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Recommended Citation

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Fantasies of (Re)collection: Collecting and Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

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More than fifteen years after its initial publication, Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987) continues to shape how scholars think about the social consequences of heritage in Great Britain. Hewison argues that the postwar obsession with museums, country houses, and other forms of heritage points to "the imaginative death of this country" (9). While he grants that the impulse to preserve and collect material traces of the past is perfectly understandable in light of postimperial realities of economic and social decline, Hewison insists that the burgeoning "heritage industry" neither preserves the past nor provides guidance for a nation struggling to envision its future. Rather, it stifles the possibility for creative change by establishing an idealized past as the model for what Great Britain should be. The dangers presented by heritage, in Hewison's account, are even greater than those recognized by the two most prominent studies on the subject prior to his own, Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* and David Lowenthal's *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. The national preoccupation with the memorabilia of former glory establishes "a set of imprisoning walls upon which we project a superficial image of a false past" (139),

Hewison argues, and these "walls" limit the potential for Britons to rethink their identities and goals in the face of the so-called "decline of Britain."

In this essay, I will read the fascination with collectors and collecting in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) in relation to two theoretical questions that Hewison's analysis provokes: (1) Can heritage or other forms of memorabilia ever assist in the imagination of more satisfying social roles and identities? and (2) Can collecting material traces lead to an accurate or truthful depiction of the past? Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel represents one of the most popular and critically acclaimed examples of the widespread fascination with collecting apparent in contemporary British fiction. This fascination can be traced back to the 1963 publication of John Fowles's *The Collector* and figures subsequently in a range of novels including Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and *England, England* (1998), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* (1988), and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Within these texts, characters are drawn to collecting in response to frustration with their class positions and social identities more generally. Not all of these novels share Hewison's pessimism about memorabilia, however; *Possession*, in particular, suggests that collecting can in certain instances help individuals to imagine alternative identities. By reading Byatt's novel with respect to the two questions above, I hope both to understand better the fascination with collecting in postwar British fiction and to complicate Hewison's account of the social implications of the postwar rise of heritage.¹

The conflicting attitudes toward heritage presented by Byatt and Hewison can be read in terms of broader debates among theorists of postmodernity and globalization over the implications of what Pierre Nora calls the "materialization of memory" (14). One of the key features of this era, in Nora's estimation, is the disappearance of the past from everyday life; as a result, memory can no longer be taken for granted by either individuals or collectives but must be deliberately and continuously reconstructed. The implications of this phenomenon are far from clear, however. The more prominent interpretation, popularized by Marxian thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, reads this phenomenon as an indication of the global triumph of capitalism and the wholesale commodification of human experience. In this understanding, the rise of heritage in Great Britain comes in response to a widespread sense that the nation is losing more direct or immediate access to past cultural traditions. Facing social instabilities within the country and the increasing influence of foreign capital, particularly from America, Britons turn to heritage artifacts and other memorabilia in order to preserve some tenuous connection to tradition in the face of global cultural homogenization. Nora himself, however, remains cautious about taking such a negative view, suggesting that heritage objects—what he calls *lieux de mémoire*—can serve as a mnemonics within environments in which a sense of historical continuity has otherwise disappeared. And a minority opinion among scholars finds that the materialization of memory can be a positive phenomenon. James Clifford, for example, argues that communities across the globe are increasingly blurring traditional distinctions between collecting and recollecting in their cultural practices, yet such examples of "(re)collection" do not necessarily represent the loss of cultural purity so much as the selective incorporation of other traditions and practices. "Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts," he writes in *The Predicament of Culture*, "drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages" (14).

Possession testifies to Clifford's more optimistic assessment, suggesting that a preoccupation with material traces is not always motivated by escapism but rather sometimes by a longing to discover more satisfying conceptions of the good life. Indeed, collecting opens up intriguing possibilities for characters, and readers by implication, to inhabit, mimic, and interrogate established social roles and conventions. My reading of Byatt will assert that collecting—as a process of selecting, acquiring, and organizing material objects so that they evoke a lost or inaccessible totality—can facilitate a critical rethinking of current social norms and identities by inviting a kind of role-play in which collectors use their imagination to position themselves within the worlds that the

collected objects evoke. In this essay I will use Clifford's admittedly awkward term "(re)collecting" to describe efforts to use collecting to establish an intimacy with the past generally associated only with memory. *Possession*, in my reading, suggests that if imaginative role-playing or "(re)collection" fails to recover the past transparently, it creates new associations, memories, and resonances that can modify how individuals perceive their own worlds. (Re)collection thus represents one prominent example of what Arjun Appadurai sees as the recent ascendancy of the imagination in constructing and negotiating the social sphere. "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency," he states, "is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (31).²

Byatt differs from both Appadurai and Clifford, however, in linking the imagination of alternative social identities to a historically accurate reconstruction of the past. Or to put this in terms of the questions I've drawn from Hewison, my reading of *Possession* suggests that an affirmative answer to the first question is possible only if there is an affirmative answer to the second. Byatt's story of the search by literary scholars Roland Michell and Maud Bailey to uncover and collect traces of the secret romance between Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte connects the scholars' transformation of their social identities to their growing knowledge about the lives and beliefs of the Victorian poets. This idea stands in sharp contrast to the theories of Appadurai and Clifford, for whom there is no necessary relationship between the transformation of social roles and an accurate reconstruction of the past. Indeed, Appadurai characterizes the past as "a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios" (30), while Clifford considers the longing to recover an "authentic" past to be a fruitless and even dangerous desire, one that engenders xenophobia and essentialism. Notwithstanding her awareness of such concerns, Byatt maintains that the imagining of more satisfying social roles requires an intimate identification with the past, an identification made possible only by acquiring significant historical knowledge.

The Lures of Collecting

From the first pages of *Possession*, Byatt presents a picture of national decline, a decline that is in large part responsible for the disappointment that drives Roland to collecting. The London Library appears in the opening scene as the last bastion "alive with history" (4), surrounded by a nation that is allowing its heritage to be exported. Roland himself barely ekes out a living as a postgraduate scholar in the 1980s, his dreams of upward mobility frustrated by a contracting academic system and stagnant economy. In this environment, Roland is able neither to fulfill his professional aspirations nor to form satisfying romantic relationships. His relationship with Val fails in large part because they both feel a literal and figurative claustrophobia caused by their limited income. As Val vividly puts it, "how are you ever going to afford to get us away from dripping cat-piss and being *on top of each other*?" (24). Class and cultural differences seem to prohibit Roland from expressing his romantic feelings for Dr. Maud Bailey; despite his efforts to escape his background as "urban lower-middle-class," he feels "some dark and outdated English social system of class . . . obscurely working and gripping him" (459). Thus when Roland accidentally discovers two letters from Randolph Henry Ash to fellow poet Christabel LaMotte while doing research in the London Library, his interest quickly shifts from professional to personal—from historical research to collecting—because the story of their secret relationship provides him the opportunity to escape from his own unsatisfying circumstances. Despite his anxieties and better judgment, he steals the letters and becomes so engrossed by the unfolding romance revealed in them that he leaves Val and travels with Maud across the English and French countrysides in search of further correspondence between the poets.

The idea that individuals turn to collecting out of a deep, if often unstated, need to escape unsatisfying social circumstances finds literary precedents within contemporary British fiction at least as far back as *The Collector*, although Fowles demonstrates a very different attitude toward collecting. Throughout *The Collector*, the

narrator, Clegg, feels himself defined by class. Even after he wins a small fortune in the betting pools, he continues to be perceived by others and himself in these terms: "They still treated me behind the scenes for what I was—a clerk," he notes (12). Who he is and how he can relate to other people is defined by his social role, his identity as a clerk. Like Roland, Clegg senses that his social role limits his capacity to find happiness and to form satisfying relationships. Lamenting his inability to win the love of a wealthy art student named Miranda, Clegg says, "There was always class between us" (39). As a child, Clegg found consolation for his social isolation and loneliness in collecting butterflies; as an adult, he is guided by a similar logic, although his passion takes a pathological turn when he decides to "collect" Miranda herself. Whereas the impulse to collect in *Possession* ultimately leads Roland and Maud to discover greater knowledge of the past and to achieve romantic intimacy with each other, a similar impulse in *The Collector* leads Clegg to kidnap and imprison Miranda in the cellar of his cottage.

Clegg's objectification of Miranda suggests rather pessimistic answers to the questions framing this essay. Collecting, in Fowles's fiction, neither facilitates the accurate reconstruction of the past nor enables collectors to imagine more fulfilling identities for themselves. Clegg redefines things, places, and ultimately people solely in relation to their potential to satisfy his desire. The gross immorality of his actions is cast as the inevitable result of collecting in Fowles's next novel, *The Magus*. The mentor figure in that novel, Conchis, declares: "This is true of all collecting. It extinguishes the moral instinct" (182). Collecting promotes the illusion that an individual can satisfy his or her desires through possession, but such an illusion can be sustained only at great cost to oneself and others. Objects cannot undo the sense of lack that spawns the collector's desire, according to both Fowles's fiction and psychoanalytic theory; possession only confirms the gap between the object and the needs it purports to satisfy, causing the collector to transfer his or her desire to other objects ad infinitum.³ Thus Clegg does not interrogate his desires or his internalization of bourgeois values, nor does he recognize the banality of his generic dream of "our living in a nice modern house, married, with kids and everything" (17). Instead, when his fantasy of leisure with Miranda fails, he replaces not the fantasy itself but the object that he believes will allow him to achieve it. As he plans a second "acquisition" in the final pages of the novel, Clegg's failure to address his initial frustration with his social identity is readily apparent. The lesson he draws from his experiences with Miranda is that he needs to respect class boundaries rather than challenge them: he notes that his new interest is "only an ordinary common shopgirl, but that was my mistake before, aiming too high" (254).

Fowles's critique of collecting recalls the long-standing Western philosophical bias against emotional attachments to material objects, a bias that also informs Hewison's critique of the heritage industry. The "idealizing-transcendentalizing tradition" tracing back from Freud and Marx to Augustine and Plato cannot, Henry Staten argues, conceive of "love for what is mortal precisely *as* mortal and because it is mortal" (xii). In this interpretation, objects might be necessary for everyday life but never worthy of enduring attachment; the material world represents at best an incompletely realized version of a utopian or divine model and at worst a perversion of ideal forms. Even human love, according to Plato's *Symposium*, achieves its highest expression when it is no longer for specific persons but for "absolute beauty," which has no physical manifestation in this world (94). Hewison demonstrates affinity with this philosophical tradition when he claims, "At best, the heritage industry only draws a screen between ourselves and our true past" (10). Heritage objects are not sources of historical knowledge but "screens" that inhibit access to a more genuine and unmediated experience of the past. "[O]ur true past," for Hewison, is preserved in the memories of individuals and traditions passed down through the generations; heritage represents the commodification of such experiences.

Possession is intriguing in this regard because Byatt depicts her protagonists as collectors despite her awareness of both philosophical critiques of collecting and literary portrayals of collectors as misanthropic, antisocial, and sexually frustrated.⁴ Byatt herself presents such a character in the novel's antagonist, the American Mortimer Cropper. Professor Cropper, who is obsessed with Ash paraphernalia, demonstrates fetishistic attitudes toward

the objects he acquires; his closet fascination with pornography implies that he objectifies people as well. Yet if his motives for acquiring material traces of Ash's life differ from Roland's, his passionate attachment to the letters does not. Roland describes himself as "possessed" by the Ash-LaMotte correspondence (527), and Maud suggests similar feelings (548). Byatt, in other words, deliberately draws parallels among the three characters; she resists an easy distinction between Roland's and Maud's apparently healthy attitudes toward the past and Cropper's pathological one. Indeed, the activities engaged in by all these characters are practically indistinguishable. Cropper resorts to grave robbery in his effort to acquire the final letters between the Victorian poets, but Roland and Maud do not confront him until after he has unearthed Ash's coffin, so that they might read the letters themselves. And given the fact that Roland and Maud are only able to consummate their relationship after they have acquired the correspondence, the novel appears to suggest that the activity of collecting enables them to imagine more satisfying social roles and relationships.

(Re)collecting the Past

To understand why Byatt links imagination and collecting despite widespread distrust of the latter requires understanding why her characters are so resigned to their modestly unhappy careers and unsatisfying love relationships. At the beginning of the novel, both Roland and Maud are disappointed with their professional and personal lives; however, despite their sophistication with theories of postmodernism and psychoanalysis, they are strikingly inarticulate about their own desires. They both mention vague fantasies of "white bed[s]" and "empty room[s]," yet they seem no more able than Clegg to describe their longings in precise terms (294, 290). Only after they discover evidence of the secret romance between Ash and LaMotte do they begin to recognize the absence of romance in their own lives. Their prior inability either to intuit the existence of the Ash-LaMotte affair or to diagnose the source of their own unhappiness implies, for Byatt, that their theoretical sophistication actually limits their ability to gain knowledge about the world. Their theories assert a conception of human nature and motivation that cannot account for genuine romantic love. Put another way, Roland's and Maud's imaginations are limited by the particular set of hermeneutic biases they have internalized. Maud notes this point with a certain resignation:

[I]n every age, there must be truths people can't fight—whether or not they want to, whether or not they will go on being truths in the future. We live in the truth of what Freud discovered. Whether or not we like it. However we've modified it. We aren't really free to suppose—to imagine—he could possibly have been wrong about human nature. In particulars, surely—but not in the large plan—

(276)

"Truth" itself constrains exploration, according to Maud—the world can be conceived of only within particular parameters. The contingent, even arbitrary, character of these parameters does not alter the limits they place on the imagination, and Roland's and Maud's self-consciousness about the contingency of the "truths of Freud" does not enable the scholars to disregard them. Thus the particular "truths" to which the present is condemned not only restrict the kinds of knowledge that Roland and Maud can acquire about the past but also determine the kinds of relationships they can establish for themselves in the present. The scholars cannot even conceive of what a mutually sustaining romantic relationship might be like. They are baffled by the idea that Ash and LaMotte might have had a healthy romance until after they have read their letters, for the scholars' Freudian-influenced notions of human nature suggest that such a relationship would be impossible. Even after finding in the letters evidence directly contradicting their ideas of human nature, they are unable to apply this information to their own lives for much of the novel. Roland and Maud continue to tolerate their disappointing social roles and relationships because they cannot imagine themselves experiencing love as the Victorian poets did.

Collecting the Ash-LaMotte correspondence leads Roland and Maud to question their assumptions and beliefs in ways they could not have previously. Maud's recognition that the "truths of Freud" are culturally contingent comes only after she and Roland have acquired letters indicating that the poets had very different beliefs about human nature. Roland takes her recognition further, suggesting that material traces can provide correctives to their theories. "Everything relates to *us* and so we're imprisoned in ourselves—we can't see *things*," he asserts (276). Whereas Maud concludes that her beliefs are culturally contingent but unchangeable, Roland insists that the continued existence of material objects or "*things*" that contradict their beliefs implies otherwise. The disparity between their theoretical models and the observable world suggests the inadequacy of the former to explain the motivations of the Victorian poets; more importantly, the disparity also implies that greater attention to material traces might provide the basis for accurately reconstructing the poets' beliefs and attitudes. Put in more theoretical terms, Roland suggests that collecting would enable them to engage in an inductive process of historical reconstruction not wholly predetermined by their initial hermeneutic biases, since the letters themselves, and not the scholars' theories, would provide the organizing principle for their search.⁵ The sum of the letters forms a larger narrative of the Ash-LaMotte romance, and any given piece offers clues as to the whereabouts of others and how they might fit together. The subsequent events of the novel confirm Roland's claim, depicting the scholars learning to describe with progressively greater accuracy the lives and beliefs of the poets as they acquire more of their correspondence.

The claim that material objects can reveal inaccuracies in previous historical reconstructions points to the stark contrast between the portrayals of collecting in Byatt's and Fowles's works. Fowles depicts his collectors as objectifying their surroundings; because collectors use objects to sustain narcissistic fantasies, they are unable to learn about the historical contexts of the objects they collect. For Byatt, collecting can encourage individuals to imagine what the worlds evoked by material traces might be like. This is not simply because objects provide a set of factual data that contradicts current knowledge. As Bill Brown notes, objects have a peculiar "specific unspecificity" that make them appear familiar in a wide variety of circumstances (3). Applying this idea to *Possession*, I take Brown to mean that although the letters were written with a specific situation and relationship in mind, they can subsequently be identified with situations other than those initially intended by their authors. The letters are discursive objects that function within multiple and shifting discourses: the romantic correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, the academic analysis of the poets' literary writings, and the discussions about human nature between Roland and Maud. Indeed, the "specific unspecificity" of the letters makes it possible for the scholars to identify their own situation with respect to the letters. And by means of this imaginative identification with the Victorian poets, Roland and Maud can adopt, to a limited degree, the poets' hermeneutic biases. Maud notes:

I've been trying to imagine him. Them. . . . We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it's a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic Love—so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love—themselves—that what they did mattered—

(290)

Roland's and Maud's imaginative identification with the poets and their perceptions of the world—an identification I am calling "(re)collection"—suggests that collecting does not necessarily involve the erasure of the past, as portrayed in Fowles's fiction. Indeed, the relative difficulty the scholars have in identifying with the poets' hermeneutic biases suggests that if objects function within multiple discourses, their significance is not totally malleable. The letters upset the conclusions of decades of literary criticism on the poets; they upset Roland's and Maud's confidence in their own emotions and desires. Thus if the "specific unspecificity" of objects means for Brown a rejection of epistemological certainty, it also means for Byatt the possibility of achieving greater historical knowledge. Collecting disrupts the scholars' sense of certainty about the poets and the

generalizability of their own beliefs regarding sexuality and desire, yet this new uncertainty enables the scholars to clarify the distinctions between the poets' and their own beliefs. Of course Byatt does not claim that collecting inevitably leads to such knowledge, simply that it can in ways that Fowles and scholars like Susan Stewart do not credit. Indeed, Stewart asserts that through collecting individuals seek "to erase the actual past in order to create an imagined past which is available for consumption" (143). And Cropper certainly demonstrates no interest in the past as a source of knowledge. Collecting, for Cropper as much as for Clegg, simply serves as a means of satisfying narcissistic desires, as demonstrated by his attitude toward Ash's watch. "For he believed [Ash's] watch had come to him," the narrator notes, "that it had been meant to come to him, that he had and held something of R. H. Ash" (418).

Appadurai's theory of social imagination can further clarify how Roland's and Maud's fairly conservative longings to reconstruct the past lead them to redefine their self-conceptions and relationships with others. Appadurai's crucial observation here is that the imaginative experiments with self-fashioning currently occurring across the globe depend on *foreign* media for their resources (3). Like Clifford, Appadurai emphasizes the importance of foreign cultural materials to the imagination, for the imagination as a human faculty is profoundly shaped by the environments or spheres individuals inhabit. Appadurai, in other words, rejects a notion of the imagination as a creative faculty that generates images and worlds *ex nihilo*. Rather, the imagination combines and modifies readily available cultural images. Foreign images can provide new resources with which individuals can experiment or role-play, expanding what Appadurai calls their "local repertoires" (7). Even the fairly cursory and often ideologically questionable knowledge derived from mass media is useful in this regard, revealing at least the existence of values and identities that differ from those encouraged by a community's current cultural practices and traditions.

The Ash-LaMotte letters in *Possession* offer a similar vista into an alien world that leads Roland and Maud to imagine their own lives in different terms. Just as Appadurai's subjects draw upon electronic media as "resources for experiments with self-making" and "scripts for possible lives" (3), Roland and Maud draw upon letters and diaries in an effort to experience for themselves the romance that the Victorian poets felt. The experience of cultural contact with a foreign society, for Appadurai, or a distant and seemingly inaccessible past, for Byatt, provides an alternative set of identities or roles that can help individuals to clarify their sometimes amorphous disappointments with their current lives.⁶ For in the process of reconstructing the past through material traces such as the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, the scholars construct a narrative that arises in part out of their frustrations and disappointment. The story of Ash and LaMotte's romance provides a model or "script" for establishing a relationship that the scholars have never experienced; by patterning their own life stories on the poets' romance, Roland and Maud utilize it as what Peter Brooks would call an alternative "masterplot" to the Freudian-influenced cultural narratives they have internalized. By the end of the novel, the shift in how they view their lives is so complete that Roland perceives the "genre" of his life story as being the same as Ash and LaMotte's: "He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously" (460). Roland does not claim here total freedom to imagine his life according to his own terms. Roland recognizes that the narrative he and Maud create also follows a socially constructed and validated pattern: "a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another." For if Roland and Maud increasingly identify their life stories with the genre of romance, it is not a completely unfamiliar genre but one that has been deemed incompatible with the dominant cultural narratives of the present.⁷ The imagination, then, has a limited though definite power to enable individuals to reclaim and embrace rejected values by drawing upon denigrated cultural narratives.

The connection between the redefinition of unsatisfying social roles and the reconstruction of the past becomes increasingly apparent in *Possession* as the plot lines about the twentieth-century scholars and the Victorian poets intertwine. Whereas Ash and LaMotte are present to readers in the early chapters only through the

secondhand descriptions of literary scholars, they are depicted directly as characters in the final third of *Possession*, precisely as Roland and Maud are retracing their lives. The fantasy of experiencing the past with an immediacy and detail typically associated only with memory—the fantasy of (re)collecting—becomes here a textual reality. The scholars' increasing knowledge of the past enables them to perceive the world in ways that more closely resemble the Victorian poets' perspectives; this shift in perception, in turn, enables Roland and Maud to redefine their attitudes toward each other and to begin to believe in the possibility of experiencing romantic love.⁸ The novel underlines the shift by depicting Roland and Maud increasingly echoing words and statements made by the poets. Indeed, the intertwining of the two plot lines becomes so pronounced that pronoun antecedents are sometimes ambiguous at moments, leaving readers uncertain for several paragraphs which couple is being depicted (see esp. 229, 297).

As the passage I quoted earlier suggests, Appadurai also uses a narrative metaphor—"scripts"—when describing how individuals experiment with the past; however, the individuals and groups he describes appear much more interested in catachresis than in reconstruction or reenactment. Appadurai's description of the past as "a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios" (30) aligns him with a utopian strand of postmodern theory tracing back to the work of Charles Jencks. According to this line of thinking, any particular identity or social role limits an individual's ability to express his or her needs. Even the highly self-conscious efforts of Byatt's characters to consolidate their experiences and feelings "out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot," as Roland puts it (456), might satisfy one set of needs only to neglect others. The postmodern ideal of what Jencks calls "double coding" arises out of a sense that genuine human happiness and emancipation are best achieved by creating fluid identities that freely blend cultural traditions. The individuals whom Appadurai describes model this vision, drawing upon multiple pasts in a syncretic and anachronistic manner for identity sources, discarding the criterion of historical accuracy that is so central to *Possession*. By uncoupling the images they observe in the media and elsewhere from their original historical contexts, these individuals open up a much wider range of potential identities for themselves. Anti-American terrorists, in one of Appadurai's most striking examples, now model themselves on Rambo without feeling any sense of ideological inconsistency. This is possible, Appadurai suggests, because such individuals refuse to consume passively the material they assimilate; rather, they appropriate it with "resistance, irony, [and] selectivity" (7).

My contention is that the differences between Byatt's and Appadurai's theories of imagination can be attributed in part to different assumptions about what leads individuals to endure unsatisfying social roles. For Appadurai, the primary constraint on personal exploration comes from notions of an organic past or essentialist identity that have been employed by nation-states, ethnic movements, and various hierarchical organizations "to incubate and reproduce compliant national citizens" (190). Hence his interest in the cultivating of resistance, irony, and selectivity, for these characteristics challenge this "incubation" by highlighting national or ethnic identities as constructions and negate the idea of pure, "authentic" cultures. As I have shown, Byatt does not share these anxieties about identifying with an "authentic" past. For Byatt, individuals endure unsatisfying social roles because they lack a knowledge of the past sufficiently deep to allow them to envision alternatives. Roland and Maud need a historical model to provide a structure for their own romance; their romantic intimacy is an outgrowth of their increasingly intimate knowledge of Ash and LaMotte's past. The epistemological exploration enabled by (re)collection presupposes that narrative can make accessible genuinely different biases and beliefs, such as the Victorian poets' beliefs about romantic love. Without the concept of an authentic past, the (re)collection Roland and Maud engage in would fail to offer genuine experimentation with alternative social roles, leaving them unable to redefine themselves or their relationship to each other.

The Truth of Objects?

The claim that imagining more satisfying social roles in *Possession* depends on reconstructing the "true" past would seem to conflict with a fairly obvious point about the novel: its reconstructed "Victorian world" is a gross simplification. The story of two fictional poets comes to stand for the defining sentiments and beliefs of the entire era, effacing the multiplicity of beliefs and cultural tensions apparent even in cursory readings of Victorian novels such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, and *Middlemarch*. Nor is this a point that the novel conceals. The subtitle of *Possession*, "A Romance," aligns the text with a literary tradition that aestheticizes the past in order to make it more easily accessible. Indeed, Amy J. Elias argues that the tradition of the historical romance dating back to Walter Scott and Alessandro Manzoni recognizes at least implicitly that its efforts to render the historical past in narrative form are belied by the complexity of the events described.⁹ Such aestheticizing of the past is likewise apparent in Byatt's casting of Ash and LaMotte as emblematic Victorians. *Possession* sharpens the distinctions between Victorian and present beliefs by effacing the complexity of Victorian views about romantic love.

Byatt herself appears troubled by her awareness that it might not be possible to reclaim the "truth" of the past, at least in the sense of unmediated access. In her essay "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction" (2000), she presents potentially conflicting claims about the possibility of accurate historical reconstruction. Initially, the essay stakes out a fairly bold claim. "I do believe that if I read *enough*, and carefully enough," Byatt asserts, "I shall have some sense of what words meant in the past, and how they related to other words in the past, and be able to use them in a modern text so that they do not lose their relations to other words in the interconnected web of their own vocabulary" (177). Byatt's pastiche of Victorian poetry and prose, in terms of this understanding, not only imitates the language of her Victorian predecessors but also accurately reconstructs their sentiments and sensibilities. Later in the essay, however, Byatt appears more cautious as she tries to apply her claim to the two novellas in *Angels and Insects* (1992), and the final sentence is a much more modest statement: "I do think that in some curious way [my stories] find, not impose" (197). Here Byatt still insists that literary narratives can accurately reconstruct the past, but the qualification suggested by the phrase "in some curious way" and the vagueness about how this is achieved suggest discomfort with her earlier contention.¹⁰

The question of historical accuracy becomes particularly urgent in *Possession* because of the threat of looming Americanization. Like Hewison, Byatt demonstrates concern that heritage can be appropriated by any number of political positions and used to legitimize historical revisionism. Both Byatt and Hewison fault British Conservatives in this regard. *Possession* laments the existence of a political regime in which national interests are governed exclusively by a Thatcherite devotion to "Market Forces" that feels little responsibility either to subsidize the arts or to prevent the flow of cultural artifacts like the Ash-LaMotte letters to America (431). But *Possession*'s more basic anxiety about American capital becomes increasingly apparent later in the novel, as Professor James Blackadder declares the Ash-LaMotte letters to be an integral part of "our national story," and another academic, Professor Leonora Stern, asserts that the transplantation of the letters to an American museum would be tantamount to "cultural imperialism" (436). The central figure for this threat becomes Cropper. Regardless of Cropper's unsympathetic and hostile portrayal, his success in the race to collect the Ash-LaMotte correspondence remains a possibility throughout the novel because of the inescapable economic advantage he enjoys over the other scholars.¹¹ The novel urges its readers to distrust his rhetoric of the "free movement of ideas and intellectual property" and to focus instead on his fetishistic attachments to pornography and Ash's personal effects (417). For if Cropper were to succeed in transplanting the Ash-LaMotte letters to the Stant Collection at Robert Dale Owen University in the United States, his reconstruction of the past would almost certainly foreclose other versions, because he would possess the material traces that provide the basis for any reconstruction. Even before the action of the novel starts, Cropper has already sought to recast Ash and, by extension, the Victorian era in fairly dismissive terms. The title of his Ash biography, *The Great Ventriloquist*,

suggests an attitude toward Ash that Maud characterizes as a "peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography: the desire to cut his subject down to size" (272). The implication is that were Cropper to succeed, his victory would almost certainly attenuate further Britain's hold on its heritage and foreclose Roland's and Maud's efforts to imagine alternative social roles for themselves.

Byatt partially resolves anxieties about historical revisionism by asserting that the past has an ontological reality that is preserved in material traces such as letters, diaries, paintings, and the bodies of the characters.¹² These traces enable characters to experience the past; they also limit the realm of possible reconstructions. When Maud considers the possible ways in which she can conceive of herself, for example, she discovers that she can only imagine herself with respect to the body she inhabits and the past she has lived:

Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? A matrix for a susurrations of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist.

(273)

Despite the instability of self, and the apparent freedom to redefine oneself that it might imply, basic parameters hold. The material reality of her body cannot be denied, for instance, although Maud conceals her hair, which is considered inappropriately blond for a feminist academic. The recognition of her body and the ways in which it places certain limitations on how she can imagine herself comes in direct response to reading Cropper's biography of Ash, his attempt at "reverse hagiography." Indeed, the body and its history offer a natural response to the challenge presented by revisionist histories like Cropper's. Minimally, *Possession* asserts that material traces of the past limit the possible scope of interpretations. The recovery of the "absolute truth" of the past may be impossible, but claims to a kind of certainty—grounded in what historian Edith Wyschogrod has called "non-events"—can indeed be made and sustained.¹³ In terms of Byatt's novel, this means that the sum of collected material traces available at a given moment establishes a set of basic boundaries for possible interpretations, and any historical reconstruction that fails to account for these traces can be negated or eliminated. The bulk of available evidence determines the degree to which the imagination is directed, and as the various scholars gain more evidence of the Ash-LaMotte affair, their reconstructions increasingly converge. This is not to suggest that interpretation is ever entirely eliminated; the novel's epilogue, which I will discuss later, demonstrates that interpretation is inevitable, and that every interpretation leads to a degree of error. The caveat here applies to the novel itself, providing a way for Byatt to acknowledge her own potential simplification and misrepresentation of the past in her search for "impossible truthfulness." But to find that (re)collection is indeed governed by certain boundaries ensures some degree of truth. The eventual consummation of Roland and Maud's relationship suggests that the "true" recovery of heritage assists Britons in redefining postimperial social identities without wallowing in passive nostalgia or capitulating to American capital.

This last point qualifies my assertion that the imagination of more satisfying social roles in *Possession* depends on an accurate reconstruction of the past. Byatt's apparent preference for what might be called a usable past over an absolutely accurate one, I noted earlier, is implied by the novel's subtitle, "A Romance." The epigraph to *Possession*, drawn from Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, clarifies the stakes of this identification. Whereas the novel, according to Hawthorne, aims at "a very minute fidelity . . . to the probable and ordinary course of man's existence," the romance, in contrast, "has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation," for the writer of romance attempts "to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us." The romance, in other words, demonstrates a commitment to reestablishing a sense of historical continuity between the past

and present, but the past itself within romance is not so much a record as a partial and often creative version of events. In the case of *Possession*, the notation "romance" foregrounds the fact that Roland and Maud are drawn to reconstruct a past that reminds them of a relationship they might never experience themselves. Their own romance is the "present that is flitting away from us," and the scholars become acutely aware of this potential loss because of the particular way in which they reconstruct the past. Ash and LaMotte presumably would have had numerous relationships and social roles, yet the scholars seek out significant knowledge of them only as poets and romantic lovers. This is not to say that Roland's and Maud's reconstruction is inaccurate or untruthful. As the novel's repeated references to "genre" and "plots" remind readers, their reconstruction is selective. It is organized in a fashion that addresses a particular set of needs that relate to the scholars at this particular moment in their lives. Ultimately, then, the novel does not claim the existence of a singular, homogeneous "Victorian world"; nor does it insist that the transformation of the scholars' social identities requires unmediated access to the past. Rather, the novel makes a more restricted claim that the scholars gain *one* alternative mode of perception inspired by the Victorian poets. And this (re)collection of the romance of the Victorian lovers provides Roland and Maud sufficient knowledge of the past to take the poets' experiences as a "masterplot" for their own lives.¹⁴

While *Possession* thus cannot be read as straightforwardly challenging Hewison's claim that British heritage is used to construct an idealized past, the novel does insist that such idealizations nonetheless provide historical knowledge crucial to rethinking current social identities. For Hewison, I noted earlier, the rise of heritage represents "the imaginative death of this country" because it encourages an obsession with reclaiming a lost wholeness that never was. This essay's reading of *Possession*, however, suggests that the reconstruction of a selective or idealized past is not always motivated by a misguided desire to "return" but often by a longing to discover an alternative way of seeing or knowing the present. More simply put, Roland never wants to become Ash. Maud never wants to become LaMotte, even after she discovers that she is LaMotte's and Ash's direct descendant. The poets' romance, as an idealized narrative description of the past, provides a structure for the scholars to shape their vague fantasies of "white bed[s]" and "empty room[s]" into coherent forms that clarify specific goals for which to strive. This does not imply, however, that Roland and Maud are determined by the narrative they reconstruct. The historical knowledge acquired through (re)collection need not take the form of a homogeneous cultural narrative that precludes the existence of alternative narratives or even variations on a theme. Indeed, it is their knowledge of the outcomes of Ash's and LaMotte's decisions that enables Roland and Maud to clarify their own choices and ultimately to diverge from the poets' romantic plot. Whereas Victorian social mores about fidelity and adultery—the nineteenth-century equivalents of the "truths of Freud," the novel implies—demand that Ash and LaMotte must ultimately and agonizingly separate, the two contemporary lovers tentatively commit to continue their romance and thereby to begin forming their own story together.

Happily Ever After?

If *Possession* suggests that (re)collection enables characters to transform constraining and unsatisfying social roles by means of an imagined recovery of British heritage, it does not promise a more general reversal of national decline. To the contrary, the novel offers no indication that the nation might reverse its fortunes, and the inescapable economic realities of decline shape the social roles imagined in the novel. Roland's belated academic recognition comes in the form of job offers in Hong Kong, Barcelona, and Amsterdam, but notably not in Britain. If Roland and Maud are to continue their relationship, the novel implies, it will be increasingly defined in transnational terms as they jet across national boundaries.

The crucial nuance to Hewison's theory of heritage implied here is that collecting enables individuals to reconfigure identities in ways that do not necessarily correspond to traditional social entities such as the nation. Indeed, the imagination as a social practice is motivated by aspirations that, in Appadurai's words, "increasingly

crosscut those of the nation-state" (10). Roland and Maud's (re)collection of the past leads them to experiment with social roles that are not aligned with conventional class and state boundaries. This is particularly intriguing, given that so much of the novel is preoccupied with the loss of national heritage. The recovery of heritage in the form of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence is the essential precondition to and guiding "masterplot" for Roland's and Maud's imaginative role-playing; however, the lovers ultimately define their social roles vis-à-vis each other as a romantic couple with no particular national affiliation. In other words, the recovery of national heritage may not imply a personal loyalty to the nation-state. Roland's and Maud's anxieties in the final chapter revolve around the complexities of maintaining a long-distance romance, with little consideration of the countries in which they might ultimately reside.

The transnational character of Roland and Maud's relationship at the end of the novel underscores the potential unpredictability of (re)collection. Although (re)collection involves exploring the world through the imagined perspectives of others, the results of this exploration are not necessarily predictable or desirable, at least from the individual's initial standpoint. Maud's transformation is most significant in this regard. Whereas she begins the novel characterized by her assertiveness and commitment to feminism, she ends it characterized by indecision and passivity.¹⁵ Indeed, the consummation scene establishes very traditional gender roles, and Roland finds himself assuming an unfamiliar dominant role in the romantic relationship: "I'll take care of you, Maud," he asserts (550). While the novel does not directly express anxiety about Maud's new role, the narrator's description of their sexual intercourse reinvokes the threat apparent in every act of collecting: possession. "Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase," the narrator writes, "entered and took possession of all her white coolness" (550).

If Roland's "possession" of Maud is meant to mark a significant shift in their relationship—the end or closure of the romance plot—it raises the possibility that closure is accomplished by reducing Maud to a diminished role. Certainly, this possibility has motivated criticism of the novel's conclusion and, in some cases, Byatt's fictional reconstructions of the past more generally. Following Louise Yelin and Monica Flegel, Ann Marie Adams asserts that the novel presents "ideologically conservative ending(s)" and endorses "uncritical and non-liberatory" methods of reading (107, 121). *Possession* is frustrating to these readers in large part because its distinguishing formal and thematic features—particularly the polyphony of voices and modes of reading it presents—are typically associated with progressive political commitments. The novel's apparent endorsement of a conservative, even regressive, social role for its female protagonist thus appears to be a betrayal of its own insights regarding the history of patriarchy in the Victorian and modern eras.

The epilogue that immediately follows the consummation of the scholars' relationship might provide a more redemptive reading of Roland's "possession" of Maud and the conclusion of the novel. Epilogues typically claim to establish a final sense of closure that reaffirms or qualifies the conclusions to which they are appended. But they tend to have an implicit destabilizing effect as well, pointing to the provisional nature of any particular conclusion. The epilogue of *Possession* follows this pattern: it depicts a meeting between Ash and his daughter, of which the scholars remain ignorant. In so doing, the novel asserts both the endurance of the past beyond scholarly representations of it and the inability of any particular representation to capture it fully. The sense of closure that the scholars feel regarding the Victorian poets' romance is demonstrated to be provisional, lasting only so long as no further material traces are discovered. Likewise, the terms established for Roland and Maud's relationship are understood to be provisional and fluid, and the use of "possession" to describe their sexual intercourse seems intended to strike a playful and ironic tone.¹⁶ The contemporary lovers have managed to find a mode of collecting that does not indulge narcissistic desires but instead leads them to experience the past with an intimacy previously impossible for them. The implication is that Roland and Maud's relationship will also be defined by a desire to achieve mutual intimacy. This is not to deny that the novel's inattention to Maud's fantasies, particularly in the final chapters, prevents the playfulness associated with this final use of the word

"possession" from canceling out the anxiety associated with the term prior to this point. Roland's hope to find "a modern way" to continue their relationship beyond the romance plotline cannot entirely erase the history of the genre and the ways in which it so often subordinates female desire in order to establish the appearance of harmony between lovers (550). Yet *Possession* can be read to demonstrate what Susan Strehle and Mary Panicia Carden refer to as the "compound and contradictory impulse" of romance to ventriloquize patriarchal cultural values and also to reveal "women's frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions" (xii). Byatt certainly signals the risks of drawing upon the past for models of social identities, noting that LaMotte discovers that her romance with Ash threatens her "self-possession" (545). Indeed, LaMotte ultimately breaks off their relationship to preserve her independence as much as to acquiesce to social pressures. Maud's choice to act otherwise and to preserve her relationship leaves open the question of whether her new social role as Roland's romantic partner will continue to prove satisfying and fulfilling.

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Footnotes

1. My reading complements the academic reassessment of Hewison's interpretation of British heritage undertaken in Michael Hunter's volume *Preserving the Past*. Hunter addresses Hewison's claims directly in his introduction, suggesting that the latter characterizes heritage in monolithic terms. For Hunter, in contrast, the activities associated with heritage neither impart a uniform set of values nor necessarily endorse conservative politics. David Lowenthal, in *Possessed by the Past*, likewise calls for a more balanced account of heritage. Developing and refining the concerns he raised earlier in *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal suggests that heritage can provide in certain instances a useful guide for the present: "[H]eritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting" (xi).
2. Appadurai does not deny that imagination has played a role in social life prior to modernity. He insists, however, that previously the imagination was confined to the expressive space of art, myth, and ritual; only in the modern era has it begun to play a crucial role in everyday life. Individuals from all backgrounds, rather than only the privileged few, are now able to use their imaginations to redefine their social identities.
3. According to Werner Muensterberger, collecting in adult life represents a holdover from childhood feelings of abandonment. Individuals first seek out objects when they discover the absence of their mothers. The impossibility of recovering the lost sense of wholeness, however, means that objects can never satisfy human desires. Indeed, Ellie Ragland views longing itself as objectless—the product of a perceived existential lack for which the subject attempts to compensate through the acquisition and incorporation of objects (167). The objectless nature of longing means that an obsession with collectibles represents psychological immaturity and typically creates an unending circuit of frustrated desire that Ragland links to the death drive.

4. Katharine Edgar notes that collectors within modern literary texts are fairly consistently characterized as philanderers who have difficulty in forming normal human relationships, carry orderliness to the point of predictability, and exhibit a passion that borders on insanity for the material collected (82).
5. Helen Wilkinson identifies a somewhat different function for collecting in the novel. In her reading, collecting represents "a starting-point for a personal act of definition or creativity" (105). Collecting enables Roland to refocus his energies away from scholarship and toward a poetic career of his own.
6. Monica Flegel makes a related argument with respect to fairy tales in Byatt's novel, suggesting that they open up an imaginative space in which cultural, sexual, and class differences are dissolved. In particular, Flegel argues that Byatt's efforts to rewrite fairy tales question cultural assumptions about women.
7. The relationship between romance and contemporary or postmodern fiction has become an increasing source of scholarly interest in the past decade. Diane Elam, in her study *Romancing the Postmodern*, argues that romance and postmodernism are intimately linked in sharing "a common concern with the persistence of excess, a concern that leads to a rethinking of history and culture" (2). Although Elam does not address *Possession* in her study, her suggestion that postmodern romances engage in questioning what readers can know and recover about the past applies to Byatt's novel. In contrast, Suzanne Keen challenges the connection between romance and postmodernism in novels such as *Possession*, arguing that their preoccupation with what "really happened" differs significantly from the focus on undecidability that characterizes postmodern fiction. Instead, Keen uses the term "romances of the archive" to describe such novels. Hans Ulrich Seeber also distinguishes between romance and postmodernism in his reading of *Possession*, concluding that the novel challenges the "deconstructive epistemological basis of postmodernism" by establishing a "utopian territory" on which people project their hopes and desires (154, 149).
8. Mark M. Hennelly Jr. provides a useful counterpoint and clarification for the argument presented here. Hennelly argues that the repeating patterns in *Possession* present characters and readers with more questions than answers: "[R]epeating patterns not only help to answer textual questions, they also question textual answers. They conceal as much as they reveal, since every repeated clue cues a new mystery and every patterned recovery of that past seems to cover over that past again" (454). This argument does not necessarily imply that there is no growth in knowledge over the course of the novel; rather, growth involves an increasing awareness that a sense of certainty forecloses inquiry.
9. Elias's impressive and wide-ranging study of what she calls "[p]ostmodernist historical romances" contends that postmodern literature is trapped between its obsessive desire for history and its skepticism about the possibility of obtaining genuine historical knowledge (45). As such, literary texts from this period are resigned "to theorize and ironically desire history rather than access it through discovery and reconstruction" (xvii). According to the argument presented here, *Possession* resists such resignation.
10. Byatt's ambivalence is apparent throughout the essays that compose her collection *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (2000). In "Forefathers," for example, she argues, "there is a new aesthetic energy to be gained from the borderlines of fact and the unknown" (55). Yet this assertion follows her criticism of Peter Ackroyd's biography of Charles Dickens, in which Ackroyd combined factual research with imagined dialogues between himself and his subject. A similar ambivalence dominates Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). This novel sets up a quest for knowledge through collecting that initially resembles that presented in *Possession*. Like the earlier novel, *The Biographer's Tale* presents an unsuccessful literary scholar, Phineas Gilbert Nanson, who becomes passionately obsessed with material traces of the past. Frustrated by the postmodern and poststructuralist theories that dominate discussions in his seminars, Nanson quits graduate school, declaring, "I need a life full of *things* . . . Full of facts" (4). Shortly thereafter, he engages in a quest to discover the history of a biographer named Scholes Destry Scholes. Unlike Roland, however, Nanson meets with little success, discovering that things provide fewer facts than he had previously believed. By the end of the novel, he confesses that one of the few facts he possesses about his subject is that Scholes might have drowned. The transformation of unsatisfying social roles in *The Biographer's Tale* requires its protagonist to abandon

collecting and the search for historical knowledge; the last lines of the novel describe Nanson quitting his writing as one of his lovers, the Swedish pollination ecologist Fulla Biefeld, arrives.

11. Cropper's initial physical description casts him in explicitly nationalistic terms. His mouth is pursed in a specifically "American" manner; likewise, his "American hips, ready for a neat belt and the faraway ghost of a gunbelt," evoke the mythos of the Wild West in order to link his national identity to the threat he represents to the other characters in the novel (*Possession* 105). These descriptions of Cropper lead me largely to concur with Keen's assessment that the portrait of his perversity sets up a simple contrast between the aims of American and British academics.
12. Tatjana Jukic's argument makes a more expansive claim than my own, suggesting that Byatt recovers some "ontological essence" of the Victorian era and its "potential for passion, for *physis* and worldliness" (85, 84). *Possession*, for Jukic, represents the third stage in the development of postmodernism and its appropriations of the Victorian age. Whereas the earlier stages, exemplified by the works of John Fowles and Peter Ackroyd respectively, were ultimately limited by their efforts to establish parallels between the present and the past, Byatt reconstructs the ways in which the Victorians perceive the world differently from how it is currently perceived.
13. Wyschogrod argues that the impossibility of recovering the "absolute truth" of the past in no way eliminates the responsibility to write accurate histories: "The historian who seeks complexity and phenomenological richness must give up the dream of absolute truth and settle for *ficciones*, not the absolute truth about what was but the certainty of that which could not have been" (168). The idea of "non-events"—events that can be proved *not* to have occurred on the basis of existing evidence—establishes a limited range of possible interpretations for what did in fact occur. Byatt's epilogue demonstrates that this kind of certainty can still permit historical error, however. An unidentified lock of hair in Ash's grave is misattributed to LaMotte rather than to her and Ash's daughter, Maia. As a consequence, the scholars never realize that Ash knew of the existence of his daughter and had met her, if only briefly.
14. My argument here concurs with Dana Shiller's claim that the narrativization of experience is an essential feature of the "Neo-Victorian novel." Shiller asserts that novels such as *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* insist that the past can only be known through the mediation of narrative.
15. Lynn Wells reads the ending of *Possession* in much more optimistic terms than my analysis allows. For Wells, Maud ultimately rejects "aggressive, self-serving feminism" in favor of "a more integrated model of self in relation to others that concedes sexual difference but allows for both desire and equitable treatment" (687).
16. Del Ivan Janik argues that the novel employs the word "possession" in two very different senses as a way to distinguish between proper and improper attitudes toward the past: "Those who seek to possess—power, place, property, the past—are revealed as villains, while those who can allow themselves to *be* possessed—by curiosity, the desire for understanding, history, love—are rewarded richly in unexpected ways" (164).