CSU Michael Schwartz Library MSL ACADEMIC ENDEAVORS

Cleveland State University
EngagedScholarship@CSU

English Faculty Publications
English Department

Winter 2002

The White Bed of Desire in A.S. Byatt's Possession

Jennifer Jeffers
Cleveland State University, j.m.jeffers53@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation
Jeffers, Jennifer, "The White Bed of Desire in A.S. Byatt's Possession" (2002). *English Faculty Publications*. 63.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/63

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

The White Bed of Desire in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*

JENNIFER M. JEFFERS

> you speak to me in riddles
> & you speak to me in rhymes.
> My body aches to breathe your breath
> your words keep me alive.
> —"Possession," Sarah McLachlan

The British novelist A. S. Byatt frequently writes about art and color theory in her fiction. In *Still Life* (1985) Byatt intentionally saturates her text with musings on art and color; bordering on the didactic, she devotes long passages to Van Gogh's chromatics and individual characters' theories on art. With *The Matisse Stories* (1996) her discussion moves into the theory of complementary colors in the story "Art Work," through the painter Robin Dennison. Painting for Robin is "a series of problems, really, inexhaustible problems, of light and color, you know" (70). In the 1990 Booker Prize–winning novel *Possession: A Romance*, however, Byatt theorizes on art and chromatics more indirectly; in fact, she leaves the chromatic spectrum almost entirely, spinning a tale, a text(ile) woven in an achromatic hue: white. I contend that the achromatic color white functions as a trope of desire and imbricates the pairs of lovers and the reader in a longing that can be fulfilled only through reading the white page. In the tale, Maud and Roland desire "clean white beds"; Ash desires "the white lady," Christabel, who is "white in the dark"; and Christabel's poems refer to white hands, linen, milk, bones, crosses, and "marbling nakedness." The reader, meanwhile, desires to possess the white page of the text—to come to "know" the text—much as a lover comes to "know" her beloved.

Possession is at once a Victorian-era love story reconstructed from the lost cor-

respondence between the poets Christabel LaMott, virtually unread until the post-1970s feminist critical reassessment of the literary canon, and Randolph Henry Ash, the Alfred Tennyson or Robert Browning of Victorian England, and a contemporary romance, which unfolds during the reconstruction of the aforementioned lost correspondence, between two academics: Maud Bailey, a successful feminist theorist and LaMott scholar, and Roland Michell, a biographical, historical critic and Ash scholar. Yet, as Byatt makes evident several times in the text, this romance is also—if perhaps not principally—a game of desire played out between the text and the reader.[1]

In the novel, the trope of desire, white, is of course a color; but it also is a geographical destiny, an object, an image, and an ineffable experience. The white page is the site where this desire must play itself out. Concerning knowledge and desire, Byatt's text operates at two levels: first, the level of the Romance, with its conventional treatment of love and adventure, written in traditional episodic sequence and emphasizing the genre's spurious and sometimes improbable action; second, the level of the text (or metatext that engages the critically aware reader), with a trajectory of carefully aimed assaults targeted at contemporary literary theory and the "professional" reader or critic. In a May 1991 cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, Byatt, fully aware of the novel's appeal and sweeping breadth, states, "It's the only one I've written to be liked, and I did it partly to show off. I thought, Why not pull out all the stops" (14). Because it is "written to be liked," Byatt is able to seduce the unsuspecting reader into a text that is metacritically aware of itself while masquerading as a traditional Romance. Indeed, *Possession* calls into question the genre of the Romance, spoofing the very idea of an eminently "readable" novel in the postmodern age; the novel captivates, but never allows the reader to possess the text.

In the history of chromatics the achromatic color white is usually aligned with its achromatic siblings, black and grey. Indeed white and black are perhaps the two most powerful and most often evoked colors in the history of ideas. In Western religion and mysticism black is traditionally associated with darkness and evil, whereas white is linked with light and goodness. One contemporary chromatic theorists summarizes:

> White symbolizes light, triumph, innocence, joy. It was easily the emblem of supreme divine power, probably because of the whiteness of the sun, and its triumph over darkness. [. . .] The meanings of purity, innocence, and regeneration are akin to those of divine power and light. The phrase, whiter than snow, occurs in this connection. (Sargent 50)

For centuries painters have attempted to define the practical use of white and black. For example, the fifteenth-century painter Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*, theorized that black and white were not even colors: "white and black are not true colours, but, one might say, moderators of colours" (quoted in Gage 118). A few centuries later Goethe pens his tremendously influential *Die*

Farbenlehre (1810). In the tradition of Aristotle, he insists that colors have an intrinsic nature that light makes visibly possible and rejects the Newtonian idea that colors are wavelengths of light. According to Goethe, because we have given language and symbols to all things in the natural world, his study proposes to "extend the application of these universal terms, this language of nature, to theory of color; to expand and enrich this language through the theory of color and the diversity of its phenomena; and thereby to help disseminate deeper insights among friends of nature" (Goethe 159). It is not surprising then that white functions in its traditionally symbolic manner for Goethe: "white, representing light, stirs it to activity" (170).

White acquires new artistic meaning in the twentieth century as artists Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, two turn-of-the-century theorists on color and form, utilized white as a color of a "primitive" or less complex period of human history. Malevich paints *White on White* (1918), intending to arouse instincts or responses free from the influence or contamination of modern culture. Malevich believed that the white square painted at an angle would elicit a certain basic or "primitive" emotion. Likewise, in his influential text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), Kandinsky theorizes that the color white "has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age" (39). Kandinsky, like many color theorists, states that white is "harmony" and "silence": "This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable, shrouds its life from our understanding" (40). The twentieth-century view of color attributes more to white than artists and theorists in previous centuries; white becomes a color in its own right.

Perhaps for that reason and for its more traditional symbolism, Byatt selects white. Or perhaps her reason for selecting white concerns desire and reading. Byatt knows that the reader longs for the whiteness that is hidden in the spaces of the unopened text; we unfold the book to satisfy our desire for words. Her use of white as the site of desire leads us to believe that we desire a *tabula rasa*: the pure white page, the end of the story, the longing fulfilled. For instance, Maurice Blanchot problematizes the activity of reading and the proper "space" of literature in *The Space of Literature* by emphasizing the text's silence in its very speaking: "For this language speaks as absence. Wordless, it speaks already; when it ceases, it persists. It is not silent, because in this language silence speaks." Blanchot continues, "But at this point of literature's space, language is not to be heard" (51). A *tabula rasa* for Blanchot is either all white or all black: all blank white spaces or a text drowned in black words; nevertheless, language "persists" even when it is "wordless." In literature white is traditionally linked to silence; yet, as we discover throughout Byatt's text, desire for white is never fulfilled with the cessation of words.[2] Ironically, we desire words more than the white page. Indeed we desire to know the story or the text, but we do not want the good story or text to end because that would end our desire. Simply put, if the story ends then so does our ability to remain in a state of longing.

As lovers and as readers, however much we long to be satiated, we do not want the process of desire to end.[3] Likewise, we have a sensual attachment to words that speak our own or someone else's longing. In *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 1) Michel Foucault theorizes that we are not sexually "repressed" but that the claim is an excuse—a ruse—to produce discourse about our terrible fictional repression. "We 'Other Victorians'" desire nothing more than the opportunity to *tell* or *write* our desires: in the confessional, on the analyst's couch, in our memoirs, and now in tabloids and on talk shows. Our desire is imbricated in the discourse we produce: "the nearly infinite task of telling—telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex" (20).

In addition, Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, dispels the notion of the text as "a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth)" (64). Identifying the text as synonymous with "tissue," Barthes theorizes that "we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (64). The text is indelibly connected to all of the texts that require us to read; the word *text* refers to an infinite web or series of events, actions, and situations. According to Barthes, all texts align and form to create an immanent plane of reading: "[the inter-text is] the impossibility of living outside the infinite text—whether this text be Proust or the daily newspaper or the television screen: the book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life" (36). Desire is that which exists between and among the variable coordinates; desire is not a "thing" but an intensity that moves with varying speeds and is that which must be negotiated or "read."

We understand that desire is not "in" language but "in" the associations or the textual web; in other words, desire is "in" the game, in the ruses, in the spaces, between the said, the not said, in the play, and constituted "in" the "private electric storm" (304) between individuals. Desire is literally and metaphorically in the white. For the lovers, metaphor stops in order for physical possession to take place; this possession produces the white page—the space on the page where the reader cannot go—it is ineffable. For the reader who is given a blank space or a white page instead of metaphors there is only longing to know what occurs in the whiteness. On the one hand, this longing or desire to know what "happens" in the whiteness when language ceases can lead the reader to imagine or formulate what occurs; with this formulation or interpretation the reader believes she possesses the text's "truth" or meaning. On the other hand, this longing to know what is in the white spaces can never be known with certainty, and therefore, it causes the reader to perpetually desire to know the white spaces of the text—"between the said, and the not said."

At the level of the Romance, the "private electric storm" is Randolph Ash's

metaphorical impression of the desire existing between him and Christabel LaMott as they walk by the sea in North Yorkshire. Randolph and Christabel's liaison is the first of the two relationships in this Romance that I would like to consider. Randolph and Christabel's alliance manifests the generative desire to "know" the other. Their game of desire moves from a "*papery way*" with which they know each other (their correspondence) to the empirical manner in which they come to know each other in North Yorkshire. The discourse of desire evident in the letters is one of productive desire; what they may "lack" in not being able, initially, to see each other is more than abundantly recuperated in the richness of the "papery" search for knowledge of the other: "*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, *that is, blessed*" (215). The letters form a web of connections and alliances markedly as real as physical touch. But letters actually do more than touch the other. Despite their papery existence, they convey desire, not in the sense that language stands in for desire, taking desire's place or representing it, but in the sense that the language produces that intensity that exists between correspondents; the word produces the flux that stirs, that excites, and that generates the desire. The lover's words not only momentarily stir desire but also sustain and perpetuate that desire. Foucault's Victorians are titillated by the very act of writing (and reading) texts; as poets, Christabel and Randolph have an acute sense and an enjoyment of language that embodies Foucault's theory of language as ruse: "the nearly infinite task of telling [. . .] as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex."

Increasingly, knowledge becomes the metaphor of desire in Christabel and Randolph's correspondence; because neither lover actually knows the other, negotiating the spaces in time (between receiving letters) and the spaces in language (reading and rereading each letter for pleasure and for new insights into the other) is a key element in "getting to know" the other: even if knowing in this instance is actually imagining. Randolph writes at one point: "*I must tell you—ever since that first meeting, I have known you were my fate, however from time to time I may have disguised that knowledge from myself*" (211). To know someone is to be able accurately to read that person; yet, this passage also indicates that Randolph has difficulty reading his own desire (for her).

The hesitation that might suggest that the flux of the Victorians' desire is based on lack is dispelled when Randolph and Christabel plan to meet in person. Randolph confesses: "*We must come to grief and regret anyway—and I for one would rather regret reality than its phantasm, knowledge than hope, the deed than the hesitation, true life and not mere sickly potentialities*" (214). Christabel counters in the next letter with an offer of desire that risks going off the white page and into a new realm:

> *No—I am out—I am out of my Tower and my Wits. I have my cottage to myself for a few brief hours—Tuesday afternoon—ca 1.00 p.m.—should you*

care to reconnoitre the humdrum truth of your imagined Bower—of—? Will you take Tea?

Oh, I regret much. Much. And there are things that must be said—soon now—and will find their moment.

I am sad, sir, today—low and sad—sad that we went walking, yet sad too, that we are not walking still. And that is all I can write, for the Muse has forsaken me—as she may mockingly forsake all Women, who dally with Her—and then—Love—

Your Christabel (215–16)

Christabel's letter depicts the desirer who is unable to master her own text, "sad that we went walking" and "sad too, that we are not walking still." Christabel, in her flux, reaches out to Randolph, not only in the act of inviting him to tea, but in the act of writing.

It is intriguing that the text plays with its title metaphor during the journey to Scarborough and Christabel and Randolph's stay there, along with the metaphors of whiteness, language, and the ineffable metaphor for coitus. One of the basic definitions of possession that the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides is "to take for one's own or into one's control, to seize"; yet, in the context of Christabel and Randolph's interaction, it is the *OED*'s sixth definition of possession that offers us the most lucid indication of the word: "The action of an idea or feeling possessing a person [. . .] an idea or impulse that holds or affects strongly." In the railway coach, Randolph muses on the "real presence" of Christabel in relation to his Foucauldian discursive Christabel: "For months he had been possessed by the imagination of her [. . .] his imagination's work had been all to make her present" (301). A few pages later Randolph thinks that he must "teach her that she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings" (304). These two passages depict the range of the metaphor of "possession" that the text employs and the way in which it attempts to encroach ever closer to an empirical possession. As Christabel and Randolph draw closer to their first night together in North Yorkshire, the metaphor for knowledge collapses into possession, then metaphor itself—language—collapses as the word cannot stand in for the action. What can stand in is white. Words recede from the page and only white remains: "Here, here, here, his head beat, his life had been leading him, it was all tending to this act, in this place, to this woman *white in the dark*, to this moving and slippery silence, to this breathing end" (my italics, 308). Prior to this "slippery silence," they walk on the beach and the metaphor for knowledge becomes the metaphor for physical possession:

"We walk well together," he told her. "Our paces suit."
"I imagined that would be so."
"And I. We know each other very well, in some ways."
"And in others, not at all."
"That can be remedied."
"Not wholly." (304)

Christabel recognizes the impossibility of reading for absolutes: although physical possession or coitus may be achieved, "wholeness," the reading for complete recognition instead of misrecognition, will not be achieved. Randolph, too, meditates that evening on the failure of language: "He thought of his hopes and expectations and the absences of language for most of them" (306). Desire finally generates the empirical knowledge or possession of the other; language recedes, but reading for knowledge of another sort prevails:

> She met him with passion, fierce as his own, and knowing too, for she exacted her pleasure from him, opened herself to it, clutched for it, with short animal cries. [. . .]
> "Don't fight me," he said once, "I *must,* said she, intent, and he thought, "No more speech," and held her down and caressed her till she cried out. Then he did speak again. "You see, I know you," and she answered breathless, "Yes, I concede. You know." (308)

Randolph refers to Christabel as, "My selkie, my white lady, Christabel" and feels her "white in the dark," yet he cannot possess her. Lovers and readers both wish to possess the white, but never fully succeed.

Near the end of their stay in Scarborough Randolph prophetically meditates on the sight of Christabel, "(t)his is my centre, he thought, here, at this place, at this time, in her, in that narrow place, where my desire has its end" (312). Christabel and Randolph are pulled apart by circumstance, but the generative aspect of their desire casts the lovers' "discourse" far into the future. Maud, as we discover at the end of the novel, is literally the product of Christabel and Randolph's desire; still, without the letters and Roland's discovery of Randolph's fragments in the poet's dusty copy of Vico, there would be no text. Therefore, at the very least and quite separate from anything they experience, Christabel and Randolph's desire produces the narrative of the text. Late in the text, Roland meditates on the "plot of fate" that drove the "dead lovers": "partly with precise postmodern pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (456). The one "plot of fate" generates the Victorian text and the contemporary text; yet, Roland's position in late modernity causes him at once to be filled with a curiosity concerning the lost correspondence and a "superstitious dread." And so, the thought of being overtaken—seized—by some unknown force (desire for knowledge) produces in Roland the same kind of ecstatic–painful feeling Christabel also felt a century earlier. This strand of thought also leads Roland to think about the letters as open texts of desire because they constitute a discourse generated without a purposeful endpoint and without "closure": "Letters, Roland discovered, are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. His time was a time of the dominance of narrative theories. Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going" (145). This passage suggests that, despite the title of

the novel, reading the letters for possession—for certainty—will be a gratuitous activity because the letters themselves are without certainty. Roland attributes this condition to the epistolary form, but it is more likely—as Blanchot indicates—an overall condition of language. Moreover, the letters do not tell the story, instead *we* tell the story: we read over Christabel's and Randolph's writings and readings, we (re)create the story, we (re)negotiate the spaces.

On the one hand, the letters between Christabel and Randolph are the text; on the other hand, the letters are only the subtext as the spaces they open up or the negotiations that are produced by the letters create several other texts. The initial text of desire at the narrative level is Roland's—then, in turn, Maud's desire to know the mystery of the correspondence between the Victorian poets. At this level, we again have the desire for knowledge. Right before Maud remembers Christabel's poem about "Dolly keeps a Secret," Roland, frustrated, is characterized as feeling "as though he was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity—not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge" (92). The letters are wrapped in white linen, and so, not only is knowledge wrapped in whiteness, but this knowledge—beyond "Dolly keeps a Secret"—has already been divulged much earlier in the text in Christabel's poem:

> The house is ready spotless
> Waiting for the Guest
> Who will see our white linen
> At its very best
> Who will take it and fold it
> And lay us to rest. (42–43)

As the Guests, Maud and Roland will unfold the linen, read the hidden correspondence, and "lay" Christabel and Randolph "to rest." It is this desire to know the mystery of the correspondence that actually produces the text we know as *Possession*. Therefore, Maud and Roland's desire for possession of the correspondence leads them not only to desire the knowledge of Christabel and Randolph's liaison, but also leads them to produce their own liaison.

However, the desire played out between Maud and Roland is quite different from the driving urgency of Christabel and Randolph to "know" each other. Maud and Roland's desire seems only to exist for the possession of the correspondence, and, in fact, they make a conscious effort to close off all physical or sexual desire. Connected to their fear or avoidance of physical desire is the issue of language. To be sure, the twentieth-century critics often seem to be the mouthpiece of the text's awareness of itself, all the while Maud and Roland are playing out their awareness and the reality of living in late-twentieth-century society: "We are so knowing. And all we've found out, is primitive sympathetic magic. Infantile polymorphous perversity. Everything relates to *us* and so we're imprisoned in ourselves—we can't see *things*. And we paint everything with this

metaphor—" (276). Surprisingly, it is more often Roland, the historical, biographical scholar, who speaks the Lacanian view on language and life, not Maud, the feminist theorist who specializes in psychoanalytic readings. The latter passage sets up Maud and Roland's first significant discussion on desire:

> "As you say. We are very knowing. We know all sorts of things. [. . .] We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it's a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic Love—so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love—themselves—that what they did mattered—"
> "I know. You know what Christabel says, 'Outside our small safe place flies Mystery.' I feel we've done away with that too—And desire, that we look into so carefully—I think all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire."
> "I think that, too."
> "Sometimes I feel," said Roland carefully, "that the best state is to be without desire." [. . .]
> "At my life, at the way it is—what I —really—want is to—to have nothing. An empty clean bed." [. . .]
> "How good it would be to desire nothing. And the same image. An empty room. White."
> "White." (290–91)

In this passage white stands in for more than the traditionally conceived light, innocence, and joy; rather it is the trope of contemporary desire: a trope of escape, one that will lift us out of the harassments of our ultramodern world, one that will transport us away—not unlike the pages of a good novel. According to Maud and Roland, the image of the white bed stands in for a life of sexual abstinence. Without the complications, the pain, and the uncertainty of romantic or sexual desire, existence could be clean, empty, and white: the perfect *tabula rasa*. As readers, we do not want a white page because we desire words—we want to go on; we want to know what "happens next"; and we want to *know*. At the level of the text, then, a *tabula rasa* would indicate either a text not yet begun, one already completed, or one impossible to read/see for various reasons. A textual *tabula rasa* also constitutes reading in the vacuity of time; existence outside of time is a sterile fantasy (impossible), but it is a fantasy without the messy and painful consequences of desire.

Still, Maud and Roland, too, want to know what is written on the page; even more, they want to *possess* that page, and it is not white but covered with Christabel's or Randolph's words. The image of the white bed becomes the running trope between Maud and Roland. Ironically, we find the image of white does more to generate desire for the other than it does to arrest its progress. For instance, separated from Roland and having Leonora for a house guest, Maud is reminded of the soiled and mangled bed of the "last terrible days of Fergus Wolff," so Maud "tried to think whom she wanted to speak to, and came up with

Roland Michell, that other devotee of white and solitary beds" (344). The first time in the text that Maud recalls the image of the Fergus affair, she remembers the pain of the relationship through stained and crumpled white sheets: "Her mind was full of an image of a huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white" (68). Indeed, broken or dirty whipped eggs is an image or metaphor that recurs throughout the text: "The tormented bed rose again in her mind's eye, like old whipped eggs, like dirty snow" (155). Fergus has no associations with "pure as the driven snow," all the images of that period are of a besmirched whiteness. Ultimately, the dirty whipped egg image connects to Maud's self-possession. To possess one's self is to remain a whole, unbroken egg; Maud tells Roland near the end of the text:

> "I feel as she did. I keep my defenses up because I must go on *doing my work*. I know how she felt about her unbroken egg. Her self-possession, her autonomy. I don't want to think of that going. You understand?" (549)

The her is, of course, Christabel, and images of eggs occur in both of the Victorians' poetry. "Swammerdam," written for Christabel, contains in its first stanza repeated metaphors concerning eggs, whiteness, and emptiness: "that you have sat with me / Here in this bare white cell, with the domed roof / As chalky-plain as any egg's inside" (221). Images of broken and whipped eggs also "spill over" into Christabel's "Spilt Milk": "A white Disfigurement / A quiet creeping Sleek / Of squandered Nourishment" and "This warm squirted White / In solid Pot—was mine—" (412).

White occupies that uncluttered space between Maud and Roland in which it is understood that desire is to be avoided. Their negotiations are not carried out in speech but in silence and on the plane of a white bed. Hence, the new game of desire for these late-twentieth-century critics is a game that outwardly avoids or tries to circumvent desire. White remains the principal image even after Maud and Roland begin to silently acknowledge their desire for one another:

> One night they fell asleep, side by side, on Maud's bed. [. . .] He slept curled against her back, a dark comma against her pale elegant phrase.
>
> They did not speak of this, but silently negotiated another such night. It was important to both of them that the touching should not proceed to any kind of fierceness or deliberate embrace. They felt that in some way this stately peacefulness of unacknowledged contact gave back their sense of their separate lives inside their separate skins. Speech, the kind of speech they knew, would have undone it. On days when the sea-mist closed them in a sudden milk-white cocoon with no perspectives they lay lazily together all day behind heavy white lace curtains on the white bed, not stirring, not speaking. (458–59)

Roland's "dark comma" suggests his nightly pauses, evidence that he knew where to halt, against "her elegant phrase" on the page of the white bed. As per-

sonified letters and punctuation on the white page of the bed, Maud and Roland "silently negotiate" because their bodies are the disseminators of communication, devoid of sexuality—yet not devoid of desire. In contrast to their Victorian counterparts, Maud and Roland recoil from fierce passion and all overt displays of feeling or desire. For the "[s]peech, the kind of speech" that Maud and Roland know is aware that the blurring of selves is simply a Romantic fantasy, a fable constituted so that one does not have to feel alienated. Slipping into a misreading of that sort leads to an uncertain and unbearable loss of identity, an activity that neither Maud nor Roland wishes to risk, and so, their cautious "contact" maintains "their sense of their separate lives inside their separate skins."

One important distinction, however, is necessary at this point. If Maud and Roland are deliberately constituting this game as one of perpetuation through lack, then they would be consciously engaging in a re-enactment of the Victorian lovers: only Maud and Roland would be enacting a parody. But this consciousness seems unlikely, not because Maud and Roland are not sophisticated enough to engage in an authentically postmodern parody, but because Maud and Roland are actually beyond that kind of game. Desire as lack has been exposed and even the parody is exhausted: "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (456). More than unfashionable, desire as lack—desire looking for control and closure—is also untimely even at the level of parody.

Here we enter the metatextual level of white in our reading, the level we have occupied since the first page of this text, as *Possession* makes us aware that control and closure are not possible. First, the novel punctures our own reading with its ability to outmaneuver us, by calling into question the postmodern, hypertechnical reading: "Might there not, he professionally asked himself, be an element of superstitious dread in any self-reflexive, inturned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognises that it has got out of hand?" (456). Next, the text outwits us by already knowing that we as professional readers will build systems: "in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing" (458). Indeed the text instigates with the reader the very game that it accuses the (professional) reader of always playing. Every text sets up the rules of its own game, a home field advantage, if you will, and the reader must always conform, at least initially, to the text's demands. Once the text captures the attention of the reader, it generates a desire to know—the reader desires to play with the text's interworkings and spaces—even, if not especially, on the text's own terms.

What the text of *Possession* will not succumb to, however, is possession. The text calls to the reader's attention the inability of the text to do more than generate the "intense pleasure of reading." The text discriminates between its own "papery" words and the empirical world: "where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic yet disagreeably distanced,

without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy" (511). The irony, of course, is that the text is aware that it produces the world we know: "the book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life." Indeed "the immediacy of sexual moisture," for example, also requires reading. As we know, Foucault theorizes that we only come to "know" sensual pleasures of "the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of a good burgundy" through the imagination's labyrinthian journey through words: first, endless scrutiny of every angle and position, the fantasy of the tactile and the olfactory to produce a kind of "knowledge." Indeed, this pattern is the very one enacted by Christabel and Randolph: first letters—endless turning and scrutiny of sensations, feelings and expressions of longing—then intimacy.

Maud and Roland wish to believe that the reading of words and images is easier than the reading of the Other, and hence, easier to keep under control than the Other. Yet, all forms of reading require us to negotiate the space between ourselves and the Other: The text is as Other as a person we desire. There are the endless scrutinies, fantasies, and negotiations that we enact in our own minds, in an effort to know or to establish who it is or what it is we desire—or we should not desire. For taboo is the very ruse that arouses and titillates those "Other Victorians"—as well as "We 'Other Victorians.'" The economies of desire are constituted by outside texts, people, and the "suspect ideological construct(s)" we read daily. Reading and desire come together when we understand: Desire is not mastery. Reading is not mastery. The split between beloved and lover (text and reader) it seems is inevitable, but the aporia formed in that instant means that the desirer will never be able to recover that moment. The climax of the novel comes, appropriately and ironically enough, when "Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase, entered and took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so that there seemed to be no boundaries" (550). The boundaries between beloved and lover seem to melt into "white coolness," but, as we know, that is a fleeting event. This transitory experience is also the condition of reading. Reader and text meet between the covers of the book in that "white coolness" of the page. The reader, too, frequently has a momentary sensation that there are "no boundaries" between her understanding and the text, and in that fleeting moment of intimacy the reader believes she possesses the text.

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1. Critics who focus on the language or language play in *Possession* include Thelma J. Shinn, "'What's in a Word?' Possessing A. S. Byatt's Metonymic Novel," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 31. 2 (1995): 164–83, and Elisabeth Bronfen, "Romancing Difference, Courting Coherence:

A. S. Byatt's *Possession* as Postmodern Moral Fiction," *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996): 117–34.

2. Other examples of writers whose texts focus on the color white include Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (the white whale immediately comes to mind when thinking of *Moby-Dick*, but the novel contains an entire section devoted to *white*); Samuel Beckett's late fiction, in particular *Company* and *Ill Seen Ill Said*; and more recently, British novelist Jenny Diski's *Skating to Antarctica*, a novel about a voyage to Antarctica to find a landscape that is all white. For an interpretation of Beckett's late prose, please see my article, "The Image of Thought: Achromatics in O'Keeffe and Beckett," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 29. 4 (1996): 59–78.

3. See Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton UP, 1987), in which Kierkegaard delineates three stages of desire. Stage one consists of desire's desiring desire: "Desire, consequently, which in this stage is present only in a presentiment of itself, is devoid of motion, devoid of unrest, only gently rocked by an unaccountable inner emotion." Stage two constitutes the beginning of a desire that may actually be consummated. With stage two Kierkegaard presents Socrates's concept of lack in a more sophisticated form and one that is familiar to contemporary readers. The desirer finds the beloved and awakens from her placid slumber: "in this awakening in which desire awakens, this jolt, separates desire and its object, gives desire an object. [. . .] The result of this separation is that desire is torn out of its substantial repose in itself, and as a consequence of this, the object no longer falls under the rubric of substantiality but splits up into multiplicity." The first part of Kierkegaard's second stage represents a classic conception of Cupid, who shoots his arrow at the heart of the unsuspecting one who sleeps. In this way, Cupid is cruel, foisting on the unsuspecting a condition that is impossible: at the very moment of the arrow's penetration into the heart of the desirer, the "jolt," the object of desire and the sensuous feeling of desire for that object split apart. Consummation would be possible in Kierkegaard's second stage of desire if the desirer could refrain from first constructing an image of the beloved and then fanning out a series of multiple virtual images based on the initial split, the initial feeling of "earthquake." As Kierkegaard adds, "[D]esire awakens, the object flees, multiple in its manifestation; longing tears itself loose from the soil and takes to wandering." Desire wants to find its object in the multiplicity that, in effect, renders this desire objectless; hence, like the first stage of desire, desire is without an object.

Kierkegaard's third stage of desire "desires the particular absolutely." With this stage Kierkegaard seems to be twisting the Platonic notion of desire when he theorizes: "[I]t must not be overlooked that the issue here is not desire in a particular individual but desire as a principle, qualified by spirit as that which spirit excludes." The twist is constituted by the seducer who enacts a sophisticated game of desire, *pretending* to desire a beloved, but, in fact, desiring only the game of desire. According to Kierkegaard, the prototypic embodiment of the third stage of desire is Don Juan: "The sensuous as it is conceived in Don Juan, as a principle, has never before been so conceived in a world; for this reason the erotic is here qualified by another predicate: here the erotic is '*seduction*.'" Desire formulated by Kierkegaard, however, similar to Plato's and Hegel's depictions, is still encased in a dialectical system that not only attempts to regulate and gauge desire (especially in the third stage), but also still conceives of desire as lack.

WORKS CITED

Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Robert Miller. New York: Hill, 1975.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982.

Byatt, A. S. *The Matisse Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1996.

———. *Possession*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random, 1978.

Gage, John. *Color and Culture*. London: Thames, 1995.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Scientific Studies*. Trans. Douglas Miller. New York: Suhrkamp, 1988.

Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Trans. M. T. H. Sadler. New York: Dover, 1977.

"Possession." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

Sargent, Walter. *The Enjoyment of Color*. New York: Dover, 1964.

Stout, Mira. "What Possessed A. S. Byatt? A British Novelist's Breakthrough Surprises Everyone but the British Novelist." *New York Times Magazine*. 26 May 1991.

Post-print standardized by MSL Academic Endeavors, the imprint of the Michael Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University, 2014