

Beatrice Nest, White Goddess: Romance and Ecology in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*

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Abstract: In A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, the author uses language proper to the literary mode of romance to portray nature with spiritual importance and human agency. To this end, Byatt makes allusions to Robert Graves's poetry and his mythographic work, *The White Goddess*. This article offers a reading of Byatt's work that foregrounds the character of Beatrice Nest and her deity-like communion with natural forces in the novel's climactic twenty-eighth chapter in which Beatrice appears as an avatar of the White Goddess, described by Graves as 'the Lady of the Wild Things'. By using these mythic elements in realistic novel set in the near-present, Byatt challenges her late-modern reader to consider nature in a more mythic light and to take a more enchanted stance towards reality.

Keywords: *Possession: A Romance*, A. S. Byatt, *The White Goddess*, literary influence, romance, ecology, pathetic fallacy.

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Interviewing A. S. Byatt in *The Paris Review*, Philip Hensher said, 'Let's talk about *Possession*. The central figure, the avenging angel of the book, is a surprising one. It's Beatrice Nest, isn't it?' Byatt simply answered, 'Yes'.¹ Despite this explicit affirmation of Beatrice's centrality in the novel, scholarship has neglected her, even as the scholars in the novel have neglected her. Scholarship's disregard of Beatrice has left the criticism about *Possession* in a curiously fragmentary state, underappreciating its climax – the graveyard scene in chapter twenty-eight – in which Beatrice, assisted by the combined forces of a personified nature, descends as an 'avenging angel' to thwart Mortimer Cropper. This personification of nature is related to the novel's form, as indicated

in its subtitle *A Romance*. In the medieval era (and as late as the Elizabethan era), which produced large amounts of romantic literature, people considered nature to be anthropomorphic, so that one literary historian warns students that there is ‘far less’ use ‘of the pathetic fallacy’ than ‘a modern reader is likely at first to suppose’.² In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye notes that such a personification of nature is natural in literary modes (such as romance) that tend towards the mythic, for ‘Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy can hardly be a fallacy when a god is the hero of the action’.³ John Milbank goes further, suggesting that ‘[o]ur life and philosophy should be “Arcadian” and “Pastoral”’, that is to say, romantic, because, ‘the “personalizing” of nature is only a human illusion if we fail to see that our personhood arises from natural life and intensifies it’.⁴ In such a view, ‘[I]t is a mistake to suppose that regarding the given as literally a gift is an anthropomorphic illusion, an instance of John Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy”’ (ibid). Instead of ‘reducing nature’s moods to our own moodiness’, we may ‘attend to her symbolic remedies or her more helpful lack of immediate sympathy’ (ibid). Admittedly, in romance, we are typically trained to attend to nature in this manner through a portrayal of her ‘immediate sympathy’. Though A.S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* is written in the postmodern era, its portrayal of nature in chapter twenty-eight is, romantically enough, anthropomorphic. Though the setting is realistic, Byatt graces it with a fairy-tale quality, largely through mythic and archetypal associations drawn from Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, such that the natural environment effectively becomes a character, which transfigures Beatrice and acts against the American thief who comes to desecrate British soil by robbing the Ash gravesite at the Hodershall Parish Church.

The villains of the text, exemplified in Mortimer Cropper, alienate themselves from nature while the heroes of the text, exemplified in Beatrice Nest, bring themselves into intimate relationship with it. According to Frye in *The Secular Scripture*, romance ‘begins an upward journey’ through the imaginative universe, from ‘death’, through ‘rebirth’, to ‘the individual’s regained identity’, which incorporates ‘images of increased

participation' including 'with nature, in pastoral and Arcadian imagery'.⁵ There is, then, a sense as the romantic story progresses along its comic trajectory that the rift between humanity and nature will be healed, often with imagery that makes humans more natural or nature more humane. This romantic development that Frye explores is related to what Jonathan Bate in *The Song of the Earth* calls 'the capacity of the writer to restore us to the earth which is our home'.⁶ According to Bate,

The poetic is ontologically double because it may be thought of as ecological in two senses: it is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*). (p. 281)

Byatt uses language (*logos*) to restore our sense of belonging to our home (*oikos*) of nature, depicting unhealthy and healthy relationships with nature through Cropper and Beatrice.

Likewise, Graves exhorts his readers to remedy their alienation from nature. There is a very prominent ecological current in his thought concerning the White Goddess. A generous quotation from the beginning, and a second from towards the end, of *The White Goddess*, will be instructive. In the 'Foreword', Graves writes,

The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. But 'nowadays?' Function and use remain the same; only the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. 'Nowadays' is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox,

salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman reckoned as 'auxiliary State personnel'. In which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet.⁷

Resisting this desecration of the White Goddess and her earth, Graves chooses to live as a mystic in close relationship with the land, living 'on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle' (p. 10). In 'Return of the Goddess', the last chapter before the 'Postscript', Graves writes,

The Goddess is no townswoman: she is the Lady of the Wild Things, haunting the wooded hill-tops – Venus Cluacina, 'she who purifies with myrtle', not Venus Cloacina, 'Patroness of the Sewage System', as she first became at Rome; and though the townsman has now begun to insist that built-up areas should have a limit, and to discuss decentralization (the decanting of the big towns into small, independent communities, well spaced out), his intention is only to urbanize the country, not to ruralize the town. Agricultural life is rapidly becoming industrialized and in England, the world's soberest social laboratory, the last vestiges of the ancient pagan celebrations of the Mother and Son are being obliterated, despite a loving insistence on Green Belts and parks and private gardens. It is only in backward parts of Southern and Western Europe that a lively sense still survives in the countryside of their continued worship. (p. 472)

Graves further comments, 'The British love of Queens [...] reflects [...] a stubborn conviction that this is a Mother Country not a Father Land' (p. 399). Graves's White Goddess is very much a nature goddess, whose devotees must attune themselves to the natural world.

By infusing her modern-day depiction of Britain with mythic feminine presences, Byatt suggests a degree of concord between her own ecological vision and that of Graves. Alexandra Chiera persuasively demonstrates that there is a strong ecological current running throughout Byatt's work.⁸ Chiera cites an interview with Byatt where she suggests that while the Victorians thought that they marred their land, they felt that they could restore it; but she believes it is marred forever (p. 49). Byatt poignantly reflects, 'I am in mourning for walking out in the fields and woods and seeing thrushes on the lawn. We have no thrushes here now. We have no house sparrows. They were here when we came. We had green finches. I have this kind of grief for the earth. I don't know if I have a grief about human societies' (pp. 49–50). Briefly surveying Byatt's career, Emilie Walezak argues that Byatt's work 'increasingly' shows the 'enmeshment of the human and the non-human in her apprehension of embodiment and embeddedness'.⁹ Walezak sees *Possession* as a kind of turning point, arguing that by this time in Byatt's career, 'Through art, she brings science to life; through science, she introduces the non-human into the humanities' (p. 439). Walezak argues that in her most recent writings Byatt 'call[s] attention to things and non-human entities as "actants"' (p. 440). Personification is an appropriately literary and romantic way of drawing attention to non-human agency.

Byatt's personification of nature in *Possession* is closely connected with Robert Graves's idea of the White Goddess. The resemblance to Graves's Goddess can hardly be accidental, for his poetry echoes near the beginning, middle, and end of *Possession*: Val recites the entirety of 'She Tells Her Love' to Roland, Roland repeats the lyrics ending lines without recalling their source, and Val recites lines from 'Sick Love' to Euan.¹⁰ The initial lines that Val quotes explicitly link human love with the vitality of Mother Earth:

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep

And put out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.¹¹

In the context of the novel, this poem appears to be about the death of love. The relationship has entered its lull, its winter, and though there is a newfound burst of energy, a new growth of grass and flowers, this spring is premature. The snow is still falling, so this new growth must perish. Though neither party acknowledges it yet, Val's quotation of these lines suggests that she knows, at some level of her consciousness, that her relationship with Roland has run its course, and when Roland repeats the final lines about the snow, he, at some level of his consciousness, reprises her intimation. Spring will come, but with new grasses and flowers; Val and Roland will find love, but not with one another.

Beatrice Nest, on the other hand, will not find romantic love through the novel's course, though her name, via Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and *Commedia*, connects her both to romantic love and to the literary mode of romance. Concerning the latter, Northrop Frye writes that 'frequently, the quest romance takes on a spiral form, an open circle where the end is the beginning transformed and renewed by the heroic quest'.¹² His first example is Dante's journey in the *Commedia* (ibid). Dante's guide is Beatrice, and in Byatt's interview in *The Paris Review*, she says that her novel's Beatrice is both 'Dante and Beatrice'. Somehow, then, Beatrice Nest takes on the roles of both pilgrim and guide, of spiritual wanderer and deified saint. Related to this problem of journey and goal is what Frye calls '[c]reative repetition', through which 'something in the past, normally accessible only by memory, is brought into the present by the imagination' (p. 175). *Possession's* form as a dual-setting romance enacts just such a repetition, and just such a repetition is itself suggested in Beatrice's surname, Nest. Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*,

A nest-house is never young. Indeed, speaking as a pedant, we might say that it is the natural habitat of the function of inhabiting. For not only do we come back to it, but we

dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest, or a lamb to the fold. The sign of return marks an infinite number of daydreams, for the reason that human returning takes place in the great rhythm of human life, a rhythm that reaches back across the years and, through the dream, combats all absence.¹³

Beatrice is a figure who ‘combats all absence’, though, for large portions of the novel, she seems to be a losing figure. Hence, Suzanne Keen may be forgiven for characterizing Beatrice’s edition of Ellen Ash’s journals as a ‘time-wasting squandering of energy on the gathering of trivia’, which is ‘seem[ingly] destined never to [be] complete[d]’.¹⁴ Beatrice’s editorial work is a labour of empathy and hospitality that comes to more-than-scholarly fruition. In fact, the scholars of the novel fail, in the end, to discover the whole historical truth about Ash and LaMotte’s relationship, yet that pales in comparison to their creative repetition of it in the present and in the scholars’ ultimate discovery of self-identity. Roland’s return to the Edenic barred garden and his intercourse with Maud evince such discoveries, yet they are more radiantly figured forth by Byatt’s transfiguration of Beatrice in the churchyard scene, which is an epiphanic disclosure of who she is and a vindication of who she tries to be.

As a setting the churchyard is wholly romantic – gothic even. Importantly, Byatt emphasizes the age of the churchyard. The church itself was ‘built in the twelfth century’,¹⁵ and so the churchyard has been consecrated ground for about eight centuries (or more, if, as was not unusual, the church was built on the location of a previous site of worship). Cropper’s violation of the sacred ground is made all the more despicable by the fact that he knows that its current steward, the Reverend Percy Drax, would not approve of his actions (p. 580). The flora of Randolph and Ellen Ash’s gravesite is also significant: it is located ‘in the shelter of a kind of grassy knoll, or mound’ overshadowed by ‘an ancient cedar and an even older yew’ (p. 581). Both cedars and yews are remarkable for their longevity, but the life of a yew is more extraordinary as it may span millennia. Robert Bevan-Jones writes

that '[s]everal hundred yews of more than 800 years of age still survive in British churchyards'.¹⁶ Discussing the ninth-century Irish tale *The Madness of Suibne* in *The White Goddess*, Graves quotes the lines, 'Yew-tree, yew-tree, true to your kind, / In churchyards you are found'.¹⁷ Intriguingly, an endnote to Cropper's magnum opus *The Great Ventriloquist* refers to a fictional poem by Swinburne that associates Yggdrasil, the world Ash tree of Norse myth, to churchyard yews.¹⁸ The major instance of Yggdrasil in Swinburne's actual poetry, in 'Hertha', likewise looks back to a pre-Christian past.¹⁹ The primeval yew of Byatt's romance may well be older than the church itself; it has an enigmatic, almost druidic quality, yielding a furtive glimpse of a mythic past long before the Christianization of the land.

These trees are significant beyond their mere age. Cedars, being evergreens, often symbolize eternal life, and yews, being evergreen and poisonous, often symbolize both eternal life and death. Fred Hageneder notes that in addition to their symbolic value, yews also had a practical reason for being common in churchyards: '[I]t comprises a well-rooted windbreak that protects a church building during winter storms.'²⁰ One senses that the trees in Byatt's story serve a double function, protecting both the church, and, more importantly, the Ash gravesite.

The gravesite seems to have two more guardians in the white owl and the dragon-weathercock that watch over it: 'A huge white owl circled the church tower, unhurried, powerful and entirely silent, intent on its own business. [...] Above the owl, the dragon moved a little, this way, that way, creaking, desisting, catching a desultory air movement.'²¹ There is a romantic quality to the white owl, for while it is like any other owl in its appearance and activity, it has an air of mystery to it, as though it were an omen or messenger from another world or the underworld. Its white colouring and presence in the graveyard endow it with an eerie quality. Due to 'their silent flight' and 'the shining of their eyes in the dark', Graves associates owls with 'the Death-goddess Hecate, or Athene, or Persephone: from whom, as the supreme source of prophecy, they derive their reputation for wisdom'.²² The dragon-weathercock is in itself as mundane as the owl, yet, carries more

romantic and esoteric associations when Graves is consulted: 'The Serpent, incarnate in the sacred serpents which were the ghosts of the dead, sent the winds' (p. 379).

Cropper enters this romantic landscape as the tricky villain. He is clearly an enemy of the feminine divine: he literally treads over 'Mnemosyne, Mother of the Muses', with her face being embroidered on his slippers.²³ In the churchyard, Cropper 'poised his sharp blade above the earth and struck and struck with terrible glee, slicing, penetrating the sloppy and resistant' (p. 586). Leonora Stern, no doubt, would interpret this blade as a phallus and Cropper's excited desecration of the churchyard as some kind of sadistic sexual perversion towards the mother earth. Byatt so personifies nature that Cropper's act is indeed felt as nothing short of rape. This repulsive moment climaxes when Cropper 'pull[s] with his bare hands at a long snake of the yew's root system, getting out his heavy knife to cut it'.²⁴ The perversion is felt all the more keenly when one knows the tradition, noted by Graves, that '[i]n Brittany it is said that church-yard yews will spread a root to the mouth of each corpse'.²⁵ The yew tree does not merely watch over the Ash gravesite, but extends its influence through it, guarding it with its roots. Melusine is very snake-adjacent, so this snaking root might well be related to Christabel, particularly given how closely Ash is linked to her on a spiritual level. If this interpretation is correct, Christabel unknowingly intimates her fate: a friend's journal records Christabel as saying, 'the Church had successfully taken in and absorbed, and partly overcome, the old pagan deities. It was now known that many little local saints are *genii loci*, Powers who inhabited a particular fount or tree' (p. 417). Perhaps Christabel is the genius of this tree; either way, it is the grave's rightful guardian, and Cropper chooses to battle it.

This battle assumes a timeless, archetypal aspect. In the letter under the tree, Christabel asks, 'Shall we survive and rise from our ashes? Like Milton's Phoenix?' (p. 597). The iconographic elements of the scene suggest that they will, echoing a mythic cyclical process addressed in *The White Goddess*:

The most familiar icon of Aegean religion is therefore a Moon-woman, a Star-son and a wise spotted Serpent grouped under a fruit-tree – Artemis, Hercules and Erechtheus. Star-son and Serpent are at war; one succeeds the other in the Moon-woman's favour, as summer succeeds winter, and winter succeeds summer; as death succeeds birth and birth succeeds death. The Sun grows weaker or stronger as the year takes its course, the branches of the tree are now loaded and now bare, but the light of the Moon is invariable. She is impartial: she destroys or creates with equal passion. (p. 379)

The structure of images in this passage is like that used in Ash's poem 'The Garden of Proserpina', which opens *Possession*, and which recurs shortly before the churchyard scene:

These things are there. The garden and the tree
The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold
The woman in the shadow of the boughs
The running water and the grassy space.
They are and were there. At the old world's rim,
In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit
Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there
The dragon Ladon crisped his jewelled crest
Scraped a gold claw and sharpened a silver tooth
And dozed and waited through eternity
Until the tricky hero Herakles
Came to his dispossession and the theft.²⁶

The Gravesian Moon-woman or Ash's 'woman in the shadow of the boughs' would be Christabel LaMotte, and, to a lesser extent, Beatrice (along with the other female literary scholars, who are unfoldings of the White Goddess's presence, including Maud, who is Christabel's descendent, and her friend Leonora). Their treasure, the fruit of their tree, is the box. Though Ash would seem to be the Herakles that dispossessed LaMotte of her self-possession, he has

become the dragon as a consequence of his theft. As Christabel writes,

I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth. But since that might not be – and it is granted to almost none – I thank God for you – if there must be a Dragon – that He was You. (p. 597)

His spiritual presence is reified in the weathervane. Who is the Starson or Herakles figure? The main contenders are Cropper and Roland. Cropper is the false Herakles, who cannot succeed in his task; Roland is the true Herakles, who will steal the dragon's treasure and become its successor; as a burgeoning poet, he becomes Ash's rightful spiritual heir.

Nature, not quite as defenceless as Cropper supposes, revolts against his ecological impiety. Even as he cuts the roots, he receives a premonition of his error: 'He felt for a moment, very purely, a *presence*, not of someone, but of some mobile *thing*, and for a moment rested dully on his spade, forbidden. In that moment, the great storm hit Sussex' (p. 586). It is important to note that the storm is unexpected: earlier, Hildebrand says, 'It's a good night. Nice and quiet. Good moon' (p. 584). It is a real, historical storm, yet it seems to arise purposefully in order to thwart Cropper's misdeeds.

Up to this point, any personification of the natural world in this scene has been subtle or implicit. Now, it screams:

A kind of dull howling and whistling began, and then a chorus of groans, and creaking sighs, the trees, protesting. [...] The wind moved in the graveyard like a creature from another dimension, trapped and screaming. The branches of the yew and cedar gesticulated desperately. (pp. 586–87)

Even as Cropper finally uncovers and clutches the prized box, 'The wind prised at the church roof and flung off a few more tiles. The trees cried out and swung' (p. 587). Nature's personified presence grows more intense as Cropper begins to attempt his exit. Britain's

revolt against Cropper swells as '[a]round his very feet the earth quaked and moved'; he hears 'a sound of rending' and he sees 'a great mass of grey descend[ing] [...] like a tumbling hill' (p. 588). The revolt rises to a melodramatic pitch when he hears 'a mixture of drums, cymbals, and theatrical thundersheet' (ibid). Horror of horrors: 'A tree had fallen directly across the Mercedes' (ibid). Having crushed Cropper's pride and joy, the yew tree becomes like a grotesque monster: '[H]e saw the yew tree throw up its arms and a huge gaping white mouth appear briefly in the reddish trunk, [...] finally snapping and shuddering to rest across the grave, obscuring it utterly' (ibid). The gravesite that took Cropper hours to uncover is recovered in a moment, and the mortal remains of Randolph and Ellen Ash remain intact.

Within this anthropomorphic nature, things take on emblematic significance. With the cascading collapse of tree after tree, Cropper's escape with his prize is delayed: '[T]here seemed to be other trees, a hedge, a huge scaly barrier reared where none had been' (p. 589). Even this barrier has a fairy-tale quality to it: it is reminiscent of the forest that arises to protect Sleeping Beauty in some versions of that tale. More importantly, being described as 'scaly', it has a dragonish quality to it. The weathercock-dragon might be idly turning on the church's tower, but this serpentine hedge successfully blocks the villain's escape long enough for the romance's heroes to arrive on the scene. The churchyard scene closes with the arrival of the more-sympathetic literary scholars. Seen by Cropper from between branches, 'Roland Michell, Maud Bailey, Leonora Stern, [and] James Blackadder' appear 'like bizarre flowers or fruit' (ibid). Appearing to Cropper like strange flora, Byatt presents a kind of kinship, of connaturality, between the forces of nature that combine to thwart Cropper and these (in varying degrees) sympathetic literary scholars.

The arrival of a final scholar stands out from the rest: '[W]ith streaming white woolly hair descended, like some witch or prophetess, a transfigured Beatrice Nest' (ibid). Nest, probably the quietest character in the novel, here undergoes a transfiguration. It is as though she were an earth goddess and somehow responsible for the preternatural weather of that night; or perhaps she and the

environment are both partaking in some other, more primeval force. With the emphasis on her 'white' hair and her 'transfigured' appearance, it is almost as though the 'white owl' and the 'white mouth' of the yew were her avatars.²⁷ With her fair complexion, her long hair, and her mystical aura, Beatrice is here reminiscent of Graves's description in *The White Goddess*:

The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startingly blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag.²⁸

The 'nest' of Graves's White Goddess in her cruel aspect as the Night Mare is 'lodged [...] in the branches of an enormous yew'.²⁹ This imagery also resembles Christabel's self-depictions as Melusina, as well as Ash's last reference to Christabel as 'the Belle Dame Sans Merci', a figure whom Graves identifies with his White Goddess (p. 26).

What awaits Beatrice after her transfiguration, when her light dims and the wind settles, and she is no longer a goddess but a woman? For a while, the mystical aura endures, and it touches Maud and Leonora as well. Because Byatt indirectly suggests that there is a kind of interchangeability between Yggdrasil and churchyard-yews,³⁰ and because Graves suggests that the former tree is closely associated with 'the Triple Goddess' as 'the Three Norns of Scandinavian legend dispensed justice under it',³¹ the three women under the yew-tree are given a Norn-like mystique in bringing Cropper to his comeuppance. Their colour-scheme suggests a similar association: 'The women, all three clothed in pajamas – Maud in Cropper's black silk, Leonora in his scarlet cotton, and Beatrice in peppermint and white stripes belonging to Hildebrand, sat side by side on the bed'.³² Black, red, and white are the colours of Graves's Triple Goddess (called 'white' for the 'principle colour' of the 'moon-trinity'), representing 'the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination'; 'the Full Moon,

the red goddess of love and battle'; and 'the New Moon, [...] the white goddess of birth and growth'.³³ This iconographic colour-scheme does not mean that the three women are triune, yet there is a strong sense that they are three women together, bound by a love for literature and perhaps friendship. Maud and Leonora are friends, and Maud and Beatrice are well on their way to becoming friends – when Beatrice weeps, Maud offers her hand.³⁴ This act of feeling is particularly meaningful as it comes from a character who in this very scene fails twice to finish the sentence beginning, 'I feel –' (p. 600). When preparing to host the scholars, as she once hosted her graduate students, to reveal Cropper's plans to them, Beatrice is described as 'happy' (p. 568). Beatrice was left behind by the academy, including the students she welcomed into her home; perhaps through the course of *Possession* she has made one or two friendships that will be more lasting, enabling this happiness to continue.

Or perhaps the course of events in the novel has prepared Beatrice to embrace a solitude that awaits her, bestowing her with the knowledge that she is still the radiant being that she was in her transfigured moment. If this more solitary destiny awaits her, it would be the ennobled (though perhaps painful) solitude of Christabel LaMotte, whose own daughter, not knowing that she is her daughter, 'misreads that, which is most natural, as something unnatural', suspecting her supposed aunt of harbouring lesbian and incestuous desires towards her (p. 595). Parallely, some of Beatrice's graduate students believe her to be a 'repressed [...] lesbian', while others see her as 'motherly' (p. 137). Xiuchun Zhang notes that in Byatt's works, '[I]solation is a *sine qua non* of literary creation', and, in Zhang's analysis, 'LaMotte as a spinster mother is a variant form of [...] a virgin fertility goddess, and both are expressive of Byatt's vision of the dialectical relationship between autonomy and creation.'³⁵ Her transfiguration is perhaps anticipated when, much earlier, she tells Maud, '[t]here is an age at which, I profoundly believe, one becomes a *witch*'.³⁶ She does indeed become 'like some witch' (p. 589). Nonetheless, she is a witch working on the side of goodness, with whom all the forces of nature are allied.

The gift of *Possession*, then, is largely self-possession, yet it is also the possession by a place, for humans, however solitary they may be, cannot exist without myriad relationships in the human and the more-than-human world. It is almost laughable when the characters dispute what legally should be done with the artefacts stolen from a grave when the moral answer is clear – “‘It shouldn’t be disturbed”, said Beatrice. “It should be put back”” (p. 591). Yet, no one listens. In everyone else, the desire to possess overcomes a willingness to be possessed. Some motives are purer than others, but Beatrice alone seems pure. Even Roland becomes another ‘tricksy Herakles’, another star-son, implicated in a ‘theft’. Beatrice herself is the pure-hearted hero of this tale – the true Roland figure or knight. Indeed, in the climax of the romance, she herself is possessed by nature – in the full-bodied, spiritualist sense of possession – and she is transfigured.

Through language Byatt re-enchants nature, giving it (or giving it back) a numinous, romantic quality. One could imagine her as saying, as John Haller (an English teacher turned tree surgeon) records Robert Graves as saying, ‘[t]rees are not simply trees. [...] They are something more. I think it would be hard to work with trees and remain stupid.’³⁷ In her novel, Byatt participates in what Bate calls ‘the work of human imagining, for the song that names the earth’.³⁸ Through romance, and through her intertextual engagement with Graves’s work, Byatt brings her characters from the twentieth century to a more intimate relationship with nature, akin to that of her nineteenth-century characters, and, indeed, she brings them into a mythic relationship with nature, like that experienced by LaMotte when she was displaced from Britain to rural France. Her romance brings her readers into a ‘misty land [where] the borderline between myth, legend and fact is not decisive [...] like a series of moving veils or woven webs between one room and another’.³⁹ By allowing her twentieth-century characters to gaze through the gossamer veils of enchantment, Byatt encourages her readers to do likewise, whether they are from the twentieth, twenty-first, or any other century.

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NOTES

¹ Philip Hensher and A. S. Byatt, ‘The Art of Fiction, No. 168’, *The Paris Review*, 159 (Fall 2002)

<<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-no-168-a-s-byatt>> [accessed 19 October 2024]

² C. S. Lewis, *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 36.

⁴ John Milbank, ‘Only Metaphysics Sustains Phenomenology’, *God and Phenomenology: Thinking with Jean-Yves Lacoste*, ed. by Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koci (Cascade, 2023), pp. 61–96 (pp. 71–72.)

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 183.

⁶ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Picador, 2001), p. ix.

⁷ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 10.

⁸ Alexandra Cheira, “‘I Have This Kind of Grief for the Earth’: A. S. Byatt’s Eco-poetics in *Ragnarök*, “Thoughts on Myth” and “Sea Story””, *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 35 (Jan. 2020), 44 – 67.

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¹⁰ A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 13, 175, and 499.

- ¹¹ Graves, Robert, 'She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep', *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 2000), p. 402.
- ¹² Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, p. 174.
- ¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 119.
- ¹⁴ Suzanne Keen, 'Romances of the Archive: Identifying Characteristics', in *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 28–62 (p. 57).
- ¹⁵ Byatt, p. 579.
- ¹⁶ Robert Bevan-Jones, *The Ancient Yew: A History of Taxus Baccata* (Oxford, England: Windgather Press, 2016), p. 48.
- ¹⁷ Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 444.
- ¹⁸ Byatt, p. 531.
- ¹⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- ²⁰ Fred Hageneder, *Yew* (London: Reaktion, 2013), p. 154.
- ²¹ Byatt, p. 585.
- ²² Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 206.
- ²³ Byatt, p. 108.
- ²⁴ Byatt, p. 586.
- ²⁵ Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 189.
- ²⁶ Byatt, pp. 1; 552–55.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 585, 588.
- ²⁸ Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 24.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ³⁰ Byatt, p. 531.
- ³¹ Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 163.
- ³² Byatt, p. 590.
- ³³ Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 65.
- ³⁴ Byatt, p. 598.
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³⁸ Bate, p. 282.

³⁹ Byatt, p. 400.