed in relation to the recent increase in the publication of fictions specifically set in or concerned with the Victorian age, which some critics call "Neo-Victorian novel" or "Retro-Victorian novel." Robin Gilmour points out this trend to be "one of the striking aspects of fiction in the last third of the twentieth century" and claims that such novels are "the kind of work which is inward with the period and the conventions of its literature, and draws on the meanings which these have come to have for us today" (189). The utilisation of Victorian history and fiction, he argues, offers contemporary writers "a sophisticated way to get back to the unsophisticated, or at least to certain powerful narrative simplicities that the contemporary novel has been wary of" (198). It is also appealing for the reader because "the age offers a solidity of characterization and a lack of formal self-consciousness not available in modern writing and for which there seems to be a real appetite." In short, "the modern version may set out to expose the inadequacies and silences of the Victorian novel, but its effect is often to give the unsophisticated reader a density and a satisfying solidity which contemporary fiction may seem to lack" (191). He explains, for example, the use of romance genre by *Possession* as one of the novel's strands which gives "unsophisticated narrative pleasures" (198).

These assumptions are to Byatt typical of postmodernist narcissism. In her essay, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-War Fiction," which seems to manifest her own view of novel-writing, Byatt points out that there is "an almost obsessive concern with the nature of truth and lies" among some experimental writers who are more concerned with the form of fiction over its subject matter (176). She argues that they indulge themselves in "aesthetic solipsism" in an enclosed world of text. Although this "aesthetic solipsism" may be what Gilmour calls "sophistication," it blocks a possible dialogue between an author and the age. The past is only a subject matter which, with no particular significance in itself, is to be utilised for and by the present. Postmodern narcissism can also distance a writer from a reader. By telling a story to the reader, the writer offers the "pleasure of reading" and in this sense, the writer is an author. However, an author does not "stand[s] next to" god as the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* claims (Fowles, 97). The implication that a reader who is easily entertained by such "pleasure of reading" is naïve, seems to indicate the dominance of literary theories which urge a self-conscious and analytical reading.

*Possession* is Byatt's attempt to deconstruct these oppositions and relationships. The Victorian past in *Possession* is "the redemptive past," as the novel attempts to "demonstrate that acknowledging that we can only know the past through its textual traces does not mean that

historical events are irretrievable, or not worth retrieving” (Shiller, 541). Jukić maintains that the novel marks a significant “return” from “word(s) to the world(s),” given the exclusive focus on the textuality of the past in earlier experimental fiction such as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Jukić describes this “return”: “A heap of words, patterns and sterile quotations that by the 1990s had come to represent the world of Victoriana, were, in *Possession*, converted back to worlds, flesh, reality, however textual these may be”(83).

My approach to examine Byatt’s half-resurrection of the Victorian past from textuality to “the real” will be characterised by a close attention to the novel’s narrative structure. This is to demonstrate how the half-resurrection is actually realised in the novel and to relate this to literary values that she has recognised in the Victorian literary tradition, which I will argue can be called the “pleasure of reading.” I have chosen to focus on the three Victorian narratives with a third-person narrator in *Possession*, namely, Chapter 15, Chapter 25 and Postscript 1868. I believe that they serve as the most illuminating examples of Byatt’s half-resurrection that I would like to configure. As the next section explains in more detail, they help Byatt communicate with her reader and they also have the effect of presenting the lives of the fictional Victorian characters as more real and immediate. They form layers of “worlds” in the novel, which contribute to half-resurrect the past as “the real.” I will then introduce Bakhtin’s concept of an “extratemporal hiatus” to illustrate how this effect is actually achieved, and in this I will particularly deal with Postscript 1868.

Following this, I will discuss the sense of eternity and immortality in the Victorian passages and its implications as a narrative and conceptual device for Byatt’s half-resurrection. This will be called “a false eternity” in Byatt’s own words as this again suggests her self-conscious negotiation with postmodernism. By revealing extremely intense, private moments in the lives of the Victorian characters, Byatt tries to present the Victorian characters as “real” human individuals and increase the verisimilitude of the Victorian past. At the same time, its “falseness” implies that Byatt is certainly aware of the demolished concept of self as an integrated whole and of the entailing criticism of the realistic mode traditionally used for representing such illusory wholeness of human characters.

Lastly, I shall conclude that her historical vision can be said to be a communication with and re-evaluation of the Victorian literary tradition. One form of such tradition embodied in *Possession* is the “pleasure of reading.” This novel is, Byatt herself says, “like the book people used to enjoy reading when they enjoyed reading”(Byatt quoted in Rothstein, 17). It is thus an enactment of reading and also about an act of reading and the pleasure of reading (Kelley, 90). The enactment of this reading involves private and interactive communication with the other. Such reading is set against postmodern narcissistic reading whose meticulousness only goes round in circles within self and text and is disengaged from the other and the extratextual world. It will then be confirmed that this “pleasure of reading” represents the primary aspect of Byatt’s half-resurrection, that is, an effort of reaching-out for the other — the past and other human beings —, and this can again be opposed to the postmodern objectification of the past and human beings. Ultimately, the novel is Byatt’s resuscitation of the lost literary tradition — the pleasure of reading and communication with other human beings by the means of literature.

## The Three Victorian Passages

The story of *Possession* begins as Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, twentieth-century literary scholars explore a secret affair between Henry Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, fictional nineteenth-century poets. Its typically postmodern narrative contains correspondences between the two poets, their works of poems, literary criticism and biographies of the two, journals of other nineteenth-century characters, and newspaper articles. These texts help Roland and Maud to construct a narrative of the Victorian past. It is important, however, that the three Victorian narratives — Chapter 15, Chapter 25 and Postscript —, are narrated by a third-person narrator and reveal secrets of the Victorian characters which the twentieth-century modern scholars in the novel are never able to know. Chapter 15 narrates a clandestine trip of Ash and Christabel in Yorkshire, and this chapter is very deliberately placed after the two modern scholars take a trip in which they look for traces of the two Victorian lovers a hundred years ago. Chapter 25 opens with the journal entries of Ellen, Ash's wife, around the time of her husband's death. Although the text of her journal is now available to the modern scholars, this chapter significantly reveals Ellen's inner thoughts about herself, Ash and Christabel, which are completely excluded from her extant journal. "Postscript 1868" comes after the ending of the twentieth-century narrative, in which the love-making of Roland and Maud is described in an intentionally clichéd romantic fashion. It describes Ash's meeting with his daughter, which is unknown to anyone else within the novel's fictional world. These passages therefore do not belong to the historical narrative the modern scholars construct from the texts that become available to them.

As I have mentioned, these three parts constitute "layers of worlds" in *Possession*. I consider, however, that their significance lies less in the signalling of their own status as one of the many possible historical representations, than in their bearing on the novel's whole narrative structure and the experience of reading this novel. Byatt herself gives reasons why she breaks the uniformity of the narrative mode by inserting these passages:

[...] my decision was very deliberate. It was partly polemical, for two reasons. I do believe that biographies are a kind of shadow-play, and that what really mattered is likely to elude the piecers-together of lives. [...] I also believe that the third-person narrator has been much maligned in the recent past — it does not aspire or pretend to be "God," simply the narrative voice, which knows what it does know. And I wanted to show that such a voice can bring the reader nearer the passions and the thoughts of the characters, without any obligation to admire the cleverness of the novelist. There is a nice irony about this — the writer and reader share what the critics and scholars cannot discover. (Byatt, Introduction to *Possession* (2000), xv)

She here emphasises the disconnection between a biographer in the present and his/her subject in the past. *Possession* is her own attempt to "feel" and "imagine" a connection to the past and its literary tradition. This passage also gives Byatt's view of the relationship between a novelist and a reader as being more valuable than a biographer's or a critic's scrutinising of his/her subject

and text.

It can therefore be said that these passages most vividly illustrate Byatt's historical vision: how she tries to establish an imaginative connection to the past literary tradition while being aware of the postmodern emphasis on the irretrievability of the past. They are an excellent example of her half-resurrection of the past from textuality to the real. In addition, they seem to serve Byatt's intention to resuscitate the pleasure of reading against the grain of postmodern/deconstruction theories. The study that follows, therefore, will primarily deal with these three passages.

### **“An Extratemporal Hiatus”: A Temporal Space in Textual Time**

The Victorian passages play an important role in Byatt's half-resurrection because of their “in-between” status in the novel's whole narrative. This intermediate status allows them to create a unique space in the novel's historical time. The significance of this space, I believe, will be made clear when we apply the concept of the literary chronotope presented by Mikhail Bakhtin. The basis of this concept is, he stresses, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84).

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indications are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

He demonstrates this essential combination of temporal and spatial dimensions in narrative with the numerous examples from a wide range of literary works.

However, the space the Victorian passages inhabit in *Possession* is not exactly the same as Bakhtin's chronotope in its nature as it reflects a poetic of historiographic metafiction. Unlike Bakhtin's examples of chronotope, such as road and salon, this space does not correspond to a concrete place that can be found in the extratextual world. To put it another way, this space does not have a referent in reality, for its chronotope is only textual and exists as a temporal space in the textual time of the novel. Its significance is only recognised in relation to the novel's whole narrative. It is a space where the historical time sustained by the novel's main narrative comes to a momentary fault and the overall mode of the Victorian time sustained in the novel is interrupted. This is where the felt distance between the present and the past becomes minimised and the immediate representation of the Victorian age is made possible independently of but still in relation to the rest of the novel's historical narrative.

Furthermore, this spatial fault in the temporality in the novel's narrative can be identified with an “extratemporal hiatus,” which Bakhtin claims can be found in the Greek romance written between the second and sixth centuries A.D. (90). He explains that works of Greek romance often contain the different levels or modes of time which coexist in them. One is biological or realistic time and the other is an “empty time” which “leaves no traces anywhere. no indications

of its passing” and “appears between two moments of a real time sequence” (91). In historiographic metafiction, a real time sequence can never be biological because this is still a fictional and textual time. This is why the empty time that the three Victorian narratives create needs to be understood specifically in its relation to the rest of the novel’s narrative. Only this way can it be an “empty time” with an illusory immediacy, which is different from the novel’s main fictional time, despite the fact that this empty time is also textually constructed.

The effect of this chronotope is most evident in one of the three Victorian passages, “Postscript 1868.” This postscript narrates Ash’s meeting with his daughter, which is known to no one in the fictional worlds of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century within the text. It opens: “There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been” (508). Its extratemporal habitus is made possible because of its “in-between” narrative status between textuality and the reality. In this between-ness, the distance between the past and the present and between the reader and the author is minimised, if not eliminated.

In the formation of this chronotope, it is significant that the narrative passage also involves a question of ending and thus has a great influence on how the novel is read and brought to closure. The concept of ending and closure is one of the main issues in the poetics of postmodernism and it constitutes an essential element of any narrative. As Aristotle claims, every narrative is expected to have a beginning, middle and ending. The fulfilment of this expectation is human necessity. As Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” suggests, human beings are governed not only by desire for pleasure but also by the unconscious drive for stasis, death, or an ending (xi). Therefore, we always expect ending when we read any narrative. “Postscript 1868” thus has an intricate relation to the way in which the novel comes to closure, or rather, the way in which the reader brings the novel to closure. It is certainly an ending, but, as I will argue in the following, with its unique narrative space, it both reinforces and undermines for the reader a sense of the closure of the novel.

An ending cannot exist without a beginning. Narrative fulfilment cannot be attained without an accordance between a beginning and an ending. Accordingly, the beginning of *Possession* suggests its possible ending. The first chapter has a poem purportedly written by Ash, “The Garden of Proserpina”: “These things are there. The garden and the tree/The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold/The woman in the shadow of the boughs/The running water and the grassy space./They are and were there. At the old world’s rim/In the Hesperidean grove” (1). Roland can be identified with “the tricky hero Herakles” who “came to his dispossession and the theft” in this paradisaical garden. “Dispossession and the theft” can imply the loss of self-control Roland is going to experience during his search because of his irresistible curiosity for the Victorian secret and also of his feeling for Maud. They can also be interpreted as Roland’s possession of Maud at the end of the novel and also as his disclosure of the past secret, which was hidden in the garden, as the poem voices “They are and were there.” Indeed, the chapter describes Roland reading Ash’s copy of Vico’s *Principj di Scienza Nuova*, which “had been undisturbed for a very long time, perhaps even since it had been laid to rest” (2).

Moreover, the way in which the novel opens foretells that the text itself will be an enactment

of reading which is paradoxically both a self-revealing and an interactive activity.

The book was thick and black and covered with dust. Its boards were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time. Its spine was missing, or rather protruded from amongst the leaves like a bulky marker. It was bandaged about and about with dirty white tape, tied in a neat bow. The librarian handed it to Roland Michell, who was sitting waiting for it in the Reading Room of the London Library. It had been exhumed from Locked Safe no. 5 where it usually stood between *Pranks of Priapus* and *The Grecian Way of Love*. It was ten in the morning, one day in September 1986. Roland had the small single table he liked best, behind a square pillar, with the clock over the fireplace nevertheless in full view. To his right was a high sunny window, through which you could see the high green leaves of St. James Square. (1)

This opening passage describes the very moment when Roland takes up “the” book, which leads him onto an unexpected further search for secrets about the affair between Ash and Christabel. This highlights the centrality of text and reading to his (re)search in which unknown texts become available and reveal hidden facts. This may also be associated with Borges’ metaphor of the world as library and book. One of his short stories, “The Library of Babel,” opens: “The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with cast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. [...] People are in the habit of inferring from this mirror that the Library is not infinite; I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite....” The narrator declares, “Like all men of the Library, I have travelled in my youth. I have wandered in search of a book” (72-3). Like this narrator in search of a book in the infinite world of library, Roland is seen to be at the gateway into a labyrinth of the textual past within the novel. At the same time, the reader is invited to a wandering in the same textual world and in the textual world of the novel.

In addition, the whole chapter strongly associates the world with the world of text that is infinite and extends over its own textual world. This effect is produced by a strong evocation of library as a chronotope, a space symbolic of literature where the finite and the infinite and the present and the past intersect. As Borges’ metaphor suggests, the London Library represents an infinite world of text where the past is still present in the form of literary heritage. For example, the narrative stresses the library’s long history: “It was shabby but civilised, alive with history but inhabited also by living poets and thinkers who could be found squatting on the slotted metal floors of the stacks, or arguing pleasantly at the turning of the stair. Here Carlyle had come, here George Eliot had progressed through the bookshelves. Roland saw her black silk skirts, her velvet trains, sweeping compressed between the Fathers of the Church, and heard her firm foot ring on metal among the German poets. Here Randolph Henry Ash had come, cramming his elastic mind and memory with unconsidered trifles from History and Topography” (2). But intermixed with the infinite are precise indications of the finite as the chapter punctuates every moment of Roland’s launch into the textual world of the past. His progress is exacted by phrases such as “All this was over by 10.30” (3); “At 11.00, he found what he thought was the relevant passage in Vico” (3). When he notices two draft letters laid in the book, “That was 11.15. The

clock ticked, motes of dust danced in sunlight, Roland meditated on the tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge” (4). His (re)search is thus embedded in the definite punctuations of time and space but at the same time is integrated in a flow of time continuing from the past. His search in text, as a crossing between the past and the present, implies the possible infinite.<sup>2</sup>

Every narrative, once initiated, anticipates an ending. Roland’s search, therefore, must have an ending. In the course of the novel’s story, Roland, in collaboration with Maud, finds and reads the letters between Ash and Christabel, and reading them, they come to grasp the intensity of the secret relationship between these Victorian lovers and also their profound passion for literature. Their relationship now ascertained, they start to look for the end of their relationship, by following their footsteps in Yorkshire and Brittany while warding off interference by other academic scholars. They learn that Christabel gave a birth to a daughter by Ash, but there seems to be no way of knowing what happened to this daughter. They finally come to know the ending of the Victorian secret when they, together with the other scholars, get hold of Christabel’s letter to Ash on his deathbed. The letter reveals that the daughter did survive, although Ash believed that she had not and Christabel also made him believe so. This proves at the same time that Maud is, in fact, a direct descendent from Ash and Christabel. Most importantly, however, this letter was not read by Ash, for Ellen did not hand it to him. Therefore modern critics conclude that he died without knowing the fact that his child to Christabel lived happily and bore their descendents.

This letter is an ending which brings the modern scholars’ search to closure. The difference of ending and closure is, Torgovnick explains, that the former is “the last definable unit of work — section, scene, chapter, page, paragraph, sentence — whichever seems most appropriate for a given text” and the latter is “the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion.” Closure, she claims, can be achieved regardless of “the degree of finality or resolution achieved by the ending” as long as it is based on “the honesty and the appropriateness of the ending’s relationship to beginning and middle” (6). In this sense, the modern scholars’ search and their narrative of the relationship between Ash and Christabel is completed with the ending Christabel’s letter offers.

However, the closure thus achieved is undermined by “Postscript 1868” which narrates Ash’s meeting with his daughter. This is known to no one in the fictional worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth-century within the text but it is only disclosed to the reader of the novel. This postscript precisely constitutes, in Bakhtin’s words, “an empty time” in the novel’s historical time. Unlike the multiple endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, this Postscript does not cancel out what is narrated in the first ending. Given that the closure of their narrative thus still remains unmarred, at least to the scholars within the text, this could be considered an extra ending offering an extra piece of information. For example, Jean-Louis Chevalier, in his delicate study of aesthetic and moral aspects of conclusion in *Possession*, calls this Postscript “the coronation,” a kind of ultimate ending that brings a story to a definite closure, a denouement. He makes celebratory comments on the Postscript: “So Ash knew all along. And nobody knew it. But it is told us, outside the narrative, yet at the very heart of the story. Is this, in 1868, not 1889, not 1987 — *the* conclusion, smelling fresh and lively and hopeful, like the love



story, and no less romantic?"(131).

This view of the ending of the Postscript as “*the conclusion*,” however, seems to fail to consider it in connection with the first ending and with the novel’s whole narrative structure. For this extra ending can be a strong implication to the reader of the novel that the modern scholar’s narrative of the past is not complete. As a result, the addition of this postscript emphasises that any historical narrative is destined to be partial and incomplete. This also means that while it provides the reader with a feeling that they are in a vantage point, over the twentieth-century scholars, from which to come closer to the truth of the past, it simultaneously reminds them that their account of the past is also partial. Thus *Possession*’s two endings, considered together, both reinforce and mitigate the sense of closure of the novel. The reader’s experience of reading the novel exactly enacts the concept around which the novel revolves: the real past is unreachable, deferred by layers and layers of its textual presentations.

It is thus possible to understand the Postscript as a typical postmodernist gesture at the impossibility of total correspondence between narrative representation and the referent. It is certainly true that most multiple endings in postmodern fiction seem to be designed to emphasise this disparity between reality and its representation. On the other hand, they tend to stifle the reader’s imagination and to suggest the writer’s complacency in his/her formal sophistication. For example, Byatt criticises the two endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as they do not allow the reader to form an imaginative affinity with the past: “They [the two endings] are a programmatic denial of the reality of any. The future tense, like the future, is a creative lie — necessarily a fiction. But these alternative endings are neither future nor conditional, but fixed, Victorian, narrative past. They therefore cancel each other out, and cancel their participants, rendering Fowles as arbitrary a puppet-maker as he declared his desire not to be. For the writer, whilst the plural endings are possibilities in the head, they intensify the reality of the future world. For the reader, now, they reduce it to paperiness again” (“People in Paper Houses,” 174).

However, the Postscript in *Possession* helps the reader to comprehend “the real” of the past, if not the reality of the past. As Byatt herself explains, her intention in adding the three Victorian passages is to demonstrate that the writer and reader share more than is available to critics, and “Postscript 1868” may be considered a special treat from Byatt for the reader, offering the provisional repletion of desire for a narrative ending. As Torgovnick argues that closure should be considered in its relation to the beginning and middle, this Postscript exposes all the red herrings that appear in the second Victorian passage. In this second passage, the reader is misled to believe that a hair plait in Ash’s watch is Christabel’s, but the Postscript reveals that it is actually Maia’s. Also in this second passage the reader can initially be sure that Ash refers to Christabel, when he says to Ellen, “Tell her,” but when they learn that he met Maia, they cannot be sure any more if it was Christabel or Maia he referred to. Thus the Postscript responds to the earlier part of the novel’s narrative, especially, the proceeding Victorian passage, and stimulates the reader’s experience of the novel’s narrative. On the other hand, the Postscript still remains outside of the textual past that the modern scholars construct. It is, indeed, an extratemporal habitus or a momentary fault created outside of the novel’s main historical time and therefore holds a unique status, for the reader, between reality and textuality, in Byatt’s half-resurrection.

Moreover, its third-person narrator distinguishes the Postscript from the rest of the narrative.

It seems to carry authority or credibility with which nineteenth-century realism conventionally bestows a third-person narrative. But as recent theories of narrative have argued, a third-person narrator is not an omnipotent god. As I cited earlier, Byatt herself comments on the use of a third-person narrator: “I also believe that the third-person narrator has been much maligned in the recent past — it does not aspire or pretend to be “God,” simply the narrative voice, which knows what it does know” (Introduction to *Possession*, xv). Her third-person narrative does not claim to be “God” or an omnipotent narrator. Instead, its narrative is a communication with the reader. Although this Postscript plays with its own fictivity, it, at least, does not “lie” or “cheat” the “naïve” reader as Byatt claims “sophisticated” postmodern writers often do.

The ultimate result of the “in-between” status of the Postscript is to break down the dualism inherent in the historical narrative: now (us) and then (them). In *Possession* the Postscript dissolves different kinds of oppositions: twentieth-century and nineteenth-century; reality and textuality; twentieth-century literary tradition (specifically, here, postmodernism) and nineteenth-century literary tradition (realism); the author (Byatt) and reader, and the nineteenth-century fictional characters. It can probably be said, as Byatt’s earlier comment suggests, that there is only one opposition or rupture which the Postscript is designed to highlight: the author (Byatt) and reader, and the twentieth-century critics within the text. The Postscript belongs to neither the twentieth-century narrative nor the narrative of the nineteenth century past constituted with the various kinds of text. Its “in-between” status creates an empty time in the novel, and the Victorian past within it becomes an “immediate representation” of the past. This distinctive narrative space and time, recognisable only to the reader of the text, can be considered as a readerly treat from the author, Byatt. The Postscript embodies her attempt to establish a privileged communication with the reader against critics.

### A False Eternity

The former section examined the Postscript as an example of Byatt’s attempt to be connected to the past and while doing so, to communicate with her reader. For another case study of Byatt’s historical vision, I shall focus on a sense of eternity that is evoked in the first two Victorian passages and seems to transcend the confinement of temporality. I will call this sense of eternity, using Byatt’s own phrase, a “false eternity” (*On Histories and Stories*, 29). This is a narrative device which is used to realise her half-resurrection and it also represents an important implication of her half-resurrection in the literary context of postmodernism. Its examination will demonstrate her historical vision trying to bring the past into life, not for us in the present but for the sake of the values — literary and moral — that the Victorian age represents to her. In her historical vision the past is not the other, “another country.” Instead, it is immediate in the present and in continuum with the present.

In *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt points out a palpable difference between the “atmosphere” in novels by writers in the post-war generation and “the blaze of excitement and energy of thought of the wartime writers.” She attributes this difference to the fact that post-war writers “are often quite deliberately working with clichés, with popular images of wartime” (25). That is, the war novels by post-war writers are pastiche in the age of an aftermath, “an unheroic

time with no urgency and no images” (26). The false eternity is thus self-consciously and deliberately generated in the war novels as a substitute for a lost sense of meaningfulness and urgency of life. She says: “the interest common to all of them [post-war writers], in linear time and the finiteness of the single biological life, is always accompanied by some teasing or puzzling image of infinity and indestructibility” (29).

It is significant that this sense of eternity is “false” and “illusory.” Human life is never eternal although it is embedded in the infinite time of the universe. However, a sense of infinity felt in our definite time helps us to order and make sense of monotonous, insignificant stretch of time. Ricoeur points out that “*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*” The narrative of our human life needs to be punctuated with references to the specific moments and events in order to mould it into a comprehensible linear story. In this sense, the evocation of the false eternity is human narrative manipulation which accommodates our desire to invest our life with meaning (52).

Frank Kermode also stresses a human need for narrative, which seems to be relevant to Byatt’s false eternity. He claims, in *The Sense of an Ending*, that we make sense of our experience by fictions, including literary fiction, and that their narrative, usually consisting of the beginning, the middle and the end, are deeply related to our perception of time. He especially introduces concepts of *chronos* and *kairos*. The former is “passing time” or “waiting time,” which is a vast stretch of time where no significant events are found. The latter means “historical moments of intemporal significance,” that is, the time when monumental moments or events take place and therefore is distinguished from *chronos* (47). These two kinds of time fill up the time between the beginning and the end. However, according to Kermode, the concept of the third kind of time, *aeuum*, was invented to make up for the lost “mythical rigidity” of beginnings which had been founded on the Christian discourse of history (67). In modern time, *aeuum* has served as a replacement for significant moments of *kairos*. *Kairos* used to give meaning to human life, but this was lost in the thirteenth-century, when Christian philosophers, taking a renewed interest in Greek philosophy, started to question the received Christian discourses of origin and ending in *Genesis and Revelation*. *Aevum* “does not abolish time or spatialize it: it co-exists with time, and is a mode in which things can be perpetual without being eternal.” This is, in fact, very similar to Byatt’s false eternity as Kermode points out that *aeuum* is in human uses “the time-order of novels” (72). *Aevum* is therefore a useful narrative device that lends finite human life “an image of endlessness consistent with a temporal end” (74).

He further argues that such doubleness of *aeuum* influences a perception of the actuality of fictional characters in novels.

Characters in novels are independent of time and succession, but may and usually do seem to operate in time and succession; the *aeuum* co-exists with temporal events at the moment of occurrence, being, it was said, like a stick in a river (72).

The double sense of being-in-time and being-out-of-time suggests, in the case of fictional characters, an illusory sense of immortality and infinity of their temporal lives. As will later be

demonstrated, Byatt's false eternity evokes such an integration of the finite and the infinite in the portraits of the lives of her Victorian lovers.

Significantly, Kermode also warns us against the danger of myth caused by the use of *aevum*. It can create consoling fictions, "a concord-fiction," which "is designed to relate events that appear to be discrete and humanly inexplicable to an acceptable human pattern" (59). Such fiction produces patterns out of a mere succession of *kairos* and *chronos* and presents us with a false picture of an ordered world. Moreover, this danger of myth is a significant issue in postmodern questioning of well-wrought narrative patterns for the effect of verisimilitude that, on the contrary, lose its effect because of the very elaboration. For example, *Aevum* can be related to the epiphanic moment that has often been a focus in the study of the modernist novel. This modernist mythologizing of the world and the individual as a unified whole is, as Mepham argues, exactly what postmodern narrative aims to repudiate (141-47). Ermarth also maintains that "[d]iscarding the terms of modernist discourse [...] is a necessary discipline to postmodernism. [...] The discourse of modernism extends its media (space, time, consciousness, money, humanity) to infinity and encourages us to forget finitude and to distribute energy toward an infinite horizon. The discourse of postmodernism finds time and space warped and bounded by finite and newly defined subjective systems" (18).

Ermarth then points out as one of the characteristics of postmodern narrative a collapse of the subject as an integrated entity. She argues that "[t]he high points of postmodern awareness are those where readers must recognize the play of discourse, its poetry, its semiotic disposition: the very things that historical novels depreciate in favour of character development, plot, meaning" (86). The concept of self as a unified whole is thus deconstructed and exposed as a discursive construct. Accordingly, realistic narrative has lost its human subject the complexity of whose entire individuality it aspired to express. At the same time, the textual status of fictional characters is no longer negligible as postmodernism emphasises the fictionality of any representation. However realistic they may be, it is no longer possible to consider fictional characters as "real" human beings. Opposed to the characters which Kermode explains as being "independent of time and succession, but may and usually do seem to operate in time and succession," characters in postmodern fiction seem to exist in their own textuality, without any real sense of time and succession. Therefore the sense of immortality and infinity of human life contained in Byatt's false eternity may be a response to the deconstruction of a unified self and to the recognised textual existence of her fictional characters.

On the other hand, the problem of representing a human subject involves not only this postmodern poetics of representation and self, but it also bears a moral implication for the important recognition of the irreducible profundity and particularity of an individual human. Iris Murdoch, in her famous essay "Against Dryness," raises an alarming voice against the dangerous reductionism or mythologizing that she has located in the post-war British novel. In this essay she criticises the "crystalline" novel which substitutes "a facile idea of sincerity" for "the hard idea of truth," and asserts the necessity of "the real impenetrable human person," in fiction, with its own particularities, "opacity of persons" (26). It is well known that Byatt often refers to Murdoch in relation to novel-writing, and her great interest in the particularity of each individual is strongly reflected in her academic study of Murdoch's early novels, *Degrees of Freedom*,

especially in its introduction where she refers to “Against Dryness.” In her more recent work, Byatt also maintains, “I believe that postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self” (*On Histories and Stories*, 31-5). As Byatt thus relates the false eternity to the collapse of the concept of the Self, the arbitrary extracting of visionary moments in the life of fictional characters seems to be intended to make up for this loss of the integrity and wholeness of the self.

In the following I wish to show that in *Possession* the false eternity in the form of the imaginary immortality and infinity of the fictional characters has been born out of Byatt’s awareness of these two opposing demands — a recognition of the textual and discursive status of fictional characters and the moral necessity of creating particular individual human beings in fiction. Byatt’s false eternity eschews the danger of myth precisely because of its falsity. For the false eternity implies not only its falsity as a sense-making narrative device but also her awareness of its falsity. The main focus will again be on the Victorian passages and “a false eternity” in them. This will illustrate how Byatt eschews the danger of myth while creating an illusion that the Victorian characters did have their own life and the past represented is “real.”

Chapter 25 most vividly depicts the intensity of the private lives of the Victorian characters, particularly, in comparison to their public lives. The chapter opens with Ellen’s journal entries describing Ash’s death, and then follows the third-person narrative of her inner thoughts, before and after his death, on the relationship between her and Ash, and between him and Christabel. This third-person narrative reveals many things to the reader of the novel, things omitted from Ellen’s journal: Ellen had known of the love affair between Ash and Christabel before being informed by Ash; she also receives a letter from Christabel, in which she asks Ellen to forgive her for having a relationship with Ash and also to deliver her letter to him; Ellen buries this letter unopened in his grave. The letter is eventually read by the modern scholars at the end of the novel; Ellen has also found Ash’s letter to Christabel, in which he asks her about their child and also pleads for her forgiveness for his intrusion into her once self-sufficient solitude.

The juxtaposition of her journal, as a public text, at the beginning of the chapter and the following third-person narrative revealing her inner thoughts as a private text illuminates the intensity of the private lives of the Victorian characters and the entanglement of their passion for each other. Richard Todd argues that two things can be said about this contrast of the private and the public in *Possession* (24-9). As discussed above, the first is Byatt’s strong interest in the particularity of each individual, notably influenced by Iris Murdoch who asserts the need to create in fiction characters who are “the real impenetrable human person.” The second is, as the result of the first, Byatt’s desire to expose biographers’ arrogance or complacency in believing that they can “possess” the whole of a subject individual, a real human being with particular profundity and complexity. In *Possession*, particularly, it was the Victorians that she wanted to create as real people who actually lived:

I also feel that [...] there was a conventional attitude to the Victorians that began with

Lytton Strachey. You know, they were simple minded. They were religious. They were moralizing. They took themselves seriously. We will mock them because we know more than they do. [...] So I really wanted to write a novel [...] which took the Victorians seriously as people at least as intelligent as we are and possibly in some ways wiser. (Byatt quoted in Collins, 12)

This will also account for a commonly held view of the Victorian characters in *Possession* as more alive and multi-dimensional than the twentieth-century characters.<sup>3</sup>

As Chevalier calls their love-story “the juncture of false conclusions with real facts,” Chapter 25 illustrates the disrupted communication of message and knowledge leading to more misunderstandings in their intense relationships. This serves to illuminate their urgent situation where their passionate feelings cannot but give in to the precariousness of fate. This again emphasises that there is always a gap between the public text of one individual’s life and his/her true private life: an individual’s life cannot be reduced to and contained in one tidy narrative. For instance, three letters appear in this chapter. One is from Ash to Christabel, which has never been dispatched, and the other two are written by Christabel respectively to Ash and Ellen. They all come into the hands of Ellen, but Ellen blocks communications between Ash and Christabel. On the other hand, it is revealed that Ellen’s marriage with Ash has also been flawed. Ellen’s reflection on their married life discloses that it has never been consummated. Also revealed is her resentment against their self-deception in not addressing this issue and the fact that her life, which might have been an ambitious and self-actualising one, has been wasted. The whole chapter thus produces a picture of their dynamic flows of emotions — hidden, wasted or misunderstood —. “I am in your hands,” a phrase which recurs in their letters and in the narrative, highlights the contingency of human relationships in face of fate. In fact, the chapter ends with this phrase, but it is not certain whether this is Ellen’s own voice or if this is Christabel’s plea in her letter to Ellen returning to her consciousness. The ambiguity of this ending is another stamp on their entangled relationships and the inexorable contingency to which they are subject. This helps the reader to imagine the urgency of their intense emotions which are not contained in their narratives in the public domain. The disrupted communications and misunderstandings in this chapter therefore expose the unavoidable gap between what is known about an individual rendered in the narrative, and their actual private lives.

In addition, their inexhaustible passion under their public presences makes a distinctive contrast to the tepid and satirical attitude of the twentieth-century scholars. Catherine Belsey asserts that the Enlightenment dissociated the double aspect of love — the physical and the spiritual, or sexual desire and metaphysical truth —, and pronounced that the former is detestable and the latter is desirable. Consequently, love has become “at once endlessly pursued and ceaselessly suspected” (74). Postmodern writing, she points out, performatively plays with the notion of “true” love and its varieties of clichés. One such cliché is “romantic” love, and *Possession* exactly uses the genre of romance to expose the opposition of metaphysical and postmodern love, which is embodied in the parallel between the two couples in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century. Roland and Maud fear losing self-control because of desire while they obsessively analyse and theorise sexuality and desire. They suffer the dissociation of body

and mind in love. They admit that they are “symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists” (267). Maud tells Roland:

We are very knowing. We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they [Ash and Christabel] 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 these things — Love — themselves — that what they did mattered —. (267)

As Belsey suggests that “postmodern love is both silent and garrulous,” private feeling and desire have both been silenced by the theorisation of desire and emphasis on illusion of true love (74). The private is brought out into the public sphere but instead and ironically, it has lost its expression in the private sphere.

In contrast, the Victorian characters are at once possessive, possessed and self-possessive in their love for the other: their reaching-out for the other is not predatory but is driven by their profound love for each other: they are possessed by love but not by knowledge or by desire for knowledge. Moreover, the nineteenth-century love relationships in the novel show their desire for the other exists both in physical and spiritual terms. Ash and Christabel share literary passion while their love still contains a carnal desire for the other. The marriage between Ash and Ellen was never consummated, but their spiritual bond was still sustained by mutual care and respect for the other. Their love shows passion, intimacy and immediacy without being predatory, which makes meaningless the concept of love as the state of either being possessed or possessing. Their love thus overcomes the dualism typically imposed on the concept of love by modern critical theories.

More importantly, their love grows and remains in their intimate, private sphere. For example, Ash asks Ellen to burn his private letters when he dies so that intrusive biographers will not hunt after them. Maud and Roland also recognise the intensity and intimacy in letters between Ash and Christabel. Roland explains why he took Ash's draft of his first letter to Christabel: “they were alive. They seemed *urgent*. I don't think they're *mine*, or anything. They seemed private” (50). The Victorian love thus does not hesitate to express the most intense and private feelings whereas the postmodern love has lost intensity – spiritual and physical – and expression in the private sphere.

This revelation of the intensity of their private lives and the integrity of their self produces and strengthens the false eternity. The false eternity thus created enables Byatt's Victorian age to have its own life and also its value in its own light and not as a mirror for the present. At the same time it becomes a criticism of twentieth-century literary scholarship. The false eternity, highlighting the intensity and immediacy of the lives of the Victorian characters, generates an illusion that these passages, outside the textual past constructed by the modern scholars, are closer to these characters and therefore to that past than the scholars. As Ellen wishes Ash's love letters to her to gain “a demi-eternity” (462), these Victorian passages contain the moments when their interrelated passions are being invested with a false eternity or “the image of immortality.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the images which evoke a false eternity is a set image of fire and phoenix. First of

all, the name of Ash is associated with one kind of tree, ash, which the poet explains to be “a common and magical tree [...] because our Norse forefathers once believed it held the world together” (95). More importantly, his name is associated with the immortality of the phoenix, which is believed to be reborn from ash. Christabel, indeed, often uses this metaphor of fire and phoenix, in her letters to Ash, to describe the absorbing, consuming nature of their relationship. The ferocity of their love erodes the inner space of her self. At the same time it seems to have gained eternal life out of time, when, in reality, social constraint and moral consciousness have demanded their relationship be terminated. Christabel’s letter to Ash on his deathbed, which is read after a hundred years by the modern scholars, includes her most impressive fire-phoenix metaphor from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. In it she compares herself with a “tame villatic fowl” while she identifies Ash as a dragon which, like phoenix, “roused from under ashes into sudden flame” (502). She asks “Did we not — did you not flame, and I catch fire? Shall we survive and rise from our ashes? Like Milton’s Phoenix?” (502). Christabel calls this letter “Testament” and in it she wishes eternal life to be bestowed on their relationship, beyond the confinement of time.

The false eternity is also created in Ash’s metaphorising Christabel’s body as time and its centre, which appears in Chapter 15, the first of the three Victorian passages. They are in a walk along the shore one day during their furtive trip. Together with the metaphor of time, the dazzling flow of images of red and grey — blood, fire and stone — reinforces the “image of immortality.”

He watched her move swiftly and surely along. [...] The layers of grey were full of the regularly rippled rounds of the colonies of ammonites that lay coiled in its substance, stony forms of life, living forms in stone. Her bright pale head, with its circling braids, seemed to repeat those forms. Her grey dress, with the winds loose in the skirts, blended almost into the grey of the stone. All along those multiplied fine ledges, all through those craze and intricate fissures, ran hundreds of tiny hurrying spiderlike living things, coloured an intense vermilion. The bluish cast of the grey of the stone increased the brightness of the red. They were like thin lines of blood; they were like a web of intermittent flame. He saw her white hands like stars on the grey stone and he saw the red creatures run through and around them.

[...] He thought of her momentarily as an hour-glass, containing time, which was caught in her like a thread of sand, of stone, of specks of life, of things that had lived and would live. She held his time, she contained his past and his future, both now cramped together, with such ferocity and such gentleness, into this small circumference. He remembered an odd linguistic fact — the word for waist in Italian is *vita*, is life — and this must be, he thought, to do with the navel, which is where our separate lives cast off, that umbilicus which poor Philip Gosse believed had had to be made by God for Adam as a kind of mythic sign of the eternal existence of the past and the future in all presents. [...] This is my centre, he thought, here, at this place, at this time, in her, in that narrow place, where my desire has its end. (286-87)

Christabel is, under Ash’s gaze, embedded in the vast stretch of natural history, which is



represented in the stone which is alive in its deadly stasis. The image of immortality is also found in the glimpse of red — expressed as blood — on its grey surface. Then Ash superimposes an image of hour-glass on her body, and in doing so he perceives an eternal continuity in its carnal mortality. His metaphor marks the most private time in his life, when the passion of their love is sublimated to overcome the common attribution of love — the opposition of body and mind —, and thus its destined short life gains an imagined eternal life. The most intimate and private part of individual life is momentarily integrated into universal time.

This momentary fault or *aveum* created in these Victorian passages contributes to Byatt's half-resurrection, for it belongs to neither postmodern narrative nor realistic narrative. It is not kept from the reader that these moments of a false eternity are still illusory, taking place in the textual reality of the past. The textuality of the past and the retrospective point of view together have the effect of producing a distance between the characters experiencing such a moment and the reader in the extratextual world. On the other hand, the false eternity still asserts the potential of an integrated self and self-possession in passionate relationship. This is because, as I have argued, the Victorian narratives configure an empty time independent of the novel's main historical time and that they also hold, for the reader, a status between reality and textuality in the narrative structure of the novel. The time and characters in these Victorian narratives are thus presented, somehow, with immediacy and authenticity, two attributes of the realistic characterisation which are usually denied in postmodern narrative. At the same time this represents the potential of having authority over one's life while being possessed by someone else at the same time. This suggests that their private sphere is opened up to others but is still self-sufficient.

This paradoxical state of integrated self is, again, opposed to the concept of self informed by the twentieth-century theoretical mind reflected in Maud and Roland. Their analytical mind has brought self and sexuality into public space but their consciousness is, on the contrary, inward-looking, enmeshed in webs of discourses. Maud and Roland admit, "all the *looking-into*" of theorisation has left them "imprisoned in ourselves [themselves]" (254). The narrator says: "Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones" (424). The boundary between the private and the public is completely disrupted in them and this endangers the integrity of their selfhood.

### **The Pleasure of Reading: Private Communication Reaching Out for the Other**

As opposed to the "looking-into" reading of the twentieth-century, *Possession* brings forward a "reaching-out" reading as a literary heritage from the Victorian past. Many critiques of *Possession* have discussed this novel in relation to reading. For example, the novel offers "postmodernist readings": "What *Possession* offers [...] is an extended, elaborate and fascinating suggestive (even exhilarating) meditation on the pleasures and problems of 'reading as a form of life'" (Alsop and Walsh, 164). One kind of "pleasure of reading" which I wish to show that the

novel embodies and demonstrates is a communicative reading. The paradoxical state of self, possessed and self-possessed, looking out and looking in, portrayed in Ash and Christabel, in fact, is related to this aspect of the "pleasure of reading." *Possession* emphasises that reading is "communication" with the other, and especially, with the past literary heritage. It should be noted, however, that although the word "resurrection" has often been used to describe the novel's re-creation of the Victorian past in the form of reading, the pleasure of reading here does not mean the unilateral movement of the reader's consciousness into the text. It rather suggests the interactive communication between the reader in the present and a text about or from the past. The reader certainly "resurrects" the text by reading it and finding there the new and the old and thus the past is "visited" by the reader. More importantly, however, the past is more than a text. As I am going to show, it does carry messages and bear values and implications to the reader in the present. The past thus arises and visits readers to activate their imaginations. As Roland realises his talent for poetic language at the end of his search, readers are transformed when they discover or re-discover the old and the new in and about themselves through an interaction with the other in their reading.

The significance of such reading is brought forward in many ways. For example, when Ash articulates his distrust of spiritualism, he, in fact, expounds on the communicative aspect of his literary activity. In his letter to a spiritual medium who claims to have communicated with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he expresses his "considerable abhorrence at the thought of that bright spirit [of Coleridge], having made his painful way out of our weary and oppressive earthly life, being constrained to heave mahogany tables, or float partially embodied, through firelit drawing-rooms, or turn his liberated Intelligence to the scrawling of such painful and inane nonsense as you have sent to me" (103). He explains his literary resurrection as an imaginative effort:

I myself, with the aid of the imagination, have worked a little in that line, have ventriloquised, have lent my voice to, and mixt my life with, those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warning, as examples, as the life of the past *persisting* in us, is the business of every thinking man and woman. But there are ways and ways [...] and some are tried and tested, and others are fraught with danger and disappointment. What is read and understood and contemplated and intellectually *grasped* is our own, [...], to live and work with. A lifetime's study will not make accessible to us more than a fragment of our own ancestral past, let alone the aeons before our race was formed. But that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on. [...] There is [...] no easy way, no short cut. (104).

His literary resurrection is reaching-out for and imaginative communication with the dead and the past literary heritage, while the séance to him is no more than a forceful grabbing of the dead. This disrespectful and egoistic resurrection is particularly associated with the twentieth-century practice of the excessively theoretical and analytical reading of past texts.

This overly self-reflexive reading is what Roland is suffering when he enters into the wonderland of the past texts at the opening of the novel. His search into the relationship between the Victorian poets introduces him to a new kind of reading, an imaginative and interactive

reading. This reading also reveals to him the old and the new in himself and particularly makes him realise his poetic creativity. On the other hand, he resurrects and transforms the dead texts by identifying the old and the new in them. He speculates, in rereading "The Garden of Proserpina," Ash's communication with the dead in his literary work:

True, the writer may have been alone also with Spenser's golden apples in the *Faerie Queene*, Proserpina's garden, glistening bright among the place's ashes and cinders, may have seen in his mind's eye, apple of his eye, the golden fruit of the Primavera, may have seen Paradise Lost, in the garden where Eve recalled Pomona and Proserpina. He was alone when he wrote and he was not alone then, all these voices sang, the same words, golden apples, different words in different places, an Irish castle, an unseen cottage, elastic-walled and grey round blind eyes. (471)

The writer is both alone and not alone. Literary creation is a solitary and private activity but in it the writer is with past literary figures and treasures and tries to hear them sing and gives them voice. The pleasure of reading involves discovering and re-discovering the new and the old in the text. In such a reading which Roland experiences, "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" (471-72).

Wolfgang Iser's illustration of an act of reading seems to offer a theoretical account of Roland's reading and resurrection of Ash and his text. He emphasises the interactive aspect of the reading act: "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader — though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (279). The reader "realises" the text. In other words, the text does not have meaning without the reader to give life to it.

He then explains the transformation process which takes place in an act of reading:

It is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences. As the literary text involves the reader in the formation of illusion and the simultaneous formation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience. Once the reader is entangled, his own preconceptions are continually overtaken, so that the text becomes his "present" whilst his own ideas fade into the "past"; as soon as this happens he is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were his "present." (295)

This passage is a vivid description of Roland's encounter with the old and the new in his re-reading of Ash's poem. As Coleridge's famous phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" suggests, this transformation is concurrent with a departure from the known to the unknown.

This transformative reading, in fact, fits a formula of romance, a genre *Possession* utilises. For example, Gillian Beer brings up several characteristics of the romance: “the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero”(10). As I mentioned earlier, “The Garden of Proserpina,” deliberately placed at the beginning of Chapter 1, presents Roland as a mythic and romantic hero, who is now leaving to find things that the poem says “are and were there” (1).<sup>5</sup> The novel’s plot neatly shapes his (re)search into a romantic journey and its whole course makes a critical comment on postmodern love. His “romantic” reading also becomes an antithesis to postmodern reading. The former welcomes the unformulated while the latter formulates the unformulatable. Some critics certainly see in *Possession* collaboration between postmodern poetics and generic features of the romance. For example, Bronfen points out that the romance genre works well with postmodernism as it offers the reader a narrative closure while it carries along many threads of plots and narrative modes without prioritising any of them (117-34). Brink also argues that the Postscript is a signal of postmodern narrative indeterminacy (307-08). However, it seems that in *Possession*, the use of the romance genre works as an antithesis to rather than in collaboration with postmodernism. Particularly, as I argued earlier, the Postscript seems to be meant to fulfil rather than irritate the reader’s desire for narrative closure and to demonstrate the “pleasure of reading.”

It is crucial, however, that the configuration of Iser’s transformative reading completely omits the presence of the author, the creator of the text, from the interaction between the reader and the text. This is because the text, in his account, does not have meaning in itself but meaning is given to it only by interpretation of it. *Possession*, however, suggests that the past texts do have meaning. They contain silent messages from the past, which call for a faithful and respectful resurrection by the reader, but not the imposition of interpretation.

Most importantly, behind the message exists the author, who lived and had his/her own individual and private life. Byatt is highly conscious of the inseparable relation between the author and his/her book when she says “If you write well, you can have your word, and your unconscious word and as much as you like of the social word now twisted to suit you, because I do believe, unlike Barthes, that authors matter” (Byatt quoted in Olga, 17). To Byatt, the author is not dead and thus a book carries the author’s voice whereas a text is independent of its author. Indeed, Roland finds the new reading of Ash’s poem only when he starts to see him as more an individual, who lived his life fully and passionately, than as one of the representative Victorian literary figures. The pleasure of reading is therefore an intimate and interactive communication between the reader and the author.

This sense that the text carries a retrievable message is, I argue, the most distinctive aspect of Byatt’s “pleasure of reading” and is the basis of her resurrection of the Victorian age in *Possession*. As Ash maintains, “reading as resurrection” should not imply forcefully dragging the dead back to the present. Neither should it mean the theoretical and narcissistic interpretation of the text. It is an imaginative communication with the dead, in which the reader’s consciousness is not enclosed in the text but it goes further to reach out for the sender of the message, the author and particular individual. It is thus most private and solitary experience reaching out for the other. In the solitude of reading, you are in fact communicating with the other, thereby redeeming the message from the text.

## Byatt's Historical Vision: An Imaginary Continuity with the Past

This "reaching-out" characterises how Byatt's historical vision works. It looks back to the past not only for the interest of the present but for what it was. The concept of knowable reality has been questioned and, as a consequence, what is left to us is layers of its textual representations. Nonetheless, Byatt's historical imagination reaches out for the reality of the past in order to establish an intimate communication with the past. What is achieved is the half-resurrection of "the real" of the past.

I consider that the novel's three Victorian passages are the materialisation of Byatt's reaching out for the past. They are at the same time her attempt to communicate with her own reader. As is expressed in Byatt's comment mentioned earlier, by inserting these parts, she is sharing with her reader the glimpse of "the reality" of the past. For example, the Postscript holds to the reader an "in-between" status: it forms "an empty time" different from the novel's historical time which belongs to neither reality nor textuality. This enables the novel's reader to share the novel's communication with the past, which excludes critics and biographers. I have also tried to show that Byatt's "half-resurrection" is embodied in the false eternity which is evoked particularly in the Victorian passages. In the moments of the false eternity the boundary between the mortal and the immortal is overcome. Also overcome is the boundary between the finite and the infinite in the lives of the Victorian characters as the novel's plot accordingly confirms that their secret love travels a long stretch of time to be redeemed. More importantly, these Victorian passages are not simply a postmodernist gesture at the fictivity of historical representation. They are "the real," which still assumes the immediacy and intimacy of that past which was lived by individual human beings. In short, these Victorian passages represent Byatt's half-resurrection which creates "immediate representation" of the past.

Moreover, the past Byatt specifically reaches out for is the Victorian age and its literary tradition. Byatt often expresses great respect for George Eliot and Robert Browning out of all other Victorian literary figures. Her literary essay "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies Incarnation and Art" echoes her own literary concerns and their evaluations. She enumerates Browning's greatness as a ventriloquist: "Browning the animator is altogether more complex, wise and fierce, calculating and inspired, passionate and intelligent, exactly and sharply judging and endlessly, charitably, imaginatively curious about all sorts of small and obscene, trivial and terrible human desires and self-deceptions" ("Robert Browning," *Passions*, 29). She describes the characters in his dramatic monologues:

Each is both an individual and a type, a creature limited by his physical and temporal spot of existence, considering both time and eternity from his own point of view. The characters have been called Victorians in disguise. They do, however, taken together, represent a sustained attempt to embody and contemplate the problems which centrally occupied the nineteenth-century European mind: the problems of the relation of time to history, of science to religion, of fact in science or history to fiction, or lies, in both, and of art to all these. (30)

It can be said that in the manner of Browning's dramatic monologue Byatt has created Ash and Christabel as "a creature limited by his [her] physical and temporal spot of existence." They are "Victorians" but also "an individual." You may also notice that "[t]he problems of the relation of time to history, of science to religion, of fact in science or history to fiction, or lies, in both, and of art to all these" are in fact major preoccupations of postmodern writers. Her recognition that the Victorians were aware of these issues which concern postmodernism today but responded to them in different ways, seems to inform her view of the past not as being "unsophisticated" but as a "lesson" for today. Her Victorian age conveys the literary and other values which that age represents to her or to us in the present and yet, its representation is not a mirror of or for the present. The "real" of the Victorian age is different from its parodied representation or the "reality" of that age. Byatt maintains:

It is always said of Browning's various resurrected pasts in his dramatic monologues that they are about Browning and the nineteenth-century, and of course this is true — but it is not always added that they are also truly about the time when the New Testament was written, or about Renaissance Christianity and Art, though they are, and are illuminating about these matters. It is not either — or. At its best, it is both. (*On Histories and Stories*, 94)

The phrase, "it is both," illuminates her historical vision. It redeems the past from textuality to "the real" in her self-conscious negotiation with a postmodern poetic of historical representation.

This self-conscious act can be set against postmodern writers as she says "Most postmodernist fiction cuts out any emotion very much earlier on. It doesn't allow the reader any pleasure, except in the cleverness of the person constructing the postmodernist fiction. I think you can have all the other pleasures as well" (Byatt quoted in Tredell, 62). *Possession* offers the "pleasure of reading," in which the glimpse of the "reality" of the past is shared between the reader and the writer and an affinity to the fictional characters is felt. Its private aspect paradoxically implies interactive communication with the other. The pleasure of reading is to hear the voice of the author and to ventriloquise it whereas the twentieth-century reading is an interpretation of signs in the world of textuality. It can be said, ultimately, that *Possession* is Byatt's ventriloquising, in the form of the pleasure of reading, of the lost voice from the Victorian literary past.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dana Shiller. "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel." *Studies in the Novel*. 29.4 (Winter 1997): 538-60. Sally Shuttleworth. "Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel." *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*. Ed. Elinor Shaffer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998. 253-68.

<sup>2</sup> It seems to be worth mentioning that the novel seems to represent modern day London as another chronotope where the past and the present and fiction and reality merge. Particularly, it is a "literary" London associated with many (real or fictional) literary figures and events in the past. Proper nouns of

places in London may also help the reader envisage both a realistic and an imaginary map of a literary London. Roland and Val's flat and its back garden in Putney is connected to Ash in an ironic contrast to his mythical garden of Proserpina. The poet also wrote a poem which is associated with the history of their neighbourhood. Also, the Putney Bridge is a site where Blanche Glover, Christabel's artist companion, committed a suicide in the fictional past of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Richard Jenkyns says in his review "Disinterring Buried Lives." *TLS*. 2-8 March 1990: 213: "The impersonation of Christabel is a triumph. [...] Ash bears some general resemblance to Browning. The impersonation is also remarkable, though less wholly successfully."

<sup>4</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 82. She uses this phrase in her discussion of Graham Swift's *Ever After* as an example of postmodern reworking of romantic love.

<sup>5</sup> His name, of course, alludes to the brave hero of the early twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland* and Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

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