STUDIA PHILOLOGICA UNIVERSITATIS VELIKOTARNOVENSIS
VOL. 43/3.2 2025 VELIKO TARNOVO

10.54664/HWWX2301

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Detecting Histories and the Past: The Letter in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990)

Abstract
In A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), two accidentally discovered letters, carefully tucked between the pages of a copy of Vico's *Principi di scienza nuova* in the London Library, open a vigorous investigation of the past. The subtitle implies that this is a quest story whose main characters set out on a detective-like scholarly journey to identify the addressee of these letters, consequently leading to the discovery of a clandestine intimate correspondence, well concealed for a hundred years, between two *fictional* nineteenth-century intellectuals, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The intertwined viewpoints of Victorianism and postmodernism, embodied by the Ash-LaMotte and Michell-Bailey pairs, evolve through a dialogue across time, reflecting on the present about the past. *Possession* presents a metafictional approach to the construction and invention of history that, later in her *On Histories and Stories* (2000), Byatt discusses through a theoretical perspective concerning the methods of writing and interpreting historical narratives.

Keywords: epistolarity, letters, metafiction, history, novel, romance.

Two accidentally uncovered letters, carefully tucked between the pages of a copy of Vico's *Principi di scienza nuova* at the London Library, result in a vigorous investigation of the past in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990). As the subtitle implies, this is a quest story that plunges its characters into an epistemological search for the identity of the addressee of these letters. This pursuit subsequently leads to the unearthing of a clandestine, intimate correspondence, well concealed for a hundred years, between two fictional nineteenth-century intellectuals, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* is not, in terms of genre, a historical novel, but is essentially made of history and has been described as a "quasihistorical novel" (Martyniuk 2004**:** 265).[1] It is a novel of the re-evaluation and gradual reconstruction of the past, undertaken by two British academics: Roland Michell, a research assistant to Professor Blackadder at the British Museum, and Dr

[1] Although *Possession* deals with history, it cannot be called a historical novel. Steven Connor, for example, makes the following distinction that helps define the generic frame and the use of history in Byatt's novel. He distinguishes "between *historical* and *historicised* fiction, between fiction about history and fiction about its own historically relative construction of history" (Connor, 1996: 142–143).

Maud Bailey, director of the Women's Resource Centre in Lincoln. In its attempt to revive Victorian poetic style and aesthetics and censure nineteenth-century social and sexual decorum, the novel views the past through the research goal and the near-detective pursuits of the two scholars. They attempt to unravel the secrets of former times and successfully resuscitate history to the point where it becomes a critical aspect in their lives as denizens of postmodernity. *Possession* narrates an invented history; generically, it is a pastiche of literary and non-literary narratives, present and past, as snippets of different angles of the lives of the two *fictitious*, mid-nineteenth century poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. However, the academic endeavours of the two *fictional* scholars, Roland Michell and Dr Bailey, turn the fragmentary quality of the novel into a story of collected evidence. This paper looks into the postmodernist conflation of history and fiction in Byatt's Possession, which Byatt explores later through the eyes of a literary critic in On Histories and Stories (2000). I hope to outline Byatt's method of fictionalising historicity and historicising fiction. I argue that the use of the epistolary mode, along with other discourses such as diary, poetry, and academic writing, has a particularly historicising as well as romanticising effect on *Possession*. I propose that the letter connects the world of postmodern researchers to the imagined world of their research, reframing the past as ongoing and revealing cyclical truths from history projected into the present. I begin by discussing the text's romance-novel rigidity and its historical importance, before moving on to the letter as a link between the Victorian and postmodern worlds.

The collection of various documents in the story points to the novel's realistic input, though slightly challenging the subtitle in which it is called "a Romance." The novel opens with a prefatory material, an excerpt from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), which seems naturally suggestive of Byatt's choice of "romance" on the title page rather than "novel." However, it also reveals a postmodern play with the nearly three centuries-long debate on the two genres. Traditionally, the novel-romance tension was based on the degrees of illusion, accuracy, and objectivity in depicting truth. From at least the end of the seventeenth century, romances were identified as chivalric, improbable, amorous as well as adventurous narratives; novels, in contrast, were seen as more lifelike.[2] Like Fielding, Samuel Johnson distinguishes between "comedy of romance" which "presents accidents that daily happen in the world" and "heroic romance" which places

[2] William Congreve, for example, views romances as "generally composed of the Constant Loves and invincible Courages of Hero's, Heroines, Kings and Queens, Mortals of the first Rank ... where lofty Language, miraculous Contingencies and impossible Performances, elevate and surprize the Reader." Novels, in contrast, "are of a more familiar nature; Come near us, and represent to us Intrigues in practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresidented. … Romances give more of Wonder, Novels more Delight" (Congreve, 1692: [ix–xi]; The Preface to the Reader, *Incognita*).

"[personages] in imaginary castles" (1750: 20).[3] This generic tension, divided between objective truth and fictiveness, has consistently been influenced by another discursive dichotomy, fiction and history, which for Walter Scott appears to have been quite conventional in meeting, as Alison Lee remarks, "the Realist demands for objectivity, detail […] and, above all, factual documentation" (1990: 30). Scott believes it is natural to look to the past for inspiration, and that the subject of truth cannot be answered without combining fiction and history. In *Waverley* he makes it obvious that his attention is on universal human qualities, that is, he uses a generic romance attribute transported into the nineteenth century to seek moral lessons from history. In *Ivanhoe*, he suggests that the interpretation of history may be modernised to serve the issues and tenets of the present day so that the past can be "translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in" (Scott 1998: 9; Dedicatory Epistle).

In this context, Byatt's allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne's observation on generic contrasts serves as a significant hint regarding her own work, *Possession*. In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance* (1851), Hawthorne describes the novel as a literary form that tends to be minutely faithful to the depiction of both the possible and the probable of daily life, whereas the romance is more liberal in allowing authors to choose the context and be governed by their own imagination.[4] Such creative latitude, he further suggests, enables writers to recreate the elusive

[3] It should be noted that by the end of the eighteenth century, *history*, *romance*, and the *novel* had been more or less classified into separate generic groups. The fundamental question of truth still distinguished between romance and the novel as it had been approached by Congreve in the late seventeenth century. According to Samuel Miller, an early nineteenth-century scholar, "fictitious narrative, as a medium of instruction and entertainment, has been employed from the earliest ages ... For many centuries the only form of fictitious history in vogue was that of *Romance*, or description of characters and manners of former times, mingled with many extravagant and improbable circumstances" (Miller 1803: 370). "The word *Novel* is intended to express that kind of fictitious history, which presents natural and probable characters" (Miller 1803: 373). By way of contrast, historians in the eighteenth century, the same authority emphasises, "admitted less fiction into their narratives; stated truths in a more luminous, connected, and satisfactory manner; and went, in general, more deeply and successfully into the relations of political causes and effects" (Miller 1803: 340).

[4] Consider the quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance* that A.S. Byatt used as one of the mottos in her novel *Possession*: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former – while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation" (Hawthorne 1991: 1; Byatt 1990: [ix]).

present through the study of the past. "The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition," we read from the motto with which Byatt implies an intended link with her *own novel*, "lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (Hawthorne 1991: 1; Byatt 1990: [ix]). As further discussed, *Possession* is informed by both genres and is designed to convey the message that the postmodern age can only find its focus by examining the unsaid in history and reconfiguring the past into the present.

Possession works at several levels. Generically ambivalent, it seems to combine the features of both novel and romance, by thematically knitting together the two parallel worlds of two Victorian-era poets and two late twentieth-century critics: encounters that gradually blur generic distinctions. As a romance, it employs the archetypal love fraught with obstacles, perilous adventure, lofty aspirations, and a predictable outcome in the experiences of both Victorians and postmoderns. At the same time, *Possession* represents a simulacrum of present-day academic life. It leads one to believe that it is a realistic study of scholars who critically seek to address the unknown in literary history, who read and analyse textual evidence, such as poetry, journals, diaries, and letters, and piece them together with what gradually comes up as discoveries in their research. With its metacritical thrust, Jennifer M. Jeffers argues, *Possession* is a text "masquerading as a traditional Romance" (Jeffers 2002: 136). The romance mode that has animated the realistic premise may be found, a review notices, in the love relationship between Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte and consequently between their two researchers, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, in the rivalry amongst academics, and in the very quest for finding, deciphering, and hiding documentary evidence (Heilman 1995: 605). Christian Gutleben even calls *Possession* "a meta-romance which plays with the reader's romantic longings" for a promised denouement (2001:109). Apart from offering imaginative freedom, the romance mode, traditionally involving readers in subjective exploits, is typified by the remote and is both meant to be inspired by and be inspiring escapism for it has a moralising, instructive message to carry from the imagined past. *Possession* shows particularly this kind of escapist return to the past: the metacritical affiliation with history has a cyclical, repetitive implication for postmodern readers and characters alike. Dealing with the lives of academics in their study of the past as a campus novel, *Possession* plans to reconstitute established ideas about history as something finished and unchangeable; the quest makes research a little bit more romantic than in fact it is but also boosts a more creative approach to history that academic conventions cannot defy.

In her *On History and Stories: Selected Essays* (2000), Byatt particularly examines the late-twentieth-century return of history to fiction. In what she terms "the renaissance of the historical novel," she vindicates the apparent re-occurrence of historical texts by elaborating on Hayden White's observations regarding history and narrative, clearly endorsing his citation of Roland Barthes's assertion that "nar-

rative is simply there, like life itself [...] international, transhistorical, transcultural" (Byatt 2000: 9–10). To defend the cohabitation of history and fiction, Byatt details an argument for this *renaissance*. Thus, the first of her selected essays, "Fathers," looks at the shared tenets of historians, theorists, and writers who have re-conceptualised established historicist premises and the knowledge of history, and have eased the transport of views and beliefs across the rigid boundaries between fiction and history. Accordingly, Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* is viewed as "a patchwork of interrelated histories" and "factual fiction," intermingling imagination with "the historical facts," and Richard Holmes's biographies of the Romantics, as a new literary-historical breed, mixing, in a time and space travel, his life with the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft, the Shelley couple, de Nerval, and Stevenson (Byatt 2000: 10). In this group of fiction that crosses generic boundaries, she considers her 2000 novel *The Biographer's Tale*, which is about the puzzling associations "between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies)": about a biographer who intends to write a lucid life history of another biographer but finds only "fragments of other random lives," a work that shares a similar academic quest with *Possession* (Byatt 2000: 10).

As both a fiction writer and essayist, Byatt has employed the postmodernist approach of blending history and fiction, which arises from the current view that both are biased narratives and are therefore open to revision. In her essay "Fathers," she agrees with a new value system of artistic and academic reception of the historical past, naturally making – to refer back to the romance-novel distinction – the probable a creative version of the possible, to make it assume a plausible reading of the past. Such a creative approach to (re)writing history, by mixing factual material, documents, biographical events, and fiction, and, also, by involving them in the present in a metacritical revision of the past seems to illustrate, through fiction, the complexities of postmodern culture by unravelling and piecing together various interpretations of the past. Noticeably, Byatt has articulated this artistic view of history not only as a literary critic in *On History and Stories* (2000) but also as a writer in *Possession*, and, a decade later, in her novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). The "renaissance" of historical fiction, she insists, is the "study of the aesthetics of inventing, or re-inventing, or combining real and imaginary human beings" (Byatt 2000: 9–10).

In her essays Byatt maintains an inseparable link between the present and the past that equally underscores her own novelistic strategies: "[i]t may be argued," she asserts, "that we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it" (Byatt 2000: 11). The link to the past for her is apparently the driving force and reason why contemporary writers undertake history as their creative objective. On the one hand, she argues that "novelists are trying to find historical paradigms for contemporary situations," but she also believes that "there are other," "less solid reasons, amongst them, the aesthetic need to write coloured

and metaphorical language, to keep past literatures alive and singing, connecting the pleasure of writing to the pleasure of reading" (Byatt 2000: 11). The interest in narration and history, Byatt further points out, results from

> the novelists' new sense of the need for, and essential interest of, storytelling, after a long period of stream-of-consciousness, followed by the fragmented, non-linear forms of the *nouveau roman* and the experimental novel. The idea that 'all history is fiction' led to a new interest in fiction as history (Byatt 2000: 38).

In this blend of history, fiction, and narration, Byatt points out, the purpose of the writer remains somewhat evasive, beyond normative definitions:

> There are many current forms of historical fiction – parodic and pastiche, forms which are documents or incorporate real ones, mixtures of past and present, hauntings and ventriloquism, historical versions of genre fictions – Roman and mediaeval and Restoration detective stories and thrillers, both in popular literature and serious writing. The purposes of the writer can be incantatory, analytic, romantic, or stylistic. Or playful, or extravagant, or allegorical. (Byatt 2000: 38)

Against this background, Byatt places her own work *Possession*. The novel, she declares,

> plays serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past – the detective story, the biography, the mediaeval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne's fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third-person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale of the three women, filtered through Freud's account of the theme in his paper on the Three Caskets. (Byatt 2000: 48)

This multi-generic foundation of Byatt's novel defies a coherent, linear historical continuity, and the eclectic and fragmentary collection of discourses reveals a narrative with multiple perspectives on present and past events. Ingeborg Hoesterey observes that "postmodern pastiche is about cultural memory and the merging of horizons past and present" (2001: xi). It serves as a "cultural critique" of the known, previous literary models, reconfigured in a web of intertextual paradigms, forming a postmodernist aesthetics of representation, a *novel* insight into assessing the past. Moreover, "the conflation of genres" appears to be the *modus operandi* and "undisputed characteristics of aesthetic postmodernism" (Hoesterey 2001: xii). According to Linda Hutcheon, such "postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and

constructively creative" (1989: 98); the past, therefore, she further maintains, could be accessed only through the traces it has left, through "documents, eye-witness accounts" (Hutcheon 1989: 113), creatively and critically combined into a historical narrative.

The use of pastiche in *Possession*, the documented validity of the past, assumes a coordinated link with the postmodern concerns and endeavours of its characters. The two coupled perspectives of Victorianism and postmodernism, represented respectively by the Ash-LaMotte and Michell-Bailey pairs, grow out of a dialogue over time, which entails considerations of the present through the past. "Postmodern fiction," Hutcheon remarks, "suggests that to re-write and to re-present the past in fiction and in history, in both cases, is to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon 1988: 110). Such an observation seems to coincide with the overall plan of *Possession*. The novel, by rejecting traditional historical chronology, utilises diary entries, letters, academic research, and poetry to propose that the present is a reinterpretation of the past, serving as a discursive medium for gathering and analysing history to illuminate its own concerns.

The generic complexity of *Possession* places the novel in what Hutcheon has termed *historiographic metafiction*, "which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual past event" (Hutcheon 1988: 122). Similarly to other postmodern historical narratives, Byatt's novel tends to unfold history through particular, personal, and overall unique past events that happened to individuals who, in turn, are part of this history or who make history itself. In *Possession*, the personal and academic interests and quests of both Roland Michell and Maud Bailey put into view exactly this historical reconstruction. However, their approach to the past relativises history as it also appears to be an attempt to understand their own time; the research/detective method of attempted systematicity is expanded into a reconstructive map of historical events. *Possession* reveals history as a figure; the story of Roland and Maud is the reconstruction of a fictional history as well as the construction of this figure.

As Byatt's characters are "fictional creations rather than actual persons," Julian Gitzen comments, the method of combining history, poetry, biography, and research may be rendered as: "Fictional realism imitates art" (Gitzen 1995: 84). Within the fictional construction of the Victorian ethos, Nancy Chinn observes that many readers have recognised "Robert Browning as the model for Ash but are not certain of a model for LaMotte since neither her life nor her poetics resemble Elizabeth Barrett's" (2001: 179). The characterization of the mid-nineteenth-century poetess appears to be deliberately vague, her identity shrouded in mystery and further obscured by the evasive biographical findings of two intellectuals and lovers. Byatt's original plan to follow the model of Christina Rossetti was relinquished as she found her, in her own words, "too Christian, too self-destructive;" her comment goes on: "I wanted someone tougher. So, I ended up with what I think is the greatest woman

poet ever, Emily Dickinson. Her sounds, her words, the rhythm of her language" (Rothstein, qtd. in Chinn 2001: 179).[5] Yet, what may be certain is that Byatt did not aim at depicting or restoring the social and economic scene of the nineteenth century. Her mind was more engaged with recreating the undisclosed and private lives of Victorian artists and the poetic spirit of the day that they enunciated in their writing as conditioned, in turn, by the moral and ethical pre-eminence of their own time.

A novel that conforms to the romance plot scheme of the quest for the truth also means to challenge the present. The lives of two fictitious poets and the fictional scholars who research them create a layered timeframe in the novel that calls into question the principle of historicity and continuity as well as the link between them. Roughly speaking, Byatt's novel, Mariadele Boccardi explains, employs two plots that unfold over two periods: "one set in the past ... and one in the present of the author's writing. The modern sections tell a quasi-detective story of a search for the events in the past that are, in turn, available to the reader in the narratives set in the past; a successful outcome to the quest could reestablish continuity" (Boccardi 2004: 193). With its characters' critical engagement with and reassessment of the past, *Possession* conforms to the generic definition of metahistorical novels that are "generally set in the present but concerned with the appropriation, revision, and transmission of history" rather than depicting "a represented historical world as such" (Nünning 2004: 364).[6] The scholarly *detectives* Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, along with other academics such as Professor Blackadder, Mortimer Cropper, Fergus Wolff, Leonora Stern, and Beatrice Nest, all rely on textual evidence to historicise the past. Yet, the blend of documents – diaries, poetry, scholarly research, and letters – seems to relativise these sources and implies that understanding the unburied past is an indefinable ideal.

[5] An interview originally quoted in Mervyn Rothstein's "Best Seller Breaks Rule on Crossing the Atlantic" (Jan. 31, 1991) and referenced in Nancy Chinn's, "I am my own riddle" (2001: 179). See also Lisa Sternlieb's *The Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden Agendas* (2002: 132–135). In her concluding chapter, Sternlieb discusses Byatt's feminist stance and poetic vision in inventing a similarity between Christabel LaMotte and Christina Rossetti. Another generally accepted view claims that Christabel LaMotte is modelled after Elizabeth Barrett Browning. See, for example, Kathleen Williams Renk's "A. S. Byatt, the Woman Artist, and Suttee" (2004: 613).

[6] The re-evaluation of the past, however, Amy J. Elias comments, has moved history to romance to show that *metahistorical romance*, a concept she builds upon Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction," shows "distrust of the humanist value of *fabula*" and that it "confronts" historicity "as repetition and deferral," by which she probably means that the postmodern writers who exploit history tend to question its continuity and orderliness as a source of imagination and narration, and that history, or some aspects of it, seem to reiterate. If understood correctly, such a perspective relates to the parallel worlds of Byatt's *Possession*. See Elias, *Sublime Desire* (2001: xi). For a critical reading of Elias's *Sublime Desire*, see McHale, "History Itself?" (2003: 151–161).

As a parody, pastiche, or mélange of different narratives, or a "meronymic" novel (Shinn 1995: 164), *Possession* uses different genres and voices to tell a story of fragmentary elements. What ties these together is the accidentally unearthed draft letters in the London Library, which inspire the two scholars to embark on a quest for unveiling silenced facts in literary history. Being the leading cause of the epistemological search, letters as physical entities and narratives rely on other written sources that allude to a possible epistolary relationship between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Chapters integrate different voices, from poetry through letter writing to a newspaper cutting or an academic paper, but the disentanglement of the web of links between these sources is basically led by the scholars' piecemeal approach to coincidences and historical ties and forms the sense of sequence in the storyline. Moreover, the epistolary mode as documentary evidence of the past raises the question of history and biography in literary studies. It shows Byatt's stance on the postmodernist methods of reading and assessing the past that view history not only as a collection of facts and physical entities but also as an imaginative construction of the links between them.

Possession recounts a story that places the letter in a complex investigative trail of "a cumulative series of" incidents (Byatt 1990: 237). Maud says, "Literary critics make natural detectives" and because of that, as "the classic detective story" evolved from "the classic adultery novel," it becomes clear that characters are in pursuit of clues about love and some wrongdoing (237–8). It is this investigative feature of *Possession* that supports Hutcheon's assertion that a "detective" plot contributes to a novel's metafictional qualities (1980: 86).[7] After Roland Michell unexpectedly finds two draft letters in Randolph Henry Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principi di scienza nuova* in the London Library, the thought that occupies his mind is how to uncover the identity of the addressee. After he does some research, he comes to believe that it might be the poetess Christabel LaMotte, which leads him to a feminist colleague, Maud Bailey. On their visit to Seal Court, in LaMotte's room, Maud suddenly remembers a poem that starts with "Dolly keeps a Secret/Safer than a Friend;" she guesses that a doll's bed, still there, may give a clue and so they find a package of letters in a cavity under its mattress. After reading a few letters to get the general idea, the Baileys – the owners of Seal Court and distant relatives of Maud Bailey – later allow them to read the whole correspondence. One of LaMotte's letters requests Ash to return her part of their correspondence and one of Ash's letters mentions a forthcoming journey that he is ready to make and, as the correspondence is open-ended, the two scholars conjecture that they may have left together. This

[7] Hutcheon maintains that fiction based on "detective plots, fantasy, games, the erotic … function as self-reflective paradigms, making the act of reading into one of active 'production,' of imagining, interpreting, decoding, ordering, in short of constructing the literary universe through the fictive referents of the words" (1980: 86). "Reader and writer," she claims, "both share the process of fiction-making in language" and "it is this process that must now be investigated" (Hutcheon 1980: 86).

mystery keeps the suspense to the end of *Possession*. The next step in the investigation leads to Mrs. Ellen Ash's journal in the British Museum, particularly the entries corresponding to Ash's journey and the mention of "importunate visitor" (231) and "a mysterious and urgent lady" (230) pressing Ellen Ash for a meeting, whom Maud believes to be Blanche Glover, LaMotte's companion. This trail is illuminated by another discovery – a letter and a note (referenced in the journal) by Blanche Glover, addressed to Ellen Ash and found among the collected correspondence of Ash's literary admirers, which was largely preserved by Ash's wife. This suggests that Blanche handed over the Ash-LaMotte letters to Ellen, implying that LaMotte was also away at the time. The next key textual reference is to Blanche Glover's death note and a newspaper cutting, pointing out LaMotte's disappearance. No record shows where Christabel LaMotte was between the summer of 1859 and the summer of 1860, the year when Ash wrote nothing. Unexpectedly Professor Leonora Stern, a feminist colleague of Maud's, appears to contribute inadvertently to the investigation. She shows a letter she received from a French scholar mentioning a journal by Sabine de Kercoz, one of LaMotte's cousins in France. This new trace sends Maud and Roland to Brittany to read Sabine's journal, according to which during the period in question Christabel LaMotte visited France; it also specifies that she was pregnant but disappeared for a short time to give secretly birth to the child elsewhere.

To keep the suspense, Byatt delays the resolution of the quest to the very last chapter. Independently, however, Mortimer Cropper comes up with the idea that LaMotte and Ash may have met during a spiritualist séance, an outcome of which is Ash's *Mummy Possest*; Professor Blackadder similarly does his research and finds out in a book on spiritualism a record of a séance at which both Ash and LaMotte were present. When a woman and the medium faint during the séance, Ash becomes frantic and shouts at the entranced woman, "Where is the child? Tell me what they have done with the child (Byatt 1990: 397)?" With the séance scene, Byatt prepares a resolution that in the historical time of the novel relates love and some presumable wrongdoing to move the story to a resolution through a Gothic element of evildoing! The quest resolves both "like the unmasking at the end of a detective story" (Byatt 1990: 483). Understanding that Cropper is willing to commit grave digging to steal the box of letters and valuables, which Ellen Ash buried with her husband in 1889 according to her journal, all parties involved decide to prevent him, but actually become silent accomplices to his diabolical act of disinterment. They find a sealed letter by Christabel LaMotte, which Ash never read, and it reveals that Maud Bailey descends from LaMotte-Ash's love child, Maia.

The quest motif suggests that history is not something given but is constantly being reshaped by new finds and that, similar to the romance, it is inspired by the remote and is subjected to individual interpretation and experience, for it is written by humans who ponder upon facts, search for links between events, and finally produce a story in writing. In other words, as Heidi Hansson points out, Byatt "shows

very clearly that there is no 'single truth' about the past to be discovered" (Hansson 2003: 357). This observation on *Possession* aligns with Byatt's own reflections in *On Histories and Stories*, where she argues that "truth is a meaningless concept" (Byatt 2000: 11). Byatt emphasises that "we cannot know the past, we are told" and that "what we think we know is only our own projection of our own needs and preoccupations on what we read and reconstruct" (Byatt 2000: 10). Such a perspective echoes Hutcheon's insights into postmodern literature: "Postmodern novels," she argues, "openly assert that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths" (Hutcheon:988: 109). For a detective-researcher in Byatt's novel, it becomes clear that knowing the past is an imaginative, reconstructive work of revealing these truths with the meaning they might have had in the past. It is, in other words, to unravel the limits of time and inventively consider the past that has left its clues to be revealed in the future:

> It makes an interesting effort of imagination to think how they saw the world. What Ash saw when he stood perhaps on this ledge. He was interested in the anemone. In the origin of life. Also in the reason we were here. (Byatt 1990: 254)

For all academics in the novel, the quest for the truth in history goes through an imaginary remaking by compiling and assembling the scattered and hidden traces from the past.

Possession evokes different meanings, ranging from the obsession of Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte with each other, to the matter-of-fact ownership of the letters (national and individual), or to the proprietary rights of the historic discovery of their secret correspondence. It is as much about history and how it possessively obsesses its fact-finders as it is about how history is made, written, invented, scrutinised, and compiled. The letter is crucial to the disentanglement of the double-plot of *Possession*. As it appears to be the cause of the entire quest, along with other textual evidence such as poetry, journals, or academic writing, it also serves as a link between the parallel worlds. Through the reading of letters and related sources, the novel metahistorically discusses nineteenth-century literature; the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, on the other hand, metacritically discusses contemporary and previous poetry and philosophy. Their letters, in addition, provide clues to an up-to-date construal of their poetic worlds and hold allusions to the two postmodern readers. Furthermore, as the historical sections of the novel mix real literary figures (Crabb Robinson, for instance) with imagined poets, making a sort of fabricated history of the nineteenth-century literary scene, *Possession* rather aims at reconstructing the worldview of Victorian poets. In this light, letter writing carries a specific historical fictionality in the novel as a parody of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century epistolary "romances" as well as of the literary correspondence

of artistic celebrities. Next, the letter is a central plot figure of secrecy, communication, confession, and an abstract bridge between correspondents, and as an entity, it becomes the primary documentary evidence in the scholarly detective quest. As the treasure trove of inquisitive scholars and the topical tie between Victorian poetic and social values and postmodernist research and ethical standards, letter writing defies the limits of time to procure new, unintended addressees. The gradual disclosure of facts regarding Ash and LaMotte makes the letter a life-long biographical testimony of the correspondents' private lives. Thus, *Possession* entails a scattered time sequence that the quest should resolve.

Elaine Showalter observes that *Possession* "uncannily" reinvents the epistolary style and decorum of Victorian literature and culture to stimulate a romanticised thirst in the characters as well as readers of an idealised past (Showalter 2005: 92). Byatt has exploited the conventional metaphor of letter writing as a bridge over distance and the letter as a substitute for the missing addressee (see Altman 1982: 13, 186). One of Ash's letters specifically explains this approach, which existed in the imagined space of epistolary intimacy in epistolary fiction and even non-fiction: "I am reluctant to take my pen from the paper and fold up this letter – for as long as I write to you, I have the illusion that we are in touch" (Byatt 1990: 196). Yet, the Ash-LaMotte correspondence is curiously reminiscent of Barrett-Browning courtship letters. Ash's letters reflect the same appreciation of LaMotte's mythologised epic that Browning shows for Elizabeth Barrett's poetic works.[8]

Both epistolary couples impregnate their letters with poetic visions and cover a wide range of literary topics. Just as the letters between Barrett and Browning combine philosophical reflections on nature and mythology with passion, so does the Ash-LaMotte correspondence convey a blend of literary critical and libidinous thinking. Byatt presents LaMotte in *a* poetic confinement, living a solitary life, "very quietly," with her companion (1990:159); from 1841 to her marriage in 1846, Elizabeth Barrett, too, lived a life of seclusion rarely accepting visitors and working intensely on her poetry. Both couples face obstacles in their epistolary exchange. Barrett, for example, writes that they "should be able to meet never again in this room, nor to have intercourse by letter through the ordinary channel. I mean, that letters of yours, addressed to me here, would infallibly be stopped and destroyed – if

[8] It is how Browning opens his correspondence in praise of Elizabeth Barrett's poetry: "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett, and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write." See "R. B to E. B. B., New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey [Post-mark, January 10, 1845.]," *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846* [1]. Elizabeth Barrett responds with gratitude: "I thank you, dear Mr. Browning, from the bottom of my heart. You meant to give me pleasure by your letter." See "E. B. B. to E. B. 50 Wimpole Street: Jan. 11, 1845," *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* 2. In a similar way Christabel LaMotte thanks her poetic suitor: "I was greatly flattered by your good opinion of my little poem" (*Possession* 159).

not opened" (Browning & Barrett 1899: 407).[9] In the like manner, LaMotte warns Ash that "there are dangers in [their] continued conversation" (Byatt 1990:184) for society would disagree with their epistolary converse and asks whether "it would be better — if [they] were to cease to correspond" (Byatt 1990: 184). In both cases, it all started with sharing recognition of their lyric projects and grew into passion and gratitude, affecting both poetic diction and worldview. Elizabeth Barrett confesses that Browning "influenced [her], in a way in which no one else did" (Browning & Barrett 1899: 506).[10] Ash finds his Muse in LaMotte for his *Swammerdam* project; LaMotte declares that she owes him her *Melusina*. Ash and LaMotte seek to discover the universal truth through ancient poetry, mythology, and philosophy in order to puzzle out the truth about themselves and their goals, just as Roland Michell and Maud Bailey do through Ash and LaMotte's poetry. In these two parallel worlds, the two poets and the late 1980s scholars of their work both look back to the past in search of some kind of definition – whether poetic or academic – or clarity – mythological or historical – of the present, Victorian and postmodern.

Byatt depicts scholars as being captivated by their yearning for making a discovery, and a find may prompt them to act unpredictably. When Roland finds Ash's two draft letters in Vico's *Principi di scienza nuova*, he is overtaken by a thievish instinct to steal them: "He read the letters again. Had a final draft been posted? Or had the impulse died or been rebuffed? Roland was seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own. It was suddenly quite impossible to put these living words back into page 300" (Byatt 1990: 8). Later in the novel, acquitting himself honourably, he confesses to the theft: "I took them. I don't know why. I never meant to – to *keep* them forever. I don't know what possessed me to do it" (Byatt 1990: 482). But as the narrator describes it, these "dead letters troubled him, physically even, because they were only beginnings;" this new find in Ash's life agitates his mind and prompts his decision that "[h]e must try to find out" (Byatt 1990: 20-21). As a result, Roland looks entirely consumed by the two drafts. By frequently referencing Poe's "*Purloined* Letter," Byatt depicts Roland Michell as both a romantic thief and a detective, so enhancing the tale with elements of mystery and suspense. At the same time, she makes him speculate ethically on the discovery, its theft, and its rightful possession. First, he thinks that he could unnoticeably restore the letters to their original place, but then declines to, as he feels "they were his" (Byatt 1990: 22). Despite his prior disapproval of the possessive nature exhibited by history hunters like Mortimer Cropper, Roland is getting used to the tactile experience, "the magnetic feel of the two letters […] folded into his pocket" (Byatt 1990: 44).

An indirect reference to the Ash-LaMotte correspondence in one of the nineteenth-century sources makes letter writing a central topic in the historical part of

[9] "E. B. B. to R. B. Thursday Night" [In the same envelope with the preceding letter], in *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (Browning & Barrett 1899: 407).

[10] "E. B. B. to R. B. [Post-mark, February 24, 1846]" (Browning & Barrett 1899: 506).

the novel. Blanche Glover's *Journal of Our Home-Life. In Our House in Richmond*, a record of her life with Christabel, insinuates a possible link between the two Victorian poets. Blanche writes: "Letter, letters, letters. Not for me. I am not meant to see or know" (Byatt 1990: 46). A discernible suppressed pain in her journal deepens the mystery about the past and the secretive sender of letters to Christabel LaMotte (Byatt 1990: 43). She talks of the letters to Christabel and their sender as a prowler at home and further mentions an arrival of "a long letter" that Blanche's life companion apparently hides from her, "but smiled over, caught up and folded away" (Byatt 1990: 45). Though no evidence clearly connects the letter-writing prowler to Ash, a scholarly hunch triggers off promising associations. The pursuit of historical evidence is likely to cause a contrivance of links between the known and the hidden from previous scholarship. At this point, Byatt hints that history and fiction may not be too far apart. Though history is based on facts, it also often relies on assumptions; true or false, it is, after all, the telling of stories: "You could make up a whole new story. On no real evidence," says Maud when she hears about the hypothetical Ash-LaMotte link and is positive that "It would change all sorts of things" (Byatt 1990: 49).

But does the uncovering of such a correspondence allow access to the poetics and philosophy of the two poets? Byatt seems to be deliberately dubious on that point. On the one hand, when the two researchers find the secret correspondence between Ash and LaMotte in Seal Court, they are in total agreement about the academic significance of the find. Michell tries to convince the Baileys that the letters "could change the face of scholarship" and that they are not looking for scandal but for academic clarity. In support of her colleague and to emphasise the significance of their discovery, Maud adds that her study of Christabel LaMotte "must be seriously altered in the light of what" they find "in these letters" (Byatt 1990: 84–90). Later in the novel, Byatt draws Roland Michell as gradually becoming more sceptical about the whole quest: the discovery has unnoticeably changed Maud and Roland's original search from inspiring, though secretive, into surreptitious and questionably meaningful. With more people involved in this quest as academic competitors in the persons of Professor Blackadder, Leonora Stern, Fergus Wolff, or Mortimer Cropper, it has "changed from Quest, a good romantic form, into Chase and Race" (Byatt 1990: 425).

The discovery of more letters ironically starts to work against the idealised vision of the past. "Letters," Roland realises, "are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure" (Byatt 1990: 130–1) as they are snippets of life without a beginning and no real end. They are written on the spur of the moment and "tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going … they are written, if they are true letters, for *a* reader" (Byatt 1990: 131). Instead, he seeks some development, as letters are dialogues and presuppose some story to tell. In contrast to other letters Ash wrote which were thoughtful and amusing, his corre-

spondence with LaMotte is impassioned speech and never intended for an outside reader. Roland starts to feel that going deep into their private correspondence is a sacrilege to this well-concealed intimate space and that it was Ash's poetry that was originally intended for him to read, not the letters, and that there is a substantial difference between literary interpretation and biography, between the literary work and the life of the poet. This sentiment is further accentuated at the conclusion of the novel: initially, as a poetry interpreter, Roland perceived himself as an equal to Ash, believing the poet had *him* in mind as a reader; however, with the correspondence highlighted and the ensuing proprietary assertions, he views himself merely as a mundane collector of facts:

> The pursuit of the letters had distanced him from Ash as they had come closer to Ash's life. In the days of his innocence Roland had been, not a hunter but a reader, and had felt superior to Mortimer Cropper, and in some sense equal to Ash, or any way related to Ash, who had written for him to read intelligently, as best as he could. Ash had not written the letter to Roland or for anyone else but Christabel LaMotte. Roland's find had turned out to be a sort of loss. (Byatt 1990: 470)

The letters, the academic tension, and the secrecy about the quest have distanced him from the sacred link between poets and their readers. The discovery suddenly starts to look like a betrayal of this creative mediation: "think of this," he further reasons, "that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other" (Byatt 1990: 471). At the same time, both scholars understand that the Ash-LaMotte literary, love correspondence sheds additional light on their poetry. They find "the same line in both poets" as "*textual* evidence" that LaMotte may have joined Randolph in Yorkshire during his scientific expedition in 1859 (Byatt 1990: 481) and that "no use of the word 'ash'" in LaMotte's fairy project *Melusina* "may be presumed to be innocent" (485). In the course of this initially energizing pursuit, Roland changes and starts to dislike his newly adopted identity of a hunter, although the discoveries help him see the object of his study in a broader picture. It is possible that Byatt recommends a balance between the material and the imaginative in academic endeavours, which should equally work together to project the historical picture.

In a series of adventures involving academic obstacles, conquests, and journeys, the novel's most intriguing part is the discovery that leads to the next discovery until sleuthing finds fulfilment. The quest for the mystery of epistolary identity and the histories that letters can hide demands a conclusion for both the novel's present and past episodes: the "cohesion and closure" as "deep human desires" (Byatt 1990: 422), which make Maud insist "[w]e need the end of the story" (Byatt 1990: 498). Furthermore, the resolution of the enigmas in the narrative inevitably

necessitates a gratifying conclusion. Indeed, Maud ultimately receives the greatest benefit; Michell, while satisfied with the entire endeavour, is disillusioned. For Maud, as Blackadder says, her exploration of myths has led her to the truth of her own origins. The unburied letter recounts the engraved truth that Christabel LaMotte is actually Maud's great-great-great grandmother. Symbolically, Seal Court has always kept half of the truth sealed; the sealed letter found in Ash's grave unseals the rest of it. This letter resolves the long-kept suspense of presumable evildoing, by referring us back to the mysterious disappearance of LaMotte's baby, reported in Sabine de Kercoz's journal, and Ash's frantic behaviour at Mrs. Lee's spiritualist séance. LaMotte's final letter confesses she owes Ash the truth and "its history" (Byatt: 499). And the truth is that Ash has a daughter, Maia Thomasine Bailey, who was adopted by LaMotte's sister Sophia. The letter reveals that when she told Ash "you have made a murderess of me" (Byatt 1990: 500) during the séance, LaMotte actually meant Blanch Glover who committed suicide, not the child. The macabre scene of disinterment and the reading of LaMotte's letter aloud "by candlelight, with the wind blowing past, and the panes of the windows rattling" (Byatt 1990: 499) creates a gothic amalgamation of past and present. LaMotte's letter and the Romantic setting allow Byatt to interpolate her own postmodernist vision of history. "All history is hard facts," LaMotte writes, "and sometimes passion and colour lent by men. I will tell you – at least – the facts" (Byatt 1990: 499). Through LaMotte's words, Byatt suggests that history is a constructed narrative of links between historical facts; when historians tell a story, they rarely chronicle people's sentiments and concerns, even though *they* are the prime cause of history as such.

Against this background, letters become a legal issue in view of the secrecy in the past and its disclosure in the present. As a physical entity, a letter changes owners; as a textual document of confession, it betrays its writer as it may reach unintended readers. In this sense, the Ash-LaMotte correspondence faces the question of legacy and proprietorship that oscillates between inheritance – as it passes from Maia Thomasine Bailey to Maud Bailey's father and consequently Maud herself – and cultural heritage – as it is endangered by mercantile interests and may leave the country. Professor Blackadder even starts a campaign to save the Ash-LaMotte papers as they represent a valuable snippet of nineteenth-century British culture and appears on a television show to make a big national issue out of the academic find: "we've discovered Ash's Dark Lady," Blackadder declares, "it's the kind of discovery scholars dream of. The letters have got to stay in our country – they're part of our national story" (Byatt 1990: 404).

To adjust realism to romance, Byatt has employed yet another mode of narrating to avoid romantic idealisation at the end of the novel and to suggest that not everything can be retrieved from the past; some stories, events, and circumstances remain forever unknown. She inserts three historical narratives, told by a supplementary omniscient narrator, to draw a line between what actually happened in

the past and what postmodern scholars can never unearth in their literary-historical quest (Martyniuk 2004: 279). Irene Martyniuk describes this additional narrative voice in *Possession* as an "all-knowing" "outside narrator" who provides information that remains secret to the characters in the novel, "only speak[ing] to the reader" (Martyniuk 2004: 275). Lynn K. Wells additionally claims that Byatt "abandons her contemporary vantage point, narrating the nineteenth-century events directly, without the intervening 'filters' of found documents" (Wells 2002: 682). The "shift in narration," Wells argues, reveals "the importance of viewing the past in its own context" (Wells 2002: 682). In her *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt clarifies the significance of what she terms a "fictive narrator [who] can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters […] than any first-person mimicry" (Byatt 2000: 56). She adds that in *Possession*, she "used this kind of narrator deliberately three times in the historical narrative – always to tell what the historians and biographers of [her] fiction never discovered" (Byatt 2000: 56).[11] The first one includes the Ash-LaMotte trip to Yorkshire (Martyniuk 2004: 273–274). Byatt occasionally undermines the narrator's historical validity by making assumptions on the possible events in the past: "an observer might have speculated for some time as to whether they were travelling together or separately;" "such an observer might have concluded … that the gentleman admired, or felt a considerable interest in, the lady" (Byatt 1990: 273); "[t]he hypothetical observer might have been able to decide whether his subject pursued an active or a contemplative life" (274). The second time Byatt's fictive narrator enters is in Chapter 25 (Martyniuk 2004: 274). Alone after her husband's death, while she is keeping vigil, Ellen writes in her journal entry a confession, addressed to her late husband. She remembers her husband's words, "burn what is alive for us with the life of our memory, and let no one else make idle curios or lies of it" (442).

Known to be discrediting documents of people's lives, letters fall victim to the power relations between their writers and recipients. To prevent unintended readers, recipients or letter writers hide them or burn them. In this historical episode, Ellen does both. She ignores Ash's advice to burn all their letters to prevent "the new vulgarity of *contemporary*" biographers from rummaging through private papers (Byatt 1990: 442). Some things, she is certain, cannot be burned, and these, for example, are their love letters as a testament to their intimacy. Despite her promise, the sentimental attachment to their correspondence as the only live link with Ash makes her relinquish the idea of burning "our dear letters" (Byatt 1990: 443). So, she decides to bury them with him instead of keeping them safe from the "vultures" (Byatt 1990: 443); at the same time, she believes they will engender a reunion with Ash when she dies: "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

[11] On Byatt's use of fictive narrator, see Irene Martyniuk's "'This is not science. This is storytelling'" (Martyniuk 2004: 265–286).

them" (Byatt 1990: 443). Through Ellen's confusion and anxiety, Byatt implies that, apart from being textual evidence of intimacy, letters can be inadvertently treacherous in the hands of recipients and unintended readers who can get complete power over them and their writers, who can publicise and discredit or destroy and/or save the reputation of the true recipient.

After Ellen Ash's journal entry and an excerpt from Mortimer Cropper's biography of Randolph Henry Ash in Chapter 25, Byatt's *fictive* narrator steps in imperceptibly to tell readers what can be kept secret from the characters in the novel. This "knowledgeable" and "intrusive" voice (Martyniuk 2004: 274, 278), who describes events in the past briefly, changes the grammatical tense in an embedded sentence to create immediacy and dramatic tension, which carries a powerful, timeless effect that competes with the contemporary narrator of the novel. Though this omniscient voice begins narrating from the past in past tense, the inserted sentence – "We are going to see her now" (Byatt 1990: 446) – shifts tense for an instant, taking on the tone and mood of a hypnotic trance, revealing truths which remain concealed from the characters in the novel. This historical narration allows the letter to maintain verisimilitude at the end of *Possession*. It is an event in the past that no document can reveal why a letter by Christabel LaMotte was buried with the Ellen-Ash papers in Ash's grave. Before her husband passes away, Ellen receives a reconciliatory letter from Christabel LaMotte, together with a sealed one, addressed to Randolph Ash, a letter Ellen never gives her husband but carries "in her pocket, like a knife" (Byatt 1990: 451). Asking for pardon and understanding, Christabel LaMotte writes three times in this letter to Ellen "I am in your hands," giving her the power to conceal or reveal the truth. Ellen then starts writing a reply "in her head" (Byatt: 451) which she never puts on paper; Byatt calls it a "Protean letter," changing constantly in form, tone, and meaning, implying that in our thoughts we keep writing letters to the living and the dead; thoughts are the unsent messages we constantly write to others. Moreover, Ellen Ash chooses not to compose a reply – not out of controlled civility or tact – but to avoid leaving any documented link between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash for future biographers. She prefers to bury this sealed letter in a box with other letters as it is a concealed truth only between the three of them. For much the same reason, she erases all traces and clues that may lead to a link between her husband and LaMotte. Upon discovering an incomplete letter sent to Christabel LaMotte in a drawer among Ash's papers, Ellen reads it, dismisses it with disdain, and subsequently burns it with satisfaction: "[s]he took this letter gingerly by its corner, now, as though it were a stunned biting creature, wasp or scorpion." She ignited a small fire in Randolph's attic grate and incinerated the letter" (Byatt 1990: 457).

The novel ends with the third historical narrative, "Postscript 1868," in which Henry Randolph Ash meets his daughter Maia and asks her to give her aunt a message, but "on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble … and she forgot the message, which was never delivered" (Byatt 1990: 511).

Like the other two historical interceptions, the Postscript depicts an event that will always remain concealed. The second ending, calling to mind the epistolary practice of continued closure, challenges the novel's romantic tenor. Because the message fails to reach Christabel LaMotte she will never know that Randolph Ash knew of his daughter Maia; for that same reason, he will always be ignorant of Christabel's knowledge of his meeting with Maia. At the same time, the first ending of the novel equally defies the romance wish fulfilment: Maud Bailey and Roland Michell who share strong feelings for one another will have to live separately as he is offered a job to work abroad, though it is an open question whether he will accept it. The end and the Postscript leave *Possession* open-ended. The entanglements between the parallel worlds show that history is recurrent and ongoing and it entails no *real* closure but the invention of possible, probable outcomes.

Just as it is about history without being a historical novel, *Possession* is about letter writing without being an epistolary novel. The novel that centres on the epistolary exchange between two Victorian poets, concealed from literary historians, includes a whole chapter of their correspondence and makes the letter stand out as central to the plot. Lynn K. Wells characterises *Possession* as "a very postmodern novel" (Wells 2002: 689) due to its amalgamation of genres and narrative techniques. It employs epistolary narratives to reconstruct the Victorian ethical context surrounding the romantic and intellectual relationship between nineteenth-century poets, as explored in a biographical study by two twentieth-century literary scholars seeking to unravel the mystery of two "lost" letters. Building on Hutcheon (1980: 86), the resurfaced letter – serving as the primary catalyst for a detective-like search for clues – takes the central role in shaping the metafictional quality of *Possession* – a novel that narrates the biographical study of two Victorian authors based on the digging up of primary and secondary sources by late twentieth-century academics, and the narration of this process contributes to the novel's plot development which grows out of a series of discoveries. In *Possession,* letters are the starting point of an epistemological quest and the go-between of two parallel worlds, Victorian and postmodern. As their object of study, letters allow Roland Michell and Maud Bailey a complementary and epiphanous reading of Victorian literature and culture. While the Ash-LaMotte correspondence that the two scholars analyse discloses two Victorian epistolarians who seek to define their lives and concerns through the philosophy and poetry of the past, the quest for the unsaid in history in *Possession* presents a metahistorical/metacritical debate about the meaning of history in the postmodern age. Byatt's novel, in other words, underscores the method of reading and interpreting history as a romance, resolved by impulse and fancy in pursuit of the unknown through the links of collected evidence and their imagined and reconstructed revision.

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