

**University of Melbourne**

**Elizabeth Colbert**

## **The intertwining of product and process in writerly identity**

### Abstract:

This paper explores, with reference to A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, the proposition that writerly identity is not only forged through Julia Kristeva's notion of the intertextual but also through inscribed social and bodily experiences as those outlined by Elizabeth Grosz. It will be argued that these elements, which shape both conscious process and unconscious thought, influence both the writing process and product.

### Biographical note:

Dr Elizabeth Colbert: My ongoing interest in fiction writing and my work as an Academic Skills Advisor in the university context have led to my interest in the writing process, research associated with creative practice and the development of the identity of the writer through their writing, both creative and academic. My interest in the experiential and its role in creative writing was sparked when I documented my own writing practice and found my understanding of my writing process was not what I thought it was. My re-reading of *Possession* had also led me to review my understanding of my writerly identity.

### Keywords:

Intertextual—Writerly Identity—Experiential—Writing Process

Roland, the central character in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, 'had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected' (1991, p. 459). Similarly, we might think of writerly identity as a point of intersection. This paper explores the proposition that writerly identity is not only forged through Julia Kristeva's originating theory of the intertextual, 'that texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed' (Allen 2006: 36), but from the inscribed social and bodily experiences emphasised by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* (1994). It will be argued that both written texts and the experiential shape writerly identity and the writing process both, in themselves, constituent elements of the text produced. By referencing *Possession*, I also hope to shed light on a point where literary studies and creative writing meet. I became aware of this intersection recently when rereading *Possession*, a re-reading which led me to ask, could my novel, *The Fragility Papers* (2009), have been written without *Possession*?

My predominant memory of *Possession* was of the central female character's bathroom. Maud's bathroom is white and loved by Roland for its cleanliness and space. However, was the bathroom my predominant memory of *Possession*? There, disturbingly, on the third page of *Possession* was a description of a book that 'sprang apart, like a box, disgorging leaf after leaf of faded paper, blue, cream, grey, covered with rusty writing, the brown scratches of steel nib' (Byatt 1991: 5). At once I heard the echo of the opening pages of my own novel which also reference the frametale structure of *Possession*. 'She thought in layers. Sheets of paper, newly white, cream with ages. Pages torn from books and magazines' (Colbert 2009). Was this possible? How could I be so unaware of my mimicry? Were such subliminal intertextual inscriptions of more influence than my conscious focus on the experiential that I had drawn upon when developing my central character?

This experience led me to ask whether *Possession* could have been written without Byatt's experience of reading and understanding nineteenth century literature and contemporary literary studies. Intertextuality, an influential theory in contemporary thinking about subjectivity (Mansfield 2000), emphasises the unflagging, dialogic engagement of the writer with other texts. My re-reading of *Possession* reinforced how little I understood of the influence of what we read and the degree to which my writerly identity had been shaped by my reading.

Many fiction writers have written about their writing processes. Umberto Eco, for example, has described the research he undertook before writing *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1985) which enabled him to create an imaginary world and write from within it by following the logical implications arising from it. Michael Ondaatje (2007), on the other hand, writes of the surprise of a text which emerges from the unconscious in a writing process that draws on the extant within the writer's psyche. Ondaatje's view of writing was closer to my own early experience of creative writing. What had emerged in this process, in my case, was material that drew on those embodied, physically inscribed and sensed experiences described by Elizabeth Grosz (1994).

Grosz argues that ‘every body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence’ (Grosz 1994: 142). Such a history includes both the ‘contingencies that befall the body’ and ‘the “raw ingredients” out of which the body is produced—its internal conditions of possibility, the history of its particular tastes, predilections, movements, habits, postures, gait, and comportment’ (Grosz 1994: 142). Further, our interpretation of the sensed is mediated not only by what has been previously unconsciously inscribed but through that which is consciously attended to or remembered.

As a writer who became conscious of the intersection of both the intertextual and experiential in my writing process and writerly identity, I found myself asking whether the term intertextual might better be written as *intertextual*, the *text* italicised, to give recognition to the breadth of texts, not only those based in language, but visual mediums such as film, heard texts such as music and other sensed experiences which the writer may draw upon when writing fiction. (As I edit my writing, the sound and rhythm of the language is paramount.) The intertwining of the two, I believe, is also illustrated in *Possession*.

The full title *Possession: A Romance*, John Mullan notes, positions the novel as a Romance that draws upon and includes the exceptional and fantastic (2005 p. 112). The novel encapsulates several other narrative threads: the illicit pursuit of a hidden past; the power of a sense of ownership of the ‘other’ in love; the unquestioned capturing of the self in a quest; the enigmatic force that captures the writer and leads to pen on paper. In Jay Parina’s (2010: 1) review of *Possession* on its release he wrote, *Possession* ‘is a tour de force that opens every narrative device of English fiction to inspection without, for a moment, ceasing to delight.’ The structure of the novel is that of a *frametale*, a structural form used in *A Thousand and One Nights* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Porter Abbott 2005). The internal story takes place and gains its strength and validity though the context of the primary narrative. Byatt’s innovations include her ‘canny invention of letters, poems and diaries from the 19th century’ (Parina 2010) based on the writings of Browning and Rossetti. She interweaves and plays with the established tradition of letters which ‘reveal the truth in gaps’ (Mullan 2006: 255) The novel also references the traditional romance as the central characters fall in love as they uncover a Victorian love story.

Further evidence of the influence of literary and cultural influences appears in Blackadder’s dream. He wakes ‘sweating from nightmares in which he was required to sit his Finals again at a moment’s notice and with new papers on Commonwealth Literature and post-Derridean strategies of non-interpretation...’ (Byatt 1991: 432). Byatt, by referencing Derrida, exemplifies the nexus where creative writing meets literary theory and enables readers familiar with Derrida to empathise with the Blackadder’s fear. What this passage offers readers unfamiliar with Derrida’s work I cannot say which naturally raises questions about the limitations of such writing.

Further influences of literary theory are evident as Byatt extends and give depth to the novel when the minor character, Arian Le Minier, writes to Maud about some papers she thinks will interest Maud:

May I say finally, as I hope to be about to say during our brief meeting, how much I admire your work on liminality. I think from that point of view too, you will find poor Sabine's journal interesting. La Bretagne is full of the mythology of crossing-places and thresholds, as she says (Byatt 1991: 411).

Liminality. In this extract, the reader meets the deft hand of Byatt as the narrative not only takes the reader into Maud's literary world but defines it so that the reader has access to the academic space she has ventured into. Both Maud and the reader, in this case, experience growth as the plot unfolds.

*Possession* 'is a pastiche of texts from which the past is to be pieced together' (Mullan 2006: 242). Different eras and genres are referenced and interwoven through form, language and syntax. However, Byatt does more than simply narrate a past story. She reveals through the narrative a conscious awareness of the process. When Val, Roland's long terms partner says:

Who wants to spend their life in the British Museum basement? It smells as bad as Mrs Jarvis' flat up there, full of cat piss. Who wants to spend their life reading old menus in cat piss (Byatt 1991: 327)?

I suspect Byatt is describing, in very contemporary language, what she may have experienced as she researched material for the novel, researching which enabled her to write:

...my father says, the name Dahud, or Dahut, is ancient times, signified "The good sorceress." He says she must have been a pagan priestess, as in an Icelandic saga, or one of the virgin priestesses of the Druids in the Ile de Sein (Byatt 1991: 378).

Byatt makes clear her awareness of the process of renewing what has become historical:

All old stories, my cousin, will bear telling and telling again in different ways. What is required is to keep alive, to polish, the simple clean forms of the tale which *must* be there—in this case the angry Ocean, the terrible leap of the horse, the fall of Dahud from the crupper, the unguilment etc etc. And yet to add something of yours, the writer, which make all these things seem new and first seem, without having been appropriated for private or personal ends. This you have done (Byatt 1991: 379).

The dialogic intertwining of past myths with the primary narrative and her narrator's reflection on the writing and reading process reflects literary interest in the intertextual at the time the novel was published.

It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasure of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex .... They not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading .... And yet, natures such as Roland's are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive (Byatt 1991: 510-11).

Such writing also hints at the writer's capacity to recreate the experiential and the enormous elasticity of the creative writer, a state perhaps arrived at after many hours of research in a library infused with the smell of cats.

Evidence of the capacity of a writer to make use of past texts and to mimic the voices of others can also be seen in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001). By

adapting and adopting the syntactic structure of Ned Kelly's *Jerilderie Letter* (1879). Carey creates his narrative voice. A further example is Carey's Jack Maggs in which the adopted voice of Charles Dickens is used to tell a story based on a fragment of the narrative in *Great Expectations*. Such creative play not only reflects the point where the writer of fiction and literature meet, where new texts reflect the intertextual nature of writing, they also reflect the variety of ways in which a writer may draw upon other texts.

Within our contemporary context, where the authoritative voice of the interpreter has been abandoned and the self has become the centre point of meaning, interpretation and exploration (Mansfield 2000), albeit subject to the voices of others, the role of studying the writing of others can be seen to have meaning for those who wish to develop their own writing. It could be argued that studying the writing of others is essential, but what of the experiential?

*Possession* evokes the experiential. I use the word evoke because, on reflection, I realised that Byatt's writing is essentially descriptive of what can be seen rather than descriptive of the embodied, which is so fully explored, for example, in Ian McEwan's reworking of the Romance genre in *On Chesil Beach* (2007). There are the odd exceptions. Christobel LaMotte writes in a confessional letter, 'I write to you as it was yesterday, of all that rage like iron bands burning round my breast, of the spite and the love (for you, for my sweet Maia, for poor Blanche too)' (Byatt 1991: 543). When Byatt skilfully wraps Maud's golden hair in a turban because Maud fears that to wear it loose will undermine her academic credibility, we sense the restriction. Equally, we sense the scent worn by Maud's nemesis, the lesbian Professor Leonora Stern who wears her hair out:

Her black hair flowed on her shoulders, her wrists and ears and visible bosom were hung with suns and stars of gold. She shone in the small space by the water-cooler and emitted pulses of florid and musky scent (Byatt 1991: 434).

I read and interpreted Leonora Stern's character through her scent and I would argue that Byatt must have experienced such a scent.

Byatt leads us through the homes of others, and into the characters of those who live in them through their bathrooms, surely a unique approach to characterisation. The bathroom surfaces as the epic-center of feeling and layering as Roland kneels at a bathroom door and peeps through the key hole, thus referencing both the human and mythological (Parina 2010), to see whether or not Maud is there. It is here that the 'kick galvanic', the romantic trope that kick starts unresolved sexual tension in a Romance novel, announces itself as Maud opens the door. 'Her hands were pink and slightly damp, the fringes of the pale hair were damp too.' Roland asks himself, 'Did she simply *emit* the electric shock ... or did she also feel it? His body knew perfectly well that she felt it' (Byatt 1995: 162-3). And it is here that the reader is asked to empathise with one of the most powerful of human feelings, the *coup de foudre*.

In addition, there are other ways in which Byatt references the experiential, particularly through her knowledge of academia and the writing process. These are evident in the earlier examples which also reflect the intertwining of the intertextual

and experiential. The writing world, literary texts and her experience of working with them and writing, is Byatt's world and she returns to its nature frequently in the novel.

Drawing on my own experience of writing, I have found that extensive research has facilitated the creation and inhabiting of other worlds in the same way as direct experience. Once my researched knowledge has been fully integrated into the psyche, I find I am able to draw upon it both consciously and unconsciously. Umberto Eco (2006) depended on lengthy research to construct his fictional world in *The Name of the Rose*: 'This world had to be as precise as possible, so that I could move around in it with total confidence' (2006, p.314). Suzanne Cassidy, in her review quotes Byatt as saying that *Possession* was written "all in one piece, unlike my others" and that she put herself "very much in character to write them" (Byatt in Cassidy 2010).

To be in character suggests a deep familiarity with it. Roland expresses my own experience: 'He could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own' (Byatt 1991: 515). My experience has been that in the process of making the voice heard, felt and seen, there is often work to be done that is based in research not only from texts but the experiential pleasure of simply walking along the beach.

Some writers, such as Carmel Bird (1988), ask us to place all our trust in the experiential and remembered. She advocates that novice writers should draw deliberately from the immediacy of their remembered past, that they take a feeling from a childhood memory and write out of the experience. The process, she argues, provides a foundation for expressing and embedding truth in fictional works. This approach is very different to that of Eco.

Bird and Eco's viewpoints represent, for me, the far points on a continuum on which descriptions of writerly identity may be hung. At one end, intense personal experiences inform the writing at the other end rests deliberate and conscious research drawn from other texts. I would argue that both are important and that one's writerly identity is an amalgam of both. If the experiential gives credibility in the expression of human feeling, the intertextual brings the referential framework that contextualises the new and allows readers to say this is different and interesting: both writer and reader come to explore new worlds through the written word. A writer's identity is thus formed through an amalgam of processes which may be drawn upon both consciously and unconsciously.

In *Possession*, Maud must let loose her hair. Symbolically she undoes the cultural turban binding her hair and identity to her academic position. Not only does the liberation of her hair demonstrate the expression of self, but her acknowledgement that she must reject the cultural restrictions impinging on her physical being: 'I—I've analysed it' she says. 'Because I have the sort of good looks I have. People treat you as a kind of possession if you have a certain sort of good looks' (Byatt 1991: 549). These restrictions are not only relevant to her character. They represent a broader awareness of the literary canon which places limitations on the writer pursuing the literary genre (and this may equally apply to those writing other genres). Read the writer is told, but does this bind the writer to the previously encoded tropes of others?

If one is to undertake literary studies in conjunction with creative writing, creative writers must be allowed to let down their hair.

For the writer, forging a text can be difficult. I often feel I am turning on the pivotal point of Deleuze and Guattari's intersecting planes (1999) or being held at Byatt's liminal point of a hazy border crossing as the text emerges. One does evolve with the knowledge gained as a text develops. However, this implies change rather than solidity in terms of writerly identity. Perhaps, as Kristeva proposed in her later writings (Allen, 2006), the illusion of solidity and a firm identity is something that belongs to the past. Perhaps, a belief in a stable identity is past history and, like the nineteenth century literature Byatt has researched and creatively referenced in *Possession*, it waits for someone to research it and draw upon it in a new contemporary text.

*Possession*, I believe, makes a case for studying the literature of the past. However, it is not only Byatt's larger understanding of past texts that underpins the novel, her experience of researching them provides many of creative stepping stones in this innovative work. The novel itself, it could be argued, reflects the *intertextual* and provides a solid foundation for discussing the writerly identity of Byatt. But does the novel define her? Probably not. In meeting the challenge to write creatively, to write beyond the extant, there is a demand for the writerly identity of a writer to remain a work in progress.

### Works cited

- Allen, Graham 2006 *Intertextuality*, Routledge, London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group
- Bird, Carmel 1988 *Dear Writer*, Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books
- Byatt, A S 1991 *Possession*, New York: Vintage International
- Carey, Peter 2001 *True History of the Kelly Gang*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press
- Cassidy, Suzanne 1990 'How to write a novel: start with two couples' in *The New York Times on the Web* October 21 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-possession.html> (accessed 21 August 21 2010)
- Colbert, E 2009 *Speaking the Unspoken: The Ontology of Writing a Novel*, Swinburne University: Unpublished PhD Thesis
- Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix 1999 *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: The Athlone Press
- Eco, Umberto 1985 *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd
- Eco, Umberto 2006 *On Literature*, London: Vintage
- Grosz, Elizabeth 1994 *Volatile Bodies*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin
- Kelly, Ned 1870 *Jerilderie Letter*, State Library of Victoria, <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/collections/treasures/jerilderieletter/jerilderie>, (accessed 8 June 2009)
- Mansfield, Nick 2000 *Subjectivity*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin
- McEwan, Ian 2007 *On Chesil Beach*, London: Jonathon Cape
- Mullan, John 2005, *How Novels Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ondaatje, 2007, in S Bunbury, 'A collage of characters' in *The Age*, April 28, 26-27

Parina, Jay 2010 'Unearthing the Secret Lover' in *The New York Times on the Web*, October 21, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-possession.html> (accessed 21 August 2010)

Porter Abbott, H 2005 *Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wynne, Patrick 2010 *Possession* by A. S. Byatt, <http://www.patrick.com/bathroom/possession.html> (accessed 15 August 2010)