

**Post-imperial Phantom Pains: Negotiating Reception and Text in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*,
Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, and Ian McEwan's *Saturday***

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1. The Root of the Matter

Perspective is key when it comes to the reception of a text, be it oral, literary, visual, or otherwise. Without a functional understanding of one's point of view, the dynamics of perspective, text reception, and the text production following in its wake become fraught with misunderstandings and misrepresentations. It is what makes discourses of reception and text so pivotal in cultural analysis, where intertextuality is inescapable, necessitating careful and conclusive consideration of what is at hand.

This thesis germinated from just such an interest in contemporary modes of text creation and text reception, markedly within the English cultural sphere, especially when seen through the lens of post-colonial discourses.¹ While Post-colonial Studies' analysis of perspective is generally based on why "postcolonial societies [continue] to engage with imperial experience" and thus "write back to a centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms",² recent concerns have turned to how the former imperial centres continue to engage with, and possibly incorporate, their former imperial structures.³ As Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft and many more have shown over the past years, the physical absence of imperial structures alone does not mean that empire was truly 'overcome', or if such an 'overcoming' is even possible.⁴ Since this is the acknowledged case for the former imperial peripheries, how much must it also be the case for the former imperial centres, from whence the imperial projects germinated, developed, and expanded? Without a centre there would be no periphery. By applying

¹ For primary in-depth analyses of imperial discourses of creativity, power, and place see, among others: Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Revised edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008; Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1993; Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. "On the Abolition of the English Department." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (Eds.). *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London, New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 6. On a different note, there is also an ongoing debate concerning the power structures within Post-colonial Studies itself, as seen in articles such as the following: Samir Dayal. "Diaspora and Double Consciousness." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Spring 1996. Chicago: Midwest Modern Language Association, pp. 46-62; Timothy Brennan. "The Empire's New Clothes." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Winter 2003. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 337-367; John C. Hawley. "The Colonizing Impulse of Postcolonial Theory." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter 2010. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 769-787, among others.

³ Consider, for example, the 2012 Annual ASNEL/GNEL Conference *Post-Imperial Imaginaries* in Berne, Switzerland, where the oscillation and flux of narrative, imaginaries, and polyvalent perspectives were considered with regard to discourses concerning post-imperial realities.

⁴ cf. Peter Childs and Patrick Williams. *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theory*. London, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 1-23; where Childs and Williams consider the question of the temporal location of 'post-colonial', when it started, and if one can say that it has even ended, especially in the case of the Americas and Australia.

the questions and methodologies traditionally considered matters of the former peripheries to the former centres, a more nuanced and detailed understanding of empire will be possible, thus allowing a deeper understanding of the systems of definition embedded within imperial structures that still linger today.⁵ This thesis is one step in that direction. It concerns itself with contemporary fictional narratives written from, and situated within, the former imperial centres; narratives that are commentaries on discourses on reception and text within the former British imperial centre, the English cultural space.

1.1 A Renaissance of the Romantic

In a millennial world full of ambiguities and fragmentation, questions regarding signification, perceived beauty, and contested truth are central concerns. For, despite the postmodern freedoms of reception and text, signification, beauty, and truth remain lodestones of fraught debate due to the very absence of constraints postmodern orthodoxies allow. As Kathryn Wall states in the introduction to her essay “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty”: “[t]he postmodern attitude has died in a kind of fin de siècle despair at its inability to interrogate the consequences of its own provisionality and indecipherability [...]”.⁶ To Wall, various global conflicts have shown postmodernism’s “provisionality and indecipherability” as inadequate responses, unwittingly putting discourses of beauty, and the truths thereby accepted, once again at the centre of discursive concern.

It is a conflict of perspective and position that I argue finds surprising articulation in three well-received English novels published and critiqued during the past 25 years: A. S. Byatt’s

⁵ For analyses of the lingering effects of imperial power in contemporary societies, consider: Peter Hitchcock. “Decolonizing (the) English”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 100, No. 3, Summer 2001. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 749-771; Heather Fielding. “Assimilation After Empire: Marina Lewycka, Paul Gilroy, and the Ethnic Bildungsroman in Contemporary Britain.” *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 43, No. 2, Summer 2011. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 200-217; Pankaj Mishra. “The Ruins of Empire: Asia’s Emergence from Western Imperialism”. *The Guardian*. 14 August 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jul/27/ruins-of-empire-pankaj-mishra>>.

⁶ Kathleen Wall. “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty: Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Vol. 77, No. 2, Spring 2008. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. pp. 757-788, here p. 757.

Possession,⁷ Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*,⁸ and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*.⁹ In their respective novels, Byatt, McEwan, and Smith establish narratives where the aesthetic experience of canonical poetry and art – defined as an overwhelming experience of the beauty and truth of a poem or a painting – is a genuine force to be reckoned. I will refer to this overwhelming force of artistic beauty and truth as the power of the aesthetic.¹⁰

In all three novels, this power of the aesthetic facilitates a change in scholarship (*Possession*), an ideological volte-face (*On Beauty*), and factually impedes physical violence as seen in *Saturday*, where a violent intruder is stopped from causing bodily harm to his victims by the beauty of a poem. Such aesthetic power is intriguing in decidedly postmodern and millennial novels, especially since the way this power is established in the narratives harks back to Romantic codes of poetic genius and the sublime, next to genuine “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity.”¹¹ In their propagation of a renaissance of the Romantic, *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* thus employ a narratorial methodology that I will call romantic realism, since the defining moments of all three narratives depend entirely on the power of the aesthetic and its evocation of poetic genius and the sublime.

What makes this implementation of the aesthetic as a genuine power so interesting is that to do so, the three novels establish a narrow discourse of cultural history, keeping the scope of the

⁷ A. S. Byatt. *Possession*. London: Vintage, 1991. All further citations will be from this edition.

⁸ Zadie Smith. *On Beauty*. London: Penguin Books, 2006. All further citations will be from this edition.

⁹ Ian McEwan. *Saturday*. London: Vintage, 2005, 2006. All further citations will be from this edition.

¹⁰ cf. Gérard Genette. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

¹¹ William Wordsworth. “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 262-274, here p. 273. From Kant’s seminal analysis of the sublime, to Edmund Burke’s gendered split of the sublime (masculine) and beauty (feminine), to the epistemic violence Jean-François Lyotard sees embedded within the concept, there has been a continuous debate about the sublime, and what one is to understand by the term alone. In this thesis, my understanding of poetic genius by and through which the sublime can be accessed is informed by Wordsworth and Coleridge’s considerations in *Lyrical Ballads*, together with Keats deliberations on “Negative Capability” which I will consider more closely in Chapter 4.2 “Negative Capability” and Authorial Expression. As stated in *Lyrical Ballads*, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” (273) In this, poetic genius signifies the poet’s ability to capture, via an otherwise inexplicable experience, a “spontaneous overflow of feeling”, both beauty and truth about lived experience in their poetry. They thus help the reader not only to a fuller understanding of lived experience by the beauty and truth of their poetry, but also to a gleaning of the initial rapturous experience, and so if the poet “communicates to his reader, those passions, if his reader’s mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure.” (273) Thus, through poetic genius and the sublime, beauty and truth can be accessed and disseminated among readers and writers alike. For a concise study of the continuous analysis of beauty and the sublime since Kant’s postulations, with specific focus on Burke’s reconsiderations, see Matthew A. Binney. “Edmund Burke’s Sublime Cosmopolitan Aesthetic.” *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1990*. Vol. 53, No. 3, Summer 2013. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 643-666. For an insightful study of the various perceptions of the sublime and its dialectics with beauty discourses, consider Judy Lohead. “The Sublime, the Ineffable, and Other Dangerous Aesthetics.” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*. Vol. 12, 2008. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 63-74.

aesthetic experience within the constraints of a white (male) canon. In all three novels, the masterpieces that trigger the aesthetic epiphanies were created by real or fictional Western canonical writers and artists. Since all three protagonists are white men who have worked their way into, and established themselves in, Western institutions of creativity, power, and place (universities and surgeries), it is interesting that the ‘vehicles’ by which their aesthetic epiphanies are engendered were created and canonised by the very demographic they belong to. There is a certain circularity in the efficacy of the aesthetic underlying the three novel’s discursive structure, where female artists are given space to create, yet hardly ever facilitate the power of the aesthetic of their male forebears and peers, and non-white (let alone non-white and non-male) artists seem hardly present at all in matters of aesthetic agency.

This circularity is what I refer to as post-imperial phantom pains, where the postmodern and post-colonial discourses, though acknowledged, do not in fact influence the discourses of creativity, power, and place within the novels. The centrality of the traditional Western canon, with its fixation on solely white male artists and writers is intriguing in postmodern novels that ostensibly tackle the problem of postmodern scholarship, discourses of art and selfhood, and the millennial threat of terrorism.

In the following I will consider how *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* reinforce imperial discourses of creativity, power, and place, while tackling questions concerning postmodern and millennial debates of scholarship, selfhood, and safety. In my close readings, I will first analyse the discursive genesis and the establishment of the powerful aesthetic within the narratives by considering Byatt’s, Smith’s, and McEwan’s arguments with regard to reception and text. I will then examine whether the implementation of a powerful aesthetic in *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* can be considered convincing. Finally, I will analyse the problematic dynamics of said implementation, arguing that, despite legitimate concerns with regard to postmodern discourses, Byatt, McEwan, and Smith’s choice of solution inadvertently reinforces the traditional Western canon without further critiquing the imperial dynamics underlying this very canon.

I thus hope to show that *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* are romantic realist texts, as in novels that, in their attempt to dissolve conceptual gridlocks embedded in postmodern discourse by employing Romantic codes of poetic genius and sublime, they simultaneously create structures of agency that reinforce the imperial discursive hegemonies, despite acknowledgements of postmodern, post-structuralist, and post-colonial shifts in discourse.

1.2 Post-coloniality and Post-imperial Phantom Pains

In order to establish a conceptual backdrop for the close readings and analysis of this thesis, I would like to look into the debate concerning definitions of ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’, since they are the conceptual field all three novels are embedded in. I will first examine a few concerns regarding ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’ as terms and concepts, and then follow with a few comments on how the ambiguity and polyvalence of the terms play out in contemporary cultural discourse. My aim here is to allow a brief glimpse into the complexity of discourse post-coloniality and post-imperial dynamics entail, circumstances that I argue inform the implicit difficulties of the central trope *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* employ: a genuinely powerful aesthetic.

1.2.1 Defining Englishness

Strict definitions of ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’ have been notoriously problematic to uphold, many attempts of which Daniel Defoe already found irritating, if not amusing.¹² Yet, as Sneja Gunew writes in *Haunted Nations* when referring to Benedict Anderson’s studies on nation, this contestedness lies in “the assumed natural and primordial homogeneity of the nation”, a homogeneity that is

actually the result of much labour to cover over the differences and disparate elements. It can take as given neither language, genealogy nor territory and is instead sutured by specific rhetorical structures of icons and symbols that construct notions of both borders and belonging.¹³

¹² Daniel Defoe’s 1695 *The True-Born Englishman* is a biting critique of monolithic definitions of ‘Englishness’ that shows a longstanding discourse about borders and belonging within the English cultural sphere. See Maximillian A. Novak. *Daniel Defoe, Master of Fictions, His Life and Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, for a study on Defoe’s writings and incorrigible inventiveness that befuddled not only his peers.

¹³ Sneja Gunew. *Haunted Nations, The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 26. Consider the short though enthusiastic debate about what would happen to the Union Jack if the Scottish Referendum of September 2014 were in favour of Scotland’s Independence. Once Scotland left the Union, it was clear that the St Andrew’s Cross that comprises a part of the Union Jack could no longer be part of the flag. Thus, successful devolution would change a symbol of English realities that has been iconic for centuries. See: Sam Judah. “What would the Union Jack look like if the Scottish bit were removed?” *BBC News Magazine*. 4 December 2013. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25205017>>. (23 October 2014); Katrin Bennhold. “If Scotland leaves, will the Union Jack still wave?”. *The New York Times*. 29 July 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/europe/if-scotland-leaves-will-the-union-jack-still-wave.html?_r=0 (23 October 2014); Ester Addley. “Experts flag up end of Union Jack if Scotland votes for Independence.” 16 September 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/16/flag-end-union-jack-scotland-independence>> (23 October 2014).

Fixed articulation of cultural signifiers, in this case nation, nationality, ethnicity, and belonging, were found to be all but fixed means to “construct notions of both borders and belonging.” Though these may pose a threat to those insisting on monolithic structures, they help invigorate discourses of identity formation in spheres where systems of definition are known to be a matter of construction, and thus constantly in flux.¹⁴ This, I argue, is one example of how the post-coloniality of the former imperial centres has been debated ever since the collapse of the European empires, though maybe not explicitly acknowledged and analysed.

The question of what ‘English’ (not to mention ‘British’) means remains hotly debated,¹⁵ a tension between historical definitions and contemporary re-definitions that is part of the criteria for my choice of primary texts. *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* individually address the dynamics Graham MacPhee points to in his analysis of the post-coloniality of post-war British Literature.¹⁶ In his critique of Enoch Powell’s unrelenting Us-vs-Them rhetoric, for example, MacPhee considers the shift away from biology as an unassailable marker of identity and belonging, to what MacPhee names,

¹⁴ See for example Judith Butler’s groundbreaking concepts on gender and performativity, and the constructedness of gendered selves: Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble, Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁵ Although Robert Young’s ideas on identity narratives and nation have come under some attack over recent years, he still was able to pinpoint the difficulties of differentiating ‘English’ and ‘British’. Young situates Englishness as a concept that “arose because it was in fact continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other,” and thus helped a continuous reproduction of “the comfortable old stereotypes of homogeneity set up as a hiding-place from the troublesome, ‘paradoxical’ narrative of Britishness.” (Robert J. C. Young. *The Idea of English Ethnicity*. London: Blackwell, 2008, p. 3, qtd. in Tobias A. Wachinger. *Posing In-between, Postcolonial Englishness and the Commodification of Hybridity*. Diss. Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München, 2001, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2003, p. 24) This definition of Englishness, Britishness, and their genesis goes hand in hand with the late 20th century analysis of conceptualisations of ‘nation’, ‘nationality’, and ‘belonging’, as Benedict Anderson shows in *Imagined Communities*. There, Anderson points out that the “‘discovery’ of grandiose civilizations hitherto only dimly rumoured – in China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent – or completely unknown – Aztec Mexico and Incan Peru – suggested and irredeemable human pluralism,” a pluralism that showed unmistakably that “these civilizations had developed quite separate from the known history of Europe, Christendom, Antiquity, indeed man: their genealogies lay outside of and were inassimilable to Eden (only homogenous, empty time would offer them accommodation).” (Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*. Revised Edition. London, New York: Verso, 2006, p. 69) This in turn required narratives of self-definition that incorporated this “irredeemable human pluralism” (Anderson 69) while equally situating and legitimizing the power and place of the European imperial centres within their empires, a dynamic that must have grown some decisive root in the cultural terms and texts of the (former) imperial centres. What is interesting to note is that such rigorous, de-centering analysis of the concepts of nation and nationality such as Andersons occurred *after* the collapse of the European empires, a revision of accepted orthodoxies that was triggered by the very collapse of the systems that sustained said orthodoxies.

¹⁶ Graham MacPhee. *Post-war British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

a diffuse complex of cultural discourses – gender roles and sexual norms, patterns of behaviour, religious practice and belief, language, clothing and styles of visual appearance, among others – to set the limits of community, tradition, belonging and difference.¹⁷

Within such a discourse, ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’ are defined by the cultural discourses MacPhee lists, and culture is thus able to function like nature, since “cultural differences are naturalised and rendered immutably fixed.”¹⁸ MacPhee considers how this naturalization of culture allows for a rigorous defence of “the felt integrity and exclusivity of the dominant ‘national’ grouping within the nation-state”, in this particular case, Britain:

In Britain, that dominant grouping has been defined at the associational level with ‘Englishness’, even when it is articulated as ‘British’ national identity, a confused and confusing structuring of identity that enables the presentation of an English ethno-national identity in the guise of more ‘reasonable’ British civic nationalism. Thus Powell could at once denounce with incandescent outrage the situation (as he saw it) that it was now ‘heresy to assert the plain fact that the English are a white nation’, while at the same time claiming that ‘I hold no man inferior because he is of different origin’ [...]. Indeed, he would even claim to be innocent of the very category of ‘race’. [...]¹⁹

MacPhee illustrates here the “diffuse complex of cultural discourse” that incorporates Englishness and the respective unarticulated posits of race and ethnicity, creating a “confused and confusing structuring of identity”, and thus opening up a conceptual space wherein an Enoch Powell may insist on being “innocent of the very category of ‘race’” while propagating undeniably racist views.

This, in return, shows the complexity of the post-coloniality of the English space, wherein the borders of the (former) imperial centre and (former) imperial periphery are not as clear-cut as often postulated, since no definite line can be extracted. Nor does it seem extractable if one considers Lord Macaulay’s imperial attempts to re-educate the indigenous populations of the Indian sub-continent. As Lord Macaulay stated in *Minutes to India* in 1835:

It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in

¹⁷ MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* 61.

¹⁸ Etienne Balibar. “Is there a ‘Neo-racism’”. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallenstein (Eds.) *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991, pp. 17-28, here p. 22, qtd. in MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* 61.

¹⁹ MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* 62.

morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.”²⁰

Macauley’s explicit postulations of creating “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect,” destabilises the Powellian insistence on difference right at the centre of the British imperial project, and at least a century before Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech.²¹ Here, I argue, one can see the discrepancy between the discourses within the imperial centre as opposed to those of the imperial periphery. How, one wonders, are the kind of “class of persons” Macaulay envisioned when stating his ideas on colonial education policies, not to be thought of as English, if they were explicitly to *be* English “in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect”? Macauley’s vision of Anglicised colonial subjects was after all the foundation on which imperial education programmes were built and implemented, allowing for generations of colonial subjects of any race, creed, and colour to be even ‘more English than the English’, a circumstance Hanif Kureishi satirises in his ground-breaking novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Protagonist Karim Amir relates his father Haroon’s shock when arriving in England, where next to seeing “the English in poverty, as roadsweepers, dustmen, shopkeepers and barmen” – something Haroon had never seen before, since in his native India the English were not part of the working class – Karim’s father was also confronted the ire of the indigenous population who did not necessarily take kindly to his English education: “[...] when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn’t necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman.”²²

For an individual such as tennis and cricket playing Haroon Amir, educated in distinctly English terms in India, where would the demarcation-lines of ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’ be?²³ And on a larger scale, where should they be drawn within the real life discourses of imperial centre

²⁰ Thomas Babington Macauley. “Minute by the Hon’ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835.” in Bureau of Education. *Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)*. H. Sharp (Ed.) Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920. Reprint. Delhi: National Archives of India, 1965, 107-117, qtd. in University of Columbia <<http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macauley001.htm>> (4 September 2014).

²¹ See “Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech.” Full Text. *The Telegraph*. 26 November 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>> (26 February 2015).

²² Hanif Kureishi. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 24-25.

²³ As Karim wryly observes, “Dad and Anwar [Haroon’s oldest friend] ... went to school in a horsedrawn rickshaw. At weekends they played cricket, and after school there was tennis on the family court. The servants would be ball-boys. The cricket matches were often against the British, and you had to let them win.” (Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* 23).

and periphery? As Bhabha already elucidated in his concept of mimicry, monolithic definitions of identity discourse grate jarringly within the context of imperial pasts and presents, since ambiguity and multi-layeredness were part and parcel of the entire imperial project.²⁴

Ian Baucom succinctly illuminates this in his analysis of locality and Englishness in *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*,²⁵ wherein he concludes that since “the middle of the nineteenth century, if not before, the [English] nation’s cultural guardians have associated Englishness with certain privileged spaces, with uniquely resonant locales.”²⁶ The highly influential Victorian art critic John Ruskin for example, “so intensely correlates Englishness with location that he comes to posit identity *as* locale.” In this, Baucom states, Ruskin was not alone since the question of locality was a continuous one in matters of Englishness. As Baucom writes,

the history of English imperialism and of the imperial determinations of English identity can be read as a history of contested spaces, of locations in which the English colonists at once attempted to manifest their cultural identities and to discipline the identities of their subordinates. But, as England dispersed its Gothic cathedrals, cricket fields, imperial maps, costumed bodies, and country houses across the surface of the globe, it found that these spaces, and the narratives of identity they physically embodied, were altered by the colonial subjects who came into contact with them.²⁷

Thus, to Baucom, empire and its effects are characterized not only by this continuous movement and re-definition, but also by “the riotous hybridizations of the postimperial metropolis” wherein the “destabilizations and re-creations of England’s disciplinary narratives of belonging” can be traced.²⁸ Thus, if, “as Ruskin and his romantic precursors indicated, identity is location,” then “imperialism has made the geography of Englishness a geography of displacement.”²⁹ What is decisive here is that these “lappings and dispersals of England’s “authoritative” cultural locales” were not temporally fixed. Being “neither exclusively postmodern occurrences nor uniquely

²⁴ Macaulay was not alone in this particular vision of empire. Consider Edmund Burke’s castigating the infamous dealings of the East India Company in India as shown in Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson’s *Romanticism and Colonialism*, (Tim Fulford, and Peter J. Kitson (Eds). *Romanticism and Colonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 14ff).

²⁵ Ian Baucom. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

²⁶ Baucom, *Out of Place* 220.

²⁷ *Out of Place* 220.

²⁸ *Out of Place* 220.

²⁹ *Out of Place* 220.

postimperial events”, they were an integral part of the entire project of empire and its aftermaths, “always sprawling, mutating, solidifying and collapsing once again.”³⁰

David Higgins, in turn, takes up Baucom’s stance on imperialism, Englishness, and locality, and takes a closer look at the Romantic precursors Baucom speaks of, showing the frictions and difficulties English imperial locality and identification created. In his recent book *Romantic Englishness*,³¹ Higgins concludes that in “The English Mail-Coach”, noted Romantic essayist De Quincey “at least ostensibly reject[s] any association between Englishness and the local.”³² Higgins further shows the imperial dynamics behind this apparent rejection when stating:

If England is represented by a mail-coach [as established by De Quincey], rather than an aestheticised rural nook, then it is characterised by process rather than place. English identity becomes an endless outward movement of power and signification from the metropolis, to provincial cities, archipelagic peripheries, imperial colonies, and, ultimately, the whole world.³³

It is a dynamic Higgins sees as part of the “imperialist practice and rhetoric” wherein a mobilisation of “potentially recalcitrant localism” was “dispers[ed] throughout the globe”, thus making “the geography of Englishness”, as Ian Baucom states, truly “a geography of displacement”³⁴ in matters

³⁰ *Out of Place* 220.

³¹ David Higgins. *Romantic Englishness: Local, National and Global Selves, 1780-1850*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

³² Higgins, *Romantic Englishness* 173.

³³ *Romantic Englishness* 173-174.

³⁴ Ian Baucom. *Out of Place* 220, qtd. in David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness* 174. Higgins is astute in assessing De Quincey’s disquiet and ambiguity in his own position and place with regard to Englishness and England. As Higgins states, De Quincey’s “self-representation as an active participant in the creation of national sympathy exists alongside a sense that he may also be an unwilling and recalcitrant citizen.” When the essayist began his project on ‘Suspensio de Profundis’ for example, he realized, much to his own horror, that to do the subject matter justice, it would have to become quite vast since “‘what is little England to the universal sea?’” (Thomas De Quincey. “The English Mail-Coach or the Glory of Motion”. Grevel Lindop et al (Eds.) *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*. 21 Vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000-3, XVI Robert Morrison (Ed.) p. 408-9, qtd. in Higgins, *Romantic Englishness* 173) but it would also require an investigation into a place and space that would not leave him undetected. Higgins identifies De Quincey’s sincere discomfort and disrupted sense of locality, as “the dark shadow of the triumphal national network of mail.” Taking up De Quincey’s imagery of an imperial network of mail as a spider web, Higgins observes: “At the metropolitan centre sits a monstrous spider controlling and punishing those who disrupted his web of print, commerce and surveillance. Without being obvious, this web penetrates every part of the nation, even the smallest ‘nook’, and, potentially, spreads even further ‘to all longitudes and latitudes’. It is significant that the web’s metonym is a ‘general history of navigation’, for this suggests its global reach.” To Higgins, there is something fascinating in this “‘vast systemic machinery’ of imperialism”, however De Quincey’s own position within this network and machinery is poignant. De Quincey, as Higgins states, “identifies himself here not with the powerful centre, but with those at the peripheries (imagined as English nooks) threatened by colonization and assimilation by a mysterious force. The self, here, is imagined in local, rather than in national terms,” and thus complicates the imperial dynamics of self and other, of centre and periphery, since the scales fluctuate so greatly. The question of centre and periphery is not fixed even as De Quincey and his peers observe the power and creativity of the place they live and write in, showing what Baucom rightly sees as a continuous “sprawling, mutating, solidifying and collapsing once again.”

of continuous movement, “always sprawling, mutating, solidifying and collapsing once again.” This continuous movement in turn, consolidated the power of Englishness as a “structure of feeling” as well as establishing English Literature as “a canonical and disciplinary formation.”³⁵

It is this inextricable entanglement of Englishness with the colonial and the imperial that leads to one other question: where and when did the imperial dynamics of Englishness end? Have they ever ended? Bluntly put, could contemporary discourses of Englishness, and by inference discourses of English Literature, contain traces of the imperial dynamics Baucom and Higgins identify, especially when said literature employs Romantic tropes as a means of conflict resolution? These are questions I will investigate further in this thesis.

As to the complexity of this conceptual space, two conclusions crystallised from the overall conundrum: first, that the term ‘English cultural space’ was fitting as an umbrella term for what I will be referring to, since all three novels’ geo-political focal point is London when the respective characters are on the British Isles.³⁶ Secondly, *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* not only illuminate the incomprehension and jarring within the above-mentioned dynamic, voluntarily as well as not; it is through their illumination of this dynamic that the narratives’ post-imperial phantom pains can be seen, phantom pains that help consolidate the powerful aesthetic of the narratives’ lifeworlds, and thus point to a larger discourse of contemporary English cultural space that this thesis wishes to comment on.

³⁵ *Romantic Englishness* 174.

³⁶ The fact that London is the geo-political space within which all three novels are located in is maybe not so surprising. London has a long tradition of functioning as a magnet to fiction narratives of Englishness, being the “mighty heart” of the former British Empire as it is that William Wordsworth already celebrated in his Westminster Bridge sonnet in 1802. See: William Wordsworth. “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3 1802.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 317. cf. among others: Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (Eds). *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992; Stuart Hall. “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies.” *Cultural Studies*. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (Eds.). New York and London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 277-294; Stephen Greenblatt. “Culture.” *Critical Terms for Literary Study, Second Edition*. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995; Arjun, Appadurai. *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, Sean Nixon (Eds). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Culture, Media and Identities series). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013.

1.3 Writing in Post-Imperial Spaces: Embedded Narratives and Telling Stories

For post-imperial phantom pains to be possible, imperial narratives of creativity, power, and place first have to be established in order to reappear in post-imperial phantom form. Thus, I would thus like to give a short analysis of what I understand as the imperial gaze, a highly pervasive perspective that I argue finds surprising perpetuation in the *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday*. My means of tracing the imperial gaze will be through critical readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a novel that comprises a particularly vivid reconstruction of the quest romance within the colonial discourse, and so has been part and parcel of the post-colonial debate on imperial systems of definition and Romantic coding.

My goal here is to give a glimpse of the dynamics of the imperial gaze and how it influences post-imperial discourses, thereby showing how contemporary post-imperial systems of definition are difficult to entangle from their imperial genealogies. One might ask why this retracing is necessary. The reason lies in what I argue is the crux of the matter in *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday*: not that the shift from imperial to post-imperial discourses remains unaccepted; rather that the incorporation of said shift and its aftermaths within discourses of English cultural space – or rather, the lack thereof – that all three novels establish, is intriguing. There is, in all three narratives, a clear understanding that something decisive took place, historically, culturally, and socially. Yet, each novel's discursive thrust in the light of this change illuminates post-imperial phantom pains as outlined in the previous chapters. Yet to be able to establish a continuity in the discourses I wish to investigate, a short outline of the initial imperial perspective is pivotal, which the following will show.

1.3.1 Imperial Genealogy and Mapping Space

Reminiscing a time before he became a “middle-aged mariner and latter-day quester [...] a consciousness demystified from the start”,³⁷ Josef Conrad’s thoroughly disillusioned Marlow sails down memory lane to a time of romantic innocence and curiosity, quite like a tired, disenchanted knight remembering his days before the quest took him out into the wilds:

Now when I was a little chap, I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there.”³⁸

The blank spaces Marlow remembers, are blank spaces on the European maps which represent romantic dreamscapes of escapist and adventurist possibilities, as is the case with William Wordsworth who envisioned Africa as “[...] a deep romantic land/A land that’s deep and far away/And fair it is as evening skies”, a “world of fairy”,³⁹ or as Mungo Park and other European explorers like James Gray Jackson saw it, Africa was a “sealed book” that needed opening.⁴⁰ It also shows a particular circumstance of the imperial gaze, namely that of empty spaces, waiting to be filled, blank spaces waiting to be seen, scaled, named and coloured in by the European explorer.⁴¹

Marlow’s quietly nostalgic reminiscence of a past where blank spaces were still a source of joy and expectation is in line with the historical temporal positioning. In the light of Marlow’s fictional temporal position, any reminiscence of his childhood would situate the boy Marlow in early to mid-nineteenth-century Britain (incidentally the historical locus of *Possession*’s Victorian plotline). This makes Conrad’s positing of Marlow’s nostalgia rather apt if one considers that,

the continuity of British imperial policy through the nineteenth century –
in fact, a narrative – is actively accompanied by this novelistic process,

³⁷ Howard Felperin. “Romance and Romanticism”. *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 6, No. 4, Summer, 1980. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 691-706, here p. 701.

³⁸ Josef Conrad. *Heart of Darkness, Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988, p. 8.

³⁹ William Wordsworth. “Peter Bell.” l. 91-93, qtd. in Michael Wiley. “Consuming Africa.” *Romantic Migrations: Local, National and Transnational Dispositions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 107-8.

⁴⁰ Robin Hallet (Ed. and Introduction) for the Royal Geographical Society. *Records of the African Association, 1788-1837*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1964, p. 47, qtd. in Wiley 107. See also: Mungo Park. *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*. Kate Ferguson Marsters (Ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.

⁴¹ This implicitly establishes the European space, in the case of the British Empire the English space, as an inscribed space that possibly needs little to no exploration (speak, inscription and recording), since it is considered to be sufficiently read and known.

whose main purpose is not to raise more questions, not to disturb or otherwise preoccupy attention, but to keep the empire more or less in place. Hardly ever is the novelist interested in doing a great deal more than mentioning or referring to India, for example, in *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre*, or Australia in *Great Expectations*. The idea is that (following the general principles of free trade) outlying territories are available for use, at will, at the novelist's discretion, usually for relatively simple purposes such as immigration, fortune, or exile.⁴²

These “outlying territories” thus remain “blank spaces on the earth”, wherein an individual, fictional as well as not, may emigrate, or be sent to, never to return again, spaces where said individual may find fortune. Novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, or E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* can thus be seen as quasi ‘second generation’ imperial texts in the nineteenth-century context, texts that attempt to encapsulate imperial lifeworlds in a greater scope, and more often than not from beyond the English shores.

In *Romantic Imperialism*, for example, Sarree Makdisi corroborates Said's analysis of imperialism that, “refers to ‘the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory’.” What is noteworthy in this development is that,

one of the difficulties presented by Britain and by British imperialism in the romantic period is that this metropolitan centre was itself being constituted, was itself coming into being, at the same time as it was constituting these distant territories as imperial possessions. Or, to be more precise, the metropolitan centre was defining these imperial territories at the very same time as they were defining the metropolitan centre itself.⁴³

In *Imperial Eyes* Mary Louise Pratt is concise in mapping out the vast network that established this imperial system of definition, a matrix of hierarchies, classifications, and associations that was considered the norm within the imperial centres, while equally establishing a narrative that inscribed the imperial centre as a centre.⁴⁴ My reason for quoting Pratt extensively on imperial

⁴² Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 88.

⁴³ Sarree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 176.

⁴⁴ As Fredric Jameson already notes in “Modernism and Imperialism”: “The very title of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, whatever other resonances it comes to have, is literally determined by the reference to cartography. But cartography is not the solution, but rather the problem, at least in its ideal epistemological form as social cognitive mapping on the global scale. The map, if there is to be one, must somehow emerge from the demands and constraints of the spatial perceptions of the individual; and since Britain is generally thought of as the quintessential imperialist power, it may be useful to begin with a sample of English spatial experience [...]” (Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism.” Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said (Eds.). *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, pp. 43-66, here p. 45).

methods and systems of definition and classification is to show, on a different scale, the “sample of [imperial] spatial experience”,⁴⁵ since Pratt’s enumeration conveys some of the scope of the European imperial project to “know the unknown Other, geo-physically, biologically, visually, socially, culturally and ontologically”:

While natural history was unquestionably constituted in and through language, it was an undertaking that was realized in many aspects of social and material life as well. Europe’s growing technological capacities were challenged by the demand for better means of preserving, transporting, displaying, and documenting specimens; artistic specializations in botanical and zoological drawing developed; printers were challenged to improve reproduction of visuals; watchmakers were in demand to invent and maintain instruments; jobs came into being for scientists on commercial expeditions and colonial outposts; patronage networks funded scientific travels and subsequent writing; amateur and professional societies of all kinds sprung up locally, nationally, and internationally; natural history collections acquired commercial as well as prestige value; botanical gardens became large-scale public spectacles, and the job of supervising them a naturalists’ dream. [...] No more vivid example could be found of the way that knowledges [sic] exist not as static accumulations of facts, bits, or bytes, but as human activities, tangles of verbal and nonverbal practices. Of course the scientific enterprise involved all manner of linguistic apparatuses. Many forms of writing, publishing, speaking, and reading brought the knowledge into being in the public sphere, and created and sustained its value. The authority of science was invested most directly in specialized descriptive texts, like the countless botanical treatises organized around the various nomenclatures and taxonomies. Journalism and narrative travel accounts, however, were essential mediators between the scientific network and a larger European public. They were central agents in legitimating scientific authority and its global project alongside Europe’s other ways of knowing the world, and being in it.⁴⁶

Now, considering the systems and structures created to sustain this continuous investigation, and the implication that the investigation was a neutral, universal observation – coupled with the distinct blindness of what Bill Ashcroft names “European consciousness”⁴⁷ to the “nomenclatures and taxonomies” of distinctly non-European, non-Christian, non-white cultures – the subsequent processes of institutionalized racialization, bias, subjugation, and domination become apparent. That these vast and global imperial networks of investigation would enhance what Alfred Crosby

⁴⁵ Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism” 45.

⁴⁶ Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Bill Ashcroft. *Caliban’s Voice, The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 80.

defines as “ecological imperialism”⁴⁸ go hand in hand with the establishment of empire needs little explanation, if one considers the fact that ecological imperialism comprises:

the reshaping of the physical environment, or administrative, architectural, and institutional feats such as the building of colonial cities (Algiers, Delhi, Saigon); at home, the emergence of new imperial élites, cultures and subcultures (schools of imperial ‘hands’, institutes, departments, sciences – such as geography, anthropology, etc. – dependent on a continuing colonial policy), new styles of art, including travel photography, exotic and Orientalist painting, poetry, fiction and music, monumental sculpture, and journalism (as memorably characterized in Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*).⁴⁹

The imperial envisioning of Timbuktu is an illuminating example. Timbuktu was an express destination of Mungo Park’s famed expedition into the Niger basin, an expedition immortalized in his game-changing *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, subsidised heavily by Great Britain’s African Association who wished “to ascertain the course, direction, source, and terminus of the Niger River, and to make commercial and diplomatic contact with those who peopled its vicinity.”⁵⁰

The hopes the African Association had for this expedition was that Park may find an east-west traversing river that would have provided “a transcontinental trade route to the Mediterranean”.⁵¹ These hopes, based on reports from Herodotus and Leo Africanus, had led Europeans to speculate that “the knowledge and language of ancient Egypt may still imperfectly survive”⁵² in Africa’s interior. Additionally, there was some anticipation that in a hidden region even the remnants of the Carthaginians might be found, retaining “some portion of those arts and sciences, and of that commercial knowledge, for which the inhabitants of Carthage were once so eminently famed.”⁵³

The commercial interest in a transcontinental trading route needs little explanation,⁵⁴ yet, one

⁴⁸ Alfred Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

⁴⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 131.

⁵⁰ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 70.

⁵¹ *Imperial Eyes* 70.

⁵² *Imperial Eyes* 70.

⁵³ *Imperial Eyes* 70.

⁵⁴ As Michael Wiley writes in *Romantic Migrations*: “The African Association had at least two motives for going to Africa: Association members believed that they could advance geographical and general scientific knowledge, and that they could earn great wealth from that knowledge by gaining access to gold, ivory, slaves and commercial markets for British goods. These interests were closely connected: the Association viewed geographical and scientific knowledge itself as a trade secret that they must guard carefully, and so, the governing committee resolved not to “disclose except to the members of the Association at large, such intelligence as they shall from time to time, receive from the persons who shall be sent out on the business of discovery.”” (Wiley, “Consuming Africa.” *Romantic Migrations: Local, National and Transnational Dispositions* 108-109.).

wonders why the African Association would be interested in remnants of Carthaginian culture? Why even connect Timbuktu with Carthage in the first place, if this connection was not preceded by a full appropriation of Roman imperial history as part and parcel of the indigenous history of the former Roman colonies, thus establishing an imperial genealogy from the former colonial power, Rome, to the then present colonial power, England, signified in ‘Britain’, thus establishing and ‘proving’ the legitimation of imperial rule?

Regarding this question of imperial genealogies, Adam R. Beach’s “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” is enlightening.⁵⁵ Beach investigates the imperial pursuits from the linguistic and philological perspective, thereby showing the underlying narrative of imperial genealogy, and thus an establishment of the dynamics of creativity, power, and place within the imperial centre and periphery. Beach states,

[it] should come as no surprise that a larger imperial role was envisioned for the language [English] by certain British linguistic theorists as well. In this particular strand of thought, standardizing English became the means by which Britain could enact a repetition of epic proportions. These theorists imagined themselves transforming English, along with Greek and Latin, into the third “classical” tongue, essentially a standard and permanent language that could withstand change across vast expanses of time and space. This English “classical” language would be implanted around the world, becoming dominant wherever Britons colonized, displacing the so-called “primitive” languages spoken by native inhabitants. Just as the English people once were civilized and improved by both Latin and the Roman conquest, so too could Britain help other nations progress by the export of English to their colonies. These same theorists were preoccupied with Britain’s status as a former province of the Roman empire and feared that their provincialism appeared most readily in matters of language.⁵⁶

Beach sees Thomas Sheridan as a particularly noteworthy culprit in this continuation of Roman imperial discourse, Sheridan who, according to Beach, saw “the entire [British] nation as a land of linguistic barbarians, primarily because they had not taken the pains to standardize their language.”⁵⁷

Since Sheridan considered English to be inferior to the standardized classical languages

⁵⁵ Adam Beach. “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century: Standardizing English, Cultural Imperialism, and the Future of the Literary Canon.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Vol. 43, No. 2, Summer 2001. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, pp. 117-141.

⁵⁶ Beach, “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 118-9.

⁵⁷ “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 119.

Latin and Greek, as well as other European tongues, his conclusion was that “the national body would have to be unified by a standard of English before it could, in good faith, reform savage body practices abroad,” to whom Sheridan compared English language usage.⁵⁸ Thus, a “metaphysical empire” was to be created through “a complex negotiation with the Roman past” where disavowals of “the martial nature of Rome” occurred. In the light of such a mission, the enthusiasm for “the continued transmission and reproduction of Latin and of Roman letters” remained constant, and, to paraphrase Roy Harris, “the status of English [...] became simultaneously part of the theory, practice, and propaganda of Britain’s imperial dominance”,⁵⁹ paralleling Ian Baucum and David Higgin’s analysis of the hegemonial practices within the English cultural space during the British Empire’s heyday.

In his analysis, Beach convincingly shows how linguistics and anthropology which were “virtually indistinguishable fields in this period” created a discourse of “the classic, standardized language and the primitive or savage language.”

In setting up this opposition, writers like Hugh Blair, Adam Smith, and Lord Monbodo, along with Sheridan, theorized an intimate connection among language, levels of civilization, and cultural survival. This paradigm was central to the imperial construction of standard English.⁶⁰

Thus the previous colonized geo-space full of colonial subjects, over time appropriated the colonial power to such a decisive extent, that when the polities of the self-same geo-space enterprised in creating their own colonies, they referred back to the colonial power that had subjugated and dominated their geo-spaces in the first place. England’s imperial history, whether as colonized or as colonizer, is immense, yet it must be taken into account if any headway is to be gained when discussing present-day discursive ambiguities and polyvalences within the former imperial centre. The past in this case is truly not prologue, but very much present,⁶¹ making not only the English

⁵⁸ “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 119.

⁵⁹ “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 119.

⁶⁰ “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 119.

⁶¹ This is visible in the unquestioned appropriation of past colonial discourses, as seen in Sheridan’s description of “The Greeks who rightfully looked “with contempt” on the rest of the world and recognized no equals because none shared their excellence in language. [...] Nor did they make any distinction between the Romans their conquerors, and other nations, including them under common denomination of Barbarians; till the Romans, by a like application to the culture of their language, became their rivals in that article.” (Thomas Sheridan. *A Dissertation on the Causes of the Difficulties Which Occur, In Learning the English Tongue*. London: J. Dodsley, 1761, (note 4), 2, qtd. in Beach, “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century” 119 .) As Beach explains, “Sheridan draws an important distinction between an empire built on barbaric military strength and a true empire that combines military technology with technology of language. The message to his contemporaries is clear: unless Britons develop their own classical

cultural space, but also the English language an all but neutral entity, implemented as it was to consolidate the hegemony of the British Empire's imperial rule and respective gaze.

1.3.2 Through a Glass Darkly: The Imperial Gaze

This depth and breadth of the imperial network of definition, from the imperial methods of observation and definition as enumerated by Mary Louise Pratt, to the standardisation of an imperial language as deliberated by Adam R. Beach, and beyond, corroborates the blindness possible by the European consciousness Ashcroft identifies. Chinua Achebe's seminal critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is illuminating in this case. In the following, I will first recapitulate Achebe's seminal analysis of Conrad's novella, before considering the dynamics of the imperial gaze embedded in the systems of definition within the novella and its critical readings. Yet first to Achebe's famous deconstruction.

Achebe acknowledges Conrad as "one of the great stylists of modern fiction" and "a good storyteller" to boot, which makes *Heart of Darkness* all the more a source of ire for Achebe, since Conrad "chose his subject well", a subject which "was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance."⁶²

Considering Linda Dryden's analysis of Conrad's literary dispute with H.G. Wells, this is no small matter. Where Wells was sceptical of Conrad's style,⁶³ Conrad insisted that he "was attempting to expand the frontiers of meaning in the novel through new narrative techniques."⁶⁴ As stated in his preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* Conrad wanted "to make people "see" and

language, one that would ensure cultural imperialism in the present and the post-colonial future, they will be judged as barbaric conquerors instead of civilizing imperialists." (119).

⁶² Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Massachusetts Review*. Vol. 18, No. 4, Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977. Rpt. in Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan (Eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Second Edition*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010, pp. 1783-1794, here p. 1785.

⁶³ As Dryden states: "Combining the retrospective comments of Wells and Ford sheds significant light on how Conrad's experimental "impressionism" contributed to the emergence of what we now call the modernist novel and illuminates how Wells became a reluctant participant in debates about the aesthetics of the novel. Although it was yet to be a recognized movement, it is clear that Conrad and Ford were anticipating literary modernism by envisioning and creating what they chose to call the "New Form" and that Wells participated in their debates with increasing scepticism." (Linda Dryden. "The Difference between Us": Conrad, Wells, and the English Novel." *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2013. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 214-233, here p. 217).

⁶⁴ Dryden, "The Difference between Us" 217.

to “feel” rather than to read, to be educated or entertained.”⁶⁵ Dryden rightly identifies the term “see” as the critical one, since it “conveys a sense of visceral experience, of instinctive understanding that cannot be contained in a word, a phrase, or even an entire paragraph. It is almost as if *seeing* supersedes *understanding* in Conrad’s literary lexicon.”⁶⁶ What however was the reader to “see” and “feel”, and how was this conveyed in *Heart of Darkness*? According Michael Leveson’s recent *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* “the task of modern fiction” for Conrad was to “overcome the muteness of events by way of an active, restless, meaning-giving subjectivity”⁶⁷ and that by this, Conrad inaugurated modernism’s “urge towards dualistic opposition and radical polarities”.⁶⁸ If so, then the binaries Achebe critiques are no trifle, since as he writes, Conrad chose a subject which “was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance.” The excerpts Achebe uses in his critique are exemplary. In one, for example, Conrad’s Marlow observes:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.⁶⁹

Achebe rightly points out that Marlow’s description is deep within the binary of human vs. non-human, sane vs. mad, known and safe vs. alien and dangerous, European vs. African, with the

⁶⁵ “The Difference between Us” 217.

⁶⁶ “The Difference between Us” 217, italics in the original.

⁶⁷ Michael Levenson (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 92, qtd. in Dryden, “The Difference between Us” 217.

⁶⁸ Michael Levenson, “Genealogy of Modernism”, p. ix. qtd. in Dryden, “The Difference between Us” 217.

⁶⁹ Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. Robert Kimbrough (Ed.), Norton Critical Editions (New York, 1971), p. 51, qtd. in Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1786.

respective positive and negative connotations – binaries and connotations Conrad’s readers would not have thought to question – as encapsulated in such descriptions as the following:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were. [...] No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their [the African natives] not being human.⁷⁰

Achebe’s critique of the novella’s overall tone and stance is enlightening when it comes to the identification of the racialized dominant narrative within Conrad’s seminal text, an essentialism Achebe interestingly names romantic:

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, [...]. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance. “Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place,” he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness.⁷¹

Achebe, the author of the ground-breaking *Things Fall Apart*,⁷² a narration of first colonial contact from an African perspective, very understandably is indignant about Conrad’s portrayal of Sub-Saharan peoples. In Marlow’s observations, Africans are either fragmented, as seen in the “burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling” Marlow describes, or they are indeed beyond the narratives of Marlow’s historical present: “prehistoric man” who partakes in “black and incomprehensible frenzy” and who “in place of speech [made] “a violent babble of uncouth sounds.”⁷³

As Achebe points out, to Marlow, the Africans observed ““exchanged short grunting phrases” even among themselves, but most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy.”⁷⁴ As one of the most prominent voices of post-war post-colonial discourse, Achebe understandably focuses on the dehumanising aspects of these descriptions that abound in *Heart of Darkness*,⁷⁵ and

⁷⁰ *Heart of Darkness* 51.

⁷¹ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1787.

⁷² Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

⁷³ “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1787.

⁷⁴ “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1788.

⁷⁵ In his final, furious verdict Achebe condemns Conrad and Conrad’s famous novella with the following: “The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such

thereby furnish the “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor” and makes Africa a “metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity into which the wandering European enters at his peril”.⁷⁶

What is implicitly part of Achebe’s ire is the embedded hierarchy of values, the a priori, so to speak, in the binaries Conrad employs and for a long time were hardly questioned, especially if Conrad helped establish modernism’s “urge towards dualistic opposition and radical polarities” in the discourses of the imperial centre.⁷⁷ The prominent reason for Achebe’s indignation is simple: the binaries stated as fact are not universals. They hail from an expressly European imperial Observer stance, but say precious little of the non-European Observed from their own stance of Observing Self. The line of sight here is a one-way street, and Achebe is merciless in his critique of the inherent blindness in said perception.⁷⁸ The positing of power is not questioned but taken for granted, speak, the definitions within which the observations are made – what in fact “unearthly”, “frenzy”, and “violent babble of uncouth sounds” mean – and from which perspective exactly. As

a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe’s civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz. Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.” (Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1789-90).

⁷⁶ Much like a knight errant wandering into an especially dangerous stretch of forest, or a particularly perilous blank space on the imperial map yet to be inscribed, possibly with ‘Here be Savages’ rather than the more traditional ‘Here be Dragons’.

⁷⁷ The centrality of Conrad’s novella in the discourse of modernism – and the conspicuous lack of any debate of the imperial dynamics that make *Heart of Darkness* such a problematic text – is particularly illuminated in the following: Mark A. Wollaeger. “The Woolfs in the Jungle: Intertextuality, Sexuality, and the Emergence of Female Modernism in *The Voyage Out*, *The Village in the Jungle* and *Heart of Darkness*.” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*. Vol. 64, No. 1, March 2003. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 33-69.

⁷⁸ As Achebe writes: “Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad’s intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad’s power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence – a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers.” (Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1788). In his own way, Achebe identifies the slippage of subjectivity Leveson speaks of in the *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, a slippage that, by Achebe’s account, is far more problematic than at first considered.

Achebe writes,

if Conrad's intention is to draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator, his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters.⁷⁹

Thus, if Conrad was sincere in “sett[ing] up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history”, what would have to be an integral part of *Heart of Darkness*' narrative is an understanding that, if to Marlow's European mind the African landscape is “unearthly”, the African movements a “frenzy”, and the African sounds heard a “violent babble of uncouth sounds”, this does not de facto make them so. What is shown in the text is Marlow's *perspective*.

Marlow's point of view is informed by his unequivocally European understanding of landscape, movement, and linguistic traditions. Marlow sees and perceives from within a European imperial matrix of definitions: from the various species of flora and fauna, to the various bodily motions that are acceptable, to the positing of positive and negative sounds and respective habits of musicality, not to mention, on a macro scale, the power relations between coloniser and colonised. Owen Knowles' Introduction to the 2007 Penguin Classic's *Heart of Darkness* is a case in point. As Knowles writes,

Marlow's initiation into Africa allots him a role not unlike that of an on-the-spot foreign correspondent, with his own independent sense of what is newsworthy: he watches, listens, reports on his interviews and trusts in the power of hard, definite particulars. The picture of Africa to emerge combines the image of a messily organized scramble for 'loot' with that of a chaotic war zone littered with upturned rusting trucks, abandoned drainage pipes and gaping craters. He also allows space for voices unheard in the newspapers of the time – those of the European 'agents', traders and other hangers-on. These voices range from the brick maker and his version of justice – 'Transgression – punishment – bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way' (31) – to Marlow's companion and his reasons for being in Africa – 'To make money, of course. What do you think?' (24) – include a description of the agents' collective voice: 'The word “ivory” rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying for it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.'⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*” 1788.

⁸⁰ Owen Knowles. “Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*”. Joseph Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. Robert Hampson (Ed.). London, New York: Penguin Classics, 2007, p. xviii.

This, I would say, is a succinct description of Marlow's perspective in *Heart of Darkness*. It is, however, a distinctly European one, where Africa remains what Achebe terms a "metaphysical battlefield" a space "devoid of all recognizable humanity into which the wandering European enters at his peril." Interestingly, Knowles' Introduction takes exception to Achebe's critique that *Heart of Darkness* comprised the disintegration of only "a single 'petty European'". Rather, or so Knowles states, "the symbol of dark nightmare also has a strenuously generalizing effect in suggesting that *all* Europeans are involved in the breakdown of the imperial dream."⁸¹

As statements go, this is one that, amusingly, entirely misses the point. Achebe's critique is the entire European imperial perspective in *Heart of Darkness*, a perspective that is blithely hegemonial in its entire practice and exertion, exemplifying the "blindness of European consciousness" Ashcroft so aptly identifies in *Caliban's Voice*. Consider for example the imperial (mis)understanding of the indigenous non-European peoples' relation to the actual non-European land. As Ashcroft writes,

Quite apart from the radical othering of a nomadic society that in and of itself justified invasion, the absence of agriculture meant that European consciousness was unable to comprehend the owner's relationship with the land.⁸²

Ashcroft further clarifies how John Locke's theories on acquisition, possession, function, and purpose played a major part in this misconception. Locke's texts, generally acknowledged as one of the founding narratives of what is now known as Western civilisation, articulated a definition of property that solidified the European incomprehension of other systems of creativity, power, and place. The biblical command to subdue and replenish the earth⁸³ had been part of the fabric of the European socio-cultural discourse for so long that concepts of 'place' and 'property' were "inextricably tangled" by the eighteenth century.⁸⁴ Thus, when Locke spoke of the creation of property via cultivation, as for example in his *Two Treatises of Government* that Ashcroft quotes from,⁸⁵ the biblical command was implicit:

Where there had been no improvement on nature, 'man' had not acted

⁸¹ Knowles. "Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*." xxi, italics in the original.

⁸² Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice* 80.

⁸³ "Genesis". *The Bible, Authorized Kings James Version*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1:28.

⁸⁴ Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice* 80.

⁸⁵ John Locke. *Two Treatises of Government (1690)*. Peter Laslett (Introd.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, qtd. in Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice* 80.

according to the Genesis directive and subdued the earth, creating ‘property’ in the process. Where the evidence of ‘use’ such as agriculture, buildings, monuments and temples was missing, it was assumed that the peoples did not have a concept of landed property, and therefore could not be seen as possessors.⁸⁶

The definition of “improvement” is hereby vital. As Ashcroft points out, the European imperial definition led to a discrepant analysis of things observed, from “an agrarian [settler] culture assuming its dominance and stealing the land belonging to hunter-gatherers”, to a near mystification of colonial landscapes, where “grazing land such as the African savanna [sic]”⁸⁷ were turned into what R. P. Neumann calls “lost Edens in need of protection and preservation”,⁸⁸ especially from the indigenous peoples on that very land. This markedly European perspective can also be seen in the reaction of the French colonial Ashcroft refers to, the botanist August Chevalier who,

reached the conclusion that the people in the savanna [sic] boundary in Guinea were clearing the forest at an alarming rate and the mosaic landscape was a consequence of this intervention. More recent investigation has shown that in fact the forested areas around the villages were a result of careful husbandry. Where the colonists saw a mirror of their own destruction of the ecology, the locals saw it very differently: not a forest landscape progressively losing its trees, but a savanna [sic] landscape filling with forest.⁸⁹

Chevalier’s conclusion is one example of the European consciousness Ashcroft identifies all through *Caliban’s Voice*, a particularly imperial line of sight that would lead to definitions of creativity, power, and place embedded within other imperial systems of definition, and most importantly, those ‘at home’ in the imperial centre. What is pivotal is that the imperial definitions would not incorporate an awareness of this conceptual blindness, since said lack of comprehension was part of the very line sight that created the definitions in the first place. It is this ubiquitous blindness of the imperial gaze to anything but itself that Achebe critiques so vehemently, a blindness that is inherent in the ‘seeing’ and ‘feeling’ engendered by Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

⁸⁶ *Caliban’s Voice* 80.

⁸⁷ *Caliban’s Voice* 80.

⁸⁸ R.P. Neumann. “Dukes, Earls and Ersatz Edens: Aristocratic Nature Preservationists in Africa.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Vol. 14. London: Sage Publications, pp. 79-98, here p. 80, qtd. in Ashcroft, *Caliban’s Voice* 80.

⁸⁹ *Caliban’s Voice* 80-8.

1.3.3 Conceptual Blindness

What is key is that this line of observation and definition of the imperial Other, within the imperial socio-cultural discourse, leaves the bias of the imperial Self unquestioned. Michael Wiley shows this succinctly in his quietly enraged analysis of naval officer and slaver John Matthews' *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone* (1788). By placing "African intellect in a hierarchy reaching down to non-human primates,"⁹⁰ by ways of finding nothing equivalent to European education, fortifications, trade and so forth among the native Africans, Matthews,

narrowed the gap between African humans and other nonhuman primates, as when he at once compared black Africans to chimpanzees and anthropomorphized chimpanzees. [...] In looking at Africa's human and non-human nature this way, Matthews followed a way of seeing the continent that had been one of the standards in Europe throughout much of the eighteenth century.⁹¹

Matthews' line of sight and observation can be seen in his own words when describing the 'unknown' landscapes of Africa that are meant to be inscribed with understandable definitions for European imperial perception:

Nature appears to have been extremely liberal, and to have poured forth her treasures with an unsparing hand... in most cases the indolence of the natives prevents their reaping those advantages of which an industrious nation would possess themselves [...] The disposition of the natives is nearly similar everywhere, extremely indolent.⁹²

Additionally, as Wiley points out, to Matthews, "Africans remained indolent unless "excited by revenge," which was when they demonstrated "implacable tempers" and showed themselves to be "full of treachery and dissimulation."⁹³ Within this semantic field of motive and action, Wiley rightly deducts that "in such representations, Africans generally show energy – physical or intellectual – only to cause harm",⁹⁴ thus creating a very flat and narrow definition of the non-

⁹⁰ Michael Wiley. "Consuming Africa" 114.

⁹¹ Wiley, "Consuming Africa" 114.

⁹² John Matthews. *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, Containing an Account of the Trade and Productions of the Country and the Civil and Religious Customs and Manners of the People*. London: B. White and Son, 1788. Rpt. London: Frank Cass, 1966, qtd. in Wiley, "Consuming Africa" 114.

⁹³ "Consuming Africa" 114.

⁹⁴ "Consuming Africa" 114.

European African Other that was nevertheless considered objective, even universal, within the nomenclature of the imperial centre. Matthews' account was after all assigned the title *A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, Containing an Account of the Trade and Productions of the Country and the Civil and Religious Customs and Manners of the People*, thus situating Matthews' texts within the field of factual reporting, i.e. a representation of the unquestionable realities (facts) at hand, the historical equivalent to Conrad's Marlow who, as Owen Knowles writes a century after the novella's publication, inhabits

a role not unlike that of an on-the-spot foreign correspondent, with his own independent sense of what is newsworthy: he watches, listens, reports on his interviews and trusts in the power of hard, definite particulars.⁹⁵

That Marlow's line of sight is inherently biased due to his European imperial position gains no traction in such a reading. Defining Marlow's role as "on-the-spot foreign correspondent" who "watches, listens, reports on his interviews" and most importantly "trusts in the power of hard, definite particulars" completely disavows the imperial systems of observation and definition that Mary Louise Pratt enumerates, let alone the blindness of European consciousness Ashcroft aptly analyses.

Marlow perceives, observes, and reports from within an imperial system of hegemonial practices. To stylize his point of view as a universally objective perspective – as terms such as "reporting" and "hard, definite particulars" imply – comprises a gross ignorance of imperial hegemonial dynamics of power. As Said writes when critiquing real live accounts of colonialists, such accounts as Marlow's, which were understood to report "hard, definite particulars" of the colonial subject peoples and spaces, these accounts,

spirited away, occluded, and elided the real power of the observer, who for reasons guaranteed only by power and by its alliance with the spirit of World History, could pronounce on the reality of native peoples as from an invisible point of super-objective perspective, using the protocols and jargon of new sciences to displace 'the natives'' point of view.⁹⁶

Marlow is thus no objective observer. Whatever he reports, whatever "hard, definite particulars"

⁹⁵ Knowles, "Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*" xvii.

⁹⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 203.

he may retain, they must all be understood as being perceived from the perspective of an imperial observer, in an imperial space, articulating the perspective of the dominant hegemonial imperial power for an audience living within said dominant hegemonial imperial space (the imperial centre, the English cultural space), which is exactly why Achebe criticizes Conrad so harshly, especially since his choice of subject, “was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance.”⁹⁷ Thus, whatever was being seen, felt, or otherwise perceived, was always biased by the imperial gaze within which the seeing, feeling, and perceiving were taking place. *Heart of Darkness* is thus an evocative text that shows what the imperial gaze actually ‘looks like’ when practiced, and Conrad is in fact very successful in allowing his readers to “see” and “feel”: namely what imperial practice actually means, cleverly conjoining how imperial ideal and imperial practice ultimately leads to “the breakdown of the imperial dream.”⁹⁸

What, however, does this have to do with the methodologies I contend are employed in *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday*? I argue that through their establishment of an English cultural space wherein the aesthetic, signified through poetic genius and the sublime, is genuinely powerful, all three novels tap into the very imperial dynamics noted above (whether knowingly or not is another matter). However, as shown previously, where objectivity is accepted as fact, even deemed a “super-objective perspective”,⁹⁹ and seen as universal from the observer’s side, the actual observation is by no means de facto objective. It is always tinted by the unquestioned definitions of self and other embedded in the observer’s perspective, their very line of sight.

If the self in question is an individual or group socio-culturally situated within the (former) imperial centre, any observations from said self need to be investigated with regard to unquestioned bias, especially in matters of the imperial gaze. *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* are all situated within the (former) imperial centre in matters of narrative, perspective, characters, and cultural space. This, I argue, warrants a more thorough investigation of the postulations of beauty and truth all three novels establish, especially since they comprise a response to postmodern and post-structuralist debates of creativity, power, and place. As asked earlier in this paper: where and when did the imperial dynamics of Englishness end?¹⁰⁰ Have they ever ended? Additionally now, if the imperial gaze has pervasive blind spots, and the imperial dynamics of Englishness still prevail –

⁹⁷ Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” 1785.

⁹⁸ Knowles, “Introduction to *Heart of Darkness*” xxi, italics in the original.

⁹⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 203.

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 1.2.1 “Defining Englishness” 15.

what of *Possession*, *On Beauty* and *Saturday*, and their employment of Romantic codes to engender a genuinely powerful aesthetic? It is after all their means to enable legitimate access to beauty and truth. How imperially infused is this methodology? Is it even feasible, or does it necessitate a particular imperially-biased construction of the English cultural space? This is the core of my analysis.

Consider the following: if, for example, to the observer the wilful exposure and display of an individual's naked body is unquestionably 'sinful', 'depraved', and 'immoral', I argue that any evaluation of a culture and practices within which exposed naked bodies are the unquestioned norm, will, by default, be framed within the logics of the observer's definition of sin, depravity, and immorality. There will be little to no space to approach voluntary nakedness without the dialectics of sin, depravity, and immorality the observer already deems unquestionable, especially when the observing individual has no concept of accepted exposure of the naked body outside this framework. Wiley's analysis of Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1779) and James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1768-1773) show this clearly.

The binaries of good/bad, moral/immoral, proper/licentious are visible in Wiley's analysis and subtle censure of the books, as seen when criticising Park's *Travels* with regard to sexual mores, where "According to [Park's] account, the African women showed sexual license, but never licentiousness."¹⁰¹ There seems to be in Wiley's account a certain relief in the fact that Mungo Park managed to describe the African women he encountered without sliding into categories of 'debauchery' as James Bruce's account does, where, "Bruce's was a geography of antithesis, one that inscribed Britain and Britain's ostensibly superior morality on a map more clearly than it inscribed Africa."¹⁰² Park in turn, "in a famous scene from *Travels* [...] used African female sexuality to establish a comparative geography" just like Bruce, however, "[Park's] scene avoided the beastliness and monstrosity of Bruce's."¹⁰³

What is interesting here is the entire categorisation in and of itself. The definition of "beastliness and monstrosity", "licentiousness", or "indolence" and "productivity" for that matter,¹⁰⁴ shows the imperial centre's internal coding, the tinted lens by which those from the

¹⁰¹ Wiley, "Consuming Africa" 115.

¹⁰² "Consuming Africa" 112.

¹⁰³ "Consuming Africa" 113.

¹⁰⁴ Consider Edward Said's analysis of economic historian Clive Day's accounts of "the services of the native [Javanese] population" in 1904, over a century after Matthews' *Voyage*. According to Day, it was impossible to appeal to the Javanese population "to an ambition to better themselves and raise their standard. Nothing less than immediate material enjoyment will stir them from their indolent routine." (Syed Hussein Alatas. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century and Its Function in*

European spaces observed the non-European spheres. Considering the fact that Bruce, Park et al saw and perceived from the vantage point of the imperial centre, with all its codes of moral, social, and cultural superiority, it is clear that they could not fathom of any difference, any definition beyond their own sight, thus substantiating the blindness of their European consciousness.

This blindness is not obsolete either. It finds fruition even in post-imperial discourses, aptly shown by Elaine Scarry in her first thoughts on beauty in *On Beauty and Being Just*, where Scarry points to these very perspectival blinkers when reflecting on why she at first was convinced palm trees were not, could not be beautiful.¹⁰⁵ It was during a holiday that Scarry realised that the palm tree in front of her balcony had “everything [she had] always loved, fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, open—lustrously in love with air and light.”¹⁰⁶ This understanding led to the question of perspectival error that became the foundation of Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, a question Scarry frames as following:

[the] vividness of the palm states the acuity with which I feel the error, a kind of dread conveyed by the words “How many?” How many other errors lie like broken plates or flowers on the floor of my mind? I pore over the floor but cannot see much surface since all the space is taken up by the fallen tree trunk, the big clumsy thing with all its leaves stuffed into one shaft.¹⁰⁷

The “big clumsy thing with all its leaves stuffed into one shaft”¹⁰⁸ was Scarry’s initial view of palm trees, the reason why she thought them aesthetically unappealing. However, after her change of sight during her holiday, Scarry’s investigation of perspective led her to realise how fundamental cultural paradigms were in her evaluation in the first place:

Because the tree about which I made the error was not a sycamore, a birch, a copper beech, a stellata Leonard magnolia but a palm tree, because in

the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism. London: Frank Cass, 1977, p. 62, qtd. in Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 202). Day’s is a statement that never once questions the imperial hegemonial narratives of creativity, power, and place embedded in his definition of ‘work ethic’, ‘pleasure’, ‘pain’, ‘punishment’, ‘reward’, and ‘worthiness’, not to mention the powerful meta-narrative of free trade and its respective trappings.

¹⁰⁵ Elaine Scarry. “On Beauty and Being Just.” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Yale University, March 25 and 26, 1998, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ “My palm tree is an example. Suddenly I am on a balcony and its huge swaying leaves are before me at eye level, arcing, arching, waving, cresting and breaking in the soft air, throwing the yellow sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side, running its fingers down its own piano keys, then running them back up again, shuffling and dealing glittering decks of aqua, green, yellow, and white. It is everything I have always loved, fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, open – lustrously in love with air and light.” (Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just” 12).

¹⁰⁷ Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just” 12-13.

¹⁰⁸ “On Beauty and Being Just” 13.

other words it was a tree whose most common ground is a hemisphere not my own (southern rather than northern) or a coast not my own (west rather than east), the error may seem to be about the distance between north and south, east and west, about mistakes arising from cultural difference.¹⁰⁹

Scarry thus points out the power of place, and how this in return determined the evaluation, binaries, and systems of definition she lived by, an understanding of the dynamics of perspective that are more complex than at first experienced. It was due to Scarry's aesthetic epiphany that she became aware of the conceptual blinkers that informed her line of sight, prompting an analysis of what sight and the evaluation of what is being seen have to do with each other – especially with regard to beauty – and how these connect with dynamics of judgement and justice. It is this postmodern ability to deconstruct a central perspective that I consider part and parcel of *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday*'s narratives. However, I argue that, though deconstruction of perspective such as Scarry's is applied, it never goes so far as to understand the imperial hegemonial practices embedded in the solutions the three novels propose in combating the postmodern "provisionality and indecipherability".

Conrad, by his own words, wanted readers of *Heart of Darkness* to "see" and to "feel", yet never questioned the very categorisation of what was being seen and felt, infused as Conrad's own point of view was by a very particular imperial perspective. Were such a minute differentiation of perspective part and parcel of Conrad's seminal narrative, in so doing exemplifying genuine "dualistic opposition and radical polarities", I doubt if Achebe's verdict would be so scathing. However, considering the historical time and socio-cultural place of Joseph Conrad the author, I wonder if such an understanding of his own perspectival blinkers would have even been possible. Elaine Scarry after all is a philosopher of a distinctly post-imperial age, wherein it is accepted understanding that an individual's socio-cultural position informs everything he or she does, down to the very definition of things accepted and those abhorred.

Nevertheless, Achebe's analysis of the deep-seated conceptual fault-lines visible in Conrad's novella, (a text Achebe considers "permanent literature" i.e. part of the Western literary canon), makes one wonder how far the differentiation of perspectival handicaps is in fact possible, considering one's own socio-cultural positioning. Following Achebe's biting critique for example, Said points out how in *Heart of Darkness*,

¹⁰⁹ "On Beauty and Being Just" 13.

[o]n the second of the two occasions when a native utters an intelligible word, he thrusts an ‘insolent black head’ through a doorway to announce Kurtz’s death, as if only a European pretext could furnish an African with reason enough to speak coherently.¹¹⁰

I would differentiate here with regard to this interpretation, since, rather than show the Europeans’ uncouthness alone, it portrays the incapability of European imperialist consciousness to actually comprehend what is supposed to be dominated/investigated – speak, inscribed and understood, written and read: the dark forest that is to be explored, the blank space on the imperial map that is supposed to be filled in with imperial words and colours. In the text, Africa and its inhabitants remain complete unknowns who elude the systems of definition and living that are seen as essentially vital for life to work at all, from the imperial, Western, European perspective. Thus the point of view that is really inscribed and understood, written and read, is only one: the European imperial perspective. All other perspectives – inscriptions, means of understanding, readings and writings – are silenced and suppressed within the hegemonial practice of the imperial gaze, thus allowing said gaze to consider its perspective universal, while all the while being distinctly subjective, which is the quintessence of conceptual blindness.

As Said puts it, in *Heart of Darkness*, Africa “recedes in integral meaning, as if with Kurtz’s passing it had once again become the blankness his imperial will had sought to overcome.”¹¹¹ However, to imagine that “blankness” was at any time fully inscribed let alone described, remains an imagining only, as seen by the contemporary description of Africa (which is, after all, a continent) as unquestionably “magnificent”, “ineffable”, and “dark”, as Said himself states:

Yet as I have said, much of Conrad’s narrative is preoccupied with what eludes articulate expression – the jungle, the desperate natives, the great river, Africa’s magnificent, ineffable dark life.¹¹²

This play on words, ineffable being a synonym of ‘deep’, makes one wonder what exactly Said means with “Africa’s magnificent, [deep] dark life”? Is this a full-up appropriation of the Western imperial gaze on Africa that remains the ‘ultimate mystery’, Wordsworth’s “deep romantic land”? Or is it an ironic point made (at the reader’s expense, if they fully agree with this image of Africa) about the gaze Said is speaking of? Considering Said’s general stance on the complexities of

¹¹⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 120.

¹¹¹ *Culture and Imperialism* 120.

¹¹² *Culture and Imperialism* 199.

imperial identities and perspective, I would err on the side of the latter, yet the question cannot be fully answered from reading the text alone since “magnificent”, “ineffable”, and “dark”, are simply other words for poetic and sublime. They invoke yet again the Romantic paradigm of the obscure and unknown that enables enlightenment and riches (intellectual, spiritual, as well as material) for the wandering Childe, errant or not. I would even go so far as to say that Said involuntarily proves Salman Rushdie’s point in “The New Empire in Britain”,¹¹³ where absorption of imperial paradigms show just how deep an impact empire had and has on the discourses of imperial Self and imperial Other – and most of all, how difficult it is to extract oneself from the once fixed binaries, no matter how aware one may be of their destructiveness and inherent deficiencies.

¹¹³ Salman Rushdie. “The New Empire within Britain.” *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010, pp. 129-138.

2. Positing Creativity, Power & Place

From the first cultural forensic explorations of Giambattista Vico¹¹⁴ to the Marxist critique of Stuart Hall,¹¹⁵ cultural practices are understood to be multifaceted, diverse, and polyvalent within the particular individual's and group's lived experience. This matrix of meanings ranges from the specificity of a war dance before a sports game, to the symbolism-cum-protocol of a military parade during a royal wedding; from the cultural positioning of a white sari worn at a funeral, to the codification of a business suit worn in a workplace. Exponentially, what is said and done by the various individuals and groups during these occasions are an intrinsic part of the socio-cultural acts themselves, not to mention their re-codification within the fictions written, received and celebrated in the respective cultural spheres.

These acts and practices thus are signifiers of a larger text, subsumed under the term 'culture', where individuals and groups follow the codings of the interpretorial texts given. The grand narratives they comprise are the coordinates by which human lived experience is navigated, a template of texts ranging from such fundamental differentiations as 'light and dark', to more complex ones, such as 'civilisation and barbarism', all the way to stratification of opera seats and where a short skirt can be seen as an inappropriate piece of attire.¹¹⁶ The fictionalisation processes that are part of the cultural practices – for the last century and a half largely by ways of the novel – take these templates and reconfigure them to an entertaining whole. They have the added bonus of commenting (deliberately or not) on the cultural practices they employ to create the narratives

¹¹⁴ Timothy Brennan. *Vico, Spinoza and Imperial Pasts*. 21 July 2010. *cornell.edu*. <<http://www.cornell.edu/video/timothy-brennan-vico-spinoza-and-the-imperial-past>>. (28 April 2014).

¹¹⁵ In his analysis of contemporary debates on black Western culture in "What is this "black" in black popular culture?", Hall, for example, writes: "The way in which a transgressive politics in one domain is constantly sutured and stabilized by reactionary or unexamined politics in another is only to be explained by [the] continuous cross-dislocation of one identity by another, one structure by another. Dominant ethnicities are always underpinned by a particular sexual economy, a particular figured masculinity, a particular class identity. There is no guarantee, in reaching for an essentialized racial identity of which we think we can be certain, that it will always turn out to be mutually liberating and progressive on all the other dimensions. [...]" Hall ends his article with a conjecture on popular culture "commodified and stereotyped as it often is, [it] is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time." (Stuart Hall. "What is this "black" in black popular culture?" *Social Justice*. Vol. 20, No. 1-2, Spring-Summer, 1993, pp. 104-11).

¹¹⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, and his treatise of social tiers and ties, and their influence on personal and group taste; Hayden White. *The Content of the Form*. Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, and White's analysis of the narratological elements of historical recording and how they reflect on cultural networks of meanings, codifications and definitions of a socio-cultural space.

in the first place. The adeptness in these practices can be thus equalled to Wittgensteinian language games on cultural lines, where the individual and group apply the cultural signifiers available to them within the matrices of cultural (meta-)texts, thereby continuing the cultural production as a whole.

Possession, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* are three such novels. In their depth and breadth they critique and comment on the cultural practices they employ to construct the lifeworlds and plots of their narratives. It is within these fictional lifeworlds, however, that the aesthetic experience is a functional method for conflict resolution. Thus, all three adhere to the same meta-text of the aesthetic, namely that it is genuinely powerful. However, this employment of the aesthetic as a powerful tool for conflict resolution holds more than at first considered. All three novels are after all generally read as realist novels,¹¹⁷ and I argue that their realism is a realism wherein the former imperial centre seems culturally untouched from post-colonial aftermaths, while simultaneously acknowledging its own historical post-coloniality. This is a disconcerting connect-disconnect of perspective which I would like to investigate further, since it allows for a discursive space where cultural genealogy is divorced from its historical locus. It is, however, so I argue, the conceptual space that enables the three novels' realism wherein the aesthetic is made powerful via Romantic codes of poetic genius and the sublime, by which beauty and truth can be experienced, understood and acquired; all this while equally obfuscating the colonial/imperial dynamics within the very Romantic codes employed by which beauty and truth are defined. Thus, *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* point to a larger discourse concerning the post-coloniality of the contemporary English cultural space, a discourse, I argue, that does not fully consider this surprising dynamic.

It is a dynamic that is especially intriguing in light of the postmodern consensus that culture and cultural practices are seen as a joint effort of individuals and groups that help shape and develop a culture as a whole “in continuous and constant interaction”.¹¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of language and communication is illuminating in this respect. Consider his stance on language and text, where

[a] word (or in general any sign) is *interindividual*. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the soul of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author

¹¹⁷ For insightful analysis of realism as a textual form consider Edward Barnaby. “The Realist Novel as a Meta-Spectacle.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*. Vol. 38, No. 1, Winter 2008. Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University pp. 37-59.

¹¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Vern W. McGee (Transl.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 89.

(speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one).¹¹⁹

Transferred to the dynamics of imperial pasts and presents, this stance is an invigorating one since it shifts the interpretorial weight away from the speaker into a more diverse space, where interpretorial prerogatives are no longer as obvious as at first imagined. The dialogic multiplicity of voices and perspectives is thereby not only possible, but an integral part of the cultural space(s).¹²⁰ Considering Ian Baucom and David Higgin's analysis of the cultural dynamics of the British empire in its heyday,¹²¹ and how this led to "lappings and dispersals of England's "authoritative" cultural locales",¹²² creating an Englishness that was characterized by an "endless outward movement of power and signification from the metropolis, to provincial cities, archipelagic peripheries, imperial colonies, and, ultimately, the whole world",¹²³ then the dialectic of articulation and interpretation Bakhtin argues for is an adequate description of imperial and post-imperial aftermaths, where meanings are "always sprawling, mutating, solidifying and collapsing once again."¹²⁴

Set within the space of imperial and post-imperial dynamics, the speaker here would be the imperial centres, with their "own inalienable right to the word", in this case the cultural signifier. However, the listener – in this case those of the imperial periphery who were 'spoken to', inundated with imperial cultural texts until they adopted them, adapted them, and finally became adepts in them¹²⁵ – the listener "has his rights" and moreover, "those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes up on it also have their rights".

¹¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 121-122.

¹²⁰ Salman Rushdie already encapsulated the potential of this polyvalence in his response to the violent repercussions of his *Satanic Verses*, where the possible reason for the highly hostile response lies in the fact that the fictional text "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation of the new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure" – a multiplicity of voices and perspectives by which "newness enters the world." (Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith". *Imaginary Homelands, Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991, p. 394).

¹²¹ See Chapter "1.3.1 Defining Englishness" for a more thorough consideration of Baucom and Higgin's analyses.

¹²² Ian Baucom, *Out of Place* 220.

¹²³ David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness* 173-174.

¹²⁴ Baucom, *Out of Place* 220.

¹²⁵ This leads to such destabilising processes such as the mimicry Bhabha points to *The Location of Culture*, thus triggering the abovementioned ambiguity and polyvalence: "[...] colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference [...] mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline,

These rights, and the rights of “those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it”, are the point of departure of post-colonial analyses within the cultural layerings of the former imperial peripheries. They, thus, are able to give voice to the multifacetedness of interpretorial space, a multifacetedness that remains a constant in these highly diverse cultural spaces. This kind of cultural polyvalence is generally subsumed under the umbrella term ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ in post-colonial discourse. It is furthermore taken as the status quo of many former colonial spaces, as well as the individuals and groups who call these spaces their ‘home space’, and so see them as part of their heritage. Additionally, due to an influx of culturally heterogeneous groups within metropolitan spaces such as New York, London, and Hong Kong, unexpected contact zones were created by simple spatial proximity, thus establishing polyvalent spaces.¹²⁶

The awareness of such polyvalence and ambiguity within the indigenous English cultural space can be seen in the two diverging definitions of Englishness postulated by T.S. Eliot, on the one hand, and Hanif Kureishi on the other, two enthusiastic Londoners who show different perspectives on a particular cultural sphere. T.S. Eliot defines Englishness in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* as,

Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar¹²⁷

while Englishness, Hanif Kureishi claims thirty-four years later, includes,

yoga exercises, going to Indian restaurants, the music of Bob Marley, the novels of Salman Rushdie, Zen Buddhism, the Hare Krishna Temple, as well as films of Sylvester Stallone, therapy, hamburgers, visits to gay bars, the dole office and the taking of drugs.¹²⁸

which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.” (Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 122, italics in the original).

¹²⁶ See Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of *contact zones* in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, where she defines *contact*, as the replacement of “narratives of conquest and domination with those of interaction, co-presence and shared practices” and *zone*, a “space [...] of compromise and resistance, assertion and imitation, hybridity and adaptation.” (Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 1-12).

¹²⁷ T.S. Eliot. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 14.

¹²⁸ Hanif Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette and Other Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 143.

These definitions of the apparently same cultural space point to a main argument in this thesis, namely that within the former British imperial centre, two strands of definitions have emerged over the past half-century of imperial decline: one shows an apparent lack of awareness of a far more international – qua imperial – positioning of the English cultural space, while the other is explicitly aware of it. It is within the conceptual space of the former, where the English post-imperial present seems absent, that I argue romantic realism can be established. As already stated above, in romantic realism, the cultural genealogy of the Romantic codes needed to make the aesthetic genuinely powerful are divorced from the historical locus of these very codes, thus leaving out the question of conceptual ambiguities and their implications. The differentiating definitions Eliot and Kureishi deliver point to this bifurcation, though this is not to say that either is ‘more right’ than the other. I would in fact say that both are equal in their position as signifiers of the English cultural space.

What both definitions do show is that there remains a layering to the English cultural space that, while fully postulated, is rarely, if ever, followed by an explicit analysis of the stratification of said cultural space, as well as its contact zones. It is a layering and polyvalence that *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* are able to illuminate in various degrees, which is another reason why I consider them very worthy of joint analysis. The three novels, I argue, illuminate implicitly and explicitly the dynamics that establish the apparent disparity of definitions, as seen in Eliot’s and Kureishi’s, and so comment on contemporary discourses of the English cultural space.

Each novel shows in its own way that to believe that the discourses of the centre remained untouched by those of the periphery requires a particular kind of narrow perspective. Exchange, no matter how unwillingly, definitely took place as the plethora of studies, texts, and analyses on empire have shown over the past century alone. Eliot’s and Kureishi’s definitions of Englishness already signify this exchange.¹²⁹ Empire and its cultural impact is not a one-way street where the often times very violent transformation processes only took place in the imperial peripheries. Rather, or so I argue along the lines of Said’s analysis of the cross-insemination of culture and imperialism,

there is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships among cultures,
among unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, among us and others;
no one has the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating,

¹²⁹ In case of Eliot’s implicit incorporation, consider Elgar who was and is famed for his *Pomp and Circumstance* marches which are an undeniably imperial in their celebration of the British Monarchy during the first decade of the 20th century, and by inference, British imperial rule, since this temporal location is often considered the apex of the British Empire. See: P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins (Eds.). *British Imperialism, 1688 – 2000*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001.

and interpreting the world free from the encumbering interests and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves.¹³⁰

Said is referring here to the United States of America, however, considering the history of empire, the question of the British Empire, whose epicentre remained England, is thought-provoking when seen from Said's stance. I argue that to fully understand the whole scope of empire, in this case the British Empire, the imperial structures embedded within the cultural terms and texts of the former imperial centre need to be fully considered as well, not to mention their impact and the respective reverberations still present and active within these former centres today. The following will, I hope, be a fruitful example of just such an investigation.

¹³⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 65.

3. A. S. Byatt's *Possession*: Informed Readers, Inspired Authors

In A. S. Byatt's award-winning novel, *Possession*, reception and text are central to the Romantic quest of the narrative's academic protagonists, a quest where the aesthetic emerges as a powerful tool for conflict resolution. It is the power of the aesthetic that leads to a significant change of scholarship in *Possession*'s fictional academic world: protagonist Roland Michell's old-fashioned textual predilections are what enable his literary quest in the first place. With the help of ever resourceful literary scholar Maud Bailey, Roland's final scholarship-changing discoveries end up guiding other academics to a 'truer', speak, more authentic analysis and reception of the texts at hand, in *Possession*'s case the texts of the fictional Victorian poets Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. They also trigger a creative inspiration for Roland that strongly mirrors the postulations in Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, where poetry is defined as "the spontaneous overflow of feelings, recollected in tranquillity," thereby closing the circle of reception and text Roland opened with his markedly traditional reading and writing skills.

In the following, I will consider how Byatt's positing of the aesthetic as powerful goes hand in hand with her embedded critique of postmodern orthodoxies of reception and text. I so argue that the concepts of poetic genius and the sublime depicted in *Possession* function as vehicles to critique postmodern discourses of reception and text, on the one hand, and on the other, propose invigorating and productive modes of reading and writing that go beyond post-structuralist orthodoxies of reader reception and text production without completely debunking them.

As already stated above, I argue that Byatt's critique of postmodern orthodoxies of reception and texts as articulated via *Possession*, is in the same line as Zadie Smith's and Ian McEwan's millennial critiques via *On Beauty* and *Saturday*, respectively. All three authors are concerned with the inadequacy of postmodern discourses to fully tackle the problems of reception and text experienced in late 20th century and millennial lifeworlds: from postmodern discourses of scholarship (*Possession*), and postmodern and millennial discourses of art and selfhood (*On Beauty*), to millennial discourses of global conflict and pervasive terrorist threat (*Saturday*). I argue that all three authors seek to inhabit a middle ground position between the statutes of Romantic poetic agency and the openness of reception gained by postmodern critique. Byatt, by dint of experience, perhaps, is hereby the most articulate in her attempt to position herself, which will be the focus of this chapter.

3.1 Against Postmodernism's Restrictions

A. S. Byatt's positioning of the aesthetic in *Possession* is no sudden quirk, but part and parcel of her insistence on reinstating the power of the author in the postmodern discourse of reception and text.¹³¹ As Philip Tew writes in *The Contemporary British Novel*, A. S. Byatt belongs to those novelists who "are increasingly responding to postmodernism and challenging its self-determining features, and in fact have balked at its restrictive interpretative code."¹³² Byatt uses her fiction as this very challenge, her narratives constituting her points of argument on definitions of reception and text. The argument herein is that Byatt's implied reader is an informed reader, a reader who has, firstly, an unquenched curiosity in language, as well as in literary and cultural knowledge. Secondly, Byatt's informed reader has sufficient foreknowledge of the various cultural and historical subject matters within the fictional texts to successfully follow and understand the narrative in its full-bodied sense. Thirdly, this reader is an informed reader in the sense of being distinctly informed by the author, thus limiting the range of readings, unlike the open-ended readings possible according to Roland Barthes. This in turn re-positions the readers' "anti-theological activity"¹³³ within readings into a more structured space.

Byatt's informed reader, I argue, is a reader who, ideally, develops into an inspired writer, who in turn will be the source of ever more texts to be explored by another informed reader, thus continuing the cultural cycle of text production, reception, and critique. I also argue that it is this particular reading-writing perspective that informs the identity narratives within her texts, firmly situated as they are in what can be considered traditional, indigenous English domains, with their respective cultural and identity-specific codes and texts.

Byatt is very adept in establishing intricate lifeworlds where deep-strata cultural analyses are the norm, *Possession* being a case in point. The narrative illuminates a particular perspective within the English cultural space from a distinctly indigenous point of view: the tensions within late twentieth century English literary scholarship and its methodologies, i.e. the spaces where socio-

¹³¹ cf. Tom Wilhelmus. "Reading A. S. Byatt Reading." *The Hudson Review*. Vol. 54, No. 3, Autumn, 2001. *The French Issue*, pp. 505-12. Wilhelmus describes Byatt's opinions on reading and writing as "more loosely, and interestingly, guided by motives more like the ones suggested by Auden: the writer reads (and writes) from impulses that are much more mixed and far ranging than precise definitions might allow." (507)

¹³² Philip Tew. *The Contemporary British Novel*. London, New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 10.

¹³³ Roland Barthes. "Death of the Author." Heath, Steven (Transl.). Vincent B. Leitch, William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara E. Johnson, John McGowan (Eds.) *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Second Edition*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010, p. 1469.

culturally approved, late twentieth century English cultural analyses actively took place.

This makes *Possession* a valuable text when considering discourses of post-coloniality in contemporary English cultural spaces, since, rather than tell alone, as seen in her numerous critical essays, Byatt shows her critique and commentaries when it comes to reception and text by ways of her own fiction. In *Possession* especially, one can identify the questions, definitions, and points of dispute Byatt has when it comes to late 20th century reading, authorship, creativity, cultural discourse, and historical accuracy, and, by and through all these, questions regarding contemporary narratives of identity. As in Byatt's other fictional texts, the multi-layered relation between historical and cultural discourse is explored and exemplified in *Possession*, consequently illuminating the cultural codings underlying the texts used. My argument here is that, despite the multi-layeredness of the narrative's texts and meta-texts, *Possession* involuntarily illuminates a distinctly narrow perspective of post-coloniality, namely one that excludes the (former) imperial centre from post-coloniality, relegating post-coloniality firmly to the (former) imperial periphery as though imperial centre and imperial periphery were socially and culturally disconnected while simultaneously belonging to the same empire and imperial history, where the constant flux between centre and periphery remain uncontested. It is a connect-disconnect of perspective that can be seen in the narrow perception of the influence of imperial discourses in the tropes and methods employed by the characters and through the text of the narrative. Thus, the cultural genealogies illuminated in *Possession* remain undocked from their historical locus, and so establish a realism that is Romantic in its thrust and exertion.

In order to adequately map the conceptual space of *Possession*'s narrative, I will first analyse how Byatt challenges postmodernism's "restrictive interpretative code" by re-evaluating the definitions of reception and text, and exemplifying this via *Possession*. I will then show how Byatt subverts questions of authorship and reading to a 'new' authorial autonomy that does not exclude readerly freedom. I will finally argue that it is due to this subversion that Byatt is able to tackle questions concerning beauty and truth that, at that particular point in time (the late twentieth century), had become decidedly out of fashion due to post-structuralist and feminist deconstructions of the concepts 'beauty' and 'truth'.

In her critique of post-structuralist and feminist deconstructions of these concepts, however, Byatt relies on the power of the aesthetic that guides and transforms the individual literary quester (speaker, reader and writer), and is ultimately the tool of methodological conflict resolution, since it is via the aesthetic that authenticity and accuracy is gained within *Possession*'s lifeworlds. While

establishing this power of the aesthetic, I argue that Byatt leaves the ambiguities of the historical locus from within which the Romantic concepts of poetic genius and sublime were established unquestioned. This lack of questioning allows the establishment of a discursive space wherein the historical genealogy of the Romantic concepts used can be left out, thereby disavowing any coloniality, let alone post-coloniality, of the indigenous English cultural space the narrative takes place in and comments on. This, I argue, is an implicit comment on contemporary discourses of the English cultural space, wherein historical post-coloniality is acknowledged, yet seems to hardly concern the cultural discourses of the former imperial centre. It is why I consider *Possession* a romantic realist text. The following comprises this very analysis.

3.2. Authorial Compromise

Any attempt to discover the author's intention within a text has been considered narrow-minded if not stultifying ever since Roland Barthes demanded the birth of the Reader, by means of killing the god-like authority of the Author, the curse of vibrant perspectives on the texts in question. The slavish search for 'what the author meant' was banned and has hardly found any champions since. Today, the concept of finding 'original' meaning and what the author 'intended' is considered archaic, if not a sign of scholarly delinquency. The pitfall within this particular search is the belief that, once the author's intention is revealed, all other interpretations are distorted readings at best, since they do not convey the 'original' meaning, speak, the 'truth' of the text. As Barthes puts it in his seminal text:

The image of literature [found] in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author" 1466.

The premise alone – that such a thing as uncontested ‘truth’, the “ultimate meaning” of a text, (and by extension, “the world as text”)¹³⁵ exists – is a tricky point of reference at the very least, which is probably why Barthes’ insistence on the death of the Author has been so successful. The text that stands for itself seems to be free, unfettered from the absolutist Author-intent, open to interpretations, meanings and double meanings, hidden and subtle meanings, meanings that (on the surface) seem to go against the text’s grain, meanings, in short, that show a different set of textuality than at first thought of on primary reception.

It has been the general orthodoxy of the past few decades that, once the text is sent out into the world, as in published, it is no longer in the author’s hands. Like a new discovery handed over to a panel, the author is required to stand before the gates of reception and quietly wait for the verdict. The reader, “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed,”¹³⁶ is the one who mines meaning out of the words given. The author can do nothing against it, and must wisely sit back and witness the onslaught of readings and meanings discovered within the “tissue of quotations”,¹³⁷ between the lines, in the subtext and meta-text, and all other texts found.

That the author may convey the existence of an influential idea that led to the creation of the text is nevertheless still accepted, which probably explains why book-readings and author-interviews, -biographies and -documentaries still exist today. There is, as it seems, still an interest in the author as an author, an interest in what he or she was thinking, feeling, experiencing when he or she wrote the text, leaving aside all insistences on the *scriptor* who is “born simultaneously with the text”.¹³⁸ A certain acceptance of historicity between author and text remains unbroken. The author who “is thought to *nourish* the book,” thinking, suffering, and living for it, “in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child,”¹³⁹ still lingers, never mind the fact that scholarly discourse has done its best to do away with this kind of Author. Following Barthes’ (understandable) opposition to the Author’s absolutist rule by replacing the Author with said *scriptor*, orthodox scholarship joins in this fixing of the *scriptor* in the literal ever-present, thus denying any processes of “recording, notation, representation [and] ‘depiction’,” confining the *scriptor* solely to performances and a putting-together of “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Barthes, “Death of the Author” 1466.

¹³⁶ “Death of the Author” 1466.

¹³⁷ Barthes, “Death of the Author” 1468.

¹³⁸ “Death of the Author” 1468.

¹³⁹ “Death of the Author” 1468.

¹⁴⁰ “Death of the Author” 1468.

However, the dilemma Barthes created by this radical tearing-down of the Author was not immediately apparent in the sweeping Reader's revolution. Barthes' demand requires that Reader and Author remain two distinct personalities, divided, unconnected, the addressor on this side, the addressee on the other, and the text in between, connecting yet separating them. However, what of those who find themselves incorporating both, as being readers and authors at the same time? Barthes' death of the Author rather puts a spoke in their wheel, since as an author, what of the reader within, and vice versa? The authorial termination demands a certain split personality, where one is killed for the other to prosper, a circumstance that cannot be forthcoming. It is a split that Byatt finds irritating and counterproductive, a conceptual gridlock Zadie Smith elucidates succinctly in her essay on Barthes and Nabokov in *Changing My Mind*. I would like to consider Smith's critique first before analysing Byatt's stance, since Smith's critique illuminates concisely the dilemma Byatt is equally aware of. As Smith writes,

[r]eading has always been my passion, my pleasure, and I am constitutionally drawn to any thesis that gives power to readers, increasing their freedom of movement. But when I became a writer, writing became my discipline, my practice, and I felt the need to believe in it as an intentional, directional act, an expression of an individual consciousness.¹⁴¹

Smith, as a reader, is in favour of the death of the Author, the opening of meanings and interpretations, or as she puts it, the increase of "freedom of movement", in this case intellectual and interpretational movement. However, as an author, this freedom of movement, rather than be welcome, seems to deny the very discipline and practice Smith speaks of, since to her, as an author, the "intentional, directional act" is part of writing, the "expression of individual consciousness", which, put more generally, can be said to be a type of confiding in the reader by relating that very individual consciousness via the text. Yet, how join the two? Smith understandably sees this as a source of great tension:

[The] tension between these two modes [reader and author] grows particularly acute when I try to read the author Nabokov as the critic Barthes recommends. On the one hand there is Barthes' radical invocation of reader's rights ("The removal of the Author... is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text or – which is the same thing – the text is henceforth made and read in such a way that on all levels its Author is absent.") On the other, Nabokov's bold assertion of

¹⁴¹ Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 44.

authorial privilege (“My characters are galley slaves”). You can hardly get going at all.¹⁴²

The juxtaposition between the reader who “utterly transforms the modern text”, and the author with his or her “galley slaves”, is evident. Barthes gives no recommendation on how to solve this matter, since to Barthes, reader and author are two separate entities, wherein the Reader as reader overthrows the rule of the Author and ascends to supreme ruler, which seems to constitute the abolishment of one absolutist rule for yet another.

A more egalitarian middle space, as Smith implicitly points out, is needed for those who find themselves in between these two modes (and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, not only them), by ways of incorporating both. Smith’s answer to this problem is to turn to the fundamentals of Barthes’ argument, the argument of authorship and readership: the act of writing itself. Where Barthes refuses to “assign a “secret,” an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text),”¹⁴³ conscripting that any “hope of knowing the world in its ultimate reality”¹⁴⁴ is untenable, thus making any compromise impossible, Smith points to Nabokov, a reader and a writer, who inhabits a more diverse sphere of discourse:

In Nabokov’s portrait of subjectivity you can still decipher by *degrees*. The lily can be more or less real,^[145] and there exists an ultimate reality even if we can never know it. Still, we can come close. To approach the reality of a novel, as readers, Nabokov asked that we bring biographical, historical, cultural, entomological and linguistic knowledge to the task, not to mention attentive care, empathy, synesthetic acuity and a keen visual sense. There can be ever more accurate readings of the lily. And there can be, consequently, philistine misreadings, a fact Barthes’ portrait of the prepotent reader (blissed out, picking her way through a riot of potential

¹⁴² Herbert Gold (Interv.). “Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction, No. 40”. *The Paris Review*. No. 41, Summer-Fall 1967. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov>>. (4 July 2015), no pages in the digital format, qtd. in Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind* 44.

¹⁴³ Barthes, “Death of the Author”, 1469; Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 48.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 48.

¹⁴⁵ Earlier in her essay, Smith quotes Nabokov on lilies: “Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information, and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless.” (See: Peter Duval-Smith and Christopher Burstall (Interv.). “1962 BBC Television Interview with Vladimir Nabokov” qtd. in Jacqueline Hamrit. *Authorship in Nabokov’s Prefaces*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 35; qtd. in Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 47).

meanings, constructing a text playfully, without limits) refuses to acknowledge.¹⁴⁶

Here a compromise between reader and author can be seen, where the freedom of the first and the authority of the second are incorporated into one, requiring active participation on both sides, where the authority of the author is kept ‘within’ the text, yet the “freedom of movement” of the reader is also restricted, since “philistine misreadings” are indeed possible. It is exactly this compromise that Smith seeks and seems to find in Nabokov’s treatises on writing, that I suggest A. S. Byatt puts to the fore in her own texts: a liminal space, an incorporating space, where the free reader and authorial writer find an invigorating, maybe even astonishing, middle ground.

Leaving aside Barthes’ insistence on authorial casualties, it is no secret that an author will often fictionalize topics and themes that interest him or her, thus creating a wider range of possibilities when it comes to discussing the various points of views, including those that would hardly be accounted as valid in an academic setting, by virtue of being difficult to prove in the accepted definitions of proof, never mind the postulation. In the case of Byatt’s works, *Possession* in particular, one of the recurring themes is reception, the freedoms and constraints of the reader and the accepted readings, i.e. scholarship. However, a few often-quoted conclusions that are made in view of this concern situate Byatt as a reconstructionist, disavowing the reader’s freedom in favour of a return to authorial rule.

In Anne Marie Adams’ concluding remarks to her widely cited “Dead Authors, Born Readers” for example, *Possession* is seen as a quasi-manifesto for the subordination of the reader, where the “[g]ood readers [...] are necessarily subordinate to, and humbly aware of, the “genius of the writer”,¹⁴⁷ thereby advocating an “uncritical and non-liberatory method of reading” wherein the author “possesses” the readers in the readerly work, and so create ““perfect readings” [which] necessarily obscure and obfuscate critical analysis.”¹⁴⁸

Adams additionally points to Louise Yelin and Monica Flegel’s analyses of *Possession*, which criticise the lack of diversified discourse in matters of gender and social interaction, respectively. According to Yelin, “Byatt seems to be suggesting, [that] by money and by a

¹⁴⁶ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 48.

¹⁴⁷ Ann Marie Adams. “Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics: Investigating Ambiguous Critical Identities in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*. Vol. 36, No. 1, Spring 2003. Chicago: Midwest Modern Language Association, pp. 107-124, here p. 120.

¹⁴⁸ Ann Marie Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 121.

suppression of homoeroticism or a redirection of women's desire from women to men,"¹⁴⁹ heterosexual romance, culture, and cultural change are made possible. Flegel, in turn, sees the blinding 'enchantment' of reading for pleasure as one of *Possession's* main hazards, where Byatt seems to postulate an "Edenic state of reading", where the reader is entirely subsumed by the text, "[leaving] behind critical readings and [embracing] reading for enjoyment."¹⁵⁰ Flegel considers the acceptance of such a reading as positive, even "happy", but also "naïve, and unethical", since one must "first believe that such a state truly existed and that it was always open to all readers of every class, gender, and race,"¹⁵¹ enabled by the "happily ever after" of fairy tale endings Byatt engenders in the narrative, which allow this very Edenic state of reading, where "gender and class issues are elided in a celebration of pure reading."¹⁵²

To Adams, Yelin, and Flegel, whose essays on *Possession* have been quoted extensively since their first publishing, Byatt's reworking of Barthes' death of the Author is attributed as distinctly negative, since it is not only seen to revert back to the old regime, but also to re-ascribe to the (impossible) ideal of "ultimate meaning". Though all three essays are very perceptive with regard to the clashes and calamities in *Possession* when it comes to the readers and readings within the text, they disregard one vital circumstance, namely that Byatt has a high regard for Barthes' Reader's revolution, only in moderation. To see Byatt's call for moderation as an entire refuting of readers' freedoms – by ways of Byatt's characters whose success and satisfaction in life, academically and privately, apparently only occur when they "lie prostrate before the genius" of the authors,¹⁵³ – is to follow Barthes' separation of readers and authors as distinctly as in his treatise on authorial death, a separation which, I argue, Byatt refutes.

Rather than cast the reader and writer into opposite fields of practice, Byatt fuses them to one, and so is able to dissolve the stringent borders between one and the other, allowing for more fluid movement which incorporates both the readerly freedom as well as the authorial prerogative. This fusing of reader and writer, not only in Byatt's fictional worlds but in her non-fiction, is what I consider one of the reasons why Christien Franken notes that it is "impossible to place Byatt's work in one category", where the labels "humanist", "post-structuralist", and "feminist" become

¹⁴⁹ Louise Yelin. "Cultural Cartography: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of Victorian Studies." *Victorian Newsletter*. Vol. 81, Spring 1992. Bowling Green, KY: Western Kentucky University, pp. 38-41, here p. 39.

¹⁵⁰ Monica Flegel. "Enchanted Readings and Fairy Tale Endings in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*." *English Studies in Canada*. Vol. 24, December 1998. Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE), pp. 413-30, here p. 429.

¹⁵¹ Monica Flegel, "Enchanted Readings" 430.

¹⁵² Flegel, "Enchanted Readings" 430.

¹⁵³ Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers" 120.

“reductive in this context”.¹⁵⁴ By incorporating everything, mixing and mingling both perspectives of reader and writer, Byatt makes specialising definitions very difficult, since within the binary opposition of reader/author, there is little space for the liminality of reader-author and author-reader.

In the light of this fusion, rather than being manifestos for authorial rule, Byatt’s fictional texts, *Possession* in particular, are discussions *on reading*. Not only the joys of this very simple and yet very complex act are considered, but also the snares and pitfalls possible. Where Flegel sees danger in Byatt’s embracing “reading for enjoyment,”¹⁵⁵ which creates “enchanted readings” that yet again posit the reader under authorial absolutist rule, I argue that it is this very enjoyment of reading Byatt endorses that allows for the Barthesian readerly freedom. The difference lies in Byatt’s insistence on moderation, since to her, the “philistine misreadings” Smith writes of are very possible and should be avoided as best as one can, since they cannot only steer into the absurd: at worst they can deaden the entire literary and cultural discourse of the text in question, and thus other texts connected via intertextuality.

This perspective, unsurprisingly, requires an unchanging connection between signifier and signified, a connection Adams, (and in their respective critiques, Flegel and Yelin), find dubious, however, it would be a fallacy to think Byatt reverts back to an *unquestioned* signifier/signified correlation. Rather, Byatt acknowledges the postmodern dilemma of the contingency of codes: that they are not universal as previously thought, but a matter of choice, even arbitrary.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, rather than do away with all strictures, Byatt points to a middle ground, namely that meanings are in fact there. They are problematic, ambiguous, and difficult to decipher, and it takes time, curiosity, and diligence to decipher them, but they are still there. Moreover, we have codes by which we cipher and decipher meanings, namely words and their constructions, language, a stance that re-evaluates the post-structuralist approach of universal ambiguity and arbitrariness.

¹⁵⁴ Christien Franken. “The Turtle and Its Adversaries: Gender Disruption in A. S. Byatt’s Critical and Academic Work.” Richard Todd and Luisa Flora (Eds.). *Theme Parks, Rain Forests and Sprouting Wastelands: European Essays on Theory and Performance in Contemporary British Fiction*. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000, pp. 195-214.

¹⁵⁵ Flegel, “Enchanted Readings” 429ff.

¹⁵⁶ In her interview with Jenny Newman and James Friel, A. S. Byatt points out that the post-structuralist questioning was “a perfectly legitimate attempt to question the authority of the text” only that it “skidded into a feeling that the text has no authority and its author doesn’t understand anything” which she clearly does not condone, implicitly pointing out that this doesn’t mean the authority of the text should not be questioned *at all*, but that the questioning should be done with moderation. (Jenny Newman and James Friel. “An Interview with A. S. Byatt.” *cercles.com*. 2003 <www.cercles.com/interviews/byatt.html>. (26 February, 2015), no page numbers in the original; see also: Sharon Monteith, Jenny Newman & Pat Wheeler (Eds.). *Contemporary British and Irish Novelists: an Introduction through Interviews*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).

What is interesting here is that the postmodern crisis stems from the certainties of codes and concepts perpetuated during empire, where the codes and definitions of nature, culture, self and other were considered universal within the imperial centres, until they were discovered to be highly ambiguous and constructed, mid-term of the last century. In the light of this, systems of definition were defined as by default ambiguous and arbitrary, since “ultimate meanings” were exposed to be assumptions and beliefs at best, and not in the least universal. Though acknowledging that this radical revision helped break the authority of the code, and thus the power of the author and sanctity of the text, (literary, culturally, and socially), Byatt disagrees with the postmodern conclusion that there are therefore no meanings at all, that everything basically can be read into anything. Byatt challenges this “restrictive interpretative code”¹⁵⁷ by insisting via her fiction and non-fiction that words do have meanings, even if the meanings are problematic, ambiguous, and contested. There is still something there, and it is up to the questing reader to find out exactly what is there.

It is this insistence on ‘something’, never mind how ambiguous, that Byatt specifically postulates in *Possession* by her narratives of reception and text-production, that Adams et al, who still subscribe to the universal ambiguity of codes and signifiers, find so problematic. It is not surprising then that critiques written from the standpoint of universal ambiguity and arbitrariness see Byatt as a reconstructionist of authorial, and thus textual absolutism. In a system of definition where there is only either/or – either the “secret”, the “ultimate meanings” of a text, or the death of the Author and the birth of the Reader, “blissed out, picking her way through a riot of potential meanings, constructing a text playfully, without limits”¹⁵⁸ – then the liminal both/and of Byatt’s perspective will be difficult to posit. In the light of the above, the repeated slotting of Byatt in the revisionist rather than unorthodox box is hardly astonishing.

Additionally, Byatt’s focus on “reading for enjoyment” ties into her insistence on meanings, for the enjoyment in the reading stems from curiosity in finding out ‘what happened’, ‘what it means’, and that curiosity can and will be satisfied if meanings can be found within the read texts. The joy and satisfaction of reading a story, of very basically finding out ‘what happened’ – which requires that meanings in fact do exist in some shape or form – is what I consider one of Byatt’s underlying focus within her fictional work, where, by using the trope of realism, meanings are borrowed from the lived experience of the author and, presumably, the readers as well.

¹⁵⁷ Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* 10.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Changing My Mind* 48.

Byatt's narratives are arguments not only for reading, but especially for the informed reader, who, by his or her curiosity and foreknowledge, has the ability to take possession and be fully possessed by a text. The reader is thus able to read and so search and find the possible meanings, and ideally know and understand what the text encodes about lived experience. This stance allows for texts that are written with (professed) intent and foresight by an author, while enabling the informed reader to find all the readings available within a text, but also making "philistine misreadings" a real possibility. Ideally, however, the informed reader, by ways of the informed text, will in the end become an informed, even inspired author, thus continuing the discourse in the cultural context.

As seen in *Possession*, Byatt creates the 'raw material', so to speak, by which the reader can merge with the implied informed reader. Additionally, Byatt describes the development of just such an informed reader as well as the ideal consequences of such reading. Byatt's argument for the informed reader is, in my opinion, at the same time one against the overeager re-reader (the perpetrator of the above-mentioned "philistine misreadings") whose unbridled zeal allows outrageous readings 'against' the text, which at best can lead to ridicule, and at worst greatly inhibit the whole process of reception and subsequent text-production.

Within this argument for the informed reader, I also argue that there is a re-establishment of the author as a creative force, not just subsidized but in fact stemming from the informed reader, creating a symbiosis between reader and author that possibly exceeds even Smith's Nabokovian compromise. This development requires certain definitions of text production and text reception, which, rather than do away completely with currently orthodox definitions of authorship and reading, redirect them to more open and yet, ironically, more traditional forms of reading and writing.

3.3 Rapture and Recapture

3.3.1 Sensual Reception

Possession makes no concessions to the reader's foreknowledge, but requires an informed reader to understand the depth and breadth of the text at hand. An understanding of what the Romance motif entails, (as touched on in the introductory quotes from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Robert Browning), as well as what changes took place during the last half of the twentieth century within Western literary and cultural discourse, are only two examples of what foreknowledge Byatt expects one to have when beginning to read *Possession*.

Possession can be seen as a blue-print of Byatt's general wishes and anxieties concerning reading, which, as Byatt seems to imply, scholarship isn't much else, via the large cast of academics whose main goal is to disseminate their various readings of seminal and obscure texts. Within *Possession*, the pleasure of reading, of hearing the words "sing and sing",¹⁵⁹ and thereby experiencing a strong, even visceral need to and know what happens next, is established as something almost sacred and worth fighting for. Accordingly, such curiosity-based readings are seen as something worth keeping safe from apparent intruders who would rob one of this most fundamental of human experiences: enjoying a good story.

Byatt exemplifies this via Roland Michell's adventure with the Ash-LaMotte letters. The entire plot is a matter of first one, then two, then a crowd of characters being driven by this very need to gather knowledge and acquire understanding, this necessity to know 'what happened next'. Roland steals the unfinished drafts of Ash's initial letter to LaMotte from the London Library due to his need to know what happened next,¹⁶⁰ thus setting off the investigatory snowball that eventually leads to a scholarly avalanche of discoveries and re-readings. When in search for the rest of the correspondence, Roland's need to know what happened next intensifies until he is overwhelmed by "some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Byatt, *Possession* 471.

¹⁶⁰ "He read the letters again. Had a final draft been posted? Or had the impulse died or been rebuffed? Roland was seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own. It was suddenly quite impossible to put these living words back into page 200 of Vico and return them to Safe 5. He looked about him: no one was looking; he slipped the letters between the leaves of his own copy of the Oxford Selected Ash, which he was never without." (Byatt, *Possession* 8).

¹⁶¹ *Possession* 82.

Here the desire for knowledge is not mere enjoyment, but is defined as part of elementary human necessities, a desire which, once fulfilled, enables a more layered perspective. It makes Roland's final reading of one of Ash's texts spark the need to write, to shape and form into words what is nebulously there, a need that is almost instinctive:

[Roland] heard Vico saying that the first men were poets and the first words were names that were also things, and he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless lists, made in Lincoln, and saw what they were.¹⁶²

Lists which will finally lead to Roland's first drafts of poems which he provisionally names "The Death Mask", "The Fairfax Wall", and a "A Number of Cats",¹⁶³ thus closing the circle of reading and writing where the first, when done with the deep desire for knowledge, almost inevitably leads to the second, or so Byatt seems to state by means of her own fictional text. Rather than "lie prostrate before the genius of Ash",¹⁶⁴ Ash is a guiding light to Roland's own creative epiphany that lies beyond the rational, structuralized and fully explainable, but within the nebulous Something that is the place of imagination and creativity: the space where the sublime, the awe-inspiring and overwhelming, may be experienced.

As Jane Campbell points out in her book on Byatt's heliotropic imagination, Roland's connection with Ash is what connects Ash with LaMotte: the "Life of Language".¹⁶⁵ It is this interest in language, as Elisabeth Bronfen writes, that makes Roland an "old-fashioned scholar", whose main work is the "decoding of citational references in Ashes [sic] poetry,"¹⁶⁶ a knowledge of such references that will help Roland considerably on his epistolary quest, since he very simply knows *where* to look while he's looking. The enchantment of the readings doesn't efface the reader and his or her interests in critical analysis, but very simply makes the reader, in this case Roland, an adept in the text, knowing what is written, where, and possibly even when, which consequently creates the informed reader's ability to recognise yet more texts by this deep familiarity with the texts in question.

¹⁶² *Possession* 472.

¹⁶³ *Possession* 475.

¹⁶⁴ Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers" 120.

¹⁶⁵ Byatt, *Possession* 172; see also: Jane Campbell. *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010, p. 113.

¹⁶⁶ Elisabeth Bronfen. "Romancing Difference, Courting Coherence: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* as Postmodern Moral Fiction." *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*. Rüdiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann (Eds.). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996. pp. 117-134, here 124, qtd. in Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers" 111.

The “enchanted readings” Flegel distrusts are not a matter of reinstating authorial rule, but the reader joining the author in his or her celebration of what humans have as tools to decipher and describe lived experience, namely words and language. Poetry and prose are thus the *use* of these codes, making Byatt’s perspective on reception and text in many ways far more sensual, in the sense of using all the faculties of perception humanly available, as coded by words and language, and so within the text.¹⁶⁷

Randolph Henry Ash, the poet of great ideas who led an unassuming life, would be an interesting, even an attractive object of study for a scholar with a fascination for great ideas, a scholar who also leads an unassuming life, a doubling that pleases Roland and quite likely enhances his own interest in Ash’s work, making him acquire a great familiarity with Ash’s words and ideas:

What Roland liked was his knowledge of the movements of Ash’s mind, stalked through the twists and turns of his syntax, suddenly sharp and clear in an unexpected epithet.¹⁶⁸

Though old-fashioned, and detrimental to his success in the departmental politics, especially in relation to ferocious Fergus Wolff,¹⁶⁹ Roland’s stance is exactly what helps him embark on his odyssey with the Ash-LaMotte letters, since he knows what to consider and look for, as Adams rightly elucidates in “Dead Authors, Born Readers”:

As his time in libraries and with rare manuscripts makes clear, Roland’s method of doing research is not reading up on theories or other secondary materials for the study of literature [...], but [investigating] *primary* texts in order to decode textual clues.¹⁷⁰

This approach may make him “fail in the midst of an academic landscape interested almost exclusively in modish theoretical brilliance,”¹⁷¹ but it is this knowledge of the primary texts that is of such importance in *Possession*. Without Roland’s deep interest in Ash’s poetry, the letters discovered in Ash’s original copy of “Vico’s *Prinzipj di Scienza Nuova* [sic]” would not have had the same effect. They would not have sparked that visceral curiosity, where it was “quite impossible

¹⁶⁷ See Byatt, *Possession* 479-481, where *Possession*’s omniscient narrator muses about the sensuality of reception, the both heady and visceral pleasure of reading.

¹⁶⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 20.

¹⁶⁹ *Possession* 32ff.

¹⁷⁰ Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 111.

¹⁷¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, “Romancing Difference” 124, qtd. in Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 111.

to put [the] living words” back into their hiding-place.¹⁷² Roland is at first “profoundly shocked” and then academically “thrilled”¹⁷³ upon finding the letters. Without his foreknowledge of Ash’s primary texts, Ash’s *writing*, Roland would not be the informed reader that he is, he would not understand what he just found.

It is this very knowledge of the primary texts that enables Roland, later on, to reach the sudden spark that is possibly the foundation of his codified meanings, i.e. his poems. Thus, it does seem as if Byatt reverts back to the Romantic ideal of the poet as genius. However, such a verdict ignores Byatt’s argument that can be summarized as a compromise via a return to the basics: an in-between, liminal space between the binaries of the Romantic poetic genius and the post-structuralist absent author on the lines of “the Life of Language”, since “the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry.”¹⁷⁴ To Byatt there is a richness in life, and thus a richness in text, that requires the dual skills of rational diligence and visceral curiosity for the individual to decipher what is taking place, or to use her own words, “what is there”.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Adams rightly points out that Byatt posits this old-fashioned textual knowledge over critical analysis, by enabling the important discovery by ways of knowledge of primary texts, on parts not only of Roland Michell (“Roland, for example, knows to go find Ash’s copy of Vico because his careful (if too often “dutiful”) reading of *The Golden Apples* showed him the importance of Vico’s thoughts in Ash’s work.” (Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 114)), but also his co-quester, Maud Bailey (“Maud is able to find the hidden letters because she is so familiar with LaMotte’s cryptic verse; indeed, she has memorized it.” (114)) What Adams (and Yelin and Flegel respectively) find problematic in this kind of reading is that in the final instance, this close knowledge of the text gives the scholars the ‘proof’ they need to find the Ash-LaMotte connection, since “the poems point directly and unproblematically back to the physical phenomena they themselves have witnessed on their own outing, thus securing the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, at least as far as Victorian representation in verse is concerned”. (114) However, the critique of this perspective ignores Byatt’s repeated insistence on reading primary texts first, thus enabling an analysis of the ambiguity of signification they entail. During their outing in Yorkshire, for example, neither Roland nor Maud are certain of their findings. There are strong clues (the landscape for example, the words heard and used in that part of the country, or Maude’s brooch), but there is no certainty, thus disallowing what Adams sees as an unproblematic referencing of physical phenomena. The problem is the very lack of certainty. Roland and Maud can only guess and follow strong hunches until the gothic ending where seemingly all is revealed, and even then some circumstances remain obscure, (see Byatt, *Possession* 268ff). Byatt, however, does fairly explicitly posit the creative of the critical which will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁷³ Byatt, *Possession* 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Possession* 473.

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Walker. “An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk.” *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 7, No. 23, Fall 2006. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. vi, 319-342.

3.3.2 Sparks of Inspiration

For the above “Life of Language” to be so decisive, the texts wherein the language is used need first to be created, a process that is central to *Possession*’s narrative. Here is where the power of the aesthetic via poetic genius and the sublime first comes to the fore. It is, however, facilitated through the liminal space established by Byatt’s oscillation between informed reader and inspired author, exemplified through Roland Michell’s experiences in matters of reception and inspiration.

Roland is a deeply curious and informed reader, who understands the transparent and subtle narratives within the primary texts given. He is a lover of ideas who follows, studies, and considers the ideas of another intellectual investigator, Ash, tracing these very ideas by their encoding in the primary texts, that is by the words, the language used. Roland is genuinely interested and intrigued by Ash’s work, his thoughts and ideas, (*why* is another matter), yet there is never the sense that he is subsumed by Ash, cowering before his greatness. Rather, Ash’s writings – not in fact the man – are a field of constant research and discovery,¹⁷⁶ never mind the pleasure of reading Ash’s own books and letters.¹⁷⁷

The enjoyment of a story that feeds from the desire to know more, the opportunity of following the “twists and turns of syntax” to discover the conclusion of a thought in an “unexpected epithet”, is made possible by the writing that is read, and thus by the writer, without whom the enjoyment of the reading would not be possible. This enabling of possible readings via writing is done by ways of inspiration, an aspect that Byatt repeatedly inspects,¹⁷⁸ and in *Possession* interweaves into a full-bodied narrative. The inescapable fact of the creative process when it comes to completing a narrative, i.e. ‘telling a story’, is also part of Zadie Smith’s argument against complete authorial disenfranchisement. Smith derives the blueprint of the creative process from

¹⁷⁶ And even when Ash, the man, becomes a matter of interest, it is with regard to his writings and what can be found within them that is the main focus of Roland’s investigations. Roland remains a scholar of primary texts, of the actual words written, to the very end.

¹⁷⁷ Roland is not an immaculate hero, one wholly focuses on text and text alone without any care for anything else. Like others among the cast of questers, he is not immune to the lure of the original, where “there was a pleasure to be had from reading the sentences Ash had read, touched with his fingers, scanned with his eyes.” (Byatt, *Possession* 2). Though slightly dubious, this is as far as Roland’s enchantment with Ash’s belongings goes, and even here his interest is firmly connected to the primary texts, the work, in question. Again, Byatt seems to point to moderation, showing the difference between the too human, all too human trait of enjoying touching and holding what belongs to those we admire, as seen in Roland’s quiet pleasure, in contrast to its monstrous counterpart, as seen in Mortimer Cropper’s obsession with all things Ash.

¹⁷⁸ From Alexander Wedderburn’s agonizing over his Elizabethan pastiche in *The Virgin in the Garden* and Frederica Potter’s highs and lows in the entire ‘Federica Quartet’, to Phineas Nanson’s difficulties in establishing a functioning biography in *The Biographer’s Tale*, not to mention the vast convolutions of creativity within *The Children’s Book*, the creative process has been an inexhaustible source of discourse within Byatt’s fictional works.

Nabokov's split of inspiration into its two Russian parts, *vorstorg* (initial rapture) and *vdoknovenie* (recapture):

Vorstorg "has no conscious purpose in view"; in *vorstorg* "the entire circle of time is conceived, which is another way of saying time ceases to exist." But after this comes the second stage; "*vdoknovenie*" (recapture). And it's here that the actual writing gets done. In Nabokov's experience, the two had quite different natures. *Vorstorg* was "hot and brief." *Vdoknovenie* "cool and sustained." In the first you lose yourself. In the second, you are doing the conscious work of construction. And while making the choices good writing requires, the Author exists, he circumscribes, he controls, he puts walls on either side of the playground. The reader, to read him properly, would do well to recognize the existence of these walls. The Author limits the possibility of the reader's play.¹⁷⁹

Where Smith is still arguing for the erection of the "walls on either side of the playground", Byatt doesn't even question the walls. On the contrary, she takes them for granted, and in *Possession* explicitly states them, namely by calling the novel *A Romance*.¹⁸⁰ In and with *Possession*, Byatt not only demonstrates her argument for the informed reader as seen, among others, in her collection of essays *Passions of the Mind*¹⁸¹ and several interviews,¹⁸² she also exemplifies the 'birth' of inspired authors who experience both *vorstorg* and *vdoknovenie* in different ways, thus creating an entirely different creature to Barthes' rebel Reader, without reinstating the archaic absolutist rule of his Author.

A case in point would be Roland's lists which lead to the poems he names, and is on the verge of writing. His *vorstorg* moment can be seen in the listings of words and names, themes and concepts he writes in Lincoln:

He wrote: blood, clay, terracotta, carnation.
He wrote: blonde, burning bush, scattering.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, *Changing My Mind* 49.

¹⁸⁰ In *Possession*, the textual topography within which the reader can play is quite fixed, however its width, depth, breadth, and expansion are not impaired by this. By layering the text such that any curiosity in the characters, their interests and the over-all themes and narrative idiosyncrasies is rewarded with a multifarious amount of interlaced and intermingling texts, an abundant number of possible readings is given. However, Byatt is careful to keep to the romantic leitmotif through all the layerings, a Romantic code that functions as a guiding light, so that the reader cannot stray into readings that would distort the text to a point of ridiculousness. This possibility, and the rather ironic outcome, of such readings are also exemplified within *Possession*, in the case of fictional secondary texts, as will be shown later in this chapter.

¹⁸¹ A. S. Byatt. *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1991.

¹⁸² Both the Jonathan Walker and the Jenny Newman, James Friel interview with A. S. Byatt are illuminating in the case of reading and writing.

He annotated this, “scattering as in Donne, ‘extreme and scattering bright’, nothing to do with scattergraphs.”

He wrote: anemone, coral, coal, hair, hairs, nail, nails, fur, owl, isinglass, scarab.

He rejected wooden, point, link, and other ambivalent words, also blot and blank, though all these sprang (another word he hesitated over) to mind. He was uncertain about the place of verbs in this primitive language. Spring, springs, springes, sprung sprang.

Arrow, bough (not branch, not root), leaf-mould, water, sky.¹⁸³

This moment, where Roland’s co-quester Maud Bailey and himself attempt to work academically and fail perfectly, is a more complex situation than Adams would have it in “Dead Authors, Born Readers”. Adams ascribes this moment to Byatt’s reconstruction of old-fashioned, stereotypical gendered discourse, where Maud’s intellectual powers are nullified in the presence of *eros*, personified by Roland, who despite all can keep on working:

Maud who has transcribed a “useful passage of Freud for her paper on metaphor,” finds that her thoughts refuse to congeal (466). Much of this refusal comes from the nature of the quote (which is about subjectivity and love), and from her concomitant awareness of Roland’s physical presence, which is itself the “object of her own “transferred libido”: “If he went out of the room it would be grey and empty. If he did not go out of it, how could she concentrate?” (467). Roland, who is represented as being aware of Maud’s conflicting thoughts, sits “writing lists of words *that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory*” (467, [Adam’s emphasis]). On the one hand, the silent exchange demonstrates the affection and intimacy that each scholar has (unsuccessfully) tried to avoid; on the other, it symbolically represents the triumph of the creative over the critical: Roland’s creative writing is literally cancelling out Maud’s critical paper. If he were to leave, she would have no object to study; if he were to stay, his very presence would (and does) resist her ability to theorize.¹⁸⁴

I agree with Adams that Byatt posits the creative over than the critical, and that the creative (and erotic) does cancel out the critical (and rational) in this moment, but it is a mistake to say that, in accordance with revisionist gender stereotypes, only Maud is the ‘victim’ of this cancellation.

¹⁸³ Byatt, *Possession* 431. The omniscient narrator then adds: “Vocabularies are crossing circles and loops. We are defined by the lines we choose to cross or be confined by.” (*Possession* 431)

¹⁸⁴ Adams, “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 117-8.

Rather, where Maud is aware of the conflict, and in a way resists it through theorizing about it, Roland has given up all fights and succumbs to the creative, by writing the very lists “that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory.” If anything, it is Roland who is critically ‘laid waste’ by the overwhelming invasion of the creative, reminiscent of the Romantic “spontaneous overflow of feeling” which Roland is able to capture in his lists.

Conversely, Maud really is “a highly sophisticated psychoanalytic critic”¹⁸⁵ as Adams puts it, a point Adams sees as only ever stated and never really exemplified within the narrative, if not entirely put into question. Yet, such an analysis ignores the dynamics within the very passage Adams uses to identify Byatt’s reconstructionism, since it is in this passage where Maud practices that very psychoanalytic criticism on herself, in the very moment of powerful *eros* and “transferral of libido”. Rather than succumb to the feeling of being overwhelmed, as in simply experience “the spontaneous overflow of feeling”, Maud is able to retain an element of analysis, of structuralisation, (a Freudian analysis of metaphor, body, and libido; what will happen if Roland stays or leaves, respectively).

Roland, in turn, already predisposed to getting lost in creative writing due to his extensive research of primary, speak creative, texts as Adams herself points out (Roland was “always the person most “alive” to the power of poetry”¹⁸⁶), Roland is unable to ‘defend’ his critical stance once the creative rises in full force. In short, Adams fails to see that Roland’s own critical faculties have been entirely overcome as well, leaving him in the inescapable grip of untameable *vorstorg*,¹⁸⁷ verging closely to a sublime experience where “the entire circle of time is conceived, which is another way of saying time ceases to exist.”¹⁸⁸

Roland’s *vdoknovenie* is yet to come when *Possession*’s narrative comes to an end, the hours and days where “the choices good writing requires” lead to the “conscious work of construction”,¹⁸⁹ the poems themselves. However, due to his writing of provisional titles like “The Fairfax Wall” or “A Number of Cats”, the *vdoknovenie* is strongly hinted on, since the initial

¹⁸⁵ “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 114.

¹⁸⁶ “Dead Authors, Born Readers” 117.

¹⁸⁷ Adams’ critique of Maud’s ‘denial’ of the creative in the narrative (Adams 118ff) is due to her very structuralizing when the unstructured, untheoretic, speak creative, is present. Maud, is tied too much into the critical to ‘let go’, she’s too in control to be creative, which ties into her general portrayal as someone very composed, cool, and collected, both externally and internally, her spotless bathroom being to Roland just one example of this collectedness. Roland, whose messy co-hab bathroom is an exemplification of his general un-collectedness, is more adept in allowing the creative, i.e. the uncontrollable, to take place in his life. His positing as the poet in the narrative, rather than Maud, goes hand in hand with this ability to very simply ‘let go’. See: Byatt, *Possession* 56-8.

¹⁸⁸ See also: Judy Lohead. “The Sublime, the Ineffable, and Other Dangerous Aesthetics” 63-7.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, *Changing My Mind* 49.

choices required for the conscious work of construction are already being made within the narrative text, a “recollection in tranquillity” wherein the actual creative texts are written. Byatt thus ends *Possession* the way she began the narrative, by exemplifying the informed reader, who by the end of the main narrative has transformed into an inspired writer due to the fact that he was an informed reader in the first place. The one precedes and is based on the other, since with Roland’s writing of creative texts, he will ideally contribute to the literary and cultural discourse, and thus lay the groundwork from which more informed readers and inspired writers may work from.

This becoming between reader and writer is Romantic in thrust, facilitated as it is by moments of sublime *vorstorg*, tempered with tranquil *vdoknovenie*, wherein meanings are possible and help establish the creative texts available to be read by other informed readers, perpetuating a process of creativity and cultural productivity that would further enhance the respective cultural landscape. It is also through this dynamic that more authentic readings are gained in *Possession*, since it is through informed readings, and the respective (Romantic) epiphanies enabled through the codified meanings, that a clearer understanding of the texts and their production is made possible, a circumstance which will be considered in the following.

3.4 Conception and Reception

3.4.1 The Dialectics of the Critical and the Creative

That the critical is part of the literary and cultural discourse is undeniable, but Byatt does rather unashamedly posit the creative before the critical, by the simple fact that to her, the creative must come first for the critical to be possible at all. Any critical analysis of LaMotte's *Melusina* or Ash's *Ask to Embla*, from the gender-politics to the mythological aspects, requires that *Melusina* and *Ask to Embla* be written first before analysis can be produced, thereby furthering literary and cultural discourse. Without the primary literature, the secondary texts cannot be, since the first is the foundation on which the second is built, as seen in the extensive fictional secondary literature on the fictional primary texts within *Possession* and Byatt's other fictional works.

Despite this positing, the critical is not in the least to be overlooked or disregarded, quite the opposite. Parallel to her fusing of reader and writer, Byatt advocates a fusion of critic and author as well, to gain the best results, rather than keeping either separate from each other or summarily denying the critic his or her place as Adams sees it:

Byatt does not set the critic up in her novel as an analogue to the Author (whose message the critic is purportedly proselytizing). If anything, *Possession* figures contemporary critics and criticism (critics and criticism rarely represented as genuinely textual or New Critical) as an impediment to the singular "message" of the Author that Barthes wishes so much to overcome.¹⁹⁰

This particular point of view disregards the unorthodox stance of Byatt's approach, namely that whether reading or writing, all that is really being done is *reading*, writing being a means of explaining one's reading. In Jonathan Walker's interview with A. S. Byatt and Jonathan Norfolk, Byatt points out the necessity both of creativity as well as craft, and that there is more than one way to reach either. When discussing pastiches of history and historical figures, the discussion quickly turns to the craft of writing, where Byatt states that during her teaching at University College, London, a colleague stated that

half the problems our students find in understanding poetry would go away if we started them all out by making them go on writing an Elizabethan sonnet until they had written an Elizabethan sonnet, or

¹⁹⁰ Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers" 120.

at least until every word was in the right place and every rhyme rhyming. Then they would see that there were technical limitations and difficulties and structures that you don't see if you haven't actually done the writing.¹⁹¹

It is evident in the interview that Byatt endorses this point of view, since, to her, the craft of writing is intricately linked to the act of reading, of which criticism is a part, though not the precedent. One materially influences the other, as seen in Byatt's conclusion to the above method that her pastiches, of which there are numerous in *Possession*, were a product of "writerly rage with criticism", since she strongly felt that critics

were imposing their own paradigms onto texts, and reading fewer and fewer of the words that were actually in the texts. And when I went back to the originals, particularly to Victorian poetry, it was nothing like what this criticism was describing. I concluded that the only thing you can really do as a critic is read every word one after the other.¹⁹²

Byatt's writing is thus an explanation of her readings of criticism, the "writerly rage" against criticism that instigated further writings and readings. This, one could say, was Byatt's initial *vorstorg* moment, the deep dissatisfaction with literary criticism coupled with a need to critique said criticism by reading "every word one after the other", and pointing out the benefits thereof, followed by the *vdoknovenie* of creating such 'return-criticism', or meta-criticism if one will. This resulted in writing, word for word, a pastiche of Victorian poetry and the postmodern criticism thereof, thereby using as groundwork a lecture of Luce Irigaray on "divine women", (where the fairy Melusine was mentioned), Ellen Moers' "book on feminized landscape", and an 1895 guidebook for Yorkshire,¹⁹³ the result of which ended up being part of *Possession*'s textual landscape. In the light of this, it is fairly unsurprising that Byatt concludes her argument of critique-via-pastiche not with a postulation on writing, but on reading.

When I read the poem [*Melusina*], I thought I'd made my point, at least to myself, because it was more interesting than the critical description to which it was intended to correspond. [...] I was trying to prove something about the reading process.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Jonathan Walker, "An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk" 336-337.

¹⁹² Walker, "An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk" 336.

¹⁹³ "An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk" 337.

¹⁹⁴ "An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk" 337.

Considering this genesis of the Melusina-motif, one of the central subjects within *Possession*, the reading and the writing processes are intricately linked, if not fused to one, both within *Possession*, but also within the writing of *Possession*. One cannot be had without the other, in fact, to Byatt, one *is* the other, as in writing is reading, and if done with the necessary verve and motivation, (in this case, Byatt's "writerly rage with criticism"), then reading is writing as well. Conclusively, if there is such a thing as 'bad writing', the existence of which is rarely contested, then there must be such a thing as 'bad reading', which Byatt repeatedly accuses critics from F. R. Leavis to the post-structuralists of doing,¹⁹⁵ promptly exemplifying her qualms through the various academic pastiches, which will be considered later in this chapter.

Thus, Roland Michell of the purloined letters and his experiences with these very letters, is one extended example of the interplay of *vorstorg* and *vdoknovenie* Byatt purports, her exemplification on reading, and by that, writing. In the light of this, the Barthesian split between Reader and Author makes little sense, since one is quite the other, and killing off one for the sake of the other would be killing off both. However, lessening the focus on one for the benefit of the other is exactly the moderation Byatt calls for, thus allowing free readers and authorial writers to exist simultaneously, without conceptual wars breaking out in the interim.

The other two prominent examples of Byatt's perspective of initial rapture and consequent recapture are seen in the fictionally recorded, critiqued, and unknown lives of *Possession*'s main Victorian characters, the poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, who are virtual gold mines for readings, writings, re-readings, and re-writings, "philistine misreadings" included. They are the textual fields on which Byatt plays out her ideas on reading and writing, as will be considered in the following analysis on conception and reception of primary texts.

¹⁹⁵ cf. Jenny Newman and James Friel. *An Interview with A. S. Byatt*; Byatt points out her dissatisfactions both with Leavis' methodology, as well as the voraciousness of post-structuralism that rather does away with the author, which Byatt, the reader, agrees with to the extent that Byatt, the author, disagrees.

3.4.2 Escaping the “Academic Wilderness”¹⁹⁶

Considering Byatt’s aforementioned fusion of reader and writer and her own critique of contemporary discourses of either, it comes as no surprise that the prevalent debates about text-production and text-reception should be present and discussed within her own narrative text, in this case *Possession*. The conventional codes revealed within the text, mostly post-structuralist, feminist, and new historicist discourses of the 1980s not only abound, but the most distinct of codes is explicitly stated, namely, the Romance. The code is given, it seems one need only follow the signposts to recognise it. However, the code itself is not so simple, since within it there are layers that need exploring, which Byatt does with perceptible enthusiasm.

Possession is a text that discusses text-production, and reception, while being a produced and received text itself, a doubling of self-referentiality that upends any postulations of chance. The continuous discourse of text, what it is and how it can and cannot be read, hereby opposing plausibility with philistinism, are central to the entire narrative. The textual diversity of the narrative allows for various readings: there are letters, diaries, excerpts, poems, fairy tales, and dialogues, memories, dreams, narrations, and recitations, all of which combine to the one narrative text of *Possession*, thus creating a fictional universe where characters, think, read, feel, and live with such clarity and confusion as one would easily find in the actual reader’s lived experience.

As Robert Heilman puts it in his article on *Possession*’s kaleidoscopic cast of characters, “Byatt creates her characters in part by their writing, of which we see a good deal and which is a significant form of characterizing activity.”¹⁹⁷ Byatt uses language to create a textual landscape whose fictional reality is never set off-balance, never mind a sudden change of narrative perspective. Words and memory, semiotics and space are all Byatt has, yet it is all she needs, and she uses them with acumen and expertise. Next to the Ash and LaMotte poems, which function as primary texts within *Possession*’s lifeworlds, one particular form of text stands out, namely that of the letter, the private letter, sent from one writer to one reader, and for her (and his) eyes only.

The private letter as one of the primal textual artefacts in social communication, having only one addressor and one addressee, occupies a particular area of textual analysis and reception theory, for the letters are written from *an* author for *a* reader. As Roland considers in *Possession*,

¹⁹⁶ Louise Yelin, “Cultural Cartography” 40.

¹⁹⁷ Robert B. Heilman. “A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* Observed”. *The Sewanee Review*. Vol. 103, No. 4, Fall 1995. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 605-612, here p. 609.

Letters [...] are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure. [...] Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going. [...] Letters finally, [...] are written, if they are true letters, for a reader.¹⁹⁸

To speak of *scriptor* here and throw out the Author who “exists before [the letter], thinks, suffers lives for it” with the antecedence of creator-created, would grossly warp the entire context and coding of the letter. Admittedly, the epistolary context and code of addressor-addressee are rarely disputed when it comes to letters as letters, whether in a fictional or non-fictional context, though misunderstandings may occur between the letter sender and his or her recipient.¹⁹⁹ Also, the text is in most cases produced in a situation where an answer is hoped for, thus creating a written dialogue that is both revelatory and coded, according to the readers’ level of information.²⁰⁰

In *Possession*, the two chief letter-writers are on the one hand, Randolph Henry Ash, the fictional Victorian poet who in his lifetime was very well known and revered, a poet whose texts are an acknowledged part of the fictional world’s English literary canon by the time the second set of protagonists in 1980s London embark on their academic careers. Ash’s recipient and other letter-writer is Christabel LaMotte, a little known fictional poetess who was rescued from oblivion by the feminist investigations in 1960s and 1970s in *Possession*’s fictional world.²⁰¹ Their written correspondence is at the core of *Possession*, and shows the development of two authors and the

¹⁹⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 130-131.

¹⁹⁹ Though not so much in the case of *epistolary literature*, where the context and coding of the letter are used as devices of narration in a narrative context, which is a different narratological field altogether. cf. Lucile Desblache. “Penning Secrets: Presence and Essence of the Epistolary Genre in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*.” *L’Esprit Créateur*. Vol. 40, No. 4, Winter 2000. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 89-95.

²⁰⁰ For an insightful study on the intimacy of letter-writing and the codes it incorporates and employs, consider Abigail Williams’ “I hope I write as bad as ever”, (Abigail Williams. “I hope I write as bad as ever.” *Eighteenth-Century Life*. Vol. 35, No. 1, Winter 2011. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 102-118), where Williams analyses Jonathan Swift’s *Journal to Stella*, Swift’s onomatopoeic re-enactments of past experiences, as well as the physical dimension of writing letters by hand. Williams analyses the “explicit link [...] between the choice of linguistic form and the ideal of carving out emotional space within the form of the letter.” (Williams 104) Together with Swift’s “conflating of text and body” and thus “substitut[ing] letter for body and body for letter”, the intimacy of the written word becomes very apparent. Williams quotes from “Letter 28” of *Journal to Stella*: “You are just here upon this little paper, and therefore I see and talk with you every evening constantly, and sometimes in the morning, but not always in the morning because that is not so modest to young ladies.” (1:32). (Williams 105) The sensuality, the physicality of the exchange is permeated through the pen and paper, thus creating an intimate space that goes beyond simple ink on paper. This is a circumstance of physical intimacy that is touched on repeatedly in *Possession* when characters come into contact with the actual written correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, positing the rationally hard-to-grasp as part and parcel of the actual academic investigation at hand.

²⁰¹ While the characters within the narrative of *Possession* are fictional, the historical chronology is not, fixing the narrative in a realist dimension, which can be described as a parallel-world 1980s London, identical to that of the actual readers’ lived experience, where the only difference is the real-life presence of the fictional characters, poets, essayists, and essays. This reinforces the realist mapping of landscapes and spaces as often used in historiographic metafiction. See: Jane Campbell, *A. S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*.

importance if not the necessity of a reader who does not wander off into “philistine misreadings”. How important the latter is, is seen in the two Victorian protagonists’ first meeting. The reason why Ash writes to LaMotte in the first place is that she seems to be the only one who understands what he has written. She reveals herself to be, in many respects, his informed reader:

*Did you not find it as strange as I did, that we should so immediately understand each other so well? For we did understand each other uncommonly well, did we not? Or is this perhaps a product of the over-excited brain of a middle-aged and somewhat disparaged poet, when he finds that his ignored, his arcane, his deviously perspicuous meanings, which he thought not meanings, since no one appeared able to understand them, had after all one clear-eyed and amused reader and judge?*²⁰²

Here “meanings” stands out. Ash professes to have intended meanings. However by their lack of reception, i.e. misunderstanding, he came to doubt them until he discovered at Crabb Robinson’s breakfast, where he and LaMotte meet, that one person in fact did understand ‘what he meant’. The authorial positioning here is distinct. It is by this first reading, which in this case is a different word for ‘understanding’, that the connection between Ash and LaMotte is made, opening up a whole new set of readings that lead to a layering of texts and intertexts that perplex more than one scholar in the 1980s’ setting of *Possession*’s fictional world. As stated above, Ash-scholar Roland repeatedly ‘retracts’ the poet’s thoughts and ideas within Ash’s primary texts, doing this with great satisfaction and relief that knowledge of Ash’s private life is hardly necessary for enriching and illuminating comprehension, or so it seems:

Roland thought he knew Ash fairly well, as well as anyone might know a man whose life seemed to be all in his mind, who lived a quiet and exemplary married life for forty years, whose correspondence was voluminous indeed, but guarded, courteous and not of the most lively. Roland liked that in Randolph Henry Ash. He was excited by the ferocious vitality and darting breadth of reference of the work, and secretly, personally, he was rather pleased that all this had been achieved out of so peaceable, so unruffled a private existence.²⁰³

²⁰² Byatt, *Possession* 5-6, italics in the original.

²⁰³ *Possession* 8.

Yet, after his audacious theft, Roland finds out just how intricately Ash's private life was linked to his oeuvre, the first step of which is Roland's understanding of the significance of the letters, the "living words" found in Ash's Vico that had been "laid to rest" in Locked Safe no. 5,²⁰⁴ – eliciting the almost sinister image of something living buried alive in a library until exhumed by the help of an informed and curious reader who understands just what he found.

The image of living words buried alive is repeated in the case of the actual Ash-LaMotte correspondence. Consider Christabel LaMotte's Doll Poem that Maud knows by heart,²⁰⁵ a creative text that encodes in its verses a decisive clue with whose help Maud and Roland are able to find the rest of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence. The interesting part here is that the poem in and of itself does not 'acquire' the meaning Maud deduces from it until she is physically present in Christabel LaMotte's room, and so sees the dolls LaMotte owned. It is in that moment of fusion between phenomena (LaMotte's dolls) and the creative (LaMotte's Doll Poem) that an extra layer of meaning to the text(s) available (dolls and poem) is established.

On their own, LaMotte's dolls and her Doll Poem are simply that: dolls and a poem about a doll. Once Maud, the informed LaMotte reader, enters the picture, though, the meanings available are exponentiated, given depth and possibility that lead to a genuine breakthrough in the quest to understand the initial letter drafts, since the dolls actually hide the rest of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence underneath them.²⁰⁶ Byatt is thus able to complicate the movement between phenomena and creativity, text reception and text production, creating a space wherein the borders blur and meanings, no matter how tenuous, are made possible to a decisive extent.

Conversely, the image of living words buried alive in libraries and dolls in abandoned rooms ties into Byatt's general theme of positing the creative over the critical, since the real treasure trove is to be found buried in the books and chests, not in the "academic wilderness"²⁰⁷ Yelin rightly identifies as one of Byatt's main points of criticism.

However, I disagree that Byatt implicitly claims "to possess Victorian secrets known or knowable by no one else."²⁰⁸ Where Yelin sees a "'creative' possession of the Victorian period,"²⁰⁹ Adams sees *Possession* as consolidating "a return of the Arnoldian repressed," thus allowing Byatt to "hol[d] out a promise that poets – or novelists? – if not critics, might someday cease wandering

²⁰⁴ *Possession* 2-3.

²⁰⁵ *Possession* 82-3.

²⁰⁶ *Possession* 84.

²⁰⁷ Yelin, "Cultural Cartography" 40.

²⁰⁸ "Cultural Cartography" 40.

²⁰⁹ Adams, "Dead Authors Born Readers" 119.

and leave the academic wilderness behind,”²¹⁰ thereby leaving all critical approaches aside, except those that find the “ultimate meaning” of the text, possibly along the Arnoldian credo of “the best that has been thought and said”.²¹¹

In the light of the above movement between phenomena and creativity, this is a rather narrow reading of *Possession* since it is both Roland and Maud’s critical academic skills that allows them to understand what they are reading in the first place, enabling them to look where others never thought to look, due to their understanding of textual analysis. Rather than being a hindrance, their academic training is what helps them in their quest to fully fathom the personal and creative relationship between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, as seen in Roland and Maud’s first conversation in Lincoln where Roland, the Ash scholar, attempts to explain to Maud, the expert on LaMotte, the reason for his interest in Christabel LaMotte. Maud asks,

‘[...] And how did you come to form the opinion that Randolph Henry Ash was interested in LaMotte?’

‘I found an unfinished draft of a letter to an unidentified woman in a book of his. I thought it might be her. It mentioned Crabb Robinson. He said she understood his poems.’

‘That doesn’t sound very probable. I wouldn’t have thought his poems would appeal to her. All that cosmic masculinity. That nasty anti-feminist poem about the medium, what was it, *Mummy Possesst?* All that ponderous obfuscation. Everything she wasn’t.’

Roland considered the pale incisive mouth with a kind of hopelessness. He wished he had not come. The hostility towards Ash somehow included himself, at least in his own eyes. Maud Bailey went on: ‘I’ve checked my card index – I’m working on a full-length study of *Melusina* – I’ve only found one reference to Ash. It’s from a note to William Rossetti – the MS is in Tallahassee – about a poem he published for her.

“‘In these dim November days I resemble nothing more than that poor Creature of RHA’s Fantasy, immured in her terrible In-Pace, quieted perforce and longing for her Quietus. It takes a Masculine Courage to find pleasure in constructing Dungeons for Innocents in his Fancy, and a Female Patience to endure them in sober fact.’”

‘That’s a reference to Ash’s *Incarcerated Sorceress?*’

‘Of course.’ Impatiently.

‘When was it written?’

²¹⁰ Yelin, “Cultural Cartography” 40.

²¹¹ This quote is interesting in its misprision, since the original is “the best which has been thought and said in the world”, showing an interesting linkage (and slippage) between speaking and thinking in contemporary discourses. See: Matthew Arnold. *Culture and Anarchy*. Wilson, J. Dover (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932, Preface [iii].

‘1869. I think. Yes. Vivid but not much help.’
 ‘Hostile if anything.’
 ‘Exactly.’²¹²

Both scholars are informed readers of the respective authors, they know the critical reception and scholarship on both Ash and LaMotte, and so can discuss and research together on equal footing, gleaning from each other’s expertise and so gaining further insights into the overall question of the connection between Ash and LaMotte. Both Roland and Maud are, if anything, active readers of the primary Ash and LaMotte texts, neither lost in “the academic wilderness” nor overwhelmed by the author’s creativity.

Rather, they are quite literally going about their business as academics, as critics, speak, readers and writers of the texts available, known, and given. It is their critical approach that allows the final discovery of Ash and LaMotte’s personal and creative connection, and as to “ultimate meanings”: the entirety of Roland and Maud’s Yorkshire outing is concerned with the very ambiguity and polyvalence of meanings postmodernity has established.

From their deliberation about the semantic field of the term ‘glove’ to the question of sexuality, both Roland and Maud are fully aware that they live in a historical period where different orthodoxies apply in comparison to Ash and LaMotte’s Victorian *grand récit*, one being that “ultimate meanings” are no longer tenable, the other being the ubiquity of the human *eros*.²¹³ It is a circumstance both scholars discuss at length and at one point, both Roland and Maud even seem to envy the apparent simplicity – from a late 20th century point of view that is – of their Victorian forebears.²¹⁴ Rather than leave critical approaches behind, the critical is central to the two scholars’ point of view, as can be seen in their conversation about prevalent, even inescapable concepts:

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

Roland wanted to ask: do you like that? He thought he had to suppose she did: her work was psychoanalytic, after all, this work on liminality and marginal beings. He said instead,

²¹² Byatt, *Possession* 42.

²¹³ *Possession* 252.

²¹⁴ *Possession* 253-4.

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

‘They valued themselves. Once, they knew God valued them. Then they began to think there was no God, only blind forces.... So they valued themselves, they loved themselves and attended to their natures – ’

‘And we don’t?’

‘At some point in history their self-value changed into – what worries you. A horrible over-simplification. It leaves out guilt for a start. Now or then.’²¹⁵

Within this conversation both scholars critical stance can be seen, only that it is not ‘purely’ academic, but equally personal, as seen in Roland’s self-referential question, “‘And we don’t?’” Via their readings of Ash and LaMotte, both Roland and Maud are able to fuse the critical and creative to a wider consideration of their own lived experience, the historical moment they themselves live in, and those in the past that they investigate. To speak of escaping the “academic wilderness” for the sake of “reading for enjoyment” here is to disregard the implicit critical and academic stance both inhabit when they read, a stance that, when reading the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, was not relegated to the late 20th century scholars alone but part and parcel of the two Victorian poets’ creative work as well.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ *Possession* 254.

²¹⁶ See the entirety of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence where both poets converse about life, death, God, materiality, creativity, and selfhood, as well as their progress with their own creative texts and the other’s critical reading of them. (*Possession* 157-20).

3.4.3 “Philistine Misreadings” and Creative Dispossession

Considering Byatt’s comments about the fallacy of biographers who do not have the adequate distance to their subject, it is ironic that Byatt repeatedly criticises exactly what Yelin accuses her of doing. Rather than working along double-standards, Byatt exemplifies her opinion by showing the defects of an absolutist stance in biographers and critics, both within and ‘outside’ *Possession*, pointing out that the presumption of knowing the subject, especially in the case of a human subject, is always contingent, as seen in the events following Roland Michell’s findings in the London Library.

Roland is more discerning of this contingency, and is given the grace of admitting that he knows Ash “as far as anyone might know a man whose life seemed to be all in his mind”.²¹⁷ In the case of Roland’s superior, Professor James Blackadder, this distance and acknowledgement are not so clear. What is known of Ash until the fictional world’s 1986 is very much taken as factual by Blackadder, considering his annotating since 1951, though his unquestioning perspective is leavened by the advent of his academic career. Blackadder is first introduced as one of the survivors of the F. R. Leavis’ school of divide and conquer, Leavis who,

did to Blackadder what he did to serious students; he showed him the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature and simultaneously deprived him of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to, or change it.²¹⁸

Which, considering the motifs of the *Possession*, was no little crime. Dispossessed of his confidence, Blackadder was lost to those ranks who had not been terrified into submission, but rather accepted, appreciated, and most of all utilized their own “capacity to contribute to or change” English literature and thus the cultural discourse. Instead, Blackadder learned to follow without question, take the primary text as the true and real, and work from there.

It is due to this Leavisian terrorising during Blackadder’s student days that any curiosity he might have as a scholar is immediately subsumed under the immense weight of the textual precedent, in this case Randolph Henry Ash’s poetry, where even an original thought seems to be

²¹⁷ Byatt, *Possession* 8.

²¹⁸ *Possession* 27.

simply a copy of Ash's.²¹⁹ By the time Blackadder is a tenured professor and so part of the critical crowds of readers and authors, he is unable to separate himself from his subject, a circumstance he is very aware of, though maybe not always consciously:

There were times when Blackadder allowed himself to see clearly that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's work.²²⁰

What is probably the most disheartening part of this insight is Blackadder's own conclusion that "it did not perhaps matter so greatly", underlining the creative suppression, the greyness of the Ash scholar.²²¹

Since one can rightly presume that James Blackadder is the fictional equivalent to very real students of the legendary Leavis, (Byatt herself was a student of the notorious Cambridge Don), Byatt seems to accuse Leavis of robbing the English literary and cultural discourse of many worthy and enriching readings and texts. Additionally, in consequence to Leavis' and his kind's crippling stance, and the ensuing rebellion that reversed that very stance to its other extreme, an impoverishment of the cultural discourse altogether was furthered.²²² Since Byatt did sit through numerous Leavis lectures on English literature, the criticism of Leavis' scare tactics can be seen as both a literary as well as a personal critique. Byatt thereby endorses the Barthesian authorial death, yet not in its full revolutionary, and ultimately misleading if not destructive sense, since Byatt simultaneously criticises the equally destructive invasiveness of the reading and writing critic.

²¹⁹ See Byatt, *Possession* 29, where after considering the consistency of owl-pellets while watching a naturalist's televised excursions, Blackadder is "pleased with his image and momentarily considered making a poem out of it. Then he discovered Ash had been beforehand with him. [...] Blackadder could not think whether he had noticed the screen naturalist because his mind was primed with Ash's image, or whether it had worked independently."

²²⁰ Byatt, *Possession* 29.

²²¹ Blackadder's greyness does not end there. He is described as a "a grey man, with a grey skin and iron grey-hair" though he proudly wears the latter long due to its fullness. Otherwise his appearance is that of the tweed-jacketed cord-trousered kind, "respectable, well-worn and dusty", thereby rounding off the image of a grumbling professor, with the slight eccentricity of having "a good ironic smile, when he smiled, which was very infrequently." (Byatt, *Possession* 29-30).

²²² In the Newman, Friel interview, Byatt gives a personal perspective on Leavis' critical skills. Answering a statement by the interviewers that "the term omniscient narrator seems almost pejorative now" Byatt answers: "Yes, this has become a malady of our times. I was a student at Cambridge under Dr. Leavis, who was very proud of himself and sure that he was right and everybody else was wrong; but he was also sure that the writers were more right than he was; whereas now a perfectly legitimate attempt to question the authority of the text has skidded into a feeling that the text has no authority and its author doesn't understand anything. In which case you may as well give up studying literature and study Acts of Parliament, which are just as interesting." (Newman and Friel, "An Interview with A. S. Byatt").

Blackadder's particular form of strangled powers of conception and reception are however alien to Ash and LaMotte, who still fully believe in the traditional absolutes of inspiration, beauty, truth, and creativity.²²³ Blackadder and those of his academic fate and lineage can be seen as foils to the very possible vibrancy, the passion of reception, text production, and cultural discourse seen in his younger counterparts (Roland and Maud, specifically), but especially in the Victorian characters. With regard to *Possession's* poets, their private lives are a vital source of *vorstorg* and *vdoknovenie*, yet certainly not the only one. Byatt thus tries to exemplify the complexity of the authorial *ego* in as many layers as would not overwhelm narrative space, using her primary texts and their writers as fictional stages on which to play out her perspectives.²²⁴

Over the course of their correspondence, the Victorian characters Ash and LaMotte discuss, argue, agree, and disagree on various topics, from theology to cosmology, poetry to writing, next to a discourse of their own projects, showing a vigorous exchange of thoughts and ideas, a written 'meeting of minds'²²⁵ that lead in their different ways to a germination of new projects and poems, which in turn help the *vdoknovenie* of each: in LaMotte's case that of her well-known *Melusina* poem and many smaller, lesser known poems, and in Ash's case that of various famous poems from *Ask to Embla* to *Mummy Possesst*. The *vorstorg* moments of each, with regard to the respective texts, are either pre-correspondence (LaMotte's *Melusina*, Ash's *Swammerdam*), or experienced during the correspondence and the consequences of their meetings, which in turn makes for the possibilities of illuminating readings, as well as amusing if not altogether absurd misreadings, by the very fact that the connection between Ash and LaMotte was unknown to scholarship until Roland stole the drafts of the first letter in the 1986' London Library.

Here Byatt plays with the ambiguity of text-production and text-reception, pointing to the fact that due to the nature of historical archivation and recording, text-reception is always precarious since it depends on an understanding of the environment existent during said text-production, thus reinstating yet again the power of authorial construction, of the "intentional,

²²³ Byatt, *Possession* 157-201

²²⁴ Though it does seem as if Byatt distrusts fragmentation, never mind her thorough use of post-structuralist perspectives within her texts. Byatt doesn't deny that these thought-structures and modes of questioning are very helpful to readers and writers when detaching themselves from the monolithic and delving into the pluralistic points of view. However, though at first enlivening and liberating with regard to Leavisite invasiveness, these same methodologies can also lead to all kinds of distortions as well, a point of Byatt's criticism that will be discussed later in this chapter.

²²⁵ Consider the Ash-LaMotte correspondence (Byatt, *Possession* 157-201) where both writers consider their interaction with other minds, both dead and living, not to mention their own communication.

directional act". It is this that Adams criticises as being entirely too simple, since to Adams the critics "decide" rather than discover that,

the descriptions with the poems point directly and unproblematically back to the physical phenomena they themselves have witnessed on their own outing (thus securing the relationship between signifiers and signifieds, at least as far as Victorian representation in verse is concerned).²²⁶

Interestingly, it is exactly Adams' stance that Byatt criticises as post-structuralism and deconstruction gone wild. In Byatt's repeatedly attested love of words and language lies the insistence that there remains a connection between signifier and signified,²²⁷ that the code is a code for a reason, the semiotic there to symbolise something, never mind if that something is infinitely difficult to describe, just like Nabokov's lily which can be captured ever more precisely, never mind if the subjectivity of the description remains. Divorcing code from phenomena, language from subject and object, is something Byatt disagrees with. To Byatt, words do mean something, as seen in her statement that all that a critic can really do is read the texts "every word one after the other", and so decipher the meaning they codify.

They may have very many meanings, but meaning is there, as seen in Ash's delight in finding LaMotte finally understood what his words meant, what he, in short, 'was after'. That the description of phenomena may be difficult bordering on impossible is something Byatt does not refuse, but that description is possible, the codings given and thus tools to be used, remains uncontested to Byatt, the contestation of which will inevitably lead to "philistine misreadings".

Meanings, Byatt purports throughout *Possession*, do exist, and they cannot be picked and chosen at will. There are many, more than one may ever know, but there remains one anchor by which one can navigate, and that is the words in question, the primary texts. That this is an academically unfashionable stance is not surprising considering the general discourse of the past four decades. Nonetheless, it is Byatt's stance, a stance she illustrates in *Possession* as seen in the literary sleuth's stay in Yorkshire, where, even when they are trying not to find anything, when Maud wants to "look at something, with interest, and without layers of meaning. Something

²²⁶ Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers" 114.

²²⁷ One example would be the Newman, Friel interview, where Byatt points out how her love for words, which she considers a "deep human pleasure" led to her use of Elizabethan flower metaphors in *The Virgin in the Garden* and how she used a Yorkshire guide book as a source for *Possession* because she very simply liked the words used in the guidebook.

new,²²⁸ meanings crop up all the same, since they are everywhere: they are the “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres” not only of culture, but of lived experience, never mind how tenuous the findings of these quotations may be. Just like Nabokov’s lily remains a lily, no matter if a layman, a naturalist, or a botanist investigates the ‘liliness’ of the lily, the signifier ‘lily’ stands for that particular phenomena in the overall codification of phenomena, i.e. language, and thus any split between signifier and signified allows only so much freedom.

As always, rather than simply state her point, Byatt shows what she means, as well as just how complex and many-layered coding, codification, and de-codifying are within lived experience in general, and literary and cultural discourses in particular. Due to the absence of any knowledge of the Ash-LaMotte connection, for example, readings of LaMotte’s texts as lesbian poetry, subtly subversive in the harsh light of dominant heteronormative Victorian (meta-)texts, are possible, maybe even plausible, since all that is known to the scholars until Roland’s discovery is that Christabel LaMotte lived with a young woman painter, Blanche Glover. Moreover, the two women lived in a small house, Bethany, a name that stands for a place of refuge for the ailing and destitute. Blanche Glover’s gratitude to LaMotte from saving her from a bleak life as a governess is stated clearly in the novel, next to the young woman’s jealous defence of their privacy from intruders.²²⁹ The consequent feminist readings in the 1960s and 1970s of LaMotte’s oeuvre as covert lesbian poetry are understandable with only this history at scholarship’s disposal, given the fact that Blanche Glover wrote a diary that sketched their quite life together. The crux here is believing that what is not known is insignificant, and taking what is known as absolute fact. In *Possession*’s case, reading all of LaMotte’s texts as lesbian texts without any consideration that different readings are indeed possible, turns out to be detrimental to the literary and cultural exchange regarding LaMotte’s works due to the very lack of knowledge concerning LaMotte.

Byatt gives an example of the breathless enthusiasm for unearthed lesbian texts and intertexts in feminist criticism, by ways of one of the fictional academic’s own essays, taken from a compilation of essays named *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte*, by the American Gender Studies academic, Professor Leonora Stern.²³⁰ With an ever-growing awareness of the depth of the Ash-LaMotte connection, Stern’s essay “From the Fount of Thirst to the Armorican Ocean-Skin”

²²⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 268.

²²⁹ Byatt, *Possession* 45-7.

²³⁰ *Possession* 243.

reads as an amusing if not entirely overblown misreading of LaMotte's texts as signs of the hidden lesbian struggle against the heteronormative social context.

Here, Byatt points to the "philistine misreadings" possible, since feminist readings had become one of the dominant critical perspective by the 1980s, where questions of *écriture féminine* and essentialist gendered texts were hotly debated²³¹ – texts, it is safe to say, if not amused, definitely annoyed Byatt in her own lived experience of feminist criticism, since at point she was,

getting very sick of women critics finding exactly the same feminized landscape in absolutely everything they read. Women are marginal; women are irrational; women are wandering; women are damp; women are flat; women are declivities. Some of us do, and some of us don't, some of the time. Anyway, I put all those things in. I overdetermined my poem like crazy.²³²

One may argue about intentionality, yet it is the very scope of the self-made primary and secondary texts within *Possession* that defies doubt in Byatt's authorial intentions. Rather than tell alone, and grumble about what irritates her within the discourses of feminist criticism, Byatt goes ahead and shows it, by ways of her own fictional text, in this particular case with Prof Stern's entertaining treatise on motifs and matrices in LaMotte's poems, thus furthering and deepening the discourse concerning this very kind of reading and criticism.

Byatt spares no space in her showing, exemplifying both sides of the argument in an admittedly positive light, since Prof Stern's misreading is understandable considering what scholarship knew of Christabel LaMotte until the aftermath of the London Library's dispossession and Roland Michell's theft. To Stern, the word choice, landscapes, and motifs in LaMotte's *Melusina* may be read as "a symbol of female language, which is partly suppressed, partly self-communing, dumb before the intrusive male and not able to speak out."²³³ However, once the purloined letters are gathered, and the extent of the connection between Ash and LaMotte is revealed, especially their correspondence where there is little suppression in language and quite a lot of "speaking out", Prof Stern's reading is, at worst, absurd.

²³¹ cf. among others, Luce Irigaray. *This Sex Is Not One*. Catherine Porter (Transl.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985; Christine van Boheemen. *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender, and Authority from Fielding to Joyce*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987; and Stephen Heath. "Men in Feminism: Men and Feminist Theory." Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. (Eds.). *Men in Feminism*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

²³² Walker, "An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk" 337.

²³³ Byatt, *Possession* 245.

Another example would be Ash's infamous *Mummy Possesst*, which hitherto was considered clear evidence of his misogynist mind-set, which even the renowned Ash scholar Blackadder had always considered "anomalous in its hostility to its female protagonist and by extension to women in general."²³⁴ Once the connection between Ash and LaMotte and the life-changing consequences of their affair are discovered, a re-evaluation of the text is genuinely considered, since it would make *Mummy Possesst*'s anomalous existence more congruent to the entirety of Ash's work.²³⁵

Here, any call to defy the author, even kill him or her off, to completely disregard any biographies or authorial environments, to leave everything to the reader and only consider the writer as *scriptor* without any pasts and presents, except those the reader considers, is established as a form of near-dilettantism, a straight road to absurdity, very basic mis-reading and thus misunderstanding. Byatt does not refuse Barthes' "tissue of quotations". The readings are necessary, they are what make the illumination of the depth of text, of the layerdness of text, possible. Byatt enlarges the scope from where the "tissue of quotations" is drawn from, namely not only "the innumerable centres of culture" but also the innumerable centres of self. There are more texts, as it were, than meet the Barthesian eye.

Byatt is not so crude, however, as to paint it all in black and white. Rather, the ambiguity of the writing process, of the actual creation and production of the text that is read, leads to the precariousness of the reading of the very text, since not all can in fact be known. Even within the narrative of *Possession*, there are lost letters, unknown meetings, and lost and unknown knowledge, cunningly portrayed to the actual reader of *Possession* with the help of an omniscient narrator who knows all pasts, presents, and futures, thereby reinstating the authorial presence without further ado, refuting the pejorative notion of the omniscient by showing its benefits in very simply 'telling a good story'.

²³⁴ Byatt, *Possession* 392.

²³⁵ Ash's *Mummy Possesst* is posited in the narrative as the famous writer's furious reaction to a grave misunderstanding between him and LaMotte.

3.5 Discourse and Perception

As I hope to have shown in the previous chapters, A. S. Byatt has legitimate concerns and points of critique regarding the postmodern and especially post-structuralist stance on text reception and text production. Through remodelled versions of poetic genius and the sublime, which I paralleled with the Nabokovian split of inspiration into *vorstorg* and *vdoknovenie*, I have argued that Byatt is able to establish a continuous becoming between informed reader and inspired author, an oscillation between reader and author that is part and parcel of the dynamics of reception and text, which to Byatt are different incarnations of reading. *Possession*, so I have argued, is a fictional narrative where Byatt exemplifies this very stance, while equally showing the limits of reception via what Zadie Smith terms “philistine misreadings”, but also the limits of what can be known about a text with regard to meaning, since some things simply cannot be known due to loss, destruction, or plain ignorance of the matters at hand.²³⁶

I would now like to go a step further and consider how the greater discourses of creativity, power, and place of the historical “spots of time” *Possession*’s narrative focuses on are addressed. My argument here is that, despite *Possession*’s great depth in subject matter, the process by which Byatt’s definition of poetic genius and sublime are attained, enabling access to admittedly ambiguous truth, yet very pervasive beauty of text and phenomena, is in fact problematic: it incorporates tropes of universality and indisputability that hark back to imperial hegemonial practices regarding culture, civilisation, and progress.

Additionally, I argue that the English cultural space within which Byatt’s process of poetic genius and sublime operates is signified by the abovementioned tropes of universality and indisputability, establishing a narrow perspective of the English cultural space that seemingly disavows any imperial let alone post-imperial systems of definition.²³⁷ Together with the Romantic

²³⁶ See *Possession*’s epilogue where the meeting between R. H. Ash and his daughter is known to none in *Possession*’s lifeworlds save R. H. Ash himself. (Byatt, *Possession* 508-511).

²³⁷ Consider Pierre Machery’s dictum on silence and ideology that Gayatri Spivak finds so helpful in illuminating underlying systems of definition and power, especially in a (post-)colonial setting: “What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notion “what it refuses to say”, although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledge or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out in a sort of journey to silence.” (Pierre Machery. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Geoffrey Wall (Transl.). London: Routledge, 1978, p. 78, qtd. in Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 81-2, italics in the original).

methodology Byatt employs to enable authorial autonomy and readerly freedom, this conceptual silence is what I would like to investigate further in the following chapter.

Perspective, as already stated, is key, and in this particular case it is illuminating that despite the fact that, historically speaking, the England of the late 20th century would be considered a post-colonial and post-imperial space, by dint of the very absence of the British Empire by this time period, the former imperial centre is generally not considered post-colonial let alone post-imperial. This circumstance in and of itself already speaks volumes of the perspective prevalent in this particular cultural space, especially regarding the fact that it is the English cultural space within which the British Empire was established, expanded, ruled, and relegated until its fairly swift dismantling midway through the 20th century.

How, one wonders, is the disappearance of an empire not to be a very distinct part of the discourse of its central cultural space? The English cultural space was after all the defining powerhouse all through the British Empire. Most of all, how is it that in a contemporary narrative such as *Possession*, these particular historical loci (the Victorian Age, the late 20th century) can be acknowledged as ground-breaking while simultaneously never acknowledging the greater seismic shifts in the historical and cultural topographies of the imperial centre? Could it be because within the discourses of *indigenous* English cultural space, the absence of imperial and post-imperial discourses is part and parcel of the English cultural discourse? That a particular silence is taken for granted, moreover, even thought as ‘the norm’?

These were the first of many questions I had when reading *Possession* (and *On Beauty* and *Saturday*, respectively). It is, after all, surprising that in a narrative that entails so many in-depth academic investigations into the larger cultural discourses of the times presented, there is not even a hint of the decisive historical events that took place during and in between the two time periods – the British Empire, the end of the British Empire, and its socio-cultural aftermaths. I find this particularly remarkable since the cultural space *Possession* is situated in is the very cultural space that, not so long ago, was the centre of that vast empire and its hegemonial cultural practices, as critics from Homi K. Bhabha and Bill Ashcroft to Ian Baucom and David Higgins have looked into extensively in their respective analyses.

However, the indigenous English cultural space established in *Possession* is not even remotely linked to coloniality, let alone post-coloniality, if by coloniality one understands a known and felt presence of empire within the imperial centre during its time of imperial expansion, and by post-coloniality one understands that within this self-same space the repercussions of the power

dynamics of empire – its absence included – linger in the prevalent socio-cultural discourses. At least it would seem so. On closer inspection, the connect-disconnect of the conceptualisations hinges entirely on one's vantage point and perspective. It is, I argue, the compartmentalisation within discourses post-empire – by which I mean discourses established after the dismantling of the British Empire – that creates this sense of absence and silence.

Within the discourse post-empire, postmodernity and post-coloniality seem to be separate entities, tackling different spheres of discourse, while both methodologies actually tackle the same subject matter: the deconstruction of powerful meta-narratives of imperial and post-imperial spaces. Only they do this from two different vantage points: the former imperial centre (in this case: England) and the former imperial periphery (in this case: England's former colonies). Where the former imperial centre sees itself in the throes of a postmodern discourse, the former imperial periphery understands its historical locus as defined by post-colonial discourses, while both are one thing together: post-imperial. It is from this vantage point that the apparently divergent threads materialise, since they help illuminate how the (former) imperial centre established and continues to establish itself as the imperial centre of a vast (former) imperial project, while equally constructing and consolidating the borders that make up the the (former) imperial periphery.

I would like to consider two central themes within *Possession* to establish my point of analysis. First, the conceptualisation of creative power, and secondly, the construction of personal place within the narrative. My goal here is to show that it is within a particularly constructed space – here, the indigenous English cultural space with a very specific ethnic makeup, gender dynamic, and class structure – that the discourses of creativity, power, and place are established in *Possession*.

Though historically post-imperial, little, I argue, has materially changed in the meta-narrative of the former imperial centre, at least in *Possession*'s narrative construction of the former centre. The English cultural space in *Possession* is constructed as an implicitly ethnically white space, wherein the only serious points of contention in matters of identity are class and gender. This begs one question, namely, whether the methodologies to legitimately access beauty and truth as proposed in *Possession* are only viable within this particular narrowly-defined cultural space. If so, it would prohibit any universality of the methodology proposed, relegating Byatt's method of informed reader and inspired author to a very narrowly-defined English cultural space, and so would be of little use except to those within that very cultural space. The consideration of this possibility will be the main point of the following analysis.

3.5.1 “An Invisible Knapsack of Provisions”²³⁸

One of the statements that triggered my line of inquiry was Byatt’s own statements in her introduction to her compilation of English short stories,²³⁹ where she writes that “[t]he English are what other English-speakers define themselves *against*.”²⁴⁰ One might want to argue that Byatt is speaking solely of RP and other ‘indigenous’ English tongues here, however her choice of authors and her befuddlement at her critiques’ ire speak of a different interpretation altogether.²⁴¹

The process of identification in Byatt’s statement is clear: it is not, in post-colonial terms, from the imperial inside out, but from the imperial outside in, or “against” Englishness, where the English identity – though hotly debated within its own ‘borders’ – is elevated to a kind of monolithic status once confronted with other identity narratives deemed non-English, despite the fact of being part of an English-speaking sphere, i.e. the (former) British Empire.

However, this does not mean that Englishness is hereby defined, but rather that it is ‘outlined’ as it is (to be) read and received by those who are deemed non-English, and thus, as Byatt’s critics pointed out: non-white.²⁴² As definitions go, it says precious little of those who inhabit the outlined borders of Englishness, and by inference whiteness, and leads to a silence, an absence in discourse that has already been critiqued by Richard Dyer in *White*, where he agrees with Peggy McIntosh that whiteness is “‘an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear and blank cheques’”.

Aligned with a definition of Englishness that implicitly incorporates whiteness, Englishness itself would possess this “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions”. Englishness would

²³⁸ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” *Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Papers Series*, 189, Rpt in Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (Eds.) *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992, pp. 70-81, here p. 70-1, qtd. in Richard Dyer. *White*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 9.

²³⁸ Todd M. Kuchta. “The Dyer Straights of Whiteness.” *Postmodern Culture*. Indiana University, 1998. 30 July 2014 <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v009/9.1r_kuchta.html>, no page numbers in the original.

²³⁹ Which are not short stories in English, but stories written by English writers, at least what Byatt defines as English writers – a definition that is “slightly self-deprecating” though very clear on its “exclusion of all kinds of non-white creativity from the aesthetic strong-hold of Albion” which “soured her critics”. (Tobias A. Wachinger, *Posing In-between, Postcolonial Englishness and the Commodification of Hybridity* 33).

²⁴⁰ A. S. Byatt. *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. xv.

²⁴¹ Wachinger, *Posing In-between* 33.

²⁴² Consider Lord Macaulay’s *Minutes to India* in Young, G.M. (Ed.), *Speeches of Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), and the complication of identity discourses the introduction of English departments and English education in the former imperial peripheries entailed. See Chapter 1.2.1 “Defining Englishness”.

thus incorporate the same invisibility as whiteness, an invisibility that is, as Dyer states, “part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content”.²⁴³ This, however, is not something one would say about Englishness, i.e. that it is “nothing in particular” and has “no content”. With the alignment of whiteness with Englishness, an interesting dynamic of identification and definition can be seen, where an apparent lack of content (whiteness) is paired with actual content (Englishness), making whiteness a quasi ‘empty’ signifier of Englishness, thus relegating all ‘content’ to Englishness alone while never having to consider the ethnicity implicitly attached to it.

Dyer’s “disrobing of whiteness”²⁴⁴ is thus illuminating since it is not a flat analysis but “complicates monolithic understandings of whiteness” by investigating its “articulation through gender and class,” and putting it within the “historical, cultural and technological conditions that have made whiteness the ostensible standard of power, reason, and beauty within Western codes of representation.”²⁴⁵ Whiteness is consequently not at all “nothing particular” nor does it have “no content”, quite the opposite. As cultural theorist John Storey states, whiteness is a definite part of the discursive space Englishness inhabits:

[In] British society white, masculine, heterosexual, middle class are unmarked in that sense that they are the ‘normal’, the ‘natural’, the ‘universal’, from which other ways of being are an inferior variation on an original. This is made clear in such formulates as female pop singer, a black journalist, a working-class writer, a gay comedian. In each instance the first term is used to qualify the second as a deviation from the ‘universal’ categories of pop singer, journalist, writer and comedian.²⁴⁶

In the light of this, Byatt’s statement that Englishness is “what other English-speakers define themselves *against*” – a statement written in the introduction to a book of English short stories by only white English writers, published by one of the most respected publishers in the English speaking sphere – retains a darker tone. The unacknowledged yet powerful presence of whiteness

²⁴³ Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege and Male Privilege” 1-2, qtd. in Richard Dyer. *White9*.

²⁴⁴ Todd M. Kuchta. “The Dyer Straights of Whiteness.” *Postmodern Culture*. Indiana University, 1998. 30 July 2014 <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v009/9.1r_kuchta.html>.

²⁴⁵ Todd M. Kuchta, “The Dyer Straights of Whiteness”.

²⁴⁶ John Storey. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. London et al: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2001, p. 5.

and all its invisible trappings within Byatt's definition is the "organizing principle in social and cultural relations"²⁴⁷ at the heart of the controversy surrounding the collection of short stories.

The flare of indignation in the wake of the book's publication shows a shift in perspective had taken place within the English cultural discourse, one that had not yet fully reached the indigenous discourse of what it actually means to be English, if one takes Byatt's befuddlement, and the Oxford University Press's acceptance of the publication of her collection into account. It also shows a particular dynamic of definition within the English cultural space, an apparent disparity already signified in T.S. Eliot's and Hanif Kureishi's previously mentioned listings. Within this dynamic, the former imperial centre seems to remain untouched by the highly diversifying processes of post-coloniality and its identity discourses, while always aware that post-coloniality is in fact extent. As a result, the deconstruction of powerful imperial meta-narratives is relegated to the confines of postmodernity, without acknowledging the distinctly post-colonial qua post-imperial processes inherent in the deconstruction of these very meta-narratives.

This, I argue, is how an acknowledgement of post-coloniality is possible while equally keeping it separate, speak absent, from the cultural and discursive space where empire began, was established, flourished, declined and disintegrated: the indigenous English cultural space. It is a connect-disconnect of perspective that I find highly interesting and that I argue *Possession* illuminates to a decisive extent since the narrative inhabits a class-conscious and gender-inquisitive yet ethnically monolithic sphere, in short: a very white space. Any methods of achievement and accomplishment established within this space would thus be only genuinely applicable in terms of whiteness, which I argue is exactly what is problematic about Byatt's means to access beauty and truth as portrayed in *Possession*.

In *Possession*, whiteness need not speak its name since it is the norm within the socio-cultural sphere the characters live in. Non-white characters such as Leonora Stern who "claimed both Creole and native Indian ancestry" next to having "a hint of Africa in the lips",²⁴⁸ are either established as the destabilising and rather disturbing Other, or they are entirely at the periphery of

²⁴⁷ Carroll Hamilton. *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 7.

²⁴⁸ *Possession* 310. The essentialisation of "a hint of Africa in the lips" is curious, since one wonders what its equivalent would be when paired with other geo-spaces, e.g. "a hint of Asia in the eyes", "a hint of Europe in the nose" or "a hint of Australia in the cheeks", to name but a few. It would make for rather contested descriptions, yet in matters of Africa, which after all is a continent, it hardly raises an eyebrow, reminiscent of the narrative of Africa found in Wordsworth's description of the "world of fairy" etc. It is an essentialisation that highlights a larger imperial discourse, where Africa remains a "magnificent, ineffable [and] dark", indescribable, mystic, and so fixed 'exotic' Object and Other to the European 'normal' Subject and Self.

Possession's characters and their lifeworlds.²⁴⁹ Leonora Stern is the exception that proves the rule. All other characters in *Possession* are seen to be of the same ethnicity, namely white. Thus the ethnicity of the characters needs no further consideration since once belonging to this particular ethnicity, all ethnic positions are seen to be in a power-equilibrium.²⁵⁰ Leonora Stern, in turn, inhabits the space of exotic, overabundant, overwhelming and generically threatening Other.²⁵¹

In such an ethnically monolithic sphere, the absence of race discourse is in fact the very presence of one particular race discourse, namely that of whiteness, within which, as Dyer et al succinctly show, ethnicity is seen as not just irrelevant, but factually absent. Following Dyer et al's analysis of the apparent absence of race within the white discourse, there seems to be no nomenclature within white discourse to pin-point its own race discourse as such, not to mention a means to evaluate itself within the wider discourses of race, especially with regard to imperial histories.

This is not to say that a discourse of race and ethnicity is not present in the narrative. It is the conspicuous absence of any discourse that encapsulates white race discourse, which makes *Possession* so intriguing, especially since it is a text that is lodged firmly within the time-frame of empire (the Victorian plotline), where, as shown in the previous chapters on the imperial gaze, race discourses were abundant and much discussed within the creative, academic, and intellectual spheres of the imperial centre. It is within this apparent absence of race, however, that the dynamics of gender and beauty are established in the narrative. It is a dynamic Byatt takes her time to consider in *Possession*, yet is not as universal as one may at first think. I argue that Byatt's method to access beauty and truth via processes of poetic genius and the sublime is only possible within the particular construction of English culture space she purports in *Possession*, namely, a white space. The methodology used to 'save' scholarship from absurdity and obscurity, to carry it out of the never-ending ambiguities of postmodern and post-structuralist discourse as propagated in *Possession*, is

²⁴⁹ To wit, a black female security guard, (*Possession*, 236) and a young and exceptionally beautiful TV presenter of Asian descent, female as well, (*Possession*, 401-403) both who, in theatre-terms, have bit parts, the former without any text, and the latter with a couple of questions to substantiate the interview Prof Blackadder wishes he didn't have to sit through.

²⁵⁰ That this a unique position within ethnic landscapes, as can be seen in conceptual analysis such as Stuart Hall's talk "Race, The Floating Signifier" (Stuart Hall. "Race, The Floating Signifier." Sut Jhally (Prod. and Ed.) Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997), to narratives ranging from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage, 1970, 2007), and Sherman Alexie's, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. (Sherman Alexie. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. London, New York: Little, Brown, 2009) to Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (Andrea Levy. *Fruit of the Lemon*. London: Picador, 1999, 2007) dissecting the stratification processes within an ethnic group, where factors such as phenotype, skin-tone, and hair-structure are part and parcel of the ethnic discourse within an ethnicity.

²⁵¹ See Chapter 3.5.3 "Experienced Beauty and Personal Truths".

constructed solely within the dynamics of the monolithic white space of the former imperial centre this very scholarship was established and is furthered in.

This is why I argue that any universal qua non-subjective appeal of Byatt's method is untenable. The beauty and truth attainable in *Possession*, and by extension, the methodology proposed in *Possession* to attain them, is a beauty and truth that can only be gained within the white English cultural space, a space where the definitions of beauty are seen to be independent of ethnicity, since ethnicity is by definition irrelevant/absent. Considering the beauty-dynamics of other ethnicities, where historically, powerful meta-narratives of miscegenation and half-caste-ism have shaped definitions of beauty,²⁵² this equilibrium within an ethnicity is a unique power-dynamic.

In matters of text, the access of beauty and truth is equally problematic, if one considers the struggle of creole languages, dialects, and other texts (oral or visual) to gain precedence within the imperial hegemonial narrative of what in fact is 'text', and how 'beauty' and 'truths' are to be gained from said text, i.e. how they are to be perceived, especially in an imperial and post-imperial context, which the characters portrayed in *Possession* are always in.²⁵³ The moment such a cultural space as established in *Possession* is complicated by non-white qua non-imperially central narratives, the methodology may no longer hold such sway. The following will encompass an analysis of this possible dynamic, where I will first establish how Byatt constructs discourses of beauty and truth in *Possession*, and then analyse how they rely on a narrowly constructed white English cultural space.

²⁵² cf. Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya (Eds). *Doing Race*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

²⁵³ For an illuminating perspective on the dynamics of creativity, power, and place in matters of narrative, consider Tim McDonell's interview of oral narratology researcher Harold Scheub (Tim McDonell. "The Man of 10,000 Tales". 29 March 2013. *narrative.ly*. <<http://narrative.ly/the-spirit-of-storytelling/the-man-with-10000-tales/>> (4 July 2015)) as well as, among many others, Paula Bennett's essay on Derek Walcott's politics and poetics (Paula Bennett. *Derek Walcott, Politics and Poetics*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 2000).

3.5.2 The Threat of Beauty

As a narrative, *Possession* gives space to various perspectives on postulations of truth, whether from an authorial or a critical perspective. When it comes to beauty, however, the narrative is far less contingent. The question of beauty is no question at all, since beauty is considered as extent, never mind how problematic it may be.

Beauty in *Possession* is posited as part of the characters' lived experience, an unquestioned fact that influences the interactions between the individual and the group and individuals among themselves. Each character, one may say, has his or her own position on the 'beauty scale', where the opposite ends of the scale would be the 'very beautiful' on the one hand, 'unattractive' on the other, and various degrees of attractiveness in between. Via the characters' physio-social positioning, Byatt is able to illustrate how the discursive revolutions that erupted in the later part of the 20th century influence the characters' perceptions of and reactions to beauty. They thus exemplify a discourse of beauty, wherein the experience of beauty cannot be analysed outside lived experience, nor denigrated when considering the entirety of a characters' motivations, desires, goals, and decisions.

It is a stance that is hardly considered in *Possession*'s critiques, possibly due to the temporal placing of the text, the late 1980s/early 1990s, where the postmodern and post-structuralist orthodoxy of beauty had a sure footing, and the definitions and negotiations of beauty were seen as negligible at best, smaller parts of far more compelling dynamics. "The banishment of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades," as Elaine Scarry states in 1998, "has been carried out by a set of political complaints against it." Scarry sees these complaints as two-fold: on the one hand, beauty is seen as "distracting attention from wrong social arrangements" by ways of "preoccupying our attention". Beauty, as it were, "makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just."²⁵⁴ On the other hand, the opposing argument holds that "when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object." Scarry sees this argument as one that is

most often prompted when the gaze is directed toward a human face or form, but the case presumably applies equally when the beautiful thing is a mourning dove, or a trellis spilling over with sweet pea, or a book whose pages are being folded back for the first time. The complaint has given rise

²⁵⁴ Elaine Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just" 39.

to a generalized discrediting of the act of “looking,” which is charged with “reifying” the very object that appears to be the subject of admiration.²⁵⁵

Scarry finds these arguments unconvincing since “they are unlikely both to be true” as the arguments “fundamentally contradict one another”:

If, for example, an opponent of beauty eventually persuades us that a human face or form or a bird or a trellis of sweet pea normally suffers from being looked at, then when the second opponent of beauty complains that beauty has caused us to turn away from social injustice, we will have to feel relieved that whatever harm the principals are now suffering is at least not being compounded by our scrutiny of them. If instead we are persuaded that beauty has distracted us from suffering, and that our attention to that suffering will help reduce the harm, we will have to assume that human perception, far from poisoning each object it turns toward, is instead fully capable of being benign.²⁵⁶

What Scarry argues for here and indeed in the entirety of “On Beauty and Being Just” is the difficulty of defining the precise space within which beauty is experienced, as well as the how and why of said experience. It is this experiential conundrum that Dorothy J. Hale considers a decade later in her analysis of Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, a novel inspired by Scarry’s lecture on beauty.²⁵⁷ The question of beauty is not a simple one, nor one that should be disregarded as has been de rigeur since the wide-scale deconstruction of Western grand narratives. To Hale, the “felt experience of cognition” of the characters in *On Beauty*, for example, is not only shown

to be contingent on social life, but any abstract idea a character might hold about the operation or value of cognition is shown to be inseparable from an individual’s social position within a particular cultural formation.²⁵⁸

This, I argue, is a point Byatt already makes in *Possession*, and considering her previous and following fictions, it is no new topic either.²⁵⁹ Why I consider this significant is that *Possession*

²⁵⁵ Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just” 39-40.

²⁵⁶ “On Beauty and Being Just” 40. Scarry footnotes: “Indeed, at the very moment when beauty was being banished from universities for distracting from social justice, scholars trying to make problems of social justice visible were sometimes accused of “reenacting” the cruelty by making suffering available to the reader’s gaze.”

²⁵⁷ Dorothy J. Hale. “On Beauty as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith.” *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 53, No. 4, Winter 2012. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 814-844.

²⁵⁸ Dorothy J. Hale, “On Beauty as Beautiful?” 815.

²⁵⁹ See the ‘Frederica Quartet’ or Byatt’s short stories in *Angels and Insects* where beauty is a definite and decisive factor in the characters’ lives, for better or for worse.

remains a seminal piece, not only in matters of a revival of Victoriana,²⁶⁰ but also as one book in recent literary history that delves deep into the dynamics of academia and academic study, research and intellectual thought and pursuit, the powerhouses where new definitions and points of analysis are developed when it comes to the ever-evolving concepts of beauty and truth.²⁶¹ Smith's *On Beauty*, published fifteen years later, inhabits this same thematic space, and argues via its characters for the same points already articulated in *Possession* with regard to the discourse of beauty and truth, a similarity in perspective that I find intriguing and will consider in the ensuing chapter "Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*: Failure, Aesthetics, and Gendered Divides". Yet to *Possession* first.

Possession's characters and their lifeworlds are invested in the same pursuit as Elaine Scarry took up in her demand to bring beauty back into the postmodern debate. However, unlike Scarry, the sheer scope of ambiguity the concept entails is not considered, a scope that Scarry succinctly demonstrates in her own experience with a palm tree, as already considered in the previous chapter on conceptual blindness.²⁶²

Scarry pin-points the significance of the power of place, and how deeply it influences evaluation and systems of definition. The matter of beauty in *Possession* is a less contested one with regard to perspective. Beauty in *Possession* is established as a universal given, so to speak, visibly present and immediately perceptible and understandable, which begs the question of how much the character's socio-cultural and ethnic positioning allows this acute perceptibility and understanding.

Initially, the questions Roland and Maud ask themselves are not much different from those that occupy Scarry, and by extension, the characters in Smith's *On Beauty* and, in less academic terms, McEwan's protagonist in *Saturday* as well. They are questions of creativity and power, in the sense of the possibilities of individual freedoms in conceptualisation and 'fact building' on the one hand, and the pressures of the group on the other; the coordinates of their social, cultural, and physical place, and how the two influence, develop and feed off of each other. When discussing

²⁶⁰ For a concise analysis of the impact *Possession* had on Neo-Victorianism, see: Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism, The Victorians in the Twenty-first Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

²⁶¹ As Philip Hensher writes admiringly in *The Paris Review*, "If English writing has stopped being a matter of small relationships and delicate social blunders, and has turned its attention to the larger questions of history, art, and the life of ideas, it is largely due to the generous example of Byatt's wide-ranging ambition. Few novelists, however, have succeeded subsequently in uniting such a daunting scope of mind with a sure grasp of the individual motivation and an unflinching tenderness; none has written so well both of Darwinian theory and the ancient, inexhaustible subject of sexual passion." (Philip Hensher (Interv.). "A. S. Byatt, The Art of Fiction No. 168." *The Paris Review*. No. 159, Fall 2001. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-a-s-byatt>> (18 March 2015)).

²⁶² See Chapter 1.3.3 "Conceptual Blindness".

the reasons for their academic interest, for example, Roland describes Ash's poetry as "what stayed alive, when [he'd] been taught and examined everything else." Maud's reaction is a smile and a telling answer, "Exactly. That's it. What could survive our education."²⁶³

Here the question of the beauty of the written word, of poetry that is alive and so a constant source of interest and investigation, "preoccupying [the reader's] attention" is at stake.²⁶⁴ Maud and Roland's education quite literally killed it off, since even Maud is sardonic about what could "survive [their] education". It is an indictment of late 20th century postmodern and post-structural literary criticism, an indictment that goes hand in hand with Byatt's personal critique of what was happening: namely that the critics were no longer reading the primary texts and criticism nearly did away with literature altogether, as in texts that are established as highly worthy to read, where the words "sing and sing", implying aesthetic cohesion generally understood as beautiful.²⁶⁵ Byatt's "writerly rage with criticism" can be seen here, since through her characters and their positioning within *Possession's* lifeworlds, Roland and Maud are in a position to show and criticize the effects of an education system Byatt sees as lacking. Again, here, any attempts to kill off the author would be futile, however the authorial criticism is embedded enough to be a point of discussion, rather than express finger-pointing.

In the following, I will analyse Byatt's construction of the dynamics of beauty within *Possession's* lifeworlds and then consider how the concept of beauty postulated in the narrative relies on the narrowly defined socio-cultural dynamics, with the respective implicit ethnic implications, that the characters partake in. My argument here is that from creative to personal beauty, the power of the aesthetic that Byatt establishes entails far more ambiguous and uncontested concepts than at first considered, relegating her argument for beauty and truth in confines reminiscent of imperial, heteronormative, ethnically monolithic spheres. It thus creates a 'reverse' circularity of discourse, where the answers to contemporary problems of reception and text lie not in the fusing of new, ambiguous, deconstructing narratives and systems of definition with those old and known, but in returning to the old imperial instrumentalisation of narratives of creativity, power, and place, thereby establishing a quasi imperial-cultural dynamic within the former imperial centre, only this time without the actual empire.

²⁶³ Byatt, *Possession* 55.

²⁶⁴ "What Roland liked was his knowledge of the movements of Ash's mind, stalked through the twists and turns of his syntax, suddenly sharp and clear in an unexpected epithet." (*Possession* 20).

²⁶⁵ See Chapter 3.4.3 "Philistine Misreadings" and Creative Dispossession".

3.5.3 Experienced Beauty and Personal Truths

Roland and Val

Byatt's first characterisation of a character's appearance is that of Roland Michell, who is described as "a small man, with very soft, startling black hair and small regular features. Val [his girlfriend] called him Mole, which he disliked. He had never told her so."²⁶⁶ This description is followed closely by a longer characterisation of Roland's live-in girlfriend Val, whose physical appearance mirrors her bifurcated life, split between the underground flat she shares with Roland, and her workday life above ground where Val temps in various City offices. The 'underground Val'

sat silently at home in old jeans and unevenly hanging long crêpey shirts, splashed with murky black and purple flowers. This one had lustreless brown hair, very straight, hanging about a pale, underground face.²⁶⁷

Val who works in the City, a "mournfully bright menial Val",²⁶⁸ is visibly transformed to fit the uniform reminiscent of Caryl Churchill's 'top girls',²⁶⁹ a young woman who wears makeup, "high heels and a black beret", and has "beautiful ankles" which disappear under "the domestic jeans" once Val returns home.²⁷⁰

Careful grooming, attractiveness, and beauty, are described not as separate entities to the characters' lives, in this case Roland and Val's, nor as something found outside oneself, in abstract separation, as, I would argue, Elaine Scarry seems to put it in her seminal text on beauty.²⁷¹ In the rather lengthy description of Val's transformation from underground to City Val as well as a

²⁶⁶ Byatt *Possession* 11. It is a characterisation Byatt picks up later when describing Roland's short walk across the Lincoln campus with Maud Bailey, where the wind "ruffled Roland's black fur." (*Possession* 39).

²⁶⁷ *Possession* 14.

²⁶⁸ *Possession* 14.

²⁶⁹ Caryl Phillips. *Top Girls*. London: Methuen Drama, 2001.

²⁷⁰ *Possession* 14.

²⁷¹ As for example when Scarry states that "[s]omething beautiful immediately catches attention yet prompts one to judgments that one then continues to scrutinize, and that one not infrequently discovers to be in error. Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation. [...] But simultaneously what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one's life depended on it. So distinct do the two mental acts appear that one might believe them prompted by two different species of beauty (as Schiller argued for the existence of both a "melting" beauty and an "energetic" beauty) [...] if it weren't for the fact that they turn up folded inside the same lyric event, though often opening out at chronologically distinct moments." (Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just" 21-2).

detailed description of Roland's academic rival Fergus Wolff,²⁷² *Possession* points to the wider scale of the experience of beauty, complicating appearance with grooming, attractiveness, and aesthetic experiences, making the conceptualisation of beauty an integral part of the characters' lived experience, which, considering the realism *Possession* rigorously follows, points to a commentary on the actual lived experience of *Possession*'s respective readers.

However, as already stated above, beauty is constructed here as existing within an ethnicity-free zone. Skin-tone, hair texture, or other features traditionally established as sign-posts of beauty and attractiveness within ethnically diverse spheres play no part. The characters' physical features, unless they are considered exceptionally beautiful or particularly unattractive, are established as near-neutral, value-free signifiers of self.

The significance of this neutrality can be seen when juxtaposed to the hierarchy of values Zadie Smith is able to encapsulate both in her award-winning *White Teeth* as well as *On Beauty*, where physical features are all but neutral entities. Where in *On Beauty*, Smith is more subtle in her portrayal of the influence of race discourses in definitions of beauty, as will be shown later in this thesis, *White Teeth* offers a far more explicit elucidation of the racial discourse underlying cultural practices of beauty within the English cultural space.

When describing the all-round physical distress of Irie Jones, the daughter of a Jamaican woman and an Englishman, Smith is able to map out the fault lines of physique that influence the white/non-white binary Irie is forced to live in, by dint of being born and raised in late 20th century London, England. Smith is thus able to show how whiteness is established as a monolithic signifier (white progeny on both parental sides for several generations) within the cultural space Irie Jones lives, while non-whiteness incorporates all matters of mixing, white ancestry included, signifying a full-up appropriation of the One Drop Rule.

²⁷² "Fergus was very tall, with brassy hair cut long on the and short at the back, in the 1980s version of the 1930s, over a dazzling white heavy sweater and loose black trousers like a Japanese martial artist. He smiled at Roland a pleased, voracious smile, with bright blue eyes and a long mouth terribly full of strong white teeth. [...] He was pleasant enough in general, though most people who met him formed the vaguest of ideas that he might be dangerous in some unspecified way." (*Possession* 32). It is worth noting that Roland is never described in such detail in the entirety of *Possession*, which leaves his physical presence largely to the reader's own imagination, with the help of the relatively vague sign posts of "a small man, with very soft startling black hair and small regular features". In matters of establishing a hero, enabling the reader to fill in the Iserian gaps allows for a personalisation process that is less possible with a more detailed description, such as with Fergus Wolff, who is after all Roland's rival, and part of the academic 'villains' in the narrative. cf. Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; Winfried Fluck. "The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte." Vol. 6, No. 3, 2002. *European Journal of English Studies*. London: Taylor and Francis, pp. 253-271.

The contested space of hair structure is one case in point. In tune with a long legacy of racial discourse where white racial signifiers are desirable and black racial signifiers undesirable, Irie longingly wishes for the texture of Caucasian hair, “[s]traight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With a fringe.”²⁷³ Irie’s attempts to gain said desirable structure at her local hair dresser’s is a constant battle, where

the impossible desire for straightness and ‘movement’ fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each unruly hair into submission.²⁷⁴

Within such a discourse, which does not stop at hair, as can be seen in Irie’s struggle with her body, and especially body-type, there is no neutrality in physical features.²⁷⁵ Each has a history in racial discourse, a discourse instigated and maintained by the expansion of the British Empire and its colonisation mechanisms, hegemonial practices, and racialized discourses of power. The discourses of physicality and physique of the (former) imperial periphery and the (former) imperial centre thus signify this bifurcated race discourse, racially ‘pure’ whiteness on the one hand (the imperial centre), and non-whiteness in whatever shape or form on the other (the imperial periphery). The fairly ‘simple’ description of *Possession*’s characters signify directly which race discourse they implicitly are established in, namely that of whiteness and it’s “invisible knapsack of provisions” in matters of physique and physical presence. The power-equilibrium of physicality within the white space is clear: the representation and description of the characters is neutral, racially speaking, establishing the invisibility of the white space all characters implicitly live and move in, leaving out several discourses of creativity, power, and place that have deeply informed the development of the (former) imperial periphery’s cultural space, but seem to leave the (former) imperial centre wholly untouched. This is why any means to appreciate and understand beauty (and

²⁷³ Zadie Smith. *White Teeth*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 273.

²⁷⁴ Smith, *White Teeth* 273.

²⁷⁵ “Now, Irie Jones, aged fifteen, was big. The European proportions of Clara’s figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with Hortense’s substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth. [...] There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land. [...] Nightmares and daydreams, on the bus, in the bath, in class. Before. After. Before. After. Before. After. The mantra of the make-over junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for genetic fate. Waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to *English Rose* – oh you know her – she’s slender, delicate thing not made for the hot suns, a surfboard rippled by the wave.” (Smith, *White Teeth* 268-9).

the truths thereby accessed) expressed within such a monolithic space are simultaneously confined to said space. There can be no universality in its methodology, nor in its modes of access, nor in its claims.

The one complication Byatt does establish in *Possession*'s dynamics of beauty is that of sexual attractiveness, as seen when Roland is described to "half wis[h]" that Val was attractive, "that a merchant banker would take her out to dinner, or a shady solicitor to the Playboy Club." However, he "hated himself for these demeaning fantasies, and was reasonably afraid that [Val] might suspect he nourished them."²⁷⁶ Here, beauty is seen as a means of power and place, in the sense of attracting power, in whatever form: "a merchant banker" who was bound to have money, one of the signifiers of power and place in 1980s London, or, worse still, "a shady solicitor" who would take a prettier Val to "the Playboy Club", a clear signifier of sexual objectification 'enabled' in this sexist dreamscape by Val's female beauty, which, after all, is fairly absent since Val remains as she is, as in "not constructed to be attractive."

The dynamics of beauty with its implicit and explicit sexual politics are subtly displayed here, but fully present in Roland's self-loathing at harbouring such "demeaning fantasies" about Val, not to mention the fact that he is "reasonably afraid" that Val "suspect[ed] he nourished them." Beauty, Byatt seems to show, is not experienced in a vacuum. However, her construction of beauty relies on one powerful vacuum, namely the apparent irrelevance of any discourse of ethnicity and its implications, since within the white space ethnicity is deemed as absent. In a text such as *Possession*, produced in reaction to methodologies of reception and text as seen in Byatt's "writerly rage with criticism", the absence of an ethnic narrative that subsequently points to a very particular narrative of ethnicity, is telling. If beauty is shown to be an integral part of the characters' lifeworlds and experience, then the absence of any articulation of ethnic signposts within this integration is a fundamental part of the process, and so undermines any possibility of universal appeal since few ethnicities act within an ethnic power-equilibrium as established in *Possession*'s definitive white space.

²⁷⁶ Byatt, *Possession* 14.

Maud Bailey

Maud Bailey's difficulties regarding beauty hint at a more complex field of mobility and constraint.²⁷⁷ From the outside perspective, meaning that of other characters, Maud is described as "a chilly mortal" by Lady Bailey, a distant unknown relative in whose Victorian house the academic hunters find the decisive letters.²⁷⁸ Maud's ex-lover and academic rival Fergus Wolff goes further and declares Maud "thicks men's blood with cold", never mind the omniscient narrator's concession of "a lot of undecodable feeling" that infuses this verdict.²⁷⁹

Roland, in turn, finds Maud cold and distant, and their first meeting triggers feelings of dislike, especially with regard to her voice, which is described as "a kind of flattened Sloane".²⁸⁰ Additionally, Maud "smelled of something ferny and sharp" and finally "Roland didn't like her voice."²⁸¹ Where Roland acknowledges that Maud dresses with surprising "coherence for an academic",²⁸² all other modes where attraction might possibly take place, like her voice, even her scent, (that is after all "sharp", an adjective that does not generally imply attraction), Maud is characterized as a cold and distant woman, "elegant" yes, but not approachable, the "ferny" adjective implying a certain element of prickliness, not to mention the ubiquitous green.

Maud is generally described in various terms of green and water, terms which imply freshness and youth on the one hand, but little by ways of warmth and comfort on the other. I allude to this due to the fact that, once Maud's 'inner life' is revealed, the 'outer' estimations show the limitedness of perception, the inability to in fact 'see' into a person and simply by observation fully capture his or her positioning. Byatt takes her time to lead the reader into Maud's inner spheres, using the bathroom space as the incubator of revelations, as she does almost all through *Possession*:²⁸³

²⁷⁷ For a concise analysis of cultural constraint and mobility see Stephen Greenblatt. "Culture". *Critical Terms for Literary Study, Second Edition*. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.

²⁷⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 144.

²⁷⁹ *Possession* 34.

²⁸⁰ Pointing to underlying class-dynamics, which will be referred to later in this chapter.

²⁸¹ *Possession* 38.

²⁸² *Possession* 38.

²⁸³ cf. Patrick Wynne on Byatt's *Possession* and bathrooms: Patrick Wynne. "Bookhenge #12." *Butterbur's Woodshed*. 1 January 1996. <<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~d-lena/WynneOnByatt.html>>. (22 April 2014); While I agree with Wynne's analysis of Byatt's predilection to use bathrooms as spaces of private revelation, I must add that this particular thematic quirk is not as clear-cut as one might at first think. Maud's bathroom does seem like a glass coffin, infused with green. The crystalline description of her bathroom, full of terms that imply water, greenness, freshness but also crispness, is a disavowal of warmth and comfort, but it also makes one wonder if Maud does her cleaning herself, or if she has a cleaning lady. Considering Maud's upper-middle class background and her own position in academia, the latter would be quite possible, since, in her reminiscence of her affair with Fergus Wolff, the level of cleanliness and spotlessness is quite equal to what Roland remembers of his Putney home ("Whenever [Maud] thought of Fergus Wolf [she remembered] unwashed coffee cups, trousers lying where they had been stepped out of, heaped dusty papers ring-

[Maud] slipped on her nightdress, long-sleeved and practical, and loosed from her shower-cap all her yellow hair. She brushed fiercely, supporting the fall, and considered her perfectly regular features in the mirror. A beautiful woman, Simone Weil said, seeing herself in the mirror, knows ‘This is I.’ An ugly woman knows, with equal certainty, ‘This is not I.’ Maud knew this neat division represented an over-simplification. The doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing. The feminists had divined that, who once, when she rose to speak at a meeting, had hissed and cat-called, assuming her crowning glory to be the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanly tested bottle. She had worn it almost shaved in her early teaching days, a vulnerable stubble on a white and shivering scalp.²⁸⁴

Here one can see that the dynamics and discourse regarding beauty severely hamper Maud’s perception of herself, since she is after all a beautiful woman, a natural blonde to boot,²⁸⁵ and thus inhabits a space within the beauty discourse of her time which Maud herself doesn’t question until Fergus Wolff dares her to, though not so far as to not see her face as a “doll mask” that has “nothing to do with her, nothing.”

Considering the fact that Maud shaved her hair in order to not be accused of buying into age-old patriarchal structures that lock the female individual in an inferior position of social power and cultural place, Maud’s beauty does in fact have a lot to do with her, yet her perception of herself, namely that of an academic, and a serious one, eschews “the doll mask” that is her face, since within the discourses she lives and works in the one seemingly disqualifies the other.

stained with wine-glasses, a carpet full of dust and ashes, the smell of socks and other smells.” (56) and “[Roland] saw his face in the glaucous basin as he cleaned his teeth. He thought of his home bathroom, full of old underwear, open pots of eyepaint, dangling shirts and stockings, sticky bottles of hair conditioner and tubes of shaving foam” (56). If true, what Roland sees in Maud’s bathroom is not a signifier of Maud’s cool, crisp, green and watery interior spaces, metaphysical as well as physical, but of her social positioning, her relative wealth. This, of course, is only speculation, the reader is not given more information of Roland’s bathroom experience, let alone Maud’s cleaning habits, than that her bathroom is pristine and that Maud has a definite weakness for green. Yet considering the information given, it would be a mistake to infer, from the crisp cleanliness of Maud’s bathroom which is an erasure of all traces of human (inter)action, to the general frigidity of its owner.

²⁸⁴ Byatt, *Possession* 57.

²⁸⁵ Maude’s blondness is possibly one articulated complication of the beauty discourse within white race discourse, since from Yeats’ “For Anne Gregory” poem that Byatt even uses to condense the complicated beauty discourse Maud is unable to escape from, to movies such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, not to mention iconographies ranging from Marilyn Monroe to Blondie and Madonna, the cultural coordinates of ‘blonde’ and ‘natural blonde’ are highly potent, and also deeply antagonizing, as can be seen in the general assumption of Maud’s peers that her hair was “the seductive and marketable product of an inhumanly tested bottle”, i.e. dyed with the help of animal testing, and so not ‘authentic’ (next to callous towards animals), tying into a particular beauty late 20th century discourse of authenticity and ‘naturalness’. It is notable, too, that the two genuinely beautiful characters in *Possession* are blond: Maud Bailey and Fergus Wolff, whom Val derisively names, “That pretentious blond bombshell” (15), tying into a narrative of blondness that is otherwise left unquestioned. For a succinct study of the cultural coordinates of blondness, see, among others: Laini Michelle Burton. *The Blonde Paradox, Power and Agency through Feminine Masquerade and Carneval*. Dissertation. Queensland: Griffith University, 2005.

This is a particular critique of the perceived dichotomy of beauty and intelligence, or rather beauty and genuine academic acumen, that I would argue is not wholly disseminated even today. Whether it is unique to the ethnic discourse Maud is part of by being a white woman is a far more interesting question. Were Maud non-white and beautiful, one wonders what the reaction to her, and her reaction to “the doll mask” as she calls it, would be. Can “doll mask” as a signifier of beauty be incorporated into non-white beauty dynamics, or is it confined to the white space? It is a question that goes quite beyond *Possession*’s discursive horizon, since Maud’s ethnicity is never once considered as a unique feature of her physical presence, never mind the fact that *Possession* is a text conceived in response to this very kind of discourse.

Thus the question remains: are the difficulties Maud faces when it comes to the interplay of beauty and academia a universal female problem, or does it depend on the ethnicity the respective woman is seen to belong to? These are questions *Possession* never even considers, which is no small matter in light of the fact that *Possession* was conceived as the author’s response to feminist criticism, next to post-structuralist methodologies, by elucidating her “writerly rage with criticism” via her fiction. Byatt establishes her critique from a solely white ethnic vantage point. However, as Gayatri Spivak and many others have shown, feminist criticism is not only about white women. There is a range to the human female experience that cannot be subsumed under one ethnic modality. How, then, is one to scale Maud’s experience in academia in the light of the intended critique of feminist criticism in general? Is Byatt’s critique only valid within a white space?

Consider Maud’s dilemma: in order to be taken seriously as an academic, as a woman, and as a female academic especially, Maud ends up hiding that part of her beauty which she can hide, either by shaving it off, or later, by perpetually covering her hair, since she cannot hide her face. Interestingly, her “crowning glory” is the one marked signifier of Maud’s ethnicity, she is after all, a natural blonde. It is intriguing that it is the marked signifier of Maud’s ethnicity that complicates her position as an academic. It is also what complicates the perception of herself as a female academic, since she’s accused of pandering to oppressive beauty-ideals due to her hair colour, making her overall beauty a continuous problem. This does not change until her quest with Roland where, finally, Maud can literally and metaphorically let her hair down, and very basically just be herself, a successful academic who is also a beautiful (white) woman.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ “[Maud] began slowly to undo, with unweaving fingers, the long thick braids. Roland watched, intently. There was a final moment when six thick strands, twice three, lay still ad formed over her shoulders. And then she put down her

That Maud only feels capable of freeing herself in the presence of an understanding male peer is yet another interesting point. Maud seems caught in an oscillation of personal attack, academic and private, before she meets Roland. On the one hand, there are the taunts of her feminist peers who jeered at her for her natural hair colour, which initially makes Maud shave off her hair. On the other hand, while they were still lovers, Fergus Wolff dared her to defy the beauty dictate of her feminist peers by quoting Yeats' essentialising "For Anne Gregory" poem and its aesthetic implications,²⁸⁷ which is why Maud finally grows her hair in a doubling act of defiance. Once the affair with Fergus ends, however, Maud hides her hair once more, unwilling to cut it, since "for pride, she would not crop it, she would not so much mark the occasion, but instead wore it always inside some sort of covering, hidden away."²⁸⁸ Thus, Maud ends up inhabiting a middle ground between the taunts and daring of her male and female peers. It is Roland's unequivocal acceptance of both Maud's academic acumen and her natural beauty that finally enables her own validation of her presence as a female academic, a moment where Maud is finally able to unveil herself and uncover her hair.

The dynamics behind this 'freeing' of Maud are an interesting mixture of sexual politics, vigorous intellectual interest, and the genuine and deep need and desire for answers to the big questions which can, and mostly are, subsumed under the nomenclatures of beauty and truth – however, without the implicit ethnic identity narrative. This can be seen in Roland and Maud's conversation during their Yorkshire outing, where Maud at one point asks Roland if he doesn't feel that their terms "eat up" everything that is worth having in their lives:

‘Do you never have the sense that our metaphors *eat up* our world? I mean of course everything connects and connects – all the time – and I suppose one studies – I study – literature because all these connections seem both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously powerful – as though we held a clue to the true nature of things? I mean, all those gloves, a minute ago, we were playing a professional game of hooks and eyes –

head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it. Her long neck bowed, she shook her head faster and faster, and Roland saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, the whirling mass, and Maud inside it saw a moving sea of gold lines, waving, and closed her eyes and saw scarlet blood. Roland felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping him. He said, 'That feels better.' Maud pushed aside her hair and looked out at him, a little flushed. 'All right. That feels better.'” (Byatt, *Possession* 272).

²⁸⁷ “Fergus had divined how afraid she was of the doll-mask and had dealt with it in his own way, daring her to let it all hang out, quoting Yeats at her in his Irish voice. Never shall a young man/Thrown into despair/By those great honey-coloured/Ramparts at your ear/Love you for yourself alone/And not your yellow hair. ‘You should be ashamed to believe that,’ said Fergus, ‘and you so wise and clever about every other thing, my dear.’ (Byatt, *Possession*, 57).

²⁸⁸ *Possession* 58.

mediaeval gloves, giants' gloves, Blanche Glover, Balzac's gloves, the sea-anemone's ovaries – and it all reduced like boiling jam to – human sexuality. Just as Leonora Stern makes the whole earth read as the female body – and language – all language. And all vegetation is pubic hair.'²⁸⁹

This brief monologue encapsulates the ubiquity of discourse about the body as Simone de Beauvoir already considered in *The Second Sex*,²⁹⁰ though in Maud's and Roland's case, it is a discourse that harangues rather than enlightens, mostly due to their own personal experience. As Maud later on explains when speaking about her time with Fergus Wolff:

I had a bad time, with Fergus. We tormented each other. I hate that, I hate the noise, the distraction. [...] I remember Fergus had a long patch of lecturing me on Penisneid. He's one of those men who argues by increments of noise – so that as you open your mouth he says another, cleverer, louder thing. [...] He used to *prance around* the flat – with nothing on – quoting Freud that “at no point in one's analytic work does one suffer more from a suspicion that one has been preaching to the winds than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis” – I don't think he – Freud – is right about that – but anyway – there was something intrinsically ridiculous about this silly shouting – before – breakfast – letting it all hang out – I couldn't work. That was how it was. I – I felt battered. For no good reason.²⁹¹

The interweaving of intellectual interest, sexual politics, and the deep desire for answers about life is hereby shown to be intricate and any attempts to disentangle the threads would warp the entire outcome, or so Byatt postulates via *Possession's* narrative. To fully understand the clash that was Maud and Fergus' time together, Byatt insists on taking all three instances into account – intellectual interest, deep desire for answers about life, and sexual politics – in order to fully establish a comprehensible discourse about what it is one is dealing with, namely the lived experience beyond the fictional pages to which the fiction contributes, comments, discusses, analyses and critiques in ways otherwise impossible in non-fictional qua academic spheres.

Nonetheless, even in this insistence, the space within which the characters navigate is an ethnically monolithic one. In this space, the complications of imperial dynamics of self and other in matters of race, creed, and colour do not touch the interplay of intellectual interest, deep desire for answers about life, and sexual politics. All three instances of inquiry seem to be exerted within

²⁸⁹ *Possession* 253, italics in the original.

²⁹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, 2010.

²⁹¹ Byatt, *Possession* 270-1, italics in the original.

a neutral ethnic space, where the only discernible tensions and frictions of human interaction, at least in this particular case, are the strictures of gender politics and underlying class dynamics. There seem to be no other pertinent ethnic narratives that influence Roland and Maud, thus constructing an English cultural space – they are both, after all, English scholars in England, conversing about English literary and cultural practice – where even the visibility of difference in matters of ethnicity, questions of culture, civilisation, and progress, would up-end the power-equilibrium, unless beauty and the truths gained are established as universals from the word go, which I argue, is the case in *Possession*.

Leonora Stern

Othering within the framework of attractiveness, beauty, and sexual politics that is established in *Possession* complicates the matter even further when one considers the exoticisation of Leonora Stern. Where Maud Bailey is a cool blond heterosexual beauty, Leonora Stern is over-abundant, overflowing, overwhelming, exceedingly colourful, amusing yet threatening presence, and highly ambiguous in her sexual preferences. Her descriptions are always in exaggeration, from Sir Bailey’s disdainful “Covered with paint and jangling jewellery, a real mess, she was,”²⁹² to a more positive placement as a “majestically large woman, in all directions” who “dressed up to her size”.²⁹³ Leonora is not simply a woman of colour, she is a woman who revels in colour, namely all colours, as seen when she joins tweed-wearing Prof Blackadder in the TV interview that is to save the Ash-LaMotte manuscripts from being carried away by voracious Mortimer Cropper. Leonora is described as being

resplendent and barbaric in a scarlet silk shirt and trousers, faintly Oriental, faintly Peruvian, with woven rainbow-coloured borders. Her black hair flowed on her shoulders, her wrists and ears and visible bosom were hung with suns and stars of gold. She shone in the small space by the water cooler and emitted pulses of florid and musky scent.²⁹⁴

The overabundant topography of Leonora, influenced by her Creole, Native American, and African descent, next to her pagan predilections, stands in overwhelming contrast to Maud’s cool reserved,

²⁹² Byatt, *Possession*, 79.

²⁹³ *Possession* 310.

²⁹⁴ *Possession* 401.

and most of all “normal”, speak, heteronormative non-explicit, non-pagan, white female presence. In comparison to her American Other, (Leonora and her “barbaric” jewellery), Maud is positively demure, safe, civilised, a late 20th century incarnation of the ‘English rose’.

The binaries here are clear and used for both comic and dramatic effect, but not ironically. Byatt is serious in her imperial Othering. The English white cultural space signified by Maud stands in clear opposition to its exotic colonial non-white Other signified by Leonora. Maud, who is conflicted yet comfortable in her quiet life (physically, sexually, and academically), feels genuinely threatened by Leonora’s over-abundance and intensity, (physically, sexually, and academically). Maud is also established as helpless when confronted with Leonora’s overwhelming Otherness. Leonora is presented as an intriguing, powerful, yet also invasive and threatening force, never mind how well-meaning, as can be seen in her ‘invasion’ of Maud’s usually pristine bathroom, a space that throughout the narrative is established as a supremely private space for thought and reflection:

Leonora splashed a long time in Maud’s bathroom and left it covered with little puddles of water, lidless bottles and several different spicy smells of unknown unguents. Maud put the lids back, mopped up the puddles, had a shower between curtains redolent of Opium and Poison, and had just climbed into her cool bed when Leonora appeared in the doorway, largely naked except for an exiguous and unbelted crimson silk dressing gown. ‘A good-night kiss,’ Leonora said.

‘I can’t.’

‘You can. It’s easy.’

Leonora came to the bed and folded Maud into her bosom. Maud fought to get her nose free. Loose hands met Leonora’s majestic belly and heavy breasts. She couldn’t *push*, that was as bad as submitting. To her shame, she began to cry.²⁹⁵

Maud in the end does succeed in escaping Leonora’s sexual advances, and Leonora is portrayed as generous when rejected – she is never portrayed as violent or rapacious, but rather more comically sexually available and interested, thus keeping the potential threat at a manageable minimum – yet Maud’s discomfort bordering on panic is clear. Leonora is, in all aspects, *too much*. There is too much of her, she is far too present, physically, sexually, and finally academically, as seen in how Maud avoids facing Leonora and her strong feminist views when it comes to LaMotte²⁹⁶ – all of

²⁹⁵ *Possession*, 316-7, italics in the original.

²⁹⁶ Maud’s discomfort with the overt sexuality of late 20th century discourse is abundantly clear in the narrative. Sexuality is not established as bad, per se, but as something too powerful to control, overwhelming all else (much like Leonora), if it is not worked against, or stemmed. As Maud relates to Roland after showing her frustration about how contemporary discourses of reception and text are “reduced like boiling jam to – human sexuality. Just as Leonora

which mirror the very imperial Othering of safe English spaces in comparison to exotic, overwhelming landscapes in the colonies, topographies, cultures, societies that, in their strangeness, foreignness, explicit sexuality, and discomfiting temperatures, threaten to entirely deconstruct the English self.

From Wordsworth's "world of fairy" to Kipling's *Kim*, from Forster's *A Passage to India* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the trope of the disconcerting and dangerous exotic Other in comparison to the sane, composed, civilised English self, is a powerful one, used more to establish the need for the English self's sanity, composure, civilisation, than a deeper understanding of what in fact makes the Other so threatening, exotic, and unknown. The heteronormative imperial hegemonial practice here can be seen in how the narrative establishes the English self as the norm, that which is safe and known and worthy of emulation, while the Other remains that against which tropes of safety, knowledge, and worthiness are established.²⁹⁷

Stern makes the whole earth read as the female body – and language – all language. And all vegetation is pubic hair," a point of view Maud emphatically disagrees with: "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 – 'You are very cross with Leonora.' 'She's very good. But I don't want to see through her eyes. It isn't a matter of her gender and my gender. I just don't.' (*Possession* 253-4).

²⁹⁷ Following the imperial narrative of Othering as Said shows in *Orientalism* (Edward Said. *Orientalism*. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1991): "[...] the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West." (4-5) Towards the end of *Orientalism*, Said points out that, "one of the great advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous and, as I argued in *Culture and Imperialism*, that cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality." (348) He closes his argument with a question, namely, "How can one today speak of "Western civilization" except as in large measure an ideological fiction, implying a sort of detached superiority for a handful of values and ideas, none of which has much meaning outside the history of conquest, immigration, travel and the mingling of peoples that gave the Western nations their present mixed identities?" (348-349). Said, thus, implicitly establishes the first decisive argument for the necessity of a discourse regarding the post-imperiality of the former imperial centre(s).

3.5.4 The Subjectivity of Reception

With regard to beauty, *Possession* is subjective in its method of gaining acuity, relying on the power-equilibrium of a monolithic white space to establish the dynamics of beauty and its accessibility and criticism. When it comes to the extractable ‘truth’ of a text, I argue, this subjectivity is also a fundamental part of the processes established in *Possession*. In the following, I will first consider the experience of truth, signified by the communication between reader and writer via the creative text, and then analyse how the above-mentioned subjectivity plays a vital part in the reception of the text available.

The skill of Byatt’s narration is that she is able to fuse the question of body politics and academic interest to a holistic whole, a fusion of text and reception that Byatt critiques post-structuralist and feminist discourses like to ignore. This melding is exemplified not only by Maud’s experiences, but also by Beatrice Nest, a genuinely enthusiastic student of Randolph Henry Ash’s poetry. Unfortunately, early in her career, Beatrice was side-lined academically and professionally to research Ash’s wife’s correspondence in hopes of finding something interesting about the great man, and maybe hidden signs that Mrs Ash was not to be overlooked either. However, it is through Beatrice’s experience when reading Ash’s poetry, especially the famous poem “Ask to Embla”, that Maud Bailey’s explanation of an academic’s initial *raison d’être* is validated:

‘I mean of course everything connects and connects – all the time – and I suppose one studies – I study – literature because all these connections seem both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously powerful – as though we held a clue to the true nature of things.’²⁹⁸

Forgotten Beatrice Nest is no different. It is her genuine interest in Ash’s oeuvre that steered her to academia in the first place, as can be seen in her reading of “Ask to Embla”, for example, where the poem seems “to be concerned neither with praise nor with blame of some distant lady, but with true conversation between men and women.”²⁹⁹ This “conversation between men and women” is what Beatrice yearned for when studying Ash as an undergraduate, since the poems opened up a world that she could not access:

²⁹⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 253.

²⁹⁹ *Possession* 113.

Reading those poems, she obscurely knew, offered her a painful and as it seemed illicit glimpse of a combination of civilised talk and raw passion which everyone must surely want, and yet which no one, as she looked around her small world, her serious Methodist parents, Mrs Bengtsson [wife to Beatrice's professor] running her University Women's Tea Club, her fellow-students agonising over invitations to dance and whist – no one seemed to have.³⁰⁰

As *Possession's* omniscient narrator later conveys, “Ash told her and she [Beatrice] heard him.”³⁰¹ This is a direct conversation between author and reader, where the author is not simply *scriptor*, but a person speaking, and the reader a person listening and understanding, reminiscent of Ash's first encounter with Christabel LaMotte, who was a reader who not only listened but understood his “*deviously perspicuous meanings, which he thought not meanings, since nobody appeared able to understand them*”,³⁰² nobody, save Christabel. Supplanting the writer-reader relationship to the one of a conversation destabilizes the post-structuralist insistence on the independence of the written word from the writer who wrote the word in the first place. It puts the word back into its initial setting, that of pronunciation, that of speech, of a code that is meant to be understood, allowing the heteroglossia and polyvalence Bakhtin speaks of, where meanings are multiple, and the “author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights,”³⁰³ allowing for a plethora of pronunciations and a layeredness of the conversation a text enables.

It is not surprising then that Beatrice Nest wanted to write about Ash in her doctoral dissertation. Sadly, she was derailed from her endeavour by her own supervisor Prof Bengtsson, who was “very doubtful” about the project. To Bengtsson's mind, Ash was “uncertain ground, a kind of morass, like Shakespeare's sonnets. What Contribution to Knowledge did [Beatrice] hope to make, could she be sure of making?”³⁰⁴ Bengtsson, here, sounds like another destructive force, who, like F. R. Leavis to his serious student Blackadder, showed Beatrice “the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature,” while “simultaneously depriv[ing her] of any confidence in [her] own capacity to contribute to, or change it.”³⁰⁵ This is clear in Bengtsson's

³⁰⁰ *Possession* 114.

³⁰¹ *Possession* 114.

³⁰² *Possession* 6, italics in the original. An excerpt of Ash's first attempts to write LaMotte.

³⁰³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* 121-2.

³⁰⁴ Byatt, *Possession* 114.

³⁰⁵ *Possession* 27.

question about Beatrice's possible "Contribution to Knowledge", a polite though brutal admonition to not make a fool of herself by trying to tackle one of 'the greats'.

Finally, where Blackadder became as grey as the Ash Factory he works in, Beatrice Nest became as sedentary, lethargic, and disillusioned as the work she never wanted to begin with started overwhelming her like a growing sediment of words. Her delay in publishing Mrs Ash's annotated diaries shows not a slowness in academic skill, but rather a refusal to give into something Beatrice never wanted to do in the first place, though seeing no means of escaping her predicament. One could say that Beatrice's lethargy is an outcome of the conflict between the social expectations given, in this case in matters of research and academia, and Beatrice's self, the reader 'within', so to speak, who in a Ricoeurian manner remains unchanged, a constant, the persistent listener and reader of Ash.³⁰⁶

This constant though quiet refusal to move into the direction Prof Bengtson set her on is given visual expression by Beatrice Nest's appearance. Beatrice Nest is described as a woman who is

indisputably solid, and nevertheless amorphous, a woman of wide and abundant flesh, sedentary swelling hips, a mass of bosom, above which spread a cheerful-shaped face, crowned by a kind of angora hat, or thick wool skein of crimped white hair, wove and tucked into a roll from which lost strands trailed and wandered in all directions.³⁰⁷

Beatrice Nest is not, by this description, a woman who conforms to the accepted definition of beautiful (white) female aesthetics.³⁰⁸ This is seen in her envisioning by her colleagues and peers,

³⁰⁶ Ricoeur's definition of 'who we are', speak identity, is an often used example of one of the non-theological identity-narratives subscribed to in Western socio-cultural discourse, and can be described as following: "The kind of identity that the Ricoeurian self has is not like that of the nonpersonal entities that perdure simply as in some significant sense "selfsame." Rather, the self's identity is constituted by an inextricable tie between such selfsameness and a self-constancy that maintains its identity through change over time. Following the distinction in Latin between *idem* and *ipse*, Ricoeur holds that the self's *idem*-identity is that which gives the self, among other things, its spatio-temporal sameness. Its *ipse*-identity is what accounts for its unique ability to initiate something new and imputable to a self, be it oneself or another, as agent. Without both sorts of identity there is no self. Because a self has both an *idem*-identity and an *ipse*-identity, it inhabits two irreducible orders of causality, namely, the physical and the intentional orders. A comprehensive account of any genuine action must express the way it is related to both of these orders." (Bernard Dauenhauer and David Pellauer. "Paul Ricoeur". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2011 Edition*. Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/ricoeur/>> (5 July 2015), no page numbers in the original.).

³⁰⁷ Byatt, *Possession* 112.

³⁰⁸ The difference in description between Leonora Stern's overtly sexual opulence and Beatrice Nest's amorphous "abundant flesh" is telling. Leonora Stern, the overwhelming non-white Other, is described in unanimously positive – if not threatening – terms when it comes to her actual physique. This is not the case with Beatrice Nest, who is after all a white woman of equally large proportions. The politics of white and black female bodies that shines through here points again to the question of the confined space within which *Possession* is able to establish access to beauty and

as “in terms of Carroll’s obstructive white sheep” in Mortimer Cropper’s case, or as Blackadder surmises “in bad moods [like] one of those puffed white spiders, bleached by the dark, feeling along the threads of her trap.”³⁰⁹ Neither of these descriptions are positive, let alone attractive, though at turns, mildly annoying to amusing, and quietly threatening and disconcerting, though it is interesting that both think of Beatrice in animal references, fictional or no.

Her female peers, in turn, at first saw Beatrice Nest as “some kind of guardian octopus, an ocean Fafnir, curled torpidly round her hoard, putting up opaque screens of ink or water smoke to obscure her whereabouts.”³¹⁰ In previous, more conciliatory times as the 1950s and 1960s where Beatrice “entertained groups of students” in her home, the young women considered her “motherly”. The post-1960s generations assumed she was “a regressed and unregenerate lesbian”, concluding a conceptual and physio-social space from which Beatrice sees no means of escaping, largely due to the “massive, unacceptable bulk of her breasts.”³¹¹

Again the physical presence of the inspired reader, in this case Beatrice, (who is part of the academic world and thus a writer as well), is part of her positioning within the world she lives in. The reverberations from her academic and professional disappointments are mirrored in less work-related spheres, though they are, in the academic sphere Beatrice lives in, openly linked. The coordinates mapped out here are Beatrice’ home, “a tiny house in Mortlake” on the one hand, her “growing irrelevance to the deliberations of the department, as Bengtsson was succeeded by Blackadder” on the other, which led to less and less students coming to visit until, after 1972, none came at all; and finally her “unacceptable” breasts. These all create a space within which Beatrice Nest must navigate, creating a character and personality whose life and work mirror each other like the other characters in *Possession*, such as Roland Michell, Maud Bailey, and Prof Blackadder.

There is one problem, though: the only characters in *Possession* who experience the beauty and truth of Randolph Henry Ash’s poetry without bias are those characters who either parallel his own identity narrative, as in educated white men, or mirror Christabel LaMotte’s socio-cultural signification. The one woman to whom Ash speaks to is Beatrice Nest, a woman confined in

truth: a particular space wherein whiteness seems absent but is powerful in its silent presence. The dynamics of this body-politics is something Zadie Smith is adept in showing, as will be considered in Chapter 4.4 “Gendered Beauty”.

³⁰⁹ *Possession* 112.

³¹⁰ *Possession* 112.

³¹¹ *Possession* 116. Again, where Leonora Stern is described as positively voluptuous and definitely welcoming in her bodily presence, Beatrice Nest’s physique is “unacceptable” and prompts her peers to non-human references, pointing to an implicit discourse of beauty that seems to run strictly along ethnic and racial lines, showing once again the silent presence of white ethnic discourse while apparently being absent from actual conscious consideration, a circumstance that will be considered further in Chapter 4.4.

severely gender-biased socio-cultural matrix, a woman who finds in Ash a means of freedom paralleling the freedoms Christabel LaMotte wishes for herself in a highly gender-biased Victorian society. All other characters find Ash unappealing, if Maud Bailey's initial reaction to and reading of Ash is to speak for the general consensus that Ash is outdated, at the very least.³¹²

Interestingly, however, it is through a deeper investigation of Ash's work that the ambiguity of the Victorian society Ash and LaMotte lived in is seen, showing how the bias of Ash's society hid the creative influences Ash and LaMotte were subject to. Ash's, and later LaMotte's, accepted and acclaimed poetic genius gained a ground-breaking boost via their correspondence, their exchange of thoughts and ideas, their genuine conversation and communication, their reading of and writing to each other, which in turn led to a life-changing affair, and ever more reading and writing, though quite anguished communication. Ash and LaMotte's "meeting of minds" is the foundation of a continuous cultural production and creative output, signified by their creative, metaphysical, and physical fecundity.

Conversely, their experience of what may be termed "spontaneous overflow of feeling recollected in tranquillity" – from Ash's loving *Ask to Embla* and his violent *Mummy Possess*, to LaMotte's inspiring *Melusina* and her many smaller personal poems – gives a glimpse of what might be called a sublime experience of two highly creative people meeting and falling in love with each other, then finally having to part due to the powerful constraints of the society they lived in, with all the heart-breaking consequences included.

The crux is that Ash and LaMotte's acclaimed creative output was conceived, developed, and finally inscribed from within experiences that needed to be silenced within the dominant narratives of the society they lived in to guarantee basic socio-cultural survival. Ash, after all, was a married man, and LaMotte an unmarried woman living with another unmarried woman. Public discovery of their affair would have had disastrous consequences for both, though possibly much more severely for LaMotte considering the gender-bias of Victorian social mores.

It would be interesting to see what scholarship of Ash and LaMotte eventually amounted to, yet the question remains – what does this say about scholarship in and of itself, if *Possession* was written in reaction to post-structuralist and feminist discourses? These discourses are pervasive not only within the Western nomenclature, but in all those domains where scholarship is taught – universities, institutes, and colleges – which via the European imperial dominance are global, and

³¹² *Possession* 42.

so socially, culturally, ethnically, and politically very diverse entities. What exactly is one to glean from the methodology proposed in *Possession*?

I argue that there are two readings possible, one more positive and one more negative. One reading would be that the heteronormative imperial hegemonial narratives of the past, speak, imperial meta-narratives, suppressed many diverse narratives of identity that are still not visible today, requiring unbiased readings. However, there is a rub: in *Possession*, these unbiased readings are only accessible to those readers who have the same socio-cultural signification as the writers in question, thus implicitly re-instating the imperial dynamics of creativity, power, and place. In *Possession*, the harbingers of enlightenment and understanding are exactly that demographic that was at the pinnacle of the imperial pyramid: the heterosexual white male, followed closely, though obscurely, by the heterosexual white female – and both from relatively prosperous, educated classes. There seems, so to speak, no escaping this imperial narrative within *Possession*'s lifeworlds.

A more positive reading would be that anyone can read in such interested and unbiased fashion as a Roland Michell if one focused on the words alone. This is, however, where cultural genealogies complicate such a perspective, since, as considered earlier in this thesis, the English language especially is no neutral entity. When Roland writes of words that “sing and sing”, his is also a perspective of a scholar firmly situated within the narrowly-defined English cultural space. Would the same be the case for readers who do not parallel Ash's demographic as easily as Roland does? What of such texts as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, where the words used may sing, but are also deeply offensive to a large part of readership outside the white English cultural space? How is an informed reader to be established if the whole process of getting informed is barbed with histories of bias, canonical blind spots, and imperial narratives of linguistic domination and subjugation – all of which are in no ways part of Byatt's construction of literary beauty and truth accessed via the poetic genius of the written text, triggering the sublime experience of truths available that readers may access, as is the case with Roland when reading Ash. Just like the dynamics of beauty established in *Possession* are not as simple as they seem to be, the methodology of gaining truth as purported in *Possession* is not as straightforward as at first assumed. The circularity of socio-cultural signifiers is clear, it seems inescapable, and the narrative gives no possibilities to break the cycle.

Rather, *Possession* inadvertently shows the breaks and fault lines within the dominant narrative already perceptible to the characters within the narrative. Val's reading of Ash, for

example, in comparison to her work experiences in her “menial” temp-jobs, shows a sense that Victorian poet R. H. Ash would probably have had little means to understand the cracks in the dominant narratives of self and other within *Possession*’s English cultural space Val witnesses, the violent disruptions being: paedophilia, severe medical complications, sudden assault, and violent death.³¹³ To Val, Ash is a dead poet who “had a thing about dead people”, the study of which Val seems to imply, entails an unpleasant whiff of intellectual necrophilia, next to its sheer irrelevance to life lived in the late 20th century. Ash, to Val, remains unappealing, divorced as his thoughts and poetry seem to be from the pressures of late 20th century urban livelihood. Conversely, this opens up the question in how far Roland’s deep interest in Ash’s poetry is a form of escapism from the tensions and frictions of the very historical space he lives in. After all, he and Maud seem exhausted by the postmodern “metaphors that seem to eat up [their] world”, their subsequent conversation showing a quiet yearning for apparently simpler times when beauty was beauty and truth was truth, and one was still able to mine what was best and brightest “in the world”,³¹⁴ which in turn does Byatt’s method to gain beauty and truth little favours.

Additionally, the deep-seated bias of the academy can be seen in how Val develops as a scholar while she and Roland study together. In the beginning, Val is an interested scholar with her own ideas, her own questions and readings. Yet she gets sucked into the academic vortex of her boyfriend’s (Roland’s) success, to a point that she starts rephrasing his own ideas when they debate.³¹⁵ Val apparently deems her own opinions increasingly less worthy, which can be seen as an internalisation of practices that denigrate the female point of view as not really valid, let alone substantial. She becomes timid though passive-aggressive in her stance on Ash, to a point that her examiners basically accuse her of plagiarism, though Val’s negative reading of Ash goes head on against Roland’s positive assessment.

³¹³ As Val relates to Roland: “‘You do what turns you on,’ said Val. ‘Everyone does, if they’re lucky, if there is anything that turns them on. You have this thing about this dead man. Who had a thing about dead people. That’s OK but not everyone is very bothered about all that. I see some things, from my menial vantage point. [...] Randolph Henry Ash wrote long ago. Forgive me if I don’t care what he wrote in his *Vico*.’” (*Possession* 20).

³¹⁴ Though even then, both are aware of the dangers inherent in such a perspective, or as Maud says about Ash, LaMotte, and their peers: “‘At some point in history their self-value changed into – what worries you. A horrible oversimplification. It leaves out guilt, for a start. Now or then.’” (*Possession* 254).

³¹⁵ When reminiscing the early days of their relationship, Roland remembers that if they did quarrel, the main reason was that “Roland expressed concern about Val’s reserve with the world in general, her refusal to advance opinions in class, and later, even to him. In the early days she had had lots of quiet opinions,” opinions which Val “had offered him, shyly slyly, couched as a kind of invitation or bait.” However, later, “Roland noticed, as he himself had his successes, Val said less and less, and when she argued, offered him increasingly his own ideas, sometimes the reverse side of the knitting, but essentially his.” (*Possession* 12).

[Val's] 'Male Ventriloquism' was judged to be good work and discounted by the examiners as probably largely by Roland, which was doubly unjust, since he had refused to look at it, and did not agree with its central proposition, which was that Randolph Henry Ash neither liked nor understood women, that his female speakers were constructs of his own fear and aggression, that even the poem-cycle, *Ask to Embla*, was the work not of love but of narcissism, the poet addressing his Anima.³¹⁶

Whether Val wrote 'Male Ventriloquism' in defiance to Roland's positive readings of Ash, or simply because, like Maud, she found him distasteful, is not certain. However, that the thesis was her own idea is clear, which makes its negative assessment "doubly unjust" as Roland rightly surmises. One can only imagine the prejudice a non-white, non-male scholar would face in such an academic climate, especially if the individual in question came from equally humble beginnings as Val and Roland.³¹⁷ It also explains Val's disillusionment with academia, and her frustration and fatigue with Roland's un-ending fascination with such a traditionally canonical poet like Ash.³¹⁸

Byatt thus shows a certain obliviousness to wider discourses of feminism that Spivak critiqued in her seminal "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where within the Western feminist discourse that incorporates what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sees as "the contribution of the bourgeois-democratic revolutions to the social and political individualism of women",³¹⁹ any critique of the meta-narratives and systems of definition used were seen to, "produce difference by differing" while equally appealing to "a sexual identity defined as essential and privileging experiences associated with that identity."³²⁰ Spivak roundly eschews such a simplifying stance, and with her

³¹⁶ *Possession* 12-13.

³¹⁷ "[Val's childhood home] was Croydon, where she lived with her divorced mother in a council flat, supported by social security, supplemented occasionally by haphazard maintenance payments from her father, who was in the Merchant Navy and had not been seen since Val was five. Val had never, during their time together, proposed to Roland that they visit her mother, though Roland had twice taken her to Glasdale, where she had helped his father was up, and had taken her mother's jeering deflation of their way of life in her stride, telling him, 'Don't worry, Mole. I've seen it all before. Only mine drinks. If you lit a match in our kitchen, it'd go up in a roar.'" (*Possession* 13).

³¹⁸ It is telling that within *Possession's* lifeworlds, it is heterosexual white educated men such as Fergus Wolff, and, belatedly, Roland Michell, who gain most from the revisions and breaks of the 1960s and 1970s. All others are either marginalised (Beatrice Nest, Val) come from different socio-cultural spaces and practices altogether (Leonora Stern), or are already members of a demographic that traditionally has full access to those institutions that regulate the cultural production and systems of creativity, power, and place (Maud, Blackadder, Cropper). The question of class will be considered further in Chapter 3.5.6 "Class and Perspective".

³¹⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. "Placing women's history in history." *New Left Review*. Vol. 133, May-June 1982. London: New Left Review, p. 21, qtd. in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988, p. 91.

³²⁰ Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 48, qtd. in Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 91.

ground-breaking critique embarked on dissecting how “the mainstream project of Western feminism both continues and displaces the battle over the right to individualism between women and men in situations of upward class mobility.”³²¹

In the light of Spivak’s demand for deep-strata analysis of the unquestioned perspectives within a powerful deconstructing discourse, I argue that the implicit implication in Byatt’s critique of feminist discourses is either, a) a universality claim to all feminist perspectives, which Spivak et al already critiqued as mirroring heteronormative imperial hegemonial practices or b) an expectation that the implied reader understands that the demographic in question are white educated men and women, excluding all other demographics and identity narratives from the methodology that Byatt proposes. Both choices betray a deep subjectivity in perspective. Byatt’s point of view is thus either rigged with perspective blinkers via implicit universality claims, or it is a simple assertion that in this particular demographic – white, educated – these are the answers she proposes to combat the pitfalls possible in post-structuralist and feminist discourses, though heavily relying on the reader’s complicity in the initial stipulation.

It is up to the reader to decide which interpretation is more conclusive. My reading is that *Possession* portrays a lack of understanding that the demographic within which it ‘takes place’ is one where systems of definition, while being highly subjective, are established as the universal norm. The narrative’s conceptual blindness is symptomatic of a wider discourse of white ethnicity, lingering imperial hegemonial practice, and the subsequent dynamics of creativity, power, and place. This makes the proposal within *Possession*’s narrative to attain beauty and truth via poetic genius and sublime something unique to one demographic – white, educated – but otherwise not very helpful in a wider, more diverse and polyvalent, speak, post-imperial socio-cultural setting as was and is the case in post-empire London and England.

³²¹ Spivak, “Can the subaltern Speak?” 91.

3.5.5 Embedded Imperial Practice

Post-structuralism demands that the reader investigate the narratives embedded within the text they are reading for those narratives that inform the entire structure, next to the silences that are part and parcel of this structure. In *Possession*, I have argued, the meta-narrative borrows heavily and at times is completely subsumed by imperial dynamics of creativity, power, and place, which can also be seen in the authorial landscapes the narrative moves in.

Ash, for example, is a representative of the traditional imperial canon by which English departments all across the British Empire were established and consolidated. This is not ‘a little extra meaning’ to the narratives of traditionally canonical poets such as Ash. To understand empire as a whole, the place of poets such as Ash within the imperial narrative of hegemonial dominance is vital. Authors such as R. H. Ash, and the texts they produced were the tools by which English Departments were established. In the light of Lord Macauley et al’s directives to create English spaces and individuals beyond traditional English shores, this is no small matter.

Ash’s own investigation shows the dominant narrative of his time. Much like his ‘real-world’ peers, Ash’s diverse interests are a search for historicity, of the beginning of the story of a vast imperial narrative all the way to “the origin of life”,³²² wherein, qua imperial identity narrative, Western civilisation was established as the pinnacle of human progress.³²³ History, as Hayden White writes, was until recently a concerted attempt to establishment a narrative arc, until postmodern discourse broke the mould.³²⁴ How, or more precisely, why is an R. H. Ash to be exempt from the great narrative search of his time, if he is in fact the great poet and thinker he is made out to be? Ash is established as an author who is “interested in everything”:

³²² *Possession* 254

³²³ As Graham MacPhee points out, part of the nomenclature of imperial hegemonial practice was that there “was no such thing as “Western” civilization, [because] there existed only “civilization”, a universal set of ideas, perspectives, values and judgements embodied in British culture but applicable to all. [...] However, against the implicit universality of this progressive view, which suggested that all people might potentially be the same given the right conditions, imperial ideology also stressed inherent differences between cultures that separated non-Europeans as fundamentally more ‘primitive’ and ‘immature’ from the achievements of the British, who represented the final, modern end of human development.” (Graham MacPhee, *Post-war British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* 11).

³²⁴ White’s delineation on the development of biological discourse is telling: “Biology became a science when it ceased to be practice as “natural history,” i.e., when scientists of organic nature ceased trying to construct the “true story” of “what happened” and began looking for the laws, purely causal and nonteleological, that could account for the evidence given by the fossil record, results of breeding practices, and so on. To be sure, as Mandelbaum stresses, a *sequential* account of a set of events is not the same as narrative account thereof. And the difference between them is the absence of any interest in teleology as an explanatory principle in the former.” (Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* 217, italics in the original).

Arab astronomy and African transport systems, angels and oakapples, hydraulics and the guillotine, druids, and the grande armée, catharists and printers' devils, ectoplasm and solar mythology, the last meals of frozen mastodons and the true nature of manna.³²⁵

When paralleled with Mary Louise Pratt's listing of the imperial observation, investigation, and archivation practices, Ash's interests are definitely part and parcel of the imperial project, where the imperial centre, as Saree Makdisi points out, was establishing itself as a centre at the same time as it was colonising and establishing the imperial periphery.³²⁶

Where did an R. H. Ash for example find the 'data' to investigate African transport systems? Quite likely with the help of such organisations as the British Africa Association and their records, so enthusiastic as the Association was in helping Mungo Park and company find trans-continental trade routes and possible vestiges of Carthaginian culture, subsuming in both objectives a narrative of imperial genealogy harking back to Roman imperialism, and so establishing an imperial legitimisation process. R. H. Ash, in his writing and reception, cannot be cut out of the narrative of empire. As a Victorian thinker and poet, he is by the very practice of his art part and parcel of the very imperial hegemonial dynamic that established and solidified imperial practice and helped establish the British Empire as a whole.

Additionally, Ash's poetry as such would have gained validation by being taught within the English academies, perpetuating the imperial dominance of structures of creativity, power, and place. Ash's acclaimed *Swammerdam*, for example, would have been part of the poetry to be memorised all across the empire, the kind of text thought worthy to be emulated, a sign of "the best which has been thought and said in the world",³²⁷ speak, the imperial world. To exempt Ash from this greater narrative is to ignore the incredible influence of said narrative within the imperial hegemonial practice, or to consider the imperial periphery entirely disconnected from the imperial centre, a connect-disconnect that, on closer inspection, simply does not hold. What happened in the centre materially influenced the periphery, and in matters of acquisition of goods, resources, and data, vice versa as well.

³²⁵ Byatt, *Possession* 28.

³²⁶ As Saree Makdisi writes in *Romantic Imperialism*: "[...] one of the difficulties presented by Britain and by British imperialism in the romantic period is that this metropolitan centre was itself being constituted, was itself coming into being, at the same time as it was constituting these distant territories as imperial possessions. Or, to be more precise, the metropolitan centre was defining these imperial territories at the very same time as they were defining the metropolitan centre itself." (Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism* 176).

³²⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* [iii].

However, this imperial dynamic is not once considered in *Possession*, a text that is deeply concerned about text, reception, and the wider implications of archivation and power-structures within academia. Rather, it is taken for granted as the norm, which creates a fairly ironic situation when juxtaposed with *Possession*'s 'villain' Professor Mortimer Cropper, and his motives and means of acquisition and possession. Cropper commits all kinds of smaller and larger crimes, from theft and grave robbery to continuous hoarding as seen in the power and importance of his Stant Collection, the inescapable Mecca of Ash scholarship. As Blackadder says, he would not "trust anyone, faced with Cropper's cheque-book, no further than [he] could see,"³²⁸ Cropper who is known to convince hapless owners to sell their Ash memorabilia for a price.³²⁹ Though, if unwilling, Cropper finds no difficulty in stooping to clandestine theft to acquire what he considers rightfully his.³³⁰

Ironically, the Ash factory is accessed via the British Museum's Egyptian crypt, the "sunless Egyptian necropolis, [...] blind staring pharaohs, crouching scribes, minor sphinxes and empty mummy cases,"³³¹ which, considering the history of museums, quite definitely has its own past of grave-robbery and possibly much bigger cheques. The implicit meta-narrative of 'the greater good' here is interesting – i.e. collecting historical artefacts, setting up an archive, and so keeping the artefacts safe from destruction for future generations to inspect, investigate, and admire – since in matters of the British Museum, this is not seen as problematic, yet in matters of a private collector such as Cropper it is seen as highly threatening and dangerous, disavowing the history of donations of large collections to museums by private collectors. Where does one draw the line of legitimate collecting and archivation? In how far is Cropper wrong to create a space of safe archivation, as in the Stant Collection,³³² which within *Possession*'s lifeworlds enjoys world-wide

³²⁸ Byatt, *Possession* 30.

³²⁹ *Possession* 95-6.

³³⁰ *Possession* 96-7.

³³¹ "[...] the Ash factory, hatched in the bowls of [the British Museum] was the Inferno. There was a way down, on iron rungs, from the Reading Room, and a way out, through a high locked portal, which brought you up into the sunless Egyptian necropolis, amongst blind staring pharaohs, crouching scribes, minor sphinxes and empty mummy cases. The Ash factory was a hot place of metal cabinets and glass cells, containing the clatter of typewriters, gloomily lit by neon tubes." (*Possession* 26-27) Later in the text, when on his way out of the Ash factory, "[Roland] emerged amongst the Egyptian heavyweights and saw, between two huge stone legs, something rapid and white and golden that turned out to be Fergus Wolff, also heading for coffee." (32).

³³² As Cropper states proudly, "In Harmony City, [...] in the Stant Collection in the University there, I have the largest and finest collection of Randolph Henry Ash's correspondence anywhere in the world. It is my aim to know as far as possible everything he did – everyone who mattered to him – every little preoccupation he had. These small letters of yours, Mrs Wapshott, are not much, maybe, on their own. But in the global perspective they add luster, they add detail, they bring the whole man just that little bit more back to life. I hope you will entrust them to the Stant Collection, Mrs Wapshott, then they will be preserved forever in the finest conditions and purified air, controlled temperature and limited access, only to accredited scholars in the field." (*Possession* 96-97)

renown, and in how far is Cropper's hoarding legitimate? He is after all obsessed with Ash, only far more personally involved than, say, Prof Blackadder, again mirroring the Othering of civilised, ordered, beneficial English investigation and invasive, exaggerating, dangerous American/colonial hoarding.

It seems that, within *Possession's* "romance of the archives",³³³ all other narratives of collection and possession that are not established within the dominant English nomenclature are constructed as threatening, disseminating, invasive, destructive – yet without any understanding of just how the dominant English nomenclature was constructed, and just how the institutions that retain these vast collections were created. These are institutions all the English academic characters in the narrative work in, yet little is said about their construction and institutionalisation via the domination/investigation/theft of artefacts in the imperial periphery with the methods Mary Louise Pratt so succinctly lists.

Meta-textually, the only threat to the former imperial centre is the new imperial centre, the United States of America, with its vast funds and trained personnel, (i.e. Cropper's many paid helpers in the Stant Collection), paralleling England's previous imperial practice during the British Empire. What is interesting here is that the US-American hegemonial practice, signified benevolently via Leonora Stern and insidiously via Mortimer Cropper, remains on all accounts invasive and threatening. If anything, this shows that the previous imperial practice of the former imperial centre quite clearly had a decisive impact on the former imperial periphery, which, when considering "the romance of the archives", must be taken into full account. Since *Possession* was conceived and written in response to methods and practices of reception and text, this embedded mirroring is intriguing, and would, I argue, require a deeper analysis of the representation of archives within the former imperial centres and their meta-narratorial habitus.

Deconstruction, when taken seriously, has no sacred cows. No narrative is safe from being picked apart, which is why it is so difficult to construct absolutist templates of beauty and truth without falling into foucauldian traps of power and subjectivity,³³⁴ and continuous questions regarding definitions of creativity and the significance of (socio-cultural) place.

³³³ Philip Hensher. "A. S. Byatt, The Art of Fiction No. 168".

³³⁴ For example Foucault's definition of the "*episteme* [as] the "apparatus" which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may not be characterized as scientific". (Michel Foucault. "Body/Power." C. Gordon (Ed.) *Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980, p. 197, qtd. in Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 94).

There is, after all, a sense of inevitability in Cropper's collecting that Blackadder doggedly tries to fight, while 'old England', as signified by the Seal Court Baileys, is constructed as cumbersome and untenable within a society that no longer functions as it used to during its glory days, in an upstairs downstairs fashion à la *Gosford Park* perhaps, if Roland's expectations with regard to English country houses are considered.³³⁵

'Old England' is a space where ownership can be a burden and unknown treasures of a time of past glories lay hidden in forgotten rooms/tombs,³³⁶ the (unsung) heroes of yore neglected (LaMotte), denigrated,³³⁷ and seen as negligible by younger, more ignorant generations who can only appreciate the wealth of their past and ancestors in terms of money for infrastructure (pipes and heating for Seal Court) and medicine (for Lady Bailey), and so have no qualms to sell off their heritage to cunning collectors of dubious morality (Cropper), though actually aggressive to those who only mean well, never mind how boisterous and bumbling they are perceived to be (Leonora).³³⁸ Sir Bailey even waves a gun at Leonora, paralleling non-European natives shaking spears at relic hunters trying to steal what is theirs, making the imperial collector/discoverer/adventurer narrative as present in *Possession* as it ever was in imperial narratives such as Kipling's *Kim*.

Empire and its nomenclature, its patterns of thought and perspective, its blind spots and systems of definition are not easily erased, so deeply-rooted as they were in the very construction, establishment, and maintenance of empire. The English cultural space, by dint of being the powerhouse at the centre of the imperial project, cannot, now, after empire disseminated, see itself as separate from the very dynamics instigated by and through it. The past is not prologue, nor is it disconnected from the present. It influences the present in greater depth and breadth than is often comfortable, showing itself in post-imperial phantom pains where the presence of empire, despite its physical absence, is very much felt and perceived in matters of narratives and systems followed and seen as fact. Post-colonial Studies has done much to show the dynamics of these phantom pains in the former imperial periphery. It is time to consider in how far this is also the case in the former

³³⁵ When entering Seal Court, Roland is after all surprised not to see "a butler or some obsequious manservant, at least a maid or companion, welcome[ing] them into a room shining with silver and silk carpets." (*Possession* 77).

³³⁶ See *Possession* 76-78, where Roland and Maud see in what dire straits the Seal Court Baileys live in.

³³⁷ Where Sir Bailey praises R. H. Ash as "a *real* poet", Christabel LaMotte, who after all is part of his family heritage, is a woman who apparently "didn't *do* anything. Just lived up there in the east wing and poured out all this stuff about fairies. It wasn't a *life*", (*Possession*, 79) showing a distinct bias reminiscent of the constraints LaMotte had to face as a poet.

³³⁸ *Possession* 79.

imperial centre, and I hope to have shown that *Possession* shows just how acute these phantom pains actually can be.

3.5.6 Class and Perspective

I would like to close my close reading with a short excursion into class dynamics in *Possession*. Next to gender, class is a definitive influence in *Possession*, as seen when Roland and Maud first meet Sir and Lady Bailey, distant relations to Maud and the unsuspecting keepers of the coveted Ash-LaMotte letters:

Sir George was small and wet and bristling. He had laced leather boots with polished rounded calves, like greaves. He had a many-pocketed shooting jacket, brown, with a flat brown tweed cap. He barked. Roland took him for a caricature and bristled vestigally with class irritation. Such people, in his and Val's world, were not quite real but still walked the earth.³³⁹

Maud as well is aware of the distinction of power and place, not to mention her place in the dynamic, since, to her, Sir George “represented the restriction and boredom of countless childhood country weekends of shooting and tramping and sporting conversation. Rejected and evaded.”³⁴⁰ Unlike Roland, whose social coordinates are quickly clarified,³⁴¹ Maud Bailey's social positioning is a little more tenuous. While conversing with the Baileys, for example, “Roland watched Maud making noises he sensed came naturally, and sensed too that she would never make in the Women's Studies building,”³⁴² a hint on the acceptability, or rather unacceptability, of Maud's near-aristocratic upbringing. Maud is after all a relation to the Sir and Lady Bailey, despite an unfortunate history of family disputes. The dynamics of the class bias within *Possession* – working class/lower middle class on the one hand and upper-middle class/aristocracy on the other – can also be seen when Roland first meets the solicitor Euan MacIntyre who is obviously interested in Roland's still-girlfriend Val. Interestingly, the class bias is framed in both mythological as well as phonetic, near-musical terms:

³³⁹ *Possession* 74.

³⁴⁰ *Possession* 74-5.

³⁴¹ Roland's father is “a minor official in the county Council” and his mother “a disappointed English graduate”, disappointed “in herself, in his father, in him”, though “the wrath of her disappointment had been the instrument of his education.” (*Possession* 10).

³⁴² *Possession* 77.

Euan MacIntyre leaned over and gravely extended a hand downwards. There was something powerful about him, Pluto delivering Persephone at the gate of the underworld. [...] His was clear and ringing, not Scots, full of what Roland might inaccurately have called toffee-nosed sounds, or plummy sounds, sounds he had spent his childhood learning to imitate derisively, hooting, curtailed, drawling, chipping sounds that prickled his non-existent hackles with class hostility.³⁴³

Euan MacIntyre is thus positioned as a more powerful suitor, a shinier knight so to speak, though considering that this meeting is in the middle of Roland's own quest to understand the Ash-LaMotte connection, the loss of Val, who was part of his old underworld life, is not so tragic. Rather, Roland ploughs along in his pursuit, paralleling the dark, exhausting and perilous pursuit of the Childe in Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower" came.³⁴⁴ The layering of Romantic intertext in *Possession*, from Maud Bailey's name,³⁴⁵ to the Ash-LaMotte biographies, and the final climax of the narrative that takes place during a quintessentially dark and stormy night, allows for in-depth readings, however it stays firmly within a framework where the narrative thrust can focus completely on class dynamics and gender relations, hetero- as well as homosexual,³⁴⁶ without any consideration of the one seemingly absent identity narrative, namely that of ethnicity.

What makes this problematic is that just like the absence of any race and ethnicity discourse, the class stratification is not questioned either, but rather set as the norm, with accepted statutes of constraints and mobility, but nothing to in fact question the status quo. Maud Bailey, for example, comes from an upper middle class background if one considers the Bailey connection, with different class constraints, but still ultimately privileged.³⁴⁷ She is a beautiful, well-read, upper middle class white woman, her position as the head of the Women Studies department in Lincoln

³⁴³ *Possession* 125.

³⁴⁴ Robert Browning. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 1266-1271.

³⁴⁵ For an insightful analysis of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. "Maud" see: James R. Kincaid. "Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns." 2 August 2002. [victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org). <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/kincaid/ch6.html>> (4 July 2015).

³⁴⁶ Despite genuine mutual liking, Maude and Leonora's relationship is a strain to Maude due to Leonora's obvious sexual interest in her.

³⁴⁷ The first encounter with the Seal Court Baileys is telling. Where Roland expects "a butler or some obsequious manservant, at least a maid or companion, welcome[ing] them into a room shining with silver and silk carpets", and is shocked to see in what a shambles the large house actually is, Maud is not surprised: "Maud, inured to poor heating and the threadbare, was still a little disturbed by the degree of discomfort represented by the sad lighting." Also, while they take tea with the Seal Court Baileys, Roland is able to observe Maud in a different social setting: "[Maud and Sir Bailey] talked horses and a little about the Norfolk Baileys. Roland watched Maud making noises which he sensed came naturally, and sensed too that she would never make in the Women's Studies building." (*Possession* 77).

University pointing to the English caste system that operates in *Possession* without much ado, let alone critique. It is simply the case, mirroring the stringent Victorian class boundaries.

The marginalisation-processes remain unchanged: Beatrice Nest and Val who come from relatively humble backgrounds are weighed down severely by the gender bias in academia, while academic rivals Fergus Wolff and Roland Michell gain most from the structures, signifying the accepted upward mobility of the heterosexual white male. With Leonora Stern established as the powerful and exotic female Other, and Mortimer Cropper as her insidious foil, the only two remaining major characters in *Possession* both come from the established classes: Maud Bailey, the offspring of landed gentry, and Prof Blackadder, the son of a clergyman.

The England in *Possession* is rigid in its caste system and, on the whole, conservative in matters of gender, since all the female characters end up with a male companion, intellectually (Beatrice's vindication of her reading of Ash, her intellectual 'first love'), sexually and romantically (Maud and Roland, Val and Euan MacIntyre), and in matters of power-politics, a union of forces: Blackadder and Leonora.³⁴⁸ Thus the critique that *Possession* is reactionary in its narrative thrust is valid, yet not as Adams, Flegel, and Yelin initially construct it.

Byatt's concerns with regard to reception and text are legitimate and, as I argued above, her solution has been misread. However, the space within which this solution is established shows the problematics Adams, Flegel, and Yelin criticise. The imperial dynamics of the heteronormative ethnically monolithic well-situated male perspective are the "organizing principle" of *Possession*'s methodology.³⁴⁹ The narrative makes one wonder if Romance in general demands heteronormative hegemonial practices and a fixed caste system. Possibly only within such a rigid grid can any rules be broken, can 'rule breaking' exist as such, where the creative becomes a force to be reckoned with by apparently bleeding into everything, though never so much as to completely disrupt the dominant narrative, as in the status quo, while equally allowing the much-cherished and narratorially conservative happy ending.

The disruption is just enough to allow fresh blood to enter the established veins of the academic body politic, as seen in Roland (an established Ash scholar who in the end is invited to join academia as a full member via several job offers), Val (romantically involved with Euan

³⁴⁸ Leonora is interesting in that her exoticness is established as a constant source of destabilisation even threat – amusing and encompassing though it is – of the heteronormative power structures *Possession*'s characters live and work in, Maud and Blackadder's reaction to Leonora being the most telling.

³⁴⁹ Carroll Hamilton, *Affirmative Reaction* 7.

MacIntyre, the rich solicitor who owns half a horse), and finally Beatrice Nest, validated in her readings by the discovery of Ash and LaMotte's relationship and mutual creative stimulus.

Possession is thus an inverse validation of the dominant system of creativity, power, and place, since by critiquing the methodologies that fully disrupted the dominant narrative (post-structuralist and feminist discourses) Byatt establishes an English cultural space where nothing is truly disrupted, questioned, or reconsidered, establishing what is old and known as essentially valid, needing only cosmetic changes but no general overhaul. Within the heteronormative, ethnically monolithic, caste-bound coordinates *Possession* operates in, this may be the case. Whether the solutions offered for text-creation and text-reception as proposed in the narrative are universally applicable remains highly questionable.

If the words written, for example, are deeply offensive, disparaging, even dismissive of whole swaths of readers due to their own socio-cultural, non-heteronormative, ethnically diverse, and non-male positioning and heritage, *Possession* has little to offer by ways of solution. The reason why this is poignant is because *Possession* was thought of and written as a reaction to post-structuralist and feminist discourses prevalent at the time of its writing and reception, – the late 1980s, the early 1990s – discourses that are generally considered applicable to contemporary systems of definition the world over.

Byatt's solution is thus quite problematic. The narrative seems to hold that only those readers who parallel the socio-cultural positioning of the respective writer will ever be able to read said author without bias, and so be able to 'access' the poetic genius and sublime embedded in an enabled through the text; it is through this 'unbiased' reading, that they are then able to invigorate scholarship. It is a method that is far too cyclical. Consider the following:

Roland is a heterosexual, well-educated, white man deeply interested in complex connections, historicity, and the world of ideas. He reads and understands Ash, a heterosexual, well-educated, white man deeply interested in complex connections, historicity, and the world of ideas, with the added bonus that Ash is able to articulate them poetically. The other late 20th century reader who understands Ash is Beatrice Nest, a heterosexual, well-educated white woman wishing for independence, a woman who enjoys female companionship and is struggling to be heard in a deeply gender-biased sphere of work and cultural practice. Beatrice is, however, invigorated by the freedom made possible by Ash's 'bold' writing, where genuine communication between men and women, between reader and writer, is key. Beatrice thus mirrors Christabel LaMotte who also understood Ash's "*perspicacious meanings*", LaMotte who is a heterosexual,

well-educated white woman wishing for independence, a woman who enjoys female companionship, and is struggling to be heard in a deeply gender-biased sphere of work and cultural practice. She is also a woman who, in creative terms, gains greatly from Ash's 'bold' writing, and his interest in genuine communication between men and women, reader and writer.

All other readers of Ash are constructed as either misguided readers prone to invasive, absurd, and destructive "philistine misreadings", threateningly or amusingly so, or they are established as tragic readers, stunted by too brutal hegemonial practices of cultural production, as seen in Blackadder's Leavisian trauma.

This creates a cyclical dynamic wherein newness can only be won from within the established modes of creativity, power, and place, allowing little to no questioning of the powerful meta-narratives and systems of production already at play, which, by the grace of the fact that the space in question is the English cultural space of the past 150 years, remain summarily imperial in their thrust and exertion, solidifying the strictures of imperial centre and imperial periphery, where the centre remains untouched by the periphery, and the periphery remains fixed as the exotic, threatening Other. This is why I argue that *Possession* suffers from acute post-imperial phantom pains and Adams, Yelin, and Flegel's critique hit the mark, only not as first intended.

4. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*: Failure, Aesthetics & Gendered Divides

The feuds and ideological wars possible in academia are the discursive space within which *On Beauty* operates, thus inhabiting the same thematic field as A. S. Byatt's *Possession*. Like Byatt, Smith is an essayist and a writer who explores the dynamics of reception and text in lived experience in both her fiction and non-fiction. Through the characters' struggles with concepts of reception and text, *On Beauty* shows Zadie Smith's deep interest in the academic and creative liminal spaces within which reception and text operate.

In her essay "Fail Better", for example, Smith's initial concerns about writing are articulated primarily from a writer's standpoint, before she turns to a definition of reading.³⁵⁰ What is interesting in Smith's definition of reading and writing is that it is not very different from what Byatt proposes, as seen in the previous chapter on informed readers and inspired authors. The difference between both writers' approaches is that where Byatt is concerned with post-structuralist and feminist discourses' impact on reading (writing being a form of reading, and scholarship a decisive extension thereof), Smith's concern is that of the ethics underlying post-structuralist methodologies of text-creation and text-reception, and how post-structuralism has muddied the waters with its own orthodoxies.

Interestingly, both Byatt and Smith come to the same conclusion regarding the solution: poetic genius, with the necessary post-structuralist addenda, enables access to sublime experience via the reception of a text, wherein beauty and truth can be known and experienced, thereby circumnavigating the irresolvable ambiguity and arbitrariness of the post-structuralist methodology. Both authors derive their stance from a dynamic oscillation between reading writer and writing reader, breaking with the Barthesian split of absolutist Author and rebel Reader, an oscillation that I have termed a continuous becoming between informed reader and inspired author.

In the following, I will consider Smith's critique of post-structuralist practices of reception that she finds wanting, and how these practices need to be amended in order to allow not only more truthful or authentic readings, but also more authentic texts to be read. Smith's definition of truthful here is not mere conjecture, but has Romantic roots in its mirroring of the Romantic poetic genius. Her definition of authenticity, subsumed under what Smith names 'a great novel', similarly borrows heavily from the semantic field of the sublime, thus establishing the same Romantic

³⁵⁰ These concerns find further contemplation in her essay compilation, *Changing My Mind*.

movement between reader and writer, reception and text as Byatt, inadvertently incorporating the post-imperial phantom pains already considered in the previous chapter.

The silences and blind spots that *Possession* shows can be equally found in *On Beauty*, embedded within narratives that are meant to critique postmodern and post-structuralist thought, while inadvertently relying on the very meta-narratives postmodern and post-structuralist thought were critiquing. This circularity shows, I argue, the same narrowly-defined English cultural space as established in *Possession*, where the (former) imperial centre continues to construct itself as a centre in relation to the (former) imperial periphery, constituting post-imperial phantom pains within a millennial text that considers identity development and selfhood within apparently diverse and liminal cultural spaces. Thus, despite its homage to Elaine Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just" on the one hand, E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* on the other, and its critique of the beauty dynamics and discourses of truth within a diverse, millennial, academic socio-cultural space, *On Beauty* betrays the same meta-narrative of monolithic inclusion and exclusion practices already pervasive in *Possession*. As in *Possession*, *On Beauty* establishes the (former) imperial centre as the discursive centre of systems of definition against which the (former) imperial periphery defines itself. Thus, rather than deconstructing imperial narratives of creativity, power, and place, *On Beauty* inadvertently reinstates them.

4.1 Writing and Positive Failure

As with Byatt's "writerly rage with criticism", Smith has valid points of critique when it comes to post-structuralist orthodoxies of reception and text. In "Fail Better", Smith argues that the postmodern and especially the post-structuralist stance on reading and writing has led to a narrowness in definition, where readers and writers

are repelled by the idea that writing fiction might be, among other things, a question of character. We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator.³⁵¹

Smith refutes this stance by stating that a "writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner." Smith goes on to explain her definition of style as not simply "a matter of fanciful syntax, [or] flamboyant icing atop a plain literary cake," nor is it to be seen "as the uncontrollable result of some mysterious velocity coiled within language itself." To Smith, writing-as-style is "a personal necessity [...] the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness." It is "a writer's way of telling the truth."³⁵²

This may seem a fairly radical stance, especially with Smith's invocation of truth, but as already stated in the previous chapter, a particularly interesting twist in Byatt's redefinition of reading and writing is that truth is extant, no matter how contested, ambiguous, and hard to define it may be.³⁵³ This truth is the kind Smith is arguing for, not only in "Fail Better", but also in her earlier essay "Love, actually", where she critiques the prescriptive equalisation of writing style and ethical attitude.

In "Love, actually", Smith considers her personal education in reading literary novels, taking this as the basis of her analysis of the novel as a form and the opportunities of ethical discourse it entails. Smith begins with a reminiscence of her first reading of E.M. Forster's *A Room With a View*, before explaining how during her studies, the "subjective affective response"³⁵⁴ to the novel had become suspicious, thereby showing the fruits of her training in the post-structuralist orthodoxies of reception and text, mirroring a similar development as a reader to Byatt's. Smith's student years deepened her suspicion of the "subjective affective response", even consolidating a

³⁵¹ Zadie Smith. "Fail Better". *The Guardian*. 13 January 2007, qtd. in *The Electric Typewriter*.

<<http://faculty.sunydutchess.edu/oneill/failbetter.htm>> (03 April 2014), no page numbers in the original.

³⁵² Smith, "Fail Better".

³⁵³ See Chapter 2.1 "Authorial Compromise".

³⁵⁴ Zadie Smith, "Love, actually". *The Guardian*. 1 November 2003.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/01/classics.zadiesmith>> (8 July 2014), no page numbers in the original.

refusal of this kind of reception. This, in turn, led to a repression of diverse critical thought, one that abjured that “ethical discussion [had] any relationship to the literary discussion.”³⁵⁵ As Smith writes,

Nietzsche would have considered us pathologically Christian in our literary habits. Oh yes, my generation liked to be in some pain when they read. The harder it was, the more good we believed it was doing for us.³⁵⁶

According to Smith, this equalisation of ‘hard reading’ with ‘doing the reader good’ stemmed from the conflation of substance and style. In this conflation, “the simple style” as seen in E. M. Forster’s novels was seen to entail a “morally prescriptive character”, while “the complex in style” as seen, for example, in DeLillo and Pynchon’s narratives, was considered to signify “the amoral or anarchic” in character.³⁵⁷

This conflation is, to Smith, by then an established writer and essayist, one of “the most persistently fallacious beliefs held by English students.” Smith spends the rest of “Love, actually” deconstructing this belief, insisting that the seemingly simple and overtly complex styles were equally important. Dismissing the simplicity of a Forsterian novel thus means overlooking the ethical value lying in wait within the easily accessible lines. To Smith, it is Forster’s narrative structure that is, admittedly, “muddled [...] impulsive, meandering, irrational” and seems to “lead him on to two further problematics: mawkishness and melodrama”,³⁵⁸ yet also allows his narratives to incorporate the mix and muddle of human life – by eschewing what de Beauvoir defines as “the esprit des serieux”.³⁵⁹ As Smith writes,

Forster’s fiction [...] shows us how very difficult an educated heart [in the Aristotelian sense] is to achieve. It is Forster who shows us how hard it is to will oneself into a meaningful relationship with the world; it is Forster who lends his empathy to those who fail to do so.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁵ Smith, “Love, actually”.

³⁵⁶ “Love, actually”.

³⁵⁷ “Love, actually”.

³⁵⁸ “Love, actually”.

³⁵⁹ “Love, actually”.

³⁶⁰ “Love, actually”.

In reference to *A Room With a View*, Smith concludes that “the lesson of the comic novel is that our moral enthusiasms make us inflexible, one-dimensional, flat”,³⁶¹ enthusiasms that Smith sees extrapolated in ethical breadth and depth in Forster’s novels, without moralising from an invisible pulpit. The “negative capability”³⁶² of Forster’s characters is what Smith sees as a bonus rather than a drawback, since it allows Forster to

[usher] in a new era for the English comic novel, one that includes the necessary recognition that the great majority of us are not like an Austen protagonist, would rather not understand ourselves, because it is easier and less dangerous. [...] he allowed the English comic novel the possibility of a spiritual and bodily life, not simply to exist as an exquisitely worked game of social ethics but as a messy human concoction.³⁶³

Here, Smith’s rather heartfelt praise of Forster and her insistence on the necessity of ethical consideration when it comes to the reception of a text blinds her to the layerings of the Austenian, “pre-Freudian”³⁶⁴ novel. The mistake Smith makes is to think that the messiness Forster gives space to in his novels, comic or no, was something new.

Smith surprisingly disregards temporality and historicity in her analysis of what is Austenian in heritage and Forsterian in innovation. It is very possible that to a Regency reader, the Bennets’ fate in *Pride and Prejudice* was quite messy, considering the loss of the entail, a genuinely scandalous elopement, and engagements that enrage powerful relatives in Kent. Also, the idea that an “Austen protagonist” happily goes about the business of understanding themselves, even if it is not easy, let alone safe, disregards the painful shifts in personal perspective, often via severe social embarrassment, that Austenian characters often have to go through, from Elisabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* to the gothic histrionics in *Northanger Abby*.

Why Smith disregards this is not clear, since if anything, an interested reader of Austen will quickly understand that her characters are “not good readers” nor are they “successful moral

³⁶¹ “Love, actually”.

³⁶² Smith quotes Keats’ famous dictum, “... and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...” (H. E. Rollins (Ed.). *The Letters of John Keats. Vol. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, pp.193-4, qtd. in Smith, “Love, actually”).

³⁶³ Smith, “Love, actually”.

³⁶⁴ “Love, actually”.

agents”, but “chaotic, irrational human beings,”³⁶⁵ only in a different time and manner, and an altogether different historical space to Forster’s Lucy Honeychurch, Maurice Hall, or Helen Schlegel.³⁶⁶ If Forster apparently “felt his infamous muddle had value, and that the more controlled, clear, Austen-like elements of his style were ethically problematic” then that says more about Forster’s reception of Austen, and by inference Smith’s reception, than Austen’s own texts. A case in point would be Smith’s apt analysis of Forster’s slant on characters:

Forster, like Austen, abhors the vain, the self-important, the mannered, the blind and the foolish. But there are fascinating differences. What one might call conscientious abstainers appear frequently in both authors. Cecil Vyse, Mr Beebe, Philip Herriton find their matches in many of the paternal figures in Austen, most noticeably Mr Bennet. By conscientious abstainer, a specific philosophic type is meant here: this is the man whose life-reading skills are as good as we might hope them to be, but who chooses only to read, to observe, but not be involved. They are the novel’s flaneurs. The invariably think of themselves as “students of human nature”, and they are condemned by both authors as Aristotle properly condemns them, as people inured to responsibilities of proper human involvement.³⁶⁷

What is interesting here is that Smith insists that the “nature of the condemnation is different for each author” and that Forster and Austen employ “two different styles.” Where Austen “shows her laissez-fair fathers as irresponsible to their families, playing pointless intellectual games that neglect a practical, social necessity,” as in the case of Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and his daughters’ imminent future, apparently no attempt is made “at their interior life: the pre-Freudian Austen does not care why they are so, only that they are so.”³⁶⁸

This is a baffling statement considering that it is very clear why Mr Bennet is as politely vitriolic and unabashedly careless as he is:

[C]aptivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give [Mr Bennet] had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem,

³⁶⁵ “Love, actually”.

³⁶⁶ “Love, actually”.

³⁶⁷ Smith, “Love, actually” 5.

³⁶⁸ “Love, actually” 5.

and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown.³⁶⁹

However, ever-resourceful Mr Bennet “was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on,” and so he uses his wife’s “ignorance and folly” as continuous contributions “to his amusement.”³⁷⁰ Additionally, his favourite daughter Elisabeth is very aware of just how blameworthy her father’s behaviour is, though due to her “respec[t] of his abilities” and her gratitude for his “affectionate treatment of herself”, Elisabeth keeps her peace, and even tries to “forget what she could not overlook” namely the “continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible.”³⁷¹

The genealogy of filial mistreatment and neglect is quite clear here, and to state that “the pre-Freudian Austen does not care why” Mr Bennet is “irresponsible to [his family]” and plays “pointless intellectual games that neglect a practical, social necessity” is to confuse the tone and style of the telling with the actual substance of the narrative – which is ironic in the light of the fact that Smith starts “Love, actually” as a debate on exactly this misleading positing of substance and style. Interestingly, this is how Smith proves her point about the misleading methodology of equating style with substance, since, to clearly apprehend the second, a careful consideration of the first is necessary, with an awareness of the respective socio-cultural coordinates.

Thus, Smith’s dissatisfaction with the readings of her student years is validated, since the narrowing effects of the post-structuralist perspective where substance is trumped by style, can still be seen even after Smith joined the ranks of published authors and essayists. Here, Byatt’s complaint that there is a strong tendency in academia to simply critique without actually reading the primary texts carefully, “every word one after the other”,³⁷² is hereby given substance, since Smith after all was a student of the very academic practices Byatt found wanting.

Smith, however, is an avid reader and writer, making her genuine admiration for Forster as a writer a source of conceptual development in her own reception of text(s). If, to Smith in “Love, actually” (2003), Forster is fundamentally more intricate in matters of human messiness than Austen, then Smith reveals a conceptual positing of the present over the past at the onset of her

³⁶⁹ Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*. Richard Bain and Judith Baxter (Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 212.

³⁷⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 212.

³⁷¹ *Pride and Prejudice* 212.

³⁷² Walker, “An Interview with A. S. Byatt and Lawrence Norfolk” 336.

writing career.³⁷³ It is a stance, I argue, that over the following eight years, Smith distances herself from due to a continuous re-evaluation of her own reception and conception of texts.

On Beauty, published in 2005, can be seen as one step on the road to Smith's ideal of reading and writing, where, with each text written, a writer gives glimpses into their own understanding, into their way of experiencing what they know as reality, as Smith states in her essay "Fail Better" in 2007. This insistence on the reading-writer and writing-reader's conceptual autonomy allows for authorial development and changes of mind which run against postmodern authorial deaths but incorporate post-structuralist readerly freedoms, much like the continuous becoming of reader and writer I argue Byatt champions. The conceptual developmental space that Smith argues for is what led to her own 2009 compilation of essays on reception and text, *Changing My Mind*. In the introduction she states that while compiling her collection she realised that

ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith. As is a cautious, optimistic creed, best expressed by Saul Bellow: "There may be truths on the side of life." I keep on waiting, but I don't think I'm going to grow out of it.³⁷⁴

In "E.M. Forster, Middle Manager"³⁷⁵ Smith is able to argue for Forster's understanding of the necessity of ethical concern in literature without the simplifications and reductionism of "Love, actually". Instead, Smith's main focus is Forster's own writerly and readerly motif: connection, "between people, nations, heart and head, labor and art".³⁷⁶ In view of *On Beauty*'s themes, characters and plotline, Smith took Forster's dictum to heart, a matter I would like to consider further in the following.

³⁷³ "Love, actually" was published in 2003, three years after her award-winning bestseller *White Teeth*.

³⁷⁴ Smith, *Changing My Mind* xiii-xiv.

³⁷⁵ *Changing My Mind* 14-28.

³⁷⁶ *Changing My Mind* 17.

4.2 “Negative Capability” and Authorial Expression

There is a Romantic subtext to Smith’s definition of a “writer’s personality” as “his manner of being in the world” which makes a writer’s style “the unavoidable trace of that manner.” The individuality of such a stance entails traces of the Romantic poet as genius, meaning that the writer, by way of his or her manner, can tap into something more than simply putting words on paper and having them make sense as well. It is a stance that Dorothy J. Hale takes exception to in her widely quoted critical response “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*”.³⁷⁷ In critiquing Smith’s point of view through analysing her fictional character Clive,³⁷⁸ Hale asserts that Smith’s definition of writing and style leaves out contingencies otherwise considered powerful. As Hale writes, to believe that the world is comprehended from the vantage point of personal perceptivity, is “to forget that the contingent and particular experiences afforded by social life produced the point of view that the individual experiences as her own.”³⁷⁹

Hale sees in Smith’s insistence on authorship and authorial perspective an evisceration of contexts, social and otherwise, that help shape that very authorial point of view. This is a different critique from my Austenian one above, since Hale focuses on the writer when writing, rather than the conceptualisation of historical, social, and cultural contexts within the text itself. It is precisely the novel, though, Hale concedes, that “suits the expression of [the] paradox” she mentions, since the novel has the means to “represent homologically the doubleness of perspectivalism.”³⁸⁰ Hale acknowledges the possibilities of reading and text that the novel enables, “the vision of life that the author projects through the novel”, which to Hale “instantiate[s] the author’s constitutive way of seeing: her vision of life is told by the novel, taken as an expressive whole.”³⁸¹ Simultaneously, the novel as a form of writing allows for a continuous back and forth between the reader and the writer, “an ongoing negotiation between interpreting subject and interpreted world.”³⁸²

To this extent, Smith and Hale seem to agree on what is possible when writing, yet Hale’s understanding of Smith’s definition of authorial perception is surprisingly narrow, since Hale

³⁷⁷ Dorothy J. Hale. “*On Beauty as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith.*” *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 53, No. 4, Winter 2012. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 814-844.

³⁷⁸ Clive is a writer whose book “smells like literature and looks like literature and maybe even, intermittently, feels like literature,” despite the fact that the book itself triggers in Clive a “strange feeling of untruth, of self-betrayal”. (Smith, “Fail Better”).

³⁷⁹ Hale, “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

³⁸⁰ “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

³⁸¹ “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

³⁸² “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

seems to believe Smith is unaware of the fact that to “understand the novel as a whole as the expression of the author’s individual point of view” is to summarily forget how “the novel itself insists on the social contexts that produce and mediate authorial vision.”³⁸³ It also is not clear why Hale thinks writing fiction in the novel form, and claiming a certain ownership of this creative process, excludes an understanding of one’s position.

In Smith’s case such a reading is especially peculiar, since Smith is aware of the textual matrices and socio-cultural heritages she, as a writer, is working with, as seen in her continuous reflection on her own styles of reception and conception from “Love, actually” to “Fail Better” to *Changing My Mind*. In “Fail Better”, Smith states clearly that her definition of a writer’s duty is “to express accurately their way of being in the world”, which requires an acute awareness of one’s positioning in said world. Consider Smith’s template of writing that incorporates the social placing and contingency Hale seems to think Smith leaves out. Smith states:

When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world. This is primarily a process of elimination: once you have removed all the dead language, the second-hand dogma, the truths that are not your own but other people’s, the mottos, the slogans, the out-and-out lies of your nation, the myths of your historical moment – once you have removed all that warps experience into a shape you do not recognise and do not believe in – what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception.³⁸⁴

What Smith does not state explicitly is that to be capable of executing this elimination, the writer must be aware of “the way the novel itself insists on the social contexts that produce and mediate authorial vision,” since that would be part of the contingencies Smith lists herself. Also, Hale critiques Smith’s definition of the “authorial identity as point of view” with regard to the point of view of the novel’s form as concomitant to forgetting that

the novelist has created the story world that she pretends to recount and to find the objective measure of her perspective in the difference between her evaluation of this world and its own autonomous existence.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

³⁸⁴ Smith, “Fail Better” 6.

³⁸⁵ Hale, “*On Beauty as Beautiful?*” 830.

What is interesting here is Hale's word choice, namely "pretend". Where the subterfuge is supposed to be located is not clear, since neither Smith, nor any contemporary fiction writer of his or her merit would insist that the words written are a one-to-one account of the lived experience beyond the fictional space. Hale's critique seems to leave out Smith's awareness of what she calls "a craft that defies craftsmanship".³⁸⁶ What Hale seems to be sceptical about is Smith's insistence on what T.S. Eliot wants to eliminate, "the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism", though maybe not in a way that Eliot might have recognised.³⁸⁷ Smith knows that she is deeply influenced by the post-structuralist school of thought where readers and writers "like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator," which is the result of the post-structuralist deconstruction and death of the Author, where the "quotation of texts" and intertextuality is key, rather than the person actually writing the text.

This mode of reading and writing, however, is lacking, as Smith says, since it leaves out contingencies and dynamics within reading and writing that post-structuralism cannot grasp as such. Smith, a reader and a writer whose personal and professional experience is part and parcel of her academic and fictional exploits,³⁸⁸ states that "writing is always the attempted revelation of [the] elusive, multifaceted self".³⁸⁹ This can be seen in the Adam Zagajewski poem Smith quotes, wherein the Self is described as "lodg[ing] between/granite blocks, between serviceable/truths", hiding itself "Between/hymns, between alliances".³⁹⁰

With such a self to contend with, Smith finds it "impossible to convey all of the truth of all our experience",³⁹¹ which is a different kind of "metaphysics and mysticism" than maybe at first considered, since Smith accepts, unequivocally, that some things cannot be known. Considering Keats' definition of "negative capability" which Smith endorses, this is not surprising. If, as Stephen Hebron writes, Keats' "negative capability" is "essential to literary achievement", wherein "a

³⁸⁶ Smith explains it as following: "Writers know that between the platonic ideal of the novel and the actual novel there is always the pesky self - vain, deluded, myopic, cowardly, compromised. That's why writing is the craft that defies craftsmanship: craftsmanship alone will not make a novel great. This is hard for young writers, like Clive, to grasp at first. A skilled cabinet-maker will make good cabinets, and a skilled cobbler will mend your shoes, but skilled writers very rarely write good books and almost never write great ones. There is a rogue element somewhere - for convenience's sake we'll call it the self, although, in less metaphysically challenged times, the "soul" would have done just as well. In our public literary conversations we are squeamish about the connection between selves and novels. We are repelled by the idea that writing fiction might be, among other things, a question of character. We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator." (Smith, "Fail Better").

³⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot. "Tradition and Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921, III, qtd. Smith, "Fail Better".

³⁸⁸ By the time "Fail Better" was published, Smith had written and published 3 well-received novels.

³⁸⁹ Smith, "Fail Better".

³⁹⁰ Adam Zagajewski. "The Self", qtd. in Smith, "Fail Better".

³⁹¹ Smith, "Fail Better".

certain passivity, a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that”,³⁹² then Smith’s acceptance of the unknowable in human lived experience is indeed Romantic in tenor, paralleling Byatt’s previously mentioned acceptance of the fundamental ambiguity of lived experience that nevertheless can be mined for meaning.

For Smith, the human self is “impossible to convey” beyond the human reach of capability, since what is to be conveyed is so vast and intricate that it remains ‘ungraspable’. The human self moves beyond forms of conceptualisation. It is thus never fully knowable via modes of perception that need conceptual frameworks such as dialectic relation simply to function, of which the human mind, as Hegel asserted, is a prime example.³⁹³ This ‘ungraspability’, which is also an inability to fully articulate the matter at hand, is a core definition of the unknowable, also known as the mystic, the sublime.

Hale identifies the “Romantic roots” of Smith’s vision of writing as “the notion that individuals are inherently unique, that consciousness is the source of their difference and substance,” and most importantly, “that successful self-expression is an ethical act of bravery.”³⁹⁴ To Hale, Smith incorporates these into “the novelistic aesthetics of alterity”, wherein Smith’s *On Beauty* would be one example. Hale specifies what she sees as Smith’s Romantic tendencies by referencing “Fail Better” where

Smith praises literature generally for giving readers access to individualized points of view that are unavailable to us in real life, [and thereby] sounds the Romantic note: “you can never know, no matter how long you live, no matter how many people you love ... the experience of the world through a consciousness other than your own.” The ability of the novel to provide what life cannot is, for Smith, the “intimation of a metaphysical event.”³⁹⁵

Hale is a little disingenuous here, since Smith is expressly not talking about “the novel” as such, but of “a great novel”, which, according to Smith, is “the intimation of a metaphysical event”,³⁹⁶ which Hale quotes. Smith goes on to define the unifying code of great novels, stating that it is

³⁹² Stephen Hebron. “John Keats and Negative Capability.” *The British Library*. <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>> (5 September 2014), no page numbers in the original.

³⁹³ Hegel’s theory of continuous becoming in human systems of conceptualization is at the core of one of my previously written essay on dialectics. See, Mayannah N. Dahlheim. *Die Anatomie des Denkens: Hegels Begriffsdefinition und die Antike Dialektik*. Regensburg: University of Regensburg, 2007.

³⁹⁴ Hale, “*On Beauty* as Beautiful?” 830.

³⁹⁵ “*On Beauty* as Beautiful?” 830.

³⁹⁶ Smith, “Fail Better”.

the individual manner in which they articulate experience and force us to be attentive, waking us from the sleepwalk of our lives. And the great joy of fiction is the variety of this process: Austen's prose will make you attentive in a different way and to different things than Wharton's; the dream Philip Roth wishes to wake us from still counts as sleep if Pynchon is the dream-catcher.³⁹⁷

In the larger context of her essay, Smith is also referring to what she considers to be a general conundrum, "a dream that haunts writers: the dream of the perfect novel."³⁹⁸ To speak here of "the novel" simply as a general form of writing, not of the very distinct type of form within the format Smith is writing about, is to warp Smith's whole point. The "intimation of a metaphysical event" she speaks of has to do with "great writing" in comparison to "bad writing", as Hale is well aware of.³⁹⁹ Once the specification of the novel that Smith clearly states is taken into account, Hale's critique weakens, since where Hale would want one to believe that Smith is speaking of all novels written, Smith in fact is writing about *a specific set* of novels: those that are generally considered to be masterpieces. It is in this context that the Romantic subtext of Smith's definition of writing and style can be seen, relegating it to a space of uniqueness and originality that is rare, and explicitly implies poetic genius, though a genius that is possible for all writers who endeavour – and have the talent, skill, stamina and, possibly, luck – to achieve it.

³⁹⁷ "Fail Better".

³⁹⁸ "Fail Better".

³⁹⁹ Hale, "On Beauty as Beautiful?" 828ff.

4.3 Aesthetic Ideology and Academia

As a writer, Smith is concerned about the actual craft itself, never mind if it “defies craftsmanship”. Hence, the small fiction about Clive in “Fail Better”, Clive who has “read a good deal of rigorous literary theory – those elegant blueprints for novels not yet built – and is now ready to build his own unparalleled house of words.”⁴⁰⁰ Yet, much to his own frustration, Clive finds it very difficult to “[fashion] the character of the corrupt Hispanic government economist, Maria Gomez, who is vital to Clive’s central theme of corruption within American identity politics.”⁴⁰¹ *On Beauty* is, I argue, Smith’s attempt to escape the Clives of the writing world and practice the “craft that defies craftsmanship” by enabling the readers of her narratives the “experience of the world through a consciousness other than [their] own”.

Just as Byatt’s “writerly rage with criticism” evolved into Byatt’s creative response to practices of reading and writing via *Possession*, Smith critiques post-structuralist discourse by insisting that writing and “subjective affective response”⁴⁰² are not separate spheres but interconnected, interdependent entities. Through the fictional acclaimed poet Claire Malcolm, whose pontoum poem “On Beauty” is world-famous in *On Beauty*’s lifeworlds,⁴⁰³ and the fictional spoken word virtuoso Carl Thomas who throughout the narrative experiments with words, rhythm, and music,⁴⁰⁴ Smith shows the tension between desire and accomplishment, comfort and discomfort. Through Claire and Carl, Smith argues that the writer’s hunger for access to beauty and truth enables the creation of the creative texts that make up the backbone of cultural production.⁴⁰⁵ Via Claire and Carl, both eager readers and writers of the cultural texts available to them, the “experience and intuitive appreciation of the beautiful [as] central to poetic talent”⁴⁰⁶ is demonstrated.

⁴⁰⁰ Smith, “Fail Better”. One may read Smith’s definition of literary theory as surprisingly prescriptive, yet, considering postmodern and post-structuralist orthodoxies, literary theory establishes the (albeit ambiguous, polyvalent, and highly flexible) gateposts of what is accepted, and acceptable, regarding literary reception and text and the respective discourses. For an aspiring writer, literary theory can therefore amount to “blueprints for novels not yet built”. Whether they are all elegant can, however, be disputed.

⁴⁰¹ “Fail Better”.

⁴⁰² Smith, “Love, actually”.

⁴⁰³ Smith, *On Beauty* 153.

⁴⁰⁴ *Possession* 135-137.

⁴⁰⁵ Where in *Possession* the vast creative output was relegated to the distant Victorian past, literary creativity and poetic writing in *On Beauty* are more contemporary.

⁴⁰⁶ Stephen Hebron, “John Keats and Negative Capability”.

This intuition does not, however, render “irrelevant anything that is arrived at through reason”,⁴⁰⁷ for both poets are members of a millennial world and apply the postmodern methodologies of deconstruction and fragmentation in their own creative processes, as seen in Claire’s poem “On Beauty” and Carl’s interest in Mozart, in whose music Carl finds a new understanding of rhythm and gravitas.⁴⁰⁸ Yet there is a distinct understanding that there is beauty in the poetic, enabling accessibility to existing truths, no matter how ambiguous and hard to grasp; most importantly, neither can be arrived at by empirical, rational, explainable means alone.

Where Claire and Carl are authors of creative texts outside the academic field, *On Beauty*’s feuding academics Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps in turn are the ones who read the primary creative texts in order to critique them. Yet, their reading and writing seems less a search for a greater understanding of beauty and truth, and more as vehicles to equally illuminate and obfuscate their own ideologies. Howard and Monty are thus readers and writers deeply embedded in academia, exposing by their almost predictable responses the same blinkeredness in criticism that Byatt already critiqued and ridiculed in *Possession*.⁴⁰⁹

Smith widens this critique of ideological blinkeredness to a deeper consideration of the personal involvement of the critic in his criticism, a linkage of reading and writing that is already part of the characterisation of characters in *Possession* whose academic subjects are directly linked to the way they exist in their lifeworlds. In the following, I will first consider how the academic characters manner and style are established in *On Beauty*, arguing that both Byatt and Smith make direct links between the characters’ way of thinking and their way of reading and writing, culminating in idiosyncratic text-creation and text-reception, oral and written.⁴¹⁰ I thus hope to show that both Byatt and Smith occupy the same perspectival space on authorship and reception,

⁴⁰⁷ Stephen Hebron, “John Keats and Negative Capability”.

⁴⁰⁸ Carl Thomas at one point tries to explain to Zora Belsey what he finds so fascinating about Mozart’s *Lacrimosa*, at first attempting to articulate his fascination via breaking down what intrigues him about the rhythm and sound of the piece, before explaining where the root of his fascination stems from: his own interest in music.

“And it was just – you know – inneresting to me, about Mozart, ‘cos I’m a musician also –”

Zora allowed herself a tiny smile at the unlikely comparison.

‘And then I found out about it a little more – ‘cos I’ve been reading about classical music, ‘cos you can’t do what I do without knowing about other shit outside of your direct, like, your influences and shit –’

Zora nodded politely.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 136, italics in the original).

Carl’s enthusiasm about Mozart ends in a monologue on the creation of *Lacrimosa*, showing a young man who is deeply interested in the diverse cultural production of the culture he lives in, and moreover feels more than free to use these texts as intertexts to his own musical creations.

⁴⁰⁹ See Chapter 2.3.2. ““Philistine Misreadings” and Creative Dispossession”.

⁴¹⁰ Where Byatt is more explicitly inclusive of academic writing in her definition of authorial personality as a continuous becoming between reader and writer, Smith implicitly adds academic writing to her definition by her characterisation of the academics reading and writing in *On Beauty*.

where a “writer’s personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner,” and “philistine misreadings” may well happen due to the reader/writers’ idiosyncratic perspective. This will be the first step to elucidate the parallels between *Possession* and *On Beauty* in their establishment of a powerful aesthetic and the inadvertent embedding of post-imperial phantom pains this entails.

4.3.1 Ethics vs. Aesthetics in *On Beauty*

Art history professors Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps need to be considered in tandem, since they are each other’s counterparts. They both are faced with a world that neither adheres to Monty’s Victorian antics, nor Howard’s postmodern cynicism. Smith takes her time to situate both men’s character and appearance within the network of their families, histories, and family histories.

Howard and Monty are both described as memorable appearances, if not handsome men just past their prime, Howard having the “two great advantages” to men his age, his hair and his weight, both of which have hardly altered since his youth.⁴¹¹ Where Howard seems more haphazard in appearance, with the appeal of a sharp mind, lasting good looks, and most of all a happy marriage,⁴¹² Monty Kipps’ appearance and decidedly Victorian style mirrors his Victorian views, at least to Zora Belsey’s discerning eyes: “the waistcoat, the pocket-handkerchief [of the] tall, imperious black man, in his late fifties, with a pug dog’s distended eyes” who nevertheless is awarded a dignified appearance.⁴¹³

What is interesting here is that both men’s physical presence parallels their academic profiles: Haphazard Howard is the obstinate post-structuralist art history professor who sees a rose as “an accumulation of cultural and biological constructions circulating around the mutually attracting binary poles of nature/artifice”.⁴¹⁴ He rails incessantly and with gusto against his

⁴¹¹ Smith, *On Beauty* 19.

⁴¹² As *On Beauty*’s mildly sardonic omniscient narrator explains: “Everybody thinks they’re in love at twenty, of course; but Howard Belsey had really still been in love at forty embarrassing but true. He never really got over her face. It gave him so much pleasure. Erskine [Howard’s colleague and confidant] often joked that only a man who had such pleasure at home could be the kind of theorist Howard was, so against pleasure in his work.” (*On Beauty* 110, italics in the original)

⁴¹³ *On Beauty* 111.

⁴¹⁴ *On Beauty* 225. It is noteworthy that the author of *Critical Practice*, the seminal text that introduced post-structuralist theory into discourses of English Literature, is Howard’s namesake, namely Catherine Belsey. (Catharine Belsey. *Critical Practice*. London, New York: Methuen, 1980). The fact that Howard is a stringent post-structural theorist makes his name hardly a matter of coincidence, possibly signifying Prof Howard Belsey as a genuine adept of post-structuralist thought.

positively neo-colonial peer Monty Kipps, who fully endorses ideas such as “Art [is] a gift of God, blessing only a handful of masters, and most Literature merely a veil for poorly reasoned left-wing ideologies.”⁴¹⁵

Both men are well-known in their field, though Monty Kipps is the more successful of the two rivals. For fifteen years both men “had been moving in similar circles; passing through the same universities, contributing to the same journals, sometimes sharing a stage – but never an opinion – during panel discussions.”⁴¹⁶ However, where “the stringency of his theories and his dislike of his colleagues” stalled Howard’s progress in Wellington college so far that he was “nowhere near as successful, nor as popular or as well paid as his peers”,⁴¹⁷ Monty Kipps can boast of having his book on Rembrandt, a “hugely popular (and populist) brick”, on the New York Times’ bestseller list “[for] half a year, crushing every book beneath it.”⁴¹⁸

Howard’s own book on Rembrandt was never actually completed, partly because of his misreading of Monty’s analysis of Rembrandt’s self-portraits, allowing Monty Kipps to “enact with one sudden tug (like a boy removing his friend’s shorts in front of the opposing team) a complete exposure, a cataclysmic embarrassment,” of Howard Belsey. Howard’s mistake was that he exposed himself by missing the decisive detail in Monty’s analysis and so “in front of the entire academic community [Howard] picked up some rope and hanged himself”.⁴¹⁹

Unsurprisingly, Howard’s humiliation intensifies the two professor’s antagonism, extending their ideological rivalry to a more personal arena. Monty Kipps “believes that art ‘naturally’ belongs to those who have been awarded the privilege of money and taste”, engendering a Victorian stance that the post-structuralist Howard Belsey, to whom “‘Art is the Western myth [...] with which we both console ourselves and make ourselves’,”⁴²⁰ already thoroughly disliked before actually personally hating Kipps. As Kathleen Wall writes in “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty”:

[Monty Kipps’] elitist ideas about art are echoed by his opinions on the right to an education; affirmative action horrifies and angers him because he abrogates the ‘natural’ order of privilege. [...] His excellent

⁴¹⁵ Smith, *On Beauty* 44.

⁴¹⁶ *On Beauty* 29.

⁴¹⁷ *On Beauty* 98.

⁴¹⁸ *On Beauty* 29.

⁴¹⁹ “[Howard] had been going through an extremely difficult time personally and had let his guard down. Monty saw his chance and took it. Howard would have done the same. [...] One doesn’t have to deserve it; one has only to leave oneself open to it.” (*On Beauty* 29).

⁴²⁰ *On Beauty* 155.

sense of aesthetic judgement also gives him the right to judge and dismiss the humanity of Charlene [the young woman he is having an affair with] because of her deficiencies.⁴²¹

This is the impasse Howard and Monty find themselves in, since neither can see that a middle ground can be attempted, as seen in the younger generations' points of action and argument, from Zora and Levi Belsey to Victoria Kipps, all in their own way trained in postmodern discourses of aesthetics, music, literature and art, thus helping them continuously redefine their ideological stance and conceptual definitions, respectively.

This second generation of Belseys and Kipps is a generation that has grown up with the “the academy’s predilections for deconstruction and for the belief in the formalist autonomy of artistic texts”,⁴²² together with an understanding of how such deconstruction and autonomy broke with the old order where “art ‘naturally’ belongs to those who have been awarded the privilege of money and taste”.⁴²³ Yet both systems of definition are not sufficient in encapsulating the aesthetic experience, at least not in *On Beauty*’s lifeworlds, allowing for the younger generation (bemused Carl Thomas in the Wellington music archive and befuddled Katie Armstrong sitting in Howard’s class included)⁴²⁴ to attempt a new narrative of aesthetics. In this new narrative, the old benchmarks are seen as extremes within which to navigate and construct a valid narrative of aesthetics to which they can adhere to. Carl’s final verdict of his experience of academia can be seen as such – his ideal of beauty, of truth and justice, has to do with what he calls ‘being human’, which can be put on par with “ways of being in the world”, since he accuses Zora and her fellow Wellingtonians to have forgotten what it means to be human:

‘You people don’t behave like human beings man – I ain’t never *seen* people behave like you people. You don’t tell the *truth*, you *deceive* people. You all act so superior, but you’re not telling the truth! [...]’⁴²⁵

In the end, this lack of truth proves too much for Carl, and he leaves the Wellington scene, never to be seen again. Levi Belsey also goes through various articulations of truth and beauty when attempting to help his Haitian acquaintances out of their disenfranchisement, just as Zora Belsey and Victoria Kipps come to their own conclusions about what is in fact valid, in matters of

⁴²¹ Kathleen Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 764.

⁴²² Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 760.

⁴²³ “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 764.

⁴²⁴ Smith, *On Beauty* 249-255.

⁴²⁵ *On Beauty* 417, italics in the original.

authenticity and aesthetics, the latter two inhabiting a contentious space of intellectual inquisitiveness and inquiry.

Zora Belsey, who sees herself as part of the young intellectual of the set, unquestioningly follows her father's post-structuralist stance, admiring him and his peers for their intellectualism until she realises that being an intellectual does not save one from human folly. Zora's change of allegiances is a matter of aesthetics. At first Zora positively approves of her father's affair with Claire Malcolm, telling academic rookie Carl Thomas, whom she happens on in Wellington,

‘My mom’s freaking *out*. But I’m really like, hello, what kind of a sophisticated guy in his fifties *doesn’t* have an affair? It’s basically mandatory. Intellectual men are attracted to intellectual women – big fucking surprise.’⁴²⁶

Zora's approval is based on a particular understanding of aesthetics, a doubling of intellectual and physical presence that her mother no longer fulfils, and so to Zora's ruthlessly idealistic mind, disqualifies her mother Kiki Belsey from any pity: Kiki Belsey is neither an academic nor artistic like Claire Malcolm, and she considerably changed in her appearance as well, or as Zora states, “my mom doesn’t do herself any favours – she’s like three hundred pounds or something.”⁴²⁷

Zora does not change her pitiless stance until she finds out that the basis of her father's infidelity is not the aesthetic choice she admires. To Zora, the aesthetic positive, speak attraction, at the heart of her father's affair with Claire Malcolm is their intellectual vitality. It is when Zora Belsey realises that her father made an all too obvious sexual choice that she changes her perspective. Her father Howard is the post-structuralist professor whose intellectual vigour Zora wishes to emulate. However, when she finds out that, on top of the Claire Malcolm debacle, Howard is having an affair with Victoria Kipps, who, visually, is a version of his wife Kiki when she was young and slim, Zora's loyalties break. To add insult to injury, Victoria Kipps is not only younger than Zora, she is also the young woman Howard's own son and Zora's brother Jerome is hopelessly in love with, all of which cancel out any concessions in matters of intellectual interest. Once she understands the entire situation, Zora's approval of her father's actions disintegrates. She accuses Howard of heartlessness and a complete lack of ethical understanding, (“When have you *ever* [...] given a *fuck* about what anyone wants?” and “Do you love Jerome? How could you *do*

⁴²⁶ *On Beauty* 139, italics in the original.

⁴²⁷ *On Beauty* 139.

this to him?”⁴²⁸), her damning verdict of her father’s behaviour ending in an explosive, “IT’S SO BORING, DAD. IT’S SO FUCKING OBVIOUS.”⁴²⁹

With this last verdict, Howard Belsey, the admired, intellectual, post-structuralist professor is demoted to the ranks of the age old group of unfaithful husbands who tried to lie their way out of discovery and blame. Interestingly, Zora phrases her accusation in the terms of “boring” and “obvious”, terms that quite likely are the binary opposite to the speciality and intricacy of the intellectual vigour and sophistication Zora so admires. Once her father is shown to be not only heartless and selfish, but also boring and obvious, Zora changes her allegiances and runs to her mother to reveal everything, forthwith championing Kiki Belsey’s act of independence via divorce, showing a shift in Zora’s perspective that is triggered by ethics rather than intellectualism. As long as Zora believed that Howard’s infidelity was engendered by intellectual exchange, she saw no wrong in it, since the exchange was a matter of minds meeting, thus leading to a meeting of bodies. The reverse destroys this aesthetic positing of mind over body, of intellectual vigour over sexual desire, drawing on time-honoured ethical questions of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour when it comes to other human beings.

Here the simplicity of the constellation – a daughter’s understanding of her father’s infidelity – allows for a discourse of ethics that parallels Forster’s narratives of individuals caught in the crosshairs of what they want and what is morally acceptable to do. It is part of Smith’s skill that the situation the Belseys find themselves in is layered, since Victoria Kipps is not the pretty moppet Zora Belsey thinks she is.⁴³⁰ It is a twist that throws a wrench into the binary of youth, beauty, and sexual attraction vs. age, plainness, and intellectual appeal that Zora has set up for herself.

Additionally, part of the Victoria Kipps-Howard Belsey affair is that Victoria Kipps sees right through Howard Belsey’s ideology and deconstructs it in a matter of minutes by stating that, to Howard, the whole point of intellectual investigation is “never ever saying *I like the tomato*”, the tomato being a stand-in for Western Art in this case, because “the tomato is not there to be

⁴²⁸ *On Beauty* 433, italics in the original.

⁴²⁹ *On Beauty* 433, capitals in the original.

⁴³⁰ As Colleen Fenno points out in her article “Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging”, Jerome Belsey is aware of the power dynamics underlying the beauty discourse both Zora and Victoria subscribe to. As Fenno states, “Jerome underscores the challenge young women confront in learning to negotiate the power that comes with beauty. He also implies that young men may understand and even sympathize with these pressures (though not all men – Carl [Thomas] and Levi [Belsey] openly cat call Victoria a few pages later).” (Colleen Fenno. “Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth and Aging.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*. Vol. 33, No 2, Fall 2014. Tulsa, OK: University of Tulsa Press, pp. 179-202, here p. 187).

liked".⁴³¹ This refusal goes so far that Howard is positively unable to say "*I like the tomato*",⁴³² something Victoria Kipps is aware of and finds almost quaint, if not amusing, though it makes her also enjoy his courses since Howard seems to be genuinely interested in what he is doing, a case of intellectual rigour that Victoria Kipps does find attractive. The fact that she looks like Kiki Belsey when Kiki was in her twenties greatly complicates the matter for Howard, but does not seem to make a real dent in Victoria Kipps' life since it is she who ends up dating academic rookie Carl Thomas – a young man Zora Belsey in turn has a crush on, thus creating a powder-keg of complications that explode once Zora finds out what exactly took place.

These questions of the tension between ethics and aesthetics are not unique to *On Beauty* and are also articulated in *Possession*. After Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, for example, realise that to gain any headway in their pursuit of the origins of the purloined letters, they must work together, Maud admits

I feel taken over by this. I want to know what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive."⁴³³

The subject of the primitive, as so often equated with human urges that are beyond the reach of cerebral activity, is a recurring one in *Possession* and a continuous one in *On Beauty*. The physical world is present and disruptive; it makes demands on the individual that cerebral activity seemingly avoids, a situation that makes Carl Thomas despair of the academic world, forces Zora Belsey to rethink what to be intellectual really is, and makes Victoria Kipps sharply clear-sighted about what Howard Belsey is in fact up to, though by no means less vulnerable to the power-politics of a professor-student affair.

The physical is very present in *Possession* and *On Beauty*, especially in matters of beauty and truth. Even Roland, when he finds the curious fragments of Ash's letter, realises that despite the fact that he feels "he was prying", he was also "being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge."⁴³⁴ This is just before Maud realises that the doll poem she remembered from her youth

⁴³¹ Smith, *On Beauty* 312, italics in the original.

⁴³² *On Beauty* 311.

⁴³³ Byatt, *Possession* 238.

⁴³⁴ *Possession* 82.

was the clue she needed, and thus already had. Through their characters' relentless insistence on fully understanding the expressions of beauty and truth in their midst, Byatt and Smith point to a circumstance which postmodern discourses have left out, and earlier discourses were too stringent to fully articulate without bias: there exists in human lived experience a space that goes beyond empirical knowledge, the obscurity yet full tangibility of which needs to be articulated in the contemporary fin de siècle/millennial lifeworlds for any substantial understanding to be reached. It is time, both authors state via their respective novels, that this circumstance be taken seriously, critically, and creatively.

4.4 Gendered Beauty

4.4.1 Complicating the Perspective

Lived experience, as the fictional and non-fictional texts of Byatt and Smith show, is a physical experience as well as an emotional and a cerebral one. All three modes of living have to be taken into account when analysing and discussing them in a comprehensible and stimulating fashion. As Smith writes of E.M. Forster, whose *Howard's End* is the DNA of *On Beauty*: "Connection [...] was Forster's great theme; between people, nations, heart and head, labor and art."⁴³⁵ What this connection is, exactly, as well as how it is experienced, is at the heart of Smith's as well Byatt's writerly concerns, though with the latter with a less Forsterian bent.

In the case of *On Beauty*, this can be seen in the implications of Howard Belsey's infidelity and the repercussions it triggers. Interestingly, one circumstance is rarely fully considered in critical readings of the novel, namely the fact that Kiki Belsey gained a lot of weight, which within a Western cultural power-politics of the female body is considered a 'devaluing' of her attraction, mirrored in Zora Belsey's initial pitilessness towards her mother.

Consider the beauty and fashion magazine Kathleen Wall conjures when she wonders about the "slippage between the attention to art and the attention to physical beauty", a slippage that "suggests a philosophical error: is a beautiful woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair* the equivalent of the Mona Lisa?"⁴³⁶ This is interesting in as much as *Vanity Fair* is part of a beauty industry that constructs terms of beauty not simply for aesthetic purposes, but also for profit, which plays into the political discourse of beauty Elaine Scarry addresses in *On Beauty and Being Just*.⁴³⁷ It is this very industry that constructs beauty within a matrix of power and profit that is part of the reason why the discourse of beauty was relegated to the postmodern back benches. For the sake of clarity, here again, Scarry's definition of the bipartite political criticism of beauty:

The first urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements. It makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just. The second argument holds that when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object. This argument is most often prompted

⁴³⁵ Smith, *Changing My Mind* 17.

⁴³⁶ Wall, "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty" 764. If Wall had written "a physically beautiful woman" that would have been far more interesting due to the ambiguity of the whole term.

⁴³⁷ See Chapter 2.4 "Discourse and Reception".

when the gaze is directed toward a human face or form, but the case presumably applies equally when the beautiful thing is a mourning dove, or a trellis spilling over with sweet pea, or a book whose pages are being folded back for the first time.⁴³⁸

It is this negative dynamic of the beauty discourse that infiltrates any experience of beauty in the narrative. However, it leaves out one decisive component, namely sexual politics. The binary of the discourse Scarry critiques is split between preoccupation and distracted attention on the one hand, and objectification on the other. *On Beauty* incorporates this binary in the reasons and justifications Howard Belsey offers with regard to his affair with Victoria Kipps, a young woman who looks like a younger version of his wife. However, Scarry's analysis doesn't delve into the complications of sexual attraction and the respective politics at play when it comes to beauty discourses. They, however, very clearly play a part in the characters' experience of aesthetics and attraction. This can especially be seen in Kiki Belsey's experiences which give a glimpse into how age and race play a role in the above-mentioned disparity. As Kiki muses:

When you are no longer in the sexual universe – when you are supposedly too old, or too big, or simply no longer thought of in that way – apparently a whole new range of male reactions to you come into play. One of them is humour. They find you funny. But then, thought Kiki, they were brought up that way, these white American boys: I'm the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry play around. Of course they find me funny. And yet I could cross the river to Boston and barely be left alone for five minutes at a tie. Only last week a young brother half her age had trailed Kiki up and down Newbury for an hour and would not relent until she said she could take her out some time; she gave him a fake number.⁴³⁹

The distinct influence of race and ethnicity discourses in beauty dynamics is very clear here. In Kiki's experience, she is no longer part of "the sexual universe" to her white heterosexual male contemporaries, and thus no longer within the confines of a beauty discourse that is deeply meshed with sexual politics. Kiki, to this demographic, is no longer beautiful/ sexually attractive, but part of a different aesthetic narrative embedded within US American culture (Aunt Jemima and "the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry play around"). Conversely, to the black heterosexual male demographic, Kiki is very much within "the sexual universe": she is considered very attractive to

⁴³⁸ Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just" 39-40.

⁴³⁹ Smith, *On Beauty* 51.

a point that she has to protect herself from unwanted male advances by handing out fake telephone numbers.

To establish any critique of a beauty discourse, let alone a gender discourse, without any consideration of discourses of race and ethnicity, is to confine the whole analysis to one modality, which is why I argue in the previous chapter that Byatt's critique of post-structuralist discourses in and through *Possession* only holds within a white ethnic space. Whatever truths established within such a discourse would thus only hold in that narrowly-defined space. The statutes of beauty are not universal, neither are the respective sexual politics and rules of attraction, making any viable truths of human interaction highly contingent to the respective ethnic and race discourse. Where *Possession*'s Beatrice Nest, for example, has large "unacceptable breasts", *On Beauty*'s Kiki Belsey, whose body mass is equally voluptuous, has an "enormous spellbinding bosom",⁴⁴⁰ a very visible part of her physique that in any encounter with another human always ends up playing a "subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the person) silent third role in the conversation":

Women bent away from it out of politeness; men – more comfortably for Kiki – sometimes remarked on it in order to get on and over it, as it were. The size was sexual and at the same time more than sexual: sex was only one small element of its symbolic range. If she were white, maybe it would refer only to sex, but she was not. And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting – it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid forties, a strange fabulation of a person she believed she was.⁴⁴¹

Part of this mirror-world sets particular constraints on Kiki. For one, she can "no longer be meek or shy." Her entire physique "directed her to a new personality; people expected new things of her, some of them good, some not."⁴⁴² What is clear in the "mass of signals" that Kiki is faced with due to her physique, signals that are "beyond her direct control", is that any discourse of beauty, and the truths thereby extrapolated, is tied to not only the ethnic discourses of the socio-cultural matrix the individual lives in, but also the sexual politics, the gender discourses, and the accepted narratives of (female) self and (male or female) other – all within the culture the respective individual is seen to belong to. This culture must not necessarily coincide with the one she actually lives in. The dynamics of creativity, power, and place interplay constantly and are very potent, if

⁴⁴⁰ *On Beauty* 47.

⁴⁴¹ *On Beauty* 47.

⁴⁴² *On Beauty* 47.

by creativity one also understands here the “new things” people expect of Kiki, and the “new personality” her physique manoeuvres her into.

What is intriguing is how Kiki’s weight gain and its socio-cultural positioning is only considered twice in *On Beauty*, once through pitiless Zora Belsey, who is convinced her mother should have seen the affair coming since with Kiki’s body as it was, she could not expect her husband to not start looking for a new sexual and romantic mate. To Zora, her mother Kiki, who was not intellectual and no longer complied with the accepted aesthetics of an attractive woman, has no valid reason to feel surprise or consider herself wronged. There is little to no consideration of the deeper aesthetic and ethical foundations of this verdict, except for Kiki’s own pain, which she voices when fighting with Howard about the affair.⁴⁴³ Otherwise, Kiki’s weight remains a conceptual space that is hardly discussed, showing a layering of discursive thrust in matters of self and other, that coincides strongly with imperial definitions of imperial Self and imperial Other. The norm Zora subscribes to is, after all, a Western white one, wherein her mother, a large black woman, is fixed as the undesired Other without much space to manoeuvre. It is also a discursive silence that goes even deeper when it comes to Kiki’s husband Howard.

⁴⁴³ See Chapter 4.6 “Aesthetic Epiphanies and Connecting Ends”.

4.4.2 Accepted Silences

While it is fully acknowledged by *On Beauty*'s characters and the book's critics that Kiki, when young and slim, was a breathtakingly beautiful woman, and that even a couple of decades and three children did little to harm her general appeal, Howard's past in this case is less obvious. Yet it is Howard's past that entails a morsel of information that belies Howard's aesthetic blindness. When considering his first encounter with Rembrandt's *Staalmeesters* and their provoking gaze, Howard reminisces:

On that day, forty-three years ago, he was an uncultured, fiercely bright, dirty-kneed, enraged, beautiful, inspired, bloody-minded schoolboy who came from nowhere and nothing and yet was determined not to stay that way – that was the Howard Belsey whom the Staalmeesters saw and judged that day.⁴⁴⁴

The notable adjective here is “beautiful”. If one takes this reminiscence as a retelling of Howard's own memories, then the reader is to understand that Howard was aware of his own beauty when he was young. Earlier in the narrative, Howard's genuine attractiveness is mentioned, but only in passing, creating a narrative space where said attractiveness seems to be of no importance, which is a serious oversight in a narrative that deals with discourses of beauty. One wonders: in how far are Howard's Marxist readings of Rembrandt, beauty, and genius, a deconstruction of his own very good looks and the fact that he once was a fiercely bright school boy? In how far can one say that Howard's stance is a disavowal of his physical past in relation to his factual present, in order to be able to join the ranks of ‘someplace and something’, since he came from “nowhere and nothing”?

Consider a beautiful, bright, uncultured, enraged, and dirty-kneed school boy, doing his best to climb the ranks in the academic system that would do him no favours in matters of fitting in. What, one wonders, would this boy's attitude towards said academic system be, by the time he's jumped all the hurdles? The back-story to Howard's nihilistic stance here would be very interesting, since if Howard Belsey were a woman, once a fiercely bright, uncultured, enraged, bloody-minded, beautiful school girl, militating against cultural and artistic tropes of beauty and genius once she's a professor, one would at least wonder how much her personal experience as a

⁴⁴⁴ Smith, *On Beauty* 384-385.

beautiful woman led her to that stance. However, in Howard's case, this particular circumstance is hardly ever mentioned at all. One wonders why.

In the light of the fact that Carl Thomas, a young talented black musician from the projects is unanimously described as very handsome, and how this beauty is unquestionably part of his presence, character, and overall social performance,⁴⁴⁵ the fact that Howard's very good looks, fading though they are, are never seriously considered, neither in *On Beauty*, nor in the texts critiquing the novel is astonishing. It is a baffling circumstance in a text where, as Fiona Tolan puts it in "Painting while Rome Burns", Smith establishes

for female characters such as Kiki Belsey, Zora Belsey and Victoria Kipps, that beauty is not an abstract physical notion but a lived experience of presence or lack to be variously contested, exploited or attained.⁴⁴⁶

Yet when it comes to Howard Belsey, who after all is a middle class white man with working class roots, the dynamics of race, gender, and status are brushed over entirely. This is bewildering in a narrative that tries, via character constellation and narrative thrust, to mine these very dynamics in an academic setting. It implicitly mirrors what Dyer et al write about whiteness and discourses of race, gender, and class: how whiteness generally manages a vanishing act, inhabiting the 'norm' status, without anyone actually thinking it odd.⁴⁴⁷

Howard's unacknowledged difficulties in accepting his own physical beauty are, I argue, part of the foundations of his theoretical stringency. Howard is, however, very aware of his aging process. As Colleen Fenno notes, "[w]hile *On Beauty* implies that midlife men maybe not be [sic] as severely affected by their appearance of aging, Howard also reveals self-doubt and a dwindling self-image clearly linked to gender and age." Fenno stipulates this self-doubt and dwindling on "the particular foci of midlife men's anxieties about appearance: hair loss and weight gain, both moving them further from a youthful male ideal."⁴⁴⁸ Fenno, however, does not consider Howard's

⁴⁴⁵ Several characters comment on Carl Thomas' outward appearance, the following are a few examples: "stupidly good-looking" with "perfect white teeth, superbly arranged" (*On Beauty* 74) is Zora's first impression of Carl, "Rubens. [...] Your face. From the four African heads." (*On Beauty* 77) is Howard's first and "[t]all, pleased with himself, pretty, *too* pretty like a conman, sleeveless, tattooed, languid, muscled, a basketball under his arm, black" (*On Beauty*, 105, italics in the original) his second verdict. "Nice boy [...] Not bad-looking either, huh?" (*On Beauty* 78) and "He had *such* a great face" (*On Beauty* 200) are Kiki's impressions.

⁴⁴⁶ Fiona Tolan. "'Painting while Rome burns': Ethics and Aesthetics in Pat Barker's *Life Class* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. Vol. 29, No. 2, Fall 2010. Tulsa, OK: The Tulsa University Press, pp. 375-393; p. 389.

⁴⁴⁷ See Chapter 3.5.1 "An Invisible Knapsack of Provisions".

⁴⁴⁸ Colleen Fenno, "Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth and Aging" 190.

particular positioning in this generalised focal point. What she does point out is that, when considering his own physical appearance via photographs ranging the span of his life, Howard

confirms that he associates an aging appearance with emasculation – each image more severe in advancing his fear of increasing deterioration. His dwindling self-image parallels the cultural narrative of decline midlife men may also confront.⁴⁴⁹

Even so, paralleling other critiques of *On Beauty*, Fenno’s analysis hardly shows an explicit connection between Howard’s very good looks and his growing anxieties. Where his wife’s position as a beautiful non-white woman within the discourses of beauty are made explicit and analysed in detail, Howard’s position as a beautiful white man within this discourse is framed in very generalised terms, letting him ‘disappear’ into the mass of “midlife men’s anxieties”, without any real particularisation. This, I argue, is an astounding discursive thrust in a narrative focused on illuminating the meta-narratives of beauty the characters live in. It shows, as already stated above, a particular discursive silence reminiscent of *Possession*’s blind spots in matters of gender and ethnicity as related in the previous chapter.

What is considered in depth is Howard’s difficulty in acknowledging beauty. After quoting Scarry on how from Plato to Dante, old-world thinkers “repeatedly describe[d] beauty as a ‘greeting’”, Kathleen Wall assesses Howard Belsey’s inability to acknowledge such a metaphysical action where beauty “lifts [one] away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you – as though the object were designed to ‘fit’ your perception.”⁴⁵⁰ Wall writes,

[b]ut metaphorically and literally, Howard keeps turning away from the act of deliberation or the movement beyond the self, choosing to hide instead in questions, in the process of interrogation.⁴⁵¹

If one takes this ‘beauty dialogue’ into account, then Howard’s refusal to acknowledge the ‘greeting’, his resistance to the act of deliberation and moving beyond himself very likely lies in the fact that to do so would mean to see himself more clearly, so clearly that he at one point would have to acknowledge the uncultured, enraged, bloody-minded, beautiful schoolboy he once was – a boy who “came from nothing and nowhere”, but really wanted to be someone who came from

⁴⁴⁹ “Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth and Aging.” 191.

⁴⁵⁰ Scarry, “On Beauty and Being Just” 25.

⁴⁵¹ Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 770.

something and somewhere. To join the ranks of ‘someone from somewhere’ Howard Belsey ‘overcame’ his past, where he had

[not yet] gone to university (against Harry’s advice), never left this piss-poor country [England], never married outside his colour and nation [...] He was still a butcher’s son and it was still just the two of them, [Howard and his father Harold], still making do, squabbling in a railway cottage in Dalston.⁴⁵²

In this case, Howard erased this past by overlapping it with a new biography, one not of working-class Howard Belsey trying to be someone, but Professor Howard Belsey who has radical views on Rembrandt, one of the canonical Masters of Western Art. The socio-cultural coordinates of Prof Howard Belsey of Wellington College construct a person, a time, a place, and a space, within which definitions are fairly clear. Prof Howard Belsey of Wellington College is someone from somewhere, unquestionably so. However, one may wonder how this particular Howard Belsey feels about his uncultured, dirty-kneed predecessor who was beautiful, brilliant, and bloody-minded, and if to become Prof Belsey, enraged Howard had to take a few steps back if not be locked up in a metaphorical closet altogether.⁴⁵³

If this erasure of the past was part and parcel of the creation of Prof Belsey, then any action that would require going beyond himself would arguably create the reverse action of seeing himself clearly. After all, Wall writes that beauty makes us “aware of the presence of something decidedly not ourselves and, should we answer its ‘greeting,’ we must learn to accommodate its way of being in the world.”⁴⁵⁴ It is an accommodation, I argue, that requires that one knows one’s own place in the world first, since in the dialectics of placing an Other, i.e. that which is “decidedly not ourselves”, the Self is defined. Thus, acknowledging beauty as beauty, or to use Victoria Kipps’

⁴⁵² Smith, *On Beauty* 295; Additionally, Dalston, to Howard’s mind “was a filthy East End slum when Howard was born into it, full of filthy people who had tried to destroy him – not least of all his own family. Now, apparently, it was the sort of place where perfectly normal people lived. A blonde in long powder-blue overcoat holding a portable computer and a pot plant, an Asian boy dressed in a cheap, shiny suit that reflected like beaten metal – it was impossible to imagine these people populating the East London of his earliest memories.” (28) Considering the fact that Howard describes the transformed Dalston as a place where “perfectly normal people lived”, the implication is that the inhabitants before – and, through that, his family and himself – were nowhere near normal, in this case middle class, i.e. people from ‘somewhere’.

⁴⁵³ Though if one takes Howard’s absent-minded comment on Carl Thomas and how he reminds him of Rubens four African heads (*On Beauty* 77), one wonders if Howard’s radical deconstructive stance is as heartfelt as he professes it to be. To acknowledge the similarity, Howard must be aware of the aesthetics of Rubens’ painting, and how there exists a resemblance, and thus a connection to the ‘real world’ reality of Carl Thomas’ handsome face. In this small moment of absent-minded recognition of beauty Howard usually eschews, it is difficult to fully believe postulations of Western Art as something *only* existent to “console” and “construct” individuals.

⁴⁵⁴ Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 763.

words, admitting “*I like the tomato*”, would connect Prof Howard Belsey, to the nobody Howard Belsey who felt the *Staalmeester*’s gaze acutely, young Howard who felt its judgement and placing in the overall matrix of creativity, power, and place he inhabited – and unsurprisingly rebelled against it. Young Howard after all was “determined not to stay that way”.

As Wall writes when considering Howard’s reaction to *Dr Nicholas Tulp Demonstrating the Anatomy of the Arm*, “Howard’s rejection of Rembrandt’s paintings is a rejection of their intersubjective power to evoke self-reflection.”⁴⁵⁵ Considering the above, Howard in fact *cannot* acknowledge Rembrandt’s paintings as beautiful, since that would provoke a kind of self-reflection that would entail, at this part of the novel, an acknowledgement of the shambles his marriage has become and his culpability in the whole mess. On a larger scale, as seen in his impromptu visit to his father Harold, a continuous acknowledgement of beauty’s (and by extension art’s) “intersubjective power to evoke self-reflection”, would force Howard to confront his past, a past he obviously does not know how to deal with, considering the quiet despair of the short interlude where father and son are unable – though not unwilling – to speak to each other, since they no longer speak the same language, semantically, socially, culturally and historically.⁴⁵⁶

In addition to Howard’s refusal to acknowledge the beauty of anything, whether animate or inanimate, unless his sex drive kicks in, there is the question of genius. Wall writes:

Howard’s denial of genius of Rembrandt is a reaction to Kant’s notion that ‘genius’ is natural quality, that in coming from nature (and hence probably from God), cannot be taught. Some individuals deserve to have it; others do not.

This is the definition of genius that Monty Kipps subscribes to, where “the creation of art is a sign of privilege, that ‘Art was a gift from God, blessing only a handful of masters’”⁴⁵⁷ making art something that “‘naturally’ belongs to those who have been awarded the privilege of money and taste.”⁴⁵⁸ For a Howard Belsey, who comes from “nothing and nowhere”, such a definition of genius

⁴⁵⁵ “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 771.

⁴⁵⁶ Howard does utilize his past, but only so far: While walking through Cricklewood, which the estate agents say is “beyond salvation”, “flâneur Howard” walks past Cricklewood’s inhabitants and “is able to love them, and, more than this, to feel himself, in his own romantic fashion, to be one of them. We scum, we happy scum! From people like these he had come. To people like these he would always belong. It was ancestry he referred to proudly at Marxist conferences and in print; it was a communion he occasionally felt on the streets of New York and in the urban outskirts of Paris. For the most part however, Howard liked to keep his working class roots’ where they flourished best: in his imagination.” (Smith, *On Beauty* 291-292).

⁴⁵⁷ *On Beauty* 44.

⁴⁵⁸ Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 764.

would disqualify him from any participation in the discourse, acquisition, and valid appreciation of art (Howard's self-identification during his walk through derelict Cricklewood is telling: "We scum, we happy scum! From people like these he had come. To people like these he would always belong.").

If Monty Kipps' Kantian definition of art were valid, Howard Belsey could never join the ranks of those who could speak and be heard, since he very simply did not belong to the moneyed and privileged ranks of society, an act of exclusion that Howard – once he acquires all the tools of academic warfare – quite naturally militates against, though maybe in a more unexpected fashion. By exposing Rembrandt, and especially the discourse of Rembrandt, as simply structures of creativity, power, and place made to keep the ignorant and poor in their ignorance and poverty, (and the privileged and moneyed in their privilege and money), Howard is able to deconstruct the whole debate of genius by revealing it to be a construction only. He can thus debunk the whole question of divine providence and belonging by showing its irrelevance, and so never has to answer the question in the first place. Thus, though not acknowledged, Howard's beauty and his difficulties with beauty, are implicitly a part of his obstinate, revisionist manner and thus his radical, post-structuralist style, inadvertently consolidating Smith's stance that a writer's style is "the unavoidable trace of that manner".

4.5 Aesthetic Epiphanies and Connecting Ends

4.5.1 Aesthetic Power and Place

The power of the aesthetic is not a simplistic affair in *On Beauty*. It is shown to be part of a wider discourse of creativity, power, and place that the creative characters in the narrative are fully aware of, Claire Malcolm especially. Reminiscing when Howard first met Kiki, Kiki was

a nursing student in New York. At that time her beauty was awesome, almost unspeakable, but more than this she radiated an essential female nature Claire had already imagined in her poetry – natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire. A goddess of the everyday. She was not one of Howard's intellectual set, but she was actively political, and her beliefs were genuine and well expressed.⁴⁵⁹

What is interesting here is the description of Kiki's beauty on the one hand, "awesome", "unspeakable", "radiat[ing] an essential female nature" and on the other hand the description of Kiki as a person, "natural, honest, powerful, unmediated, full of something like genuine desire", all of which are adjectives that, when put into an academic discourse, would immediately provoke a demand for definition. Kiki is described in absolutes that cannot be found in Howard's academic spheres, and quite likely were debunked as socio-cultural constructions in his "intellectual set"; yet to Claire, they describe Kiki and what she considers "a new kind of woman [who] had come into the world as promised, as advertised."⁴⁶⁰

There is something hopeful, and also a sense of relief, in this description of Kiki who, despite everything, remains the quintessential Other to Claire Malcolm and Howard Belsey, not only in matters of race and gender, but also, and maybe especially, in matters of intellectual pursuits and metaphysical standpoints. To Claire Malcolm, Kiki still believes in absolutes, in things that matter, while Claire is actively doing her best to reconcile such absolutes with her intellectual training via "the idea of 'fittingness': that is, when your chosen pursuit and your ability to achieve it – no matter how small or insignificant both might be – are matched exactly, are fitting."⁴⁶¹ It is Claire's attempt to return to that time where she was not only acknowledged as a genius poet but

⁴⁵⁹ Smith, *On Beauty* 227.

⁴⁶⁰ *On Beauty* 227.

⁴⁶¹ *On Beauty* 214.

also knew herself to be unfettered by intellectual boundaries in her pursuit of beauty and truth, in her case via poetry.

Howard, however, is unable to believe in anything remotely absolute, to the extent that Kiki accuses him of just that, his inability to have faith in anything, and how his lack of faith in anything betrays all, himself included.⁴⁶² Kiki knows Howard well, maybe too well, so well that she has to focus on the Howard of now, rather than the “sheer temporal *layers* of Howard”.⁴⁶³ However, Kiki’s intellectual honesty is the bright light that is able to throw Howard’s faults, lies, and inconsistencies into stark relief such that she can see him clearly: on the one hand Howard’s “subtle, wonderful intricate brain” and on the other hand his “dick [that was] a vulgar, stupid little prick”.⁴⁶⁴ Kiki sees Howard clearly, warts and all, and so is, as Wall writes, equal to her husband’s subject of study, Rembrandt, who is “unsparing in his brutal representation of the vulnerable face, while at the same time [...] tender and observant about the subject’s vulnerability to the vagaries of time and life.”⁴⁶⁵

Kiki sees clearly and has the strength to “not flinch”⁴⁶⁶ once she sees her subject, Howard, clearly. Instead, Kiki takes action, and basically ends their marriage, leaving Howard in order to live her own life and concentrate on herself, someone she has been neglecting for the sake of her husband as Kiki realises. Kiki’s flight from her marriage in a way fulfils yet again the promise Claire Malcolm sees in her, namely that Kiki is really the “new kind of woman” who came into the world “as promised, as advertised”, by simply deciding when enough was enough, and thus changing her life accordingly.

Howard, in turn, pleads to be understood with a kind of entreaty for the validity of his mid-life crisis as a result of an unending male preoccupation with beauty:

It’s true that men – they respond to beauty... it doesn’t end for them, this... this concern with beauty as a physical actuality in the word - and that’s clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes... but it’s *true* and I don’t know how else to explain it.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶² ‘You know, Howard, all you *ever* do is rip into everybody else. You don’t have any *beliefs* – that’s why you’re scared of people with beliefs, people who have dedicated themselves to something, to an *idea*.’ (*On Beauty* 392, italics in the original).

⁴⁶³ *On Beauty* 203, italics in the original.

⁴⁶⁴ *On Beauty* 205.

⁴⁶⁵ Wall, “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 772, Footnote 9.

⁴⁶⁶ *On Beauty* 203.

⁴⁶⁷ *On Beauty* 207, italics in the original.

The mistake Howard makes here is to believe that this pre-occupation is a) gendered, and b) that it absolves him from any ethical decisions. As seen in Kiki's observation of the "mass of signals" she cannot escape, her understanding and also appreciation of beauty, sexual politics, and the dynamics both entail is very apparent. It doesn't "end for [her]" either. It is her reaction to these influences that is important, where, rather than absolving Kiki from decision-making, rather necessitate decisive action. Thus, the narrative establishes that aesthetics do not absolve one from ethics, rather the opposite in fact, since the aesthetic experience – the perception of beauty – incorporates active participation of the perceiving self, which is where "ethical fairness" is situated, as Scarry states:

When we speak about beauty, attention sometimes falls on the beautiful object, at other times on the perceiver's cognitive act of beholding the beautiful thing, and at still other times on the creative act that is prompted by one's being in the presence of what is beautiful. The invitation to ethical fairness can be found at each of these three sites [...].⁴⁶⁸

In practical terms, this means that within each "site", the question of "balance and the weighing of both sides" exemplified by the Aristotelian analogy that "justice is a perfect cube",⁴⁶⁹ requires that that balance be considered, a balance that has a very real place in lived experience. As Kiki points out heatedly, Howard's proselytising may be all good and well, but there is a reality he refuses to grasp that goes beyond intellectualism and is tied to the aesthetic experience as well: "This life [is real]. We're really here – this is really happening. Suffering is *real*. When you hurt people, it's *real*. When you fuck one of our best friends, that's a real thing and it *hurts* me."⁴⁷⁰ Here, any undocking from ethical consideration via aesthetics (in this case Howard's argument for the overwhelming and thus ethically absolving power of beauty) is untenable, since consequences do take place, in this case the injustice of selfishly inflicting pain on his own family.⁴⁷¹

As Colleen Fenno points out, one main reason for Howard and Kiki's marital collapse is Howard's internalization of the "monogamy-equals-monotony storyline",⁴⁷² which propels him to an affair, though, as Fenno points out, "he still loves Kiki". Howard, like other characters in *On Beauty*, "buy[s] into cultural constructions about aging and youth", which allows him to "accept

⁴⁶⁸ Scarry, "On Beauty and Being Just" 65.

⁴⁶⁹ "On Beauty and Being Just" 64.

⁴⁷⁰ Smith, *On Beauty* 394.

⁴⁷¹ Fenno, "Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging" 192.

⁴⁷² "Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging" 192.

the idea” that he is not doing much else than doing the expected: “just another middle-aged professor suffering the expected mid-life crisis.”⁴⁷³ It is interesting that Howard, so bent on deconstructing power-dynamics in Western beauty definitions, falls prey to the one powerful dynamic with regard to Western beauty definitions, namely that of beauty and attractiveness in a heterosexual partnership. It is a cultural template of heteronormative Western aesthetics that gives him leeway to not reconsider his actions, a discourse which Howard simply complies with, rather than deconstruct as radically as he would, for example, with a rose, which he after all states is “an accumulation of cultural and biological constructions circulating around the mutually attracting binary poles of nature/artifice”.⁴⁷⁴

Howard’s inability to accept the powerful and destabilising discourses that influence his life is ironic as he is part of an academic field that champions fluidity, ambiguity, and constant flux by debunking absolutes and fixed narratives. Rather, his continuous merciless deconstruction leads to a mirroring of Monty Kipps’ rigidity and hypocrisy on a different scale, since as Kiki explains angrily, “we [the Belsey’s] can’t talk about anything seriously, everything’s ironic, nothing’s serious – everyone’s scared to *speak* in case *you* think its clichéd or dull – you’re like the thought police.”⁴⁷⁵ Kiki deconstructs Howard’s statutes of intellectual superiority and ethical detachment by showing that he is no better than his academic rival. She condemns his rigid aesthetic perspective and his selfish ethical stance that disallows any forward movement, fixing Howard in a continuous rebellion that ends up destroying more than it establishes.

What is striking is that Howard actually acts like a youth who is just beginning to learn that there is such a thing as moral responsibility, quite like Karim Amir in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, who only late in the novel develops a conscience, and at least tries not to hurt those dear to him with his egotistic actions. Howard seems freeze-framed in emotional time, unable to move forward, to truly grow. However, to move on would be to acknowledge the past and lay it to rest, yet for someone whose past is quite literally absent, as seen in the virtual absence of Howard’s family on the Belseys family picture wall,⁴⁷⁶ moving on would require facing his past first. Howard Belsey is unable to do this until he is left without the trappings of his comfortable life and must find his way back into his place as Prof Howard Belsey again.

⁴⁷³ Smith, *On Beauty* 143, qtd. in Fenno, “Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging” 192.

⁴⁷⁴ *On Beauty* 225.

⁴⁷⁵ *On Beauty* 393.

⁴⁷⁶ *On Beauty* 18.

Kiki's flight from their marital home has left its mark by the time the reader meets Howard again, the signs of neglect obvious.⁴⁷⁷ It is in the final scene of the novel where Howard is to give a lecture that is to save his career, that words very literally elude him, not least because he left his papers in his car and so either had to cancel the talk or ad-lib. Instead, silence reigns as Howard clicks through the PowerPoint of paintings, finally zooming in on Rembrandt's *Hendrickje Bathing, 1654* and is able to share a moment of intimacy and understanding with Kiki, who is sitting in the audience. This is the moment where Howard "saw out into the audience and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled. Howard looked back at the woman on the wall."⁴⁷⁸

It is a moment of layered recognition that, as Wall writes, "the greeting of the work of art mediates the greeting between the ever-humane Kiki and the now human Howard,"⁴⁷⁹ thus concluding the transformation of a marriage and a family via the aesthetic experience of beauty and the acceptance of the existence of truth, no matter how contested. The Belseys evolve from parents and children into a group of adults who are closely related and part of each other's lives. It is at the end of *On Beauty*, after the contentious question of the existence of poetic genius and the sublime are answered positively, that the Belseys begin to live more individual lives. No longer bound to the narratives of self they so far thought unchangeable, all family members are on the verge of finding new ways to be in the world by the time the narrative ends.

Before the hopeful moment between Kiki and Howard occurs, for example, their academically zealous daughter Zora also goes through a classic college epiphany. By the end of *On Beauty*, Zora's sense of self is no longer constrained by the internalized outer gaze,⁴⁸⁰ but opened to a genuine attempt to see herself as herself, Zora Belsey, who wakes up in the morning and does not think about what she will look like as she had done so far, since what she is really

⁴⁷⁷ "He had given up smoking soon after Kiki walked out, but now he cursed that decision – his lungs were in no way better at coping with this exertion than they would have been five months ago. He had also put on twenty-three pounds." (*On Beauty* 440-441).

⁴⁷⁸ *On Beauty* 443.

⁴⁷⁹ Wall, "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty" 774.

⁴⁸⁰ Fenno is enlightening in her analysis of Zora's internalisation of Western beauty discourses. As she states, "Zora's caustic, emotional response [to Victoria Kipps'] based on very little real interaction and dwelling mostly on Victoria's appearance, signals that she judges Victoria because she feels inadequate next to her "physical superiority." (Fenno, "Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging" 186). The reaction of the two young women to each other also shows "how young women internalize cultural standards and privilege beauty over intelligence" (187). What none of the characters really consider, and the novel implicitly touches on but never fully extrapolates, is that the definition of "physical superiority", beauty, and desirability is informed by powerful discourses of race and cultural paradigms of creativity, power, and place, which all characters internalize, but only Kiki seems to be genuinely aware of, though powerless to influence.

interested in is the course she is about to go to, and what she will learn there.⁴⁸¹ Zora's brothers as well have come to see themselves as independent selves that need to carve out their own lives, Jerome at Brown University after months of indecisiveness and religious searching, and Levi finally busy finishing high school after altercations with his disenfranchised Haitians and fights with his parents, who still have full legal responsibility for him.

Both Levi and Jerome fight their own battles in the course of *On Beauty* and come to their own conclusions about truth and beauty, while considering not only themselves but also others, and vice versa, thus closing the circle of the Belsey family's development. By the end of *On Beauty*, everybody learnt something about themselves and everyone else, beauty and truth have been found to be problematic but unavoidable realities, and art remains a necessity in accessing the bone and marrow of life. Thus the connection "between people, nations, heart and head, labor and art" is illustrated and finely constructed in the best Forsterian fashion, thus forming an insightful homage to E. M. Forster's style and manner, and *Howard's End*.

4.5.2 Imperial "Organizing Principle" Unchanged

I hope to have shown that with *On Beauty*, Smith parallels Byatt's conclusions in *Possession*, where beauty and truth are contested and ambiguous, but still attainable via poetic genius and the sublime. However, just like in *Possession*, the underlying meta-narratives of ethnicity and class that influence the discourses of beauty and truth are also left largely untouched. As seen in the characterisation of Howard Belsey and his family, friends, and enemies, the "organizing principle" in *On Beauty* is equal to the one in *Possession*, where whiteness yet again disappears in the overall discourse, and the discourse of beauty is highly gendered, where female beauty of all ethnicities is considered, but white male beauty largely left to itself as if it needed no further consideration.

Moreover, paralleling *Possession*'s aesthetic structure, the art that facilitates the aesthetic epiphany Howard experiences is one of the old Masters, Rembrandt, and so part of the Western canon that was part and parcel of the imperial definitions of creativity, power, and place. Howard is undoubtedly able to deconstruct the socio-cultural matrices that influence the evaluation of Rembrandt, yet it is precisely Rembrandt's art that helps him access these very constructions, establishing a cyclicity of discourse reminiscent of *Possession*'s circular dynamic of reception

⁴⁸¹ Smith, *On Beauty* 420.

and text. Like in *Possession*, the socio-cultural position of the educated white man is central to the entire structure of *On Beauty*. Monty Kipps is complicit in this perspective since he exemplifies the quintessential Victorian mind-set, minus the ethnic stipulations. The discourse he represents, though, is an imperial one, one that does not question the power-politics of imperial cultural practice.

Monty Kipps is an example of Macauleyan imperial education: a man more English than the colonial English themselves. Due to the power-politics of American race relations of the last half century, a Monty Kipps would have been able to fly under the radar of any serious scrutiny regarding considerations of privilege and exploitation, since he probably belonged to the first of a generation of black (male) intellectuals who were able to join the ranks of the Western, white elite by very basically ‘following the rules’. Kipps anger at Charlene’s wish to join Wellington despite having “no college education, and no college experience, [a young African-American woman] who did not graduate from her high school,”⁴⁸² possibly stems from his own history of having to fight to get where he was. It seems that now that Monty Kipps has his privilege, he also wants to enjoy *being* privileged. This naturally necessitates that there exist a group of people who lack privilege, making ‘jumping hurdles’ to gain the privileges of his caste (the erudite professor) a devaluing of the entire system of acquisition and privilege, which would also explain Monty Kipps’ anti-affirmative action stance.

Such a mind-set of course completely ignores, maybe even suppresses, the fact that the (academic) world has gone through several revolutions over the past seventy-odd years. Charlene’s supplication to stay in Claire Malcolm’s unorthodox poetry class of non-Wellingtonian students, a class that takes the exclusionary dynamics of American education system into account, is very understandable. It also makes Monty Kipps’ staunch refusal to lend a helping hand, while equally exploiting Charlene sexually as his affair, a selfish and callous stance at best. Thus, the implicit imperial perspective of rigid social stratification, and pre-scribed hierarchies of value, not to mention the gender bias and power politics implicit in the male professor-female student constellation, is replicated in Monty Kipps’ manner and style.⁴⁸³

Additionally, the Othering that takes place in *On Beauty* is according to the definitions of imperial Self and imperial Other, since Kiki remains the, admittedly admired and desired, Other to

⁴⁸² *On Beauty*, 365.

⁴⁸³ For further consideration of Monty Kipps imperial layerings consider Chapter 4.5.3 “Communication and Compromise”.

her white counterparts. Interestingly, Kiki is aware of this Othering, which Howard in turn simply does not understand, since to him, the space he lives in, a very white space, is factually the norm. As Kiki retorts during their fight,

You don't even notice it – you never notice. You think it's normal. Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this ... this *sea* of white. I barely *know* any black folk any more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your *fucking* college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I *staked my whole life* on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that.⁴⁸⁴

Here the fault lines of ethnicity, and their intricate connectedness to power dynamics, the evaluation of creativity, and simple spatial components can be seen. Howard's reply to Kiki's outburst shows the imperial gaze he implicitly follows, "I can't understand you [...] You're not making any sense to me. You're hysterical now."⁴⁸⁵ To Howard, Kiki's anger makes no sense since his perspective, when it comes to lived experience, is one of an ethnicity-free space, where race apparently plays no part in evaluation and perception, positioning Howard's conceptual perspective right within the imperial centre's normative definitions of Self and Other.

The fact that Kiki points out that he chose "A little *white* woman [...] a tiny little white woman I could fit in my pocket,"⁴⁸⁶ shows Kiki's awareness of the race and ethnicity discourses at play here, discourses that are a full part of Kiki's lived experience, as already previously discussed, when it comes to the matter of her physique. Howard's response to Kiki's accusation is, "You're being ludicrous,"⁴⁸⁷ unaware as he clearly is of the systems of definition of beauty and truth at play here, disturbing and disrupting discourses of creativity, power, and place which are anchored in cultural-ethnic matrices. In this particular case, that of white discourses of beauty where Kiki would not be considered beautiful (this is the discourse Zora adheres to, and is tormented by), while in a black discourse of beauty, together with a feminist hope in the discourse Claire Malcom articulates, Kiki is not only beautiful but highly desirable. The fact that Howard cheated on Kiki with, as she says, "A little *white* woman", and Kiki's very apparent pain and rage about this, shows that to Kiki, Howard's aesthetics are essentially informed by a white beauty

⁴⁸⁴ *On Beauty* 206, italics in the original.

⁴⁸⁵ *On Beauty* 206.

⁴⁸⁶ *On Beauty* 206, italics in the original.

⁴⁸⁷ *On Beauty* 206.

discourse, excluding her as a large black woman from any place in it, mirroring the imperial stratification of Self and Other, the implicit hierarchy of values included.

Howard, by being Howard, lives in a white space, and inhabits a white perspective, including the respective socio-cultural coordinates awarded him just by being himself within a Western society, both English and US American. Howard's walk home, for example, is a very different one to his son Levi's, who after all is a mix-raced young man, which is just one of many fissures in perspective that *On Beauty* shows. The scene is an everyday scene: Levi Belsey is walking down the sidewalk to his home, a suburban house in Wellington. Just like his sister, Levi is very aware of the narratives of power and place his mere presence in suburban Wellington put into question, since

Maybe he should buy a T-shirt that just had on it YO – I'M NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU. He could use a T-shirt like that. Maybe like three times each day on his travels that T-shirt would come in handy. There was always some old lady who needed to be reassured on that point.⁴⁸⁸

Later on, when finally reaching his home he meets his sister Zora who is helping decorate the house in preparation for their parents' garden party. The scene is as mundane as it can be with regard to party preparations, however there is a twist when Zora sees who is watching Levi.

‘Wow,’ she whispered, bringing one hand up to her forehead as a visor, ‘this one really can't believe her eyes. Check it out – she's having some kind of cognitive failure. She's going to malfunction.’

‘Huh?’

‘Thank you! Yes, move along now – he lives here – yes that's right – no crime is taking place – thank you for your interest’!

Levi turned around and saw the blushing woman Zora was yelling at, now scurrying by on the other side of the street.

‘What's wrong with these people exactly?’ Zora put both feet on the ground and pulled off her gardening gloves. [...]⁴⁸⁹

It is difficult to imagine Howard Belsey having to face the same scrutiny let alone bias on his daily walk home, in fact, his daily walk to anywhere on either side of the Atlantic. Howard, by being a white heterosexual male, carries the “invisible knapsack of provisions” Peggy Mackintosh speaks

⁴⁸⁸ *On Beauty* 80, capitals in the original.

⁴⁸⁹ *On Beauty* 83; for a fuller evaluation of culturally coded fears with regard to gender and race in *On Beauty* consider: Kanika Batra. “Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede: Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Black Studies in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*.” *Callaloo*. Vol. 33, No. 4, Fall 2010. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1079-1092.

of, a knapsack that allows him to never experience the kind of bias his son experiences daily. Howard can thus live in an environment that is seemingly free of any racial or ethnic discourses, since the powerful discourses that apply to his son never really influence Howard's own lived experience, thus establishing a narrow perspective of the world he lives in, while equally projecting a sense of universality.

The other Belsey children are not immune to this powerful discourse either. When Zora, for example, complains about her mother's weight gain to Carl Thomas, Carl's reply is a calm "Fat ladies need love too",⁴⁹⁰ implicitly reminding Zora that she is dealing with two discourses of beauty and truth here, systems of definition, observation, action, and response that Kiki Belsey is well aware of, a "mass of signals" that are often "beyond her direct control", pointing to the racialized aspect of the beauty discourse all character's live and act in, which Smith often touches on, but never fully mines. Zora, by complaining about her mother's weight gain as she does, clearly adheres to the Western mainstream, speak, white narrative of beauty and desirability that demands a particular slim physique for a woman to be considered beautiful and thus desirable. On a structurally deeper level, this mirrors imperial hegemonial practices of Self and Other, where the Self defined is the white Western Self, relegating all other beauty discourses, and the truths available by them, to the space of 'Other', and thus irrelevant in the established white Western 'norm'.

Now, juxtaposing this dynamic with *On Beauty's* final scene, where Howard is forced to stop speaking and must finally look at the paintings he's critiquing, Howard finally sees Rembrandt's *Hendrickje*, the beauty of the painting, which by contemporary hyper-glossed photo-shopped standards of beauty (consider the *Vanity Fair* magazine Wall conjures)⁴⁹¹ *Hendrickje* would actually be considered 'no oil painting', while she actually is exactly that: an oil painting by one of the greats of Western Art and its discourse. This juxtaposition and cross-referencing is why I argue that Smith goes a step further than Scarry by pointing out – however unintentionally – that

⁴⁹⁰ Smith *On Beauty* 139.

⁴⁹¹ As Colleen Fenno points out, the constraints of the beauty industry are very powerful, something both Claire Malcom and Kiki Belsey are aware of: "If Claire reveals that cultural influences like women's magazines still promote negative body images, then Kiki reveals that even avoiding such influences at home does little to overcome the problem. [...] Like Claire, [Kiki] recognizes that beauty ideals promote self-hate and self-disgust in young women, even as she concedes the inevitable failure in trying to fulfil them. Despite her best efforts to protect her daughter from anything that might contribute to an unhealthy self-perception, Kiki regrets that Zora still faces the chronic presence of cultural "hatred of women and their bodies"" (Smith, *On Beauty* 197, qtd. in Fenno "Zadie Smith *On Beauty*, Youth, and Aging 189). It is also within this discourse that Zora Belsey and Victoria Kipps interact, leading to the toxic and hostile reactions between the two young women, never mind Jerome Belsey's attempts at reconciliation by pointing out the complexity of the beauty discourse at hand.

beauty is never neutral or static, neither one's perception nor one's appreciation of it. This makes any objective discourse of beauty an act of justice, and thus judgement, due to its stipulation of available and acceptable truths no matter how ambiguous. Any subjective discourse, unaware of its own prerogatives, is thereby highly blinkered due to its negligence of the complexities of the world at large.

Thus, like Byatt in *Possession*, Smith is able to show via the implementation of poetic genius and the sublime that the discourses of beauty and truth are a fundamental part of lived experience and so should be taken seriously, never mind how ambiguous they are. *On Beauty* establishes clearly that postmodern and post-structuralist discourses have left work undone, and that the concepts of beauty and truth genuinely need further discussion. However, to do so, Smith establishes a narrative that hinges on a powerful aesthetic that is based on the old imperial structures of creativity, power, and place where the "organising principle" at the heart of the discourses critiqued – the heterosexual, white male; the traditional Western canon – is established as the norm, thus mirroring the post-imperial phantom pains already visible in *Possession*. Like Byatt, Smith makes a very valid point. Like Byatt, Smith inadvertently reanimates the structures that postmodernism and post-structuralism revolutionised so radically, showing that what is needed here is a step beyond the old strictures of traditional imperial hegemonial practice and the radical critique of postmodern and post-structuralist thought, a step to a conceptual space that allows the discussion of beauty, truth, poetic genius and the sublime without inadvertently reinstating what was rightly rebelled against before.

4.5.3 Communication and Compromise

On Beauty's narrative palimpsest is E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, showing once again Smith's admiration for the Edwardian author. The layering can be clearly seen in Monty Kipps, *On Beauty*'s Mr Wilcox Sr., whose hypocrisy and sense of righteous entitlement mirrors Monty Kipps' self-positioning. The twist here is the decidedly post-colonial narrative of a Haitian-born intellectual appropriating a deeply colonial mind-set in a post-imperial space. Change Monty Kipps' skin colour, transport his birthplace to the Home Counties in the late nineteenth century, and you have an excellent example of a Victorian gentleman, vices, hypocrisies, and family values included. Thus, while Monty Kipps' Kantian aesthetics are simply a postulation of the exclusionary aesthetics of divine providence that were seen as fact in previous centuries, Howard Belsey understands that the *grand récit* such as Kipps believes in are constructed. However, what Howard fails to realise, and so cannot acknowledge, is that despite their constructedness, aesthetic meta-narratives are part and parcel of the human lived experience, since they establish a system of definition by which individuals and groups live by. This makes them vital in understanding said experience, disallowing their dismissal, but requiring that they be discussed in their entirety, since they are attempts to encapsulate a lived experience that still remains elusive to empirical investigations.⁴⁹²

Howard and Monty's feud is thus understandable if not predictable, and the backdrop before which the events in *On Beauty* play out. However, the world *On Beauty* plays in, is a world that increasingly demands that there be concrete postulations about beauty and truth, about equality and justice, but without the elitism and exclusionism of the old orders. It is a world embodied by the two men's wives, Kiki Belsey and Carlene Kipps, women who share an understanding of the beauty art can reveal, without bashing each other with ideologies in the interim.⁴⁹³ The gendered split is interesting, though it does not continue with the Belsey and the Kipps' children who, well-versed in their parents' academic and non-academic points of view, search and at times find new ways of "being in the world".

The second generation Belseys and Kipps understand the necessity of the wide-scale deconstruction of the Arnoldian and Leavisque paradigms as seen in postmodern and post-

⁴⁹² This is where, on a structural level, Smith and Byatt inhabit the same conceptual space, showing with their respective novels their insistence that, yes, lived experience is intricate, ambiguous, and difficult to decipher, yet there exists something that can be deciphered, and so needs constant negotiation of terms and concepts.

⁴⁹³ Smith, *On Beauty* 174-9.

structuralist orthodoxy, and accept them as factually valid. Nonetheless, each in their own way, insist on a valid substitute in return, from Zora Belsey's understanding of ethical necessities, Jerome Belsey's search for teleological clarity, and Victoria Kipps deconstructing of Howard's post-structuralist ideology, to Levi Belsey's insistence on social equality. Each inhabits the position that all partake in the human project of trying to understand what beauty and truth really are, nor is anyone exempt from achieving equality and justice for all. The three Belsey siblings, Zora, Jerome and Levi, and Victoria Kipps are the ones who in fact do try to come closer to deciphering the complexities of their lived experience, some more blinkered than others, but the youthful verve to simply *find out* what is really happening is very there.

Theirs is a world hovering in the liminal space between the Victorian strictures of a Monty Kipps and full-scale rebellion against any type of structure, any type of prescribed meaning, as seen with Howard Belsey. What is interesting to note is that both Howard and Monty are corrupted by the narrow-mindedness of their orthodoxies, creating a hypocritical space wherein hard-headed antagonism is possible at the expense of all else dragged into the battle, which, for those generations following (wives, lovers, and children alike), is just part of the problem. Compromise and communication, *On Beauty's* narrative seems to state, are necessary, not only socially and culturally, but ideologically as well, showing that perspectives are exactly that: a point of view, a line of sight, and thus, highly subjective. In that, though, *On Beauty* incorporates the same post-imperial phantom pains already visible in *Possession's* structure. In *On Beauty's* case, however, there is a stronger sense that there are more questions to be asked and answered about postmodern and especially millennial discourses of beauty and truth; that, if anything, contemporary discourses are just at the beginning of shedding light on the deeper strata of systems of definition that inform the dynamics of creativity, power, and place that are accepted and applied today.

5. Ian McEwan's *Saturday*: Textual Ambiguity, Layered Reception & the Sublime

5.1. Textual Ambiguity

Though not explicitly stated, yet frequently implied in his essays and interviews, reading and writing are not separate activities to Ian McEwan. They are means by which to comment on and communicate complex ideas and layered points of view. As McEwan himself states, he “look[s] on novels as exploratory forms of investigation, at its broadest and best, into human nature.”⁴⁹⁴ A writer who was long considered “Ian Macabre”,⁴⁹⁵ the exploration of human nature’s darker sides is what is generally attributed to McEwan’s oeuvre, primarily due to the awful acts of violence acted out in his narratives. As eminent New York Times reviewer Michelle Kakutani wrote of McEwan’s 1998 Booker prize winning novel *Amsterdam*:

Like so many of the author’s stories, “Amsterdam” concerns the sudden intrusion of violent, perverse events into his characters’ mundane lives, events that cruelly expose the psychological fault lines running beneath the humdrum surface of their world.⁴⁹⁶

The cruel exposure of the “psychological fault lines running beneath humdrum surface[s]” is symptomatic of McEwan’s fiction, exemplifying his interest in the morass of human behaviour which, according to his own acknowledgement, is McEwan’s attempt to “imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good.”⁴⁹⁷ With the novel form being an “exploratory” means of investigation, “at its broadest and best, into human nature” to McEwan, post-structuralist authorial deaths and readerly rebellions are expressly curtailed within his narratives, especially since McEwan’s relation to his characters is reminiscent of Nabokov’s “galley slaves”.⁴⁹⁸ In as much as

⁴⁹⁴ Ian McEwan. *Interview with Dan Cryer*. p. B6. qtd. in Brian Finney. “Briony’s Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.” *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 27, No. 3, Winter 2004. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 68-82, here p. 76.

⁴⁹⁵ Merritt Moseley. “Current Books in Review.” *Sewanee Review*. Vol. 119, No. 2, Spring 2011. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. xxii-xxiii; p. xxiii.

⁴⁹⁶ Michelle Kakutani. “Amsterdam’: Dark Tour De Force.” *Books of The Times*. 1 December 1998. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/29/daily/amsterdam-book-review.html>> (7 August 2014).

⁴⁹⁷ Ian McEwan, “Points of Departure,” Interview with Ian Hamilton. *New Review*. Vol. 5, No. 2 (1978), p. 20, qtd. in Finney 69.

⁴⁹⁸ As The New York Times reviewer William H. Pritchard writes, “What readers tend to remember from McEwan’s fiction is its penchant for contriving scenes of awful catastrophe: human dismemberment in “The Comfort of Strangers”; a confrontation between a woman and two deadly wild dogs in “Black Dogs”; the tour de force balloon disaster that brilliantly opens “Enduring Love.” [...] “Amsterdam” may be compared with McEwan’s first two novels, “The Cement Garden” and “The Comfort of Strangers,” which have been cleverly, and accurately, tagged with three of Hobbes’s adjectives (slightly modified) to describe life in the state of nature – nasty, British and short.” (William H. Pritchard. “Publish and Perish.” *The New York Times Book Review*. 27 December 1998).

the careful construction of McEwan's novels is often visible through the text and meta-text of the narratives, his novels exemplify the "response and a contribution to an even more thorough going sense that reality or history are provisional," a mode of writing Patricia Waugh sees embedded in "contemporary meta-fictional writing".⁴⁹⁹ In McEwan's fiction in general, and in *Saturday* specifically, the lifeworlds described are "no longer [worlds] of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures."⁵⁰⁰

Paralleling A. S. Byatt and Zadie Smith's becoming between reader and writer, the reading writer McEwan opens a reading game for the reader via his novels, which, in turn, enables other reading writers to consider the possible modes of interpretation. This back-and-forth of reception and text as is possible between readers and writers is continuous, wherein the interdependent text proliferates its signification,⁵⁰¹ and allows McEwan to "alert his reader to the status of his text as a literary artefact."⁵⁰² This is especially the case in McEwan's *Saturday*, where the text's narratorial positioning has led to a lot of discussion since it is not immediately identifiable.⁵⁰³ Where in Byatt's *Possession* and Smith's *On Beauty* the omniscient narrator is clearly defined and the differentiation between characters and narrator remains clear, *Saturday* refuses such 'easy' compartmentalisations by fuzzing the apparent borders.

As Christina Root writes in "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism",⁵⁰⁴ it is not always easy to distinguish the voices of narrator and character in *Saturday*, to a point that "the first critics writing about *Saturday*, [couldn't] quite believe that McEwan was endorsing the views of a character who seems in so many ways smug and limited," critics who surprisingly "didn't see any

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/27/reviews/981227.27pritcht.html>>. (7 August 2014).

⁴⁹⁹ Patricia Waugh. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1984, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁰ Waugh, *Metafiction* 7.

⁵⁰¹ Brian Finney. "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion" 73.

⁵⁰² Finney, "Briony's Stand Against Oblivion" 74.

⁵⁰³ *Saturday* is not the only fiction in which McEwan 'plays' with the constructedness of a narrative. McEwan's subsequent novel *Atonement* embeds the "status of his text as a literary artefact" more dramatically, using the artificiality of narrative – in the sense of the artistic dimensions and the fiction – as a major plot-twist. For further reading, see: Mary Behrmann. "The Waiting Game: Medieval Allusions and the Lethal Nature of Passivity in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 42, No. 4, Winter 2010. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press pp. 453-470; Kathleen D'Angelo. "'To Make a Novel': The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 41, No. 1, Spring 2009. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 88-105; James Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*." *Philosophy and Literature*. Vol. 29, No. 1, April 2005. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 130-145; Richard Robinson. "The Modernism of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. Vol. 56, No. 3, Fall 2010. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 473-495.

⁵⁰⁴ Christian Root. "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*." *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 35, No. 1, Fall 2011. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 60-78.

other way to read [Perowne than] as the author's mouthpiece."⁵⁰⁵ This circumstance seemed validated by McEwan's own admission that he gave Henry Perowne "his house, his squash game, his fish stew recipe, his mother" and even "bits of his children."⁵⁰⁶ Additionally, McEwan has been known to be vocally sceptical of magic realism,⁵⁰⁷ a stance that comprises *Saturday*'s main character's literary and cultural standpoint.⁵⁰⁸ These admissions and their general critical acceptance shows that, despite post-structural orthodoxies concerning reception and text, there still remains a strong acceptance of the author as Author within the reading audience, mirroring the friction within the English cultural discourse that *Saturday* hints on, as will be considered later in this chapter.

Nonetheless, I agree with Root that to follow the equalisation *Saturday*'s initial critics fell for would be to lose an enriching reading experience, and maybe even establish "philistine misreadings" by ways of ignoring the possibilities of reception available. Root advocates reading the novel "against the grain not only of its protagonist's views but also of McEwan's", seeing this as especially worthwhile since on closer reading, *Saturday* "conjures the ghosts of other consciousnesses [sic] just outside the window of [Henry Perowne's] mind."⁵⁰⁹

The textual matrix within which *Saturday* develops points to the breadth of *Saturday*'s writer's reading via the very embeddedness of the fictional texts. Intertextual references glimmer and glint through *Saturday*, mute flashes and long rays of textual reflection that the main character Henry Perowne is ignorant of, but the discerning reader would spot due to the parallelism of narrative structures and the events that take place. Mark Currie elucidates the layering of narratorial awareness when stating that protagonist Henry Perowne's "own condition as a fictional narrative is unknowable to him."⁵¹⁰ Currie argues that this state of affairs could be beyond the omniscient narrator's plain of perception as well, an "omniscient narrative voice which is concerned with

⁵⁰⁵ Christina Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism" 63; With regard to the difficulty of pinpointing authorial perspective consider the following: James Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*"; Kendall Walton. "Style and the Processes of Art." *The Concept of Style*. Beryl Lang (Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 72–103; Alexander Nehemas. "Writer, Work, Text, Author." *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*. Anthony J. Cascardi (Ed.). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 265–91.

⁵⁰⁶ Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism" 63.

⁵⁰⁷ In his essay on faith in fiction, McEwan compares his fiction as a church with a "god of fiction" who tends to desert his believers, magic realism being one of fictions orthodoxies, to which McEwan considers himself as having been "always low church on that one". Ian McEwan. "Ian McEwan: when faith in fiction falters – and how it is restored." *The Guardian*. 16 February 2013. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/16/ian-mcewan-faith-fiction-falters>.> (12 August 2014).

⁵⁰⁸ Moseley, "Current Books in Review" xxiii.

⁵⁰⁹ Root, "A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism" 64.

⁵¹⁰ Mark Currie. *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007, p. 127.

knowing [Perowne], but not with its own relation to that knowledge.”⁵¹¹ Thus, while the authorial narrative voice within *Saturday* is very aware that it is narrating Perowne’s day, it is nonetheless unaware of the fact that “it is engaged in a polemic between literature and science”, while the discerning reader, in turn, will be aware of this polemic.

Several critics have pointed out the narratorial layering of *Saturday*,⁵¹² unbeknownst to *Saturday*’s own protagonist, wherein the intertextuality of the text is woven into its very fabric, and makes it, as Root writes, “obsessively intertextual”.⁵¹³ Henry Perowne as well as *Saturday*’s narrator, however, remain blissfully unaware of this textual tapestry, where

[s]cenes are fashioned out of and echo *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, *Howards End*, Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” and Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*, among others. Matthew Arnold is practically a character, even though Henry has never heard of him. [...] Similarly, Joyce’s “The Dead” seems eerily present in the last scene, both in verbal echoes and in Henry’s actual thoughts.⁵¹⁴

Root is quick to assert that these “literary ghosts” have no influence on the causal sequences within *Saturday*, however, their presence is felt: “they are there, creating patterns of meaning that influence our reading of the novel’s present,”⁵¹⁵ thereby showing “what Kristeva claims are some of the different ways in which a text, in relating to other texts, becomes productive of further meanings.”⁵¹⁶ The sheer layerdness of intertextual references in *Saturday* insists on intention rather than authorial absence, utilizing the kind of reader-writer dynamic that Byatt and Smith argue for,

⁵¹¹ Mark Currie, *About Time* 127.

⁵¹² See among others: Sebastian Groes (Ed.). “Ian McEwan and the Modernist Consciousness of the City in *Saturday*.” *Ian McEwan*. London: Continuum, 2009, pp. 99–114; Dominic Head. *Ian McEwan*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007; Molly Clark Hillard. ““When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight”: Re-Reading McEwan’s *Saturday* and Arnold’s “Dover Beach”.” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*. Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2008. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 181–206; Teresa Winterhalter. ““Plastic Fork in Hand”: Reading as a Tool of Ethical Repair in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*. Vol. 40, No. 3, Fall 2010. Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University, pp. 338–363.

⁵¹³ Root, “A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism” 67.

⁵¹⁴ “A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism” 67; Additionally, *Saturday*’s opening scene, where Henry Perowne watches a burning plane in the sky, is often considered to be a reference to the opening lines of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. [...] But it’s night. He’s afraid of the way the glass will fall – soon – it will be a spectacle: the fall of a crystal palace. But coming down in total blackout, without one glint of light, only great invisible crashing.” Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Sydney: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 1.

⁵¹⁵ Root, “A Melodiousness at Odds with Pessimism” 67.

⁵¹⁶ Finney, “Briony’s Stand against Oblivion” 73.

while in McEwan's case, this receptive and conceptual middle ground is exemplified, but not fully articulated in an explicitly theoretical framework.⁵¹⁷

In the following I would like to explore how this allows McEwan to chart multi-layered anxieties of reception in *Saturday*'s textual palimpsest, paralleling Byatt and Smith's critique of postmodern and post-structural orthodoxies. I argue that, by showing a thoroughly millennial mind-set through Henry Perowne, McEwan shows what Kathleen Wall refers to when stating that the "postmodern attitude has died in a kind of fin de siècle despair at its inability to interrogate the consequences of its own provisionality and indecipherability[...]"⁵¹⁸

By letting the reader follow neurosurgeon Henry Perowne through his *Saturday*, McEwan establishes a narrative of millennial identity within the English cultural space, (in this case an urban one), and so is able to show the blind spots and sheer helplessness of postmodern and post-structuralist discourses when faced with the uncompromising brutality of physical violence. Like Byatt with regard to scholarship, and Smith to identity and selfhood, McEwan thereby shows that postmodern and post-structuralist discourses have left work undone, in this case regarding how to face down physical threat since part of the millennial lived experience means finding ways to repel the brutality and violence of global terrorism.

However, just like Byatt and Smith, McEwan inadvertently reinstates imperial systems of definition in his attempt to envision a working prevention-mechanism against physical violence and attack. I argue that, in *Saturday*, the post-imperial phantom pains already identified in *Possession* and *On Beauty* are part and parcel of the narrative, since Henry Perowne is far more imperial in mind-set and outlook than at first considered. His perspective is deeply informed by imperial narratives of Self and Other, paralleling systems of definition already critiqued in the critical readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as analysed previously in this thesis. Additionally, Henry's daughter Daisy Perowne, whose poetry recital is the prevention-mechanism used to prevent physical violence, inadvertently reinstates imperial definitions of creativity, power, and place, thus establishing the same cyclicity of agency as already shown in *Possession* and *On*

⁵¹⁷ Merrit Moseley's verdict on the Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan interview she reviews is that McEwan is "just as intelligent and thoughtful [as fellow novelist and friend Julian Barnes]; he just isn't as stylish an interview subject. He repeats the same [biographical] items again and again [...]. In conversation with Ryan Roberts he says that giving interviews, most of which he refuses, "feels more like a duty, part of one's professional terms of engagement," and that comes across to a reader. He's dutiful." (Moseley, "Current Books in Review" xxii – xiii) However, McEwan is not, as Moseley implicitly laments, enlightening as to his reasons and thoughts on writing but keeps very much to himself, which leaves the interested reader to the confines of McEwan's narratives, with the occasional essay and comment as benchmarks of more personal elucidation.

⁵¹⁸ Wall, "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty" 757.

Beauty. Thus, paralleling the dynamics of the previously analysed novels, *Saturday* asks valid questions about how to prevent physical violence and establish safety in the face of persistent terrorist threat. Yet, by trying to establish a method, the narrative inadvertently reinstates an old imperial order that was rightfully rebelled against midway through the 20th century.

5.2. The Dual Anxiety of Layered Influence

If one were to compare *Saturday* to a carefully constructed piece of music, gleaned from Raymond Williams' concept of literature as notation,⁵¹⁹ then the motif of Ian McEwan's *Saturday* is the anxiety of influence in reception and text. The continuous ambiguity, the constant lack of absolutes and continuity, let alone lasting definitions, is constant in the narrative. This anxiety of influence is expressed not only in the characters' experiences, but also in the structure of the narrative and its intricate intertextuality. As Molly Clark Hillard writes in her analysis of *Saturday* and "Dover Beach", Harold Bloom's seminal *The Anxiety of Influence* and its "poetic misprision" is a defining textual trope in *Saturday*. Misprision, as she writes

signifies the deliberate misreading of past poetry, a self-protective measure that allows a poet to destroy the prior text to create his own work: to mistake in order to remake [...]. Yet both "Dover Beach" and *Saturday* are texts that are both anxiously and deliriously under the influence, are texts about texts proffered for reconsideration."⁵²⁰

This meta-textual anxiety in *Saturday* is marked by what Hillard sees as a particular kind of misprision, a misprision that "marks the moment where an intertext walks free in literature."⁵²¹ This particular misprision "is textual as well as meta-textual (in that readers and characters alike commit it)".⁵²² To Hillard, misprision and re-reading a text are thus "connected practices, for re-reading adds another interpretation without destroying the first,"⁵²³ elaborating the intertextuality of the narrative. This is where Hillard joins Brian Finney in his Kristevan definition of "re-reading" as "the junction of several texts of which it is simultaneously the re-reading, accentuation,

⁵¹⁹ Raymond Williams. "Literature in Society." Hilda Schiff (Ed.). *Contemporary Approaches to English Studies*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977, pp. 24-37.

⁵²⁰ Molly Clark Hillard. "'When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight'" 183.

⁵²¹ Hillard, "'When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight'" 184.

⁵²² "'When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight'" 184.

⁵²³ "'When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight'" 184.

condensation, displacement and depth.”⁵²⁴ Hillard and Finney’s analysis of *Saturday* also parallels Christina Root’s abovementioned “literary ghosts”, where “McEwan’s citations [should be read] as intertexts rather than sources”,⁵²⁵ allowing for a rich reading of *Saturday* without confusing textual genealogies.

As to the second anxiety of influence, meaning that of the anxiety of the characters within the text, what I would like to consider is the anxiety triggered by the influence of the urban outside – the London urban space, specifically – on the inside space, namely that of the domestic space of the urban citizen.⁵²⁶ Since *Saturday* is a novel that is able to “represent the contemporary uneasiness” by focusing on one day only,⁵²⁷ the narrative can “emphasiz[e] the ways in which [Henry Perowne’s] domestic, quotidian life is infected by, remains inextricable from, and cannot escape the larger socio-political forces at work.”⁵²⁸ The social-political forces at work in *Saturday* are in the temporal corridor of post-9/11 but pre-7/7 London, (Saturday, 15 February 2003 to be exact), where the anxiety regarding personal, urban and global safety are a key factor in daily life, from politics and media to the daily lives of individuals, such as the neurosurgeon Henry Perowne.

Saturday’s narrative plays out within this corridor of time, and is in many ways an imaginary of violent invasion, in this case via a home invasion scenario. The narrative does not, however, consider the actual devastating effects of violence, since the victims – the Perowne family – are able to save themselves virtually unharmed. In the light of the 7/7 attacks that were perpetrated five months after *Saturday*’s publishing date, the imaginary is merely a contemplation of what could happen in an urban space where “monstrous spectacular scenes” and the “possibility of their

⁵²⁴ Finney, “Briony’s Stand against Oblivion” 73.

⁵²⁵ Hillard, “When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight” 184. See also: Hannah Courtney. “Narrative Temporality and Slowed Scene: The Interaction of Event and Thought Representation in Ian McEwan’s Fiction.” *Narrative*. Vol. 21, No. 2, May 2013. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, pp. 180-197.

⁵²⁶ The question of urban domesticity has a long tradition, burgeoning during the late 18th century when the development of vast urban spaces in Europe, such as London and Paris, created a new living space until then unprecedented. There are extensive studies on the discourse of the urban domestic, the following are a few to consider: Lennard J. Davis. *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997; Edward Timms. *Unreal City, Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985; J. Paul Hunter. *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century Fiction*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992; Amanda Vickery. *Behind Closed Doors: At home in Georgian England*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2009; Richard Daniel Lehan. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998; Larry H. Peer (Ed.). *Romanticism and the City*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁵²⁷ Migali Cornier Michael. “Writing Fiction in a Post-9/11 World: Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*.” *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and After in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*. Cara Cilano (Ed.) Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005, pp. 25-51, here p. 26.

⁵²⁸ Migali Cornier Michael, “Writing Fiction in a Post-9/11 World” 26.

recurrence” remain a “thread that binds the days.”⁵²⁹ Still, while *Saturday* as a text remains firmly within the realms of fiction, the borders between fiction and lived experience within the narrative are not so clear-cut. The above-mentioned binding thread, where the “government’s counsel – that an attack in a European or American city is an inevitability,”⁵³⁰ is ever-present, shows this blurring since the constant anxiety regarding terrorist attack is not simply part of *Saturday*’s fictional London, but also part of the real-world metropolis, as will be considered in the following with regard to McEwan’s response to the 7/7 bombings and the medial response to the 9/11 terrorist attack.

In a city such as London, which according to *Saturday*’s narrator “lies wide open, impossible to defend, waiting for its bomb, like a hundred other cities”,⁵³¹ the genuine fear of a terrorist attack would need addressing, a fear that sadly found violent actuality not long after the possibility was articulated in McEwan’s novel. The general critical response is that *Saturday* is hauntingly foreshadowing, overthrowing post-structuralist orthodoxies that separate author and text so stringently all means of reception and interpretation are left to the reader. Yet, it is undeniable that the outcome of McEwan’s narrative and the real-world events are very different. The 7/7 attacks were a sobering demonstration of the stark difference between lived experience and fictional contemplation. Though, rather than completely disrupt London as imagined in Chris Cleave’s *Incendiary*, for example,⁵³² the metropolis continued as before, which might explain what baffles McEwan so much in *The Guardian* article he penned on the day after the attacks. McEwan’s reaction to the violence of the attacks is quite telling, and arguably demonstrates Zadie Smith’s insistence that there is far more to an author’s writing than mere style.

What is intriguing is that McEwan’s shock and incredulity at the attacks, and his subsequent reference to the arts, parallel the means of tackling violence in *Saturday*, though in a far less confident and conciliatory manner. Rather, to comprehend the violence that took place, McEwan takes refuge in W. H. Auden’s “Le Musée des Beaux Arts” where the poem’s persona acknowledges that

⁵²⁹ Ian McEwan, *Saturday* 176.

⁵³⁰ McEwan, *Saturday* 176.

⁵³¹ *Saturday* 276.

⁵³² Chris Cleave. *Incendiary*. Reissue edition. London: Simon & Schuster, 2011; It is a sad coincidence that *Incendiary*, a novel about a terrorist attack during a London football match, was launched on the very day of the 7/7 attacks. The novel was immediately suspended until a later date once the devastation was known.

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters; how well, they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;⁵³³

McEwan finds solace in Auden's poetic analysis of the tragedy that goes fairly unnoticed in Brueghel's *Icarus*, where "Icarus falling from the sky is accompanied by life simply refusing to be disrupted. A ploughman goes about his work, a ship "sailed calmly on", dogs keep on with "their doggy business".⁵³⁴ On 7 July 2005 McEwan sees life paralleling the harsh observation wrapped in poetic form that Auden was so capable of encapsulating:

In London yesterday, where crowds fumbling with mobile phones tried to find unimpeded ways across the city, there was much evidence of the truth of Auden's insight. While rescue workers searched for survivors and the dead in the smoke-filled blackness below, at pavement level men were loading lorries, a woman sold umbrellas in her usual patch, the lunchtime sandwich makers were hard at work.⁵³⁵

McEwan's reaction is thus Romantic in tenor, as in, he finds truth and solace in poetry, showing that, at least to *Saturday*'s author, some kind of truth about lived experience is accessible via poetic genius.⁵³⁶ In the light of this, it is maybe not so surprising that *Saturday*'s outcome relies so heavily on Romantic statutes of poetic genius and the sublime, if one agrees with Smith that a writer's style is the expression of his manner. This Romantic inclination is, however, not such an unproblematic stance as one may think, a matter that will be considered later in this chapter.

⁵³³ W. H. Auden. "Le Musée des Beaux Arts". *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 2428-29, l. 1-4.

⁵³⁴ W. H. Auden "Le Musée des Beaux Arts" l. 12, 21, qtd. in Ian McEwan. "How could we have forgotten that this was always going to happen?" l. 5. 08. July. 2005. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jul/08/terrorism.july74>> (12 August 2014), no page numbers in the original.

⁵³⁵ Ian McEwan. "How could we have forgotten that this was always going to happen?"

⁵³⁶ In the *Der Spiegel* interview he gave a week later, McEwan acknowledges his lasting surprise and wonder at how Londoners were able to go about their business as they usually did after the sudden extreme violence. (Volker Hage and Matthias Matussek. "SPIEGEL Interview with British Author Ian McEwan: 'We're Witnessing a Civil War in Islam'." *Der Spiegel*. 19 July 2005. <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-with-british-author-ian-mcewan-we-re-witnessing-a-civil-war-in-islam-a-365767.html>> (7 August 2014). In his 8 July 2005 article, McEwan asked, "Who will want to travel on the tube, once it has been cleared? How will we sit at our ease in a restaurant, cinema or theatre?" Yet considering his bafflement a week later, such questions were not applicable to the continuing bustle of the large metropolis, going about its own business, not necessarily as if nothing happened, but simply as what was in fact the case, that great tragedy took place as Auden already noted: "While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along"; (Auden, "Le Musée des Beaux Arts" l. 4)⁵³⁶ not to mention "the expensive delicate ship" which might be substituted for 21st century cars, busses, airplanes and Tube lines. ("Le Musée des Beaux Arts" l. 19-21).

Returning to the corridor of time *Saturday* is situated in – after 9/11 but before 7/7 – the real-life violence has not yet taken place, yet the threat of a terrorist attack is very much present. As Jeffery Clymer asserts, terrorism “is a form of action whose sheer outrageousness may awe us into silence”, yet it “also compels us to attempt to regain our mental balance by groping toward a narrative structure in which the tragic events can be understood, even if they still make no sense to us at all.”⁵³⁷ *Saturday* can be seen as just such an attempt to establish a narrative, especially considering the fact that, after the 9/11 attacks, the need for an explanatory narrative was complicated by what Douglas Kellner refers to as “the global media spectacle”.⁵³⁸ This unprecedented circumstance sprung from what Migali Cornier Michael describes as “the relentless media coverage of the [9/11] attacks”, and this in an age of “the interconnected networked globe”. The subsequent result was an “insecurity and anxiety which the media fuelled with hysteric coverage”.⁵³⁹

Considering *Saturday*’s protagonist Henry Perowne’s annoyance at his “readiness to be persuaded that the world has changed beyond recall,” not to mention his awareness of the possibility that his comfortable urban life is not so safe anymore, since “harmless streets and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy – well-organised, tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal”,⁵⁴⁰ suggests the very media coverage and selective cacophony that Kellner and Cornier Michael refer to.

The impact of the “permanent “state of exception””⁵⁴¹ created by this media coverage was that, rather than focus on the actual struggle of “real world political foes”, the “global media

⁵³⁷ Jeffery A. Clymer. *America’s Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*. Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 2003, p. 211.

⁵³⁸ Douglas Kellner. “September 11, Social Theory and Democratic Politics.” *Theory, Culture and Society*. Vol. 19, 2002. London: Sage Publications, pp. 147-159, here p. 152.

⁵³⁹ Interestingly, Cornier Michael considers Great Britain to be largely spared the hysteria due to its geopolitical distance to the United States. However, due to the very “global media spectacle” Kellner identifies, Cornier Michael’s verdict seems contradictory, since global does mean the whole planet, Great Britain included. What Cornier Michael does acquiesce is that *Saturday* “at times hints at a parallel between Britain after World War II and the United States following the 9/11 attacks, which positions the contemporary British perspective as possessing historical insight and distance to which Americans do not yet have access and also allows for a kind of self critical gaze informed as it were by the spectacle of official American responses to the terrorist attacks.” (Cornier Michael, “Writing Fiction in a Post-9/11 World” 25).

⁵⁴⁰ McEwan, *Saturday* 76.

⁵⁴¹ See: Giorgio Agamben. *State of Exception*. Kevin Attell (Transl.). Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005, qtd. in Marita Gronnvoll. “Critiques of Popular Cultural Representations of 9/11.” *American Studies*. Vol. 53, No. 2, 2014. Chicago: Mid-American Studies Association, pp. 155-165, here p. 157. In reference to Stacy Takacs’ *Terrorism TV*, (Stacy Takacs. *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, (*Cultureamerica*). Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2012) Gronnvoll adds, “the news media’s construction of 9/11 as an “exceptional” experience of unprecedented “dimensions” ripped the events from their historical context and permitted an interpretation of them in cosmic terms,” (157) thus perpetuating the “state of exception” Agamben identifies.

spectacle” made the response to 9/11 “a struggle between abstract good and abstract evil for the soul of humanity”; and not on a local, US-American scale, but a world-wide one.

These are the “socio-political forces at work” within *Saturday*’s lifeworlds, blurring the lines between lived experience and fictional narrative, since the referent of the signifier/signified is clearly identifiable: the global terrorist threat as experienced between 9/11 and 7/7. The anxiety is acute, as seen in *Saturday*’s opening scene where Henry Perowne anxiously contemplates what the burning plane he espies through his bedroom window could really be:

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory, doomed.⁵⁴²

The conflation of the above-mentioned media coverage and the anxiety regarding severe violence is something Henry Perowne is aware of throughout *Saturday*, a narratorial conflation of lived experience and fictional lifeworlds that borrows heavily from the realist tradition, where, as McEwan writes, “things that never happened can tangle with things that did, [and] an imaginary being can hold hands with the flesh-and-blood real”.⁵⁴³ This is especially clear in the description of the news coverage of the burning plane Perowne sees. It is, via Perowne’s perpetual unease, a pervasive comment on the relationship between the media and their audiences in the corridor of time between 9/11 and 7/7. As Henry ponders,

Just as the hospitals have their crisis plans, so the television networks stand ready to deliver, and their audiences wait. Bigger, grosser, next time. Please don’t let it happen. But let me see it all the same, as it’s happening and from every angle, and let me be among the first to know.⁵⁴⁴

However, since the terror has not yet happened to Londoners in general and Perowne in particular, despite the anticipation of extreme violence, the trauma is not yet theirs or his to deal with, and can be contemplated from a distance, wherein sympathy and “rational magnanimity”⁵⁴⁵ may be

⁵⁴² McEwan, *Saturday* 16.

⁵⁴³ Ian McEwan. “Ian McEwan: when faith in fiction falters – and how it is restored.”

⁵⁴⁴ McEwan, *Saturday* 176.

⁵⁴⁵ Tim Gauthier. ““Selective in Your Mercies”: Privilege, Vulnerability, and the Limits of Empathy in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*.” *College Literature*. Vol. 40, No. 2, Spring 2013. West Chester, PA: West Chester University Press, pp. 7-30, here p. 8.

possible. However, even this “rational magnanimity” does not lessen the anxiety, quite the contrary. Here, one can see how McEwan exemplifies Kathleen Wall’s critique of postmodern discourse’s “inability to interrogate the consequences of its own provisionality and indecipherability”.⁵⁴⁶ At least not, as it seems, for the older generation(s) as represented by Henry Perowne since his son Theo is shown to have a method of coping with the constant anxiety. Theo’s method is to simply focus on the personal rather than the communal, let alone global, and so an adept utilisation of fragmentation and ambiguity, an acceptance of the polyvalence at hand, rather than a constant battle with it. As Perowne reminisces,

On a recent Sunday evening Theo came up with an aphorism: the bigger you think, the crappier it looks. Asked to explain he said, ‘When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in – you know, a girl I’ve just met, or this song we’re going to do with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. So this is going to be my motto – think small.’⁵⁴⁷

Perowne attempts to follow his son’s example, yet he is aware of a clear difference in attitude, since Theo belongs to what Perowne considers to be a “sincerely godless generation” where there is “no entity [...] to doubt,”⁵⁴⁸ unlike for Perowne who was raised in a Christian household. To Henry, Theo’s

initiation, in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers, was intense but he adapted quickly. [...] As long as there’s nothing new, his mind is free. International terror, security cordons, preparations for war – these represent the steady state, like the weather. Emerging into adult consciousness, this is the world [Theo] finds.⁵⁴⁹

This is quite likely why Theo is able to carve out a niche for himself where a comprehensible order and sense of safety can prevail, never mind “the political situation, global warming, world poverty” that “all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to.” In Perowne’s exchanges with his son, the prevailing impression is that as a jazz musician, accustomed to the randomness and perpetual movement of the music he plays, Theo has accepted the status quo as

⁵⁴⁶ Kathleen Wall. “Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty” 757.

⁵⁴⁷ McEwan, *Saturday* 34-5.

⁵⁴⁸ *Saturday* 32.

⁵⁴⁹ *Saturday* 32.

the actual lived experience to be dealt with. His father, in turn, struggles greatly with the constant disruption of the stability and peace he lives in, fully immersed as he is in the certainties of the physical body that are the subject of his profession as a neurosurgeon. The mirroring of the individual characters' profession with their reception of the texts and narratives they live in and work with is reminiscent of *Possession* and *On Beauty*'s characters, where the individual's profession and perception of the world are intricately linked to their mode of reception and how they very basically read texts, printed as well as not, making their style the expression of their manner.

Interestingly, the ideological positioning of the characters does not change in *Saturday*, never mind the violence experienced, very likely due to the fact that no harm was actually done. It makes one wonder what kind of novel *Saturday* would have been if McEwan had not completed and published it before the 7/7 attacks – and whether the Perowne's would have escaped their attackers virtually unscathed. Had harm actually been done to the Perowne family, *Saturday* would be a very different book, and the peace and order restored would not be possible as it is in *Saturday*, but trauma and the terrible 'success' of violence, as in the harm and pain inflicted, would have to be considered.

As it is, *Saturday* is a contemplation of threat rather than a full scale consideration of violence and its traumatic aftermaths. It thus constitutes a meta-scape of the 'tenterhooks' atmosphere prevalent before and after a succession of large-scale terrorist attacks within Western metropolises (New York, Madrid, and London, respectively). Even so, the novel shows that, despite intricate frameworks of thought and action, postmodern and post-structuralist discourse have little to offer in matters of solutions with regard to terrorist threat in Western urban spaces, illuminating the "inability to interrogate the consequences of [the postmodern attitude's] own provisionality and indecipherability". There are very many pertinent questions regarding the prevention of violence and the establishment of lasting safety, yet the millennial discourses within the spaces concerned are of little help, or so *Saturday*'s narrative states. However, the solution the novel proposes – stopping violence with a powerful aesthetic – shows the same conceptual blind spots Byatt's and Smith's solutions reveal in *Possession* and *On Beauty*, respectively. Additionally, the solution offered in *Saturday*, though fictional, seems highly unlikely in its potency. The power of aesthetic that McEwan evokes in *Saturday* is near supernatural in its effect of making violent attackers virtually harmless. It also shows a deep faith in aesthetic power that is reminiscent of the

Romantic faith in poetic genius to not only influence but change attitudes and minds, and so lived experience by accessing the sublime.

As Doryjane Berrir writes, *Saturday* is a novel with “that ‘pull of simple narrative’ [and] the power to lure us with the hope of imaginative possibilities”.⁵⁵⁰ In this, the narrative enables the reader to “shape a more liveable future,” since in *Saturday* an expected possibility, violent physical attack, is turned into an actuality but positively overcome, in every sense of the term.

It is not surprising then that Tim Gauthier critiques this as one reason why *Saturday* is “too hopeful”, though, to Gauthier, the greater fault lies in that *Saturday*

neglects to address the ways in which Western society’s lack of recognition of the other (and how that lack is perceived by the other) may prove detrimental to its own future. The fears Perowne expresses are, in part, indicative of an unwillingness to accept any outsider perspective or to consider how the treatment of the other may highlight the flaws of the privileged system within which he luxuriates.”⁵⁵¹

While I agree with Gauthier that Perowne’s “seemingly benign and benevolent actions” simply “emphasize the blind spots of privilege” as well as the “cooption of empathy to assert a superior moral stance over that of the other”,⁵⁵² I argue that to read the whole novel in this light is to disregard Henry’s daughter Daisy’s position in *Saturday*. Her remonstrations and protestations, not to mention her final saving agency via poetry, disallows such a whole-scale assessment, which I will consider further in Chapter 5.3 “Creative Agency and the Sublime.” Yet before considering Daisy Perowne’s saving recital, I will look into *Saturday*’s conceptual layering of reception and text as seen in Henry Perowne’s (mis)understanding of literature, a perspective, I argue, that shows the same post-imperial phantom pains already visible in *Possession* and *On Beauty*.

⁵⁵⁰ Doryjane Berrir. ““What are Novelists For?”: Writing and Rewiring Reality from Woolf to McEwan.” *Woolf in the Real World*. Karen V. Kukil (Ed.). Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2005, pp. 165-170, here p. 169.

⁵⁵¹ Tim Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 8-9.

⁵⁵² Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 9.

5.3 Ambiguous Empathy

The question *Saturday* attempts to answer is how to repel physical violence within Western urban spaces, in this particular case London, where the respective inhabitants live with the constant threat of such violence. In *Saturday*, the prevention-mechanism is the poetic genius expressed in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" that triggers such an overwhelming, speak sublime, experience for the attackers that all threat is dispersed, and no violence takes place, leaving the initial victims, the Perowne family, unscathed. It is after this Romantic prevention that the protagonist Henry Perowne is able to help the main attacker Baxter in finding a possible cure for his debilitating disease (which is established as being in part responsible for his violence), thus apparently showing empathy in the face of adversity, and so reinstating order and safety.

Tim Gauthier takes exception to *Saturday*'s ending, critiquing that the novel's conclusion lacks genuine empathy, since all that can be found in the text is the "empathic gesture", which, according to Patti Lather is often "an appropriation in the guise of an embrace, [by which] empathy violates the other and is part of the demand for totality",⁵⁵³ and so perpetuates the cycle of violence. Thus, the order and safety restored at the end of *Saturday* would only be tenuous since the cycle of violence was in fact not broken.

Additionally, within this empty empathic gesture, Gayatri Spivak's warning is exemplified, namely that, "[u]nless we are trained into imagining the other, a necessary, impossible, and interminable task, nothing we do through politico-legal calculation will last."⁵⁵⁴ Thus, any solution given with regard to the initial question would be hardly valid.

Considering the fact that, despite all his efforts, it is clear that Henry Perowne was not trained in the imagining Spivak argues for, the solution *Saturday* proposes seems empty. Henry Perowne after all finds it near impossible to consider, let alone understand, what a different stance to his own perspective would mean, which implicitly points to a deeper conceptual conundrum in the millennial discourses regarding Western urban safety and violence-prevention. As Gauthier states, *Saturday* fails to consider "the ways in which Western society's lack of recognition of the other (and how that lack is perceived by the other) may prove detrimental to its own future," not to

⁵⁵³ Patti Lather. "Against Empathy, Voice, and Authenticity." In *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*. Alicia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (Eds). New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 7-26, here p. 19.

⁵⁵⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Terror: A Speech After 9-11." *Boundary 2*. Vol. 31, No. 2, 2004. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 81-111, here p. 83, qtd. in Gauthier, "Selective in Your Mercies" 7.

mention how an “unwillingness to accept any outsider perspective or to consider how the treatment of the other” is part of the entire problem, highlighting as it does “the flaws of the privileged system” within these very spaces.

This deeper problem, I argue, is exemplified in two parts in *Saturday*: firstly, Henry Perowne’s personal stance concerning what he does not understand, and secondly, the actual outcome of *Saturday*, where the initial violent threat is rendered altogether harmless through surprising means. In the following, I will first analyse Henry Perowne’s personal perspective with regard to literature and by inference socio-cultural practice, and then consider how this very obtuseness lays the groundwork for the surprising solution *Saturday* offers for violence-prevention.

5.3.1 Magic Realism and the Matter of Perspective

With regard to the neurosurgeon’s attitude, Henry Perowne’s reaction to magic realism, which he finds irritating if not silly, is telling. Considering the “global media spectacle” Henry cannot escape, magic realism should be amenable to his anxieties about safety, since as Eugene L. Arva writes

the magical realist image stands apart, first because it is the result of an aporetic attitude toward reality, and second because it recreates the real—the limit[ed] events that resist representation—as an immediate, *felt* reality.⁵⁵⁵

Additionally, due to its subversive character,

magical realism foregrounds, somewhat paradoxically, the falsehood of its fantastic imagery exactly in order to expose the falsehood—and the traumatic absence—of the reality that it endeavors to re-present.⁵⁵⁶

Arva’s examples are the two seminal magic realist narratives, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* where the “magical realist images attempt to recreate traumatic events by *simulating* the overwhelming affects that prevented their narrativization in the first place.” Thus, the descriptions of massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight’s Children*

⁵⁵⁵ Eugene L. Arva. “Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Winter 2008. Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University. pp. 60-85, here 60, italics in the original.

⁵⁵⁶ Arva 61.

although rich in sensory details, conspicuously lack any specific words denoting physical violence, but rely instead on metaphors suggesting the pain and horror of the events as experienced by individual characters. Through the authors' and the readers' traumatic imagination, traumatic memories are turned into narrative memory.⁵⁵⁷

In the light of the temporal location of *Saturday*, the corridor between the New York 9/11 attacks and the London 7/7 bombings, such a mode of narration that articulates violent situations in fictional form should be something Henry Perowne would find compelling, anxious for the safety of his family and himself as he is. He is after all aware that “there are people around the planet, well-connected and organized, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point.”⁵⁵⁸ One would assume that, living in such a state of constant anxiety, Henry Perowne would find magic realist texts worth his time and consideration.

The contrary is the case. Perowne's antagonism is rooted, I argue, in the unquestioned acceptance of the space he inhabits, of the supposed reality magic realism calls into question, and so shows his deep “unwillingness to accept any outsider perspective”. To the neurosurgeon, the material world he experiences is unassailable, “beyond the requirements of proof”.⁵⁵⁹ To him, “a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery.” If anything is destabilised, collapsed, and left changed, then it “will be [Perowne's] own ignorance. Whatever the score, it is already chalked up.”⁵⁶⁰ However, due to the general ambiguity of the world he lives in – war, disease, and old age in general; burning planes, terrorist threats, altercations in the middle of London in particular – this also makes Henry Perowne a fundamentally anxious man. Ambiguities, uncertainties, even mere possibilities,⁵⁶¹ imbue him with fear, irritation, and restlessness, as seen in the fact that even his free time, which is “always fragmented”, makes him uncomfortable:

⁵⁵⁷ Arva, “Writing the Vanishing Real” 61.

⁵⁵⁸ McEwan, *Saturday* 81.

⁵⁵⁹ *Saturday* 19.

⁵⁶⁰ *Saturday* 19.

⁵⁶¹ One telling moment is when Perowne is on his way to visit his mother and makes some errands: “He steps out of the bedroom and then, sideways on, skips down the first run of stairs two at a time, without holding the banister for safety. It's a trick he learned in adolescence, and he can do it better than ever. But a skidding boot heel, a shattered coccyx, six months on his back in bed, a year rebuilding his wasted muscles – the premonitory fantasy fills less than half a second, and it works. He takes the next flight in the ordinary way.” (*Saturday* 150) One may consider Perowne's change of heart mere sensible caution, but in the light of Perowne's general worries all through *Saturday*, the sudden change from youthful joy and exuberance to fairly stodgy consideration and fear of injury underlines Perowne's general anxieties about life.

[Henry Perowne] doesn't want to spend his days off lying, or even sitting, down. Nor does he really want to be a spectator of other lives, of imaginary lives – even though these past hours he's put in an unusual number of minutes gazing from the bedroom window. And it interests him less to have the world reinvented; he wants it explained. The times are strange enough. Why make things up?⁵⁶²

Henry Perowne evidently wants certainty. He is deeply invested in what he understands as facts, building blocks that make up the world so to speak, and so do not need further reflection. Reflection means questions, doubt, uncertainty, even possibilities of “anything can happen”,⁵⁶³ making questions of what in fact matters unavoidable.

At first glance it might seem as if Henry's need for certainty is a refusal to engage with the ambiguities of lived experience as such, since that would demand of him to always be on his toes, to always reconsider, rethink, re-evaluate, never relax and get comfortable. It would require that he be continuously aware of the fact that whatever certainties he has are constructed and must be maintained rather than taken for granted. Yet that would be to overlook the state of continuous anxiety Perowne lives in.

This can be seen in his great relief when, after an early morning full of worry about the burning plane, Perowne sees that London's streets are not sites of extreme violence. He takes this as the validation of safety, although it is exactly this peaceability that enables the ambiguity of the terrorist threat.⁵⁶⁴ Finally, Henry can only find peace in his own home when he goes through all eventualities he is aware of and concludes that nothing bad can come from them. It is only then that he can abandon himself “to a gentle swell of dissociation”:

Nothing matters much. Whatever's been troubling him is benignly resolved. The pilots are harmless Russians, Lily is well cared for, Daisy is home with her book, those two million marchers are good-hearted souls, Theo and Chas have written a fine song, Rosalind will win her case on Monday and is on her way, it's statistically improbable that terrorists will murder his family tonight, his stew, he suspects might be

⁵⁶² *Saturday* 66.

⁵⁶³ *Saturday* 68.

⁵⁶⁴ “And it's at this point he remembers the source of his vague sense of shame or embarrassment: his readiness to be persuaded that the world has changed beyond recall, that harmless streets like this and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy – well-organised, tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal. How foolishly apocalyptic those apprehensions seem by daylight, when the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them are their own justification, their own insurance. The world has not fundamentally changed. Talk of a hundred-year crisis is indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle in the place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, land and fresh water shortages, hunger, poetry and the rest.” (*Saturday* 76-77).

one of his best, all the patients on next week's list will come through, Grammaticus means well really, and tomorrow – Sunday – will deliver Henry and Rosalind into a morning of sleep and sensuality.⁵⁶⁵

However, his deliberations and the statistics Perowne refers to do not incorporate being attacked in his own house, showing rather drastically how statistics for all their numbers can fail to fully encapsulate individual eventualities, thus nourishing the groundswell of the neurosurgeon's continuous anxiety. Later in the novel, the necessity for certainty is mirrored in Henry's genuine pleasure in his work as a neurosurgeon, where

[at] the very first stroke of sunflower yellow on pale skin, a familiar contentedness settles on Henry; it's the pleasure of knowing precisely what he's doing, of seeing the instruments arrayed on the trolley, of being with his firm in the muffled quiet of the theatre, the murmur of the air filtration, the sharper hiss of oxygen passing into the mask taped to Baxter's face out of sight under the drapes, the clarity of the overhead lights. It's a reminder from childhood of the closed fascination of a board game.⁵⁶⁶

The comparison to a board game is telling. The fixedness of the rules of a board game allows for an absence of ambiguity, which, considering Henry's overall stance in life, mirrors his confusion when it comes to creativity, especially the kind that upends the strictures of what he considers 'real'. Magic realism, after all, is a form of narration bent on foregrounding and exposing

the falsehood – and the traumatic absence – of the reality that it endeavors to re-present, [wherein the] fantastic *re-presentation* (imaginative reconstitution) works where realistic *representation* (descriptive mimesis) has apparently failed.⁵⁶⁷

Yet, to Perowne, the representational descriptive mimesis is exactly what he expects of a fictional narration since, to him, reality is a fixed entity that need not be argued about or discussed. Reality, to Henry Perowne, constitutes of a world of experience where “a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery.” Thus, Henry Perowne's reaction to his daughter's attempt to educate him is almost understandable.

⁵⁶⁵ *Saturday* 201-202.

⁵⁶⁶ *Saturday* 250.

⁵⁶⁷ Arva, “Writing the Vanishing Real” 61, my italics.

Henry is aware of how his artistic daughter Daisy sees him (“a coarse, unredeemable materialist” a man who “lacks an imagination”⁵⁶⁸), however, in her hope to help him to a more sophisticated perspective, Daisy still gives Henry a reading list that he works through diligently, though not with enthusiasm. To the neurosurgeon, reading “these sophisticated fairy stories” means “a slowing of mental processes” that uses up “many hours of his valuable time”.⁵⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, Henry’s verdicts are equally unimaginative, and show that literature completely passes him by in matters of thought-provoking inquisitiveness and genuine inquiry, and not only in its magic realist incarnations:

What did he [Henry] grasp, after all? That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so. If, as Daisy said, the genius was in the detail, then he was unmoved. The details were apt and convincing enough, but surely not so very difficult to marshal if you were halfway observant and had the patience to write it all down. These books were products of steady, workmanlike accumulation.⁵⁷⁰

To Perowne, books are data and he is satisfied, though not surprised, to find that *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* show him times and places that were “once just so.” Reading creative texts, to Henry Perowne, is no different to reading medical magazines on brain functions, only that those termed literature are to empirically describe lived experience. This can be seen in his irritation about Daisy’s poem “The Ballad of the Brain on my Shoe” which Perowne “likes least”.⁵⁷¹ The poem is an imaginative piece about “Daisy’s visit to the operating theatre one morning to watch her father at work.” While Daisy’s grandfather and famous poet John Grammaticus “laughed liked an idiot” when he read the poem, neurosurgeon Henry Perowne points out crossly that no “grey or white matter was lost.” He does admit that he “thought he caught in the poem art’s essential but – he had to suppose – forgivable dishonesty.”⁵⁷²

The fact that Henry Perowne expects realistic mimesis from a poem, as though his daughter were a record-keeper noting the minutes of an operation, is more than telling. Henry Perowne is a reader who seems oblivious to several revolutions of discourse in matters of reception and text,

⁵⁶⁸ McEwan, *Saturday* 134.

⁵⁶⁹ *Saturday* 67.

⁵⁷⁰ *Saturday* 67.

⁵⁷¹ *Saturday* 139.

⁵⁷² *Saturday* 139.

stuck as he is in a Victorianesque realism, expecting the pages to ‘show’ what he basically already knows, but doesn’t mind reading about in more detail. This is what allows him to state with conviction that “books were products of steady, workmanlike accumulation” just like a collection of data about brain-cells.

In the light of such a definition of literature, magic realism is understandably an unpleasant surprise. The neurosurgeon’s irritation is clear when he wonders about the authors of such texts, considering his references in this case are Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Marquez, and Günter Grass, among others:

What were these authors of reputation doing – grown men and women of the twentieth century – granting supernatural powers to their characters? He never made it all the way through a single one of those irksome confections. And written for adults, not children.⁵⁷³

The last admonition is a humanising twist to Perowne’s smug obtuseness. Supernatural powers in narratives have their place, and that is in children’s stories. One would not be surprised if Henry Perowne belonged to those who believe children’s books have no part in ‘real’ literature, which can be seen in his ensuing deliberation of just why magic realism is ridiculous to him. Perowne sees himself as someone who “respect[s] the material world, its limits, and what it can sustain – consciousness, no less,” due to his repeated attempts to “ease the miseries of failing minds by repairing brains.”⁵⁷⁴ However, the grave perspectival mistake Perowne makes is to think that all he knows and sees is truly all that is there to be known and seen, even if his work, and the conclusions stemming from them, have become not just “an article of faith” but “a quotidian fact” to him since

the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs. If that’s worthy of awe, it also deserves curiosity; the actual, not the magical, should be the challenge. This reading list persuaded Perowne that the supernatural was the recourse of an insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷³ *Saturday* 67.

⁵⁷⁴ *Saturday* 67.

⁵⁷⁵ *Saturday* 67.

Henry Perowne's indictment of magic realism's failings is interesting since these failings, which he considers "a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real," are exactly his position with regard to the very ambiguity of what he considers to be factual.

If Perowne really were as serious about consciousness and reception as he seems to think he is, he would not make statements of "the actual" so easily and freely. This is where the deeper problem of Perowne's millennial perspective can be seen, since he is decidedly ignorant of the perspectival blinkers he has. As seen in the previous analysis of critical readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the blind spots of the imperial gaze,⁵⁷⁶ what is considered 'fact' is not as unbiased, let alone objective, as Perowne would have it. Conrad's Marlow, likened even in millennial readings of the novella to a reporter relying on "the power of hard, definite particulars",⁵⁷⁷ is an imperial observer with decidedly imperial blinkers that he himself is not in the least aware of. Henry Perowne betrays the same imperial mind-set by stating, without even a moment of doubt, that "a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery." Perowne is not in the least aware of the perspectival blinkers he may have as a London neurosurgeon, not to mention a white heterosexual male London neurosurgeon, with working class roots who worked his way into a very successful medical career. As shown in previous chapters, to leave out the powerful discourses of class, race, and gender from a serious consideration of perspective is to skew the entire analysis to one narrow modality, which is hazardous to genuine inquiry, and reminiscent of imperial hegemonial practice where the analysis made is considered to be universally valid.

Next to showing an "unwillingness to accept any outsider perspective", Perowne's definition of phenomena betrays the imperial "super-objective perspective"⁵⁷⁸ Edward Said criticises so thoroughly in *Cultural Imperialism*, a perspective that erases all other perspectives from its line of sight by its complete blindness to other systems of definition, a conceptual blindness Bill Ashcroft, for example, maps out in *Caliban's Voice*. The imperial gaze, as previously analysed, is a highly blinkered perspective that revels in its own apparent universality, and most importantly, is not even aware of its own blinkered perspective.

⁵⁷⁶ See Chapters 1.3.2. "Through a Glass Darkly: the Imperial Gaze" and 1.3.3. "Conceptual Blindness".

⁵⁷⁷ Owen Knowles. "Introduction to Heart of Darkness" xvii.

⁵⁷⁸ Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism* 203.

This also explains why Perowne's daughter Daisy, fully aware of the dynamics of perspective as she is,⁵⁷⁹ thinks her father is a "coarse, unredeemable materialist" without imagination, and so, or so the implication, a man without real empathy. Perowne, after all, never steps out of his own materialist perspective, except during the overwhelming moment while hearing his daughter recite Matthew Arnold's poem. For a few moments there seems hope of a change of perspective, but this hope is left unfulfilled, since, as Gauthier rightly states, Henry's operating on Baxter is not empathy, but a restoring of Perowne's initial materialist perspective.

At the end of the novel, Perowne is still an unapologetic materialist who does not question the methodology he subscribes to, a methodology of reception and text that is highly imperial in tenor and focus, since it is not even aware of its own universality claims. It is a perspective that allows Henry Perowne to consider his experience of the world as universally applicable, which, interestingly, shows the "childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible" he criticises more sophisticated perspectives on lived experience of doing.

Thus, *Saturday* establishes a narrative where the post-imperial phantom pains of the narrative are embedded in its protagonist's very line of sight, in the way he thinks and acts within his lifeworld. Inadvertently, *Saturday* seems to point within, into the millennial English cultural space, rather than without, when it comes to finding a means to prevent violent attack. The implicit suggestion seems to be that, to gain any headway in matters of establishing safety within Western urban spaces in general, and that of the English metropolis in particular, a full consideration of the perspectives within this space, together with their blind spots and blinkers, is needed.

⁵⁷⁹ While throughout *Saturday* Daisy Perowne shows her firm education in postmodern and post-structuralist discourse, Henry Perowne is blithely ignorant of the prevalent discourses of consciousness and reception, not to mention the debates of what both mean. These debates are vast, they have a very long tradition and are nowhere near concluded, ranging in more contemporary terms from Michel Foucault's analysis of individuals, groups, and the power-structures that bind them, to Jean-Francois Lyotard's reconsideration of the narratives that shape realities lived and experienced, Julia Kristeva's seminal readings of Mikhail Bakhtin with regard to history, and Jacques Derrida's definition of intertextuality in matters of socio-political realities, not to mention the reader response theories of the past three decades. If one looks to less literary fields, such as the clashes between the Philosophy of the Mind researchers and neuroscientists all across the globe, the subject matter of consciousness and reception, not to mention the texts (in all shapes and forms) perceived, are intricate and very hotly debated. To Henry Perowne, however, these debates are quite literally absent with regard to his own perspective.

5.3.2 Random Influence

McEwan is not so crude as to establish Perowne's narrow perspective as a simple one. There are cracks in Perowne's self-professed materialism which belie the certainties attainable by his system of definition. As shown above, Henry Perowne is his most smug when he thinks himself safe and certain. Considering the fact that *Saturday* is a contemplation of how to retain safety in face of the perpetual threat of sudden violence and attack, this smugness needs to be looked at a little more closely, especially when considering what happens when Henry Perowne loses his sense of safety and certainty.

In the light of this, I argue that when Henry Perowne is fearful, anxious, and no longer certain, he immediately resorts to all *available* tools given to create certainties, tools he knows about but disdains when he feels safe and certain again. This oscillation between safety and anxiety can be seen in Henry Perowne's attempts to calm himself with regard the burning plane he sees through his bedroom window in the morning:

Misunderstanding is general all over the world. How can we trust ourselves? [Perowne] sees now the details he half-ignored in order to nourish his fears: that the plane was not being driven into a public building, that it was making a regular, controlled descent, that it was on a well-used flight path – none of this fitted the general unease. He told himself there were two possible outcomes – the cat dead or alive.⁵⁸⁰

In view of the fact that not long before this contemplation Henry asserts that Schrödinger's cat paradox never made sense to him, as in "no human sense",⁵⁸¹ his employment of the theorem is exemplary. The dichotomy of Henry Perowne when anxious and Henry Perowne when certain is an oscillation between two states of mind, and two states of deliberation – mystic and magical when anxious, rational and medical when certain, with religious overtones no less⁵⁸² – though the former is shown in hints and flashes of thought, while the latter is given the full force of the veritable. This

⁵⁸⁰ McEwan, *Saturday* 39

⁵⁸¹ *Saturday* 18.

⁵⁸² When describing his own state of mind when operating, Henry Perowne admits to experiencing "a superhuman capacity, more like a craving, for work" (*Saturday* 11). Additionally, "when he comes down from the operating room" Perowne likens himself to "a god, an angel with glad tidings – of life, not death" (23), next to the absolute control he can assert in the operating theatre, which he after all likens to a board game, where one wrong move can create "terrible, lifelong consequences", though he is meticulous in making sure that such outcomes don't occur. (254) These are all positions that are starkly reminiscent of the 'god complex' often ascribed to doctors and surgeons, thus enhancing the religious overtones once Henry Perowne feels safe and secure.

oscillation, I argue, shows Perowne to be ideologically disingenuous at best and hypocritical at worst, especially in his disavowal of the value of narratives that do not adhere to realist mimesis, an oscillation that I will consider in the following.

There are several instances in *Saturday* where Perowne's tendency to consider the mystic and the magical shine through. When reminiscing on meeting and marrying his wife Rosalind, Perowne states,

Coming between Rosalind and her ghost [Rosalind's deeply cherished memory of her deceased mother Marianne] he must assume responsibilities. They had entered into an unspoken contract. Starkly put, to make love to Rosalind was to marry her.⁵⁸³

This, however, did not disturb let alone distract him, but rather “the simplicity of the arrangement gave Henry Perowne nothing but delight.”⁵⁸⁴ It is the use of ‘ghost’ here that is interesting, a signifier of Rosalind's persistent memory of her late mother Marianne, a memory and reference point that is so strong that Perowne sees it fit to describe Marianne's presence in their relationship as supernatural and otherworldly. Marianne's presence in their relationship is a ghost Henry respects (“Coming between Rosalind and her ghost he must assume responsibilities”), much as a new tenant would when moving into a haunted house, only that in this case, the space of the haunting is Rosalind's whole life, and so calls the stringency of Perowne's materialist stance into question.

Another referencing of otherworldly signifiers in the neurosurgeon's mode of reception can be seen during Perowne's drive to his squash game with his colleague Jay Strauss. While driving through London's streets Henry thinks about what progress has been made in the world on the one hand,⁵⁸⁵ and the academic cynicism that is part of his daughter Daisy's world on the other. In

⁵⁸³ *Saturday* 48.

⁵⁸⁴ *Saturday* 48.

⁵⁸⁵ “But if the present dispensation [of the “consumerist and technological civilisation”] is wiped out now, the future will look back on us as gods, certainly in this city, lucky gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended life-spans, wondrous machines... [w]hole music libraries held in an object the size of a child's hand. Cameras that can beam their snapshots around the world [...]” (*Saturday* 77-78) In this listing, Perowne leaves out the systems of production and the political situations that enable the “supermarket cornucopias”, the “warm clothes that weigh nothing” and the “wondrous machines”, not once considering what, for example, thoroughly destabilised Third World economies, sweat shops, resource wars and indentured labour have to do with the very progress he so celebrates. For a sharp analysis of such a blinkered perspective see Pankaj Mishra. “Watch this Man”, Review of *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, by Niall Ferguson, *London Review of Books*. Vol. 33, No. 21, 2011. <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n21/pankaj-mishra/watch-this-man>> (28 September 2012), p. 10-12.

Henry's experience of Daisy's academic life, "the idea of progress [is] old-fashioned and ridiculous,"⁵⁸⁶ which irritates him enough that in "indignation [he] grips the wheel tighter in his right hand", and subsequently "swings the Mercedes east into Maple Street [in a] spirit of aggressive celebration of the times".⁵⁸⁷ This small though significant reaction mirrors Henry's need for certainties, in this particular case the factuality of progress, to him implicitly positive, thereby eschewing academic analysis of what progress actually means, if it is genuinely positive, and how it can be defined.

When stating, for example, that "for the professors in the academy, for the humanities generally, misery is more amenable to analysis: happiness is a harder nut to crack,"⁵⁸⁸ Perowne covertly accuses the academy of relishing misery, rather than focusing on contentment. What Perowne does not consider is that this difficulty does not refuse analysis, a factor which would throw off the easy binary of miserable academy vs. happy materialism. Rather, Henry's need for certainties shows an incompatibility – for him that is – between happiness and ambiguity. To Perowne, for happiness to exist, certainties must be unquestionable, in this case progress must be unquestionable, and implicitly positive. This is the opposite stance to his son Theo's method of "thinking small", wherein deep-strata ambiguities (political chaos, global warming, terrorism) are the status quo, but personal happiness is genuinely possible. Conversely, Henry's insistence on unarguable certainties repeatedly triggers his anxiety, since nothing is certain in the millennial world he lives in, no matter how often Perowne attempts to create certainties for himself.

In this juxtaposition of father and son, there seems to be an implicit postulation that within the Western urban sphere that concerns itself deeply with safety, in this case the English metropolitan space London, the discourses available to tackle the problem are not homogenous. The generational split in discursive approaches to millennial ambiguities shows two possibilities: on the one hand we have Theo Perowne whose method to cope with contemporary uncertainties is to "think small". Rather than be overwhelmed by the macro situation such as global warming, economic inequality, and terrorism, Theo concentrates on the micro situation, namely his own personal space, and so is able to establish his own individual *récit*. Thus, instead of following a prescribed *grand récit* that explains the world to him, Theo is fully postmodern and post-structural

⁵⁸⁶ *Saturday* 77.

⁵⁸⁷ *Saturday* 77.

⁵⁸⁸ *Saturday* 78.

in his individual approach to his lived experience by utilising the ability and fragmentation at hand and “thinking small”.

His father Henry, in turn, is unable to disregard the *grand récit* available within his lived experience. Though living within a socio-cultural space that fully incorporates postmodern and post-structural discourses into socio-cultural narratives and modes of action, Henry Perowne has great difficulty accepting postmodern and post-structuralist thought, and the continuous ambiguity and polyvalence it insists on. Perowne’s discomfort with the deconstruction of the *grand récit* that informed Western discourse for centuries can be seen in his statement that his son Theo belongs to a decidedly “godless generation”, and so has no (religious) grand narrative of truth and justice to fall back on, but fairly establishes his own *récit* by “thinking small”. The world Theo grows up in, Perowne acknowledges, is one that is by definition fragmented, ambiguous, and uncertain. It is continuously in turmoil, a world of “international terror, security cordons, [and] preparations for war”, a world Theo has come to accept without question, since this fragmentation, ambiguity and uncertainty “represent a steady state, [like] the weather.”⁵⁸⁹

It is a world Henry Perowne finds difficult to cope with since he still has a deep need for unquestionable certainties. Yet it is this need that repeatedly triggers his anxiety in a world that does not supply unquestionable certainties. Interestingly, once his anxieties are triggered, Perowne falls back onto other ways to explain lived experience, even if he dislikes these systems of definition. This can be seen in another instance during Perowne’s car drive to his squash game, where Perowne acknowledges that

his wellbeing appears to need spectral entities to oppose it, figures of his own invention whom he can defeat. He’s sometimes like this before a game. [Perowne] doesn’t particularly like himself in this frame, but the second-by-second wash of his thoughts is only partially his to control – the drift, the white noise of solitary thought is driven by his emotional state.⁵⁹⁰

This “emotional state” is one that infuses Perowne with doubt regarding his means of observation, perception, and assessing phenomena, since he ends up wondering if he is maybe not as happy and content as he first deliberated, but is only “psyching himself up”⁵⁹¹ for the squash game with his very competitive colleague Jay Strauss. Again, a spark of anxiety flashes through the certainties

⁵⁸⁹ *Saturday* 32.

⁵⁹⁰ *Saturday* 78.

⁵⁹¹ *Saturday* 78.

Perowne creates for himself, signified by the need for “spectral entities to oppose”, an uncertainty of reception and text that lingers all through *Saturday*. Though Perowne is a materialist, it is interestingly enough this very system of definition that he subscribes to so fully that repeatedly triggers his anxiety, since which explanation is the most valid one? And how establish certainty if there is more than one possible answer to the question at hand, in this case whether Perowne is genuinely happy or simply “psyching himself up”?

Here, one can see a melding of the empirical discourses of the natural sciences, psychology, and postmodern and post-structuralist thought that have deeply influenced late 20th century and millennial Western socio-cultural practice, and so make up the bulk of Perowne’s perspective. The crux here is that Perowne is unable to establish certainty by the very systems of definition he subscribes to, systems of definition that are meant to illuminate and explain lived experience. Considering the fact that Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon, belongs to the group of men and women who work in institutions of power, this inability to establish certainty is intriguing, showing once again what Kathleen Wall sees as the “fin de siècle despair” of the “postmodern attitude”. In the face of the very real possibility of wide-scale physical violence, how establish safety within discourses that cannot establish certainty due to being either highly diverse in possible explanations or inherently ambiguous, polyvalent, and uncertain?

Saturday’s answer to this very pertinent question is, I argue, to fall back to an older order that knew absolutes and certainties, never mind if they were roundly rebelled against midway through the 20th century.⁵⁹² That lived experience is full of situations where Western discourses of rationality and materialism are of little to no help is constantly present in *Saturday*. This is especially the case during the street altercation with Baxter and his thugs. The means by which Perowne extracts himself from the violence of Baxter and his men is peculiar in the light of the neurosurgeon’s otherwise staunch materialist stance.

During the altercation, Perowne realises that Baxter is quite likely suffering from a “neurodegenerative disease”.⁵⁹³ The identification of the disease’s symptoms is the neurosurgeon’s leverage to get himself out of a very uncomfortable situation. Yet, rather than state this frankly, as, say, a medical professional would in a hospital ward, Perowne says, “Your father had it. Now

⁵⁹² Interestingly, there would be another option, namely Theo’s method of “thinking small”, of starting with the personal and then moving on to the communal and global. However, this is not even considered in the narrative, which in and of itself is telling, showing, I argue, a distrust of the ambiguous, polyvalent systems of definition already part of the millennial Western urban spaces.

⁵⁹³ McEwan, *Saturday* 96.

you've got it too," a statement that Perowne himself likens to "a witch doctor delivering a curse."⁵⁹⁴ Henry keeps to the trope till the end, wherein he and Baxter "are together [...] in a world not of the medical, but of the magical. When you're diseased it is unwise to abuse the shaman."⁵⁹⁵

Though this is Perowne's stance on Baxter, with all the condescension included, (he is aware that what he did to save himself is "shameless blackmail"⁵⁹⁶), the fact that Perowne uses this trope at all, activating its implicit power-dynamic where Perowne is no longer the victim, is telling. Here, in a situation of serious uncertainty and genuine lack of safety, Perowne resolves to highly non-materialist means to keep himself safe. It is not only a one-time occurrence either. When wondering how to approach his lover, how to assess the urgency of a burning plane, when considering the merits of Western progress, not to mention his actions during the altercation with Baxter and his thugs, Perowne no longer relies on his materialist perspective, neither in his methods of deduction, nor his subsequent actions. The Western systems of definition of rationality and materialism that Perowne otherwise subscribes to no longer are imbued with the certainty they usually hold for him once Henry finds himself in a highly uncertain situation. It is then when he employs tropes of the magical and the mystical by referring to ghosts, spectral entities, witch doctors, shamanism, all of which are states of experiencing and explaining lived experience that have little to nothing to do with the Western scientific, materialist stance Perowne takes when he feels safe again.

Perowne's perspective is thus not homogeneously materialist, though he clearly thinks it is. By inference, if *Saturday* is to be seen as a contemplation of safety and the means to establish safety in millennial Western urban spaces, London in particular, the systems of definition available within these spaces have cracks and fissures that need to be addressed, especially with regard to establishing certainty. Henry Perowne's shift of perspective with regard to threat and safety is genuinely noteworthy. It shows a pervasive dynamic where within the safety of non-violent spaces, the self-confessed realist⁵⁹⁷ and 21st century "good doctor" who is "an affable product of prosperity and decades of peace,"⁵⁹⁸ can resort to Western discourses of reason, medical conclusions, and materialism. When facing ancient threats, however, as in outright violent physical attack, those structures of the rational that the self-confessed realist considers to be 'truth' and 'fact' are of little

⁵⁹⁴ *Saturday* 94.

⁵⁹⁵ *Saturday* 95.

⁵⁹⁶ *Saturday* 97.

⁵⁹⁷ *Saturday* 168.

⁵⁹⁸ *Saturday* 276.

to no help to him, and the “good doctor” resorts to other means to explain and help himself attain certainty and safety again.

Something beyond human control, as established within Western cultural spaces, is needed when faced with the smaller and greater uncertainties of lived experience, or so *Saturday* proposes via its narrative. This need stems from the circumstance that the extreme violence that might occur is the exertion of human control established and perpetuated by these very Western cultural spaces, if one considers imperial and post-imperial histories, only in the most negative sense: terrorist attacks in actual Western metropolises, in this case London; in *Saturday*'s case, harming the Perowne family members, first Perowne in the street and then later Daisy and Rosalind in the Perowne's home. In this, *Saturday* parallels *Possession* and *On Beauty* by stating that there is more to lived experience than postmodern and post-structuralist discourses alone can fathom. There remains a part of lived experience that still is out of reach never mind the discourses available.

Additionally, though in a most understated way, *Saturday* points out that when faced with the threat of real physical violence, the Western discourses of rationality and materialism cannot guarantee certainties, as can be seen in Henry Perowne's own anxieties, as well as the violent home invasion scenario that is stopped via poetic genius and the sublime before any physical harm can be done. *Saturday* thereby proposes, so I argue, a return to a particular set of Romantic absolutes – the genius of creativity and the overwhelming power of the sublime – without which the threat and actuality of physical violence cannot be faced down. This return to an older order rather than the search for something genuinely new is not surprising when one considers the fact that Perowne never really considers taking up his son Theo's approach to millennial lived experience.

That Theo Perowne might have a point is not even remotely considered in the narrative. Rather, the main perspective, Henry Perowne's, is fixed on the established Western discourses of rationality and materialism (cracks and fissures included), and then turns to an even older order when rendered helpless in the face of uncertainty and violence. In the following, I would like to consider just how *Saturday* establishes a powerful aesthetic, before considering how its utilisation within the narrative further shows the deep-seated post-imperial phantom pains already considered.

5.4 Creative Agency and the Sublime

A lot has been said about Daisy's life-saving recital of "Dover Beach" at the end of *Saturday*, and the fact that it is by her recital of Matthew Arnold's famous poem that Daisy is able to save herself. Due to her poetic means of de-escalation, Daisy helps her father and brother save the whole family from violent Baxter and his ominous thugs. Tim Gauthier's critique is one I find especially illuminating in this case. To Gauthier, *Saturday* is a narrative that incorporates a reaffirmation of patriarchal power-structures since Daisy doesn't cite her own poetry – she is, after all, a recently published poet – but recites a canonical English poem that still contains strong whiffs of imperial patriotism. However, rather than take Gauthier's damning stance in full, I suggest that Daisy is an example of a fusing of the old with the new. She is rigorous in her critique of her father's position, as seen in her heated argument with Henry about the impending invasion of Iraq,⁵⁹⁹ and she has the courage and talent to try her hand as a poet, while also having the old-fashioned skills of memorising the canonical texts at hand.

Daisy knows the canon, old and revised, and is able and willing to make her own contribution to the various canons available. The consequence of her agency, however, also entails one decisive factor: namely that Daisy is pregnant, which opens up a completely different discourse of creativity, power, and place. Considering Henry Perowne's generally conservative perspective, it is not surprising that Daisy's pregnancy, though a 'saving grace' in the attempted rape,⁶⁰⁰ is relegated to the spheres of denial and anger once the threat of Baxter and his cronies is subdued. Perowne even "refuses to accept that [Daisy] might have chosen to be pregnant",⁶⁰¹ seeing his daughter's pregnancy as a "a calamity, an insult and a waste",⁶⁰² and thereby defining the father of his grandchild not only as "the despoiler of his daughter",⁶⁰³ but also the instigator of

this unknown Italian's assault on the family's peace and cohesion, at his impertinently depositing his seed without first making himself available for inspection, evaluation – where was he now, for example?⁶⁰⁴

⁵⁹⁹ McEwan, *Saturday* 185-193.

⁶⁰⁰ As Perowne observes of the attackers, "These two young men are immature, probably without much sexual experience. Daisy's condition embarrasses them. Perhaps it disgusts them. It's a hope." (*Saturday*, 219).

⁶⁰¹ *Saturday* 243.

⁶⁰² *Saturday* 240.

⁶⁰³ *Saturday* 243.

⁶⁰⁴ *Saturday* 243.

For a 21st century neurosurgeon who professedly loves his daughter and wants only the best for her, Perowne's stance is oddly reminiscent of conduct books of previous centuries that deliberated what a proper (young) woman was to be, most of all a model of "discretion, silence and modesty,"⁶⁰⁵ especially because women were not to be trusted to know what was best for them. In the light of Perowne's refusal "to accept that [Daisy] might have chosen to be pregnant" not to mention that her pregnancy to him is "a calamity, an insult and a waste", his stance is not far from a Regency family's horror at their daughter's "infamous elopement",⁶⁰⁶ though the social consequences are, granted, nowhere near equal. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Henry acknowledges Daisy's agency only in the moment of extreme vulnerability, and even then it is 'channelled' through a male, canonical voice, that of Victorian poet Matthew Arnold.⁶⁰⁷

However, McEwan does address one thing with the attack: namely that "the security and complacency" of postmodern life that Kathleen Wall indicts in the first lines of "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty", has few weapons against ancient forms of violence: rape and murder. It is Daisy's pregnancy on the one hand, (a proclamation of her agency as a sexually emancipated woman), and Matthew Arnold's poetry on the other, (which can only be accessed via Daisy's mnemonic skills and presentation), that show the difficulty of a present that needs both structures of the past to establish safety and order, or so *Saturday* seems to suggest. What saves the Perownes are not the Western discourses of rationality and materialism that Henry Perowne identifies as his system of definition. Rather, it is by accessing the old imperial order where questions of creativity, power, and place were answered in absolutes that a young millennial woman can very basically save herself and her family.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁵ cf. Mary Poovey. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 3. As the 18th century conduct book *The Ladies Library* put it, "[so] especially the Female Sex, whose Passions being naturally the more impetuous, ought to be the most strictly guarded, and kept under the sever Discipline of Reason; For where 'tis otherwise, where a Woman has no Guide but her Will, and her Will is nothing but her Humour, the Event is sure to be fatal to herself; and often to others also." (Poovey, *The Proper Lady and Woman Writer* 21) Within such a definition of female selves, female agency is fairly non-existent, displacing said agency outside any genuine decisiveness and outright independent action.

⁶⁰⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 312.

⁶⁰⁷ This in turn complicates the patriarchal power-structures Gauthier critiques, since Perowne does not know that the poem Daisy recites is Matthew Arnold's. Here again, *Saturday*'s initial critic's confusion as to the moral stance of the author is understandable, since the textual layering is complex enough to be ambiguous in its meaning. Why Daisy and why "Dover Beach"? The semantic fields Daisy as a character and "Dover Beach" as a poem inhabit confuse the positing of whatever message is being conveyed, to which I will relate to later in this chapter.

⁶⁰⁸ Daisy is a young woman who unquestionably explores her own creativity – aesthetically, socially, culturally, and sexually – and so signifies the freedom, safety, and order of her socio-cultural space she lives in: the West in general, and the English cultural space in particular. This explains why Gauthier is so critical of *Saturday*'s outcome since the socio-cultural positioning of the characters "emphasize[s] the blind spots of [their] privilege" (Gauthier, "Selective in Your Mercies" 9), as in the very privilege the Perownes live in.

Thus, quite like in *Possession* and *On Beauty*, though in far more violent forms, beauty and truth are treated with regard to threat and safety in *Saturday*.⁶⁰⁹ Both are portrayed as contingent – truth cannot be fully plumbed as seen in Henry Perowne’s oscillation between the mystic and the materialist, depending on his sense of safety and anxiety, respectively. Beauty, in turn, is a continuous aesthetic question, intellectually, as seen with Perowne’s struggle with literature, and physically, as seen in the clashing reactions to Daisy’s presence, who at one point in the novel is a beautiful young pregnant woman, naked in the middle of her family’s home, reciting poetry to save herself. Additionally, what is known may mislead and help, simultaneously, as seen in both Baxter and Henry’s misprision of “Dover Beach”, since both believe the poem is Daisy’s, while the artistic beauty of Arnold’s poem is the real saving grace.

Saturday can thus also be seen as a deeply Victorian novel in the sense of how the real threat of violence is displaced and rendered null in a mixture of divine artistry and motherhood,⁶¹⁰ wherein Daisy’s genuinely life-changing agency is seen in her pregnancy, which until the attack was unknown to all men involved (Daisy’s mother Rosalind knew all along), as well as Daisy’s refuge in old forms of aesthetics, namely the actual memorizing of poetry by rote, as her grandfather taught her.⁶¹¹ Interestingly, Daisy’s agency stems from creativity, in all its forms. Though Victorian in its markings in *Saturday*, the novel posits creativity as the tool with which to dispel vicious threats, namely rape (of Daisy) and murder (of her mother Rosalind).⁶¹² In the narrative, this violence is something the more materialist tools a Henry Perowne has can do nothing against. It is the sublime, that which overwhelms, that which cannot be explained, let alone rationalized, that renders Baxter at first uncomfortable (the discovery of Daisy’s pregnancy when she is forced to strip naked), thus destabilising his control of the situation, and finally throwing him

⁶⁰⁹ In *Possession* the concerns were the threat to scholarship via “philistine misreadings”, and how to establish genuinely fruitful modes of reception and text. In *On Beauty* the concerns of threat and safety were articulated in matters of integrity and selfhood, as in, how to establish empathy in the face of moral adversity.

⁶¹⁰ cf. Coventry Patmore’s (in)famous poem “The Angel in the House” (Coventry Patmore. “The Angel in the House.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition, Volume 2*. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 1428-9), and John Ruskin’s celebration of female virginity and motherhood – conspicuously *without* the necessary sexual activity in between – in his seminal piece on female conduct *Of Queen’s Gardens*: John Ruskin. *Of Queen’s Gardens*. London: Dent/Everyman, 1907, Rpt. 1965.

⁶¹¹ John Grammaticus, Daisy’s famous poet grandfather, “believed in children learning by rote, and he was prepared to pay up. Shakespeare, Milton and the King James Bible – five pounds for every twenty lines memorised from the passages he marked. These three were the sources of all good English verse and prose; he instructed her to roll the syllables around her tongue and feel their rhythmic power. [...] Even now, six years on, at the age of twenty-three, she claims to be able to spout – her word – non-stop for more than two hours.” (McEwan, *Saturday* 134).

⁶¹² It is interesting to note that in the home invasion scenario, the three people incapacitated are the women and the elderly man, Rosalind, Daisy, and John Grammaticus, thus leaving the able-bodied young and middle aged men of the family (Henry and his son Theo) to be the active repellents of the threat. The traditional setting of those in threat in comparison to those set to save is conspicuous in the light of Henry Perowne’s rather Victorian ideas on female agency.

completely off via her recital of “Dover Beach”. Baxter ends up exclaiming in utter bafflement, “You wrote that. You *wrote* that. [...] It’s beautiful. You know that, don’t you. It’s beautiful. And you wrote it.”⁶¹³

Saturday’s verdict, on a meta-textual level, on genuine physical threat, as is the case with terrorist threat, is a quiet though pervasive argument for a return to old imperial form, since the threat cannot be argued out of existence but is very much there in the real possibility of horrifying violence. Thus, the tools otherwise neglected, even laid to rest, must be unearthed again, and given to the next generation for their very own protection, or so *Saturday* proposes. The question such a stance leaves unanswered, however, is two-fold: if Daisy had not known “Dover Beach” by heart, if she had not been trained by her poet grandfather in the traditional canon – what then? And if she hadn’t been pregnant, would “Dover Beach” have helped at all? It seems rather that without the latter the former might not have had the same heft and power, though both are, in their own ways, results of acts of creation, meaning beyond the grasp of the fully understandable – from a predominantly male point of view that is.

It is only after Daisy is able to deconstruct Baxter’s aggression via the sublime experience of the poetry she recites that her father Henry is able to step back into the rationality and materialism of his assessment of Baxter as someone diseased, rather than a real and serious threat to safety. Before that, both Perowne and Baxter are caught up in the experience of the sublime. The power of the aesthetic is unquestionable in *Saturday* since it overwhelms the two characters least prone to be aesthetically moved. As Theresa Winterhalter writes in her analysis of Henry Perowne’s experience upon Daisy’s second recital of “Dover Beach”, Perowne is

unmoored from his defences of dismissing the power of poetry as mere musing, he experiences the words anew, finding them abundant with the free play of linguistic signifiers, the indeterminacy of conclusions, and fluctuating meanings.⁶¹⁴

The mirroring of Perowne and Baxter is clear. Both are overwhelmed by Daisy’s recital of “Dover Beach”, matching each other in their reaction to her first and her second reading: During the first reading, Perowne only hears and sees Daisy and her as yet unknown lover, mirroring Baxter’s

⁶¹³ *Saturday* 222.

⁶¹⁴ Theresa Winterhalter, ““Plastic Fork in Hand”” 349.

smirking verdict of Daisy's first book of poetry, "*My Saucy Bark*. By Saucy Daisy Perowne."⁶¹⁵ The second reading is a different matter. Henry is "so dislodged from his own certainty that he is now able to change the persona of the poem",⁶¹⁶ enabling him to humanize Baxter in as much as "his awareness that Baxter, too, may inhabit this poem", and so be part of a uniquely sublime experience of the beauty in the spoken poetic word.⁶¹⁷ Baxter, in turn, is transformed by his experience of the poem, dismissing his thugs, and allowing Daisy to dress, thus decreasing Daisy's extreme vulnerability, and so making the situation more manageable for the Perownes. Thus, *Saturday* establishes the aesthetic as genuinely powerful, a means by which socio-cultural boundaries can be crossed, joining a violent thug and a materialist neurosurgeon in their experience of something inexplicable, beautiful, and true. It is an aesthetic experience that changes the entire following course of action, since after the second reading Baxter changes his mind about attacking Daisy and humiliating the Perownes.

However, rather than create empathy and so actually change perspectives, the powerful aesthetic is established as means to consolidate the already existing order, rather than change the old into something new. This can be seen in the fact that once Daisy is allowed to dress and Baxter claims her freshly pressed poems for himself that Perowne

attributes the threat of physical violence to a "degenerating mind" rather than to Baxter's earlier humiliation or to the possible affront a disadvantaged individual might feel when confronted with the affluence and good luck embodied by the Perowne family.⁶¹⁸

The critical assessment of Henry and Baxter's reaction to the poetry recital is split between readings of an emphatic, communal moment joining Perowne and Baxter on the one hand, and the "empty emphatic gesture" on the other. Kathleen Wall and Molly Clark Hillard, for example, join Theresa Winterhalter in their reading of Baxter and Perowne's joint experience as a strong moment of empathy. As Winterhalter writes, Perowne's second understanding of "Dover Beach" is a moment where

⁶¹⁵ *Saturday* 219; Perowne after all states before Daisy's arrival that "It would be easier for him if her poems weren't so wanton – it isn't only wild sex they celebrate, but restless novelty, the rooms and beds visited once and left at dawn, the walk home down wet Parisian streets whose efficient cleansing by the city the authorities is the occasion for various metaphors. [...] Is it only fatherly soft-headedness that makes him suspect that a girl who sleeps around to earnestly have an improved chance of ending up with a lower-grade male, an inadequate, a loser? Or is his own peculiarity in this field, his own lack of exploratory vigor, making for another problem of reference?" (*Saturday* 184).

⁶¹⁶ Winterhalter, "Plastic Fork in Hand" 350.

⁶¹⁷ Winterhalter, "Plastic Fork in Hand" 350.

⁶¹⁸ Gauthier, "Selective in Your Mercies" 19.

Henry expands his capacity for empathy and begins the process of recognizing the liberatory potential in irreconcilable moments of interpretative ambiguity; he allows space for the lives of others, both victims and oppressors, to emerge in his realms of sympathy.⁶¹⁹

Tim Gauthier disagrees with this reading. According to Gauthier, what Hillard, Wall, and Winterhalter ignore is “the neurosurgeon’s descriptions of Baxter’s “general simian air” and as something less than civilized”.⁶²⁰ It is this reductionism that, to Gauthier, shows that whatever empathy one may think Perowne possesses, it is simply a gesture, not the genuine article. Gauthier criticizes that

Perowne frequently stops short of empathy, pitying Baxter rather than putting himself in his place. Perowne proves himself incapable of making that leap, in part because he identifies himself as a “professional reductionist” [...]. When he does focus on the issue of the haves and have-nots, his training and specialization inevitably lead him to biological formulations rather than political or socioeconomic ones.⁶²¹

I agree with Gauthier’s reading since all through *Saturday* Henry Perowne never manages to escape his methodology of life, namely that there are fixed facts beyond his control, “awaiting his discovery”. What seems to be empathy is no more than sympathy, which as Julinna Oxley states “involves direct concern for another person as a subject distinct from oneself”.⁶²² This marks the difference to Judith Butler’s hope for empathy that Gauthier refers to in his analysis, a hope that, “being awakened to one’s own vulnerability should cause one to contemplate it as a condition uniting us all.”⁶²³ Though Butler is aware of the fact that this is counter-intuitive, her hope remains that to awaken to one’s own vulnerability is not

an awakesness [sic] ... to [one’s] own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of [one’s] own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other.”⁶²⁴

⁶¹⁹ Winterhalter ““Plastic Fork in Hand”” 250.

⁶²⁰ Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 19.

⁶²¹ “Selective in Your Mercies” 18.

⁶²² Julinna C. Oxley. *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy: Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory and Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 17, qtd. in Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 20.

⁶²³ Judith Butler. *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso, 2004, p. 134, qtd. in Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 15.

⁶²⁴ Butler, *Prearious Life* 134, qtd. in Gauthier “Selective in Your Mercies” 15-16.

This hope is not fulfilled in *Saturday*, as Gauthier rightly deduces. Henry Perowne feels sorry for Baxter, which constitutes “differential positioning between sympathizer and sympathized”.⁶²⁵ As Gauthier points out “the sympathizer’s non-suffering condition in fact liberates him or her to feel for the other’s piteous state.” However, this relationship does not constitute empathy, “since the sympathizer inevitably remains in a dominant position in relation to the sympathized.”⁶²⁶

In the case of neurosurgeon Perowne and terminally ill Baxter, the power differential is clear. It is the neurosurgeon’s medical background that allows him to blackmail Baxter the first time they meet. It is during the altercation that Perowne mentions a possible trial therapy to help find a cure for Baxter’s disease. It is this very offer that makes Baxter demand to see the “American trail”,⁶²⁷ after allowing Daisy to dress. It is Baxter’s demand for the trial that allows Henry Perowne and Baxter to leave the hostage scene in the living room – the conclusion of which the reader is not told since the narrative’s focalization is Henry’s perspective. Finally, in the concluding scenes when Perowne operates on Baxter, the former attacker is strapped to the operating table, just like any other patient in neurosurgeon Perowne’s operating theatre, rather than the violent threat to his family. This constellation enables sympathy, but, as Gauthier states, simultaneously “serves as a distancing mechanism since it prevents the neurosurgeon from acknowledging mutual vulnerability.”⁶²⁸

Saturday is thus able to celebrate “the power of civilization through Art and Science, to ward off, and maybe even civilize the barbarians at the gates.”⁶²⁹ Henry Perowne’s decision to operate on Baxter thereby “proclaims the superiority of a ‘civilization’ whose perhaps most distinguishing feature is its ability to empathize – the real difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’.”⁶³⁰ However, there is a catch. Gauthier postulates this particular reading only to deconstruct it since it leaves out the fact that the “antagonist”, in this case Baxter, “is never provided an opportunity to offer an alternate cultural conceptualization (unattractive though it may be) or to voice a grievance against perceived injustice (ill-conceived though its expression may be).”⁶³¹ This is not entirely accurate, since when Henry and his son Theo finally manage to overwhelm Baxter, there is a moment of clarity for the neurosurgeon, where

⁶²⁵ “Selective in Your Mercies” 20.

⁶²⁶ “Selective in Your Mercies” 20.

⁶²⁷ McEwan, *Saturday* 224.

⁶²⁸ Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 20.

⁶²⁹ “Selective in Your Mercies” 12.

⁶³⁰ “Selective in Your Mercies” 12.

⁶³¹ “Selective in Your Mercies” 12.

[w]hen Baxter is entirely airborne, suspended in time, looking directly at Henry with an expression, not so much of terror, as dismay. And Henry thinks he sees in the wide brown eyes a sorrowful accusation of betrayal. He, Henry Perowne, possesses so much – the work, money, status, the home, above all, the family – the handsome healthy son with the strong guitarist’s hands come to the rescue him, the beautiful poet for a daughter, unattainable even in her nakedness, the famous father-in-law, the gifted, loving wife; and he has done nothing, given nothing to Baxter who has so little that is not wrecked by his defective gene, and who is soon to have even less.⁶³²

Perowne, as it seems, is momentarily aware of the discrepancy between his and Baxter’s socio-cultural positioning. The effect, however, is not empathy as Wall, Hillard, and Winterhalter conclude, but sympathy. Perowne pities Baxter, for the inescapable effects of his debilitating disease that very likely have made him the violent thug that he is, and so out of pity the neurosurgeon operates on him. Thus the threat, at first all terror, is “simply the embodiment of a defective, irrational stance that is the product of arrested intellectual and emotional development.”⁶³³ Baxter is not inexplicable evil after all. He is explainable and can be made harmless, by Art first and Science next. As Gauthier writes, *Saturday*

as such [...] becomes an exercise in wish fulfilment, with the forces of creativity – embodied in a pregnant poet, no less – ultimately, though somewhat ambivalently, vanquishing those of destruction.⁶³⁴

Consequently, *Saturday* remains a contemplation of threat, with a Romantic resolution to said threat, the implication being that, when the threat is experienced the ‘weaponry’ that is most successful is the old imperial order, where creativity, power, and place were articulated in absolutes and so, via poetic genius and the sublime, could access that which is beyond human control and Western rationalisation processes. This way, the apparent victim can counteract the loss of control, which is what violence factually is. Thus, safety is established and order sustained, where the initial rationalisation processes and materialist systems of definition can hold again. In *Saturday*, they are left for the emergency plans after the calamity has taken place, the operations, the kitting and fixing after the terror is dispelled and rendered harmless.

⁶³² *Saturday* 227-228.

⁶³³ Gauthier 12.

⁶³⁴ Gauthier 12

While I agree with Gauthier that *Saturday* “presents an unapologetic view of Western life and wealth”, a way of life that is only marred “by fear and anxiety about its tenuousness in light of seemingly uncontrollable and random threats”,⁶³⁵ what is far more intriguing is that, according to *Saturday*, the means to dispel real and serious violence are means that can only be found in confines of the poetic and the sublime, which is a decidedly 19th century solution to a very 21st century problem. *Saturday* seems to suggest that Art and Science are genuinely the tools to stop terrorism, which, next to war, is the severest invasion of a ‘home space’ imaginable. It is “Dover Beach” that renders Baxter speechless, and so ‘enables’ him to call back his thugs, not to mention the disconcerting fact (for the thugs, that is), of Daisy’s pregnancy. The powerful aesthetic is what will fend off physical calamity and disaster, or so *Saturday* proposes by its outcome. This is not mere conjecture in the novel. The aesthetic is factually powerful in *Saturday*, equal to a physical weapon ready for use when faced with physical violence, which is an incredible stance to take in the face of global terrorist threat.

It is highly intriguing that *Saturday*’s proposal to solve a post-imperial problem, global terrorist threat, is not to find post-imperial solutions, but to turn back to imperial systems of definition and use what was once apparently so successful – without even the slightest consideration of how the initial imperial systems of definition helped create the post-imperial situation. It is not that the narrative shows no awareness of this, Daisy Perowne’s continuous protestations against Henry Perowne’s stance regarding the impending invasion of Iraq show her understanding of imperial histories that are starkly present in post-imperial realities. However, Henry Perowne is conspicuously ignorant of the histories and dynamics of creativity, power, and place at play in the global situation he sees himself continuously faced with. His myopic perspective is a quiet indictment of the Western perspective in general, and that of those living within the English cultural space in particular.

I argue that Perowne’s obtuseness to the larger structures at hand is an implicit, possibly unintentional, cautioning to very simply educate oneself with regard to the complexity of the millennial situation, both on a macro and a micro scale. This cautioning is reminiscent of the continuous admonitions of Post-colonial Studies to genuinely analyse the ambiguity and polyvalence of the post-colonial/post-imperial perspectives; to question and analyse all universality claims given; and to fully appreciate the imperial historical and socio-cultural genealogies in order

⁶³⁵ Gauthier, “Selective in Your Mercies” 12.

to understand post-imperial realities, and not simply brush them aside as irrelevant. If anything, *Saturday* implicitly shows their relevancy since it is downright reactionary to offer imperial systems of definition to solve the problems these very systems were highly partial in creating.⁶³⁶

It is illuminating that Henry Perowne, neurosurgeon though he is, is established as a fairly ignorant individual when it comes to the larger socio-cultural dynamics of the world he lives in. The smugness of a Henry Perowne when he feels safe obfuscates the problem at hand, namely that of sustaining physical safety in a Western metropolis, in this case London, since the complexity and flexibility of the problem requires equal complexity and flexibility in its solution.

Whether it is in fact feasible is a question that cannot be answered in this particular paper, but one thing must be taken into account when considering *Saturday*'s postulation, namely that it was conceived, written, and published before 7/7, when the possibility of terrorism in the British capital became a terrible actuality. As stated above, it would be a worthy thought experiment to consider if *Saturday* would have been possible after the 7/7 attacks. As it is, the novel is the articulated hope of safety before terror actually struck, a hope that was shattered, showing the poignant insight of W. H. Auden's poem about the high arts and their masters. In light of the actuality of the 7/7 terrorist attacks, *Saturday* is shown to be not much more than a contemplation of available tools for defence, one that shows the deep concerns of safety in contemporary lived experience within the English cultural space.

⁶³⁶ For further reading see: David Fromkin, *The Peace to End all Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Avon Books, 1990; and P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins (Eds). *British Imperialism, 1688 – 2000*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001.

6. Concluding Remarks

As I hope to have shown, the resolutions in *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* borrow heavily from concepts of poetic genius and the sublime, making Romantic conceptualisations of reception and text a recurring trope in all three narratives. All three novels deal with different subject matters – the orthodoxies of academia, multi-cultural identities, and terrorist threat. What is remarkable is that all three novels employ the Romantic tropes of poetic genius and the sublime to dissolve disputes and render threats harmless, via the narrative adventures of their protagonists: Roland Mitchell’s quest in *Possession*, Howard Belsey’s struggle in *On Beauty*, Henry Perowne’s anxiety in *Saturday*.⁶³⁷ In the following, I would like to recapitulate the embedded imperial practice I have argued for in this thesis, where, while attempting to answer valid questions about contemporary lived experience in the English cultural space, all three novels inadvertently re-instate powerful imperial meta-narratives of Self and Other.

6.1. *Possession*, Realism, and Empire: A Contemporary Perspective

Since *Possession* is, as stated above, markedly realist, excepting the fictional historical characters, one can safely say that Post-colonial Studies was definitely a known field in late 1980s London, though possibly considered unorthodox and disruptive. Still, with the loud demands to re-consider and re-evaluate the canon with regard to the pervasiveness of imperial dynamics, it would not have been surprising if a Randolph Henry Ash was swept up in the fight to re-negotiate what was to be read in the academies and beyond. To postulations that a consideration of empire is not needed in such a narrative as *Possession*, I hope they can be refuted by this paper’s initial analysis of the genealogy of imperial systems of definition from the centre to the periphery and back.⁶³⁸ The very absence of empire in such a profoundly inquisitive text as *Possession*, which to a large part is situated right at the centre of British imperial pursuit, does, I believe, require a modicum of inquisitiveness.

⁶³⁷ It is noteworthy that a) all three protagonists are male and b) all three male protagonists come from white working-class backgrounds, and have worked their way ‘up’ into fairly comfortable middle class lives, with all the status, prestige (and sometimes money) included.

⁶³⁸ See Chapter 1 “The Root of the Matter”.

Why this silence, one wonders? Why not even a hint that great changes were taking place, especially as Randolph Henry Ash is considered to be a writer of “ferocious vitality and daring breadth of reference of the work”, a writer whose inquisitiveness ranges from death and dentistry to civilizational pasts and Greek mythology? As Ash scholar Roland Michell ruminates

Here Randolph Henry Ash had come, cramming his elastic mind and memory with unconsidered trifles from History and Topography, form the felicitous alphabetical conjunctions of Science and Miscelleneous – Dancing, Deaf and Dumb, Death, Dentistry, Devil and Demonology, Distrubution, Dogs, Domestic Servants, Dreams. In his day, works on Evolution had been catalogued under Pre-Adamite Man. Roland had only recently discovered that the London Library possessed Ash’s own copy of Vico’s *Principj di Scienza Nuova*.⁶³⁹

In the light of Mary Louise Pratt’s enumeration of imperial methods of observation and definition,⁶⁴⁰ this list, though eclectic, is true to British imperial form. Additionally, Randolph Henry Ash, a scholar of Vico, would be the kind of inquisitive reader who would probably have read Mungo Park’s *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* since even the African Association hoped Park would find something of the Carthaginians in Africa’s interior.⁶⁴¹

Ash is a writer and thinker who read Vico, another writer and thinker who, “looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend; this piecing together was his ‘new science’” and who understood Proserpine to be “the corn, the origin of commerce and community”.⁶⁴² As *Possession* implies, it was Ash’s reading of Vico that influenced the poem “Garden of Proserpina” wherein Proserpina is “‘gold-skinned in the gloom’, [...] ‘grain-golden’ [and] ‘bound with golden links’ which might have been jewellery or chains.”⁶⁴³ It is Roland Michell in turn who, as a close reading scholar, cross-references Ash’s Proserpina “under the headings of grain, apples, chain, treasure,”⁶⁴⁴ thus showing the line of associations from Vico over Ash to Roland, creating a deep-strata space of readings and reception, next to layered intertextuality. For a narrative that goes this deep into readings of texts, why the absence of empire? Evolution and “Victorian reflection of religious doubt”⁶⁴⁵ are mentioned, even the beginnings of

⁶³⁹ Byatt, *Possession* 2.

⁶⁴⁰ See Chapter 1.3.1 “Imperial Genealogy and Mapping Space”.

⁶⁴¹ See Chapter 1.3.3 “Conceptual Blindness”.

⁶⁴² Byatt, *Possession* 3.

⁶⁴³ *Possession* 4.

⁶⁴⁴ *Possession* 4.

⁶⁴⁵ *Possession* 3.

psychology since, “Ash liked his characters at or over the edge of madness, constructing systems of belief and survival from the fragments of experience available to them.”⁶⁴⁶

Yet there remains no trace of empire in *Possession*'s consideration of Ash's reading, his reception and his way of life, not even during his exchanges with Christabel LaMotte, firm in her Christian faith and genuinely concerned with the paradoxes of artistic and female life as she is. This is surprising in a narrative that painstakingly maps out the socio-cultural position of all its characters. I argue that this silence is due to a connect-disconnect in the discourse of empire. The (former) imperial periphery in *Possession* truly is the periphery. It has no part in discourses of the (former) imperial centre, unless in sudden, exotic flashes of presence. I would not, however, argue that this is a one-to-one portrayal of the discourses that took place during the Victorian era. As fictional narratives from *Jane Eyre* to *A Passage to India* show, not to mention all the reports, travelogues, and journals composed and published at the time, the Victorians were deeply involved in the imperial pursuits of the British Empire.⁶⁴⁷

Rather, I argue that the conspicuous absence of empire in a narrative whose focal point is a highly imperial period shows a particular late 20th century perspective, wherein, due to the understanding of the vast complications of empire, the whole subject is kept out of the picture as a whole. This is why I have argued that *Possession* is a romantic realist text: the Romantic modulation of the narrative's realism stems from a late 20th century impetus regarding English cultural discourse and the above-mentioned connect-disconnect of said discourse.

Why this sequestering of (former) imperial spheres is done is an altogether different question. What is intriguing is that it works. It is remarkable that it is possible to narrate in depth and breadth about fictional lives in the (former) imperial centre without hardly even touching on the (former) imperial periphery, and not raise any questions. This, I argue, shows a particular connect-disconnect dynamic in the recent discourses of imperial power-structures, a bifurcation of English identity narratives, where the (former) imperial centre and the (former) imperial periphery remain conspicuously separate and apart.

It is possible that, by focusing predominantly on the former imperial periphery, Post-colonial Studies has created a space where, to the (former) imperial centre, empire happened ‘out

⁶⁴⁶ *Possession* 7.

⁶⁴⁷ See amongst others: Stephan H. Clark (Ed.). *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London, New York: Zed Books, 1999; and Liza Marz Harper. *Solitary travelers: Nineteenth-century women's travel narratives and the scientific vocation*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001.

there' rather than 'in here'. This, in turn, possibly created a discursive space where empire simply seems to have no importance, let alone relevance, to the (former) imperial centre's discursive space. Thus, the systems of power and definition that help construct *Possession's* world can be left as unspoken background where empire looms large like a silent elephant in the room. In this time and space, the most powerful identity narratives posited the imperial Self as the unassailable norm against which the imperial Other was defined. Conclusively, it is in this dynamic that the ethnicity prescribed to the imperial Self makes a disappearing act, and whiteness, with all its social, cultural, political, and ideological trappings, "need not speak its name".

It is within these coordinates of Self and Other within the former imperial centres where realism as a form was established. Yet it was and remains a specific realism, a realism that was 'broken' by magic realism, which, interestingly, saw no other way to incorporate the ambiguities, breaks, disruptions, and plain madness of the empire in its periphery into the narrative structures of the imperial centre, than by adding magical traits, from sabre teeth, to sprouting wings, unnatural aging processes, disappearing cities, and so on. In the light of the imperial quest narrative, articulated in texts such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to name just two, the magical elements magic realism utilises can be seen as a further articulation of that initial narrative: the questing Childe venturing forth into an unknown space where dragons and other magical creatures reside, only that in the case of magic realism, the quest narrative is told from the apparent magical creatures' perspective, (the magical creatures being the quintessential Other to the imperial questing Self in the quest narrative).⁶⁴⁸

Realism, as a narrative form, is thus a realism within the Western cultural spheres in general and the English cultural space in particular, where the normative ethnicity as defined within the European imperial project plays no role, class (as in the class that should be emulated and aspired to, the gentry and the aristocracy) remains fairly unquestioned, and the normative gender is male. The critiques of *Possession* as being decidedly heteronormative and traditionalist, even reactionary, are understandable within this matrix of cultural terms and texts. However, once the wider matrix from post-colonial and post-imperial perspective is considered, the specificity is far clearer and any universality claims are toppled.

⁶⁴⁸ For an analysis of the complex dialectics of narrative and socio-cultural dynamics see: Frederic Jameson. *The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge 2006. For a succinct analysis of the interplay between realism, magic realism, and romance as forms of writing, see: Geetha Ramanathan. "Magical Women in the Modern." *Locating Gender in Modernism, The Outsider Female*. Routledge Studies in Twentieth Century Literature. New York: 2012, pp. 105-131.

6.2 Saturday, On Beauty, and Historical Legacies

As shown above, in the world of *Possession* that is either firmly Victorian or influenced by Victoriana, empire curiously plays no conceptual, discursive, let alone physical part. In the world of *Saturday*, the legacy of empire that deeply influences present-day global politics is hardly even established, though hinted on in Daisy Perowne's heated replies to her concerned father Henry with regard to the impending invasion of Iraq. It is Daisy's continuous questions and frustration with Henry Perowne's easy answers that show an understanding of the disregard of imperial historical genealogy in concerns of safety within Western urban spaces, and most importantly, that this disregard is not a norm, nor is it a universal. It is a perspective. It is, I argue, the perspective from within the former imperial centre, where, despite all evidence to the contrary, empire is outside and faraway and has little to do with the 'general public', the individuals and groups who live within these normative indigenous (Western/English) spaces, in this case represented by neurosurgeon Henry Perowne.

The fictional neurosurgeon embodies the comfortable ignorance and insouciance of the undisturbed imperial gaze within a post-imperial world. Perowne's is a traditionally hegemonial gaze, one embedded deep within imperial structures of Self and Other. It is a gaze that parallels Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*,⁶⁴⁹ Marlow who "reports" what is considered to be obviously perceivable, with no understanding of the inherent blinkers in the very perception of the phenomena at hand. As Perowne states himself, he is convinced that the world he experiences is unassailable and so "beyond the requirements of proof." Thus, to him, "a result, a consequence, exists separately in the world, independent of himself, known to others, awaiting his discovery."⁶⁵⁰ Such a stance completely ignores, even allows the respective individual to not be aware of the fact that ideology, teleology, and basic systems of definition embedded in the socio-cultural matrix the individual lives in deeply influence the very evaluation of the phenomena at hand.

What Perowne perceives is already tinted by the lens of his identity politics, the society he lives in, his place in it, and his own individual wants, needs, wishes, and biases. These are perspectival blinkers that disallow the objectivity Perowne is so certain of when speaking of phenomena that are "known to others, awaiting his discovery." The implied neutrality of perception is never neutral, but shows the very particular conceptual, discursive, and socio-cultural

⁶⁴⁹ See Chapter 1.3.2 "Through a Glass Darkly: the Imperial Gaze".

⁶⁵⁰ *Saturday* 19.

coordinates Henry Perowne lives in and by. This, I argue, is how the post-imperial phantom pains come to the fore in *Saturday*.

The legacy of empire is that Perowne's point of view and perception is a gaze that has at its disposal tools of maintaining what Gauthier calls a "fantasy", wherein, the respective individual, in this case Henry Perowne, is "unable to conceive of a system better than the one in which he lives."⁶⁵¹ It is, I argue, the legacy of the powerful hegemonial imperial gaze, factually informed by the dominant white male gaze, one Henry does "everything in his power to preserve";⁶⁵² one in which little can destabilise, save the individual's own psychological and physical weakness. The fact that it is within this perspective that a Romantic poetic genius and the subsequent sublime experience of artistic beauty (and the truth thereby accessed) is established, shows the Romantic cadence of *Saturday*'s realism, since it is this power of the aesthetic that changes the course of the Perowne family's history by literally changing their attackers' violent intentions to peaceable ones, and so keeping the whole family physically safe. It is this dynamic, so firmly embedded in the post-imperial phantom pains of *Saturday*'s over-all narrative, that makes the novel a romantic realist text.

In this, *On Beauty*'s Howard Belsey shows the opposite end of Henry Perowne's habitus, wherein the materialist point of view such as Henry Perowne's lends no relief, since the subject-matter is hardly elucidated by considerations of DNA strands. Once scrutinised with genuine acuity and interest, the phenomena considered so certain by a Henry Perowne are shown to be deeply embedded within powerful systems of definition that are not as fixed as at first expected, but constructed to establish certainties in light of the never-ending ambiguities of lived experience. Howard's ideological conundrum is that he, quite like Henry Perowne, remains a staunch materialist, pessimistic and deterministic with regard to the human condition, yet unable, as it were, to agree that "*This is a tomato*" due to his thorough post-structuralist training. To Howard, there is no relief from the constant deconstruction of post-structuralist theory, since once looked at, the certainties proclaimed as fact for so long are seen to be part and parcel of powerful meta-narratives, where even the definition of the phenomena perceived can lead to serious disagreements.

To a Howard Belsey, the anxiety of Henry Perowne is a constant status quo, since post-structuralism allows no certainties and so gives no relief within a world that continues to demand certainties, no matter how constructed. However, it is at the end of *On Beauty*, after Howard

⁶⁵¹ Gauthier, "Selective in Your Mercies" 22.

⁶⁵² "Selective in Your Mercies" 22.

Belsey's continuous struggle with beauty and truth and the disastrous consequences thereof, where the Romantic power of the aesthetic comes into play: Howard is at last so overwhelmed by the power of Rembrandt's art, in this case *Hendrickje Bathing*, that speech is no longer necessary and the beauty of this example of Western canonical art speaks such a truth as defies articulation and enables an estranged husband and wife to (re)connect once more.

The Romance of this aesthetic moment is an example of "spontaneous overflow of feeling", triggered by something sublime, speak, powerful and beyond the grasp of human rationality, the kind of rationality Howard Belsey continuously employs in his post-structuralist academic pursuits. Yet it is this aesthetic overwhelming that allows the novel to end on a quasi-harmonious note of connection, expressing *On Beauty*'s palimpsest, E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, and its epigraph "only connect". It is via a sublime experience of beauty, facilitated by Rembrandt's famous painting, that a genuine moment of connection between Howard and Kiki Belsey is finally made possible, a moment of aesthetic experience and connection that establishes a kind of truth – never mind how tenuous – about human relations. *On Beauty* as a whole showcases Howard Belsey's struggle to access beauty and truth, no matter their contingency, Howard Belsey who, like Henry Perowne in *Saturday*, is a heterosexual, middle class, well-educated white male. That his quest to understand beauty and so access truth is done via a powerful Romantic aesthetic and Western canonical art while the narrative as a whole shows the same perspectival blind spots regarding creativity, power, and place as *Possession* and *Saturday* do, makes *On Beauty*, so I argue, a romantic realist text.

Interestingly, it is *Possession*'s Roland Michell who is able to find a way out of the tunnel-vision of such a stance as inhabited by Henry Perowne and Howard Belsey. By ways of a shift of perspective away from the critical to the creative, Roland is able to consider more vibrant possibilities of thought and action, though always within the monolithic environments of London's ethnically uniform spaces of academia and artistry. Thus, the cyclicity is maintained even in the case of Roland Michell, thereby giving no actual relief to the basic problem of contemporary reception and text when it comes to the major topics of scholarship, self, and safety within the English cultural space.

All three novels seem to say the same: the only tool available to save and protect are the old modes of creativity, power, and place, deeply imperial in their structure though they are. However, these modes offer one thing, namely the possibility of some type of certainty, agency, and action in the light of an increasingly fragmented, globalised, and uncertain world. This is

possibly why they are so attractive, and so were used by three very different authors in three very different texts as a means of solution to pertinent contemporary problems.

6.3 Reception and Text: Final Remarks

Byatt, Smith, and McEwan ask themselves the same question: How fuse postmodern and especially post-structuralist discourse with the challenges of contemporary lived experience? Each author tackles one topic, though not exclusively: scholarship, selfhood, and safety. I have argued that the questions Smith and McEwan ask in the millennial context are the questions Byatt was already asking in the late 20th century context. Remarkably, all three offer the same solution to the three different problems at hand: poetic genius and the sublime are the vehicles by which beauty and truth can be accessed and experienced. That is intriguing. Here we have three different subjects, three different novels, and three different authors, yet their solution is the same, a kind of ‘one-size-fits-all’ for the diverse challenges we face today in matters of reception and text in the widest sense: from scholarly discourses, to identity narratives, to the very establishment of a safe space to live in.

What is equally interesting is that all three books are deeply concerned with good writing, meaningful, authentic, beautiful, and true. From Roland Michell’s epistolary hunt in *Possession*, to Howard Belsey’s struggle with aesthetics in *On Beauty*, to Henry Perowne’s obtuse confusion in *Saturday*, all three narratives are acutely concerned with reception and text, and the evaluation thereof. In their own way, Byatt, Smith, and McEwan make a case not only for good writing, but especially for good reading. Reception, all three establish via their novels, is essential. It is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced, and can be damaging if not done well.

One question does remain, though, namely whether this stance demands a certain adherence to the dominant perspective. All three books are, after all, written from a predominantly white, male, heterosexual, urban professional perspective, as seen in the novel’s protagonists: Roland Michell, Howard Belsey, Henry Perowne. One wonders in how far that perspective is part of their appeal: by shedding a light on the still dominant Western identity narrative and perspective.

Taking this into consideration, is Edward Said possibly right that the novel is by definition imperial in its methodology and exertion? Is the only narrative accepted as valid and worth investigating within the form, the lodestone to which all other narratives gravitate and “define

themselves against”, the dominant imperial narrative of self: male, heteronormative, white, socio-culturally well-situated?

If so, how is this different from the statutes of the old canon: maybe old, possibly dead, white men, who, if they were not heterosexual, knew to sublimate well? Has nothing really changed then within the English cultural discourse? I argue that the ‘problem’ is that everything has in fact changed within the English cultural space, and these three novels try to negotiate a place, a conceptual space, where a once dominant identity narrative has to navigate a world where said hegemonial domination no longer holds. What is problematic is that all three novels implicitly propose ‘business as usual’ as their solution to the difficulties at hand, even more so: a return to the once dominant order as if nothing really happened, let alone is happening.

One could see this as an implicit yearning for the old certainties which cannot be re-established in a world that shows clearly those certainties were never as certain as imagined. However, the narratives unanimously propose that newness, solutions, accountability, and safety can only be established when the old hegemonial order is restored, which may be enticing to some, but offers no real solution in an increasingly polyvalent, connected, and fragmented world. All three authors ask valid questions with and through their novels, the articulation of which is more than praiseworthy. The questions A. S. Byatt, Zadie Smith, and Ian McEwan ask via *Possession*, *On Beauty* and *Saturday* need to be asked. They address serious concerns of our contemporary lived experience. The solutions offered in the narratives, however, leave many important aspects unquestioned and quite a few answers fairly wanting.

There is one final question I would like to consider in the light of the above: Is the novel, as a form, possibly implicitly imperial and normative? If one follows the development of the novel form, its canonisation, and its subsequent deconstruction and fragmentation, the parallels to the rise and fall of the European empires, especially the British Empire, are striking. Midway through the 18th century, for example, conjoined narratives of development, from *Tristram Shandy* to *Robinson Crusoe* started appearing, still fragmented with regard to focus, and polyvocal in style, yet there is a narrative, an attempt to draw an arc from a beginning, to a middle, to some kind of end – a narrative of not necessarily inevitable, but understandable development.

By Regency England, gothic novels, as in novels trying to understand the unknown dangerous and often sexually deviant Other in ‘safe’ (speak English) environments, from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to *The Monk*, were on the rise; the novel of manners such as *Pride and Prejudice* that elucidate the society’s internal structures, and novels of moral development such as

Jane Eyre gained traction. Then all through the 19th century there was a solidification of form: an absorption into the heteronormative, white, social-culturally well-situated, male paradigms could be observed. The form gained greater and greater traction, where, from Walter Scott and Dickens to the French writers (Dumas, Balzac, Flaubert, to name three), narratives of development are established, 'showing' the possible identity narratives imperially available: tales of morality and decline, of bravery and hardship, of adventure, predominantly from the male point of view, a notable exception being George Eliot.

Then the apex of empire where decadence joined the discourse, where psychoanalysis showed the internal disruptions, deepening the narrative arc, the modes of explanation, the narratives possible, though this would not gain full weight until the first real shock to empire, the First World War. With the perceived breaks, fissions, and fragmentations, together with the development of potent technologies and a greater connection of lifeworlds towards the imperial centre, more concerns of whether the narrative arc was feasible began to arise. Attempts to retrace this arc were written and published by various writers, from James Joyce to D.H. Lawrence, and, of course, Virginia Woolf, whose perspective was decidedly female, though highly privileged. Yet the narrative arc – beginning, middle, end – the structure of narrative, linear despite flashbacks, flash-forwards, dreams, premonitions, one-day-wanderings through capital cities, still remained.

And then the second shock, followed by the biggest break: the Second World War and its toppling of political 'truths' and moral paradigms, not to mention the sudden and ultimate decline of empire, where the narrative was terminated, not with a bang, but with a sudden, irritating petering out, threads still flaying, attempts to weave them back to a whole present, yet rarely as successful as before. And in this climate, with looming danger of genuine all-out-war and extinction, the narrative structure of the novel was deconstructed entirely, fragmented, shown for its artificiality, its attitude towards 'reality' and 'real depictions' overthrown, as seen, for example, in *The French Lieutenant's Wife*; radically subverted with magic realist texts where the fantastic and realist merged, establishing an understandable, explicable, destabilising whole. New voices joined what had become the norm: non-male, non-white voices, unearthed, (re)discovered, shown to be always present but suppressed, narratives that still followed the normative arc, but told other stories, showing that the cracks, fissions, and breaks were always there (from *Wuthering Heights* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, among many more). There was a decided emergence of 'new' literatures, speak, new narratives suppressed, unseen and unacknowledged by the dominant narrative. Texts that

were disruptive, changing, reworking, and questioning the narrative arc of beginning, middle, end, of the decisiveness, the near-inevitability latent in the linear form.

And now, in a post-imperial, highly connected virtual age? What of the form of the novel? What of the narrative form of beginning, middle, and end, where linearity is considered good form, with an accepted amount of fissions and fragmentation, but not so much as to break the linearity and ‘what happened and why’? What of that form in a digital age where ‘what happened’ is never certain, needs revising, rechecking, reconsidering, and ‘why’ is so highly contested it needs whole networks of media, universities, and think-tanks to even begin to answer that question.

The simplicity of the initial form – beginning, middle, end – is no longer tenable as it once was. Rather, said simplicity was shown to be a perspective only. The complicating questions were always there, though only recently fully articulated and accepted: Why is that point the beginning? Why this the middle? Who said it ended? Is the exposition even plausible? Rising action for whom exactly? Complications from which perspective? What kind of climax are we talking about? Why falling action? Why is this simply not a continuation of the ‘rising’ action – and why rising anyway? Why is this arc mountainous, alpinesque? Why not a sine-cosine wave? Why not a canyon? As for the ending: why a catastrophe/happy ending if the catastrophe brings newness (a break of the old form) and the happy ending keeps to the old and known? Why happy anyway? What is ‘happy’? What exactly denotes catastrophic, especially if death means rebirth? And is an open ending genuinely open? And so on and so forth.

It may seem that we are currently experiencing what Raymond Williams terms a “pre-emergent phase” in cultural discourse,⁶⁵³ where the modes of text-creation and text-reception reflect the intense fragmentation, polyvalence, and multiplicity of the millennial socio-cultural spaces. Fortunately, there is a medium available to do this: the virtual space, where all kinds of new ways of writing, of reading, and perceiving are being established. What will be interesting to witness is whether a dominant narrative form will emerge, or if it already has established itself: that there is no dominant narrative. It would be the completion of the postmodern, post-structuralist, and post-colonial discourse by accepting and incorporating the textual and meta-textual genealogies that influence the current historical space: post-imperiality, where hegemonial practices are seen for what they are, powerful systems of definition regarding creativity, power, and place, and so dealt with accordingly.

⁶⁵³ Raymond Williams. “Literature in Society” 36-7.

The questions the three novels analysed in this thesis ask concerning creativity, power, and place are questions that need to be asked. Yet the answers *Possession*, *On Beauty*, and *Saturday* offer in the light of scholarship, selfhood, and safety are too cyclical to be of genuine use in a highly polyvalent and fragmented millennial lived experience. They are, on the whole, thought-experiments that offer little newness while genuinely attempting to help newness enter the world.

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