

Viaduct

**Hauntology and Possession: The Representation of Cultural Anxiety in A. S. Byatt's
*Possession: A Romance***

In 2019, Abel Makkonen Tesfaye's – better known as The Weeknd – hit song *Blinding Lights* became an overnight sensation. The song rapidly took over the charts, being ranked as the #1 Greatest Hot 100 Hit of All Time by Billboard (Mamo). On Spotify, the song was the most streamed single in 2020 with 1.6 million streams (Spotify); to date, on YouTube, its official videoclip has been viewed nearly 592 million times (The Weeknd). In 2022 the song's echo lingers on, doubtlessly as the latest and most resounding testament to the fact that demand and longing for the eighties and its aesthetics has not abated. The explanation for this retro resurgence has probably to do with the growing popularity of Synthwave – as recently experienced across a variety of media: such as in videogames like *Hotline Miami*, *GTA Vice City* and *Cyberpunk 2077*; and in films like *Driver* and *Bladerunner*, etc. Synthwave is a genre that is by definition nostalgic, since it largely defines itself as a legacy and celebration of director-composer John Carpenter's audio-cinematic influence (ROTS 00:00:45). Essex based Synthwave composer Eric "Ogre" Ogden defines the genre as a "very postmodern subcultural thing. It's got one foot in the past and it's got one foot in the future as well. And so, it's forward facing and backward facing at the same time. And if you are somewhere in the middle, that's probably what I'd call Synthwave" (ROTS 00:07:17-00:07:34). It is this allegorical disorientation that is most apparent about *Blinding Lights*. During an interview with Esquire, The Weeknd was asked to offer an interpretation for his song. In his words, as quoted by Allison P. Davis, "The song is about, how you want to see someone at night, and you're intoxicated, and you're driving to this person and you're just blinded by streetlights, but nothing could stop you from trying to go see that person, because you're so lonely. I don't want to ever promote drunk driving, but that's what the dark undertone is" (Davis). It appears that more is concealed beneath this interpretation. While the song, on its literal level, really is about drunk driving, it is also a love song addressed to the event as defined by Jacques Derrida. The event, experienced on the ontological level, is the living through of the blurred moment, it is a dedication to the speeding chase that slows down the surrounding world, only secondarily is it an homage to delirium and perhaps only insofar as it suspends moments: "it puts time out of joint" (Derrida 20). The song is not about the reaching of the destination. It is about the futility of travel, about the paradox of moving without progress. It is this tension, or suspension that Slavoj Žižek calls the "dialectics at a standstill" (WTTDOTR 7). The similarities between the two concepts arise from the fact that in both situations, the world is in a frozen state of expectancy.

It could be argued that, in terms of their ontological and temporal structure, there is a similarity between The Weeknd's clip and a very different cultural text, A. S. Byatt's 1990 novel *Possession: A Romance*. Wherein Byatt's novel, worn out academics, Roland Mitchell and Dr Maud Bailey stumble upon a correspondence between Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The letters reveal that the two poets had a secret affair, which becomes a major breakthrough in academia, since though the two poets have been extensively researched, due to incomplete information, biographers have misidentified themes and symbols in their works, leading to a misunderstanding of their characters. The inquiry undertaken by the academics reveals that, in emotional terms, the two Victorians actually led rather unfulfilling lives, which led to an elopement that not only had a lasting effect on their lives and personalities but resulted in the birth of a child of whom Maud Bailey is a direct descendant. Mirroring the Victorians, Maud and Roland lead similarly unhappy lives and are dissatisfied in their current circumstances. Plagued by a feeling of and a general lack of direction, the two come to develop a bond, which not only fulfils their romantic desires but symbolically restores the order in the novel's universe: it grants Maud a sense of freedom regarding identity through legacy and an active feminine role, and enables Roland to realise his poetic inclinations and assume a firm, appreciated position in the relationship.

Throughout the novel, burial and interaction with the dead, creation through language, and historical progress are themes that receive heightened emphasis. These themes, identified by 18th-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico in his *The First New Science (La Scienza Nuova, 1725)*, as the foundational pillars, not just of all civilisations but of an eternal history (Vico 66), govern the narrative logic of the novel. This essay will explore these themes and their narrative underpinning through close reading, viewing them through the lenses of various continental philosophical discourses to reveal the fundamental contradictions that constitute the way in which cultural anxieties are expressed in the novel.

The plot of the novel is suspended between two exhumations (Byatt 1, 494). The first is the metaphorical exhumation of Ash's own copy of *The First New Science* from a locked safe in the British Museum. The book, wrapped in white tape, similarly to how one would find an embalmed mummy, is accidentally disembowelled by Roland, revealing among its contents, a draft for the first piece of correspondence between the two poets (2). This disturbance of the dead invokes not only the haunting spectre of Vico, who prophesied a corruption of the age of men (Vico 82), but one that manifests alterity itself. The spectre which begins to haunt Roland is the very idea that things could be very different. This scene of the novel then, lends itself to be interpreted as the standstill that Derrida and Žižek were referring to.

The uncanny presence of ghosts and spectres, more recently often referred to by the term hauntology, has long fascinated cultural theorists. Mark Fisher, in his essay *What Is Hauntology*, defined it with regard to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. The film, he says, "refers to hauntology in the most general sense—the quality of (dis)possession that is proper to human existence as such, the way in which the past has a way of using us to repeat itself" (WIH? 19). But by the time Fisher wrote about the term, in his words, it was already living "its second (un)life" (WIH? 1). He attributed the term's coinage to Jacques Derrida (GOML Why Hauntology?), who in his 1993 *Specters of Marx* set out to ponder upon the "dissolution of the Soviet Union" (Magnus and Collenberg vii), and on how Marxist theory could be (re)appropriated: "Who? The 'Marxist' who will engender what for a long time is going to prevail under the name of 'Marxism'" (Derrida 47). Derrida, however, established certain parameters within which hauntology takes on a broader meaning. Rather than being restricted just to the looming threat of historical repetition, in his terms, hauntology becomes a way of understanding history and of conversing with it. This is partly constituted as the emotional labour of mourning: ("First of all, mourning. We will be speaking of nothing else"), but also as a legacy ("Kant qui genuit Hegel qui genuit Marx"), and, finally, as transforming labour, "the 'spirit of the spirit' is work" (Derrida 9). These three elements together express what Derrida meant by hauntology, insofar as it refers to a state in which the process of dealing with the past has been disturbed or it remains incomplete. He often quotes a line, as Fisher also noted, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "the time is out of joint," which signifies that historical progress, in the Derridean sense, or the flow of time itself, had stopped because it reached a sort of impasse (GOML Why Hauntology?). While this deadlock for Derrida was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which made the inheritance of Marx precarious, for Fisher, it resulted in what he called capitalist realism, which is a set of social circumstances in which culture becomes oversaturated, and the creation of new art becomes impossible. (CR 3) The two conditions or diagnoses are not unrelated, however, as Fisher, besides the lack of political alternatives and the reduction of modernism to a periodically surfacing, frozen aesthetic style, also lists the lack of socio-political alterity as one of the symptoms of the predicament he describes. "[A] whole generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from the outside. It now, in fact, has the opposite problem; having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonise and appropriate?" (CR 8).

Fisher is not alone in problematizing the tendency to generate 'monoculture' in contemporary society. Setting off from a dialectical viewpoint, South Korean-born philosopher

Byung-Chul Han, in his *The Burnout Society*, posits that our current age is determined by a group of signature illnesses: “From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Han 1). To oversimplify, a persistent fatigue is identified as the hallmark mental illness of the present times. Fisher and Han both attribute the proliferation of these ailments to being overworked, or rather, to being constantly overwhelmed, which leads to exhaustion. “Reacting immediately, yielding to every impulse, already amounts to illness and represents a symptom of exhaustion” (Han 21). Fisher connects exhaustion to cultural and political sterility: “What we are dealing with now, however, is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility” (CR 7). In fact, the two theoreticians find common ground in invoking Kafka to describe the absurdity of the situation (Han 35; CR 22). Furthermore, Han decidedly shifts to ontological grounds to express the sentiment, which Fisher also articulated, that the problem stems from “too-much-of-the-Same” (Han 5). In his views, society has over immunised itself against the Other, by introducing it and incorporating it too often. He postulates:

The dialectic of negativity is the fundamental trait of immunity. The immunologically Other is the negative that intrudes into the Own and seeks to negate it. The Own founders on the negativity of the Other when it proves incapable of negation in turn. That is, the immunological self-assertion of the Own proceeds as the negation of negation. The Own asserts itself in—and against—the Other by negating its negativity. Immunological prophylaxis, that is, inoculation, follows the dialectic of negativity. Fragments of the Other are introduced into the Own in order to provoke an immunoreaction. (Han 3-4)

It is in these conditions that the protagonists of *Possession* are labouring. Roland and his partner Val, live in destitution not only in the monetary sense, but also through being born in an age where the possibility for the creation of something new, something truly Other had long been exhausted (Byatt 10). The situation is further exacerbated as we learn that Roland’s supervisor, James Blackadder, even though born at the height of the popularity of Ash scholarship, had been disillusioned in his youth thanks to his own overly scrupulous professor (Byatt 27-28). Consequently, he developed a laconic essay style which serves as a sort of defence mechanism (27). Ironically, the talented young scholar with his own poetic ambitions had been rendered untraceable in his work, his narrative voice giving way to be wholly engulfed by that of Ash’s. At one point, he is shown to erase all traces of his own views,

Blackadder looked at all this, and crossed out the adjective “curious” before “feminist attack.” He thought about crossing out “somewhat lurid and imaginative” before Cropper’s account of the seances. These superfluous adjectives were the traces of his own views, and therefore unnecessary. He contemplated crossing out the references to Cropper and Dr Wicker in their entirety. Much of his writing met this fate. It was set down, depersonalised, and then erased. Much of his time was spent deciding whether or not to erase things. He usually did. (299-300)

It is imperative to understand the allusion that this mode of creation makes. In Byatt’s novel, academic writing, as such, is problematised not only because, in a postmodern way, it recycles literature by generating texts on already existing texts only to create even more, but also because Vico understood interaction with the new, with the radically Other in terms of poetic language. He posited not only that the first civilised men were necessarily poets (Vico 154), but also that the slightest interaction with something previously unknown requires the use of metaphors (151). For Vico, an austere, concrete, and strict language, such as that of contemporary academic discourse, could never have served as the foundation of an advanced civilization. As he points out in a chapter dedicated to the issue, the belief that Roman customs, which he held in high regard, came from Sparta is a misconception (123-124). Thus, Blackadder’s writing style of “Spartan brevity” is sterile by definition (Byatt 27).

Blackadder’s American counterpart, Mortimer Cropper, finds himself in a different but effectively identical situation. Cropper, commanding a seemingly endless stream of funding and personal wealth, is set on purchasing all available Ash memorabilia. As Blackadder states his concerns, “I wouldn’t trust anyone, faced with Cropper’s cheque-book, not further than I could see” (Byatt 30). Although as seen during the lecture scene, Cropper’s silhouette indeed looms over Ash’s heritage, it is also the manifestation of a desperate attempt to overcompensate, to manufacture connections with Ash:

From time to time, as if by accident, the animated shadow of Cropper’s aquiline head would be thrown, as if in silhouette, across these luminous objects. On one of these occasions he would laugh, apologise, and say half-seriously, carefully scripted, there you see the biographer, a component of the picture, a moving shadow, not to be forgotten among the things he works with. (Byatt 385)

Even though he pretends that he finds but “a humble pleasure” in his work (Byatt 385-386), his actions are gravitating towards impersonating Ash, rather than representing him. This is most obviously seen in his habitual use of Ash’s pocket watch as if it were his own. As described by the narrator, he believes the “watch had come to him” (387). This act of appropriation also

represents, in Fisher's sense, how cultural objects are increasingly determined by their monetary value. The power of capitalist realism, he suggests, derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or Das Kapital, a monetary value (CR 4). What Blackadder's desperate pleadings to the Ministry of Arts and the Reviewing Committee to keep Ash memorabilia in the country represents is the Sisyphean fight against capital itself (Byatt 398). As he is told, "If the retention of these old letters in the country is truly in the national interest, ..., then Market Forces will ensure that the papers are kept in this country without any artificial aid from the state" (398). As Fisher explains, the problem with capital is that it installs itself as the only viable ideology to adhere to (CR 4). In this sense, the very problem is that the only logical outcome is that market value overrules national and scientific interests. This also denotes the tendency of contemporary society to generate artifacts, which are then eternally preserved and put on display. As Fisher elaborates, "In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, transformed into artifacts" (CR 4).

It is this process of commodification that entails petrification. The concept of petrification takes on a plethora of meanings within the novel's context. Firstly, in Levinasian terms, it involves 'bracketing': the reduction of Otherness at the expense of its richness. This is necessary because, as Andrew Gibson explains, "The other always and definitively overflows the frame in which I would seek to enclose the other" (Gibson 25). Therefore, possession, in all senses of the word, must involve reduction (25). Secondly, more in the terminology of R. D. Laing, petrification denotes the way in which people make sense of each other but becomes pathologically harmful if it is overdone (Laing 46-47). This entails the depersonalisation of the other, which makes them feel 'set in stone' which, again, denies a significant portion of their personhood (46). Thirdly, the act of petrification is a withdrawal of *vita* in its most general sense. The force that Ash is in search of, and what Roland is also after, what Maud and Christabel need to recognise in themselves, is the essential quality that allows the constitution of the new via a retention of the ability to change. As Ash professes to Christabel,

[I am in love] with you. And by extension, all creatures who remotely resemble you. Which is, all creatures, for we are all part of some divine organism I do believe, that breaths its own breath and lives a little here, and dies a little there, but is eternal. And you are a manifestation of its secret perfection. You are the life of things. (Byatt 285)

Here, Ash's metaphysical inclination is well observable. What he refers to here is creative power at its purest. The same power that is at work, according to Vico when one becomes to know the unfamiliar, which necessitates giving it life. He writes,

When men want to create ideas of things of which they are ignorant, they are naturally led to conceive them through resemblances with things that they know. And when there is a scarcity of known things, they judge the things of which they are ignorant in accordance with their own nature. Hence, since the nature that we know best consists in our own properties, men attribute to things that are insensate and inanimate, movement, sense and reason, which are the most luminous labours of poetry. But when even these properties are of no assistance, they conceive things as intelligent substances, which is our own human substance. This is the supreme, divine artifice of the poetic faculty, through which, in a God-like manner, from our own idea we give being to things that lack it. (151)

As exemplified, petrification – seen as eternal preservation or reduction – is constituted as a counter-process to the creation of the new. In this light, it sterilises culture but also, figuratively, people. The resulting impotence is reflected not only in the lack of romantic encounters in the character's lives: Ash being childless in his marriage, Roland and Val lacking romance, Cropper and Blackadder being seemingly without family, but is represented in the unfruitful academic discourse. Furthermore, it is inscribed in the very spaces the characters inhabit. Where Roland and Blackadder work, the Ash Factory, is a wordplay on the systematic production of papers on Ash, but it is ostensibly also a crematorium which, instead of burying or memorialising the dead, incinerates them. This, in Vico's eyes, would be a serious deviation from one of the most important customs, the burial of the dead, which, he argued is the namesake of humanity itself (Vico 263). He writes, "This was our third principle of humanity, i.e. burial of the dead, through which humanity was named *humanitas* from *humare*, 'to bury'" (263). If burial does not take place, the dead is not given back to the earth: this interferes with the very principles of nature.

Taking the argument further, it is this lack of fertilisation that makes the world of *Possession* barren. In Roland's own home, access to the garden is denied by the landlady, which is effectively a ban on entering the Garden of Eden. "The garden was long, thin, bowery, with sunny spots of grass, surrounded by little box hedges, its air full of roses, swarthy damask, thick ivory, floating pink, its borders restraining fantastic striped and spotted lilies, curling bronze and gold, bold and hot and rich. And forbidden" (Byatt 17). This rich description itself constitutes the garden as a teeming source of not only life but of metaphor. What ails the

characters of the novel is the desolation of the everyday, a life created through a language that lost its fabulous origins. For Roland, Maud, and Val, this is the result of the “de-eroticisation of contemporary culture”, as Fisher writes when citing Berardi: “In this insomniac, inundated state, Berardi claims, culture becomes de-eroticised. The art of seduction takes too much time, and, according to Berardi, something like Viagra answers not to a biological but to a cultural deficit: desperately short of time, energy and attention, we demand quick fixes” (GOML “The slow cancellation of the future”). For Randolph and Ellen Ash, for Christabel LaMotte and Blanche Glover, not even such quick fixes are available. From the rigidity of Victorian society which abhors romance outside, and often even within, marriage, the characters can scarcely escape. They are sentenced to existing in perpetual struggle. Blanche Glover commits suicide not only because Christabel leaves her, but also because Victorian socio-economic conditions render her life-goals impossible (Byatt 216). Although Ellen Ash lives to a ripe age, it is revealed that she was unable to have sex with her husband due to anxieties and fears inculcated into her (459-460). Her only legacy remains her journal in which she would write about jelly-making, which is a desperate attempt to establish any semblance of preserving liquidity, preventing petrification (462). Ash breaks out of this deadlock when he meets Christabel during a dinner party. In a way, Christabel’s presence is a direct consequence of disjointed time; she has been invoked by this very disjunction. Effectively, it is her very appearance that makes Ash realise that he is in a deadlock. Although her appearance almost always has a spectral quality to it - this is emphasised in the train scene where she wears nondescript grey clothing with white accessories (274), and alternatively, in her poetic persona, the fairy creature Melusine (289-298) - she is also spectral, in the sense, that she constitutes the very ‘lost future’ of Fisherian terminology. In this sense, she is the “could have been other”.

Christabel’s Otherness is also emphasised by contingency; she represents the never presented alternative route that has never been offered to Ash. In Derrida’s articulation, this is the “altogether other” where the emphasis is on the repetitive nature of haunting, he further elaborated on this as, “this, altogether other, every other, from which the repetition compulsion arises: that every other is altogether other” (Derrida 217). What Derrida is referring to here is that, in hauntological situations, establishing a clear-cut chronology is impossible since any or every instance of the repetition might be unique, yet they do form a chain of events where the first one is not necessarily the one that initiates the process. Here, he points to Freud’s essay, *The Uncanny*, which attempts to elucidate the plethora of meanings that are attached to the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (both meaning something like uncanny). Drawing upon the work of Ernst Jentsch, and interrogating several works of literature as well as everyday

experiences, Freud comes up with a wide range of connotations for the term (Freud 1). He finds that the *unheimlich*, the uncanny, also meaning unfamiliar, seem to be closely related not only to compulsive repetition but also to death itself. “Many people experience the feeling [of uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. As we have seen, many languages in use today can only render the German expression ‘an *unheimliches* house’ by ‘a haunted house’” (Freud 13). This not only charges the spectral attributes of Christabel with connotations of death, but also explain Ash’s uncharacteristically strong interest in her, which in turn sets Roland off on his investigation or quest. Ash’s attraction is constituted as a logically necessary consequence of his predicament. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “If something gets too traumatic, too violent, even too filled in with enjoyment, it shatters the coordinates of our reality, we have to fictionalise it” (TPGTC 04:50-05:03). This not only means that Christabel must be first constituted by Ash as a fantasy but also that this first interaction between the Same and Other takes on traumatic quality. The excess experienced here becomes the force that restructures reality through trauma. As Žižek elaborates, “When a fantasy object, something imagined, an object from inner space enters our ordinary reality, the texture of reality is twisted, distorted. This is how desire inscribes itself into reality, by distorting it. Desire is a wound of reality” (TPGTC 46:38-47:04). This desire is, then, the very force that kickstarts the Victorians on their journey. Ash’s desire retroactively constitutes Christabel as source of the events but also as the goal towards which they orient themselves. She becomes cause and effect and causation itself. It is in this way that she becomes truly spectral, altogether other, an object of fascination which in turn haunts the one that is after her. Derrida outlines this circularity of logic in being haunted when he argues for a circular logic of causation. He writes, “Why does it whisper to us to follow a ghost? Where? Whither? What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading? Here again what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back” (Derrida 9-10). How Ash would deal with being haunted, as it were, was also prescribed by him,

He [the scholar or intellectual] should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (Derrida 221)

The act of giving back speech to the spectre is then the only proper way of processing the past. It is the act of mourning and giving life itself. This undertaking is best reflected in the

creative art of Ash: as mentioned, he is celebrated chiefly for his ventriloquism, for “his unwieldy range” (Byatt 27). Able to assume many personas through poetry, he has the ability to be possessed by voices. According to Žižek, since voice is not an organic part of the human body, it is considered an autonomous partial object (TPGTC 14:02-14:13). Speech, therefore, always carries some effect of ventriloquism (TPGTC 14:21-14:27). He goes on to postulate: “The only way, for me, to get rid of this autonomous partial object is to become this object” (TPGTC 30:48-30:56). For Ash, this means that to rid himself of the spectre, he must first let it possess him, let it speak through him. This achieves not only the creation of art, but also fills Christabel with life, as per the prescription of Vico. Being able to create new art, while being indistinguishable from it is the reason why Ash haunts the contemporary characters of the novel. This is the act that Cropper and Blackadder are unable to replicate despite their efforts. The unassuming Roland, however, seemingly born already too late to properly contribute, manages to become Ash, since he is the one who realises his ambitions as a poet. This is clearly reflected in his newfound access to the garden outside their basement flat (Byatt 474). After visiting it, he immediately produces several pieces of original poetry (475). The reason why Roland becomes the one to deal successfully with being haunted by Ash is that he does not try to elaborate on Ash’s personality or poetic practice, but through approaching the practice of poetry as a craftsman, is able to restore life to him and respect his ambiguity as a person. This is seen when he thinks back to seeing Ash’s death mask which, and by virtue of the concept becoming interesting for him, as it were, comes to life (473). This tolerance for a person’s ambiguity is what makes him a stable partner for Maud, a naturally unsure person, who finds a reliable supportive partner in him. As Roland promises to her: “I’ll take care of you, Maud” (507). The same is true for Ash: it is primarily his ability to achieve possession without absorption that characterises him. This manhood, without any definitively masculine trait is what Deleuze reflects on when he says, “Becoming does not move in the other direction, one does not become Man, insofar as man presents himself as a dominant form of expression that claims to impose itself on all matter, whereas woman, animal, or molecule always has a component of flight that escapes its own formalization” (ECAC 1). This always actively formulating, female Selfhood is what Žižek also confirms:

When we see a face, it’s basically always the half of it. A subject is a partial something: a face, something we see, behind it, there is a void, a nothingness and of course we spontaneously tend to fill in that nothingness with our fantasies about the wealth of human personality and so on, and so on. To see what is lacking in reality, to see it as

that, there you see subjectivity. To confront subjectivity means to confront femininity.

Woman is the subject; masculinity is a fake. (TPGTC 1:03:05-1:03:54)

These statements illuminate two simultaneously. First, that Roland's and Ash's assumption of the male position proves successful precisely because in it they assume a complete neutrality, a position from where, movement is only ever possible towards alterity. Second, that what should happen to Maud and Christabel is not that they settle into some sort of a prefigured, ideal feminine role, but find their authenticity in their fleeting Otherness. While for Maud, this comes about as somewhat of a given, via the realisation that she is genetically predestined to be the inheritor of the Victorian couple's legacy. Thus, a great deal of transformative labour is prescribed to her: she will have to deal with her ghosts (Byatt 505-507). In the meantime, Christabel goes through a whole passion of her own. Her storyline is resumed with her niece's journal, which she begins at Christabel's behest (335). Here it is learned that Christabel went through a great deal of emotional distress, from which she must recover (Byatt 346). Towards the end of her journey, she gives birth to Ash's child, whose fate remains unknown until the very end of the novel (377-379). Christabel also learns in Brittany about the true flexibility of fairy stories. She discovers that they are retold annually and while they change greatly, their essence or milieu remains the same (352-355). It is this changing attribute to which Deleuze refers to as fleeting and what is also the sought-after attribute of organic life-forms. Christabel's becoming-women, insofar as she is also a becoming-poet but also learning of her femininity in general, involves the very steps Ash and Roland had to take when deviating from the normative perspective.

To summarise, for her, self-actualization is a preservation of a certain kind of liquidity, which is the very opposite of the petrification that threatens to befall the characters. The traces of this achievement are discoverable throughout her poetry, especially in the allegorical readings of Melusina's, which scholars (mis)interpret as the washing away of gender boundaries for women (Byatt 334). Although this assumption is not entirely incorrect, the abolition of boundaries encompasses far more than just gender: It encompasses any rigidity as regards identity. During her nights with Ash, she is clearly portrayed as something liquid (283). The previously mentioned, threatening petrification as artifact creation is best exemplified in her case by the Whitby jet brooch that Maud inherits from her (260). It comes to represent a failure of mourning, because it manifests eternalising. Jet, which is petrified wood, is the very material which has lost its organic characteristics; it has lost its *vitas*. The fact that it was in Maud's possession all along her journey, without her recognising its importance, displays that it had lost all its commemorative function. As a matter of fact, it had become the very item with

which Maud ties her hair down, restricting its free mobility (its fluidity), thus performing much of what Christabel had come to stand against (259-260). To reiterate, the jet brooch had become devoid of real meaning, which signifies modern detachment from old customs. In Vico's interpretation, the age of Man had come, where, due to the great extent of advancement, humanity loses what is most important, itself. He writes: "Men commonly attend first to the necessary, then to the comfortable, next to the pleasant, later to the luxurious or superfluous, and finally, in a frenzy of abuse, they lay waste to their substance" (Vico 82). In a way, the jet brooch is not only the best example of what happened to the Victorians' legacy, but also the most perfect representation of what befell the world of Possession in general. Set in stone and sterile, what it lacks is the very desire that could animate it again. In essence, what Roland really does at the beginning is more than just a stumbling upon a great discovery; he dares to desire. Similarly to the stories Freud calls uncanny, it is unclear whether the event is the cause or the consequence (Freud 11-12). Nevertheless, taking Ash's letters is certainly more than an act of theft. It is an Act. Žižek, as he elaborates on Derrida and Kierkegaard's ideas, in the end, reformulating Robespierre, describes the surmounting of difficulties that precedes an act:

An Act always involves a radical risk, what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, called the madness of a decision: it is a step into the open, with no guarantee about the final outcome – why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. This lack of guarantee is what the critics cannot tolerate: they want an Act without risk – not without empirical risks, but without the much more radical 'transcendental risk' that the Act will not only simply fail, but radically misfire. In short, to paraphrase Robespierre, those who oppose the 'absolute Act' effectively oppose the Act as such, they want an Act without the Act. (WTTDOTR 152-153)

With this interpretation in mind, we can have a clearer idea of the narrative logic of *Possession*. Within its plot, a strong circularity is observed. Desire presupposes an act, but the act itself must be desired. The taking of letters is the very dispossession that starts the chain of events which culminate in Roland "taking possession" of Maud (Byatt 507). Ash must take possession of LaMotte, but only to let her go immediately afterwards. The idea of circularity permeates *Possession*, only to be cut short at the final scene, in the very last paragraph: "In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a trat smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful" (507). The liveliness and intensity of the garden scene is finally recapitulated, but the reader is left with the question: what happens next?

It is tempting to point to the previously showcased circularities to argue that a new beginning is imminent. Once again, mankind awakes to an original sin, and eternal history keeps progressing. The age of irony re-enters into the age of poetry. But if there is such a repetition, it would mean that Roland and Maud are still condemned to the fate that the Victorians suffered. In the end, they awake and ashamed of their nudity, they are banished from the garden once more. There is an illuminating Spinoza interpretation by Deleuze, in which he reflects on the proposition that God forbade the apple because it is poisonous. It will harm Adam, “it will determine the parts of Adam’s body ... to enter into new relations that no longer accord with his own essence” (SPP 22). In the biological sense, the consumption of the apple also means a beginning of denaturalisation. The ambiguity of the story, much like the ambiguity of the Breton tales and their potency to transfigure, is preserved with the sudden ending. Wanting to know what is beyond the end constitutes a desire, the satiation of which would inherently involve concretising it. Ultimately, what Vico’s theory necessitates in the novel’s context is that the metaphor, as such, be poisonous for humanity. It determines them in such a way that they develop a desire for it. Žižek, in his example, points out the fundamental question in the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix*: why does the Matrix really need human energy? His answer is that it does not; the energy needs the Matrix (TPGTC 50:48-51:35). This means that before we could desire something, we have to fictionalise it. What happens in the last scenes of *Possession* is that fantasy and reality are completely realigned. In Žižek’s view this is a “direct short circuit” that makes the existence of libidinal economy impossible (TPGTC 1:07:32). As Deleuze writes, “Spinoza sometimes defines desire as ‘appetite together with consciousness of the appetite’” (SPP 20). If the appetite is forever satiated, no further developments may take place. The text’s narrative framework mirrors that of libidinal economy. Much like the death drive, it is eternally recurring and can be satiated only temporarily. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* plays with the fictionality of its events, as well as its own, in a way that it establishes it, that is, its own fictionality as a source-object of desire. This results in an emerging anxiety regarding continuity, which reflects the views that permeate contemporary culture.

The main objective of this essay was to show how the circular logic of *Possession* manifests itself in the way its narrative unfolds: it starts from disjointed time and returns to it. 15 years have passed since Fisher laid out his concerns in *Capitalist Realism: Is There an Alternative?*, though Western culture seems to have changed very little. Most of the issues he raised are still with us today. It is difficult not to see contemporary cultural products, such as *Blinding Lights* but also *Possession* as a symptomatic manifestation of compulsive repetition in culture, but if Derrida is to be believed, every instance of repetition carries within it some

level of Otherness, something that rejuvenates it. It is important to see that these products are not just a regurgitation of elements that are established by generic conventions: they also reinvent these conventions. Far from being clear cut instances of retro or pastiche, these works knowingly attempt to mediate between past and future. Their popularity is proof that a large audience had developed an appetite for them, when they will no longer satiate said appetites, they will discover new objects to crave.

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