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The Never-ending Quest:
Possession as a Postmodern Literary Romance

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

—A.S. Byatt
from *Possession*

Imagined worlds are far more interesting than real ones. The best manifestation of this are the books that take their readers into those imagined worlds in which fantastical things happen, people fall in love and remain there and stories have endings that bring everything together—escapist literature. These books give us an image of the ideal world, something we know to be possible only in stories, but which leads us, by its very presence in those stories, to believe in it. As Byatt writes in the passage above, the reader experiencing one of those perfect, electric moments of communion with a text is also experiencing that communion with her own subconscious knowledge; the truth of the story was already present in her mind.

When I read Byatt's *Possession*, I fell in love. It has intrigue, adventure, love and good writing, all in the context of the exciting and dramatic alternate universe of literary studies. It is one of those books that insists that text is still a medium for desire and imagination, that stories are as valid an interpretation of reality as any other and that belief in the ideal is sustainable in a world of skepticism and irony. I recognize less sheepishly now than I did the first time I read *Possession* that what attracted me to it was its subtitle, "A Romance." This subtitle held the promise of things entirely unrealistic and attractive: a beautifully structured story and a

deliciously gratifying resolution; the safety of being enveloped in a more magical, comfortable world free from the terrors of reality and its irritating counterpart, realism; the chance to feel that experience of total happiness.

I am not alone in my affinity for the romance. In fact, it seems to be a surprisingly persistent form. The romance appears, of course, in the mass-market genre fiction we see in supermarket checkout lines, but also in literature we might consider a little more on the side of high art—in novels like *Possession*. Generally, the farther one travels down the dark, overgrown path into academia, the farther away one moves from the study and appreciation of forms like the romance, focusing instead on the kind of literature more characterized by skepticism and decentralization than by narrative and archetype—we might study romances, but always with a historical perspective. The kind of reading Byatt describes in the passage quoted above is not, however appealing it may be personally, a legitimate basis for interpreting text. Among the community of people who might see the importance of interpreting text, namely the academic community, the feeling Byatt describes, of becoming aware of one's already extant knowledge of a text, does not create any kind of intelligible point of observation for anyone other than the one reader. The personal is not necessarily communal. Not only is it practically unworkable, it is also academically unfashionable to see text as a medium for transcendent knowledge; rather, it is more generally thought of as a collection of intertwined codes that form some sort of indeterminate, arbitrary whole.

Possession presents us with an interesting case: in incorporating elements of the postmodern and the archetypes of the romance narrative, it becomes a transgressive and fascinating text. It is a romance about text, among other things: it brings together the scholastic earnestness of Victorian England and the institutionalized need to deconstruct knowledge of

1980s England in a clash of intellectual movements. *Possession* tells the story of two contemporary academics, Roland and Maude, who focus their academic careers on researching two Victorian authors, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, respectively. Roland and Maude soon discover that their Victorian scholars had a secret love affair, and begin to construct the whole story by uncovering the obscured evidence. The novel consists of several interwoven stories: the first is Roland's and Maude's quest to put together the pieces of the historical love affair, keeping their findings from rival academicians, while a romance slowly develops between them; the second is the historical narration that takes place in the Victorian era, including some of Ash and LaMotte's interactions and the solitary reflections of Ash's wife Ellen; the last, excerpts from the primary documents, including texts of the letters written between Ash and LaMotte and pieces of Ash's and LaMotte's writings, presented as epigraphs to the chapters of the novel. Most of the text is occupied by Roland and Maud's part of the narrative, but theirs is not necessarily the primary or most real story, any more than it is the main romance of *Possession*. What is real and what is romance are questions the story engages with constantly.

While *Possession* is a romance, it is also a self-aware work about the nature of text, writing, reading, authorship, truth, history, scholarship and human relationships—it is a postmodern romance. Its self-reflection and its thematic exploration of life in an overthought, deconstructed world characterize it as postmodern; its use of specific archetypes and formal elements characterizes it as romance. This is a strange pairing. Initially, I saw this postmodern romance not as a collaboration but as more of a collision between two attitudes that seem to share little common ground: the satirical, anti-narrative skepticism of postmodernism and the strong, nostalgic adherence to form of the romance. Postmodern literature tends to diverge from traditional methods of conveying meaning, problematizing reading and interpretation; the

romance is defined by its specific archetypes of plot and character, the rise and fall that tell the story of the main characters' struggle for meaning and self-discovery. The conflict seems overwhelmingly irreconcilable, pitting as it does the romantic belief in an ideal world and in the affective connection to literature against the postmodern undermining of those beliefs.

Yet, despite the ideological divide, postmodernism and the romance seem to have a strange affinity. They have some striking points of intersection in their non-realistic or hyper-realistic approaches to reality, their tendencies toward baroque excess, the fantastical and the grotesque, the use of artifice. Romances often incorporate magic, surrealism or subtler forms of non-realism. Postmodern literature also often engages in non-realism in style, construction and setting—surrealism, magical realism, the generally grotesque or fantastic, satiric extremes and pastiche. Diane Elam frames this a different way: "...I want to suggest instead that both romance and postmodernism share a common concern with the persistence of excess, a concern that leads to a rethinking of history and culture" (2). Elam identifies a real point of similarity, but it perhaps works even better as an illustration of a fundamental difference in the postmodern and the romantic attitudes toward reality. While postmodern nostalgia, for example, is a kind of object-less longing, romantic nostalgia functions on the understanding that there is an actual ideal world. This object of romantic nostalgia is the imagination, which is necessarily better than reality, and attainable.

Sites of collision like this one can be revealing. The enduring presence of the romance structure in the frustrating sea of indeterminacy that postmodernism sometimes resembles should make us wonder: what does this mean? Is the postmodern romance a mark of regression into conservative nostalgia? Postmodern literature and criticism have their appeals, but their obfuscations can be exhausting, lacking the comfort of the familiar. I have already admitted my

inclination toward romance. I miss the innocent days of reading adventure stories; perhaps Byatt does, too. Does this make us irresponsible members of the literary community, old-fashioned and curmudgeonly? Rather more likely is the idea that this return to a familiar form has complicated implications for postmodernism in literature. Certainly, we desire the idealism and the structured quest for gratification of that desire that the romance gives us, but the postmodern atmosphere is no less pervasive for all that. So the question becomes, in the postmodern romance, how does the romance affect the postmodern?

I would like to explore how *Possession* brings together these two sensibilities in its approach to the world and to narrative. In bringing into focus this conflict between archetype and postmodernism, *Possession* provides a kind of guide to both the status of the romance in the postmodern era and how we might look at postmodernism with more clarity. The story of the romance can be seen as evolutionary, in the sense that it has adapted to its surroundings with each new literary era while maintaining recognizable features. It has traditionally had something to say about love, desire, transcendence and idealism, all things which the postmodern perspective rejects in their simple forms. In *Possession*, the romantic quest takes as its object the existence of narrative itself. Under the revisions of postmodernism, the romance becomes a quest for a cohesive text, for some kind of a whole in the postmodern world's seemingly insurmountable pluralism. Narrative is deconstructed and shown naked as it is simultaneously reconstructed and fulfilled; *Possession* is always consciously and simultaneously following and creating its narrative structure. We see relevance stripped away in some ways, but also restored to the romance narrative if for no other reason than for its familiarity and its intelligibility. Even if we no longer see a particular meaning attached to the structure of the romance, it is still relevant in that it provides shape by which people organize and understand their lives. Certainly,

in *Possession*, the meat of the story is the attempt to find a story, to fit the events into a recognizable narrative structure in the hope that it will provide some kind of clarity. The clarity we and the characters seek is both elusive and obvious: first, there is no story except that which we create, and second, we cannot help but create stories in the search for meaning.

The subplot to this main story about the quest for narrative is the story of the reader's personal involvement with a text. While postmodernism is, in a way, just a marker for a whole set of characteristics and projects, it is also somehow a limiting presence, at least in terms of human sympathy and attachment. It is an activity of destabilizing that seems intuitively to act counter to the romance's normalizing tendencies, and its tendency towards satire and irony present a direct opposition to the romance's positing of the existence of an ideal. The postmodern also sometimes becomes the robotic or the cyborg—it indicates a kind of inhumanity, in that it represents a loss of faith in humanistic endeavors, delegitimizing the emotional engagement with literature that Byatt describes, the kind of engagement once thought to be the ideal way of interacting with literature. *Possession*, I think, is a stand against that kind of flattening. It is the story of text finding itself, but also of people finding meaning in text, re-engaging with it as a means to something beyond the incoherent. It is a foothold in the struggle against the postmodern undermining of curiosity and emotional attachment, and it shows a surprising space within postmodernism's encompassing but smothering grasp for readerly affection and involvement.

I. What is the romance?

The improbable, desiring, erotic, and violent world of romance reminds us that we are not awake when we have abolished the dream world: we are awake only when we have absorbed it again.

—Northrop Frye
The Secular Scripture (61)

Historically, the romance can be followed through the classical, medieval, Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods. The first kind of work called a romance is the narrative poem that becomes popular in France in the 12th Century, given this name because it is written in a romance language rather than Latin, which contributes to its occasional designation as popular or low literature. Crucial elements of these romances are the quest or adventure, magic and orientation around aristocratic characters and concerns. The classical romance, a title retroactively applied, is something like the *Odyssey*, an adventure story in which a hero with special abilities pursues an object that is repeatedly deferred. The romantic quest unites the more literal search for something with a protagonist's search for identity and belonging. The main character may be secretly or explicitly aristocratic or the unwitting heir to special powers, knowledge, a legacy—the rhetoric of class is used in multiple ways, either to indicate literally elevated social class or royalty, or to refer to some ability, usually magical, that sets the character above other people. This is the generic pattern of the romance.

Northrop Frye theorizes the romance more completely than any critic in *The Secular Scripture*, his book devoted to the form. He writes that, “the conventions of prose romance show little change over the course of centuries, and conservatism of this kind is the mark of a stable genre” (4). For Frye, the romance is a paradigm involving a hero with exceptional power in a world with unrealistic natural laws. Frye's romance involves a dialectical conflict between good and evil, a strong element of wish fulfillment, aristocratic or chivalric values, and nostalgia for

the past. The romance has three basic parts—he calls them journey, struggle, and exaltation—and is a clearly and specifically defined genre. He classifies the romance as “curiously paradoxical”—it is frequently nostalgic for something that has never existed, and it is both aristocratic and proletarian. Frye also identifies what he calls the epiphany, “the symbolic presentation of the point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment” (Frye *Anatomy of Criticism* 203). The romance tends to present an ordered world, one in which action is ritualized and meaningful.

Frye’s conception of the romance is relies on specific devices, but his definition is adaptable toward a more general idea of the romance. For my purposes, the basic criteria of a romance are as follows: the story is shaped by a central quest; the characters are involved with some kind of legacy or special inheritance; the setting is heavily influenced by non-realism nostalgia. These categories are all broad, and may be fulfilled in varying ways. In contemporary romances, the quest tends to be more internal, possibly for identity or belonging, but it can also be a literal one. Non-realism can encompass both the supernatural or magical and the idea of the unrealistic, satisfying ending—romances frequently have both, but not always. And finally, the romance’s sense of nostalgia is a flexible but essential characteristic. Nostalgia can have as its object the past (or the imagined past), the exotic or the unknown and unknowable.

These elements make up the quest romance as a form, but for my project, the romantic mode or attitude embodied in the form is central. Barbara Fuchs gives a broad definition of the romance, based partially on Frye’s, arguing that “the romance, as a critical idiom, may be most useful to contemporary readers if it retains some of its historical commodiousness and is conceptualized as a set of literary strategies that can be adopted by different forms” (2). I refer to the romance as a form with the understanding that it is also, as Fuchs writes, a relatively flexible

set of literary strategies. As a mode, the romance represents a kind of affirmation of the power of imagination, an assertion that an ideal world exists and that it is achievable through some kind of ascendance. It tends toward a highly structured, constructed way of arriving at that ideal, but it arrives there all the same.

II. What is postmodernism?

Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees.

—Linda Hutcheon
The Politics of Postmodernism

To begin with an understatement, postmodernism is a difficult element to qualify. Language being what it is these days, any summary of it will of course be inadequate. It can be seen as a historicized period, but it seems more useful to understand it as a cultural moment, a huge entity that spans many disciplines and encompasses many versions and contradictions of itself.

For my purposes, it is most useful to consider postmodernism an activity, or an attitude characterized by constant self-awareness, skepticism and destabilizing. There are many accounts of postmodernism, each classifying it differently, but all of them telling a different aspect of the same story of cultural fragmentation and indeterminacy. Frederic Jameson's and Jean-Francois Lyotard's theories of postmodernism revolve around the idea that advanced capitalism has replaced all areas of life with the market. Rather than culture, the market gives us cultural production; similarly, it replaces desire, interest, culture with commodification. Culture, like history, becomes a construction and a production. Lyotard writes in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*:

But this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield. Such realism accommodates all tendencies, just as capital

accommodates all 'needs,' providing that the tendencies and needs have purchasing power. As for taste, there is no need to be delicate when one speculates or entertains oneself. (76)

Lyotard's analysis emphasizes how the forces of the market serve unrefined tastes rather than any notion of art. And of course, the market not only indulges but also shapes these interests; behind every element of life, every piece of art or media, we see not history or tradition or meaning but rather a collaboration between the market and the shallowest of interests. And while this apparent emptiness increases, we also see a mind-blowing proliferation of information and media; together, these two phenomena bring us a picture of an overinformed, decontextualized culture.

How do we treat culture in this kind of environment? Frederic Jameson suggests that what we are left with is the nostalgia mode. He writes in his 1988 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" that nostalgia is a symptom of having no conception of our historical situation or our present. Jameson writes, "Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject...we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach" (287). So in Jameson's assessment, cultural production has been reduced to a kind of reheating of old cultural tropes that imitate other cultural tropes we think of as representing the past—an infinite chain of simulation. Jameson's treatment of nostalgia conveys a kind of disappointment with society's incapacity to historicize itself. Nostalgia, for Jameson, is just another painful consequence of the negative and harmful cultural moment that is postmodernism.

Linda Hutcheon presents another account of postmodernism. She proposes that, rather than being steeped in nostalgia for an imagined past, postmodernism always and necessarily treats images of the past with irony. In her introduction to *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she

writes, “it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return.’ Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism” (4). So while Jameson’s approach might lead us to a rather disparaging view of the function of the postmodern romance, Hutcheon’s clearly guides us in a different direction, allowing for a more encompassing postmodernism, one that is less pathetic and perhaps more complex than Jameson’s.

Jameson and Hutcheon, though they give different accounts of the way postmodernism functions, both make clear that a postmodern perspective does not leave room for belief in any kind of achievable ideal. In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye posits the satiric mode as antithetical to a romantic one; in this framework, we can associate a postmodern mode with the satiric and see it as opposed to the romantic. Like the romance, postmodernism relies heavily on the use of artifice. Unlike the romance, its use of artifice is self-conscious non-progressive; formal elements are not used to build a narrative of progress, but are rather just used. Postmodern literature also tends to treat with undifferentiated seriousness the realistic and the fantastic. John Barth describes postmodern literature, or at least the best version of it, as something that synthesizes or transcends antitheses: realism vs. non-realism, junk vs. pure literature, etc. It creates a sort of unity out of multiplicity, but one that is not meant to form any known structure.

III. The Postmodern Condition

Possession is, in a way, a book entirely about scholarship. Its varied treatment of that theme can be read as a way of expressing a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward postmodernism, which is the dominant paradigm of the academic world described and satired in the book. Roland and Maud are deeply involved in the contemporary academic scene (in a way that makes this whole

project seem very meta-realistic). *Possession* gently mocks the shifting fashions of academia, the seriousness with which scholars become enmeshed in the objects and subjects of their study and the endless, engulfing analysis involved in criticism. At the same time, the book regards scholarship as a serious and legitimate way of engaging with the world. Randolph Ash, one of the two Victorian poets at the heart of the story, is a man whose life is centered around study. He is the classic Victorian poet-scholar (with whom Byatt seems to have a particular fascination throughout her work): he studies poetry, myth and legend, philosophy, nature, evolution and spiritualism. He, and more generally the Victorian thread of *Possession*, represents scholarship in a more romantic mode: study is a quest for knowledge, and knowledge is attainable. The scholarship that Mortimer Cropper, James Blackadder and Roland engage in is a more specific and obsessive kind. They are all contemporary academics who have chosen to devote their lives to the relatively exclusive and specialized study more familiar to us now in the postmodern age. Maud, Leonora Stern and Beatrice Nest also participate in this kind of scholarship, but represent the feminist subcategory.

Characters in *Possession* are classified by their positions relative to scholarship, and the way they are classified frames the conflict between certain theoretical positions within the study of literature. One of the most obvious is a kind of outmoded, overly personal form of engagement. Mortimer Cropper and Beatrice Nest embody this more romantic model of scholarship, being extremely personally engaged in their work in ways that manifest a clear desire for escape, but with little ability to view their own activities from with any distance. (Beatrice ultimately undergoes a transformation much like a romantic hero's, while Cropper's resolution is not so happy.) Cropper very clearly represents this kind of scholarship in its most negative form. He embodies an extreme in biographical study: he fixates on ownership of

artifacts related to Ash's life, feels entitled to all of Ash's secrets, more so than any of the other scholars think is reasonable (though we eventually see them all gripped by the temptation of gratifiable curiosity) and scorns boring textual scholarship in favor of a more glamorous and active form: "He felt he was over some border of the permissible and everything was just fine. He was not a grey old scholar, smelling of the lamp, sitting on his fundament. He was *doing*, he would find, it was his destiny" (535). Cropper is never particularly interested in theoretical pursuits, but rather in the collection and ownership of the facts and particles of Ash's life. Cropper conflates Ash's life with his own excessively; whatever a reasonable level of identification with one's subject is, Cropper is clearly beyond it. Of course, all the academic characters in *Possession* are motivated at certain times by impulses of curiosity and desire to hoard knowledge (as well as what Byatt gently satires as "narrative curiosity" and "narrative greed"), but Cropper is most consistently so. While in other cases, motives are confused and complex, Cropper's are almost always obviously nefarious. He is most certainly the villain of academia.

Beatrice Nest's engagement with her scholarship is similar to Cropper's in that it is excessive, but where Cropper is a villain, Beatrice is a victim, largely by virtue of being a woman. As she tells Maud in an early scene, "'*They* said it would be better to—to do this task which presented itself so to speak and seemed appropriate to my—my sex—my capacities as they were thought to be, whatever they were' (240)." Beatrice has spent her life editing the boring journals of Ash's wife Ellen after being shunted away from studying Ash himself, and the changing tides of feminism have washed her onto a rather unfashionable and isolated island.

James Blackadder and Leonora Stern present more moderate forms of scholarship, at least in terms of personal motivation. Perhaps most important to their characterizations, these

two possess a necessary degree of self-awareness that Cropper does not. Leonora has all the stereotypical qualities of the unconditionally radical feminist, but is generally presented as well-intentioned. She is motivated by a lampoonably excessive, but justifiable, rage against the patriarchy. In the moment of excitement, when the discovery of the letters is made public and the Ivory Tower is briefly invaded by television crews, Leonora shows that she has a sense of humor about the situation. James Blackadder is a respectable curmudgeon; when put in the public eye, he is horrified by the need to cheaply inject sex appeal into his presentation of Ash. He is honorably opposed to the commodification of scholarship, humorously skeptical of feminist extremism. We are sometimes given access to Blackadder's private musings, and we sometimes see his doubts about his own choice of lifestyle.

Byatt uses the characters and their positions regarding scholarship to create a gentle resistance toward theoretical extremism, the side of academia more oriented toward the postmodern attitude. Fergus Wolff, Roland's colleague and Maud's ex-lover, is one of the characters more visibly and successfully entrenched in his theoretical activities, and yet he is certainly a destructive force in the novel. Maud has frequent flashbacks of her rather traumatic relationship with Fergus: he bombarded her with politics, quoting Freud's writing on penis envy to her in the early mornings and goading her into keeping her hair long as a political statement, but one with which she was never quite comfortable. We are invited to feel hostile toward Fergus, who later interferes with Roland's and Maud's quest by involving Cropper, possibly out of jealousy and decidedly out of some malicious feeling. Beatrice Nest, on the other hand, embodies a stubborn fear of contemporary scholarship, also identifiable as a more moderate, traditional form of scholarship. We see Beatrice as a somewhat pathetic character, a woman who has lived through many sea changes in academia, and is now awkwardly outside of any real

academic community. Beatrice's attitude toward scholarship, though stubborn, is certainly friendlier than Fergus's, and her suspicions about Ellen Ash's journal are ultimately partially vindicated (though the fact that a sexual affair is at the heart of the mystery in *Possession* is complicated). This seems to throw the balance at least a little in her favor.

Perhaps most importantly, *Possession* sets up a tense relationship between Roland and Maud and what they study. They are certainly familiar and with (and accomplices to) the most esoteric of poststructuralist theory, but they are also less unconditionally committed than some. Roland carries with him a constant insecurity about his scholastic ability, and frequently wonders about the ultimate point of his career. Maud betrays a similar doubt in an interview with Beatrice Nest while trying to gain access to Ellen Ash's journal. Beatrice stubbornly refuses to believe Leonora Stern's supposition that Ellen Ash conceals potentially scandalous sexual secrets in her journals, and Maud finds some sympathy for her:

This dogged and flushed minor defiance struck another chord of fellow-feeling in Maud, who edged her chair closer and looked into the rumpled weary face. Maud thought of Leonora's ferocity, of Fergus's wicked playfulness, of the whole tenor and endeavour of twentieth-century literary scholarship, of a bed like a dirty egg-white.

'I agree, Dr Nest. In fact I do agree. The whole of our scholarship—the whole of our thought—we question everything except the centrality of sexuality—Unfortunately feminism can hardly avoid privileging such matters. I sometimes wish I had embarked on geology myself.'

Beatrice Nest smiled and handed over the journal. (241-242)

In this passage, personal sympathy and intellectual belief conflate. Maud responds to Beatrice's stubborn claim that whatever Ellen Ash was hiding in her carefully crafted journal was not lascivious in nature. Her reaction is partly intellectual, but seems even more emotional; she responds to Beatrice's "dogged and flushed" declaration, both descriptors indicating emotional excitement rather than intellectually solid argument. Maud, looking at Beatrice's rumpled weary face," thinks not of Leonora's central arguments regarding the lesbian undercurrents of

Christabel LaMotte's imagery, but rather of her ferocity; she thinks not of the brilliant paper Fergus wrote for the sexuality and textuality conference, but rather of his "wicked playfulness." She quickly re-evaluates "twentieth-century literary scholarship" on the basis of its "whole tenor," or its general character, and the repulsive recurring image that reminds her of Fergus, and shifts her opinion toward Beatrice's. Maud's personal feelings toward sex mix with her professional opinion. Beatrice, of course, is charmed by Maud's moment of sympathy, and lets Maud see the journal because she feels the same way about sex and scholarship.

Later, Roland and Maud seem to tire of the endless academic theorizing in the middle of *Possession*, as they follow Ash and LaMotte into Yorkshire trying to find clues that they went together. Talking about their relationships and the way young people of their generation know too much, Roland and Maud discover a coincidental fantasy of a clean, white bed, a piece of imagery they each imagine would be free of demands and politics. Maud says of it, "Maybe we're symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists. Or maybe it's just us" (291). In the joy of coming upon this mutual desire, they decide to take a small day trip they think will be unrelated to their academic pursuits. Here they come into a calm communion with each other and with their world—they picnic, and Roland persuades Maud to literally let down her hair, which she usually keeps restricted so other feminists will not condemn her for its blond color (a rather clear comment on political extremism). The scene is heavy with color and natural imagery. The readers will know in a few pages that Christabel and Randolph have been here before them.

Possession is full of moments like these, in which overly political or overly sexualized analysis is rejected, if gently, in favor of a more humanistic feeling toward literature and nature. The effect of Byatt's characterization of Maud and Roland as somewhat hesitant towards their

own scholarship is somewhat complex, and that complexity is amplified by other elements in the novel that contribute to the sort of discussion carried on about literature. The treatment of literature is given depth by the metafictional quality of the discussion here—*Possession* is literature, and as such takes advantage of the methods through which readers can derive meaning from it. Just as our main characters' attitudes toward literary theory make a comment on literature, *Possession*'s extremely self-conscious narrative makes similar comments. The novel is quite preoccupied with the qualities of traditional narrative, and the way narrative influences our expectations as readers and as actors in our lives. In the passage above, for example, Roland and Maud have been following a partially known narrative. They are deliberately tracing the story of the Victorian lovers, but decide to take a break. Roland suggests that they go to a place attractively called Boggle Hole, saying, "I just want to look at something, with interest, and without layers of meaning. Something new" (291). Their temporary escape from following Ash and LaMotte is in a way false, as Ash and LaMotte did go to Boggle Hole on their excursion. The narrative of the Victorians within *Possession* refuses to let Roland and Maud escape, and they inevitably follow their path; similarly, the larger narrative of *Possession* refuses to allow this instance to be free of coincidence and meaning. The section beginning immediately after Roland's words begins, "Something new, they had said. They had a perfect day for it," giving a reader the sense that this is, of course, not new (291). Just as Boggle Hole is the site one of the most profound scenes in the forging of Roland's and Maud's relationship, it is central to Randolph's and Christabel's brief romance. Byatt narrates Ash's thoughts, "He remembered most, when it was over, when time had run out, a day they had spent in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word" (311). The imagery is almost identical: Roland and Maud see "high hedges thick with dog-roses...intricately and thickly entwined with

rampant wild honeysuckle, trailing and weaving creamy flowers among the pink and gold,” while Ash and LaMotte see, “tall hedges thick with dog-roses, intricately entwined with creamy honeysuckle” (292, 311). Roland is fascinated by Maud’s hair; Randolph with Christabel’s waist.

Possession self-consciously invokes the demands of narrative form in a way that both satires them and reinscribes them, both following and creating a narrative pattern. The characters are academics, and so are conscious of the structure of their own actions. They struggle with the tension between wanting to know what happened between Ash and LaMotte and the compulsion to study text for text. The mystery takes them out of their accustomed habits of study; instead, their own actions become the kind of narrative they might study. Roland and Maud, discussing their own desire to keep the letters a secret, call what they feel “narrative curiosity.” Later, when the two are in France, and Ariane LeMinier presents Maud with the journal of Christabel’s cousin from the period Christabel spent in Brittany, Maud’s dominant emotions are “curiosity and narrative greed” (363). Ariane’s note to Maud at the end of the journal explains that she did not tell Maud any of its contents so as to preserve for her the “narrative shock and pleasure” of reading it herself” (410). These characters are obviously conscious of the narrative arc of both the story they are following and its parallel, in which they are participating. The greater text itself, *Possession* as a sum of all the partial texts that comprise it, also clearly defers to these narrative functions. *Possession* preserves for us, the readers, all the same narrative shock that Maud and Roland experience as they put together the story of Randolph and Christabel through the journals and the letters. We feel all the narrative greed and curiosity they feel, if not more, for we know that we are reading two stories, and we desire the development of each. Our intuitive sense of narrative form is gratified perhaps even more, as we see the actions behind the

letters and journals: we know how Ellen Ash feels as she buries the box and Christabel's unread letter with Randolph; we know that Randolph met his daughter, and why Christabel never knew.

V. The Romantic Quest

Through this self-aware, self-reinforcing construction of narrative, *Possession* creates its romantic quest. The quest occurs on multiple levels in the text. First, Roland and Maud are searching for the truth behind the original discovered letters, a search that leads them on an adventure through letters, diaries, works of literature and the English and French countrysides. They are constructing a coherent historical narrative. Second, they are themselves (consciously) part of a narrative, that of their lives and actions. Third, of course, is the greater narrative of *Possession*. Each of these narratives is in some way built around the question of whether they can be construed as a narrative, or perhaps whether they can be construed in any way other than a narrative.

Roland's and Maud's search for the historical narrative is fraught with doubts about the legitimacy of their enterprise. What is the point of such a quest? Is the knowledge they seek to gain a valid kind of knowledge—is it even knowledge? It is clear that trying to find out the details of a love affair between the two poets they study academically is of dubious respectability. This is one reason Roland and Maud hide their activities. The other, as they admit to themselves, is the strange sense of personal possessiveness they feel toward the secret, their personal investment in the story. On this level, the *Possession* explores the legitimacy of biographical knowledge in general. It interrogates the issue of personal curiosity as it follows the characters on a quest partially motivated by personal curiosity. This level of the quest also

explores the idea of the historical narrative—is it legitimate in the contemporary intellectual-cultural milieu to try to tell a story of what happened to two people on the most basic, literal level? While the characters question this themselves, their doubts never reach far enough to make them stop looking. They want to know, they are driven by curiosity and a strong desire to finish the story, and ultimately, they make the choice to look at the secret in the box and find out what happened.

Still, the end of the novel complicates the delivery of narrative gratification. In the postscript, Randolph meets his daughter Maia, who fails to give his coded message to her supposed aunt Maud. The intense pathos of this scene, which finishes the novel, belies to some degree the scholars' belief that they know the end of the story and our belief that we can know the end of a story. They never find out that Randolph met his daughter, nor do they know that the lock of hair in his grave is hers. So while *Possession* concedes something to the idea of personal curiosity in that it allows the characters the ending they are looking for, it undermines any stability one might find in that ending by immediately showing a piece of the story that Roland and Maud and their band of scholars will never know. The book ends with the thwarted attempt at communication:

“Tell your aunt,” he said, “that you met a poet, who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new.”

“I’ll try to remember,” she said, steadying her crown.

So he kissed her, always matter-of-fact, so as not to frighten her, and went on his way.

And on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble, and the lovely crown was broken, and she forgot the message, which was never delivered. (555)

This knowledge the reader is left with creates a delicate and deeply wrenching tension between the ending of Roland’s and Maud’s story, in love and poetry, and the second ending, the ending

of the historical narrative and of the whole book, in which the readers witness an instance of beautiful and delicate tenderness made tragic by its privateness, the fact that it is never witnessed or acknowledged, never recorded or communicated. So the readers are left with conflicting impressions: first, that the contemporary thread of the story is completed, the main characters in love, curiosity satisfied, everything in its place; second, that the historical narrative ends bittersweetly, because Randolph met his child but no one ever knew but him and us.

The multiple endings of *Possession* create a strange balance between continuity and discontinuity. The threads of knowledge and communication are complexly woven: earlier, Ellen Ash reads the final from Randolph to Christabel, but does not deliver it; Ellen buries Christabel's final letter of revelation with Randolph when he dies, and Roland, Maud, et al. are the first to ever read it; Roland and Maud and the others believe that Randolph never knew about his child; Randolph gives Maia a message to let Christabel know he has met her, but the message is lost. And the whole adventure begins, of course, with unfinished drafts of letters, and the question of what ever became of those inchoate messages. If the quest (or quests) of *Possession* is toward a reconstruction of narrative, then the resolution presented is unclear. One story concludes happily, with Roland and Maud deciding to allow themselves to love each other and with Roland escaping his stifling life and beginning to write poetry; another story ends with several instances of what would be acts of reconciliation uncompleted. And the larger story, the story of *Possession*, how does it end? The postscript begins:

There are things that 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.

Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was. (552)

Possession ends with an affirmation of story. While the events of the postscript are supposedly never told, they are told here in the end of the book, and they make the book something other than what it would have been without it. The final line of this passage, “This is how it was,” impresses on the readers that we are being told a story. The final line of the book finishes, “...and she forgot the message, which was never delivered.” Not all stories are told. But although the book ends with an anecdote about interrupted messages, it is also a moment of profound emotional communication with the reader—this is the most wrenching moment in *Possession*. To understate the situation, the signals here are mixed.

This ambivalence about narrative manifests itself not only in the construction of *Possession*, but also in Roland’s and Maud’s reflections on their situation. That Roland and Maud are fulfilling their own narrative is obvious, both to the readers and to them (this is underscored by the reference, through Roland’s name, to the unfulfilled romantic narrative of “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” the Browning poem which by its existence as a namesake lends Roland’s story an air of predetermination, but in its content seems to convey the futility of the quest in general). They are set up: they are following a story of two people falling in love and conducting an affair (two people who, being writers of narrative poetry and stories, probably thought about their lives in narrative, too), but to find out each step of the story, they have to reconstruct it themselves. While they are in Brittany solving the mystery of Christabel’s period of absence, Roland reflects on his strange involvement with predetermination:

Somewhere in the locked-away letters, Ash had referred to the plot of fate that seemed to hold or drive the dead lovers. Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others. He tried to extend this aperçu. Might there not, he professionally asked himself, be an element of superstitious dread in any self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognises that it has got out of hand? That recognises that connections proliferate

apparently at random, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, which would, of course, being a good postmodernist principle, require the aleatory or the multivalent or the “free,” but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some—to what?—end. Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. ‘Falling in love,’ characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot. Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite might be true. Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. And that would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with. (456)

Realizing that he is embroiled in a kind of theoretical game, Roland begins to deconstruct his life as he would a text. He contemplates the possibility that his life is being determined by some kind of narrative force, and identifies that he feels like an imposter into someone else’s narrative, or like someone else’s narrative might be imposing on him. He tries to rationalize his narrative superstition, as well as to attribute the possibility that he and Maud are falling in love to the effects of the felt pressure of the narrative. Here, narrative is a danger. Involvement with narrative would compromise their integrity, not just on a professional level—a romantic involvement might interfere with Roland’s and Maud’s ability to work together logically—but also on an intellectual level—to fancy themselves in love would be a concession to a narrative tradition they are not necessarily willing to grant credibility to. If Roland and Maud succumb to the deep human desire for coherence and closure, they are giving in to conduct that is below them both professionally and intellectually, framing the temptations of narrative as somehow superficial. This categorization of desire for narrative structure as both deeply human and intellectually gauche frames the central tension of *Possession*’s treatment of narrative: we continue to want stories to give shape and meaning to life, but imagination can never really mold life into a story.

Of course, as we see in the end of the book, Roland and Maud do behave as if the plot they are in is “that sort of plot.” But their decision to believe in love and stories with endings is not simply capitulation to the ancient, pagan power of the romantic narrative, but rather a fully aware, informed and self-conscious acceptance of the inevitability of its structure.

V. The Legacy

Possession turns the romance’s element of legacy and continuity into, not surprisingly, another exploration of text and narrative. The idea of familial continuity, manifested in Maud’s lineage, reflects the deeper theme of continuity in narrative, and more specifically, in the relevance of narrative. We know Maud is related to Christabel, but we do not find out until the cluster of surprises at end of *Possession* that Maud is directly descended from both Randolph and Christabel. In the style of the traditional romance, Maud has been involved all along in a quest for her own identity. When the group of scholars reads the disinterred letter from Christabel to Randolph, Blackadder points out the coincidence: ““How strange for you, Maud, to turn out to be descended from both—how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth—no, the truth—of your own origins.”” (547). Blackadder also observes that Maud is the recipient of the unread letter Ellen Ash preserved by burying it with Randolph. Like the heroine of many a romance, Maud finds that she is the heir to a special legacy. The legality of the inheritance in this case is in dispute, but as far as most of the characters and the structure of the narrative are concerned, Maud, as an intellectual and a scholar, is the true heir to the letters of her ancestors.

Though Maud is the inheritor of the literal legacy of the letters, both Roland and Maud are positioned as inheritors of the legacy in the larger structure of the romantic quest story. Maud

is possibly the legal heir to the physical letters, but Roland becomes a kind of intellectual heir, as he begins to turn the vague lists of words in his head into poetry, moving from his role of parasitic academic into the role of the author of original texts, or creator. While characters in the contemporary thread of the book live in a world of largely secondary texts and build their community on those texts, *Possession* still privileges the original text, usually the literary text, over the scholarly text. The latter are subjects of dialogue, but we rarely see them excerpted. When they are present in *Possession*, as with Mortimer Cropper's biography of Ash and Leonora Stern's writings on Christabel LaMotte, they serve the purpose of satire. Cropper's biography is a nostalgic, narcissistic piece of work (best contrasted with Crabb Robinson's impulse to "do some good by keeping a record of my interviews" of the great literary men he was not privileged to join); Stern's book is an example of the kind of dogmatic, radical theory *Possession* satires in other places (28). Where these kinds of writing are shown as excessive or indulgent, the literary writings of Ash, LaMotte and others are given more credit. So when Roland begins to write poetry, we can see this as a kind of inheritance of a practice that has been somewhat discredited or discouraged by the postmodern academic milieu.

Writing and knowledge based in narrative are similarly discredited by the postmodern intelligentsia, and both are to some degree revitalized by *Possession*'s rejection of extreme (either traditional or radical) theoretical positions. Cropper's overly simplistic, materialistic scholarship represents one extreme pole, while Leonora's uncompromising politics represents another. Roland and Maud are caught in the middle of a field that constantly complicates the process of acquiring knowledge, and they move somewhat vaguely between positions—as scholars, they owe their training to the postmodern-oriented community of the university literature department, but their instincts sometimes cause them to rebel. *Possession* is partially

about Roland and Maud finding a place in all of this, finding a middle ground and perhaps reconnecting with a kind of scholarship they can commit to on more than one level. Their training delegitimizes the framing of knowledge in narrative, but their experience increasingly confirms the relevance of narrative. Their special position as both investigators of this mystery and members of academia, heirs in some way to the knowledge of two worlds, give them a perfect vantage from which to forge a new, tempered understanding of scholarship.

Roland and Maud also hesitantly come to terms with the idea of love being a vital and compelling force despite its recent unpopularity, as concepts go. They fall in love with each other despite academic commitments that would seem to prohibit belief in love at all. And when they do finally let go of their resistance, the narrative seems to lose its self-consciousness, but it doesn't really.

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 crushed 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. (550-551)

This passage, while it seems more genuine, perhaps, than other moments in the narrative, is still full of the self-referential elements present all throughout *Possession*. The nakedness is not complete. Roland and Maud are alone and laid bare to each other, but the narrative does not lose its fullness. This passage invokes, for the last time in the book, the idea of possession itself, even using the very word. It evokes the language of much earlier literature, the gendered language of

the conquering knight, but in a way that nods at the feminist work present in the book (and the voice crying out in triumph is Maud's).

The act of love causes a rebirth in the natural world, just as the storm reflects the moral disorder at the frenzied height of the grave robbing. Just as with every invocation of a literary trope in *Possession*, this one is not unself-conscious. The imagery of vitality and newness at the end of this passage is a reference to the traditional manifestation of human chaos in natural world, as well as a reference to the Fall, in which human folly effects the destruction of Paradise. This passage complicates the idea of continuity. Roland and Maud inherit the ability to love, and their love heals and remakes the world, but they also re-enter the world of pain and suffering...

VI. The Real, the Non-real and the Ideal

A romance evokes a world we can see clearly as non-realistic. Frye, using terminology borrowed from Wallace Stevens, sets up a clear conflict between imagination and reality. The latter, defined in contrast with the former, is "whatever the imagination works with that is not itself" (Frye *The Secular Scripture* 36). Frye rather sweepingly divides all of fiction into these two categories:

In the fiction-writing of the last four or five centuries there has been a kind of reversible shuttle moving between imagination and reality, as Stevens uses those words. One direction is called 'romantic,' the other 'realistic.' The realistic tendency moves in the direction of the representational and the displaced, the romantic tendency in the opposite direction, concentrating on the formulaic units of myth and metaphor (37).

While Frye is not describing realism specifically, he is presenting the romance's approach to reality as oppositional to the straight representation of reality. The conflict, simply, is imagination versus reality. Diane Elam recognizes the same conflict in *Romancing the*

Postmodern; she takes as her project the “privileging of realism over romance in the tradition of the novel” (2).

Possession takes a complex position with regard to what is realistic and what is not. Its approach to the world is a complicated project, as the book does not employ magical realism, surrealism or the kind of postmodern stylistic devices that might qualify as non-realistic.

Possession is written in a relatively realistic style, certainly in opposition with more blatantly postmodern works. Its participation in postmodern discourse lies more in its treatment of the postmodern condition of the world, or navigating life in a postmodern context, than in its style. The sense of conflict between the realistic and the non-realistic lies in *Possession*'s treatment of the idea of narrative in life. The book explores deeply the phenomenon of thinking about life in terms of narrative: attributing narrative properties to life, disentangling what we think of as stories and what we think of as the normal world, letting narrative structure the way we think about reality. Instead of clearly constructing a world we can recognize as unrealistic, *Possession* allows its layering of narratives and interweaving of stories lull its readers into a gentle but ultimately disconcerting sense of narrative and reality blurring into one rather amorphous entity.

Possession engages briefly with the idea of realism as one approach to writing realistically about life. Roland's story is a kind of effort to keep himself out of a realist novel. His choice between life with Val and life with Maud become almost a deliberate choice between realism and something else. In the passages in which Roland thinks about Val, he is overwhelmed by ugly associations—guilt, poverty, cat piss. Their life together is a depressing tableau, characterized by frugality, guilty silences, resentment and a kind of resigned recognition that neither of them has any better option than to stay together. Roland thinks of his family as disappointed and himself as someone who has missed out on all the excitement: “In the

expansive 1960s he would have advanced rapidly and involuntarily, but now he saw himself as a failure and felt vaguely responsible for this” (14). Val comes from a working-class background similar to Roland’s, with a single mother supported by social security. But where Roland has at least some ambition, or potential to transcend what he feels are his unpleasant beginnings, Val seems determined to sink masochistically into a life of misery and invisibility. While Roland finishes his PhD, Val takes entry-level jobs: “She would not be drawn out to talk about her work, to which she almost never referred without the adjective ‘menial.’ ‘I must do a few more menial things before I go to bed’ or, more oddly, ‘I was nearly run over on my menial way this morning’” (17). The absurdity of Val’s statements emphasizes the absurdity of extreme realism as an approach to reality.

While Roland’s life at the beginning of *Possession* is the setup for a perfectly depressing realist novel, they are also an ideal beginning of a contemporary romance. They form a base from which to ascend, and Roland does ascend from poverty to employment, from stasis to creativity, from realism to romance. In a way, Roland’s personal ascent parallels *Possession*’s ascent away from realism. But the other end of that journey is not clearly defined in the opposition. What exactly is the form of non-realism that *Possession* ends up with?

Possession certainly plays with realistic and non-realistic conditions. One is the idea that intellectual self-awareness is a heightened form of reality—a more realistic way of interpreting life. Self-awareness involves a constant deconstruction of the world the characters live in, informed by an education in theory and power structures, etc., resulting in a rejection of essentialisms and the uncomplicated definitions of love and subjectivity. The academics strive for this, and they thrive in this deconstructive and, in a way, self-destructive activity. It becomes another kind of fiction the characters are involved in. The intense state of awareness is a both a

hyper-realistic world, in that it attempts to take into account the truths that lie behind the daily experiences of life, but it is also a kind of unrealistic world, in that it is an unsustainable way of thinking about and experiencing the world. Some characters, like Leonora Stern and Mortimer Cropper, do live their lives in the extreme reaches of the theoretical world, but occasionally concede to the more moderate world others live in. Roland and Maud are exhausted by their involvement in this project. They find themselves at the extreme, in a position in which deconstruction is excessive and perhaps unproductive, and the political as a means of seeking truth is no longer attractive or promising (and the narrative is becoming increasingly so), and they reject it to a certain degree. On the trip to York, Maud says, ““Maybe we’re symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists””; later, Roland says, ““It’s exhausting. When everything’s a deliberate political stance. Even if it’s interesting”” (293, 295).

Possession engages with the world of academic self-awareness as a kind of non-realism, but it engages most deeply with the idea of reality as story, in some ways the opposite of that academic excess. The characters struggle with the framing of their lives as a narrative; the narrative acknowledges its own form as a conceit as it recreates it. Repeatedly, we see indications that the idea of narrative is unreal and unrealistic, and yet it becomes inevitable and powerfully attractive as a way of thinking about reality. Narrative form is in itself a kind of non-reality, but it is also necessary to the processing of reality. Story is both *Possession*’s form of a non-realistic world and its conception of the most realistic portrayal of life. It acknowledges that engaging with the fiction of narrative form is as realistic an activity as any other. The question of what comprises a realistic world becomes somewhat unproductive when we concede to the difficulty of distinguishing between realistic and non-realistic, as *Possession* does to some degree in its treatment of narrative.

Perhaps the most important element of non-realism in *Possession* is the quintessentially romantic view that an ideal world exists. The struggle to sort out the themes of scholarship, theory, curiosity and love, among others, is an effort to reassert the existence of some ideal world, something beyond the mean and meager conditions of the empirical world. Roland and Maude refuse to give up the belief that love, for one, could be real, trained as they are to doubt it. *Possession's* conclusion affirms that belief by affirming the ability of imagination to lift the imaginers to a romantic transcendence. Writing and creation are wrapped up in this—Roland's path to scholar to writer is nothing less than a romantic ascent. And yet, while these elements of the story resolve in happiness and elevation, no real object is ever reached. For all the energy put into the quest and into the anticipation of a final answer, there is none. What we discover at the opening of the tomb, which is in itself a kind of decoy quest, is another decoy—a clue that shows the readers that no solution is ever reached, no final knowledge is ever gained. We, with the characters, arrive at a state of glorified consciousness, of belief in imagination and idealism without any proof—but without any need of proof—that it promises anything.

VII. Resolution

The quest has always been the central, unifying structure of the romance, the quintessential driving force of the adventure narrative that seeks and builds, then finds and resolves. The romance is a triumphant struggle for meaning and fulfillment; it is a perfect and obvious matching of meaning and narrative structure, in which personal, human fulfillment is paired with the graceful arc of the story. It is the narrative embodiment of progress, and as such, becomes an obvious site for postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction. In the postmodern moment, the

romance becomes a kind of blank, a story so transparently and outdatedly structured that it attracts revision and reinfusion with multiple meanings, and yet it retains the narrative structure that has always defined romance. Where romance supports an understanding of reality based in ascent, a reality in which change is progressive and action transforms, postmodernism posits a reality that thwarts the formulation of theories of progress, so the postmodern reinterpretation of the quest must be, somehow, a quest and an anti-quest. It must be a self-conscious journey that both engages with the idea of search and rejects the possibility of finding. It must relinquish the object or goal.

And yet, what is a quest with no goal? It is a quest that realizes that its endpoint is also its beginning point, which is also its intermediate points. It is a quest that recognizes both its own futility and inevitability. The postmodern romance becomes a metaphor for the unachievable quests attempted by narrative, literature, art and theory. In a frame of reference which puts us in contact with the meaninglessness of literature, in which texts seem to offer nothing but language games and conceptual tricks, the romance reappears as a manifestation of the unavoidable but irresolvable quest we embark on in art and in criticism to construct either transcendent meaning or a stable opposition to it. The structural elements of the quest are mocking symbols of the literary field's tools; the nostalgia is a path that would seem to lead into the past or some other impossible reality, but leaves us exactly where we began.

In *Possession*, we have a story constructed piecemeal, simultaneously discovered and put together by the characters as the reader discovers them and puts them together. The characters and the reader are companions on a quest for meaning and narrative. We end up with a relatively unified story, but its resolution avoids being truly satisfactory. What does *Possession* leave us with? We find the truth behind the affair of the two Victorian poets—that it was messy, as every

affair is, and that it ended badly. We learn that they had a child, that Randolph met her and that Christabel felt a natural human remorse at the end of her life. We find that Randolph's wife knew about the affair and that she did love her husband but could not give him the final letter from Christabel. But in the parallel story, we see Roland and Maud give in to tradition, in a way, and take some distance from postmodern meta-analysis of their lives: they fall in love, Roland starts to become a writer and life goes on.

Diane Elam writes, "postmodernism *is* romance," and that it is "not a new, more depressing, narrative but rather the coexistence of multiple and mutually exclusive narrative possibilities without a point of abstraction from which we might survey them. Postmodern romance offers no perspectival view; it is an *ironic coexistence* of temporalities." If not depressing, then this view of postmodernism is at least confusing (though I might still argue that the "coexistence of multiple and mutually exclusive narrative possibilities without a point of abstraction" is depressing). That we have no point of abstraction is a rather defeatist claim. Postmodernism's attempt to defeat the narrative, or its claim that narrative can no longer narrate reality, is an interesting and clever idea, but that narrative will always be more relevant and intelligible. The postmodern romance, while it may not offer a perspectival view, offers through its seemingly ironic coexistence the possibility of a way out of the mess. It offers the comfort of the narrative, however meaningless or overly determined, a point from which we can gain some distance from the part of postmodernism that indicates that we have no ground to stand on, no point of abstraction. The postmodern romance shows us the quest in postmodernism, the attempt to find meaning even when we know better than to expect any, and it shows that this is not an illegitimate enterprise.

We find that the postmodern romance returns us to a less extreme, less dire worldview. It brings a familiar structure to the exploration of the postmodern condition—a structure that gives intelligibility to the loss of meaning and narrative, that structure being the constant search to reconstruct these things in their absence. When we suddenly derail a set of definitions, assumptions and ways of understanding the world, what can we possibly talk about but those very entities? We begin a process of learning how to talk about the new, learning how to break from the old, but of course the very process of building something new requires having something to build with—*bricolage* as a necessary activity. In this case, the new is undefined, or only defined as a negative; what is the alternative to narrative? And so we talk about postmodern literature and the postmodern condition as spaces in which the narrative no longer exists, or the narrative is broken, fractured, deconstructed. But in talking about narrative and its fundamental descriptive and proscriptive inadequacies, we are still talking about narrative. Similarly, we are still talking about structure—poststructuralism, postmodernism's loyal younger sibling, being a term for the state of self-conscious reflection that occurs once we problematize structure itself as a means to acquire and confer knowledge. Two projects, that of forming understanding in the structure of narrative and that of simply trying to form understanding, are deeply ingrained, and so they are unavoidable as subjects of discussion, of reading and of writing.

The postmodern romance, then, is the perfect structure for this conversation. It is familiar and obvious, so that the self-consciousness required for a project like this one comes easily. The project is the search for narrative or for whatever is to replace it, and so it is as reasonable a choice as any that this search takes the form of the most traditional of all searches, the romance. The search for narrative has all the most important elements: a quest, elevated origins (the privileged status of narrative), a special inheritance (the possibility of discovering the next step

of the literary evolutionary process), unrealistic conditions (this is fiction and literature, not the most real of all worlds). In adapting itself to the postmodern crisis of narrative and knowledge, the romantic structure illustrates its usefulness simultaneously as it explores its own demise.

This phenomenon creates a space in which to explore the deconstruction and reconstruction of narrative less radically and perhaps more rigorously (it seems most fair to call this a phenomenon—genre seems too overdetermined a word for the postmodern romance, plot and other terms that suggest themselves too specific). While the manifestos and polemics by now so familiar to us are stirring and persuasive, they are necessarily works of emotion rather than careful consideration. The space the postmodern romance opens up also allows for a reconsideration of certain positive, productive activities, themes abandoned rather hastily in the tendency to deconstruct-and-destroy: love, reason, writing. *Possession* explores and gives credit to all of these themes while engaging with the postmodern deconstructive project as well, and leaves us in a sort of middle position. It mediates postmodernism's relentless ironizing tendency. We do not have to abandon postmodernism to have a little faith in love and reason, and nor do we have to abandon love and reason to be conscious of the postmodern world, or conscious of the world in a postmodern sense, recognizing its utter lack of absolutes. Certainly, everything is artifice, but deconstructing artifice does not disappear it. Nor is deconstruction an endpoint but rather a continual process, a search we engage in even while we know it has no resolution. *Possession*, on the other hand, shows us the value of artifice and of that continual process.

This quest we cannot abandon in literature proves relevant to theory and criticism as well. If we are talking about writing, reading and narrative, then we must also be talking about interpretation and criticism, those practices connected with reading and illuminating texts. Adena Rosmarin, in the introduction to her book *The Power of Genre*, writes that literary theory has

always defined itself as a direct search for the truth. She frames the theoretical, critical search for knowledge as a quest: “The problem with this program is that the search—whether for the perfectly solid ground or for the perfectly reflective medium—is never ending. More precisely, it is always reachable in theory but never reached in practice” (5). Rosmarin identifies in criticism a practice similar to that of postmodern narrative. Knowing that there is no ultimate truth buried under the bedrock or on the horizon, the theorist continues to theorize. In narrative, knowing that there is no ultimate truth to be gained from pursuing the narrative arc to its final resolution, we still pursue that arc. But rather than being a problem, this search is simply an inevitable characteristic of critical practice.

Recognizing the centrality of the quest, we can see postmodernism more clearly as a liminal space, or an attitude towards reality that opens up the possibility of constructing something with the pieces we have taken apart. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, “...postmodernism can probably not be considered a new paradigm...It has not replaced liberal humanism, even if it has seriously challenged it. It may mark, however, the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new” (4). What that new something may be is wonderfully unclear.

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