

## RETRACING MYTH IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*: A ROMANCE

*Tras las huellas del mito en Possession de A. S. Byatt*

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Recibido: abril de 2017; Aceptado: septiembre de 2017;

Publicado: diciembre de 2017

Ref. Bibl. MANUEL BOTERO CAMACHO Y MANUEL NÚÑEZ VALEIRAS. RETRACING MYTH IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*: A ROMANCE. *1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada*, 7 (2017), 277-293

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on an interpretation of *Possession: A Romance* by A. S. Byatt as a reconstruction of the Western questing hero's archetype. The protagonist, Roland Michell, embodies the rewriting of various literary heroes, alongside the correspondent scenarios of the texts they inhabit, throughout the narrative. In addition, the work considers *Possession* as an embodiment of the apocryphal text «The Key to All Mythologies», studying how Byatt collects different myths and texts that converge with Roland's search, who is looking unknowingly for that cipher, the essence and truth that underlies each archetype.

*Key words:* Byatt; Myth-Criticism; Comparative Literature; Rewriting.

RESUMEN: El artículo se centra en una interpretación de *Possession* de A. S. Byatt como una reconstrucción del arquetipo occidental del héroe que emprende una búsqueda. El protagonista, Roland Michell, encarna la reescritura de varios héroes literarios, junto con los correspondientes escenarios de los textos que habitan, a través de la narrativa. Además, este trabajo considera *Possession* como una encarnación del texto apócrifo «La clave para toda las mitologías», y se estudia cómo Byatt recopila diferentes mitos y textos que convergen con la búsqueda de Roland, quien está buscando sin saberlo ese código, la esencia y verdad que subyacen a cada arquetipo.

*Palabras clave:* Byatt; Mitocrítica; Literatura comparada; Reescritura.

A. S. Byatt's *Possession* narrates the journey of (self-) discovery of Roland Michell, a mediocre literary critic specialised in and obsessed with Randolph Henry Ash, a prominent Victorian writer, who lives with his girlfriend and who finds himself stuck and frustrated both in his professional career and in his love life. The monotony of his life is brought to an end by his discovery of a previously unknown love letter from Ash to another poet, Christabel LaMotte, a Victorian poet of great significance for feminists thanks to her independence and her rumoured homosexuality. The search for the collected letters between them leads Roland to meet Maud Bailey, a literary critic specialised in LaMotte, who joins his research in an attempt to elucidate the nature of the relationship between these writers and its effect on their respective works<sup>1</sup>. The last significant character for the present study is the writer Isidore LaMotte, Christabel's father and Maud Bailey's ancestor, whose work «The Key to all Mythologies» is central to the development of the novel and the proposed analysis<sup>2</sup>. It is essential for the reader

1. The literary significance of the names of *Possession*'s protagonists is widely acknowledged. The name of Roland could refer to the protagonist of Robert Browning's poem «Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came», in addition to the eponymous French hero from *La Chanson du Roland*. Ash is considered to be partly based on Robert Browning himself, while La Motte echoes Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson (CHINN 2001, 179). Lastly, Maud Bailey's name is a clear reference to Tennyson's *Maud: A Monodrama*.

2. The title of LaMotte's apocryphal text is a blatant reference to the character of Mr. Casaubon and his work from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (ELIOT 1910, 87), who is in turn a reference to the classical scholar Isaac Casaubon.

to understand that all these characters, and their alluded works, are Byatt's own creation. In fact, the title of Isidore's book is quite appropriate to define *Possession* itself; Byatt arranges a complex framework that attempts to include –even if only nominally– diverse mythologies in her colourful puzzle, which converts the novel into a thorough referential guide for Western culture. Literature and love could be deemed the essence of Roland's research and quest; a fact relevant for the theory proposed since these two motivations are two major elements in one of the most significant alluded texts, Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

However, the novel is not only a reconstruction of the *Comedy* but also a collection of mythological re-readings: Dante is not the only archetype followed in *Possession* as references that range from Hercules to Eve, from Ragnarök to Alice, can be traced within. As a result, in the novel the staging of myth is not rigid and does not need to be consistent: one character can simultaneously represent Adam and Dante but it does not necessarily mean that his counterpart, if playing Eve, must also be Beatrice. This design resembles the process of composition of characters like Christabel LaMotte. According to Chinn, though Byatt initially started to compose the figure with Christina Rossetti in mind (2001, 179), she opted instead for Emily Dickinson (2001, 179). However, by incorporating aspects of Melusine later on, the Dickinsonian prototype «apparently weakens» resulting in the creation of a «complex [...] character in its own right» (Chinn 2001, 181, 183). This technique multiplies the reenactments throughout the text, offering several readings of the mythological foundations. In addition, Roland follows the basic parameters of the hero established by Campbell (1949, 49-243)<sup>3</sup>.

The function of these other alluded texts is to prepare the layout and reconstruction of the *Comedy* presented by Byatt, reflecting how art depicts and reinterprets the mythical. In fact, myth constitutes one of the major foundations of literature, especially for High modernists and postmodernists. One could think that, as Morgan claims, «High modernism's reliance on myth to accommodate artistic expression [...] would seem to suggest myth as inimical to the kind of mediations the postwar novel was faced with» (2004, 512). Indeed, the context and the culture of post-war Europe might have proven contrary to the search for order and meaning in the forms of

3. In «The Keys», CAMPBELL offers an outline of the hero's adventure: started by the «Call to adventure», receiving the aid of the «Helper», followed by the crossing of the «Threshold», facing the necessary tests, which result in a series of various outcomes, all of which imply an «expansion of consciousness [...] and of being». Afterwards, the «return» takes place in which the hero has to cross the threshold again, carrying the «boon» or «elixir» that «restores the world» (1949, 245-246).

the past that had been so fruitful to artist of the previous generation. However, despite the deep socioeconomic transformations and the technological advancements of the period, myth has retained its privileged position. In her analysis of British post-war fiction, Byatt herself refers to Barnes' *As If by Magic* as «a “literary” artefact symbiotically involved both in realism and in the modernist aspirations to the completeness of myth» (1980, 36). Such statement could be applied as well to *Possession* without a doubt, a work in which Byatt «play[s] quite consciously with a postmodern creation and recreation of old forms» (Morgan 2004, 515), these «reflect the nature of narrative and of their own narrative in particular. Narration is the goal and the medium» (cit. Morgan 2004, 515).

The proposal intends to show Byatt as the conjurer behind Ash and Christabel and as ghostwriter of their works. At the same time, the analysis considers that *Possession* is the manifestation of the work by Isidore LaMotte, his attempt to decipher all mythologies. The main characters, Roland and Maud unveil the relationship between the poetry of Ash and LaMotte, who in their search of the origin of myth end up guiding them from a metaphorical hell to a postmodern paradise. This journey for a kind of redemption, which is unbeknownst to them, leads them through a domain whose representation is greatly indebted to Dante, who ultimately catalyses and socialises the mythical and mystical categories of the underworld. However, by combining different textual sources that function similarly to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Byatt's protagonist is allowed eventually to free himself from the burden of replication and constitute a character in his own right. Overall, this paper shows Byatt as a puppeteer poet who, through Isidore, Ash and Christabel, and their reflection on Roland and Maud, takes the reader into a reinterpretative journey of mythology.

In fact, various authors have already explored Byatt's role in the text, defining it as that of a ventriloquist (Colón 2003, 77; Hulbert 1993, 56; Sánchez 1995, 33). They refer to Byatt's penning of the diverse works from the Victorian writers included in the text, which «interweaves the paths and preoccupations of her two couples» as well as the historical and cultural contexts of their respective centuries, thus combining «styles, genres, voices in good postmodern manner. The tale of her contemporary pair is a detective story, and the mystery at its heart is the tale of her Victorian pair, which is a romance» (Hulbert 1993, 56). As a result, authors like Rallo have remarked upon the opportunity that *Possession* offers to study and compare the two time periods featured:

A través de un doble eje temporal en el que el pasado aflora en el presente mediante un complejo tejido de ecos, alusiones y citas –y donde

Byatt integra todo tipo de escritos creados por ella misma como composiciones de sus personajes-, la novela articula un diálogo con la historia sobre el trasfondo de la época victoriana (2006, 17).

Despite the interest that such perspective certainly has, this article focuses instead on the search for that Truth that facilitates the rediscovery of the intrinsic value of myth. In that regard, *Possession* could very well be considered the reflection of Isidore LaMotte's and Ash' respective attempts to elucidate the essence of myth. In fact, said search appears quoted in many occasions throughout the novel, highlighting the significance of the concept of «key» in the process: «Suffused by a kind of fashionable search for The Key to All Mythologies but also with Breton national identity and culture» (Byatt 1991, 31). In this game of mirrors the stress is placed on the repetition of archetypes and patterns that characterises the quest at hand, undoubtedly emphasised through the novel's reliance on «inter- and intra-textuality» (Colón 2003, 77).

Repeating patterns, in fact, provide an endless series of textual metonymies: patterns themselves suggest previous repetitions even before repeating repeats them again. They seem, in part, a function of the metaphysical and metatextual quest for origins that motivates characters in and readers of *Possession* alike (Henelly 2003, 443).

Henelly's view similarly underlines the two aspects highlighted in the previous lines, a search for the source and the repetition of the archetypes of the alluded texts, as well as of those within *Possession* itself. The Victorian couple, Christabel and Ash act as archetypal shadows of Roland and Maud, seemingly usurping in many occasions the protagonist roles bullying them into the poor role of replicas<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Isidore's work, «The Key to All Mythologies», becomes archetypal for the quest of Ash and Christabel and, through them, for that of Roland and Maud. In fact, the chain of archetypes extends beyond the fictional characters as Byatt herself and *Possession* become the actual archetypes for Isidore and his work respectively. Her reliance on intertextuality, moreover, even offers the possibility to extend the chain back into fiction, as the choice of name for Isidore's book renders George Eliot and her character, Mr. Casaubon, as archetypes. As a result, *Possession's* narrative not only consists of the fictional account, the journey

4. MORGAN stresses the significance in Byatt's thought of Jung's «primitive underworld» and Levi-Strauss' «preconscious», as both «can be seen as a permeable membrane through the fabric of which the collective past and the individual present are forever passing and re-passing in the process of deforming and reforming themselves and one another» (2004, 509).

of the characters, but also is constituted by the routes of signification established across its intertextual and intratextual links. To that purpose, the apocryphal texts penned surreptitiously by Byatt are essential. From a postmodernist vision, *Possession* can be read as a work in which poetry and epistles generate the narrative. The various fragments of Ash's and LaMotte's correspondence, poems and tales are not merely companions to the main narrative but, if considered with the ideas of the reflection of archetypes and the repetition of patterns, they become the narrative itself. These act as mirrors in which Maud and Roland are constantly reflected and defined, as both of them feel they are a kind of repetition of those eternal archetypes: «There's a place on the map called the Boggle Hole. It's a nice word –I wondered–» (Byatt 1991, 268). The fact that both couples visit the same specific place because of the aesthetic value of a word is quite significant. «He remembered most, when it was over, when time had run out, a day they had spent in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word» (Byatt 1991, 286). This is essential to Roland's quest because in order to fulfil it he will have to leave behind all the external influences that define him.

In this puzzle of multiple cultural manifestations, there is a network that contributes to build a unique image, an underlying truth. Of special relevance to the repetition of archetypes are those ideas related to the Eternal Return of the Identical theory and the evolution of time. Authors concerned with this line of thought are quoted and referred throughout the book: Vico, Nietzsche, Carlyle, Linneo, Lyell, and Plato, to name a few. The most important concepts for the development of the novel and Roland's search are the persistence of the archetypes with clear echoes to Plato (1986, 595-e) and the Eternal Return of the Identical, developed by Nietzsche in works like *Thus, Spoke Zarathustra* (1917, 173-174) and *The Will to Power*<sup>5</sup>. Another reference related to cyclicity can be spotted in the title of a fictional book by Ash, «Ragnarök». The significance of the eschatological battle between the gods for cyclicity is that after the cataclysmic event there would be a renewal of life. In fact, the importance of cyclicity in culture still operates since, according to Shinn, it is essential for the development of the contemporary novel:

5. In note 1066 of *The Will To Power*, from the premise that in «infinite time» every possible combination would be eventually realized an infinite number of times, NIETZSCHE concludes that «a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated» (1968, 549). However, in *Thus, Spoke Zarathustra* he qualifies such idea by deeming the dwarf's view of time as a circle as having taken the matter «lightly» (1917, 174).

It is in the contemporary novel, therefore, still the stronghold of myth-making, of the «cyclical story» of our shared experience, that the balance can be restored, that linear history can be reflected in a patched, perhaps crazed but once more intact, mirror which reveals as well its cyclical recurrence (2017, 166).

The search for the cipher that uncovers the secrets of mythology, a puzzle composed by archetypes, can be defined by three basic characteristics. Firstly, by the enormous presence of the Western literary canon: «[...] a heap of books, two of which could be seen to be the “Divine Comedy” and “Faust” [...] the two named books and two of the others, which had been painstakingly identified as “Quixote” and Lyell’s “Geology”» (Byatt 1991, 16). The presence of the canon is not delimited to literature but is also present through paintings, Classical mythology, science, philosophy, etc., elements that constitute most of the mythological framework of the novel. Secondly, by the confrontation between what it is universal in form against what it is particular in content, a juxtaposition that seems to be related with Plato’s archetypes and with the concept of real: «The idea of Woman is less than brilliant Vivien, and the idea of Merlin will not allegorise male wisdom. He is Merlin» (Byatt 1991, 355). Both Maud and Roland fight against this duality, which constitutes one of the main themes of the novel since they are unwilling to be the mere shadows of those great poets. Finally, by the struggle between language and myth, and what it is Essential Truth: «Do you never have the sense that our metaphors eat up our world? [...] Everything relates to us and so we’re imprisoned in ourselves –we can’t see things. And we paint everything with this metaphor–» (Byatt 1991, 253-254). The aim of the novel and of that search is finding what lies beneath language and myth; the whole novel is the story of the search for the key that will provide Roland this Truth and, throughout the book, he has to fight with both language and myth to discover it; a difficult task as they shape our reality.

One of the most significant literary archetypes that take over the narrative and over Roland’s character almost right from the start is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, as Dante becomes the first hero embodied by Roland. An analogy can be established between the *Comedy*’s two protagonists, Dante and Virgil –his guide through Hell and Purgatory– with Roland and Ash. This interpretation is confirmed with the description of Roland’s house, in which the reader discovers that he possesses several portraits of Ash. In one of them, one of the books featured in it is the *Divine Comedy*. Two of the portraits were set aside as Val, his girlfriend, «[...] had banished these to the dark of the hall» (Byatt 1991, 16). The fact that those portraits are placed there alludes to the location Virgil occupies within Dante’s comedy:

Limbo. Likewise, his house, as well as the Ash Factory, can be viewed as Dante's *Inferno*, a domain not just understood in physical terms, but also in psychological terms, as suggested by all the arguments between the couple. In this light the definitive clue appears: «At the end of the room the window opened onto a little yard, with steps to the garden, which was visible between railings in the upper third of the window» (Byatt 1991, 17). The eye's movement towards the forbidden garden represents a language and a movement of ascendance, from Hell to Paradise. From the existence of these two opposed dimensions and the mention, up to 74 times, of the number three in the novel, it could also be inferred the intermediate existence of Purgatory. This poses the question of the assigned role Val would occupy within this version of Dante's Hell. The answer can be found if we divert our gaze from the *Comedy* to Classic mythology, specifically to the character of Proserpine, goddess of the Underworld, given the significance that such figure has in Ash's poetry (Byatt 1991, 1-4).

However, Roland can also be identified with Hercules and Adam, the former mentioned in the initial poem alongside the Garden of the Hesperides and the dragon Ladon (Byatt 1991, 1). The beast is incarnated by old Mrs. Irving, the guardian of the garden, who has banned them from it. However, the interpretation of Roland as Adam proves far richer: the forbidden garden –«The garden was long, thin, bowery [...] curling bronze and gold, bold and hot and rich. And forbidden» (Byatt 1991, 17)– echoes Eden, from where they seem to have been expelled or excluded not just physically but psychologically, thus converging with the idea that the house represents Hell. Mrs. Irving then, represents the angel Gabriel, who guards the entrance, and Val embodies Eve. Although the hero's journey has followed the stages posed by Campbell (1949, 69-77), Byatt makes an effort to obviate the supernatural aid, which emphasises the protagonist's solitude as he is deprived of the traditional helper. One could assume that the characters representing power figures –in a reference to minor divinities– are either negligent or hostile to Roland because of their desire to prevent him from attaining the object of the quest. The protagonist is psychologically lost, and the garden is proposed as a place whose entrance is forbidden as long as Roland is not prepared. The circular narrative of the book supports this thesis, as Roland will come back to his home and he will enter the garden in the true climax of the novel. As a result, it is confirmed that Roland cannot enter the garden because he has not evolved yet; he has not completed his search.

Throughout the novel, Byatt consistently creates spaces –which might or might not be rewritings– where elements and characters from different literary and mythological traditions are joined together, as happens in the



present case. A rather interesting symbol within Byatt's reconstruction of Dante's Hell related with these spaces is the recurrent smell of cat urine. Cats, according to Egyptian mythology, guard the threshold of the great beyond; they are creatures which belong to both worlds. In the description of the house, Roland mentions the strong smell of cat piss, which here symbolises Hell and the misery in which they live. This symbol is repeated in the case of the Ash Factory (Byatt 1991, 27), other space that also works as Hell. Thus, the figure of the guardian of the threshold maintains its significance throughout the novel, which can be linked without further explanations with Campbell's crossing of thresholds (1949, 77-89). This symbol is significant throughout the novel as it constitutes an essential element for the mythological narrative of the hero: «Here, "limen", the Latin word for 'threshold', may be a point but more probably is a sequential symbolization, time period, or other intermediating place, or sometimes an interpart of some ongoing process» (Miller 2000, 296).

One of these locations is Roland's workplace, the Ash Factory, a place underneath the British Museum where literary critics who work on Ash are gathered. This scenario can be integrated within the interpretation of the work as a rewriting of the *Divine Comedy* as indicated by references like: «In his first pleasure at being admitted to this inner circle of learning he had compared it to Dante's Paradiso» (Byatt 1991, 26). Even more, Roland refers to the Ash Factory as the «Inferno» (Byatt 1991, 26) and, accordingly, to access the place they have to descend. Both places and dimensions, his house and his love life, his workplace and his career, are described as a Hell where Roland feels oppressed and in need of fulfilment. A few lines later, we meet Beatrice Nest; however, she is not the Beatrice Roland needs as this character represents another guardian of the threshold. She is described as the protector of her cave (Byatt 1991, 27), her surname suggests isolation as well, and the alias she is given to, along with her description as an amorphous creature, contribute to create the image of a mythological monster. One of the nicknames she is given is a big and lonely spider waiting in her web, another nickname is «Carroll's obstructive white sheep» (Byatt 1991, 98, 112); the last of them is the most interesting: Fafnir. This creature is another figure which has the role of guardian of a treasure. Fafnir is a goblin in Nordic mythology who wants all the gold for itself and that is turned into a dragon, which represents greed. This mythological vocabulary evokes the figure of someone who is hoarding a treasure, one that is not to be shared with anybody. In this case, the treasure –the key kept by Nest– is the collection of diaries of Ellen Ash, which becomes paramount to the investigation. Another example of these mythological spaces is, for instance, Lincoln University, whose entrance is

clearly presented as a Carrollian setting: the disposition of the garden as a chess board, the colourful ambient, parts of the garden which are designed as mazes and the curious sentence which introduces the concept of magic: «They all disappear. We don't know where. As if by magic» (Byatt 1991, 39). Beatrice's nickname, previously remarked, constitutes another reference to *Through the Looking-Glass*, which contributes to create a mythical and, rather oneiric, environment.

Soon after the discovery of Ellen's diary, Roland's real Beatrice, Maud Bailey, is introduced. The first reference to her is found in the conversation between Roland and Fergus: «She thicks men's blood with cold» (Byatt 1991, 34). This reference to verse 194 of Coleridge's «The Rime of the Ancient Mariner» (1996, 69), which features a seafaring hero, comes preceded by a not so innocent question made by Roland: «What is she like? Will she eat me?» (Byatt 1991, 34). Given the allusion to Coleridge's sailor followed by Roland's concern to be eaten, it could be argued that a reference to Homer's *Odyssey* can be read between the lines, specifically to Circe, who turns Ulysses' mariners into swine. This vision of the possible Circe as a future Beatrice draws attention to the evolution and separation of the initial archetype and the concept of the ideal woman. At the same time, it temporarily transforms Roland into Odysseus, which is not strange as Ulysses represents a rather paradigmatic example of the questing hero. Once Roland meets Maud –lead by Ash, or rather by his work on the author– the pseudo definitive ascent to Paradise occurs. Roland has come to Maud because he expects that she will help him with his investigation; he hopes that she would enlighten his search of the Truth. Lincoln University, which «could not have been more different from the Ash Factory» (Byatt 1991, 43), conforms a space in which an ascendant movement also takes place, as both of them go up in a Paternoster elevator (Byatt 1991, 40); however, this is not enough anymore. It is not sufficient to be guided by Virgil and Beatrice as in the *Divine Comedy*, Roland needs to keep searching. Maud, in addition, is far from representing the archetypal Beatrice. At this point, Roland partially abandons his role as Dante as Maud and Ash still accompany him throughout the novel, acting as guides towards salvation and truth.

Maud represents the vindication of a different gender model outside the parameters that patriarchy has enforced throughout the centuries; initially, she constitutes the modern depiction of those women that Western culture has feared and demonised. Maud can be easily identified with the fairy Melusine, a figure that is recurrently referred in *Possession* (Franken 2001, 83). Melusine, who combines the shapes of «snake, woman or mermaid» and can metamorphose into a «woman, snake, and dragon» (Alban 2003, 1) is, therefore, central to the novel. In her work, Alban argues that

the fairy unites the «two major plot strands of the novel» represented by each couple (2003, 1) and is likewise of great significance for another of the text's principal motifs: «the primal garden» (Alban 2003, 2). Alban indicates the representation of «This garden myth» is based on the Garden of Hesperides, Eden and, through Ash's name, to Yggdrasil, all of which include «a serpent or dragon» that is interpreted as «the primal evil force» that eventually causes «the loss of paradise» (2003, 1). Consequently, Maud's figure is symbolically loaded with power but also with menace, as similarly Jean d'Arras' *Mélusine* poses a threat and punishment to the transgressions of the male hero and his invasion of her privacy, an independence that Maud claims for herself. Roland's impression of Maud in a particular scene, suggests another cursed woman in literature: Medusa, a being that like Melusine also combines the forms of snake and woman. Before becoming a monster, she was a ravishing maiden who was raped by Poseidon and was transformed by Athena as punishment for defiling her temple. According to the myth, Medusa transforms whoever looks at her into stone; though Maud lacks such power, Roland feels «the *kick galvanic*, the stunning blow» that Ash compared to the shock produced by the «Moray eel [...] to unsuspecting marine explorers» (Byatt 1991, 147). The effect is even emphasised when Roland remarks on Maud's beautiful hair «It was down, he saw, the hair, running all over her shoulders and neck, swinging across her face, [...] Did she simply emit the electric shock, he wondered, or did she also feel it?» (Byatt 1991, 147). The beauty of the hair of both women, Maud's reticence to show it freely (Byatt 1991, 58), the shocking effect of its sight and the serpentine form of the eel might suffice to validate the relation, in addition to the multiple references to Medusa throughout the work.

Soon it becomes evident that Roland's search is not only his own quest, but an archetypal search, which he is starting to control. He discovers this when he sees himself clearly portrayed in LaMotte's «The Glass Coffin» (Byatt 1991, 58), a version of the brothers Grimm's tale «Little Briar Rose». In this narration, the hero –unaware of his potential– as a reward for showing kindness to the animals of the owner of a forest house is asked to choose between three presents, eventually selecting an artistic key. This object enables him to start his adventure and also to finish it. The key, the metaphorical light, guides him through the underworld to find his future lover, just as Virgil guided Dante. On the contrary, Roland's key is rather complex: it is a concept. It came to existence when he stole the letter from the library, an impulsive decision similar to that of the hero of the tale. Thus, just as the tale's hero chose the key because he is a craftsman, Roland's key can be identified with literature and his investigation. Ash is Roland's guide in the same way that the key is the tailor's. Maud represents another dimension

of this enabler, but eventually proves insufficient since the character has not evolved enough to be able to decipher the puzzle yet. His key cannot be completed with the aid of a guide, whether a Virgil or a Beatrice, since it requires more: at this stage, it needs that Roland achieves his full potential as an archetype. This new kind of hero needs to undertake his search alone. This is the inherent dimension of his quest, which ultimately proves to be the most relevant. However, his mission is hindered by all the aforementioned archetypes incarnated by Roland. He starts to think more about how he is defined by the external world when he realises that he is not Ash and that he lacks self-esteem: «They valued themselves. Once, they knew God valued them. [...] 'At some point in history their self-value changed» (Byatt 1991, 254). At the end of his quest, what really matters is the hero's self-esteem and the acceptance of his identity.

Another interesting symbol is the figure of the old man that judges if the hero is apt or not, working as a kind of guardian of the threshold. Given the similarities, it is legitimate to suppose Roland as a repetition of that character. Such idea is suggested by the narration of Maud and Roland's visit to Christabel's grave just after LaMotte's tale. Here, Roland embodies the archetypal heroic knight as he saves a damsel in distress: «George, dear, I have had an adventure and been rescued by a knight» (Byatt 1991, 74). This constitute one of the «romance motifs» of the novel, in addition to «the quest theme», the depiction of «Maud as a Lady, Roland as a knight» and the function of «the Bailey's ancestral home» as «the castle or tower» (Morgan 2004, 516). The damsel rescued is a descendant of Christabel's family, living with her husband in a nearby house, close to Christabel's resting place. Given the fact that they live in that old house by themselves, that there are several parts of the house unused –due to Mrs Bailey's impaired mobility– and the dark, cold, ghastly and gothic air of the house (Byatt 1991, 146), it would not be hare-brained to consider it a reconstruction of Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher» (1967, 90-91)<sup>6</sup>. This setting resembles, in many ways, a shadow of «The Glass Coffin»: the house in the forest, the dog, the old man as a guardian of a key but especially because in this house there

6. The rewriting of Poe's tale is constructed in separate allusions that once combined unlock the reference. In addition to the ones already mentioned, the weather depicted in the surroundings of Maud's house (BYATT 1991, 135) seems to share the ominous quality that the one which the narrator of POE's tales describes at his first sight of Usher's state (1978, 397-398). «The Glass Coffin» mentions two siblings who share an «unwed» life just as the case of Roderick and Madeline Usher (BYATT 1991, 64). Lastly, when they arrive at the house of the Bailey's they do so through a «Gothic Porch» (BYATT 1991, 76) resembling the «Gothic Archway» that POE's narrator describes (1978, 400)

is a crucial clue in order to make possible the continuity of our heroes' quest. The guardian, Mr. George, accepts to show Maud and Roland the room that once belonged to Christabel, and it could be inferred that he does it to reward Roland for helping his wife earlier. Roland is both the hero of the tale and the novel's heroic knight; spaces and characters are overlapped but maintain an equal status as none of them prevails over the rest. The treasure found within evokes the Grail in two senses, the discovery of «Christabel's letters and the dawning attachment between Maud and Roland» (Morgan 2004, 516).

The knightly echoes do not end here. Without going any further, the name of the protagonist himself refers to a paragon of knightly virtues described in *Chanson du Roland*. In Christabel's tale «The Threshold», the main character is a knight. At this point in the narrative, it is inevitable to think of him as an archetypal repetition of Roland. This knight finds in his way three guardians of the threshold and, if their mythical and supernatural aspects are also considered, it is fair to think that they refer either to the goddess Hecate, or to the trial of the Apple of Discord, in which Paris had to bestow the apple to the goddess of his preference. His options were Athena, Hera and Aphrodite, choosing the latter as she promised him what he desired the most, Helena's love. In the tale, the knight has to choose a guide between the three presented options to continue his journey to the Great Beyond of the threshold: «You may go no further this way», said they, «for this is the edge of things, here, and beyond is another country» (Byatt 1991, 152). He finally chooses not the one who promised him power, or the one who promised him passion and mystery, but the one who offered him what he really needed. In the end, with the third dame as a guide, they descend far beyond the threshold.

After reading the collected letters, Roland and Maud become attached as their esteem for each other gives way to a budding romance. Before this moment, Maud described him as meek and Blackadder as dull, what is not surprising considering Roland's mediocrity. Nevertheless, since the finding of the letters and since the beginning of his full dedication to his own cause and search, Roland gains brilliance. In contrast, Maud, though initially «had been Roland's superior academically and financially, she seemingly finishes up as the stock heroine of a romance, loved but outclassed by her man» (Wells 2002, 670).

Their journey in search for clues that may allow them to affirm that Ash and LaMotte were together in a specific trip heightens the effect of the mirror play between the two couples that determines the acts and the relationship of Maud and Roland. This results not only from the repetition of the trip as a couple, but from the fact that the four of them, in their respective

*époque's* way, are absorbed into a quest about life and its meaning. The quest is the same in essence but different in content. Meanwhile Ash, in his own arrogance and based on his letters, believes to be the most appropriate person to develop the cipher that decodes all mythologies. With a great curiosity that transcends the artistic and the scientific point of view<sup>7</sup>, Roland is characterised by questioning the sense of the quest itself, making a conscious evaluation of his own limits. During this journey, Roland is embodying a new type of hero, different from previous paradigms but at the same time similar in the eagerness to search: he is the postmodern hero. The postmodern hero looks for meaning through deconstruction, self-conscience and demythification and, consequently, laments the limits inherently imposed to the human condition, for instance, regarding language. Due to this conscious exercise, both Roland and Maud feel somehow oppressed by culture. Ash and Christabel represent the idea of an unwillingness to limit themselves to be merely the repetition of anyone, but that idea penetrates with more strength in Maud and Roland, who cannot help feeling as shadows of both Victorian authors. Roland feels trapped within the limits of those mirrors and embodiments:

Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others (Byatt 1991, 421).

Once they are conscious of the prison they live in, they try to escape. In this way, by the end of the novel, they rebel against the depersonalization that implies understanding themselves just as repetitions, shadows. Thus, platonic archetypes are confronted with the categorical vital affirmation of the Nietzschean Eternal Return, which has not been achieved yet by the protagonist.

According to Campbell, the hero's quest is not concluded until he returns home, task that, until that point, has been usually refused (1949, 193-196). The hero of *Possession* is not an exception, and his refusal to undertake the return can be seen when, having escaped with Maud, he wants to avoid his reencounter with Val, his boss and, by extension, his life. The

7. In *Possession* the knowledge of the myth is placed at the same level than scientific knowledge: «What both novelists [Byatt and Murdoch] present to their readers is an epistemological hall of mirrors were not only are the relative values of rational an intuitive knowledge almost impossible to distinguish, but also the power of competing systems of knowledge, and the relevance to human existence, are disputed» (MORGAN 2004, 503).

quest finds its dénouement when Roland comes back home, where he no longer lives with Val.

The hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness; there he accomplishes his adventure, or again is simply lost to us, imprisoned or in danger; and his return is described as coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless –and here is a great key to the understanding of myth and symbol– the two kingdoms are actually one (Campbell 1949, 217).

Returning to the starting point, the circularity remains clear in an external level, but not in an internal one. In fact, as he resumes at the end his initial position, a comparison between his attitudes in both moments can be made, serving to highlight the evolution of the character. This improvement is obvious when he receives letters of acceptance from three different universities. When this happens, Roland gives the step towards the definitive interior level. Finally, he peels off all kinds of embodiments. Throughout the novel, he has been embodying different archetypes of heroes in a quest that is about his own identity even though he remains oblivious to it. Now, knowing and valuing himself, this newly gained self-esteem allows him to discover that he does not need guides anymore. Even though the echoes of the *Comedy* can still be felt and are applicable to several textual elements –regarding Ash as Virgil, Maud as Beatrice, the house as Hell, the Garden as Paradise– Roland escapes his identification with Dante. He overtakes that construction; he stops being confined to the mould of the Florentine and leaves it behind.

Mrs. Irving, that first guardian of the threshold, the one who forbade the entrance to the garden, has died and her cats need to be fed. It may be possible to interpret that the fact that Roland can feed them, walk between them and, somehow, dominate them is only possible now that he has connected with himself. In Mrs. Irving's absence, Roland decides to enter the garden. The cats pass before him as it does correspond to creatures that move between both worlds. Once he is inside, Roland feels happy and confident about all his capacities, able to connect with his innermost self, his creativity, and produces poetry. He becomes enraptured in that poetry and with the very essence of himself and the things that have made that possible. There is a final acceptance of all his inheritance, and it is in that attitude that he finds comfort and strength. «I don't quite like it. There's something unnaturally determined about it all. Daemonic. I feel they have taken me over. 'One always feels like that about ancestors» (Byatt 1991, 505). Roland has found the key to all mythologies; or rather, he has become that key: the last embodiment of our hero is no longer an

embodiment nor a hero, but an acceptance of the inner self and of his individuality.

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