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SISTER NARRATIVES: MARGARET DRABBLE'S *THE WATERFALL* AND A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION: A ROMANCE*

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Aims of the dissertation and definition of its subject

The present dissertation focuses on two novels by two sisters, Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and claims them to be sister narratives not because of their authors' family relationship, but because of the intrinsic textual qualities of the two novels. *The Waterfall* belongs to the post-45 *Jane Eyre*-rewritings and focuses on the self-in-the-making process of the female narrator protagonist, Jane Gray. The novel consists of constantly oscillating third- and first person narratives which write and reflect on the protagonist's wished-for romance story at the same time. The third-person romance exemplifies many of the features that Catherine Belsey (*Critical Practice* 1980) attributes to classic realist texts and heavily relies on nineteenth-century female literary texts, such as Jane Austen's novels, especially *Emma* (1816), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) , whereas the first-person parts show the gradual disillusionment of the narrator protagonist with her own romantic expectations and unintentionally write her *Bildungsroman*. As opposed to Drabble's novel, *Possession* is a multi-focal work with emphatic postmodern traits. It focuses on two parallel love stories: the nineteenth-century romance of two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, and the literary discovery and unfolding love story of two contemporary researchers, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell. *Possession* is heavily and explicitly indebted to post-structuralist linguistic theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, a feature that immensely influences the novel's structure as well. The novel consists of a mosaic of letters, diary entries, tales and poems constituting a *mélange* of genres, which makes the narrative dispersed and urges the reader to enter the never ending game of signification in the course of reading and reconstructing the parallel love stories.

I consider the two novels distinct works of two very different authors which, despite their dissimilarities, have several common features that relate them to the female literary tradition. Both novels consciously continue and contest the nineteenth-century female literary tradition by depicting the female artist figures of Jane Gray and Christabel LaMotte, Maud Bailey as well as the fairy Melusina. Both novels offer solutions to the generic discrepancy of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*, that is, two genres which could not be contained in one plot in an unproblematic way in most nineteenth-century novels by women writers. As both nineteenth-century genres are heavily gendered—the romance being the feminine story of social integration and the *Bildungsroman* the masculine one—their coexistence created a tension for the female protagonists, as well as their female authors, which could be reconciled

by setting one part of the contradiction aside, usually the *Bildung*, and provide social integration for the heroine through marriage as a successful resolution for the romance. Though generic variants of both genres have long existed for women, such as the female *Bildung*, the voyage-in (Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* 1983), or the novel of manners, the generic clashes call for a revision of the relation of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*. I claim that *The Waterfall* and *Possession* revise the generic discrepancies of these two nineteenth-century genres by providing a synthesis of the two which, instead of denying the female protagonists either the romance or the *Bildung* ending, provides them with the freedom of "having it all," social integration, maturity and love at the same time.

This synthetising attitude relates Drabble's and Byatt's two novels not only to each other but also to the female literary tradition as it has been long negotiating the generic discrepancies of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*. Without neglecting their dissimilarities which are due to their authors' different artistic interests and methods, theoretical views and the 20-year time difference between the two novels, I propose that *The Waterfall* and *Possession* successfully negotiate the generic clashes of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*, which makes them sister narratives in the female literary tradition.

Methods

I provide a comparative analysis of the two sister narratives which focuses on the generic synthesis of the romance and the *Bildungsroman* and points out the various methods the two novels apply to negotiate the generic clashes. Naturally, my analysis relies on the study of the romance and the *Bildungsroman* and their generic variants, applies close reading to detect the various intertextual and citational references and is informed by feminist literary theory as well as Belsey's and Linda Hutcheon's views on textuality and postmodernism among others. I propose that besides the thematic and textual interest in the female literary tradition it is the two novels' common genre, historiographic metafiction as defined by Hutcheon, that provides a common ground for this comparative analysis. For this reason, besides the study of the genres of the romance and the *Bildungsroman* and the related plots, it is inevitable to devote an analysis to the temporal and spatial conditions that Drabble and Byatt create in their novels.

Theses

In this analysis I focus on the following:

1. How do tales as primary gendered plots function in the generic synthesis of *The Waterfall* and *Possession* as well as *Jane Eyre*?
2. How does Jane Gray in *The Waterfall* read her *Bildungsroman* as a romance due to her self-deception which is based on Austen's, Eliot's and Brontë's intertexts as sources of her romantic (dis)illusions?
3. How does Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* read as quests for origins, as citationality, as a female story without generating further generic clashes?
4. How do spatial imagery and the concept of heterotopia contribute to the generic synthesis of the romance and the *Bildungsroman* as a means of contesting the nineteenth-century female literary tradition?

1. Both *The Waterfall* and *Possession* as well as one of their central intertexts, *Jane Eyre* rely on archetypal gendered plots as depicted in (fairy) tales. All three novels emphasise the didactic function of tales and read them as social constructs that are suitable to contain and perpetuate patriarchal ideology. However, most tales are contested in the novels thus the patriarchal assumptions they convey are also re-visitied, revised and relativised at the same time.

Jane Eyre, one of the earliest attempts at negotiating the generic clashes of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*, applies "Beauty and the Beast" as the most pervasive tale of the Thornfield part of the novel, which provides Jane Eyre with a distorted vision of her own romantic entanglement with Rochester that threatens her with the loss of her independence and autonomy. In the meantime, Grace Poole's recurrent laughter introduces the leitmotif of "The Bluebeard" into Jane's story, which she does not take into consideration. As a result of her aborted wedding with Rochester Jane discards the romantic expectations induced by "Beauty and the Beast," and considers the threatening potentials of Bluebeard's bloody chamber. From this point on, Jane does not base her hopes and expectations on fairy tales and discards them as stories that distort human relationships.

The Waterfall discards fairy tales as a result of Jane Gray's disillusionment and after sticking to the two extremes, first eagerly embracing the romantic clichés of "Sleeping Beauty," then totally refusing them, Jane learns how to balance her life without slipping into

new forms of self-deception. Drabble shows the protagonist's disillusionment not only by discarding fairy tale patterns but by presenting more and more critical tales that help Jane to re-evaluate her own life.

Unlike Brontë and Drabble, Byatt includes the texts of the tales in *Possession* and clearly marks authorship. In "The Glass Coffin" the "author," Christabel LaMotte willingly sidesteps from traditional fairy tale patterns and subverts such formulas as the happy marriage of the hero and heroine or having a prince as the hero. The hilarious and self-reflexive dialogues point out the heavily gendered and structured nature of fairy tales and provide an alternative resolution in which everybody lives happily ever after though none of the traditional fairy tale formulas is completed. "The Threshold" marks the initiation of the hero who is sent on a quest and though the story seems to be out of context it greatly informs the character of Roland Michell. Gode's tale tells a story of female development, a voyage-in, which ends with the death of the heroine as a form of punishment for her transgressive sexuality. This tale functions as a warning to the pregnant Christabel.

All the tales the three novels apply present generic variants of the romance and the *Bildungsroman* and provide potential patterns to follow for the characters. In this way, tales function here as in real life by retaining their didactic function.

2. The narrator protagonist of *The Waterfall*, Jane Gray constructs her wished-for romance in the third-person narrative. This romance narrative heavily relies on three nineteenth-century intertexts, Austen's *Emma*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. In this third-person romance Jane Gray rereads these nineteenth-century novels as romances without paying attention to the *Bildung* elements. Though all three novels contain significant *Bildung* elements Jane Gray completely neglects them and focuses only on the romance patterns.

Significantly, the three intertexts contain *Bildung* elements: Emma enjoys a relative freedom due to her social and financial position, Jane Eyre learns to be a governess and later on supports herself, and Maggie Tulliver's *Bildung* is symptomatic of the psychosocial position of women in a strict patriarchal community which condemns the transgressive heroine to death. Despite these obvious *Bildung* elements Jane Gray rereads all three novels as romances, even *The Mill on the Floss*, which is hardly ever categorised as a romance. Jane Gray peeps behind the decorous cover story of Austen's novel of manners and celebrates the genuine romance pairing of Frank Churchill and Emma, which evokes adulterous medieval romances, and, at the same time, loathes the propriety and hypocrisy of a society whose proper embodiment she finds in the pairing of Emma and Mr. Knightley as well as her own

parents. Though Jane Gray proves to be highly critical of her own parents' marriage and hypocritical social attitudes she fails to recognise the distortions of Rochester's love for Jane Eyre, which she idolises as romantic love *par excellence*. Jane Gray limits her reading only to the Thornfield part of Brontë's novel and though she yearns for the balance and harmony of Jane Eyre's life at the end of the novel she stubbornly attributes it to Rochester's love in Thornfield. For this reason Jane Gray concludes that to enjoy the kind of harmony Jane Eyre has achieved by the end of her story she needs to have her own Rochester. This role, however, properly suits James, Jane Gray's brother-in-law and lover who eagerly takes part in this romantic self-deception as he is able to relate to Jane only along romantic clichés. Jane Gray's misreadings continue in her attitude towards *The Mill on the Floss*, which is the most problematic to read exclusively as a romance. Jane Gray respects Maggie Tulliver for her final resignation as Jane herself is incapable of renouncing her transgressive love relation with James. Though she judges Maggie along the very same patriarchal views as the women of St. Oggs do she is unable to evaluate her own relationship along the same norms.

Jane Gray's reading strategy is one-sided and is based on literalising as she eagerly imitates the nineteenth-century heroines who haunt her. However, while she rereads the nineteenth-century intertexts exclusively as romances and is confronted with the discrepancies of her romantic expectations and actual situation, Jane Gray unintentionally enters her own *Bildungsroman*. She negotiates her own *Bildung* and romance by synthetising them into a female *Künstlerroman* which guarantees her the freedom of love and maturity at the same time.

3. Byatt categorises *Possession* as a romance in the subtitle though she produces a generic mosaic which is made up of romance, *Bildungsroman*, biography, diary, letters, epic and lyrical poetry among others. Despite the great variety of genres and the expected generic clashes, the genre of the romance seems to be capable of containing easily these textual pieces, which marks the romance as a multifarious, flexible generic container here. However, I claim that the majority of genres that Byatt incorporates in *Possession* can be read as quests for origins that import *Bildung* elements to all the textual building blocks of the novel.

The romance of the Victorian poets, Ash and LaMotte, is based on their desire which can also be traced in its theorised form as narrative curiosity which motivates the twentieth-century scholars, Maud and Roland to investigate the textual traces of the nineteenth-century romance. Though the contemporary researchers have personal and theoretical doubts about

desire their gradual recovery of the nineteenth-century romance turns their narrative curiosity into desire which results in the slowly unfolding romance of their own.

The biographer figures who are also fuelled by desire for knowledge also want to discover the lives of the two Victorian poets but the methods they apply reveal their distorted views. Their quests for knowledge, for the origins of meaning that can guarantee the truth of the biographies they write, prove to be either false quests or anti-quests. Either the aggressive intrusion of the author (Cropper) or its total elimination (Blackadder), its "death," proves to be misleading in locating meaning. Similarly, the absolute priority of female sexuality in meaning formation (Leonora Stern) and its complete negation (Beatrice Nest) distort meaning, neither does the direct recovery of the Lacanian unconscious (Fergus Wolff) succeed in revealing the origin of meaning. These false and anti-quests parody the Victorian quest for origins and can also been interpreted as various forms of the postmodern yearning for the lost referent. Nevertheless, the lost referent—paradoxically—has always already been there, just as in the case of palimpsests, as it can be read in Maud's face, who turns out to be the descendant of both Ash and LaMotte. I propose that the desire for the origin of meaning in *Possession* is the very same desire that drives the romance of Ash and LaMotte. In this way, the quests for origins become citational just as desire itself, a feature that characterises Byatt's novel not only on the thematic but on the structural level as well.

Byatt's novel consciously plays with the notion of the romance as it extends its meaning well over its traditional understanding as a genre by proposing that besides presenting a love story the romance is a citational mode of relating the present to the past, which, at the same time, relates this interpretation to the genre of historiographic metafiction. Citationality informs the structuring of the plot, which, actually, is made up of two parallel plots, a nineteenth- and a twentieth-century one. It is in the middle of the novel that citationality becomes the most striking, and is taken to the extreme in the form of analepsis in Chapter 15. Here the hierarchy of the original and copy is disqualified, it is no longer relevant if the past influences the present or the other way round, and, as a result, the notion of chronology is no longer applicable. In *Possession* citationality determines character formation as well: the four main characters, Ash and Christabel, Roland and Maud are citational ones as they are obviously modelled on literary characters as well as on nineteenth-century poets except that they barely resemble them in any significant way. (Belsey, *Desire* 85) Besides investigating the possible sources of the various characters I claim that characters are not only based on extratextual references but intratextual ones as well, since the tales *Possession* contains also function as sources of character formation.

The most emblematic citational character in the novel is Melusina: the female protagonist of Christabel LaMotte's epic, a once powerful goddess who functions as the prefiguration of both Christabel and Maud and is depicted as a double-natured woman who is a caring mother and a monster at the same time. The figure of Melusina is the site of dramatising Byatt's as well as Christabel's and Maud's relation to the female literary tradition, which Byatt arranges in a circle. The parallel scenes and citational references permeate the whole novel and create a network of images which confers meaning on the whole text and makes it read as a novel about the female experience. The story starts with Melusina the powerful fertility goddess who brings prosperity to her husband's family and land but due to her enchanted nature she is dispossessed of her powers by her own husband, which reads as judgement of patriarchy on female power. Though Christabel is dispossessed of her love and child just as Melusina she starts repossessing female powers by writing her epic that tells the story of the goddess from her point of view. Christabel makes Melusina the protagonist of the epic and, unlike the medieval versions, depicts her as the victim of her husband's dispossession, not as a monster/witch who betrays her man. When Maud starts doing her research on Christabel and Melusina she completes the repossession of womanly powers, which provides her autonomy and love in the end. The cycle of women figures can be read in terms of genres as well: Melusina's romance is continued by Christabel's *Bildungsroman* and romance with Ash that is actually contained by her female *Künstlerroman*, and the cycle is completed by Maud's slowly unfolding romance. In this way, cyclicality and citationality create a synthesis of the two genres, which also relates both novels to the female literary tradition.

4. After a detailed investigation of the plots of *The Waterfall* and *Possession* as well as the concepts of time that inform the plots it is necessary to locate the stories in space as well. To avoid the inherent risks of investigating such a broad term as space I limit my analysis to spatial imagery and the concept of heterotopia which I consider to play an important role in the romance-*Bildungsroman* argument. As both notions of space are present in *Jane Eyre*, the common intertext of Drabble's and Byatt's novels, I include Brontë's novel in the analysis.

As images of enclosure are the most symptomatic images of the female experience according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar I analyse these images in the three novels. In *Jane Eyre* enclosure is applied to control women in Lowood and Thornfield. Lowood is the site of feminine education which is heavily based on enclosure as a natural condition of women's lives, whereas in Thornfield enclosure is the means of rationalising transgressive

female energies that are no longer seen as feminine, namely, enclosure is the means of controlling the mad Bertha. The concept of enclosure highlights the arbitrariness of the norms along which femininity and normality are defined. The attic, which is the image of male rationality in the phenomenologist view, becomes gendered in *Jane Eyre* and turns to be the site of men's rationalising attitudes towards women's transgressive, thus unfeminine nature, which, according to Gilbert and Gubar is the source of men's fears. In *The Waterfall* confinement is Jane Gray's self-imposed condition right after childbirth, which suits James, her lover well to cherish romantic clichés. The potential of madness lurks in the background in the case of Jane, who sticks to her attic bedroom so ardently that her confinement and agoraphic behaviour make her not properly feminine along the nineteenth-century norms but quite weird in a twentieth-century context. This also highlights the arbitrariness of the construct of femininity. Both Jane Eyre and Jane Gray can escape the representational trap of the image of the house as a means of enclosure by their relative independence to own their own houses. The actual or theoretical ownership of a house frees both Janes from the objectifying and rationalising powers of masculinity and at the same time functions as a claim on their own bodies. Houses and other enclosed places define most women in *Possession* as well: Val, Lady Bailey, Christabel and Maud are defined by concrete places whereas Beatrice and Ellen Ash are prisoners of their own bodies. Byatt seemingly continues the nineteenth-century tradition of depicting women as enclosed into closed spaces as well as their own bodies till she parodies her own adherence to the tradition by presenting the resplendent and promiscuous figure of Leonora Stern. Leonora with the shy and agoraphobic Blackadder turn the tradition upside down in a carnivalesque manner, which highlights Byatt's ironic and self-parodying relation to the tradition she continues. All three novels question the traditional concept of femininity which is the cornerstone of the romance ideology. By the questioning attitude they create new subject positions for the women characters from which they can have access not only to the traditional role of a romance heroine.

The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia provides the asocial context for the radical ending of *Jane Eyre* where the final union of the protagonists is based on mutuality and not traditional social discourses. Similarly, in *The Waterfall* heterotopia creates an asocial context which is the only site that can contain the transgressive and, in a social context, adulterous love relation of Jane Gray and James. Thus both in Brontë's and Drabble's novel heterotopias function as means of introducing such orders that create the only possible sites to contain the radical romances in their novels. Byatt structures *Possession* along three heterotopias: the first scene is set in the London Library, the middle chapters are set in Yorkshire where the parallel

plots are connected in an analeptic way, and the final scene takes place in the graveyard. All three heterotopias can be interpreted as heterochronies as well, which reinforces the generic peculiarities of the romance as a mode of relating the present to the past.

Conclusion

I claim that Drabble's *The Waterfall* and Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* are sister narratives because both novels enter into a dialogue with the nineteenth-century literary tradition and by this they become related to each other as well. I propose that the main reason for this sisterhood is that both novels elaborate on the possible generic synthesis of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*, two typical nineteenth-century genres whose coexistence has proved to be problematic for women characters within one plot. As Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, one of the earliest and best-known attempts to settle the generic clashes of the romance and the *Bildungsroman*, is a common intertext for both twentieth-century novels, the comparative analysis of *The Waterfall* and *Possession* inevitably needs a recurrent reliance on, and interpretation of this nineteenth-cantury classic as well.

The sisterhood of Drabble's and Byatt's two novels is reinforced by the following:

- Both novels incorporate tales as primary gendered plots and retain their didactic nature.
- *The Waterfall* reads nineteenth-century *Bildungsromans* exclusively as romances, which marks the potentials of a generic "crossover" of the two genres; the female protagonist's reading of nineteenth-century *Bildungsromans* as romances results in her own female *Künstlerroman*, which guarantees her the successful resolution of both romances and *Bildungsromans*.
- The generic mosaic of *Possession: A Romance* gives priority to quest elements which lend *Bildung* qualities to all the genres it includes; the novel extends the genre of the romance over a story of love to a mode of relating the present to the past, which opens up the plot, character formation as well as structure towards citationality and cyclicality; furthermore, the figure of Melusina and her nineteenth- and twentieth-century refigurations make it possible to read the genres of the romance and *Bildungsroman* in a cyclical way.
- The revision of the traditional spatial imagery of the nineteenth-century female literary tradition provides new subject positions for the female protagonists from

which they can have access not only to the roles of romance heroines; the concept of Foucauldian heterotopia can provide an alternative space for such romances that cannot be contained by the prevailing social structures and in this way the notion of romantic love and proper romance pairings can be revised; heterotopia can function as heterochrony as well, which reinforces the notion of the romance as a mode of relating the present to the past that enables citationality and temporal intersections.

- *The Waterfall* and *Possession* elaborate on the generic clashes of the romance and *Bildungsroman* on many levels, including plot, character formation, imagery, time and space.

For these reasons I claim that *The Waterfall* and *Possession* are sister narratives which are integral parts of the female literary tradition.

Related publications:

"The Intertext on Love She Inherits:" The Ideology of the Romance in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*. *Gender Studies*. Vol. 1. 2005/4 University of the West, Timisoara. 53-64.

Jane olvasata, avagy lehet-e Jane Grayből Jane Eyre? *Studia Litteraria* XLIV., Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2006. 142-151.

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Salih, Sarah. *Judith Butler*. *HJEAS* Vol. 9, No. 1. (2003) IEAS of University of Debrecen, Debrecen. 191-3.

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