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POSSESSING THE LITERARY MYSTERY:

READING, WRITING AND INTERPRETING THE DETECTIVE PROCESS

IN A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*

by

Barbara Mongrain ©
H.B.A., Lakehead University, 1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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1998

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This thesis investigates how Byatt's literary mystery *Possession* uses elements of antidetective fiction and subverts conventions of the classic detective story. The classic detective novel is a genre in which the strange and mysterious is always explained, rationalized, eradicated, and abolished by the detective. While classic detective stories feature red herrings and false leads which delay the solution of the mystery, the detective uses his/her superior intellect and reasoning ability to successfully unravel such diversions and get at the bare bones of real truth. In contrast, the antidetective novel foregrounds a world where the disconcerting realm of mystery remains unsolved, the quest to pin an answer on the unknown unsatisfied. In the antidetective novel, the detective's struggle to figure out the truth is often mocked, undermined, and forever delayed by the author.

To support my claim that *Possession* is a metafictional antidetective novel, I analyse, in detail, the detective process Byatt designs for both fictional detectives and extra-textual readers. My discussion of the investigative process in *Possession* focuses on the narrative games Byatt creates between readers and writers inside and outside of the fiction. The various pieces of written discourses *Possession* features as textual clues keep much of the mystery of the past an enigma, thereby destroying the closure and positivism inherent in classic detective fiction.

In *Possession* Byatt concocts a flexible reading game/detective process via an unstable ontological horizon, unreliable narration, and dubious intrusions by the omniscient narrator. While the metafictional antidetective novel *Possession* strives to undermine and assault the classic detective's search for the truth, Byatt's art affirms the energy of dynamic storytelling and the *process,* not product, of reading.

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For my parents Joan and Neil,

and brothers Mark and Dean,

whose love for me and confidence in my abilities is unwavering.

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"'Literary critics make natural detectives,' said Maud. 'You know the theory that the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel - everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?'"

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

And then he heard, within the water's voice
A melody more fluent and more strange,
A silver chant that wove its liquid length
Along the hurrying channel of the stream
And wound with that to twist one rope of sound,
Silver and stony. They went on and down
Steady and hearkening, and on either hand
The wet walls narrowed. Then, around a bend
There came an opening, and both horse and man
Stockstill, with humming ear and dazzled eye
Stared at a mystery.

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

"This Peeping Tom has put his eye to the nick or cranny in our walls and peers shamelessly in."

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

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CHAPTER ONE:

MAKING STRANGE WITH ANTIDETECTIVE FICTION

Outside our small safe place flies Mystery.

We hear it howl adown the winds; we see

Its forces set great whirlpools on the spin

In the dark deeps, as a child sets a top

Idly in motion, whips it for a while

Then tires and lets it stagger. (*Possession* 290)

A.S. Byatt's fifth novel, *Possession,* has won the author much critical acclaim and a few awards, such as the Booker Prize in 1990. The novel is a textual myriad of ideas, a forum where Byatt flexes her literary muscles in an exercise of "literary ventriloquism" (Stout 14), revealing her skills as a literary critic, scholar, and creative writer. Like *Possession,* Byatt's four earlier novels, namely *The Shadow of a Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and *Still Life* (1985) contain "major characters, who, like Byatt and others of her acquaintance, are either scholars or artists" (Gitzen 84). As Mira Stout writes, "[a] sense of claustrophobia permeates [*The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*]...charting the intricate, highly cultivated thoughts and furtive sexuality of one family....[*Shadow of a Sun*, *The Game* and *Sugar*] cover much of the same ground from acute angles" (24). But, since these works, and Byatt's later novels *Angels and Insects* (1992) and *Babel Tower* (1996) are not literary mysteries, they shed little light on my study of *Possession*. Hence, this thesis does not refer to the rest of Byatt's *oeuvre*.

While *Possession* is studied for its appeal as a postmodern text, and its ambitious treatment of history, there is a lack of study devoted to the text as a literary mystery.

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Like Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* and Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, Byatt's strategic plotting and narrative control over the various written clues and documentation design a process of detection literally dependent on reading, writing, and making sense of texts.

In general terms, the literary mystery is a subgenre of the mystery novel that does not necessarily feature a mystery that is literary in character. In these types of mysteries, the mystery itself can be about texts, but the detective process may not involve or rely on the actual reading of written texts. Henry James' tale "The Aspern Papers" and Carol Shields' novel *Swann* can both be classified as literary mysteries, but the source of mystery in them is in the absence, rather than existence, of texts, and in the unattainable, untraceable records of the artist's life and, in the case of *Swann*, poetry. *Swann* is a mystery about the dead poet Mary Swann, but readers see only a glimpse of her actual creative writing (which we discover has been reconstructed and therefore altered after its accidental destruction by the editors of her only existing text). In "The Aspern Papers" the narrator's quest is to possess the papers of his mentor author Geoffrey Aspern, whose writing (autobiographical or fictional), we never read. The mystery of the story lies in the narrator's relationship with Miss Bordereau, the owner of the papers, and her niece Miss Tita, not the life, death, or details of Aspern's life.

In contrast, the mystery that shrouds *Possession* depends entirely on existing texts, and the collecting, reading, and interpreting of them by characters. The literary mystery, perhaps more than any other genre, engages readers to participate actively during the reading process, for they (like the detectives in the novel) must read and

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interpret textual clues in attempt to solve the mystery.

The mystery/quest plot of *Possession* appears simple enough when summarized: "Action proceeds simultaneously in two centuries, as we are introduced to the nineteenth century lovers LaMotte and Ash through their letters, journals, poems, and other literary remains. The hitherto unsuspected affair between these two is brought to light by two later day academic sleuths, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, who in the course of their inquiries in turn fall in love" (Gitzen 85). This synopsis ignores the dynamic detective *process* -- the reading, analysis, comprehension and ordering of various texts to solve a mystery -- vital to the digestion of Byatt's literary mystery.

My use of the term "literary mystery" refers to mysteries that not only originate from written texts, but those that can only be solved and investigated by the act of reading. In the literary mystery detection relies almost entirely on the reading and consequent hermeneutic process. *Possession* is a critical literary mystery, where the multiplicity of texts and voices we encounter comments on the slippery nature of interpreting texts, the art and study of biography -- how we write and read a life -- and the reading and writing of fictional and non-fictional discourse.

On certain narrative levels, *Possession* appears surrounded with the aura of the classic detective novel, but underneath this formulaic guise reside elements pertinent to the art of the metaphysical, or postmodern detective story. At the beginning of *Possession*, readers witness the birth of mystery in a dusty library when Roland Michell opens Randolph Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova* and finds two letters written by Ash to an unknown reader. This discovery leads Roland to ask the first

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of many questions that stimulate the detective process foregrounded in the rest of the narrative: "Had the correspondence continued? If it had, where was it, what jewels of information about Ash's 'ignored, arcane, deviously perspicuous meanings' might not be revealed by it? Scholarship might have to reassess all sorts of certainties. On the other hand, had the correspondence ever in fact started? Or had Ash finally floundered in his inability to express his sense of urgency?" (Byatt 7). When Roland leaves the library with Ash's letters in tow, he begins the investigation he and fellow scholar Maud embark on, where mystery frequently rears its tempting head. Like the detective who reads clues and gathers evidence to solve a crime, fictional readers/detectives Maud and Roland read texts and attempt to impose order and closure on the world of language. As the narrator of *Possession* admits, "[c]oherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (422). Maud and Roland are driven by their urge to know "what happened"; by their need not only for the "end of the story" but for any coherent meaning they can create using a variety of different texts. The reading excursion in *Possession* includes many stereotypical moments common to the classic detective novel -- villains, false clues, disappointing leads -- but these elements are only fronts worn by the antidetective novel, a more sinister text with unsettling intentions. Reading any kind of text is a risky venture often fraught with ambiguity; but when the interpretation of texts must decide literary history, what text (or texts) will triumph as a piece of truth?

This investigation will begin with a discussion of some of the patterns common to

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the classic detective story. The classic detective novel's reliance on inductive reasoning, dependence and order in a positivistic universe has led many critics to link the genre to Roland Barthes' notion of the "hermeneutic code." The hermeneutic code "raises an enigma only to keep increasing its narratological value by delaying or obscuring revelations. Such postponement...structures the desire to read for the end, for the disclosure that will occur in the story's closure" (Cohan and Shires 124). Like the hermeneutic code, the classic detective story works unflinchingly "towards a particular goal: the point in which the story's transformation of question into answer encodes the answer with 'the basic condition for truth'" (Cohan and Shires 124). In Chapters Two and Three my investigation will explore the many ways *Possession* both frustrates and (partially) satisfies the hermeneutic desire of its fictional detectives and extra-textual readers. This chapter will also discuss the development of the antidetective novel, and its aim to wrench readers of the classic detective story out of their positivistic universe. My close reading of the detective process in *Possession* will reveal the metafictional antidetective strategies Byatt uses in the novel.

This chapter's discussion of the classic detective novel and its antithesis prop the case wide open, freeing me to investigate and discuss the following: what written discourses comprise the detective process of *Possession*, and does one discourse contain more authority than another in this process? How does the narrator present textual clues, and to which levels of readers are these clues addressed? How does the novel combine multi-levels of readers with embedded narratives to manipulate the detective process? How does the omniscient narrator's presence in Chapters Fifteen, Twenty-Five and the

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Postscript affect the shape of the detective quest?

How the complicated structure of the detective process uses and subverts elements common to the detective story formula underlies my discussion of what *Possession* communicates about the process of reading, writing and interpreting fiction and other forms of written discourse. Byatt's literary mystery is one that works to establish

> the existence of two genres, the reality of two norms: that of the genre it transgresses, which dominated the preceding literature, and that of the genre it creates....Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature' not detective fiction. (Todorov 43)

The most important dominant convention of the popular mystery story formula is the exploration and explanation of buried secrets, and the quandary of the narrative always has an identifiable, rational solution (Cawelti 42-43). Mysteries exist as many kinds of stories in different types of prose fiction, from the Oedipus myth and the Bible to tales of espionage and crime (Tani 1), but the element most common to the mystery story formula is the quest to pin an answer on the unexplained (Cawelti 43). Mystery and detective fiction are often mentioned in the same breath because the two forms are closely related -- the mystery can be referred to as a "less specialized" form of the detective story (Landrum 101). The suspense thriller, the hard-boiled detective novel, and the spy saga are also variations of detective stories -- the lines between these types of stories often blur into one another -- but while mystery is often a secondary quality in these stories and in other formulas such as adventures and romances, the classical detective story depends

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entirely on the existence of an apparently unsolved mystery (Cawelti 43).

The mystery story found a popular home in April 1841 when, for the first time in literary history, Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" merged the detective with the detection process (Sweeney 1). Poe's "The Murders in Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter" (1845) and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842) fight against the "metaphors for chaos" in his other works, to create the stereotypical detective C. Auguste Dupin, the

> essential metaphor for order...the instrument of pure logic, able to triumph because he alone in a world of credulous men, holds to the Scholastic principle of *adequatio rei et intellectus*, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning. (Holquist 141)

In *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, John G. Cawelti identifies the following six main patterns of action in Poe's detective story (which appear in both "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter"): "(*a*) introduction of the detective; (*b*) crime and clues; *(c)* investigation; *(d)* announcement of the solution; *(e)* explanation of the solution; *(f)* denouement" (81-82). Since my study of *Possession* focuses on the detective process and the eventual solution/non-solution reached by (extra-textual and fictional) readers by the end of the novel, my discussion of the classic detective novel formula primarily concentrates on patterns (c) -- the investigation -- and (f) -- the denouement.

Poe's depiction of the detective profession and a scientific, professional mode of

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dealing with crime occur appropriately during the period of technological development that led to the nineteenth-century belief in a "scientific and optimistic attitude of positivistic philosophy towards reality and human control of reality" (Tani 11). The detective story reflects this positivism by its basis in a

> monolithic certainty that immediate psychic or historical experience is part of a comforting, even exciting and suspenseful well-made cosmic drama....[Detective stories] demand the kind of social and political organization that finds its fulfilment in the imposed certainties of the well-made world of the totalitarian state, where investigation or inquisition in behalf of the achievement of a total, that is, pre-ordained or teleologically determined structure -- a "final solution" -- is the defining activity. (Spanos 150, 154)

The allure of a neat, secure world where reason triumphs against the evils of chaos is the haven fans of the detective story live in, and a nightmare for critics and readers who see such a world as hackneyed and unbelievable. Literary critics often condemn formula stories such as the classic detective novel as kitsch that lacks the ability to upset emotions and confront difficulties; that provides readers with easy responses to the world with writing that "springs not from artists or craftsmen, but from the machine...art is difficult, kitsch is easy" (Holquist 136-137).

While some readers reject formulaic literature because of its escapist agenda, others return to it repeatedly because of the reassurance of entertainment and escape found in reading about an ordered world. Cawelti explains how a critical approach that

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defines formula stories as "subliterature" and "lowbrow culture" is problematic in how it can lead readers to

> perceive and evaluate formula literature simply as an inferior or perverted form of something better, instead of seeing its 'escapist' characteristics as aspects of an artistic type with its own purposes and justification...our capacity to use our imaginations to construct alternative worlds into which we can temporarily retreat is certainly a central human characteristic and seems, on the whole, a valuable one. (13)

Many readers find appeal in the determined logic of the detective story's narrative pattern, where the mystery or "picture puzzle" appears as "jumbled pieces of a puzzle and the detective puts them back together. He makes a picture out of the pieces, just as a positivistic consciousness makes a picture out of a fragmentary perceptual reality" (Ewert 167). The crime that usually signifies the beginning of the classical detective story indicates a disruption of society's normal order; thus the eventual moment when the detective solves the crime, and explains how he reached the solution (put the puzzle back together) indicates the restoration of this order (Cawelti 83). At the moment of solution the "reader joins the detective in his superior position, assuming the role of spider to the criminal fly," where all that seemed "chaotic and confused" is exposed as "clear and logical" (Cawelti 87).

Cawelti states that many readers admit that the moment the detective gives and explains the solution of the mystery sometimes seems "anti-climactic," but he deems it a vital and necessary part of the detective story, since solution is the end to which the

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narrative strives (88). During the investigation, clues are "initially presented in the wrong order...[and] wrenched out of their proper context in space and their place in a chronological sequence," so the chronology of the solution section "sets...events back into their logical position in a sequence of action," pleasing readers as they witness a "clear and meaningful order emerge out of...random and chaotic events" (Cawelti 89). As Cawelti suggests, the announcement of the solution is also appealing to readers because they have witnessed the process of investigation as it has unfolded; even if the reader has not come to the same conclusion as the detective, he/she does not feel cheated or tricked but surprised, since

> the puzzle or riddle aspect of the detective story depends less upon the reader's own ability to solve the mystery than on giving...[him/her] enough participation in it to enable...[their appreciation of] the wit of the detective and to understand the new perspective on which the explanation depends. (88-89)

In this thesis I will discuss how Byatt challenges the hierarchical status of the fictional detective in the classic detective novel by constructing the detective process in *Possession* around multi-levels of readers who receive different versions of clues written by numerous sources. The disparate detective methods in the novel make it impossible for readers outside the fiction to revel in the superior "wit of the detective," for extra-textual readers come away from the novel armed with much more knowledge than fictional detectives. The fluid ontological horizon of *Possession* prevents the detective process from reaching the crucial solution scene to which the classic detective novel

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strives. Instead, extra-textual readers witness fictional readers revel in what they think is *the* solution to the mystery, though the omniscient narrator has kept Roland and Maud from knowing a substantial chunk of events belonging to the Victorian past. The superior wit in *Possession* belongs to the author of the novel, who dupes her fictional readers by sending them on a wild literary goose-chase full of textual clues which, in many cases, turn out to cause the mystery quest to regress further and keep the "truth" they seek an intangible mystery.

Stefano Tani writes in *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* that detective stories incite two basic emotions in readers that are, for the most part, unconscious, and of a "bourgeois pattern":

> One is a sense of escape from reality, since the story is stereotypic (the characters are chess-pawns, the murder a bloodless excuse for a cerebral game, and the environment is safely remote, some beautiful country house in Britain). The other feeling...is a sense of reassurance, since the detective's rationality restores the order violated by the murder (the culprit is discovered and punished and the status quo reestablished; the mystery can be understood and solved, if not prevented). (21)

The detective story can be read as a "narrative of purification" whereby in solving a mystery -- "an affront to rationality and to social order" -- the detective "affirms the perfect fit between individual and society, mind and morals" (Gomel 352). Dettmar claims that the detective novel is what Barthes labels "a text of pleasure," because it foregrounds the comfort readers find during the reading process (162-163). Using the

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following quote by David J. Grossvogel, Dettmar explains how the detective novel's rejection of the strange and curious makes the genre "an art of reassurance":

> The detective story does not propose to be "real": it proposes only, and as a game, that the mystery is located on *this side* of the unknown. It replaces the awesomeness of limits by a false beard - a mask that is only superficially menacing and can be removed in due time. It redefines mystery by counterstating it; by assuming that mystery can be overcome, it allows the reader to play at being a god with no resonance....Judging by the large number of its participants, this kind of elevation game is sufficient for the greatest part of the fiction-reading public. (162-163)

Many critics of detective fiction have connected the classic detective novel's dependence on order, cause/effect and inductive reasoning in a definable universe to what Roland Barthes described in S/Z as the "hermeneutic code." As the "narrative of suspense," the hermeneutic code structures the reader's expectation for answers to "the basic question: what will happen next in the story and why?" (Cohan & Shires 123). Detective stories are so completely dominated by the hermeneutic code that some writers have labelled the genre the "hermeneutic tale" (Dove 30). The terms of the hermeneutic code, Barthes writes:

> structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution...the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story's "unfolding" and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs an opposite

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> action: it must set up *delays*...in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named "reticence," the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside.... (119)

The aspect most vital to the definition of the hermeneutic code is "that the enigma be held in suspense" because the structure of the mystery is tied to the expectation of the solution (Ewert 166). The formulaic nature of the classic detective novel asserts that in the end, in spite of variations of style and characterization among different writers of detective fiction, all mystery will be explained. In Barthes' terms, the rigid formula of the detective story

> becomes the basic condition for truth: truth, these narratives tell us, is what is *at the end* of expectation. This design...implies a return to order, for expectation is an order: disorder is supplementary, it is what is forever added on without solving anything, without finishing anything; order is complementary, it completes, fills up, saturates, and dismisses everything that risks adding on: truth is what completes, what closes. (119)

The concept of the hermeneutic code makes evident "how a reader's desire to know is stimulated by the author in such a way that it functions as a 'structuring force,'" how the discovery of a dead body at the beginning of a detective story changes the reading activity into an investigation for an answer (Porter 86). The narrative progression

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of the detective story from mystery concealed to mystery revealed indicates that these narratives make themselves whole in the conclusion, so that in retrospect the reader can see how all incidents have been used as necessary elements in a larger system (Porter 87).

Randolph Henry Ash -- one of the main subjects of the mystery quest in *Possession* -- describes his own reading preoccupation as one clearly dominated by the hermeneutic code: "*I cannot bear not to know the end of a tale. I will read the most trivial things - once commenced only out of a feverish greed to be able to* swallow *the ending - sweet or sour - and to be done with what I need never have embarked on*" (176). Like Ash, the fictional characters/detectives in *Possession* are ruled by their desire to know "what happened"; to form "an integrated, unitary narrative...out of the cache of hidden letters and the other archival material at their disposal" (Holmes 321). Roland and Maud's quest conforms to the preoccupation of the classic detective novel because they read for the end of the story, and the "truth" they suppose exists in this end. Roland appreciates and enjoys the process of reading the "twists and turns of...[Ash's] syntax" (Byatt 20), yet upon the discovery of the letters, it is clear that his interest rests in *solving* the hidden story of Ash's life:

> [T]hese dead letters troubled him, physically even, because they were only beginnings. He did not imagine Randolph Henry Ash, his pen moving rapidly across the paper, but he did have the thought of the pads of the long-dead fingers which had held and folded these half-covered sheets, before preserving them in the book, instead of jettisoning them. *Who*? He must try to find out. (20-21)

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Roland's quest to find "the end" to the story started by these letters is a difficult and futile detective excursion because there exists, as extra-textual readers come to discover, no completeness or end in the clues themselves. The literary clues in *Possession* make "more difficult the 'totalizing' activity - the desire for an all-encompassing and unified teleological understanding" (Holmes 321) guaranteed by the classic detective story genre. While the omniscient narrator's intrusions do offer extra-textual readers more of a sense of hermeneutic closure (though incomplete) than fictional detectives achieve, this method undermines and attacks the premise of *Possession* as a literary mystery by placing partial solution of the mystery in that which has not been written nor even spoken; many fragments of "truth" exist only in the "silences" (453). Roland and Maud's position in the fiction ensures that they never discover the "truths" that live in the silences; through ontological privilege, extra-textual readers learn what secrets hide in the gaps, but we do so knowing (though the entire novel is a literary construct that is read) that we have not achieved this knowledge without the help and disclosure of the omniscient narrator.

In *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, Dennis Porter's discussion of the detective novel further traces the genre's relation to critical concepts developed through the work of Roland Barthes; concepts which help to further explain the narrative appeal of detective fiction. According to Porter, the reading of a narrative whose aim and end is resolution and disclosure makes the classic detective novel a very "readable" text, a novel easily read because it is both enjoyable and easy to read (82).

Readable novels consist of those texts with which we are all familiar, those

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termed as classics and also popular works of all kinds (Porter 83). Silverman's reading of Barthes explains how the readable text

> strives above all for homogeneity. It organizes its materials according to the "principle of non-contradiction," stressing at all points the "compatible nature of circumstances." This is not to say that the readerly text eliminates oppositions; on the contrary, it uses them as a major structuring device. However, it rigorously limits the number of oppositions which can come into play at any juncture, and the manner in which they can be articulated. (243)

The readable text relies on an implicit agreement between author and reader where the author acts as a "problem setter" and the reader as a "problem solver," where the "success of a given work with a reader depends in the first place on the reader's willingness not only to suspend disbelief but also to play the reading game according to the rules of the genre" (Porter 85).

Porter explains that the detective novel is a highly readable text because anyone who is familiar with the patterns of the genre will have no problem recognizing the "terms of its intelligibility" even before reading the whole text, by the obvious nature of the mystery with which the novel opens (86). Operating between the beginning and end of the novel is what Barthes calls the proairetic code, which "determines the sequence of events within a story" (Silverman 262), and refers to "any succession of acts...that constitute themselves into a nameable sequence, such as a murder, a journey, the eating of a meal, or the taking of a bath" (Porter 86). The proairetic sequences in the detective

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novel can be easily detected since the patterns of the genre are fixed and determined (Porter 86). Porter makes it evident that the "logico-temporal order" -- a vital feature of the readable text -- is inherent in the narrative events of the detective novel due to the controlling hermeneutic and proairetic codes:

> A detective story...is committed to the principle of noncontradiction and nonreversibility...detective stories have been read in the faith that...there is a system of multiple connections between all the isolatable parts of a written text, that everything which occurs is a necessary element in an ordered whole. The task of reading consists largely of the effort to perceive the connections involved in order to reconstitute the whole. Consequently, one of the clearest signs that we are in the presence of a readable text is that within it "everything fits together"....And in a detective novel author and reader alike are satisfied only if everything appears to fit together with a machinelike perfection. (88)

In *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Novel*, the advice Howard Haycraft gives to writers to stick to the "rules of the game" underscores the readability of the genre:

> Stripped of its decorations and embellishments, the detective story is at bottom one thing only: a conflict of wits between criminal and sleuth, in which the detective is traditionally victorious by out-thinking his adversary. Each important plot incident...must be the perfect and logical consequence and result of this central conflict of crime and pursuit...The

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> formula is capable of infinite variation....It may be adorned and disguised in almost any fashion the author chooses...[but] in basic structure it must never vary by so much as a hairsbreadth from absolute logicality. (258)

In contrast to the "absolute logicality" of the classic detective novel, postmodernist writers such as Robbe-Grillet and Borges write texts that suggest "how the apparently familiar [detective story] may turn out to hide a mysterious and often threatening face" (Porter 245), by breaking down the conventions of the classic detective story "into a meaningless mechanism without purpose...[to] parody positivistic detection" (Tani 34).

Otherwise known as the metaphysical/ inverted detective novel or the postmodern mystery, the antidetective novel is committed to "defamiliarization," which turns the detective story on its head by subverting its quest to satisfy "perceptual refamiliarization" (Porter 245). Holquist echoes Porter when he claims that, instead of the familiar, the antidetective novel

> gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack....[Antidetective novel writers fight] against the Modernist attempt to fill the void of the world with rediscovered mythical symbols. Rather, they dramatize the void. If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved. (155)

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By reading to discover how Ash and LaMotte lived, Maud and Roland engage in a mystery quest aimed to solve *lives*, not deaths; they long "to resurrect the living past rather than the mouldering remains of yesterday's story" (Shinn 168). While Roland admits that he is "an old-fashioned textual critic, not a biographer" (Byatt 50) and Maud states that she is seldom curious about Christabel's life because she feels "a sort of squeamishness about things she might have touched, or places she might have been" (Byatt 55), both scholars immerse themselves in Ash and LaMotte's written remains. The unfinished letters are "alive" (56) to Maud and Roland, because they represent beginnings without ends.

The antidetective novel's aim to solve a life works to subvert the positivistic "ideological underpinnings" common to the genre:

> Our time...calls for an existence-art, one that by refusing to resolve discords...into the satisfying concordances of an inclusive *telos* (or Identity), constitutes an assault against an *art*-ificialized nature in behalf of the recovery of its primordial terrors - and possibilities. The most immediate task, therefore, in which the contemporary writer must engage himself...is that of undermining the detectivelike expectations of the positivistic mind, of unhoming Western Man, by evoking rather than purging pity and terror - anxiety. (Spanos quoted by Dettmar 155)

With its "lack of center" and absence of a "unifying system" (Tani 39), the antidetective novel reflects how the postmodernist writer has revised the agreement between author and reader "along lines which many readers of more conventional fiction

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find unfavourable to themselves. A recurring theme of...[postmodernist] fiction is treachery - enacted between individuals, obscurely at work within society and, more generally, the treacherous nature of appearance" (Alexander 3).

Antidetective novelists frustrate readers' expectations and change a "mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of avant-garde sensibility," by substituting the "central and ordering character" of the detective for the "decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of nonsolution" (Tani 40). The popular fiction of the detective novel thrives on the "rhythm of desire" by first arousing desire, then teasing it by delaying disclosure with "systematic digression" until the end solution finally reveals all (Porter 246). In contradiction, the antidetective fiction of Robbe-Grillet and Borges incites desire without the intention to satisfy; as stories "without exits," these fictions work like "traps" to lure readers and "manipulate desire" (Porter 246-247). The classic detective novel brings the reader back safely once the narrative is complete, whereas "many [antidetective] modern tales are machines without exits" and neat ends (Porter 246). In the antidetective novel "conventions [of the classic detective novel] are paradoxically functional in the disintegration of the genre" so that the reader will first identify the novel as such; eventually, when the "delay of the solution becomes nonsolution" and when the promise of fulfilment remains unfulfilled at the end of the novel, patterns of the genre are recognized as "deceitful clues planted by the writer to rouse the attention of the reader before disappointing his expectations" (Tani 42-43).

Dettmar believes that the antidetective novel "not only reaches - and teaches - very different answers about the nature of experience, but by disguising itself in the

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detective's overcoat and deerstalker, it lures the reader into a specially designed trap: the reader reads like a detective a tale which cautions against reading like a detective" (156). As an "art of disruption" (Dettmar 162), the antidetective novel does as Barthes' "writerly"[1] text does: it "imposes a state of loss, [and]...unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes quoted in Dettmar 163). According to Dettmar, true mystery is only to be found in this "dangerous realm," a realm always avoided by the classic detective novel but emphasized by the antidetective novel. The essential difference between the detective novel and the antidetective novel is that the latter "embodies the perception of reality as extraordinary and even monstrous," whereas the former "discovers over and over again a hidden banality governed by familiar laws" (Porter 245).

Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1953 novel *The Erasers* is a text whose narrative shows a move from the classic detective novel to the antidetective novel (Ewert 167). While the novel contains conventional aspects of the classic detective novel -- a murder, a detective, and a victim -- what remains is anything but conventional:

> The text is full of illusory scenes, false starts into futures which do not materialize, fake flashbacks, and rearranged chronologies. This confusion on the level of plot is increased by the novel's multiple modes of narration, which include interior monologue, stream-of consciousness, free

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[1] Like the antidetective novel, Barthes' "writerly text" is a novel that "strives for anarchy and incoherence...[and] denies the possibility of closure" (Silverman 246-247).

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> indirect discourse, and an elusive omniscient observer. (Ewert 168)

The Erasers also features an unconventional detective: he lacks Dupin's self-confidence, and "spends much of his time walking...through streets that look alike, adopting roles for himself to boost his confidence or stepping into roles suggested for him by others, acting a suspect before he is one, excusing his guilt before he becomes guilty" (Ewert 168). *The Erasers* is often compared to Borges' short story "Death and the Compass," in how both authors use the detective character to depict innovative, unconventional endings:

> [*The Erasers*] is the story of a detective who knows he must be at a certain place at a certain time in order to catch the criminal, but when he shows up he himself commits the murder. The Borges tale uses the same twist to achieve the opposite effect: when the detective works out where the next in a series of murders must occur, he shows up only to become the victim. (Holquist 154-155)

The solution that the entire detective novel works towards is of principal importance because it is the "final and fulfilling link in the detective novel's sequence, the one that gives sense to the genre and justifies its existence" (Tani 41). In both *The Erasers* and "Death and the Compass," Robbe-Grillet and Borges rely on the fact that the endings to their fictions will disorient readers and deprive them of the positivistic ending they have come to expect from classic detective fiction (Porter 246). This dependence upon reader expectations leads Porter to claim that:

> even the *nouveau roman* was not the writable text Barthes dreamed of in *S/Z* because it still relied for its effect on reader expectations learned from

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> the reading of traditional novels. Its power to disturb depends on a reader's attempt to solve the problem of its meaning in terms of the two sequential codes, the hermeneutic and the proairetic. (246)

In spite of its "illusory scenes and chronological discrepancies," *The Erasers* is a "transitional novel...still coded in such a way that the reader can...distinguish between illusion and 'real' events and reconstruct a chronology....[T]he novel offers closure and a solution, although it is a kind of closure (and a solution) which will leave the reader with a sense of the circularity of the text" (Ewert 168). *The Erasers* may still allow readers to recuperate the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, but the text does provide a map for other antidetective novelists to explore.

Detective fiction promises, as does all fiction ruled by the hermeneutic code, that there are "important revelations to be made," that all has "something behind it"; yet the aim of such revelations in antidetective fiction is to disappoint desire (Porter 248). Robbe-Grillet's antidetective novel *The Voyeur* "largely relies for his success on reading habits that are inappropriate in his novel. Without warning, he changes the rules of the reading game and leaves the reader to discover for himself what the new rules are" (Porter 254). The reader of *The Voyeur* is baited and enticed by the narrative, but never released from contradiction; the "expected 'solidarities' among parts, to which Barthes refers in S/Z...fail to materialize....If in *The Erasers* the detective is the criminal, in *The Voyeur* the reader is" (Porter 254).

To demonstrate how the solution (or nonsolution) *The Voyeur* relies on depends on the experience of the reader, Holquist examines the three different movie posters

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which are described at the beginning, middle and end of the book. The first poster looks as follows:

> In the garishly colored advertisement, a colossal man dressed in Renaissance clothes was clutching a young girl wearing a kind of long pale nightgown; the man was holding her wrists behind her back with one hand, and was strangling her with the other. The upper part of her body and her head were bent backward in her effort to escape her executioner, and her long blond hair hung down to the ground. The setting in the background represented a tremendous pillared bed with red covers. (*The Voyeur* quoted in Holquist 151)

Holquist explains how this poster, with its "colossal men" and young women in long nightdresses, depicts an "absurd, theatrical" scene often found in trashy thrillers (151). As the young girl in the poster is strangled, so is the character Violet/Jacqueline being strangled by the character Mathias (Holquist 151). To Holquist, this first poster is a section of a "very complicated, serial joke," a link to the nonsolution of the text: "in this scene Robbe-Grillet sets up what he *might* have done, had he written a conventional murder novel. This first poster is a metaphor for what would have been the traditional literary treatment of his subject - garish, hyperbolic, narrative" (152).

Holquist suggests that the second poster is a metaphor for the structure of *The Voyeur* itself:

> The new advertisement represented a landscape...a moor dotted with clumps of bushes in its interlacing lines but something else must have

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> been superimposed: here and there certain outlines or patches of color appeared which did not seem to be part of the original design. On the other hand they could not be said to constitute another drawing entirely; they appeared to have no relation to one another....They succeeded...in so blurring the configurations of the moor that it was doubtful whether the poster represented a landscape at all....Underneath was spread in huge letters what must have been the name of the film: "Monsieur X on the Double Circuit." Not conforming to the trends of recent productions, this title - which was scarcely enticing, having little or no relation to anything human - provided remarkably little information about what type of film it described. Perhaps it was a detective story, or a thriller. (*The Voyeur* quoted in Holquist 152)

The landscape described in this poster resembles the area where the crime in the novel is committed, but of more relevance is the suggestion that there are "two different posters, one on top of the other...a palimpsest, and remaining, therefore, still slightly visible under the new text" (Holquist 152). The text's suggestion that the title, "Monsieur X on the Double Circuit," had "little or no relation to anything human" is a fitting description of *The Voyeur* because it is a text about "things, not humans....[I]t is a new text, a new kind of plot, written over the face of the old detective story, whose traditional elements still are legible underneath the new message" (Holquist 152-153).

According to Holquist, the third poster, which appears near the very end of the book, indicates how the antidetective novel destroys the traces of the classic detective

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novel:

> On the other side of the monument he notices the bulletin-board is covered with a completely white sheet of paper pasted on the surface of the wood. At this moment the garageman comes out of his tobacco shop carrying a little bottle and a fine brush. Mathias asks him what happened to the sign that was up the day before: it wasn't the right one, the garageman answers, for the film they had sent along with it; the distributor had made an error in the shipment. He would have to announce next Sunday's program by a hand-made ink inscription. Mathias leaves the man already busy with his task firmly tracing a large letter O. (*The Voyeur* quoted in Holquist 153)

This poster reflects how the antidetective novel "is non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered....No, the new story is purged of such linear teleology....[I]t is not, like the old posters, mass produced....It is rather a fresh sheet of paper, on which the reader...must hand letter his own answers" (Holquist 153). The title "O" signifies how the telos of *The Voyeur* is its lack of telos; how the story is a process; how, to experience the novel, the reader "must turn [the book] into a series of objects" and "collate all the clues" Robbe-Grillet provides (Holquist 153). Even after the reader performs the investigative actions of the detective, the novel remains a "real process," since, when put together, all the clues end in the "line which has no end" (Holquist 153).

As Porter asserts, the conventional reward of the detective novel is in the reconstruction scene, where it is recognized that "everything is seen to fit after all" (254).

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Since the conclusion of *The Voyeur* depends on the re-enactment of the crime committed against the girl, the reader wants to witness her rape and murder; thus, this text "cunningly obliges the reader to acknowledge the voyeuristic character of the activity he is engaged in" (Porter 254). Porter suggests that, if the detective is the criminal in *The Erasers*, the reader is the criminal in *The Voyeur*; the title of the text "is an accusation. The hollow center is designed to show that the voyeur is not so much the fragmented consciousness, locatable intermittently as text within a containing text, but the reader himself" (254-255).

Tani's discussion of the antidetective novel focuses mainly on how the solution section is treated and depicted --whether it is denied, abolished, parodied, or satisfied only partially -- for this is the method he uses to distinguish one type of antidetective novel from another (41-42). The labels Tani assigns to three different types of antidetective fiction --innovation, deconstruction and metafiction-- correspond to the different techniques used in depicting the solution (43). Tani stresses that these divisions overlap and are not rigidly defined; what connects these three categories is a "teasing, puzzle-like relation between the text and the reader, which gets more overt and sophisticated" as we move from the innovative to the deconstructive to the metafictional antidetective text and its treatment of the solution (44-45). The puzzle-like relation between author and reader replaces and alters the role of standard suspense, since the reader's involvement in the detective process is only partially or not at all satisfied by the conclusion of an antidetective novel (Tani 45).

In the innovative antidetective novel, an "early solution disappoints the reader and

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then an unexpected final one puzzles" him/her, or a solution does not indicate that the guilty is punished, or a solution is found by accident (Tani 43). The innovative antidetective novel reflects a "social preoccupation related to the crime and its causes," totally unfamiliar to the British school, and it "undermines conventional detective fiction by arriving at solutions without justice and by social criticism" (Tani 43,76). The innovative detective novel freely uses and twists the formula of the classic detective novel, but does not subvert it, since "some partially satisfying solution is still present"(Tani 43).

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is an example of an innovative detective novel because of its unfulfilling solution; for its accent on the "possibility of human error in the detecting process" when the "Holmesian William of Baskerville...imposes his professional logic on facts that are only casual"; for how one wonders whether the solution the detective finds is "only the projection of his desires, one of the multiple solutions that a puzzle may have, or the *real* solution" (Tani 52).

The solution is suspended in the deconstructive antidetective novel, when the text ends shortly before resolution is reached, "after having teased the reader into a wild goose chase throughout the fiction by planted and inconsequential clues" (Tani 43). Suspending the solution can "leave a reader in total darkness...or intimate a solution...or give a mocking solution that is rationally unacceptable" (Tani 43). The detective experiences the investigative process as an "existential quest" (Tani 43) with a more indefinite view of the world because he/she "is unable to impose a meaning, an interpretation of the outside occurrences he [or she] is asked, as a sleuth, to solve and

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interpret" (Tani 76).

Tani maintains that the deconstructive antidetective novel is more a quest for identity "which can be 'solved,' while the 'outside mystery,' reality, is never solved" (77); thus, "justice is not even an issue any more, since there is no solution" (78):

> At the end he (or she) quits sizing up clues and admits the mystery: he [or she] discovers that in the meanwhile, even if he has not found an objective solution, he has at least grown and understood something about his own identity. In a very Poesque way, the confrontation is no longer between a detective and a murderer, but between the detective and reality, or between the detective's mind and his sense of identity, which is falling apart....(76)

The metafictional antidetective novel, Tani claims, is an antidetective text in only a general way, since elements essential to the classic detective novel -- the detective, the criminal and the dead body -- hardly exist because they are replaced by the reader, who is compelled to make sense out of an unfinished fiction that has been distorted or cut short by a playful and perverse 'criminal,' the writer....The detective is no longer a character but a function assigned to the reader as the criminal is no longer a murderer but the writer himself who 'kills' (distorts and cuts) the text and thus compels the reader to become a 'detective.' The fiction becomes an excuse for a 'literary detection,' and if there is a killer in the fiction, he is a 'literary killer,' a killer of texts...and this killer represents within the fiction the operation that the writer...performed on it. (113)

Metafictional antidetective novels contain elements found in innovative and deconstructive antidetective texts, such as unfulfilled suspense and incomplete solutions,

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but it is the connection between author and reader that remains different:

the writer is no longer an 'absent' third-person narrator but part of his text, which he enters and leaves continuously...or playfully and misleadingly 'explains' through a fictional persona....He keeps reminding us that what we are reading is only fiction and that he is the conjuror in this magic game, which has no reality but its own. (Tani 114)

Possession is primarily a metafictional antidetective novel, one that features detection "present in the relation between the writer who deviously writes ('hides') his own text and the reader who wants to make sense out of it (who 'seeks' a solution). A similar 'hide-and-seek' relation corresponds within the fiction" (Tani 43-44). Like Calvino's metafictional antidetective novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller,* a text which features the interaction between writer and reader outside and within the fiction (Tani 44), *Possession* features narrative games played on multi-levels of reading and writing: between authors (such as Christabel and Randolph) and readers (such as Maud and Roland) within the novel; between writer (Byatt) and extra-textual readers of the text; between fictional readers and extra-textual readers; between writer and fictional readers. My discussion in Chapters Two and Three explores how the complex, often dubious relationships between these groups assault the classic detective novel's guarantee of closure and restoration of order (differently) for both extra-textual and fictional readers. However, Byatt does not go to the same extremes to subvert the classic detective novel genre as have other antidetective novelists, for the novel does offer some sense of closure (but as I have already stated, this closure is ambiguous and as disappointing as it is rewarding) to extra-textual readers. Byatt's choice to supply a sense of an ending in her

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version of the detective novel defies those "writers like Robbe-Grillet...[who] said...strongly that plot and character are the real enemies of the novel, that we must get rid of them at all costs" (Wachtel 87). Byatt says that to the

> very long period when the one thing everybody abused was the well-made plot...there was bound to be a reaction, and that is why books like *The Name of the Rose,* which exploits the formal structure of the detective plot even while doing something quite different with it, have given recent readers such delight. I think there is a genuine narrative hunger. People, having said plot is trivial, have now come back to being technically interested in it, so one can actually exploit it quite cooly.
> (Wachtel 87- 88)

Possession "cooly" leads fictional readers to believe they have recuperated the past, stamped out mystery, and returned to the sunny world of the classic detective novel where reason and order triumph. Extra-textual readers discover that their reading position is paradoxical: while ontological privilege grants them a sense of closure regarding the mystery, they are at the same time aware that fictional readers have been duped by the author; Maud and Roland's sense of an end originates from an incomplete collection of clues, which they have wrongly interpreted. This knowledge -- in spite of the fact that the Postscript lets us in on a juicy supersecret -- leaves extra-textual readers forever rooted in the uncertain, anxious, dubious world of the postmodern mystery.

While reading A.S. Byatt's *Possession,* one often has the sense that he/she is both a voyeur and participant in a "magic game" (Tani 114), where two different levels of

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detectives -- fictional and extra-textual -- both work to impose some sense of order and meaning out of various disordered texts. For both extra-textual and fictional readers, the detective process in *Possession* depends entirely upon the reading process.

The intellectual experience that Byatt provides for readers of her ambitious text can best be captured in the following passage taken from one of Christabel LaMotte's fairy tales in *Possession*, "The Glass Coffin":

> 'You must go out of this house,' said the little grey man, 'and call to the West Wind, and show her your key, when she comes, and let her carry you where she will...If she will take you, you will be set down in a bare heath, on a great stone, which...is the gate to your adventure, though it will seem to have been fixed and unmoving since the making of the world....You must descend without fear, or hesitation, and descend further, and still descend; you will find that your glass key will shed light on your way if you hold it before you. In time you will come to a stone vestibule, with two doors leading to branching passages you must not follow, and a low curtained door leading on and downwards. You must...lay on it the milk-white feather which the hen will give you, and the curtain will be opened silently, by unseen hands, and the doors beyond it will lie open, and you may come into the hall where you shall find what you shall find.'
>
> 'Well, I will adventure,' said the little tailor...and he bade them all good-bye and went into the clearing, and called to the West Wind, holding up his key. (60-61)

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CHAPTER TWO:

RED HERRING STEW: NARRATIVE GAMES SOME PEOPLE PLAY

[Maud said] "'...I want to - to - follow the - path. I feel taken over by this. I want to *know* what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out....It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive.'

'Narrative curiosity -'" (Byatt 238)

Through her accomplice, the narrator, Byatt writes the metafictional antidetective novel *Possession,* which makes her the master "criminal" of the novel, one who "'kills (distorts and cuts) the text and thus compels the reader to become a 'detective'"(Tani 113). As I have mentioned, the detective process in *Possession* is structured around two levels of detectives/readers: extra-textual readers outside the novel, and fictional readers/detectives -- such as Roland and Maud -- inside the novel. The investigation performed by *Possession's* detectives is controlled by a complicated narrative structure, in this novel "bursting with addressors and addressees, textual authors and consumers, and fictions within fictions" (Buxton 206). Stefano Tani asserts that the "the detection [in the metafictional antidetective novel] is present in the relation between the writer who deviously writes ('hides') his own text and the reader who wants to make sense out of it (who 'seeks' a solution)" (43-44). Tani structures his discussion of Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* in terms of the various "hide and seek" relationships between writer and reader outside and within the novel (43-44). This chapter explores (as Tani does with Calvino's book) the "hide and seek" relationships *Possession* presents between writer and readers outside and within the fiction: 1) writer (Byatt) and extra-textual

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reader; 2) fictional "writers" (this chapter concentrates mainly on the journals of Blanche Glover and Sabine Lucrèce) and fictional readers Maud Bailey and Roland Michell. The use of embedded narratives (textual clues) dramatizes the "hide and seek" relationships between these groups of writers and readers, complicating the detective process so much that the hermeneutic code is only partially satisfied for fictional readers, and dubiously satisfied for extra-textual readers. In *Possession*, Byatt truly illustrates her statement that "language always tells lies" (Wachtel 83).

To explain the narrative games Byatt plays with *Possession's* fictional and extra-textual readers, this chapter employs terms from modern narrative theory: specifically, diegetic, hypodiegetic, extradiegetic and intradiegetic. When a novel's structure is comprised of embedded narratives, these stories within stories "create a stratification of levels whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded" (Rimmon-Kenan 91). In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains that the extradiegetic level is "immediately superior to the first narrative, and [is] concerned with its narration (Genette...calls this the 'extradiegetic level', his 'diegesis' being roughly analogous to my 'story')" (91). It is at the extradiegetic level that the narrator of *Possession* presents the fictional detectives Roland, Maud et al. Directly below the extradiegetic level is "the diegetic level [or, "the universe of the first narrative" (Genette 228)] narrated by it, that is the events themselves" (Rimmon-Kenan 91), such as Maud and Roland's investigation and the events involving their fellow scholars Cropper, Blackadder, Wolff, Stern, and Nest. Rimmon-Kenan states that the "stories told by fictional characters...constitute a second degree narrative, hence a

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hypodiegetic level (ie., a level 'below' another level of diegesis)" (91-92). In *Possession* textual clues, such as Blanche's and Sabine's journals, and Randolph's and Christabel's letters, constitute examples of the hypodiegetic level of the novel.

As Rimmon-Kenan indicates, "[n]arration is always at a higher level than the story it narrates. Thus the diegetic level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, the hypodiegetic level by a diegetic (intradiegetic) one" (92). An extradiegetic narrator "is a narrator who...exists on a different narrative level from the level of the events narrated...whilst an intradiegetic narrator is one who is presented as existing on the same level of reality as the characters in the story he or she tells" (Hawthorn 42). Since "[b]oth extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrators can be either absent from or present in the story they narrate" (Rimmon-Kenan 95), narrative theorist Gérard Genette defines a homodiegetic narrator as one who is "present as a character in the story he[/she] tells" and a heterodiegetic narrator as one who is "absent from the story he/[she] tells" (244, 245).

Possession opens with narration from an extradiegetic narrator, for the voice belongs to one "who is not a member of the world of the story" (Hawthorn 42): "The book was thick and black and covered with dust. Its boards were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time....The librarian handed it to Roland Michell, who was sitting waiting for it in the Reading Room of the London Library" (Byatt 1). Blanche is a (diegetic) intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator in *Possession*, for the story she tells in her journal -- a book which constitutes part of the hypodiegesis of *Possession* -- involves her as a character on the same level of reality (the Victorian past) as LaMotte: "She [Christabel] was getting her Literary Letter ready to post, though she denied this, and said

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she was hurrying to finish the *Glass Coffin* for the book of tales. I believe she is writing fewer poems. Certainly she does not show me them...as we were used to do" (Byatt 46).

In *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov explains how the narrative of the classic detective novel is structured to ask readers the question "what happened and how did it happen?" Todorov claims that the detective novel "contains not one, but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation" (44). The first story (the crime, usually a murder) explains "'what really happened,'" and the second story (the investigation), explains "'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it'" (Todorov 45).

What interests Todorov is how detective fiction manages to put "two aspects of one and the same work...two points of view about the same thing...side by side" (45-46). Todorov stresses that the "absence" but reality of the first story and the "presence" but (less important) mediating function of the second story explains the paradoxical nature of their side by side presentation (46). The first story (the crime) is a story of

> an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book....[The] narrator cannot transmit directly the conversations of the characters who are implicated, nor describe their actions: to do so, he must necessarily employ the intermediary of another (or the same) character who will report, in the second story, the words heard or the actions observed. (46)

In *Possession* the first story (the hypodiegetic level of *Possession*) -- that of the "crime" -- refers to the world of the Victorian past where LaMotte, Ash et al. lived and

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breathed. The second story (the diegetic level of *Possession*) -- that of the investigation -- refers to the sleuthing activities which twentieth-century detectives Maud, Roland et al. perform to learn the story of the past.

As a literary mystery, *Possession* is "a detective story concerned with reading....Its detectives are literary analysts, but these intrepid textual sleuths are not dealing with the cause and effect rationalization of a recent event (customarily a murder), but with a 'crime scene' from which they are distanced by a century or more" (Buxton 206). Though *Possession* raises the

> possibility of a death...(that of the poets' child), the mystery resides not in the conventional detection of the perpetrators of a murder, but rather in tracing the trajectory of the crime itself: passion. In this inversion of the genre, the criminals - Ash and LaMotte - are discovered at the outset, the narrative progression is in detecting the exact details of their illicit exploits. (Buxton 206)

LaMotte and Ash's sexual and emotional affair is not the only passion that leads to "crime" in *Possession*. The literary nature of the investigation, the mystery and the detective process, testifies to the passion of reading, to the "pleasures and compulsions and reticences of narrative" (Holmes 321), whether it be Victorian poetry, intimate letters or private journals.

The two "crimes" that begin *Possession* involve letters, underscoring the literary nature native to both the mystery and the investigation in the novel. The first "crime" of *Possession* is committed by Randolph Henry Ash, Victorian gentleman and poet. Like the

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unsolved crime of murder at the beginning of the classic detective novel that disrupts the "normal order of society" (Cawelti 83), these two letters have the potential to unsettle the literary community. The textual remains not only threaten Roland's impression that "he knew Ash fairly well" (7), but they also pose a threat to the literary community involved in Ash study. As a literary scholar, Roland recognizes the "criminal" potential of the letters, which lead him to wonder "what jewels of information about Ash's 'ignored, arcane, deviously perspicuous meanings' might not be revealed by it? Scholarship might have to reassess all sorts of certainties" (7). The letters also lead Maud to suggest that a connection between Ash and LaMotte "would change all sorts of things. LaMotte scholarship. Even ideas about *Melusina*. That Fairy Topic. It's *intriguing*" (49). As representatives of an absent story, the letters Roland discovers "structure the enigma" (Barthes 119) and thus create his urge to solve the mystery and satisfy the hermeneutic code.

Roland literally commits a crime when he steals Ash's letters from the library: "He looked about him: no one was looking: he slipped the letters between the leaves of his own copy of the Oxford Selected Ash....There were notices about mutilation of volumes, about theft, with which he quite failed to associate himself" (8). Where the detective in the classic detective story strives to figure out "whodunit," the detectives in this literary mystery work to discover the story behind "whyitwaswritten." While Roland's theft of the letters is criminal behaviour, his actions indicate his desire to learn the first story. There are other characters in *Possession* (whom I will soon discuss) whose actions can be deemed "criminal" assaults against the detective process because they steal

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(burn, hide and never write) letters to keep the first story forever hidden.

Todorov explains that the second story (the investigation)

> has no importance in itself...[but] serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime....[The second story] must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct. It has even been attempted...to suppress this second story altogether. One publisher put out real dossiers, consisting of police reports, interrogations, photographs....these 'authentic' documents were to lead the reader to the discovery of the criminal. (46)

Many critics of *Possession* have observed that the second story -- the story of Maud and Roland's investigation of the Ash-LaMotte mystery -- often seems of no importance in itself, that it exists only to access the first story. Richard Todd believes that the "sole *raison d'etre* of these twentieth-century counterparts, perhaps even that which identifies and constructs them existentially, is the very retrieval of the nineteenth-century originals" (104). The author of *Possession* admits the same: to the question "Do you favour the Victorians?" Byatt responds,

> Oh, yes. This is part of the whole joke of the novel: the dead are actually much more alive and vital than the living....The poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true...that they become rather papery and are miserably aware of this. (Wachtel 82, 83)

The literary nature of the textual clues that direct the detective process bring the

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Victorians alive and directly capture the living words of the deceased, unearthing the thoughts written by "long-dead fingers" (Byatt 21). Todorov's assertion that the first story "cannot be immediately present" (46) is thereby violated. Like the dead body that signifies the absent story in the classic detective novel, Randolph's letters signify a hidden story; but unlike the corpse whose story can only be recovered through the mediating eyes and reports of the detective, those two unfinished letters are the gateway to the hypodiegetic level of the fiction. In this embedded narrative world, the dead are, in a sense, resurrected, for they speak through the words they have written on the page.

Blanche Glover's journal and suicide note are examples of "*delays*" in *Possession* which seek to ensure that the mystery behind Ash's letters hold the "enigma...in suspense" (Ewert 166). As one of the most mysterious figures in the novel, Blanche is a character who frustrates the mystery quest, for while her writing incites hermeneutic desire in both extra-textual and fictional readers, her tendency to conceal more than she reveals keeps this desire forever unsatisfied.

The embedded narrative Blanche creates through her writing is metaphorically represented by the structure of boxes which encase the journal. Maud sets before Roland "various boxes: *Melusina I. Melusina II....Misc Lyrics. Blanche*" (43). Within the box labelled "*Blanche*" is Blanche's journal, a "long thick green book, a little like an accounts book" (43). The heading of Blanche's journal, "**A Journal of Our Home-Life. In our House in Richmond**" (43) titles the journey of extra-textual readers from the diegetic (the box labelled "*Blanche*") to the hypodiegetic (the "long thick green book") world of the fiction.

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In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale writes that narrative embedding can "have the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction" (112). Blanche's journal may occupy the hypodiegetic level of the fiction, but, for extra-textual readers, her journal writing can be said to break the narrative frames surrounding the diegetic and hypodiegetic levels of the fiction, erasing the time and narrative world separating her from the mystery quest. Roland and extra-textual readers read the following passage from Blanche's journal:

> So now we have a Prowler. Something is ranging and snuffing round our small retreat, trying the shutters and huffing and puffing inside the door. In old days they put mountain ash berries and a cast horseshoe over the lintel to frighten away the Fairy Folk. I shall nail some up now...to prevent passage....How very small, how very safe, is a threatened dwelling. How large the locks seem, how appalling would be their forcing and splintering. (46-47)

Blanche's fear is due to Ash's prowling around LaMotte, but Byatt implies a second level of signification behind this journal entry because Blanche's words can also apply to Roland in the act of reading her. This passage from Blanche's journal is an example of narrative game play between Byatt and extra-textual readers, for when the "borders between then and now...are continually undermined" (Buxton 210), the tenuous division between the story of the "crime" and the story of the investigation is exposed. The literal time sharing between the Victorian past and the twentieth century displayed in

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this excerpt from Blanche's journal subverts Todorov's claim that the "first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins" (44). Byatt does with Blanche's journal what antidetective novelist Robbe-Grillet does in *The Voyeur*: she "changes the rules of the reading game and leaves the reader to discover for himself what the new rules are" (Porter 254). The detective process becomes more complicated for extra-textual readers as they realize that the "gulf between the past and the present rapidly diminishes....That bygone time constantly interrupts the present diegesis of the novel as Byatt weaves the contemporary and the historical into one immediate textual present" (Buxton 210).

As an ironic and playful nod to Blanche's world violation, Byatt has Roland ask Maud: "You know this Prowler Blanche Glover got so worried about? Is anything known about him? The wolf at the door?" Maud replies, "she may have made up the prowling. She had a vivid imagination" (49). From their position within the fiction, Maud and Roland seem incapable of realizing how Blanche's words reflect their own actions. Blanche's comment that "this Peeping Tom has put his eye to the nick or cranny in our walls and peers shamelessly in" (47) may refer to her jealousy about the attachment forming between Ash and LaMotte, but Byatt also cleverly uses these words from Blanche to manipulate the concept of "crime" in *Possession*. Both fictional detectives and extra-textual readers are implicated as "criminals" when their passion to know the first story leads them to engage in the "criminally" voyeuristic behaviour of reading Blanche's private thoughts.

When Blanche tells Christabel -- one of the central figures of all the peeping and creeping by both levels of readers -- that she is anxiously concerned about all of the

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"huffing and puffing" round their narrative level's "door," Christabel "laughs and says he means no harm, and is incapable of seeing the essential things we know and keep safe....so it must always be. But it amuses her to hear him lolloping and panting round our solid walls..." (47). Christabel's reassurances to Blanche are reliable, for, by the end of the novel, the narrator "remains (coyly?) silent on the exact details of the purportedly lesbian nature" (Buxton 216) of Blanche and Christabel's relationship. Blanche's "paintings have all been lost" (Jenkyns 213); hence this part of her story -- the first story -- remains a mystery for all readers both inside and outside of the fiction: "[No paintings] have ever been found. I suppose Christabel may have kept them all. Or burned them up in distress, we simply don't know" (Byatt 312). Roland's discovery that the "writing ended, indeed the book ended, abruptly, not even at the end of the year" (47-48) is confirmed through Blanche's own words in the final entry of her journal: "The Wolf is Gone from the Door. Dog Tray's hearth is his own" (47). By having Blanche cease to write her journal, Byatt deviously "hides" her text like the metafictional antidetective novelist to keep the "grasping fingers" (47) of extra-textual and fictional readers from peering through and "seeking" a solution that could tear down the "solid walls" that harbour the secrets of Blanche's life with Christabel.

The narrative frame-breaking Blanche's journal achieves should suggest to both extra-textual and fictional readers that they must be suspicious of any textual clues the writer lays out for them to read. The textual clues are not simply words fixed on the page written centuries ago, but narrative fragments of a *present* story. By using the (author) Blanche as a tool to keep part of the first story forever hidden, the writer (Byatt) frustrates

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the desire of readers with the metafictional antidetective habit of presenting "deceitful clue[s] [commonly known as 'red herrings' in the classic detective story]...to rouse the attention of the reader before disappointing his expectations" (Tani 42-43). The unsolved mystery shrouding the character Blanche also confuses the notion of "readability" in *Possession*. As a readable text, the classic detective novel possesses a "system of multiple connections between all the isolatable parts...[where] everything which occurs is a necessary element in an ordered whole" so "[t]he task of reading [is]...to perceive the connections involved in order to reconstitute the whole" (Porter 88). In contrast, *Possession* houses Blanche, one of those "isolatable parts," who defies the reconstitution of the whole by remaining an elusive, mismatched piece of the puzzle; Blanche replaces the "ordered whole" of the classic detective novel with the gaping hole of mystery.

Fictional readers read Blanche's suicide note exclusively "in the hope of finding some clue as to how Christabel LaMotte had spent the time between the Yorkshire journey and the inquest" (306). Richard Todd writes that Blanche's "very recuperation by the twentieth-century plot of *Possession* gives her a voice and a role 'on the other side' that she despairingly, in the nineteenth-century plot, believed herself not to be capable of having" (Todd 107). But the extent to which fictional detectives "hear" Blanche's voice and assign her a role "on the other side" is superficial at best; Blanche's note is only a source of disappointment for Roland and Maud, as it does not give them any insight into the mystery of Christabel's whereabouts. For extra-textual readers the "here" in Blanche's claim that it "*has indeed been borne in upon me that* here *I am a superfluous creature*" (309) can refer to the diegetic level of the fiction in light of the uselessness that

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fictional characters Roland and Maud find in her textual remains. As Richard Jenkyns writes, Blanche's

> suicide letter is very eloquent, defiant and defeated, mixing an honourable earnestness with spasms of genteel bitterness; and its poignancy is much increased by our sense that there lies behind it a story of passion, aspiration and failure, unspoken and irrecoverable. (213)

Jenkyns' claim that Blanche's story remains "unspoken and irrecoverable" is accurate, but it applies more to fictional readers, for the omniscient narration will later ensure that extra-textual readers outside the fiction will at least hear a meagre fragment of the first story spoken by Blanche. For extra-textual readers Blanche's suicide letter is anything but a static, useless, textual clue; the role she plays in the mystery lets extra-textual readers see that her "*Maker* [in this context Byatt and not God]...*will make better use hereafter of my capacities - great and here unwanted and unused - for love and for creative Work*" (308-309).

In her role as "author," Blanche pens her plans to kill herself and her story, but, for extra-textual readers, Byatt has Blanche's writing paradoxically foretell the moment in Chapter Twenty-Five when the omniscient narrator will resurrect her from a papery death. Blanche's certainty that "There *I shall know and be known....I trust perhaps to speak*" (309) is enacted when Byatt moves Blanche up to the diegetic level of the fiction to "speak" and therefore become "known" ("There") to extra-textual readers through the omniscient narration. Ironically, Blanche's textual resurrection results from her role as "criminal"; like Roland at the beginning of *Possession*, Blanche also steals something

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written by Ash to LaMotte when she takes Ash's poem *Swammerdam* from the poetess; but unlike Roland's, Blanche's theft of the poem enables extra-textual readers to literally hear part of the first story. Through the omniscient narrator, Blanche tells part of the first story in one of Ellen's flashbacks (i.e. "'[w]e were so happy, Mrs Ash, we were all in all to each other, we were innocent'"), proving that she survives in the diegetic level of the fiction, or, to use Blanche's words, the "fairer world, on the other side" (308). For fictional readers all the suicide note represents are Blanche's death and more mystery, but for extra-textual readers, Byatt's narrative game has Blanche's letter predict how her appearance in the omniscient narration obliterates the second story. Blanche tells her own part of the first story directly, and not through characters (such as Roland and Maud) in the second story, thereby subverting Todorov's claim that the first story "cannot be immediately present in the book," that the author must "employ the intermediary of another...character who will report, in the second story, the words heard or the actions observed" (46).

Extra-textual readers should now be aware that they cannot rely on the detective efforts of fictional readers, since the omniscient narrator (whose role in the detective process I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three) ignores these readers when handing out valuable information pertaining to the first story, thereby revealing the many deficiencies of their investigation. Blanche's suicide note typifies the insecure ontological boundaries in *Possession* to expose just how flexible and suspect the reading game is in this metafictional antidetective novel.

Evidence that *Possession* is a flexible reading game constructed by the author

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surfaces when Byatt excludes (at different times) both sets of readers during moments crucial to the detective process. Excluding fictional and extra-textual readers undermines their reading/detective efforts, and fetters any chances these readers have of learning the whole, true story of the "crime."

For roughly the first hundred pages of *Possession* Byatt positions fictional detectives Roland and Maud at the head of the investigation into LaMotte and Ash's lives; extra-textual readers follow their progress as they map and read textual clues. This order of readers resembles that of the classic detective story, where the

> puzzle or riddle aspect...depends less upon the reader's own ability to solve the mystery than on giving him enough participation in it to enable him better to appreciate the wit of the detective and to understand the new perspective on which the explanation [of the mystery] depends. (Cawelti 89)

Maud and Roland are logical choices to head the investigation of this literary mystery, for they, like the detective in the classic detective story, possess creative reasoning powers; Maud and Roland's status as literary scholars also imbues them with valuable knowledge about LaMotte and Ash.

Roland's power as a reader becomes evident when he first reads Blanche Glover's journal. Because Roland does not deem three and a half weeks of Blanche's journal -- consisting of "simple meals, walks and readings, music and Blanche's plans for paintings" (45) -- relevant to his investigation, these pages are omitted from the novel *Possession*, and hence from the eyes of extra-textual readers. In an antidetective

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manoeuvre Byatt keeps a substantial part of Blanche's journal -- part of the first story -- forever hidden from extra-textual readers by forcing them to rely completely on Roland's capabilities as a reader. (Blanche remains a mysterious, unreadable character in the novel, so one could suggest that Roland's initial reading of her journal is, indeed, inadequate.)

Byatt changes the rules of the reading game when she abandons fictional detectives and undermines the relevance of their reading by excluding their interpretation and response to particular textual clues from the novel. Whereas the classic detective novel uses the detective process to foreground the sleuth's superior ability to read and correctly interpret clues, *Possession* does the opposite by excluding Maud and Roland from this process, exposing how the antidetective novel breaks down the conventions of the classic detective story "[to] parody positivistic detection" (Tani 34). The suspense and excitement that fill the moments before Roland and Maud discover the bundles of letters written by Ash and LaMotte indicate how urgently important it is for fictional detectives to find and read the correspondence:

> Roland lifted the lid on a bare casket....He felt unable to tap and tug at the framework. He felt unable to urge the unbuckling of the trunk. He felt as though he were prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity - not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge. (82)

Roland's feeling that he was "being *uselessly* [italics mine] urged on" (82) is quite an apt emotion to describe how Byatt diminishes the significance of their roles as detectives

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when she summarizes, rather than dramatizes, the moment when he and Maud do finally read the letters they have found. In spite of the excellent, exciting detective work Maud and Roland perform to find the Ash-LaMotte letters, extra-textual readers may be disappointed when they discover that gaps and dining replace Maud and Roland's digestion -- analysis and interpretation -- of the letters:

> And so they worked on, against the clock, cold and excited, until Lady Bailey came to offer them supper (135);
>
> The work time that followed was a taciturn time. They bent their heads diligently - what they read will be discovered later - and looked up at each other almost sullenly. Snow fell. And fell...Lady Bailey came with coffee... into a room still with cold and full of a kind of grey clarity (143);
>
> In the afternoon they read steadily and with more surprise. They dined with the Baileys by the kitchen fire....(145)

(Fictional detectives are abandoned once again when they read Sabine de Kercoz's journal. The narrator describes the event as follows: "There, over the next three days, they read Sabine's journal. What they thought will be told later. This is what they read" [335]). The gaps that replace and therefore suppress Maud and Roland's reading of the Ash-LaMotte letters do assign extra-textual readers the freedom and independence to infer their own meaning and interpretations. However, in the context of the classic detective novel, the gaps that replace the responses fictional detectives have to the letters also undermine and subvert their capabilities. By excluding (at different times) both extra-textual and fictional readers from various reading and detective processes, Byatt

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ensures that these readers cannot learn a unified, cohesive, complete story of the "crime."

Byatt undermines the investigative/reading abilities of fictional detectives when they read the Ash/LaMotte correspondence. To save time Maud insists that she and Roland use her research method to read the letters: "...they should each read the letters of the poet who interested them, and...they should agree conventions of recording their observations on index cards according to a system she was already using in the Women's Resource Centre" (129). Maud's reading method causes Roland anxiety, for while reading, he

> asked for clarification and was answered, it appeared, with riddles. Roland, not in possession of the other side of the correspondence, could not even tell what riddles, and looked up increasingly at the perplexing woman on the other side of the table, who...was making minutely neat notes on her little fans of cards, pinning them together with silver hooks and pins, frowning. (130)

Roland's "mounting sense of stress" (130) comes from his belief that letters "are a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure," that they "tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going" (131). Roland's lack of confidence in Maud's reading strategy -- an anxiety foreign to the classic detective hero -- confirms that their method of reading the letters "is at variance with...[Roland's] need for finality" (Holmes 321). To emphasize how inefficient Roland and Maud's reading method is and to further undermine their detective efforts, Byatt has extra-textual readers read the Ash-LaMotte correspondence in its proper sequence. Discrepant reading methods break down

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any sense that the detective process in *Possession* is a cohesive effort performed by allied readers inside and outside of the fiction; divergent detective processes guarantee that the investigation of this literary mystery can not recuperate a unified story of the "crime." (Roland and Maud's reading of and response to the Ash-LaMotte correspondence also appears superficial when the research notes they make from the letters do not appear in the novel for extra-textual readers to read.)

After Roland and Maud discover that Ash and LaMotte did have a romantic liaison, they shift the focus of their investigation to the chunk of time when Christabel could not be found. Maud wonders

> [w]here had Christabel been, and why had she gone, and where had Randolph Ash been, between July 1859 and the summer of 1860?...LaMotte scholars had never found any satisfactory explanation for Christabel's apparent absence at the time of Blanche's death, and had worked on the supposition of a quarrel between the two women. (309)

In hope of finding answers to these questions, Maud reads a newspaper clipping written shortly after Blanche's death. Byatt slyly uses this newspaper clipping to structure a "paradoxical continuity" (McHale, *Postmodernist* 120) between the first and second stories, therefore violating and foregrounding the ontological boundaries between the past and present worlds. The clipping reports that:

> [Blanche]...lived alone, in a house once shared with the Poetess, Miss Christabel LaMotte, whose whereabouts are not at present known, and have not been known for some time....Police are seeking to find out Miss

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LaMotte's current place of residence. (309)

Maud reads the newspaper clipping to advance her investigation further, but she is met instead with words that mirror her quest and describe her *present* actions. Neither Maud in the diegetic level nor the police in the hypodiegetic level know where Christabel is, so they are all "seeking to find out Miss LaMotte's current place of residence" (309). In this instance part of the first story (the police's physical search for Christabel) mirrors part of the second story (Maud's search through documents for Christabel's whereabouts) as the second story tries to detect the first story, subverting Todorov's claim that the first story "ends before the second begins" (44). Fictional readers may use the newspaper clipping as a textual clue, but, as a tool of the metafictional antidetective novel, Byatt uses the clipping to hide the solution to the mystery instead, by creating a metalepsis, or, to quote McHale quoting Douglas Hofstadter, a "Strange Loop," which "'occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started'" (*Postmodernist* 119). Maud's desire to learn part of the first story by reading (moving 'down' to the hypodiegetic level) only leads her to read of an investigation on that level which mirrors her own on the diegetic level; thus, she ends up right back where she started with no new knowledge about Christabel's whereabouts.

In their quest to learn the first story, Roland and Maud search for textual clues that will bring them closest to that story. Christabel's aversion to journal writing prevents the chance that Roland and Maud will get a version of the first story from Christabel. When Roland asks Maud, "'And LaMotte. Did she keep a journal?'" she replies,

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> 'Not as far as we know. Almost certainly not. She wrote to one of her nieces advising against it....'If you can order your Thoughts and shape them into Art, good: If you can live in the obligations and affections of Daily Life, good. But do not get into the habit of morbid Self-examination.' (41)

It is significant that neither Christabel nor Randolph, the two principal subjects in the literary mystery *Possession*, keep diaries. By having extra-textual and fictional readers rely on diaries written by those (such as Sabine, Blanche and Ellen) who are at an inevitable distance from Christabel's and Randolph's life experiences, Byatt already ensures that readers will receive less reliable accounts of events that occurred in the poets' lives.

Unlike her cousin Christabel, Sabine is a woman who engages extensively in "morbid Self-examination." In *Possession,* the "truth" guaranteed by the end of the classic detective novel becomes one of those "[s]hape-shifting monsters of the night" (331) created by unreliable interpretations and distortions of the story of the "crime." Sabine's journal is perhaps the most unreliable of all textual clues in the novel: the multi-levels of interpretation involved in both the reading and writing of her journal are another way the metafictional antidetective author keeps the real first story hidden from both extra-textual and fictional readers. A close reading of Sabine's journal reveals that the quest to learn the past through written documents is a process akin to that of storytelling and fabrication, illustrating

> the difficulties of all attempts to represent experience....[The textual clues

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> in *Possession*] never speak for themselves; they must be interpreted. In our age of "the hermeneutics of suspicion," interpretations and glosses proliferate and, monster-like, threaten to devour the primary texts. (Holmes 320)

The path that extra-textual and fictional readers must travel before they gain access to Sabine's musings (and before the journal's appearance in the novel) is marked by interpretation and manipulation. The translation of Sabine's journal from French to English is one obvious example of how this document has been both manipulated and interpreted. While I do not wish to dive into a lengthy discussion of critical issues concerning the translation of texts, the following are some questions that stem from the translation of Sabine's journal which help make a case for its unreliability as a textual clue: Who has done the translating of Sabine's journal? (Extra-textual readers read the English version of the journal, yet they do so without knowing who has completed the translating.) How does the translation change, distort, omit, shape or help construct the English document extra-textual readers read? If Maud has been the one to translate Sabine's journal, how has her theoretical orientation (psychoanalytic feminism) informed that translation? (After translating the French of Le Minier's letter to Stern, Maud apologizes, "Sorry about the clumsy translation, Leonora" (314); so, even if extra-textual readers could be sure that Maud has been the one to translate Sabine's journal, they may still doubt the accuracy of her translation.) In the guise of the metafictional antidetective novelist, Byatt cleverly uses the difference between languages to nourish doubt and anxiety in extra-textual readers, and erect a barrier that confuses their search for the first

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story. Unlike fictional detectives, Byatt never grants extra-textual readers the opportunity to see the original, French version of Sabine's journal; hence they are unable to theorize if the translation of the document has resulted in "[d]istortion" and/or "corruption" (Holmes 320) of that document.

French scholar Ariane Le Minier -- a minor character in *Possession* -- is the reader at whose discretion both extra-textual and fictional readers read Sabine's journal. Maud and Roland do not get the opportunity to select those portions of Sabine's journal that may help their investigation; instead, Le Minier gives them a photocopied text (a literal, ironic remove from Sabine's original journal) that she has made from the journal. Hence all of what extra-textual and fictional readers read of Sabine's journal is based solely on what Le Minier has interpreted to be pertinent to a study of Christabel LaMotte. Le Minier's control over what extra-textual and fictional readers read from the diary should lead these readers to ask a question similar to one I have asked regarding the translation of Sabine's journal from French to English: How does Le Minier change, distort, omit, shape or help construct the document extra-textual readers read? But *Possession* supplies no answer to this question, and both sets of readers are forced to accept whatever representation of Sabine's journal Le Minier's reading has created.

Some thirty pages into Sabine's journal appears a message from Le Minier that confirms that extra-textual readers, as much as fictional readers, have been left out of the detective loop by the metafictional antidetective novel writer Byatt: "Here there are some pages missing, and what *is* written becomes perfunctory and repetitive. I have not made photocopies of the rest of this month until the evening of Christmas. You may see this

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material if you wish (368). Le Minier's reassurance that fictional readers can see the material she has left out of Maud's photocopy of Sabine's journal is a jest from Byatt, since it is impossible for extra-textual readers to access any of this material from their position in the world outside the fiction. By having the "perfunctory and repetitive" portion of Sabine's journal available to fictional readers (even if they do not choose to read this material) but forever hidden from extra-textual readers, Byatt alters the rules of the reading game to create an uneven field of detection. (The passage quoted above may be an example of how extra-textual readers have been excluded from the detective process, but, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three of this thesis, the omniscient narration in Chapters Fifteen, Twenty-Five and the Postscript excludes fictional readers and denies them access to much of the information extra-textual readers learn.)

In the paragraph which opens Sabine's journal, the young woman writes that she has started the book

> at the suggestion of...Christabel LaMotte, who said something that struck me most forcibly. 'A writer only becomes a true writer by practising his craft, by experimenting constantly with language, as a great artist may experiment with clay or oils until the medium becomes second nature, to be moulded however the artist may desire.' (335)

Sabine's constant experiments with language shade, shape, and smother the "truth" of the first story with various interpretive distortions and a continually changing perception of reality. Sabine's journal is evidence of how, in this metafictional antidetective novel, "writers" within the novel behave like "criminals" by distorting the story of the "crime,"

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thus forcing the reader to become a "detective" (Tani 113). Like many of the textual clues in *Possession,* Sabine's journal provides "a different interpretation of the shared past. That 'ordinary language' of non-fiction which purports to describe reality objectively is therefore shown to be as much if not more of an artifice, a construct, than the most individualistically romantic narrative of the artist" (Shinn 173). While Roland and Maud read the journal of Sabine to investigate a literary mystery, Byatt uses this autobiographical discourse to showcase an unreliable narrator who corrupts the absolute positivism and unobjectionable "truth" reconstructed by detectives in the classic detective novel and sought by the fictional detectives in *Possession.*

A narrator who is reliable "is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth," while a narrator who is unreliable "is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect" (Rimmon-Kenan 100). In *Constructing Postmodernism*, Brian McHale explains that a "character's unreliability normally manifests itself in his or her interpretations or evaluations of the fictive world" (64). McHale stresses that one of the many ways a character's reliability can be confirmed is by having the narrative "shuttle back and forth between the character's consciousness and external reality directly presented by the narrator, thereby confirming the character's perceptions" (*Constructing* 65). While classic detective stories contain unreliable clues (commonly known as "red herrings") that detectives must sift through in order to flesh out the true story of the "crime," the narrator in this genre always restores coherence and abolishes mystery by eradicating unreliability and all distortions of the

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"truth" by the end of the novel. Sabine's introspection does disclose events that extra-textual readers can identify as "truths" because these happenings have been corroborated by the extradiegetic narrator elsewhere in the novel: Christabel visited the Manoir de Kernemet; she was pregnant and had a child. But, aside from these truths, the "shape-shifting" distortions Sabine moulds in her journal remain untouched by the extradiegetic narrator, making it impossible for extra-textual readers to learn an untainted, true version of the story of the "crime." In the face of all the unreliabilities of Sabine's journal, all extra-textual readers can do is anxiously accept that Sabine's storytelling controls what they know about Christabel's stay at the Manoir de Kernemet and how they come to know about it.

Sabine's journal comprises part of the hypodiegetic level of the fiction, and, as the narrator/author of and a character in that journal, she is an intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator. Sabine's status as an intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator already marks her as an unreliable narrator, for as Rimmon-Kenan asserts, "[i]ntradiegetic narrators, especially when they are homodiegetic, are on the whole more fallible than extradiegetic ones, because they are also characters in the fictional world" (103). By capturing her innermost thoughts in a personal diary, written for her eyes only (336), Sabine demonstrates (and often admits) her own failure to capture the "truth" of the first story.

The unreliability of Sabine's narration becomes evident through her mixed, flexible emotions regarding her cousin Christabel. As Sabine's opinion of Christabel shifts back and forth between admiration and jealousy, her physical description of her cousin also oscillates. Sabine's initial description of Christabel includes the following

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details:

> She is...studiously neat and carefully dressed, with...elegant little green boots....She wears [her hair] - not becomingly - in little bunches of curls over her ears.
>
> Her little face is white and pointed...Even the inner curl of the nostril, even the pinched little lips, were white, or faintly touched with ivory. Her eyes are a strange pale green; she keeps them half-hidden. She keeps her mouth compressed too - she is thin-lipped - so that when she opens it one is surprised by the size and apparent strength of her large, very regular, teeth, which are distinctly ivory in colour. (343-344)

The boiling hatred Sabine later feels for her cousin completely controls and shapes the new, revised physical description she pens of Christabel:

> I hate her smooth pale head and her greeny eyes and her shiny green feet beneath her skirts, as though she was some sort of serpent, hissing quietly like the pot in the hearth, but ready to strike when warmed by generosity. She has huge teeth like Baba Yaga or the wolf in the English tale who pretended to be a grandmother. (366)

The radical differences between these two entries display how "[c]ontrasts and incongruities in the narrator's language alert us to...unreliability in the narrator's evaluations" (Rimmon-Kenan 102). When they read Sabine's journal extra-textual readers will not learn one original, true story of the "crime"; instead, they will read new first stories constructed by emotional haste and dramatic, uninformed sweeps of

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judgement. Sabine's claim that "...I sit there like a shape-changing witch, swelling with rage and shrinking with shame....And *she* changes in my sight....She will bite [my father]....She will....At the time I write this I know I am absurd. And when I write *that*, I know I am not" (366) can be read by extra-textual readers as a jab from the metafictional antidetective novelist Byatt who leaves Sabine's "shape-shifting" version of the "truth" to represent the first story. Without the intervention of the extradiegetic narrator, who could repair these distortions, the "truth" of the way it all had been remains an intangible mystery for extra-textual readers. Sabine's position as "writer" and intradiegetic homodiegetic narrator enables Byatt to keep the "truth" of the past forever hidden from extra-textual readers.

Sabine addresses her own fallibility as a narrator when she realizes that Christabel is pregnant: "[m]uch, if not all is explained....What [my father]...feels is pity and protectiveness, I see it now, I have read sentiments that did not exist except in my own fevered imagination" (369). While extra-textual readers do learn one "truth" from this journal entry -- that Christabel is pregnant -- this knowledge is surrounded by the reality that the majority of Sabine's journal is a fabricated product of her imagination and her changing interpretation of the first story.

Though both extra-textual and fictional readers use Sabine's journal as a textual clue, Byatt has not allowed this young "writer" access to the complete first story either:

> A letter came today for my father from M. Michelet, and enclosed in it one for Christabel. She took it composedly enough, as though she had been expecting it, and then when she saw it properly, caught her breath and put

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> it aside, unopened....All day she did not open it. I do not know when or if she did. (379)

Christabel's refusal to read the letter prevents Sabine from "reading" and interpreting this mysterious part of the first story and from writing it for extra-textual and fictional readers.

Byatt uses both the gaps in Sabine's journal and her unreliable narration to design an antidetective trap for extra-textual readers and frustrate their desire for the whole "truth"of the past. When Sabine realizes that her journal "[f]or some time now...has been neither writer's exercise nor record of my world, only a narrative of jealousy and bafflement and resentment" that may someday "be read, by accident, and misconstrued" (371), she chooses to stop writing it for two months. By having Sabine cease to write her journal, Byatt structures gaps of missing time that suppress the past and keep it hidden from extra-textual readers. As I have discussed, what Sabine does write does not let extra-textual readers escape the maze of mystery; her unreliable narration can only, at best, offer extra-textual readers a dubious, distorted, tenuous representation of the first story.

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CHAPTER THREE:

THE QUEST FOR THE TRUTH: TRACKING THE SHAPE-SHIFTING MONSTER

(Randolph in a letter to Christabel) "*So if I construct a fictive eye-witness account - a credible plausible account - am I lending life to truth with my fiction - or verisimilitude to a colossal Lie with my feverish imagination? Do I do as they did, the evangelists, reconstructing the events of the Story in after-time?*" (Byatt 168)

This chapter continues my discussion of the narrative games Byatt plays with both extra-textual and fictional readers in *Possession*, with a focus on how the omniscient narrator's intrusions manipulate the detective process. Like Chapter Two, this chapter concentrates on the "hide and seek" relationships *Possession* presents between writer and readers outside and within the fiction: 1) writer (Byatt) and extra-textual readers; 2) "writer" (this chapter draws examples from Ellen Ash's journal and Mortimer Cropper's *The Great Ventriloquist*) and extra-textual readers.

The omniscient narration in Chapter Fifteen (and in Twenty-Five and the Postscript) greatly affects the detective process, for it "supplies a good deal of information not contained in those letters, diaries, and poems, with the result that the novel's readers know more than its modern scholars do about the Victorian characters" (Holmes 332). The boundaries of the novel's ontological framework are (temporarily) severed when Byatt creates the first "omniscient time capsule" (Buxton 208) of the novel, moving characters Ash and LaMotte from the hypodiegetic to the diegetic level of the fiction. Though the omniscient narration is, like the other textual clues in the novel, a document which distances extra-textual readers' "direct access to [the]... independent

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reality" (Holmes 321) of the first story, the stuff of this narration does allow extra-textual readers "more direct, less inhibited" (Holmes 332) access to this first story than it does fictional readers. (But while the knowledge the omniscient narrator gives extra-textual readers is gratifying, as I will later explain, it paradoxically becomes the source of their disappointment and doubt.) While the previous passages I have discussed in the previous chapter are symptomatic of the flexible ontological boundaries in *Possession*, the narrator's omniscience smashes through them, leaving fictional readers stranded in a limbo of ignorance. In this chapter Byatt directly undermines the "detectivelike expectation of the positivistic mind" (Spanos quoted by Dettmar 155) by blatantly ignoring fictional detectives and denying them access to this very important segment of Ash and LaMotte's lives. Chapter Fifteen reveals to extra-textual readers that nothing is certain in the detective landscape of this novel; control is clearly in the hands of Byatt, the metafictional antidetective writer, who can, and has, changed the rules of the reading game to complicate the detective process.

While the following conversation Ash and LaMotte have alludes to what little time the poets have alone together, for extra-textual readers Ash and LaMotte's words can also apply to the short span of time Byatt gives them on the diegetic level of the fiction:

> 'Ah, how can we bear it?'
>
> 'Bear what?'
>
> 'This. For so short a time. How can we sleep this time away?'
>
> 'We can pretend...that we have all the time in the world.'

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> 'And every day we shall have less. And then none.'
>
> 'Would you rather, therefore, have had nothing at all?'
>
> 'No. This is where I have always been coming to. Since my time began. And when I go away from here, this will be the mid-point, to which everything ran, before, and *from* which everything will run. But now...we are here, we are *now*, and those other times are running elsewhere.'
>
> 'Poetic, but not comfortable doctrine.' (284)

The "mid-point" Christabel refers to is the very locus of the chapter from which she (for the first time) speaks directly, as Chapter Fifteen is the mid-section of the novel *Possession*. Christabel and Randolph's position on the diegetic level of the fiction is real but temporary, for the narrative omniscience which allows extra-textual readers access to Ash and LaMotte's unwritten thoughts and actions lasts for only a "short time" since "those other times running elsewhere" -- mainly the narrative time belonging to Roland and Maud -- will shortly occupy the diegetic level of the fiction once again. Ash and LaMotte may not be aware that they are fictional characters in a novel, but their conversation quoted above reminds extra-textual readers that Ash and LaMotte are fictional constructs of the author, Byatt, who allows these characters a temporary appearance on the diegetic level of the fiction.

With an unexpected, disconcerting twist, the omniscient narration of Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire eliminates the second story -- the story of the investigation -- altogether, completely destroying the idea that the second story is needed to reconstruct and explain the first story -- the story of the "crime." The notion extra-textual readers

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have of the first and second story is confused when the story of Maud and Roland's investigation becomes completely absent, replaced by the *present* story of the "crime," which Maud and Roland are attempting to resurrect. In the context of the classic detective novel, raising Ash and LaMotte to the level of the diegetic world is analogous to physically raising the murder victim from the dead to obtain the story of the "crime."

Through the omniscient narration in Chapter Fifteen, extra-textual readers learn that Randolph and Christabel spent "a day...in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word" (286). Roland and Maud have no idea that Randolph and Christabel travelled to Boggle Hole, since there exists "no Boggle Hole in Cropper or the Ash Letters" (268). Ironically, Roland suggests that he and Maud make a trip to Boggle Hole themselves, since he thinks "[i]t's a nice word," but also to "take a day off from *them*, get out of their story, go and look at something for ourselves....I just want to look at something, with interest, and without layers of meaning. Something new" (268). Having Maud and Roland travel to the same place Christabel and Randolph visited is a sly way for extra-textual readers to see how Byatt undermines the efforts of her fictional detectives. The sleuths of the second story do not go on their journey to Boggle Hole because their superior detective wit has led them there; rather, they make the connection to the past accidentally in an attempt to (temporarily) abandon their quest to learn the story of the "crime," to "get out of [Ash and LaMotte's]...story" (268). The journeys to Boggle Hole may create parallels between the past and present, but the parallels exclude the detective process and the story of the investigation, creating the painful irony that, "[p]aradoxically, Roland and Maud come closest to finding Christabel

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and Randolph by ceasing to look for them" (Holmes 332). The parallel trips are a stunning example of how the metafictional antidetective writer (Byatt) "hides" the text from (fictional) readers; Maud and Roland's ignorance about Randolph and Christabel's trip to Boggle Hole prevents them from "seeking" a solution and from knowing how close they have come to finding a vital part of this literary mystery.

As an obvious source of mystery, Ellen's journal is an important element in the literary mystery *Possession*. The admissions in Ellen's journal set up "the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution" (Barthes 119); the letters she describes and writes about receiving incite the narrative curiosity of both real and fictional readers. Byatt uses Ellen's journal to incite the hermeneutic desire of fictional readers, only to leave it partially unsatisfied, as my discussion of the narrator's omniscience (in Chapter Twenty-Five) will demonstrate.

The enigma in Ellen's journal surfaces when she writes of a letter she has received, "requesting an interview with *me personally* in a matter of great importance, the writer said, to me myself" (230). Soon after this letter comes another, from a "mysterious and urgent lady. A matter of life and death, she writes. She is well-educated, and if hysterical, not *frantically* so" (230). Ellen then writes that one "afternoon there was a hammering at the door, and a distracted Bertha let in a strange lady who demanded to see me....I told her she might come back when I was recovered and she accepted this postponement briskly and nervously" (230).

After this brief but intense build-up of suspense comes an entry whose gaps clearly structure "*delays*...in the flow of discourse;...with an organized set of stoppages"

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indicating a "dilatory area whose emblem might be named 'reticence'" (Barthes 119):

> Half a bad day, and half, as may happen, a good clear day, one might say, renewed. The furniture-cleaning has gone on well during my somnolent absence and all that - the arm-chairs, the table covers, the lamps, the screen - seems also renewed.
>
> My importunate visitor came and we talked some time. That matter is now I hope quite at an end and wholly cleared up. (230-231)

Ellen's journal leaves Maud and extra-textual readers

> in an agony of indecision. What Evidence had Ellen kept? And of what? A clandestine correspondence or a trip to the Yorkshire coast with a solitary biologising poet? What had Ellen felt or understood? Had Blanche handed her the purloined manuscript of *Swammerdam*? (234)

Except for "[w]hat evidence had Ellen kept? And of what?" the omniscient narrator in Chapter Twenty-Five answers all of these questions for extra-textual readers. Byatt uses the narrative curiosity stimulated by Ellen's journal to manipulate fictional readers; for them, the "truth...*at the end* of expectation" (Barthes 119) -- a promise of the classic detective formula -- is only partially satisfied. Unlike extra-textual readers, Maud and her co-detectives are caught in the web of a fiction that does not grant them access to the omniscient narrator's "truth" telling. By including extra-textual readers, but deliberately leaving fictional readers out of the omniscient narrator's divulgence, Byatt behaves like an antidetective novelist by "parody[ing the] positivistic detection" (Tani 34) inherent in the classic detective novel.

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Chapter Twenty-Five begins with an entry from Ellen's journal, dated November 25th, 1889, written two nights after Ash's death. In this entry, fictional readers are made aware that they will never know some of the secrets of Ash and LaMotte's life. Ellen tells of making a fire and burning "some things" to grant Ash's dying request that some secrets of his life "shall not be picked by vultures" (443). The last paragraph of the journal entry teases the curiosity of both extra-textual and fictional readers when Ellen admits that there

> are things I cannot burn. Nor ever I think look at again. There are things here that are not mine, that I could not be a party to burning....What can I do? I cannot leave them to be buried with me. Trust may be betrayed. I shall lay these things to rest with him now, to await my coming. Let the earth take them. (443)

Before I reveal what secrets Chapter Twenty-Five discloses about Ellen, Ash and LaMotte, I wish to discuss the writing that appears immediately after the above journal entry by Ellen. Wedged between Ellen's journal entry and the omniscient narrator's second intrusion in the novel is an excerpt from Mortimer Cropper's *The Great Ventriloquist* -- or is it? If extra-textual readers look at this excerpt carefully, they may see traces of the omniscient narrator lurking in its lines. What appears to be an embedded narrative written by fictional character Cropper could actually be the omniscient narrator's preamble to the narration about Ellen which follows. The passage is intended for extra-textual readers only, for, though fictional readers would have access to, and may have already read Cropper's book on Ash, the excerpt is not prefaced with any indication

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that it appears in this textual space (page 443) of the novel because fictional readers are reading it. It is also suspicious that the section allegedly written by Cropper is numbered "Chapter 26" (443), and ironically so, in that it follows Ellen's journal entry which appears in Chapter Twenty-Five of *Possession.* Numbering Cropper's chapter number twenty-six makes the entry appear as if it is a chapter in the overall structure of the novel *Possession*, and not a chapter from an embedded narrative -- a book on Ash -- written by fictional character Cropper. The title of the book from which this chapter comes is also ironic: perhaps "*The Great Ventriloquist*" is not a reference to Ash, but a self-reflexive nod from the omniscient narrator pulling off her mask as Cropper (of course this reference has been applied by critics to Byatt herself, and her "bravura display of literary ventriloquism" (Stout 14) in *Possession*). The omniscient narrator's posture as a character in the diegesis of the fiction is a literal example of how the writer of the metafictional antidetective novel "deviously writes ('hides') his own text" from readers seeking a solution (Tani 43-44). The omniscient narrator's masquerade as Cropper would be disconcerting for extra-textual readers, since Cropper is a character described in the novel and by most critics in very unflattering terms (Buxton paints Cropper as a grave-robbing self-aggrandizing biographer whose "interest in Ash is implicitly necrophiliac and ghoulish" (206)).

For those who believe that "'After Life's fitful fever'" (443) is an embedded narrative on the hypodiegetic level of the fiction written by Cropper (and not the omniscient narrator), this piece still complicates the ontological structure of *Possession.* Through Chapter 26 of *The Great Ventriloquist* Cropper becomes a travelling narrator

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and a narrative bridge between the mystery of the past and the investigation of the present.

Cropper's narrative travel aggravates and accurately reflects the craving extra-textual and fictional readers have to dig up Ash and LaMotte's buried secrets. From a point in his past of the diegetic world (1964), Cropper narrates events that happened a few days after Ellen's November 25th, 1889 journal entry: " Ellen laid upon [Randolph's coffin] a box, containing 'our letters and other mementoes' which were 'too dear to burn, too precious to ever expose to public view'" (443). A few paragraphs later, from a point in his past -- Cropper wrote *The Great Ventriloquist* in 1964 -- Cropper narrates events occurring in 1986, some twenty-two years into the future. Cropper foretells part of the 1986 mystery quest in *Possession* by commenting on the interest he and fictional detectives Maud, Roland et al. have concerning

> what was contained in the box [buried with Ash in his grave]....We do not know what invaluable evidence is lost to us, but we have seen, in these pages, the ample richness of what remains...Such decisions to destroy, to hide, the records of an exemplary life are made in the heat of life, or more often in the grip of immediate *post-mortem* despair, and have little to do with the measured judgement, and desire for full and calm knowledge, which succeed these perturbations....
>
> Might we not argue, in extenuation of our desire to behold what is hidden, that those whose disapproval made demons of them to their nearest and dearest, are now our beloved ancestors, whose relics we would

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cherish in the light of day? (444-445)

By travelling to different points of time on multi levels of the fiction (back to the past and forward into the future) from a fixed position of the novel's narrative space (1964), Cropper confuses the ontological levels that separate the story of the "crime" and the story of the investigation; they have now become intertwined and indistinguishable. The time travel which Cropper's passage performs exposes, to extra-textual readers, the artifice involved in these textual clues; they are not fixed pieces of history and "truth," as fictional readers seem to hope, but fluid (travelling) texts belonging to the author, who uses them as devices to prolong her narrative games.

The omniscient narration featuring Ellen in Chapter Twenty-Five stimulates the narrative curiosity of extra-textual readers by revealing that there "was a decision to be made [by Ellen] and tomorrow would be too late" (448). This "decision" involves and is structured by an array of predominantly literary clues:

> She laid out the objects involved in her decision. A packet of letters, tied with faded violet ribbons. A bracelet of hair she had worked, from his hair and her own...which now she meant to bury with him. His watch. An unfinished letter, undated, in his own hand, which she had earlier found in his desk. A letter to herself in a spidery hand.
>
> A sealed envelope. (449)

The "letter to herself in a spidery hand" is from Christabel, and in it the poetess begs Ellen to give the ailing Ash a letter she has written to him, which discloses "some things" (450). Ellen refuses to open LaMotte's letter to Ash, since "she did not want to

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know what was in the letter....Not known, not spoken about, not an instrument of useless torture, as it would be if seen, whether its contents were good or bad" (460).

The sealed letter results in another disconcerting change to the rules of reading the game *Possession*. The narrator's omniscience may grant extra-textual readers the privilege of letting them eavesdrop on some of Ellen's innermost thoughts, but Ellen still controls and directs much of what extra-textual readers read. Ellen commits a "crime" against extra-textual readers when she buries (hides) the letter with Ash in his grave, thus keeping part of the first story concealed to prevent extra-textual readers from progressing through the next stage of the mystery quest.

Extra-textual readers who expect that the omniscient narration in Chapter Twenty-Five will dispel all the mystery in *Possession* will be disappointed when the contents of the sealed letter are kept a secret from them until fictional/reader/detective Mortimer Cropper literally unearths it from the grave. Forcing extra-textual readers to depend on the group of fictional detectives -- "that strange gathering of disparate seekers and hunters" (499) -- for access to LaMotte's letter undermines the privilege the omniscient narrator has previously granted extra-textual readers. At this point in the novel, extra-textual readers may realize that their reading position is similarly designed to that of fictional readers; while Byatt often leaves her characters out of the detective loop but lets extra-textual readers in on hidden secrets, she can choose, at any time, to revoke this privilege.

The passage that narrates Ellen's attempts to commit a "crime" against LaMotte also describes her intention that the sealed letter will some day be opened and read:

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> And why were the letters so carefully put up then, in their sealed enclosure? Could she read them, where she was going, could he?...
> I want them to have a *sort of duration*, she said to herself. A demi-eternity.
>
> And if the ghouls dig them up again?
>
> Then justice will perhaps be done to *her* when I am not here to see it. (462)

Maud, Roland and the other fictional detectives read the letter for "the end of the story" (498), and their subsequent reading leads them to believe that the letter is the source of this end. Ellen's choice to bury the letter is a gift for fictional readers; they cry success when they read LaMotte's letter, for in it the poetess offers information that Maud, Roland and the other scholars see as the key to their mystery quest: that she and Ash did have a daughter, Maia, who was raised by her sister Sophie, and that Christabel is really Maud's great-great-great-grandmother. Maud's discovery of her origins but inability to completely reconstruct the first story indicates that *Possession* harbors elements of the deconstructive antidetective novel, a work which ends up as more a quest for identity, "which can be 'solved,' while the 'outside mystery,' reality, is never solved" (Tani 78).

Maud's familial ties with both Christabel and Randolph may be a delicious revelation, but it is also "perhaps the most subversive inflection to the conventional object of detection" (Buxton 207), because it literally fuses and confuses the story of the "crime" and the story of the investigation. Blackadder's comment to Maud that she has been "'exploring all along the myth - no the truth - of your own origins'" (503) is another irony which subverts the notion that the fictional detective possesses superior wit and

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successfully puts all the pieces of the mystery puzzle back together knowingly and rationally. Maud is discomforted when she realizes, in spite of her intelligence and rationality, that she "turn[s] out to be a central figure in...[the first] story" (505); without her knowledge, she has literally possessed part of the first story all along: "'I don't quite like it. There's something unnaturally determined about it all. Daemonic. I feel they have taken me over'" (505).

Whereas the classic detective novel features a detective who uses superior wit to solve crimes, in *Possession* it is a system of "crimes" which lead fictional detectives to believe they have solved the mystery. Maud only discovers her origins and hence puts a piece back into the puzzle through a chain of "crimes" (defined as such for the way information is concealed from those who should know it -- such as Ash -- and is revealed to those such as Cropper who literally commit a crime to attain it) spanning both the hypodiegetic and diegetic levels of the fiction: Ellen keeps the letter hidden from Ash, stealing his chance for knowledge; to do justice to LaMotte, Ellen buries the letter making it possible that the "ghouls and vultures" may discover LaMotte's relationship with Ash; Cropper robs a grave and steals the letter to possess the secrets he hopes it will contain; and finally, though Beatrice Nest insists the letter "'shouldn't be disturbed....It should be put back'" (498), Maud foregoes the issue of privacy and becomes Cropper's accomplice, urging him to complete his "crime" when she insists, "'We need the end of the story...we *must* look'" (498).

Whereas the classic detective novelist provides the detective access to clues he/she interprets and orders to solve the mystery, Byatt destroys or keeps hidden many

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(but not all) clues from fictional detectives, demolishing their opportunity to end their quest with a complete solution. In Chapter twenty-five the omniscient narrator places "truth" in letters written for extra-textual readers. In contrast, because the letters have been burned, destroyed, or considered but never written by Ellen Ash, they do not exist for fictional detectives to read. Since the only path to "truth" available to Maud and Roland is through reading written discourse, Byatt mocks their investigation by disclosing "truth" in letters that do not exist for fictional detectives on the diegetic level of the fiction.

Through an unfinished letter Ash has written but never sent, extra-textual readers become aware of his desire for the answers that will fill the gaps LaMotte's silence has created:

> *I write each year...although I know you will not answer...to take away some of the black weight I labour under....There is something I* must know *and you know what that is....What became of my child? Did he live? How can I ask, not knowing? How can I ask, not knowing?* (455-456)

This letter makes Ellen well aware that her husband is desperate to know what became of his child, but she still denies him the chance for this knowledge by never giving him LaMotte's letter. Soon after extra-textual readers read Ash's unfinished letter, Ellen "took [it]...gingerly by its corner...as though it were a stunned biting creature, wasp or scorpion. She made a little fire in Randolph's attic grate, and burned the letter, turning it with the poker until it was black flakes" (457). For readers in the world outside the fiction, Ash's *destroyed* letter tells part of the first story; but extra-textual readers become

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voyeurs participating in a metafictional antidetective novel when they witness this destructive act. Burning the letter puts Ellen in the role of the metafictional antidetective novelist, one who "is a 'literary killer,' a killer of texts...and this killer represents within the fiction the operation that the writer...performed on it" (Tani 113). Byatt kills this portion of the first story in the novel by having Ellen commit a "crime" against fictional readers; by destroying Ash's letter Ellen ensures that they will never read his words, that this part of his text will forever be hidden from those fictional detectives "seeking" a solution.

In Chapter Twenty-Five extra-textual readers come to know part of the first story when the omniscient narrator allows them to eavesdrop on Ellen's thoughts and feelings through letters she "wrote...in her head" (451):

> 'You must understand that I have always known of your -'
>
> How to find a word? Relationship, liaison, love?
>
> 'You must understand that my husband told me, long ago, freely and truthfully, of his feeling for you...'
>
> 'How can you ask this of me, how can you break up this short time I have with him...I cannot give him your letter.' (451, 452)

Though these thoughts bring extra-textual readers closer to a sense of the hermeneutic closure sought by the classic detective novel's readership, we also know Ellen "wrote down nothing" (452) so fictional readers are unable to access or read her thoughts, for "the only way that *they* can know history is through its inscription" (Buxton 213-214). Byatt punches holes in the validity of the literary mystery by locating part of the first

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story in thoughts inaccessible to fictional readers, rather than in tangible, literary clues, around which most of the novel has been structured.

But should extra-textual readers even trust the letters Ellen wrote in her head? These readers may find anxiety lurking in their readerly satisfaction when Byatt warns that, even if Ellen had put her thoughts down in a letter to LaMotte, "it would be no more and no less than the truth, but it would not ring true, it would not convey the truth of the way it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silences that extended before and after it, always the silences" (453). Thus, the knowledge extra-textual readers gain through the omniscient narrator is pregnant with paradox: they may find satisfaction by listening to Ellen's thoughts, but, as Ellen says, no amount of this can ever "convey the truth of the way it had been." The "truths" located in silence expose the limitations of the detective quest for both extra-textual and fictional detectives by confirming that "truth" is an eternal enigma that can only ever be recovered partially; even the author can never capture the complete truth of the way it had been, can never fill the gaps where silence speaks unattainable truths. Byatt gives extra-textual readers a bit of "truth," but simultaneously reveals how complete "truth" is impossible, thereby partially satisfying but at the same time disappointing hermeneutic satisfaction to undermine the "detectivelike expectations of the positivistic mind" (Spanos quoted by Dettmar 155).

Extra-textual readers witness the further undermining of fictional readers' detective efforts when, through Ellen, Byatt not only reveals that the "truth" exists in gaps of silence, but that distorted "truth" is inherent in much of what is written. The omniscient narrator tells extra-textual readers that Ellen "sat down to manufacture the

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carefully edited, the carefully *strained* (the metaphor was one of jelly-making) truth of her journal. She would decide later what to do with *that*. It was both a defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures" (461-462). "*Strained* truth" is partial truth, and this is all fictional readers ever attain. While the deliberately filtered truth of Ellen's journal baits fictional readers, it assaults the investigation they perform; unlike that which is not written, this textual clue directs the interpretation of lies. Byatt ultimately undermines the fictional readers' quest to construct the first story by reading textual clues, for, no matter how efficient and astute their reading ability, partial/fragmented clues will only lead to partial solution. By exposing the inadequacies of the classic detective novel and its assertion that truth is a fixed attainable entity, Byatt also critiques her own literary mystery, a novel whose aim is to solve a mystery based on reading and interpreting textual clues.

In the Postscript 1868 that ends the novel, extra-textual readers realize that *Possession,* unlike the classic detective novel, does not "reconstitute the whole" nor reveal how "'everything fits together'" (Porter 88); instead, the omniscient narrator tells extra-textual readers the story of what happened to ensure that everything did not fit together. Byatt narrates the meeting between Ash and his daughter Maia to create what McHale calls a "missing end-frame" (*Postmodernist* 117), leaving extra-textual readers in the hypodiegesis of the fiction without returning to the diegetic world and the second story. The Postscript entry begins: "There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never

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been" (508). As in Chapters Fifteen and Twenty-Five, the Postscript reveals information to extra-textual readers that fictional readers will never know, but in this section fictional readers are not the only ones left unknowing. Christabel LaMotte never knows that Ash and his daughter have met. Ash says to Maia, "'Tell your aunt...that you met a poet, who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new'" (510). However, Ash's request is never granted, for "on the way home, she met her brothers...and she forgot the message, which was never delivered" (511). As the message is spoken but never written down, it cannot travel from the hypodiegetic to the diegetic world -- from Ash to Roland -- nor can it travel within the hypodiegetic world -- from Maia to Christabel. The guilt Christabel feels from her treatment of Randolph is never assuaged; her final attempt to have his forgiveness is never heard; nor does she know that Ash has met with his daughter. Hence, while the Postscript privileges extra-textual readers with access to such a delightful, pleasing secret, extra-textual readers should, at the same time, realize that their hermeneutic satisfaction is rooted in the *partiality* of the first story. The Postscript raises a final anxiety in extra-textual readers by foregrounding the fact that there has never been a complete first story -- the story of the "crime" -- in the first place; hence, the efforts of both extra-textual and fictional detectives to construct or write the first story have been both impossible and in vain. If there has never been a complete, first story to reconstruct, then the second story -- the story of the investigation -- is, for extra-textual and fictional readers, forever partial, the sense of an ending unsatisfied.

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CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Do you know - the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination....**Whatever the absolute Truth - or Untruth..*****I am saying that without the Maker's imagination nothing*** **can live** ***for us - whether alive or dead, or once alive and now dead, or waiting to be brought to life....Tell me you know - and that it is not simple - or simply to be rejected - there is a truth of Imagination.***

[Randolph Ash in a letter to Christabel LaMotte 168, 169]

Throughout this thesis I examine how Byatt's literary mystery and metafictional antidetective novel *Possession* subverts and undermines the classic detective novel's quest to eradicate mystery and restore "truth," closure, and certainty to the world. My discussion of Byatt's narrative games targets how her book assaults the classic detective novel's aim to achieve "resolution and disclosure" (Porter 82) by completely reconstructing the past, or the first story - the story of the crime. As Todorov explains, the word "crime" in classic detective fiction refers to an actual breech of the law, customarily a murder (45).

In contrast, Byatt's antidetective strategy in *Possession* imbues the word "crime" with a variety of connotations relating to both the activities of characters in the first story and largely to the investigative activities of detectives in the second story (the story of the investigation). Ash and LaMotte's love affair leads critic Jackie Buxton to declare them the "villains" of the first story, since Maud and Roland's investigation "resides not in the conventional detection of the perpetrators of a murder, but rather in tracing the trajectory of the crime itself: passion" (206). Buxton insists that Byatt inverts the detective story

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genre by having "the criminals - Ash and LaMotte...discovered at the outset" with the rest of the novel "detecting the exact details of their illicit exploits" (206). While Ash and LaMotte's escapades are described as "criminal" because their actions deceive others and disrupt the moral code of their society, there are other characters in *Possession* who can be deemed "criminals" by how their actions and words keep fictional detectives and extra-textual readers from learning the whole story of the past, and hence from obtaining the total hermeneutic satisfaction on which the classic detective novel depends. A brief discussion of some characters who comprise the cast of "criminals" (excluding Ash and LaMotte) in *Possession* will illustrate how the various notions of "crime" in this literary mystery are inextricably linked to the reading, writing and interpretation of written discourses.

As Stefano Tani insists, the author of the metafictional antidetective novel is the head "criminal" figure who organizes the attack on classic detective fiction by playing games with readers both inside and outside of the fiction (Tani 44, 113). Byatt launches her "criminal" mission against the classic detective story through her fictional accomplices and journal keepers Blanche, Sabine and Ellen; these "writers" "kill," "distort and cut" the text in ways that force extra-textual and fictional readers to become "detectives" (Tani 113). Byatt mocks and manipulates the detective efforts of extra-textual and fictional readers by sneaking various antidetective strategies into the seemingly benign discourse of journal writing. As tools used by the metafictional antidetective novelist Byatt, Blanche's, Ellen's and Sabine's journals commit "crimes" against extra-textual and fictional readers by filling the detective quest in *Possession* with

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uncertainty and doubt and "killing" the guarantee of truth and restoration of order inherent in the classic detective novel. The ultimate "crime" common to the journals which comprise the hypodiegetic level of the fiction is their inability to tell all readers one unified story of the past. Whereas the classic detective novel ends with the triumph of "truth" by unmasking the criminal, "criminals" parade freely throughout the pages of *Possession*, for it is their textual clues that write the mystery of the first story and control and manipulate the investigation of the second story.

Though the various antidetective strategies I have explored in this thesis are "criminal" in the context of the classic detective novel because they work to disappoint readerly expectations by repressing their hermeneutic satisfaction, the concept of "crime" can also be applied to fictional detectives, those seekers of closure. Buxton suggests this when she states that "it could also be argued that Byatt's generic inversion is, in fact, two-fold. As the narrative progresses it appears that Ash and LaMotte - the supposed criminals - increasingly become the victims of the contemporary detectives' quest for the truth" (217). Though Buxton does not develop this idea, her claim that it is the sleuths in *Possession* who engage in "criminal" behaviour inspires some interesting connotations of the notion of the "crime" that involve readers both inside and outside of the fiction. Like the classic detective who uses his/her superior wit and interpretive abilities for the sole purpose of stamping out mystery, many of the fictional detectives in *Possession* use their skills as professional readers and writers to "kill" the mystery of the past and restore order to the present. The detective process fictional readers such as Maud and Roland and extra-textual readers perform in order to learn the story of the past inevitably involves

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placing their interpretive judgement on the textual clues; hence, their position as readers makes it impossible to avoid (like "writers" Blanche, Ellen and Sabine) the "criminal" activities of distorting and manipulating the past.

Michael Holquist asserts, "[i]f, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved" (155). The classic detective novel's aim to solve a murder/death creates a detective process completely obsessed with one end, one final product; whereas the antidetective novel's aim to solve a life makes this type of novel process-oriented (the irony lies in the fact that antidetective strategies, as Tani says, "kill" texts in order to compel the reader to participate in the detective process). Perhaps the nastiest "criminals" in the antidetective novel *Possession* are those who believe that a *life* can be put into a neat package of positivism. Maud and Roland are guilty of this by reading exclusively for "the end" (498) of the first story; critic Mortimer Cropper also assumes that a life can be successfully tracked, labelled and written, for he believes that owning various physical objects once belonging to Ash will satisfy his "aim to know as far as possible everything he did - everyone who mattered to him - every little preoccupation he had" (96). In a letter to Maud, French scholar Ariane Le Minier is guilty of summarizing Sabine's life into a dull short story and ignoring the vital storytelling process extra-textual and fictional detectives witness when they read Sabine's journal:

> *Sabine's story after these events is part happy, part sad....She married in 1863, after a prolonged battle with her father to be allowed to meet possible* partis. *The M. De Kergarouet she married was a dull and*

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> *melancholic person, considerably older than she was, who became obsessively devoted to her, and died of grief, it was said...a year after she died in her third child-bed. She bore two daughters, neither of whom survived into adolescence.* (380)

Though the metafictional antidetective novel *Possession* seeks to disappoint and disconcert readers of the classic detective novel, this literary mystery ultimately affirms the vitality of storytelling. Whereas endless creativity, fabrication and the weaving of multiple tales that defy one true story are enemies of kitsch and classic detective fiction, they are captivating accomplices of art and antidetective fiction. By asserting that the only tangible truth that exists is the "truth of the Imagination" (169), Byatt's intellectually stimulating literary mystery *Possession* nourishes the dynamic participation of readers in an ongoing detective process involving the reading, writing and interpretation of texts.

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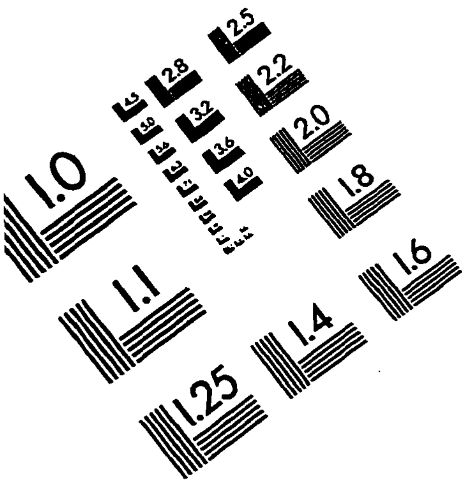

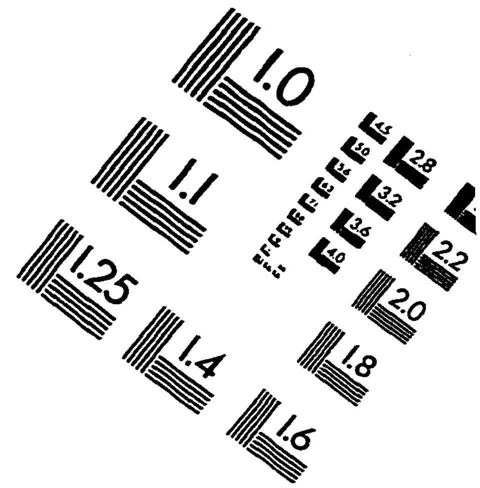

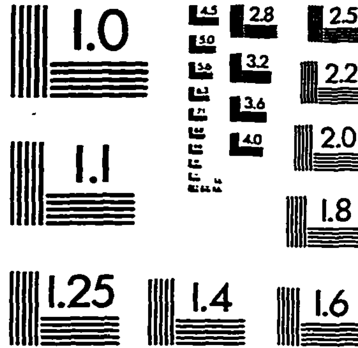

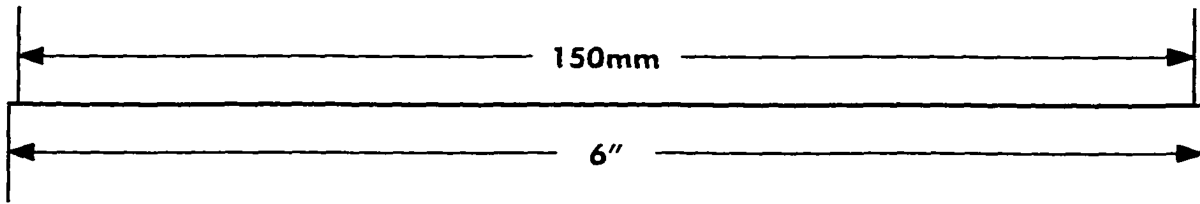

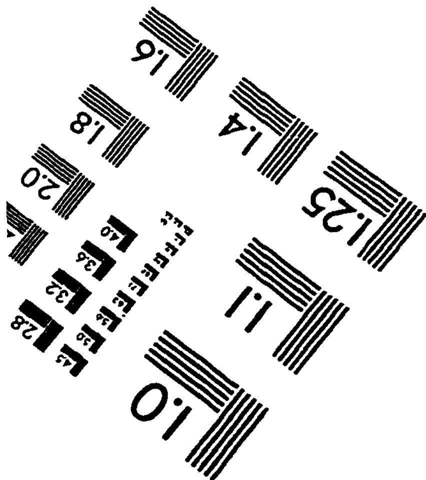

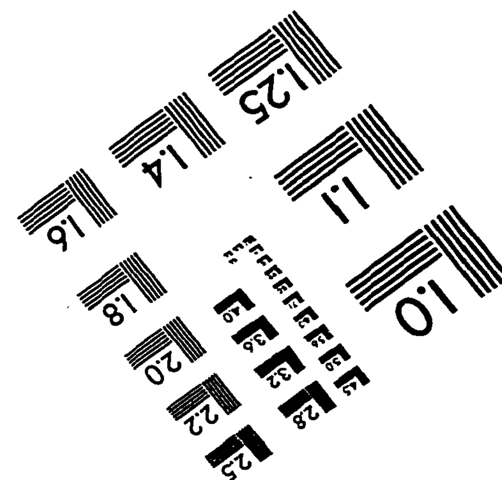

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