

## **‘A solid metaphoric extension of his Self’: thing theory and collecting in A. S. Byatt’s fiction.**

By Kate Limond

In his 2001 article “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown suggests that ‘the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.’<sup>1</sup> By this, Brown means that when the word ‘thing’ is used, it describes the relation of an experiencing subject to another subject, rather than describing the object it ostensibly appears to refer to: ‘temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects).’<sup>2</sup> Following Brown’s definition of the thing naming a particular subject-object relation, the object in literature describes less an imagined referent than a particular subject-object relation, concerned with the subject’s identity.

A collection, especially for certain characters in Byatt’s fiction, is interwoven with the collector’s sense of identity. Whilst a collection is a group of objects assembled because of certain similarities in those objects (such as a museum’s collection of objects relating to, for example, Elizabeth I’s reign), for Byatt’s fiction, these collections also express something about the collector. The collection, then, becomes a metaphoric extension of the subject (to use *Possession*’s Mortimer Cropper’s words on R. H. Ash’s ash-plant).<sup>3</sup>

Much criticism on the practice of collecting in literature posits the collection in this way: that collecting has something to do with identity. Helen Wilkinson asserts that ‘collecting practices reflect external personality traits. More than that, they may be used as ways of shaping one’s personality, a deliberate reconstruction of one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things, (Autumn, 2001), p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, Vintage Books, London, 1991, p.245. All subsequent references are to this edition, abbreviated to *P*.

identity.<sup>4</sup> John Su notes that ‘*Possession*, in particular, suggests that collecting can in certain instances help individuals to imagine alternative identities.’<sup>5</sup>

Both Su and Wilkinson recognise that collecting in literature has been represented in negatively. Both refer to John Fowles’s *The Collector*, as well as Byatt’s work, which has a distinctly negative psychosexual central theme. Wilkinson grapples with the cultural conception of the collector in her introduction, detailing a National Lottery advert that emphasises the single, virginal nature of the collector but she also stresses that ‘collections in Byatt’s work may be negative and sterile, but they may also be positive and life-affirming.’<sup>6</sup> In an analysis of Lao She’s work, Rey Chow notes that a collection can be a form of self-knowledge<sup>7</sup> and can have political connotations. Su similarly posits collecting beyond the individual identity, within the context of national (British) heritage. What emerges from these analyses of collecting is that the practice has diverse meanings, but is particularly concerned with the identity of an individual and of a culture.

Whether *Possession* is characterised as a Neo-Victorian, a post-modern or an academic novel, and whether its subject matter is essentially love, desire, reading or something else,<sup>8</sup> all of these readings note the centrality of the relationship between the contemporary period and the Victorians. The narrator introduces Blackadder, guardian of the so-called ‘ash factory’, and puts forward one view of criticism:

There were times when Blackadder allowed himself to see clearly that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, ‘Mrs Brown and Mr Cropper: Good and Bad Collectors in the Work of A.S. Byatt and Other Recent Fiction’, in ed. Susan M Pearce, *Experiencing material culture in the western world*, Leicester University Press, London, 1997, p.104

<sup>5</sup> Su, ‘Fantasies of (Re)Collection: Collecting and Imagination in A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance*’, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (Winter, 2004), p.685

<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson, Art. Cit., p.96.

<sup>7</sup> Rey Chow, ‘Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Autumn, 2001), pp. 286-304, see pp.294-295 for the link between collecting and self-knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Catherine Belsey on love and desire in ‘Questioning the Metaphysics of Desire’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issues (Part 1) (Summer, 1994), pp. 683-705; Ann Marie Adams on reading in ‘Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics: Investigating Ambiguous Critical Identities in A. S. Byatt’s “Possession”’, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Thinking Post-Identity, (Spring, 2003), pp. 107-124.

task, that all his thoughts would be another man's thoughts, all his work another man's work. And then he thought it did not matter so greatly. He did after all find Ash fascinating, even after all these years. It was a pleasant subordination, if he was a subordinate. He believe Mortimer Cropper thought himself the lord and owner of Ash, but he, Blackadder, knew his place better (P, 29).

This comments upon the relationships of these two very different scholars, to their subject – the fictional Victorian poet, Randolph Henry Ash. It is also suggestive of how each relates to Ash, emphasising how he fits into their respective identities. In introducing Blackadder in this way, the narrator also introduces Cropper (in comparison) with a single fact: 'the lord and owner of Ash' (P, 29). This situates Cropper's relationship with Ash within the narrative's concern with the novel's eponymous concept, *possession*.

This sentence gives the reader his or her first taste of a character who has been dubbed the novel's villain. Whilst it is a likely description, it is delimiting. Cropper's extensive collection of relics associated with Ash is shown to be part of his personal mythology. He sees his collection as central to his identity, as shown by the narrator's description of his first encounter with an Ash object: 'almost, he sometimes brushed the thought, as though he had no existence, no separate existence of his own after that first contact with the paper's electric rustle and the ink's energetic black looping' (P, 105). This quotation links Cropper to Blackadder, as they both feel that they have no existence outside of Ash and that Ash is central for both of them – but the crucial difference is between the intellectual, for Blackadder, and the material, for Cropper.

Wilkinson's phrasing suggests that Roland's first contact with Ash's letter is similar to Cropper's first contact with an Ash relic;

Roland experiences a similar *frisson* when he finds a lost letter of Ash's in a book which had belonged to the latter, a discovery on which the plot hinges. The emotional power of objects with historical or personal associations is acknowledged and celebrated by the novel.<sup>9</sup>

Wilkinson sums up the meaning of this comparison by stating that it is a question of 'response' to these objects and their use value for both collectors: 'Roland's encounter with Ash's objects inspires him to creative action, Cropper's collection is

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, Art. Cit., p.104.

ensconced in airless sterility, and his writing on Ash does not gain insight from his possession of those objects.’<sup>10</sup>

I would argue that it is a question of reification. Roland feels the letters he finds are ‘alive. They seemed *urgent*’ (*P*, 50), when generally Ash’s ‘correspondence was voluminous indeed, but guarded, courteous and not of the most lively’ (*P*, 8) and Maud agrees (*P*, 56). In contrast, Cropper’s experience with Ash’s letters is concerned with concepts such as ‘rarity value’ (*P*, 95), rather than the specific qualities of the objects themselves. The letters’ Roland finds suggest a kind of embodiment, or reification, of Ash, which is what makes them feel as if they were alive, whereas, as Wilkinson points out, Cropper’s interaction with his Ash objects is sterile. However, Roland shows insight into Cropper’s collecting passion when he says that ‘he feels they *are* really his, perhaps... because he loves them best’ (*P*, 484). And Cropper’s passion is strong:

He wondered once, about juxtaposing it [Ash’s watch] in his, its owner’s hand, with a hologram of itself. But he saw that his emotions, which were violent, about Ash’s watch, were private, not to be confused with his public appeals. For he believed the watch had come to him, that it had been meant to come to him, that he had and held something of R.H. Ash. It ticked near his heart. He would have liked to be a poet. (*P*, 387).

This quotation confirms Roland’s view and Cropper’s sense of a personal mythology, in which Ash plays a central role, as he has been incorporated into Cropper’s identity. The last sentence is telling: ‘he would have liked to be a poet’. This again links Blackadder and Cropper with their use of Ash; Blackadder initially wrote poetry, but imagining Leavis’s comments, he burns it and turns himself seriously to criticism. Wilkinson suggests that ‘biography and criticism are seen as analogous to collecting’<sup>11</sup> – characterising both Cropper and Blackadder as intellectual collectors. The significance of this is again to underpin the question of the intellectual use value. It could be argued that Blackadder sees himself truly (‘pleasant subordination’), whilst Cropper uses Ash objects, his criticism and biographies ‘as a means of satisfying narcissistic desires.’<sup>12</sup> And of course, Roland is inspired to creativity – he begins collecting lists of words, which will inform his poetry (*P*, 431).

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.110.

<sup>12</sup> Su, Art. Cit., p.695.

However, Roland's relationship to collecting is more complex than this, and as Su helpfully notes:

Byatt, in other words, deliberately draws parallels among the three characters; she resists an easy distinction between Roland's and Maud's apparently healthy attitudes towards the past and Cropper's pathological one. Indeed, the activities engaged in by all these characters are practically indistinguishable.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the similarities of their collecting behaviours, there is the question of Maud and Roland's relationship to objects they associate with La Motte and Ash prior to their involvement in the story of the relationship between the two. Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator notes that 'Roland possessed three images of Randolph Henry Ash' (*P*, 15). These are described at length and in detail, the description attending to the qualities of the original paintings and their reproduction as photographs, including damage, 'they were a bit the worse for wear; the flat was not clean and was damp' (*P*, 17). More words are given to describe these photographs than to the flat and the rest of its décor. This puts a particular kind of emphasis on these photographs, placing them more centrally in significance than the flat itself. The language – 'Roland possessed...' – also situates these photographs within the novel's central theme, therefore setting up another comparison between Roland and Cropper's collecting habits. Both are Ash scholars and both take their work, as it were, home.

This description of the photographs assumes more significance when Roland returns to the flat before the Mortlake conference and the narrator returns to the collection of photographs. Again, the similarities between Roland and Cropper's assimilation of their collections are striking: 'he had always seen these aspects as part of himself, of Roland Mitchell, he had lived with them' (*P*, 472). The narrator draws attention to Roland's sense of a personal mythology, similarly to Cropper's 'no separate existence of his own' (*P*, 105) after encountering his first Ash object. However, the difference is Roland's recognition that 'all and none of these were Ash' (*P*, 473). Whether the result of his reaction to collecting is 'the possibility of achieving greater historical knowledge'<sup>14</sup> or 'a starting-point for a personal act of definition or creativity',<sup>15</sup> the suggestion is that the epiphany enabled by collecting is something positive.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.691.

<sup>14</sup> Su, *Art. Cit.*, p.695.

<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson, *Art. Cit.*, p.105.

Maud undergoes a similar transformation. She begins with a personal connection to La Motte, as a descendant of the latter's niece, and she inherits some of Christabel's possessions. As a child, she finds a mermaid brooch in a dressing-up box, which takes 'because it reminded me of the Little Mermaid... and then lately of the Fairy Melusina' (*P*, 260). In the jet shop they visit, however, the object possibly takes on new meanings, that is could have belonged to Christabel herself, either bought by Ash and sent to her or she could have been present when it was bought, if she accompanied him. The significance of the discoveries they make is that Maud has been 'exploring all along the myth – no, the truth – of your own origins' (*P*, 503). In this way, like the letters for Roland, Maud becomes a reification of Ash and La Motte, as a product of them. Maud has collected her past, which leads her to new knowledge (of her origins) and to fall in love with Roland, as 'collecting disrupts the scholars' sense of certainty about the poets and the generalizability of their own beliefs regarding sexuality and desire.'<sup>16</sup> Maud, therefore, is enabled – by the changes in her world-view from the understanding gained from the poets – to achieve what Ash and La Motte could not – the possibility, if not the actuality, of a life where she can continue her work and *also* love, offering a possible solution to Christabel's riddle of the unbroken egg.

There is, of course, the problem of the ending and the postscript. As Su acknowledges:

Whilst the novel does not directly express anxiety about Maud's new role, the narrator's description of their sexual intercourse reinvokes the threat apparent in every act of collecting: possession. "Roland finally, to use an outdated phrase," the narrator writes, "entered and took possession of all her white coolness"<sup>17</sup>

However, Su suggests that the epilogue has a 'destabilizing effect'<sup>18</sup> and that 'the sense of closure the scholars feel regarding the Victorian poets' romance is demonstrated to be provisional, lasting only so far as no further material traces are discovered,'<sup>19</sup> referring to the fact that the hair in the watch is not Christabel's but Maia's, which shows the reader that Ash in fact met his daughter, although the characters in the novel do not know this. Su continues: 'Likewise, the terms

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<sup>16</sup> Su, *Art. Cit.*, p.695.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.708.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.709.

established for Roland and Maud's relationship are understood to be provisional and fluid, and the use of "possession" to describe their sexual intercourse seems intended to strike a playful and ironic tone.<sup>20</sup>

The question of authenticity is central here – if the 'possession' of Maud by Roland is taken at face value, then it suggests that the riddle of the unbroken egg is not solved, as Maud will lose her 'self-possession, her autonomy' and end up relegated to a 'conservative, even regressive, social role.'<sup>21</sup> If, however, Su's reading is accepted, then the ending becomes an ironic fulfilment of the novel's subtitle 'A Romance'; following the conventions of the genre – a genre which 'often subordinates female desire in order to establish the appearance of harmony between lovers.'<sup>22</sup> I would suggest that taking second look at some of the objects of the novel itself supports this reading.

Byatt plays with the question of authenticity throughout the novel with regards to the various collecting practices and to the objects themselves. It is suggested the fulfilment of collecting is either more historical knowledge (and the reinvention of contemporary roles) or the opening of artistic opportunities (or both), rather than possession of the objects themselves. The characters' response to the objects has been shown to be exemplary of their essential ends, even if their collecting activities are similar. The question of authenticity is again illustrative of this attitude. Cropper is disappointed that he has never 'been able to procure an authenticated example of this Wotan-stave [Ash's ash-plant] for the Stant Collection' (*P*, 247). Cropper is concerned to acquire the *real thing*, the original. Following the excerpt that this quotation is contained in, the narrator states that 'Maud intuited something terrible about Cropper's imagination from all this. He had a particularly vicious version of reverse hagiography; the desire to cut his subject down to size' (*P*, 250). There is a sense that if Cropper can possess everything associated *with* Ash, then he can possess Ash uniquely, truly becoming his 'lord and keeper' in his own eyes, by his own terms and dominate him.

Maud and Roland, when visiting Christabel's house, note that it is 'a good restoration job... it makes you feel funny. A simulacrum' (*P*, 210). Maud and Roland discuss the interest of such a restoration, 'it would have been sootier. It would have

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.708.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.709.

looked older. When it was younger’ and ‘a postmodern quotation’ (*P*, 211). This leads them to reveal that they neither of them has ‘been much interested in places – in things – with associations’ (*P*, 211). In this sense, engaging with authenticity is not limiting but a recognition that like Ellen’s diary nothing forms, a complete picture. Cropper’s reverse hagiography, by contrast, is a delimiting form of understanding, driven by desire to possess Ash through the objects associated with him; that Ash *is* these objects. This is similar to Brown’s concept, in *A Sense of Things*, that ideas can be contained within objects – that the idea can be reach through the objects. As Brown notes, however, this is a projection rather than an understanding of the innate value of the object; ‘we look *through* objects.’<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, Maud and Roland’s understanding of La Motte’s house is that it is invested with a sense of the uncanny; ‘the sight of the little house was indeed disturbing’ (*P*, 211). The effect of this is that it destabilizes meaning; unlike the other objects associated with the poets in the text, this house is specifically *not* representative of La Motte’s life and is understood in those terms; both Roland and Maud admit that they have never been interested in such relics. Directly following this mutual revelation, they start the process that leads them to follow Ash’s journey.

Cropper’s retaking of Ash’s journeys appears, particularly via interjections such as the one concerning the ash-plant, to underpin his personal mythology, whereas when Maud and Roland follow Ash and La Motte’s journeys, it is presented in the text as a search for truth. Maud and Roland feel the letters are alive and Cropper appears to feel that Ash is contained in the objects Ash owned, which are similar responses. However, not all objects provoke this kind of response. La Motte’s house destabilizes the meaning of objects within the text, as does the misidentified lock of hair. The effect of this is that objects show themselves to have an excess of meaning, beyond what the characters project and intuit. These objects lead the characters on to further knowledge, despite the fact that their knowledge is provisional (as demonstrated by Su). Despite the text endorsing provisional conclusions, the suggestion is that the modern scholars have now *enough*, if not exhaustive, knowledge to reinvent themselves in the roles of lover and poet.

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, p.4.

Wilkinson locates Cropper's collecting negative instinct to sexual repression: 'he has a classically repressed sexuality with the hall marks of an Oedipus complex.'<sup>24</sup> She compares him to two of the collectors in *The Virgin in the Garden*:

Felicity Wells, usually referred to as "Miss Wells", is a kind of stereotype of spinsterhood, who even lives in the vicarage. Lucas Simmond's repression takes a more extreme form. He has a bizarre castration fantasy. He removes the genitals from the pictures of men and women in the biology lab, and later attempts to castrate himself.<sup>25</sup>

Miss Wells's room is described as 'tiny, decorated, perched in and temporary. Black Victorian bookcases, with machine-cut Gothic beading of the kind that ruined the young Alfred Tennyson, supported a bitty collection of objects.'<sup>26</sup> Whilst the argument for sexual repression is clear, the objects have a wider significance, linked to the coming coronation of Elizabeth II and England's cultural history:

She saw, then, the layered glowing mystery, the gorgeous stuff Felicity Wells saw, and saw further the ambition to embody, here, now, in the present time and place, the vigour, the sense of form, the coherence lost, lost, with the English Golden Age. She saw how the hanging stage-cope on Miss Wells's wardrobe-rail, and the *Illustrated London News* photograph of the Dean of Westminster in a cope worn at the Coronation of Charles II, brought out for the Coronation of Elizabeth II (*VITG*, 143).

Stephanie's seeing of all of these things fulfils something of Su's discussion of Hewison's work – collecting 'stifles the possibility for creative change by establishing an idealized past as the model for what Great Britain should be.'<sup>27</sup>

Alexander's play, *Astraea*, also fulfils Su definition of how the meaning of collecting (idealising the past) can be stifling. *Astraea* is later seen as the death-throes of verse drama:

in the seventies the whole thing was dismissed as a petrified final paroxysm of a decadent individualist modernism, full of irrelevant and damaging cultural nostalgia, cluttered, blown. A *cul-de-sac*, the verse drama revival, as should have been seen in the beginning (*VITG*, 134).

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<sup>24</sup> Wilkinson, Art. Cit., p.108.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.109.

<sup>26</sup> A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden*, Vintage, Great Britain, 2003, p.141. All subsequent references are to this edition, abbreviated to *VITG*.

<sup>27</sup> Su, Art. Cit., p.684.

The narrator suggests, through prolepsis and ironically, that this is perhaps an unfair categorisation; ‘the people had simply hoped, because the time was after the effort of war and the rigour of austerity, and the hope, despite the spasmodic construction of pleasure gardens and festival halls, had had, alas, like Hamlet’s despair, no objective correlative’ (*VITG*, 318).

Miss Wells sighs at the knowledge of colour symbolism in Elizabethan dress, ‘lovely words, there were, for green. Poppingay, gooseturd, willow’ (*VITG*, 144). The effect of this, along with her ‘bitty collection of objects’ and her ‘state of cultural ecstasy’ over the Coronation of Elizabeth II, essentially seems to embody the stifling sense of heritage that looks backwards rather than forward. Her spinsterhood, in a novel where marriage is important and detailed exploration of the possibilities of sex and relationships, could be seen as representing the static culture of looking back and remaining stagnant, instead of developing creatively and experimenting.

Lucas Simmonds is similarly in a kind of developmental stasis. His quasi-religious explorations with Marcus are shown as essentially harmful; both of them suffer breakdowns at the end of the novel. He states, as his condition worsens, ‘I have no private life. I have no life. I touch no one’ (*VITG*, 501). Lucas’s collection is a scientific one within the school where he teaches:

Jam-jars, test-tubes. Dozens of foetuses. Ting creamy-pink rats, blunt-headed, blind-eyed, with minute stumps of feet and tails, all rolled together and surely slightly crumbling like cheese in the surrounding liquid. Larger round-bellied ratlings, cord and placenta attached, flat-headed unborn cats, pallid flesh, unformed eyes closed against the glass wall and the light. Snake embryos, preserved in strings, like beads on a chain, coiled forever undelivered’ (*VITG*, 159).

Lucas says to Stephanie that he hates Biology (*VITG*, 501), similarly to how he has previously said he would not teach sex education, ‘you must get a good lady from some Welfare in a hat to do that’ (*VITG*, 408). The emphasis here is on a rejection of the body and specifically sexuality. Whilst Miss Wells is portrayed as asexual, Lucas has sexual desire, as shown when asks Marcus to touch him, but it is a disturbed sexuality. Along with his rejection of biology, it could be argued that his collection is a necessary but unwilling one that, as Wilkinson points out, shows his disturbed relation to sexuality, as he removes any visible genitalia. Like Miss Wells’ collection, Lucas’s collection is presented as static. Whilst the ‘living things’ (*VITG*, 160) of the

collection are mentioned, more time space is given to the dead things, ‘forever undelivered.’

Lucas’s identity is also a stereotype, but a carefully studied one, ‘whose normality was unremarkable, even banal, whose staffroom chatter was a carefully achieved flow of corporate trivia’ (*VITG*, 466). The operative phrase here is ‘carefully achieved’, which is similar to Marcus’s perception of Lucas later, in *Still Life*; ‘he had been able to appear “normal” because he was abnormal.’<sup>28</sup> Both Lucas and Miss Wells, Wilkinson points out, are ‘bad collectors,’<sup>29</sup> where collecting is associated with sexual repression and negative, stagnant positions in society, as well as the unproductive link with an idealized past.

Other collectors in the Quartet have anomalous, or normal but predatory, sexual attitudes that are played out through their collecting. If Lucas and Miss Wells can be seen as analogous in the meaning of their collecting, then Alexander and Matthew Crowe can be seen as dichotomous. Their collecting practices are domestic and archival, and sexually abstemious and predatory, respectively. By this I mean that Alexander feels that showing people his things is sexually dangerous (in terms of romantic and sexual entanglements) and Crowe actively uses his collection as an aid to seduction. Both centre on the seduction or deflection of Frederica.

Crowe’s collection is contained in his mansion, Long Royston, ‘it was a large building made both for living in and for display, but with slightly more emphasis on the living’ (*VITG*, 18-19). It will eventually be used as a site for a new University and Alexander’s play, *Astraea*, will be hosted there:

The point was, Alexander must see, that this was all most timely; the inauguration of an Appeal, the announcement of the Gift, the Royal Charter, in Coronation Year, all could coincide, and be celebrated, amongst other things, by a performance of Alexander’s wholly appropriate play in the summer evenings on the terrace of Long Royston itself (*VITG*, 20).

The combination of all these events, local and national, could be seen as fitting in to the cultural stasis that the play is symbolic of, for some later (fictional) critics. In this sense, Crowe’s marshalling of events, and the context his collection is seen in, is analogous with the other collectors in the novel.

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<sup>28</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Still Life*, Vintage, Great Britain, 1995, p.37. All subsequent references are to this edition, abbreviated to *SL*.

<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson, *Art. Cit.*, p.109.

Crowe's house is representative of the upper classes for *The Virgin in the Garden* and his collection confirms this. Crowe initially shows his plaster friezes in the Great Hall, showing Frederica what, and how, to admire, and then they tour the State Bedrooms. In the bedrooms, sex is naturally brought up, when Wilkie wonders 'how long since anyone made love in those beds? A rather grand experience, I should think' (*VITG*, 181). This statement, coupled with Crowe's arms 'heaped with the protective paper that hid the bedspreads' (*VITG*, 181) is suggestive of the sterility Wilkinson associates with Cropper's collection.

In the more intimate setting of 'Crowe's little wing' (*VITG*, 186), Crowe shows Frederica his Marsyas, and makes the first physical contact, putting his arm round her whilst asking her what she thinks. This sets up a pattern for the novel, where Crowe shows Frederica his culture and attempts to seduce her. The next time Crowe runs into Frederica, he explains a piece of culture to her before bringing her back to his house and embarking on a more comprehensive seduction than just putting his arm around her. Whilst this particular piece of cultural knowledge that Crowe imparts is not regarding his house, it is regarding the school, which is related to him, as his great-grandfather founded it (*VITG*, 22). The present Crowe finds the school somewhat distasteful:

What a *rejecting* institution. My worthy forebear. All this catholic atheist religiosity. Hideous, truly. Look at them. No one smiling except ever-so-sweet Jesus. Athene with the muscles of a coal-heaver and a mouth like Lizzie Siddall. Pop-eye Shakespeare with no calves and drooping garters (*VITG*, 283).

On another occasion, taking Frederica away from the group of actors, whom she is upsetting with her opinion, Crowe says, 'come, I have something to show you' (*VITG*, 387) and shows her drawings before manipulating, or man-handling, perhaps, her body again. He bids her, in between prodding and poking, to look at his Inigo Jones. He says he could make her a 'real woman' (presumably, deflowering her) and Frederica is quick on the uptake:

More to the point to make me a real virgin princess. I've got to be good, since it's no good being clever, and I've got no skills like singing and dancing, and to be truthful I'm too uninformed to see what's special about your pictures, except that they're old, people are always *showing me things*, and I'm simply too ignorant to know why the things inspire whatever they do inspire. And when I do say what I do know I get hooted at (*VITG*, 388).

In some ways, this could be read as both a response to Crowe's collection as well as his sexual advances – as is shown later in the text, she is sexually naïve and will not risk showing this to Alexander, to whom she told she was not.

Crowe's response suggests the essence of Crowe's collection, or at least how he characterises it, for seduction of Frederica: 'I only want you to remember in ten years you saw such things... you must stand for who must remember' (*VITG*, 388). This is similar to Crowe's pronouncement in an earlier scene of seduction, 'of course I have no particular gifts. I only care for gifts in others' (*VITG*, 284-5) and that his power is 'a heritage I hold in trust for the culture' (*VITG*, 285). This may be false, or it may be a true insight to Crowe's role as a facilitator – equally, and typically of Byatt, it could be both. Whilst such comments show Crowe as situated on the periphery, artistically, they also reveal that the play would not happen without him and much of the richness of the novel is centred on his house and his collection.

Crowe initiates a sexual contract with Frederica; suggesting that she can 'show me a little more while I show you a little more' (*VITG*, 390). This appears to refer to Crowe leading her and imparting sexual knowledge, but it could equally refer to her allowing him to explore her body whilst he imparts culture to her. The text leaves the interpretation open.

On their next meeting, the one that the narrative has been building up to, they are in one of the stately bedrooms, the Sun room. Crowe, obligingly, shows Frederica more, his 'lighting effects. I can do sunrise and sunset, the blaze of noon and a rather inadequate twilight, which I thought might amuse you. An indoor sun at dead of night. Shine here to us and thou art everywhere' (*VITG*, 433). Again, as a prelude to seduction, this time the ultimate seduction, Crowe shows Frederica culture. This seduction is not a success, and when Frederica runs off, she encounters further seduction by culture, but with mutually knowing participants; Wilkie quotes Shakespeare to Marina.

Crowe treats Frederica as one of his cultural objects, he talks about herself to herself; 'his chat took the form of a running commentary on her parts, as though she were a work of art' (*VITG*, 285). This objectifies Frederica and conflates her with his collection. In the Sun room, he asks, 'may I look at you' but 'he was not really asking' (*VITG*, 433). However, Frederica gets up and runs away.

The conflation of her with his collection, suggesting objectification, is similar to Cropper's attitude to his collection and sexuality in *Possession*, (in that his collection expresses his sexuality). This is demonstrated through the narrator's description of Cropper's private collection of photographs:

He opened his locked case, putting away Randolph Ash's letter to his godchild, or anyway the stolen images, and drew out those other photographs of which he had a large and varied *collection* – as far as it was possible to vary, in flesh or tone or angle or close detail, so essentially simple an activity, a preoccupation. He had his own ways of sublimation (*P*, 111, emphasis mine).

This 'act' is reconfirmed later in the text, when Cropper is effectively window-shopping for sex: 'Peepshow. Model. Young girls wanted. Live Sex NonStop. Come Up and Have Fun. Serious Instruction. His own tastes were precise, narrow, and somewhat specialist' (*P*, 304).

In comparison to Cropper and Crowe, Alexander makes effort to avoid the act in its physical manifestation. What interests Alexander is 'imaginary relish. He liked imagined contact with real women, and real contact with imaginary women' (*VITG*, 453). Unlike Crowe, Alexander is unwilling to show his collection, which is made up of decidedly domestic objects, but is not less significant in terms of his identity. Crowe's collection can be seen as his power and money manifest, as the heritage that he enables him to wield such power. Cropper, similarly, sees his own collection in this light: 'he was an important man. He wielded power: power of appointment, power of disappointment, power of the cheque book, power of Thoth and the Mercurial access to the Arcana of the Stant Collection' (*P*, 99).

Alexander's collection is more distinctly personal than those of Crowe or Cropper. To an extent, the latter's collections can be seen as belonging in the sphere of the archive, rather than the everyday. Alexander's collection falls into the latter category and as such it has a use value that Crowe and Cropper's do not and therefore is closer to him. For whilst Cropper's collection of Ash objects is bound up with his identity, the significance of the collection is that, to use Wilkinson's phrase again, it is kept in 'airless sterility,'<sup>30</sup> rather than having this kind of domestic use value.

Alexander understands his collection is directly representative of himself; 'he knew very well what it meant to show things, particularly his own things, to people. It

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.104.

was next to giving gifts' (*VITG*, 135). Alexander also notes that 'he had always managed to stop women coming here' (*VITG*, 455), which underpins his concern about what showing his things means, as well as propriety, as he lives in a school. There are two particular scenes in the text that are related to his room. The first is when Frederica comes to read for the role of the young Elizabeth in his play and the second when Jenny, Frederica and Marcus all visit him in one day.

In her first visit to Alexander's room, Frederica sees it as representative of himself as well: 'she had always meant to penetrate this place' (*VITG*, 127) and the use of the word 'penetrate' suggests both the sexual act (in reverse) and the gaining of knowledge, of insight, of which it is analogous. She takes in every detail and the description is comprehensive, from the colours of the walls to adornments, such as his Wedgwood bowls, to his posters and his books. Similarly to Crowe, Alexander is drawn into inculcating Frederica with culture, explaining his verse to her and other details such as the 'secretly obscene' (*VITG*, 133) meaning of the motto of her school to showing her how to look at his photograph of Rodin's *Danaide*. However, unlike the predatory Crowe who uses such talk as the preamble to seduction, Alexander 'was immediately distressed by his own behaviour' (*VITG*, 135), knowing what it is to show his things to people.

He has also shown his *Danaide* to Jenny and the memory of this is a comparison between the two women, and how they react to his things. Alexander notes that Jenny had been 'unlike Frederica, volubly admiring, had achieved an almost immediate familiarity with his things, discriminating stone from stone, finding adjectives for the woman's white despair: she knew it was despair' (*VITG*, 135). Frederica's ignorance and Jenny's knowledge are juxtaposed, forming a comparison between the two, as previously noted through clothing, food and domesticity. The effect of this is that it draws the reader to notice that both make a kind of claim on Alexander through his objects; Frederica had always meant to penetrate the place and Jenny buys bulbs for his Wedgwood bowls. This sets up a correspondence between the objects, the women and Alexander, mediated through their experience of his objects and brings him closer to the two women.

It is through his objects that he literally displays his self-knowledge. Alexander keeps Picasso's *The Blue Boy* on the wall:

Alexander knew, he thought, what this Boy was. He knew also from time to time what he himself was: a man who displayed the Rodin *Danaide* to fierce girls but kept on his wall, as a mode of knowledge, this Boy. It was not that Boy was a desirable boy: he was not. What Alexander felt for him approximated most closely to vicious envy (*VITG*, 136).

This quotation is significant for several reasons and revelatory of both Alexander's attitude towards objects and his sexuality. The Boy represents androgyny; 'between his thighs his creased clothes indicate complex sexual ambiguity, deep-pleated and firmly bulging: he could be anything, or more probably everything' (*VITG*, 136). The reader is prepared for Alexander's admiration for androgyny in the prologue, 'later still he had come to associate this arcane pleasure with Spenser's Dame Nature, who "hath both kinds in one", "nor needeth other none". A satisfactory state of affairs. To imagine' (*VITG*, 13).

The Boy, then, represents Alexander's identification with androgyny, which he 'kept on his wall, as a mode knowledge' – a mode of self-knowledge. In this way, Alexander is linked to the recognition that some of the characters in *Possession* have, through language. Both Blackadder and Cropper have this kind of 'from time to time' recognition that the narrator describes Alexander as having in relation to *The Blue Boy*; 'there were times when Blackadder allowed himself to see clearly that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's life' (*P*, 29). Cropper is described similarly:

History, writing, infect after a time a man's sense of himself, and Mortimer Cropper, fluently documenting every last item of the days of Randolph Henry Ash, his goings-out and his comings-in, his dinner engagements, his walking-tours, his excessive sympathy with servants, his impatience with lionising, had naturally perhaps felt his own identity at times, as the very best of times, as insubstantial, leached into this matter-of-fact writing, stuff-of-record' (*P*, 98-9).

However, as is characteristic of *Possession*, Cropper's form of recognition is not so much recognition as narcissism. As a collector, Alexander's collection displays his self-knowledge as much as Cropper's obscures it. Whilst both are arguably somewhat off-kilter as far as sexuality is concerned, the narrator appears to view Alexander's as a quirk rather than something seedy, or dangerous. This is one of things that makes him, to borrow Wilkinson's phrase, more of a good than a bad collector, although I think there is more ambiguity there than Wilkinson allows for in her schema.

Later in the text, as noted above, Jenny, Frederica and Marcus visit him successively. This chapter is meant as a comparison to the earlier one; the names mirror one another; the first called ‘In The Tower’ and the later one, ‘Interludes in Two Towers’. In both chapters, there is an emphasis on the collection of objects in Alexander’s room and his sexuality, highlighting their mediating effect. It is no accident that the major instances in which Alexander’s room feature also contain meditations on his sexuality. If Alexander’s Boy is a mode of knowledge that is left partially unsaid rather than definitively stated at this point in the text, this second set of scenes in his rooms are explicit regarding other aspects of his sexuality: ‘he considered his own erotic oddities and embarrassments... he liked fear. Not excessive fear. He had no fantasies of ripping flesh, piercing heels or whirling knouts’ (*VITG*, 453). The narrator continues:

But the ripple of apprehension, the prickle of hairs on the skin, the sense of panic flight through crashing undergrowth and under whipping foliage, the alertness of scent and sight bestowed by a flicker of real fear, this he repeatedly provokes’ (*VITG*, 454).

The narrator goes on to say that part of the reason for his desire for Frederica is because of her portrayal of his princess in his play, ‘who represented his fear of minatory women, but also, being a self-portrait, shared it’ (*VITG*, 454). The ‘self-portrait’ is made through Elizabeth’s androgyny and Alexander’s admiration of it, which the reader sees in the prologue and through *The Blue Boy*.

However, unfortunately for Alexander, his love of ‘imagined contact with real women’ (*VITG*, 453) has become a little *too* real by this point, which he perceives and this underpins his decision to get out of Blesford. In a turn of some comic irony, both his feared women burst in upon his ‘delicious solitude’ (*VITG*, 454) in succession. Again it is collection of objects that mediate Alexander’s relation with these women. When Alexander’s responses do not exactly satisfy Jenny, she begins ‘striding up and down, and rearranging things, the Wedgwood bowls with their fleeing forms and forest boughs, the stone cairn’ (*VITG*, 456). When Jenny attempts to seduce Alexander, she is juxtaposed with his objects, described as ‘naked under the *Danaide*’ (*VITG*, 458) and Jenny’s words, following Alexander’s effective rejection of her are ‘Oh, I meant so well, and have made it so much worse, blundering in, *displaying myself*’ (*VITG*, 458, emphasis mine). By using the phrase ‘displaying’, she objectifies

herself, linking to the narrator's description of her being naked under the *Danaide*, rather than merely naked in his room.

Part of the significance of Alexander's collection is the way other characters project their own values and ways of seeing on to it. Literate Frederica finds herself not understanding the art and reading the information on the posters and the titles of the books on the shelves. Her reaction to Alexander's room is similar to her reaction to Crowe's objects, prefiguring her later cry of being 'too ignorant' to understand the visual information offered. The narrator states she was 'early inured to the knowledge that *Lear* was truer and wiser than anything else, she had never been surprised enough to ask herself why, why a man should want to write out a play and not simply deal at no removes with the grim truths of an age' (*VITG*, 135). Continuing, the narrator says that Frederica watches

Alexander's familiar description of the *Danaide*'s spine [and] was enough struck by strangeness to marvel that a man might choose to make a marble woman, and another man, or another woman, might prefer to stand and look at that stone, rather than to... do anything else (*VITG*, 135).

The essence of these reactions is that they embody Frederica's worldview and show Alexander's collection in terms of what she projects onto it, rather than allowing her, or anyone else, to spy out the meanings that Alexander keeps in his objects, such within the Boy.

Jenny's reaction to his room is similar to Frederica's, although is a different kind of projection – as Jenny longs to be a part of Alexander's life, so she brings 'additions' (*VITG*, 135) to his collection. This effectively places a part of herself, objectified, with Alexander. However, the narrator notes that she cries as she gives these to Alexander, 'because they had had to be bought with Geoffrey's money; nothing was truly hers to give' (*VITG*, 136). Her gift of the objects, thereby placing a part of herself with Alexander in the form of the association of the objects, is tainted for her, because it was not her money that bought them.

Marcus's views Alexander's collection geometrically,

He liked the concatenation of the ovoids of alabaster, and the irregular dark glossy and chalky rounds and planes of the chalk and flints, he liked the lines of both of these against the rounds and rectangles of the *Danaide*'s white haunches and black limits. The place had some proper balance between space and bodies in space. It made him, temporarily, feel safer (*VITG*, 466).

This is a projection, too, because Marcus sees the world through geometry, which as he says, makes him feel safer. Marcus dislikes the Boy because the garlands around his neck remind him of the experience of Ophelia, which was clearly not a pleasant one for him.

Whilst Alexander's possessions definitely constitute a kind of domestic collection, the emphasis is on their enabling function as a means to offer – and represent – the possibility of self-knowledge. This is distinctly different from the characterisation of collecting in psychology, as Su points out: 'objects cannot undo the sense of lack that spawns the desire, according to both Fowles's fiction and psychoanalytic theory; possession only confirms the gap between the object and the needs it purports to satisfy, causing the collector to transfer his or her desire to other objects ad infinitum.'<sup>31</sup> The effect of this recognition is that it confirms, in Wilkinson's terms, the distinction between good and bad collectors – bad collectors follow this process and use the collection to transfer desire and so never reconciling with the recognition that the 'subject shall be constituted by lack.'<sup>32</sup>

Whilst Lucas Simmonds's collection is intricately bound with his job, Wilkinson's emphasis is that it represents a collection that is innately linked to his own psychological issues – in that he castrates parts of his collection, which shows his psychological issues projected onto it. There is a question, here, of transferring the desire he feels with regards to himself onto his collection and the manifest death drive increasingly plays a part in his conversations with Marcus – from the latter's fear, when driving back from an excursion that the former wants them to be nothing (via crashing) to one of their last conversations before Lucas goes 'classically mad', where Lucas feels that they might get obliterated by lightning but that they must try nonetheless. Marcus rejects Lucas's offer and subsequently, so the former feels, the latter goes mad.

Felicity Wells's collection is symptomatic of a similar psychological function as Lucas's. The emphasis here, from Wilkinson, is that it represents her (implicitly) abnormal virginal state, I would also add that it functions within Su's interpretation of the collector's psychology, in that she projects her desire onto the objects. Stephanie

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<sup>31</sup> Su, *Art. Cit.*, p.690.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Wyatt, 'I Want to Be You: Envy, the Lacanian Double, and Feminist Community in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 1998), p. 37.

intuits the meaning of Felicity's collection, for that within Su's discussion of objects of cultural heritage, her collection is symptomatic of Hewison's definition that heritage is stifling and not productive.<sup>33</sup> This is compounded by her misreading of Cromwell in the lecture she gives and which Bill refutes; which suggests that she misreads the past, idealizing it in a way that is not conducive to opening up the possibilities inherent in the present.

Of course, Cropper is the most classic example of the collector's psychology, in that, as Su points out, Cropper 'demonstrates fetishistic attitudes towards the objects he acquires' his closet fascination with pornography implies that he objectifies people as well.'<sup>34</sup> This sense of objectification is also represented by the sense of continuity Cropper feels between Ash and himself; as if by collecting Ash's objects, he can incorporate Ash – as if he were an object – into his own identity. This is a two-way process for Cropper, as his interjections into his characterisation of Ash's life through the biography he writes is a way of projecting his own concerns into and onto Ash's life.

The contrast, of course, is provided by Alexander's collecting in the Quartet and Maud and Roland's collecting in *Possession*. The significance of this is that the collections add to their self-knowledge, allowing them to interrogate their hermeneutic paradigms, rather than projecting their meaning and desire onto the objects themselves. In this way, Byatt offers the reader a positive reading of collecting that is focused on the materiality of objects, celebrating the opening of meaning that the collections can inspire and therefore reinscripting the associations made in twentieth century culture with regards to collecting.

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<sup>33</sup> Su, Art. Cit., p.684.

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