A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*: READING WITH – AND AGAINST – THEORY

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Abstract – This essay reads A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* with and against theory, arguing that the novel models critical tact: use theory when it sharpens perception, resist it when singular form and voice demand listening rather than system (Byatt 1990). The epigraphic hinge – Robert Browning's "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's definition of "Romance" as a latitude governed by "the truth of the human heart" – authorizes imaginative truth without abandoning rigor and turns principle into method (Hawthorne 1851). First, the polysemy of possession – haunting, property, erotic attachment – precedes any scheme and keeps the plot ethically charged around the archive: Who owns the dead, their letters, their silence? Adapting Jacques Derrida's account of the archive as both domiciling and commanding, I read the scholars as custodians rather than conquerors and the ending as conversion of possession into care (Derrida 1996). Second, Byatt's pivot from a "ghostly palimpsest" of theory to story-first design follows Umberto Eco's counsel that a strong narrative can include anything, which the detective scaffolding proves: clues and chases catch what they're made to catch while also displaying what escapes (Eco 1984). In this arrangement theory clarifies but does not command; narrative timing and focalization decide what matters when. Third, the book makes poems livelier than their makers by treating imitation as inquiry. In dialogue with Linda Hutcheon's account of parody as repetition with critical distance, Byatt's invented Victorian poems and letters perform criticism from within, testing biography and intention without losing the sensuous work of style (Hutcheon 1985; Byatt 1990). Finally, influence becomes hospitality: to be "already possessed" by Browning and Tennyson is to host prior voices and preserve their difference (Byatt 1990). *Possession* thus demonstrates narrative rigour as the best vehicle for ideas and converts the will to possess into practices of attention, responsibility, and care (Eco 1984; Derrida 1996).

Keywords: possession; archive ethics; romance; parody and pastiche; hospitality.

In what follows I read Byatt's novel with theory when it sharpens perception and against theory when the singularity of form, address, and style demands tact rather than system. The book itself models this stance. Its scholars think with an important group of literary theorists[1] yet the narrative keeps reminding us that any mesh catches only what it was made to catch. *Possession* opens under two epigraphs – Browning's "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'" (voice, ventriloquism) and Hawthorne's definition of "Romance" as latitude tied to the "truth of the human heart" – which together authorize an ethic of imaginative truth without abandoning rigor[2] and set the reading contract turning principle into narrative method.

Thus, Byatt's introduction reads like a compact manifesto for how to read *Possession* and simultaneously names the axes of this essay. First, the polysemy of possession – haunting, property, sex – arrives before any theory; the novel will keep those senses in play as ethical tests for the living:

[1] Barthes's erotics, Eco's openness, Iser's gaps, de Man's vigilance, Lyotard's "small narratives", Holub's reception communities, Hutcheon's parodic "repetition with critical distance", J. Hillis Miller's host/hostis hinge, and Derrida's supplement. All the references in bibliography.
[2] Robert Browning, "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'", in *Dramatis Personae* (1864); Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface", in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

Who owns the dead? What do we owe their papers? Where does intimacy begin to look like seizure? She then narrates a crucial pivot: from a "ghostly palimpsest" of theory to a story-first detective design learned from Eco – "if you tell a strong story, you can include anything". That line is the book's method in miniature: use theory, don't let theory use you. Equally programmatic is her claim that "poems have more life than poets", a brisk rebuke to biographical mastery and a rationale for writing the Victorian poems herself; parody and pastiche become critical instruments, not ornamental flourishes. Finally, her confession of being "already possessed" by Browning and Tennyson reframes influence as hospitality: the living host the voices that inhabit them. Taken together, the introduction announces the novel's double wager – narrative rigour as the best vehicle for ideas, and an ethics that trades possession for care – exactly the balance a reader must strike when reading with and against theory[3].

A.S. Byatt's *Possession* follows two present-day scholars – Roland Michell and Maud Bailey – after Roland uncovers draft letters tucked into Randolph Henry Ash's copy of Vico in the British Museum. The find leads him to Maud, the leading scholar on Christabel LaMotte; together they track clues to Sir George's house, a Bailey family property where, in a dust-dark turret room among Christabel's dolls, they discover the poets' hidden correspondence.

The novel braids timelines and forms: the Victorian plot is told through poems, diaries, notebooks, and letters; the contemporary plot turns scholarship into literary detection as Roland and Maud follow traces from London to Yorkshire fosses and Breton cliffs. Rivals and institutions press in – especially the acquisitive biographer Mortimer Cropper and the critic Leonora Stern – so that the chase becomes a debate about ownership, privacy, and the uses of the dead. New documents keep revising the story: Sabine de Kercoz's diary, Blanche Glover's letters, and Ellen Ash's vigil journal. A storm-tossed exhumation yields a cache – hair, keepsakes, love letters, and a sealed message to Ash – read aloud by candlelight at the end of the novel, altering reputations and exposing the limits of every prior theory. As Roland and Maud's partnership ripens into love, each is changed by the work: Roland turns from commentary to making; Maud loosens her theoretical armour and claims a complicated lineage.

The essay moves from library mastery to romance as an ethical mode by following the novel's own choreography. It begins in the British Museum, where the fantasy of control – catalogues, editions, careers – meets its check in the epistolary ethics of Ash's letters: documents that "envisage no outcome" (p. 145), address a single addressee, and teach Roland and Maud that scholarship must become tact rather than capture. That lesson sends them outdoors into field reading – Yorkshire fosses, "gills and riggs and ling" (p. 287), Brittany cliffs – where place-names and weather turn interpretation from symbol-hunting to indexical attention. Out of this come two readerly Bildung paths: Roland moves from dutiful mapping to the hairs-on-neck rapture and, finally, to word-lists and the urge to make; Maud loosens her theoretical armour (from "seen" to "felt") and learns to guard as well as disclose. The chase then exposes a larger critique of possession: Cropper's spectacular acquisitiveness, Ellen's vigilant burning and burial, and the candlelit communal reading of the grave cache all insist that how you obtain texts determines how you may use them – and that there is no innocent last word. The novel's subtitle finally frames these practices: "A Romance" licenses invention in the Hawthornean sense – latitude bound to "the truth of the human heart" – so that love, archive, and reading can be pursued without seizure. In short, *Possession* turns the scholar's will to mastery into a craft of hospitality: letters teach limits, landscapes teach attention, the protagonists are remade by what they read, and romance supplies the ethical air they learn to breathe.

Formally, *Possession* behaves like Eco's open work: poems, notebooks, scholarly editions, letters, diaries, and faux paratexts are arranged so that meaning emerges among them rather than from anyone (Eco 1989, pp. 4-6)[4]. The letters that set the plot in motion teach this first lesson. Roland's

[3] Byatt's "Introduction" is in the paperback published in Vintage Classic in 2025. All the other references to the novel are to the Vintage International Edition, New York, 1991. Page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

[4] Eco argues that certain artworks are designed to be incomplete on the interpretive level: they contain structured indeterminacies that invite the receiver to help actualize the work. This is not "anything goes". Openness is regulated by

exhilaration on touching Ash's draft – an excitement that was physical as well as mental – announces reading as a double register. But the letters immediately disappoint predictive habits:

> But with this reading, after a time – a very short time – the habitual pleasures of recognition and foresight gave way to a mounting sense of stress. This was primarily because the writer of the letters was himself under stress, confused by the object and recipient of his attentions. He found it difficult to fix this creature in his scheme of things. He asked for clarification and was answered, it appeared, with riddles. Roland, not in possession of the other side of the correspondence, could not even tell what riddles…
> […]
> Letters, Roland discovered, are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. His time was a time of the dominance of narrative theories. Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going.
> […]
> Letters, finally, exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for *a* reader. (p. 145)

In the turret room at Sir George's – face to face with the dolls and the first cache of letters – Roland is quietly re-educated by the form he's reading. The "mounting sense of stress" he feels is not simply suspense but an affective pedagogy: the writer's own confusion and riddling answers migrate into the act of reading, dislodging Roland's habitual pleasure in "recognition and foresight" and shifting him from interpretive mastery to attentive listening[5]. The epistolary form then resets his temporal expectations. "Letters… envisage no outcome, no closure": they are written in a serial present, each sentence composed without knowledge of how the story will end, which frustrates the late-twentieth-century "dominance of narrative theories" Roland knows. Meaning must be made in gaps – in the literal absence of Christabel's replies and in the structure of non-teleological address (Iser 1978, pp. 40-45)[6]. Hence the gnomic power of "Roland, not in possession of the other side of the correspondence, could not even tell what riddles…": without the counter-letters, even the problem has no stable name. Truth becomes asymptotic and supplemental – each fragment both completes and displaces the last[7]. Most pointedly, "letters… exclude the reader": real letters are written for *someone*, not for us. Byatt turns this into an ethic that rebukes acquisitive criticism (Cropper's, and more gently

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form – what Eco calls a "field of possibilities" – so that multiple coherent readings/performances can emerge without collapsing into arbitrariness. *Possession* adopts this logic: Byatt curates poems, letters, diaries, edits, and faux paratexts so that meaning arises among them, through the reader's traversals and recombinations, rather than from any single authoritative source. Eco U. 1989, "The Poetics of the Open Work" in *The Open Work*. Translated by Anna Cancogni. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

[5] For de Man, rhetoric is not decorative surplus but a force that undoes straightforward reference: tropes (metaphor, allegory, irony) make statements oscillate between literal and figural senses, producing an undecidability no summary can capture. Hence paraphrase – turning figures into propositions – misreads by flattening the very work the language performs. In *Possession*, Ash's riddling letters and the mythic figuration (Melusina, Proserpina) exemplify this resistance: they yield meanings only as figures, not as paraphrasable doctrine. de Man P. 1979, *Allegories of Reading*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

[6] Iser argues that texts are built with gaps – omissions, indirections, unanswered cues – that compel readers to project connections and thus co-produce meaning. Reading is an activity, not reception: we shuttle between given segments, fill in transitions, test and revise hypotheses; the work exists fully only in this performance. *Possession* literalizes the model: torn letters, missing replies, diaries that stop, and poems without glosses force Roland, Maud (and us) to supply links – until each new document reopens the gap and reshapes the story we thought we knew. Iser W. 1978, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

[7] See Derrida, *Glas* that stages reading as a graft: two columns (Hegel/Genet) interlace quotations and commentary so that each new citation is a supplement – an addition that also substitutes for and alters what it seems merely to complete. The archive is thus a prosthesis, not a neutral store; every insertion "contaminates" the origin it claims to preserve. *Possession* dramatizes this logic: Sabine's diary, Ellen's vigil pages, and the grave-cache (hair, letters, sealed note) don't just fill gaps; they displace prior narratives and force a new configuration of lives and texts. In this sense, every act of archival "possession" is already a transforming graft. Derrida J. 1986, *Glas,* Translated by Leavey J. P. Jr. and Rand R., University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Roland's and Maud's): reading should be hospitality rather than seizure, a hosting that knows its limits[8].

Byatt answers the greed of acquisitive reading with a passage that teaches how to attend rather than to seize:

> There are readings – of the same text – that are *dutiful*, readings that map and dissect, readings that hear a rustling of unheard sounds, that count grey little pronouns for pleasure or instruction and for a time do not hear golden or apples. There are *personal* readings, that snatch for personal meanings, I am full of love, or disgust, or fear, I scan for love, or disgust, or fear. There are – believe it – *impersonal* readings – where the mind's eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind's ear hears them sing and sing.
> Now and then there are readings which make the *hairs on the neck*, the *non-existent pelt*, stand on end and tremble, when every *word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact*, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark – readings when the knowledge that 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. (pp. 511-512, italics mine)

The paragraph arranges a small drama of reception in three movements – "dutiful", "personal", "impersonal" – and the diction shifts with each. "Dutiful" reading is dry and fussy, "count[ing] grey little pronouns", a comic image of control that literally cannot "hear golden or apples". "Personal" reading swings to the other extreme – "I am full of love, or disgust, or fear" – a snatching for mirrors. The surprise is the third term: in "impersonal" reading the ego loosens and the senses awaken; lines are not dissected but "move onwards" and "sing and sing". Music, not measurement, becomes the figure for understanding.

The prose then enacts the experience it names. Short, itemizing clauses give way to long, breath-rich sentences whose cadence carries the reader forward ("when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact"). Images mix tactility and light – "stones of fire", "points of stars" – so that reading feels both graspable and ungraspable, bright and resistant. Even the body answers: "the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt", a wry admission that the most "impersonal" experience is also the most intimate, registered in the skin. Finally, Byatt frames the paradox at the heart of good reading: the text appears utterly new and, at once, something "always there", newly recognized. That double motion – forward rush and retrospective recognition, novelty and homecoming – replaces the will to own with the willingness to be moved. The passage thus completes the rebuke begun by the letters: the richest encounter with a text is not a capture but a consent, a listening so exact that the words are allowed to be as they are and to "sing and sing".

Byatt then turns the epistolary form into an ethic. True letters are written for someone; the scholar arrives as an eavesdropper. Ellen Ash's midnight entry is one of the novel's clearest meditations on possession, privacy, and the ethics of archive – and it does its thinking through diction and scene. I cite this page at length because its force lies in its rhythm and address ('thee/thy'), where the stakes of privacy, love, and ownership are enacted rather than merely stated:

> NOVEMBER 25TH 1889

[8] In Latin *hostis* means "enemy", while French *hôte* names both host and guest; Christian "host" is also the offered body. J. Hillis Miller exploits this wobble to argue that the relation of literature and criticism is reversible: the text hosts the critic (feeds, shelters), and the critic hosts the text (keeps it alive by reading, teaching, editing). Because host and guest slide toward *hostis*, hospitality can turn into hostility – welcome becomes appropriation, curation becomes capture. *Possession* dramatizes the hinge: Roland and Maud learn hosting as tact; Ellen practices protective hospitality; Cropper crosses the hinge into hostile acquisition. See Hillis Miller J. 2005, "The Critic as a Host", in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, edited by Julian Wolfreys, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 54–69.

> I write this sitting at His desk at two in the morning. I cannot sleep and he sleeps his last sleep in the coffin, quite still, and his soul gone away. I sit among his possessions – now mine or no one's – and think that his life, his presence, departs more slowly from these inanimate than from him, who was once animate and is now, I cannot write it, I should not have started writing. My dear, I sit here and write, to whom but thee? I feel better here amongst thy things – the pen is reluctant to form 'thee', 'thy', there is no one there, and yet here is still a presence.
>
> Here is an unfinished letter. There are the microscope, the slides, a book with a marker, and – oh, my dear – uncut leaves. I fear sleep, I fear what dreams may come, Randolph, and so I sit here and write.
>
> When he was lying there he said, 'Burn what they should not see,' and I said, 'Yes', I promised. At such times, it seems, a kind of dreadful energy comes, to do things quickly, before action becomes impossible. He hated the new vulgarity of contemporary biography, the ransacking of Dickens's desk for his most trivial memoranda, Forster's unspeakable intrusions into the private pains and concealments of the Carlyles. He said often to me, burn what is alive for us with the life of our memory, and let no one else make idle curios or lies of it. I remember being much struck with Harriet Martineau, in her autobiography, saying, that to print private letters was a form of treachery – as though one should tell the intimate talk of two friends with their feet on the fender, on winter nights. I have made a fire here, and burned some things. I shall burn more. He shall not be picked by vultures.
>
> There are things I cannot burn. Nor ever I think look at again. There are things here that are not mine, that I could not be a party to burning. And there are our dear letters, from all those foolish years of separation. What can I do? I cannot leave them to be buried with me. Trust may be betrayed. I shall lay these things to rest with him now, to await my coming. Let the earth take them". (pp. 480-481)

Ellen Ash's night vigil at "His desk" turns the title *Possession* into an ethical problem lived in the first person. Writing at two in the morning to "thee", she feels the tug of presence in things – "uncut leaves", "the microscope", a marked book – while the possessives wobble ("his possessions – now mine or no one's"). Her pen hesitates over "thee/thy", dramatizing the fault line between intimacy and legal ownership. She rejects the new "vulgarity" of ransacked desks and biographical prying, calling it treachery, and undertakes a severe household liturgy: burn what is alive only for their memory; bury what is not hers to destroy. Fire erases; earth preserves – so her protection is also an archive in disguise, a time capsule "to await my coming". She speaks of "vultures", but her choices are not vengeful; they are acts of care shaped by grief and by a sense of propriety that distinguishes *mine to guard* from *not mine to show*. The cost is real: her restraint will keep a letter unread and a truth untold, even as the buried cache will later be unearthed, and the story rewritten. The page offers the clearest counter to acquisitive possession: not a last word but tact – an attention willing to keep some words unspoken and some papers out of sight, honouring love without turning it into display.

If Ellen's vigil is the ethic of withholding – fire and earth as acts of care – then Cropper's lecture is its dazzling negative. Where Ellen writes to "thee" in the dark, he floods a church with light-beams and twin screens; where she guards a desk, he choreographs a display of relics – hair bracelets, specimen jars, a pyramid museum – until biography becomes spectacle. Ellen's verbs are hush and keep; Cropper's are magnify and acquire. Moving from her night-watch to his showmanship makes the novel's moral axis unmistakable: one figure practices custody that limits what may be known; the other converts knowing into possession and brand. Introducing Cropper after Ellen, we watch restraint flip into appetite – and we can measure exactly what the archive gains and what it risks when stewardship turns to show. What follows must be quoted at length because its argument is made by staging: the church setting, the double screens, and the catalogue of reliquaries enact the very spectacle my analysis critiques; paraphrase would miss the performance:

> Cropper loved lecturing. He was not of the old school, who fix the audience with a mesmeric eye and a melodious voice. He was a hi-tech lecturer, a magician of white screens and light-beams, sound-effects and magnifications.

[…]

The lecture, in the dark of the church, was accompanied by a series of brilliant images on the double screens. Huge oil-portraits, jewel-bright magnified miniatures, early photographs of bearded sages among broken arches of Gothic cathedrals, were juxtaposed with visions of the light and space of Robert Dale Owen University, of the sparkling sheen of the glass pyramid that housed the Stant Collection, of the brilliant little boxes which preserved the tresses of Randolph's and Ellen's woven hair, Ellen's cushion embroidered with lemon-trees, the jet brooch of York roses on its cushion of green velvet.

[…]

'Of course, what we all hope for and at the same time fear, is some major discovery that will confirm, or disprove, or change at the least, a lifetime's work. A lost Shakespeare play. The vanished works of Aeschylus. Such a discovery was made recently when a collection of letters from Wordsworth to his wife were found in a trunk in an attic. Scholars had said that Wordsworth's only passion was his sister. They had confidently called his wife dull, and unimportant. Yet here, after all those years of marriage, were these letters, full of sexual passion on both parts. History has had to be rewritten. Scholars have taken humble pleasure in rewriting it. (pp. 416-417)

Cropper's "Art of a Biographer" is biography as show, a hi-tech liturgy performed in a church, complete with double screens of relics. The spectacle gives institutional form to the appetite he elsewhere names as "famishing". When he praises the "humble pleasure" of rewriting history after a discovery (his Wordsworth example), the novel endorses the principle – archives do revise received stories – while exposing its ambivalence: the supplement that corrects also becomes a trophy to be staged by the discoverer. Byatt thereby fuses method with ethics. There is, as Cropper says, no last word; but the work of living with that nonfinality divides the characters – between possession as spectacle and reading as hospitality.

Between Ellen's nocturnal custody and Cropper's lit-up display, the novel refuses to keep us indoors. It sends Roland and Maud out into weather – because the papers themselves point north. Rereading "Melusina", Roland hears Yorkshire in the diction ("gills", "riggs", "ling"), and Ash's letters speak of air like "summer colts playing on the moors". A marginal "Hob" and the folklore of Boggle country sharpen the hunch. They go to test whether Christabel's supposedly Breton landscapes are, in fact, Yorkshire places – to see if names in the poems are names on the ground. What follows is neither secrecy nor seizure but method: a shift from symbolic inference to indexical, topographic reading, where evidence lies in waterfalls, strata, and dialect – the world itself becoming the archive:

There was more pleasure for Roland and Maud in their walk, the next day, along the becks to the fosses. They walked out from Goathland and saw the threads and glassy interrupted fans of the Mallyan Spout; they scrambled along river paths above the running peaty water, and crossed moorland, scrambling down again to riversides.

[…]

Roland had been reading Melusina in bed and was now convinced that Christabel had been in Yorkshire.

[…]

'It has to be here. Where do people think it is? It's full of local words from here, gills and riggs and ling. The air is from here. Like in his letter. She talks about the air like summer colts playing on the moors. That's a Yorkshire saying.'

'I suppose if it is no one has noticed it before because they weren't looking. That is – her landscapes were always supposed to be really Brittany, claiming to be Poitou, and heavily influenced by Romantic local colour – the Brontës, Scott, Wordsworth. Or symbolic.'

'Do you think she was here?'

'Oh yes. I feel certain. But I've no proof that will stand up. The Hob. The Yorkshire words. Perhaps my brooch. (pp. 287-288)

Byatt replace pure symbol-hunting with indexical attention to place, dialect, and ecology. On the Goathland walk the scholars shift from library hermeneutics to a topographic, tactile reading of the poets: from parsing text to following – literally – their footsteps. On the moor the novel replaces the critic's desk with fieldwork, and the diction registers an embodied way of knowing: "threads and glassy interrupted fans", "peaty water", the scramble along river paths – sensation before thesis. Roland's hunch that the poem's "air is from here" shifts interpretation from symbol to index. Instead of treating LaMotte's scenery as generic Romantic décor – "Brittany… Brontës, Scott, Wordsworth… Or symbolic" – he and Maud test place-bound evidence: dialect and toponyms ("gills and riggs and ling"), named waterfalls verified in situ (Mallyan Spout), becks and fosses underfoot. The vocabulary anchors the verse in a specific ecology, not an abstract aesthetic. Maud's response – "I feel certain. But I've no proof that will stand up" – marks the ethical pivot: she lets felt knowledge lead while keeping scholarly caution about what can be claimed in print. "No one has noticed it before because they weren't looking" quietly indicts received readings; earlier critics saw Brittany because they expected Brittany. The walk sutures myth and geology – Roland's bedtime *Melusina* meets peat and grit – insisting the Victorian text be read at once as mythopoetic and local, a both/and neither pure symbolism nor pure positivism can manage. And the method is an ethic: to walk is to host the past rather than seize it. Where Cropper will violate a grave, Roland and Maud learn by moving with a landscape – an anti-possessive form of knowledge that prepares both their scholarship and their relationship for the book's larger lesson. In short, the Goathland excursion dramatizes their re-education: from desk-bound, symbol-hunting expertise to a situated, indexical, and hospitable reading that lets the material world (names, air, water, path) correct and enlarge what they "knew so well".

Sabine de Kercoz's diary from Brittany deepens the novel's lesson, serving as its most instructive archival form. Where letters address a single "you" and scholarly prose addresses a public "we", the diary speaks to no one and so thinks freely – about stories and persons, Aristotle's primacy of mythos over ethos, the traffic between oral lais and written literature. Its pages perform the book's lesson in method: to read not by imposing allegory but by attending to indices – place-names, dialect, weather, ritual. Crucially, the diary supplies the supplement that remakes the case (Christabel's pregnancy and confinement), proving that knowledge arrives as revision rather than capture.

Moreover, Sabine de Kercoz's diary doubles as the novel's ars poetica**.** The composite citation below – woven from her entries and Christabel's marginal notes – tracks a single arc from fear before the blank page to a craft of metaphor, a sense of 'moving veils' between myth and fact, and an ethic of retelling without appropriation, with Romance proposed as a space of women's freedom:

> The blank space of these white pages fills me with fear and desire… This is the book in which I shall make myself into a true writer… *Am I writing this for Christabel… or privately to myself, for the sake of truth alone?*… I shall lock away this volume… Work written only for one pair of eyes… loses some of its vitality, but… gains a certain freedom… In this misty land the borderline between myth, legend and fact is… a series of moving veils… I am now making metaphors… *You have found… a way which is not allegory nor yet faux-naïf… Your Dahud is both individual human being and symbolic truth… Keep alive… the simple clean forms of the tale… and yet add something of yours… without having been appropriated for private or personal ends.*… She wants to write a Fairy Epic… not grounded in historical truth, but in poetic and imaginative truth… *Romance is a proper form for women*… Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her? (pp. 358-413, mine italics)

These diary pages stage, in miniature, the novel's pedagogy of reading and making. Sabine's opening – "the blank space…fills me with fear and desire" – turns the page into an ethical scene of beginning: she will "make [her]self into a true writer" by practice, not inspiration. Immediately she asks whom she addresses: Christabel? herself? God? Each addressee implies a different truth regime, and her choice to lock the notebook produces the paradox she records – private writing "loses…vitality" but gains freedom and "adult quality", shedding the urge "to charm". The entries then trace a craft lesson unfolding on the page. In a mist where the border between myth and fact is

"moving veils", Sabine discovers that metaphor is not ornament but method; her prose nests spaces ("box-bed… chamber… manor… protecting wall") and, with that architectural figure, moves "back in time, inward in space" from house to history to self. The diary becomes a workshop where fear becomes form.

Christabel's mentorship sharpens that workshop into poetics and ethics. Her marginalia on Sabine's "Dahud" tale lay down rules that govern the whole novel: avoid both flat allegory and faux-naïf; keep the clean forms of the old story alive (ocean, leap, fall, engulfment) while adding something that makes them "seem new and first seen", without appropriating them for private ends. That clause quietly rebukes possessive uses of narrative and models the tact the scholars must learn. The orchard conversation extends the program: Romance is proposed as a form where women may move "free of the restraints of history and fact", and the final question – "Who knows what Melusina was in her freedom with no eyes on her?" – links genre to privacy, craft to the ethics of the gaze. Across these pages Byatt shows why Sabine's diary matters to the novel's argument: it is the archive at its most alive, a place where audience, form, myth, and modesty are negotiated sentence by sentence, and where the imperative is not to own a story but to tell it again – faithfully, freshly, and with care.

An aside on the orchard scene and the subtitle: under the cherry blossom – a classic *locus amoenus* of romance – Christabel sets out the book's generic contract. She imagines a "Fairy Epic… not grounded in historical truth, but in poetic and imaginative truth", and calls romance "a proper form for women", a space where a woman might be "free… with no eyes on her". In that shaded, Edenic setting, genre becomes ethics: romance licenses *latitude* (coincidence, quest, mythic recurrence) while protecting privacy against the policing gaze, as the Melusina example makes clear. This is why the novel is subtitled "A Romance", not as mere pastiche, but as a declared mode that allows Byatt to braid archival fact with invention, to honour "the truth of the human heart", and to tell a woman's story without turning it into evidence to be seized. The orchard is the workshop where that programme is spoken aloud. Byatt's own book – part quest, part pastoral, part fairy epic in prose – enacts the argument while letting a Victorian diarist say why.

After Sabine's *ars poetica* of retelling without appropriation, Ash supplies the matching poetics of reception. In one of his early letters to Christabel, he names the 'life of the Imagination' as the only sure life and casts reading as a hosted event – breath passed from writer to reader, life sustained for 'the length of the faith' the addressee grants. The passage doubles as Byatt's credo about why texts cannot be owned but only kept alive in attention:

> *Do you know – the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination*. Whatever the absolute Truth – or Untruth – of that old life-in-death – Poetry can make that man live for the length of the faith you or any other choose to give to him. *I do not claim to bestow Life as He did – on Lazarus – but maybe as Elisha did – who lay on the dead body – and breathed life into it –*
>
> *Or as the Poet of the Gospel did – for he was Poet, whatever else – Poet, whether scientific historian or no.*
>
> *Do you touch at my meaning? When I write* I know. *Remember that miraculous saying of the boy Keats – I am certain of nothing, but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination.* (p. 185, italic in the text)

Ash's confession – "the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination… Poetry can make that man live for the length of the faith you… choose to give to him" – turns meaning into a hosted event rather than a possession. Life in the poem lasts as long as a reader's faith lasts; truth is enacted in the encounter, not stored like a relic. The letter's haptic imagery ("lay on the dead body – and breathed life into it") matches the novel's pedagogy of tact: breath, touch, cadence, the seen stroke of ink – exactly the materials that pull Roland from the mantra "language is inadequate" toward an attention that feels form and trace. And because these lines are a letter to Christabel, our reading remains slightly illicit; Byatt lets us overhear while reminding us that meaning is fundamentally addressed – relational, time-bound, dependent on a "you". The Keatsian clinch – "the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination" – anchors the novel's ethic: imaginative truth is not

the opposite of fact but a different mode of fidelity, one that binds reader and text in care rather than capture.

With Sabine's *ars poetica* of retelling without appropriation and Ash's credo that a poem lives by the reader's faith in view, Roland and Maud's education comes into focus: to read is to practice tact – to host voices that were not addressed to them, accept partial witness, let some gaps remain gaps, and keep attention rather than ownership as the measure of understanding[9].

Roland's readerly *Bildung* moves from procedure to tact. His own typology – dutiful, personal, impersonal – culminates in the hairs-on-neck rapture where "every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact", and the old refrain that "language is essentially inadequate" yields to a new care for "the ways in which it could be said" (p. 513). Practically, that shift means abandoning "sentences of criticism" for stubborn lists of names that "resisted arrangement", a Vichian return to the pre-syntactic moment when "the first words were names that were also things" (p. 512). Theory is not discarded; it is resized by the poem's material trace, cadence, and hand. In counterpoint, Maud's path runs from armour to care. Copying Freud for a paper on metaphor, she revises herself from "seen" to "felt", even as she recognizes that ego, id, and libido are "metaphorical hypostasisations" (p. 466) – an admission that stages the inescapability of figuration while marking an ethical pivot from optical distance to somatic tact. Earlier, their shared fantasy of a "clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked" (p. 290). Because it crystallizes the novel's target – our era's analytical fluency coupled with affective hesitation – the passage warrants full citation:

> […] 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 these things – Love – themselves – that what they did mattered –'
>
> 'I know. You know what Christabel says. "Outside our small safe place flies Mystery." I feel we've done away with that too – And desire, that we look into so carefully – I think all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire.'
>
> 'I think that, too.'
>
> 'Sometimes I feel,' said Roland carefully, 'that the best state is to be without desire. When I really look at myself –'
>
> 'If you have a self –'
>
> 'At my life, at the way it is – what I *really* want is to – to have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked. Some of that is to do with – my personal circumstances. But some of it's general. I think.'

[9] Hutcheon helps us name the stylization – this is respectful pastiche that critiques as it honours – and Holub clarifies that meanings here are made in communities and institutions (editors, archives, universities), not in private reverie alone. Hutcheon defines parody as "repetition with critical distance": a stylized return that both honours and questions its source. In this light, Byatt's faux-nineteenth-century Brittany diary adopts the period's idiom (pious tone, ethnographic catalogues, moral maxims) to think with and against it – respectful pastiche that also exposes how such records authorize knowledge and police women's bodies. Hutcheon L. 1985, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Methuen, New York. Holub's reception theory adds the social frame: meanings are made in communities and institutions (editors, archives, universities, copyright regimes, funding), not in private reverie alone. Sabine's pages "mean" one thing in a cousin's notebook, another when catalogued, excerpted, or litigated; the novel stages these mediations to show that reading is a public practice shaped by procedures as much as by sensibility. Holub R. C. 1984, *Reception Theory*, Routledge, London.

> ‘I know what you mean. No, that’s a feeble thing to say. It’s a much more powerful coincidence than that. That’s what I think about, when I’m alone. How good it would be to have nothing. How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty bed in an empty room. White.’
> ‘White.’
> ‘Exactly the same’. (pp. 290-291, italics in the text)

This is one of Byatt’s most precise self-diagnoses of the late-twentieth-century condition the novel anatomizes. The dialogue is built out of hedges, dashes, and refrain – “We are very knowing ... we know ... we know*”* – a rhythm that mimics a culture saturated with theory and self-analysis. Maud lists the axioms of their intellectual moment (“no unitary ego”, “systems”, “Romantic Love” as an “ideological construct”), and Roland agrees that “we see [sex] everywhere”. The effect is paradoxical: abundance of discourse, poverty of experience. When Maud quotes Christabel – “Outside our small safe place flies Mystery” – she names the loss their sophistication has brought about: the fenced-off safety of critique, and the banishment of the very thing (mystery, risk, enchantment) that animates desire.

Byatt lets the cost of *knowingness* fall directly on eros. “All the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire”, Maud says; the hyphenated noun turns analysis into a kind of clinical *vivisection*. Roland extends the diagnosis into an ascetic wish: “the best state is to be without desire”. His image – “a clean empty bed in a clean empty room … nothing is asked or to be asked” – is chilling and telling. The repeated “clean/empty” and the refusal of the verb “ask” frame desire as demand, intrusion, obligation; purity becomes the fantasy of being unrequired. Maud’s echo – “the same image … White” – makes the blankness literal. The bed is also a sly metonym of the page: whiteness as sterility, but also as the blank on which another script might be written. In a book about reading, the shared vision of an empty bed reads as the wish for a page uninscribed by cultural scripts about sex and love.

Formally, the scene advances their relationship by paradox. The confession of wanting “nothing” becomes their first real intimacy: a synchronized imagination (“Exactly the same”) that moves them from parallel defensiveness into shared vulnerability. They are still inside the late-modern posture – suspicious of “Love”, wary of the “unitary ego”, expert at analysis – but by recognizing the limits of that posture together, they open the space for a different practice: not the conquest of desire, but tact toward it. The conversation thus prepares the ethical turn the novel cares about – away from possession (of truths, of persons) toward a hospitable attention that can allow love and reading to happen without pre-empting them with theory. Taken together, these arcs – starting from the wish to desire nothing in a culture of knowingness which names the cost of perpetual analysis –, vindicate the novel’s small-narrative pedagogy: not a single sovereign method, but local practices fitted to form, where reading becomes care.

One more turn is crucial: their revision never finishes. Sabine de Kercoz’s diary’s revelation of Christabel’s pregnancy deals a further blow to already strained certainties, shifting the affair from literary intrigue to kinship and moral responsibility. What they thought they “knew” must be reread – poems, letters, even landscapes tilt under the new weight of a child and a concealed lineage. The novel insists on this nonfinality: knowledge arrives in instalments, each piece forcing another adjustment (the later grave cache and the Postscript’s private meeting). In Lyotard’s sense, they learn to live by small narratives – local, revisable accounts – so that the end of their readerly education is not closure but a disciplined readiness to read again.

If Roland and Maud learn to live by small, revisable narratives – a readiness to read again – the novel immediately sets their education against its dark twin: what reading becomes when curiosity hardens into a single drive to possess. Cropper embodies the libidinal core of acquisitive scholarship. As said before, his hi-tech lecture in a church turns biography into spectacle. The graveyard sequence pushes that impulse to an obscene clarity. The prose eroticizes violation: “He struck, he struck, he struck”, the spade “slicing, penetrating” (p. 535), sweat on the back felt as joy; desire is literalized as the will to cut into the past. Then nature refuses the fantasy of mastery and flips heroics into farce: a

storm howls; "the wind moved in the graveyard like a creature from another dimension, trapped and screaming. The branches of the yew and cedar gesticulated desperately" (p. 536); trees fall and trap the car; the scholars appear in a flashlight tableau "like bizarre flowers" (p. 539), Beatrice Nest descending with "streaming white woolly hair" (p. 539) like a witch or sibyl. The dug-up trunk delivers a reliquary box – specimen jar, oiled silk, a hair bracelet, a pale plait, and the sealed letter "To: Randolph Henry Ash, under cover" – at once prize and indictment. Ellen's ethic of fire-and-earth is broken even as the find becomes the very supplement that revises the whole story. Fittingly, what follows is not ownership but a candlelit communal reading: a secular séance in which critics channel the dead rather than claim them, Browning's epigraph literalized. Byatt pointedly stages the discovery of Christabel's sealed letter not as a triumph of ownership but as a ritual of listening. In a dark hotel room, during the storm, the scholars sit in a circle and read the letter aloud by candlelight:

> So, in that hotel room, to that strange gathering of disparate seekers and hunters, Christabel LaMotte's letter to Randolph Ash was read aloud, by candlelight, with the wind howling past, and the panes of the windows rattling with the little blows of flying debris as it raced on and on, over the downs. (p. 542)

Byatt frames the act of reading as a scene, almost liturgical. The ordinary hotel room becomes a secular chapel; the scholars – named as "seekers and hunters", a phrase that admits their earlier appetite – are reconfigured as listeners. "Read aloud" returns a private text to orality: breath, voice, cadence. The candlelight pointedly opposes Cropper's projector glare; illumination is fragile, non-spectacular, and shared. Sound-work – "howling", "rattling", "little blows" – turns the storm into a chorus, a gothic surround that both heightens drama and mocks mastery: nature insists that this is not a moment of possession but of exposure and humility.

The syntax mimics the staging. A long, accumulating sentence strings prepositional phrases – "by… with… with…" – so that the letter is held in a web of circumstances rather than presented as a trophy. Even the geography matters: "over the downs" returns us to the book's topographic thread, reminding us that this revelation is anchored in a particular landscape whose weather and history press on the text.

Most crucially, the addressee is absent. A letter meant to Ash is voiced among others; we overhear what was never delivered. That triangulation embodies the novel's ethic: reading is a hosted event, not an act of ownership. They do not seize the letter; they hold it, together, long enough for Christabel's voice to pass through the room.

It would be too long to reproduce Christabel's whole confession, but a few keystones show what the letter does:

> My dear – my dear – … You have a daughter … *All History is hard facts – and something else – passion and colour lent by men … our daughter was born in Brittany… and carried to England* … I was afraid… you would wish to take her… and she was mine … *I regret… not those few sharp sweet days of passion… I regret… our old letters* … I have been Melusina these thirty years … *I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth* … I write under cover to your wife … *If you are able or willing – please send me a sign that you have read this. I dare not ask, if you forgive.* (pp. 542-546, italics in the text)

As a final address, the letter is confession, testament, and poetics at once. It rewrites "History" as the crossing of fact with "passion and colour", and supplies the missing fact that reorders every reading: the child. Yet its motor is renunciation**,** not revelation-for-display. Christabel names the fear that governed her silence – Ash (and Ellen) might "take" the child – and accepts the cost: decades of self-exile, "Melusina… crying on the wind", the unloved "spinster aunt". Her rhetoric binds motherhood, secrecy, and authorship ("without me this Tale might not have come to the Telling"), while refusing possession: she sends the truth "under cover to your wife", ceding control; she asks only for a sign, not absolution. Interleaved citations – Gretchen and Faust, *Samson Agonistes*, the

Phoenix, Coleridge's "glittering eye" – place her private history inside a literary commons without turning it into trophy. Read aloud by candlelight, the letter becomes the novel's last lesson in tact: the past can be known without being owned**,** and the "truth of the human heart" is best delivered as a guarded gift, not a prize.

Christabel's letter certainly "explains" the case – there is a child, there was a deliberate concealment, Blanche's death is re-situated – but its deeper work is to finish remaking the readers who pursued it. Because the novel's argument reaches its true conclusion not in the revelation alone but in the dialogue and diction that follow it, I quote the scene extensively: only its texture shows how Christabel's letter finishes remaking Maud and Roland – shifting them from archival mastery to tact and rewriting "possession" as mutual hospitality:

> Blackadder said, 'How strange for you, Maud, to turn out to be descended from both – how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth – no the truth – of your own origins.'
> Everyone looked at Maud, who sat looking at the photograph.
> […]
> He stroked her wet hair, gently, absently.
> Maud said, 'What next?'
> 'How do you mean, what next?'
> 'What happens next? To us?'
> 'You will have a lot of legal problems. And a lot of editing to do. I – I have made some plans.'
> 'I thought – we might edit the letters together, you and I?'
> 'That's generous, but not necessary. You turn out to be a central figure in this story. I only got into it by stealing, in the first place. I've learned a lot.'
> 'What have you learned?'
> 'Oh – something from Ash and Vico. About poetic language. I'm – I – I have things I have to write.'
> 'You seem angry with me. I don't understand why.'
> 'No, I'm not. That is, yes, I have been. You have your certainties. Literary theory. Feminism. A sort of social ease, it comes out with Euan, a world you belong in. I haven't got anything. Or hadn't. And I grew – attached to you. I know male pride is out of date and unimportant, but it mattered.'
> Maud said 'I feel –' and stopped.
> 'You feel?'
> He looked at her. Her face was like carved marble in the candlelight. Icily regular, splendidly null, as he had often said to himself.
> […]
> So they took off their unaccustomed clothes, Cropper's multicoloured lendings, and climbed naked inside the curtains and into the depths of the feather bed and blew out the candle. And very slowly and with infinite gentle delays and delicate diversions and variations of indirect assault Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries, and he heard, towards dawn, from a long way off, her clear voice crying out, uninhibited, unashamed, in pleasure and triumph.
> In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crashed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful. (pp. 547, 548, 549, 550, 551)

Blackadder's slip ("the myth – no the truth – of your own origins") names Maud's turn: the archive is no longer a field she manages but a history that claims her. Her first question after the reading – "What next? … To us?" – shows the replacement of theoretical distance by embodied concern; she has moved from interpreting romance to living an ethic of care and discretion the letter models ("under cover to your wife"). Roland's change is equally plain. Instead of capitalizing on the

find – co-editing, consolidating authority – he declines: "I have things I have to write". The hunt has shifted him from sentences of criticism to the making of poems, from proving a system to trusting cadence and "poetic language". Even his vexed admission about pride and class ("I haven't got anything. Or hadn't") is part of the unarmouring the search has required.

Byatt seals this pedagogy not with a thesis but with a scene. The love-making pointedly glosses the title – "to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession" – only to cancel the possessive logic at once: "there seemed to be no boundaries", and it is Maud's voice that rings out "uninhibited, unashamed". Possession becomes mutual hospitality, not annexation. Dawn brings not closure but aftermath: a fresh, resinous, apple-tart air that smells of storm-felled branches and new growth – death and renewal in one breath. The letter thus alters facts and, more importantly, forms Maud and Roland's ways of knowing and speaking: from mastery to tact, from surveillance to stewardship, from "myth" as grid to "truth" as lived relation. The plot is solved; the readers are changed.

Byatt's quiet "Postscript" exists to give the *reader alone* a decisive truth that no archive, critic, or character can ever know: on a hot May day Ash meets his daughter, crowns her, and pockets a plait of her hair. That undocumented moment retroactively explains the blond hair in his grave and, more importantly, rebukes the fantasy of total scholarly possession that has animated the chase. The Postscript "repairs the record" precisely by stepping outside the record: after a novel of letters, diaries, editions, and gaps, it begins by reminding us that some events "leave no discernible trace". The grave's relic is made legible without tabloid revelation – the hair is the child's, not a lover's trophy – so closure arrives as a gift to the reader rather than a triumph of academic extraction. The scene also rewrites the abduction myth that haunts the book: in a meadow saturated with Persephone imagery, there is no seizure, only a chaste, paternal coronation – "a crown for a May Queen", a kiss "so as not to frighten her", a lock of hair exchanged for a story. Naming, a recurrent obsession, returns in play and tenderness ("Maia Thomasine Bailey"), not proprietorial taxonomy. Even style becomes argument: the lavish catalogue of cornflowers, poppies, bryony, and nightshade makes the hour feel inexhaustible, a counterexample to Roland's former fears that language is "papery and dry". And chance asserts itself against design: Ash's message, entrusted to the child for 'the aunt' (Christabel), is forgotten; the crown breaks in a sibling scuffle. History turns on accident and loss, which is why evidence misleads and why the archive can never be the last word.

Placed after the storm-lit grave and the candlelit communal reading, the Postscript is Byatt's final ethic. It restores privacy (no one ever speaks of the meeting), corrects a key misunderstanding without humiliating the living, and converts "possession" into care. The novel thus ends where its pedagogy has been tending: truth sometimes belongs not in the file but in a reader's tactful custody – known, cherished, and left unclaimed.

Possession teaches us to read with and against theory until our desire to own gives way to hospitality: an attention that can recognize, repair, and finally release what it knows[10].

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[10] Critics have traced how *Possession* reframes knowledge as an affective relation to the past. Kate Mitchell argues that Byatt re-centres the literary text as a 'medium' and locates an ideal reader willing to be possessed by it−an ethical posture of desire rather ownership (Mitchell K. 2010, "(Dis)Possessing Knowledge: A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Romance" in *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 94–95, 106. John J. Su reads the novel's obsession with manuscripts, hair, brooches and letters through the culture of collecting, showing how acquisitive desire can both imprison and liberate imagination. Su J. J. 2004, "Fantasies of (Re)Collection: Collecting and Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*", in *Contemporary Literature* 45, no. 4, pp. 684–712, here pp. 684–86. Dana Shiller's influential account of the 'neo-Victorian' novel helps situate *Possession* within a broader return to nineteenth-century forms, even as the novel resists nostalgic closure. Shiller D. 1997, "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel", in *Studies in the Novel* 29, no. 4, pp. 538–560, esp. Pp. 538–539. Together, these critics illuminate how Byatt turns reading into a romance, where mutual possession – of texts, of others – always risks dispossession.

of a book on Joseph Conrad, «Joseph Conrad e le aporie dell'esistenza: da 'Youth' a *The Mirror of the Sea*» and of essays and articles on Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elisabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, R.L.Stevenson. She has also written on contemporary poetry with particular reference to Ted Hughes and Desmond Egan. She has published in *Hobbes Studies* with an essay on Hobbes and Shakespeare and in the volume on "gardens" edited by Andrea Mariani with an article on John Milton. At the moment she is interested in Postmodernist novels and poetry and is writing a book on *London Fields* by Martin Amis.

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