In Her Own Words:
The Image of Ice, Snow and Glass in A. S. Byatt's Possession

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Abstract:

This essay calls for a new way of reading novels: readers should try their best to empty out themselves while reading to be a proper learner of the artist's mind. And the essential aesthetic value that an artistic work has, is by being impressive rather than expressive. This essay focuses on A. S. Byatt's own explanation of choices of images to better reflect upon images within her novel, *Possession: A Romance.* While the methodology, "in her own words", brings us closer to the intellectual thoughts of the author, discerning images of ice, snow, and glass in her novel could unfold a sensuous landscape before us, and we can therefore delightfully see how words and images mingle with each other, and how intellectual thoughts and senses are unified into one impression as the magic of art.

Keywords: A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, Image, Ice, Snow

Why in Her Own Words?

Before discussing images of ice, snow, and glass in *Possession: A Romance*, we should articulate the significance of the new methodology of reading: why "in the author's own words" is important.

When we read a novel, it is usually difficult to find something essential or transcendent which is embedded in it. As Walter Benjamin tells us,

> For what does a literary work "say"? What does it communicate? It "tells" very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation

> which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential (Benjamin, 69).

When readers are overwhelmed by an ocean of information, they barely notice the essential theme and often do not hear the muse. Readers should be conscious of the limits of interpretations and make every attempt to empty out themselves. In this way, the artistic works will gradually evolve into the thing itself, and we understand them most thoroughly and intensely when we simply do not search for the key to the mythology, but can appreciate them with Kantian disinterestedness, and on their own terms.

In this emptying-out process, writers' own explanations of their works will be highly beneficial. Even though writers themselves do not necessarily need to be the best interpreter of their own works, a modest exploration and discovery of what inspires them most and their secret mental landscapes will help readers' and writers' imaginations to commingle and blend into resplendent magic.

S. Byatt says something rather similar to Walter Benjamin in her novel:

> There are readings – of the same text – that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect, readings that hear a rustling of unheard sounds, that count grey little pronouns for pleasure or instruction and for a time do not hear golden or apples. There are personal readings, which snatch for personal meanings, I am full of love, or disgust, or fear, I scan for love, or disgust, or fear. There are – believe it – impersonal readings – where the mind's eye sees the lines move onwards and the mind's ear hears them sing and sing.
>
> Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark – readings when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was

> always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge (Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, 511-512).

In other words, to be impersonal while reading is the first step towards a genuine understanding of literary works, and then when each word matters like "stones of fire" or "points of stars in the dark", we have known the magic of art by heart: the magic has always been there, and our cognition and recognition give it an ultimate meaning.

The second reason why we should apply the methodology, "in the writer's own words", is as follows. Everyone has certain opinions towards an aesthetic object, but these opinions might be the walls that block the radiance of light and might prevent us from a sympathetic understanding of art and this world. In George Eliot's words, "opinions are a poor cement between human souls":

> I can't tell you how much melancholy it causes me that people are, for the most part, so incapable of comprehending the state of mind which cares for that which is essentially human in all forms of belief, and desires to exhibit it under all forms with loving truthfulness. Free-thinkers are scarcely wider than the orthodox in this matter – they all want to see themselves and their own opinions held up as the true and the lovely. On the same ground that an idle woman with flirtations and flounces likes to read a French novel because she can imagine herself the heroine, grave people, with opinions, like the most admirable character in a novel to be their mouth-piece. If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures (Eliot, 526).

In other words, only when we put ourselves in others' shoes and are able to imagine most profoundly and sympathetically can we contribute to the growing good of human society. Every artist embeds a design in their art, and in every attempt to get closer to this marvelous sense of design, our

own opinions gradually dissolve in the writer's imagination. We no longer use them for instruction or pleasure purposes but could see possibilities and different perspectives, and generate the longing for a "plane of immanence" as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, where opinions are merely the signs of pseudoscience, and concepts serve as the variation we bring back from chaos.

Why Image?

I focus especially on images because images in novels contribute to the minutely sensuous landscape of art by being impressive rather than expressive. Each piece of art is an image of thought essentially, in other words, we can reduce each novel to a simple image. This image may be hidden within the novel as clue and can generate the longing for regarding the whole novel as something picturesque. As Nabokov tells us:

> A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. And I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting (Nabokov, 3).

The beautiful destiny of a novel is to become a painting, an essential image. When we can behave towards a novel "as we do towards a painting," and when the novel itself becomes something impressive rather than expressive, the design of the artist is finally within us.

In Her Own Words

Byatt is particularly inspired by snow, ice, and glass, and saw the similarities and differences between ice and glass as enchanting. She also regards ice, snow, and glass as an ambivalent matter for artists, "both chilling and life-giving":

> Graham Greene wrote that every artist has a splinter of **ice** in his heart, and I think artists recognize the distancing of **glass and ice** as an ambivalent matter, both chilling and life-giving, saving as well as threatening. When as a grown woman I first read *The Glass Coffin,* I was entranced by the images of artistry the storyteller used to describe the miniature castle in the **glass case**, the craftsmanship the tailor sees in what is in fact a product of the Black Arts, a reduction of Life to Life-in-Death (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 156-157).

Byatt is fascinated by several literary characters such as Snow White, Hans Anderson's Snow Queen, and Queen Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. She notices the underlying similarities shared by these characters:

> Science and reason are bad, kindness is good. It is a frequent, but not a necessary opposition. And I found in it, and in the dangerous isolation of the girl on her slippery shiny height a figure of what was beginning to bother me, the conflict between a female destiny, the kiss, the marriage, the child-bearing, the death, and the frightening loneliness of cleverness, the cold distance of seeing the world through art, of putting a frame round things (155-156).

Science and reason, like Snow Queen's mathematical beauty, could be an artistic detachment as well as an elegant enchantment, and the "frozen and stony images" became Byatt's "images of choosing the perfection of the work." (164)

The Image of Ice, Snow, and Glass in *Possession: A Romance*

Firstly, the image of snow. Readers shall see that Christabel LaMotte, the woman and artist in *Possession: A Romance*, is distinctively sensuous and poetically philosophical due to her capability of "seeing the world through art." Her self-congratulatory solitude is preserved well through her snowy imagination which propounds intense delight:

> All day **snow** fell
> **Snow** fell all night
> My silent lintel
> Silted white
> Inside a Creature
> Feathered – Bright –
> With **snowy** Feature
> Eyes of Light
> Propounds – Delight
> – C. LaMotte
> (Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, 142)

This poem shows how the falling snow creates a silently glowing landscape, and how the snowy feature of a bright feather could take the mind to every place decorated by whiteness. In this poem, the song of solitude is the muse and the inspiration when the whole world becomes creatures of an artist's mind, and when the whole world is simplified into an artist's image of thought.

Another poem in this novel contains the image of ice, and also helps explain the ambivalent effect of "seeing the world through art": a combination of ice and fire as Life-in-Death:

Maud bowed her head with the self-consciousness of such a gesture, and thought of Christabel, standing here, looking at this frozen surface, darkly glowing under blown traces of snow.

> And in the pool two fishes play
> Argent and gules they shine alway
> Against the green against the grey
> They flash upon a summer's day
> And in the depth of wintry night

They slumber open-eyed and bright
Silver and red, a shadowed light
Ice-veiled and steadily upright
A paradox of chilly fire
Of life in death, of quenched desire
That has no force, e'en to respire
Suspended until frost retire –
(Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*, 157)

The paradox of chilly fire in this poem is also the secret of art, and a desire which is firstly conjured up by the nature of life, and then plunges into the ocean of obscurity when the boundary between life and death is blurred, and when ice and fire knowingly treasure each other's efforts and gracefully combine to produce an unbelievable charm, encouraging future adventurers in setting forth. Art itself is ice-veiled, wintry, and feathered; the language of art is also the destiny of art; the origin of art is also a particular moment of being when the artist becomes at once aware and unaware of their own existence.

The above-said finally brings us to the most important poem in this novel, *The Garden of Proserpina* by a fictional Victorian poet, Randolph Ash. It contains the image of ice and glass and also shows how the combination of ice and fire could be parallel to that of life and death as an essential charm of art, and how glass could be the destiny and home of all memories. I will first take a look at the first four stanzas:

Since riddles are the order of our day
Come here, my love, and I will tell thee one.

There is a place to which all Poets come
Some having sought it long, some unawares,
Some having battled monsters, some asleep
Who chance upon the path in thickest dream,
Some lost in mythy mazes, some direct
From fear of death, or lust of life or thought
And some who lost themselves in Arcady . . .

These things are there. The garden and the tree
The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold

The woman in the shadow of the boughs
The running water and the grassy space.

They are and were there. At the old world's rim
In the Hesperidean grove, the fruit
Glowed golden on eternal boughs, and there
The dragon Ladon crisped his jewelled crest
Scraped a gold claw and showed a silver tooth
And dozed and waited through eternity
Until the tricksy hero, Herakles
Came to his dispossession and the theft. (Byatt, 503)

This place, which all poets desire, is a combination of life and mystery, and should be the key to all life forms. Sometimes people wait their whole lifetime seeking shelter, and sometimes in dreams, its beautiful illusions gradually unfold as another kind of reality. The garden and the tree, the serpent, the fruit of gold were and are there, which are a shadow of our mind, and also a pleasure of our imagination. The dragon Ladon is in a dreamland, and its weariness swims across eternity as an antidote to time and decay, but this unbothered time and life are finally dispossessed, and the entire landscape has therefore absorbed a different meaning. Then the next three stanzas with the image of ice and glass:

Far otherwise, among the northern **ice**
In a high frozen fastness, in the waste
Of jagged **ice-teeth** and tall **glassy spikes**
Hidden from demons of the frost and mist
Freya's walled garden, with its orchard green
With summery frothing leaves and bright with fruit
Lay where the Ases came to eat the warm
Apples of everlasting youth and strength.
Close by, the World Ash rose from out the dark,
Thrusting his roots into the cavern where
Nidhogg the dark coiled with his forking tongue
And gnawed the roots of life that still renewed.
And there too were the water and the lawns,
The front of Urd, where past and future mixed
All colours and no colour, **glassy** still

Or ominously turbulent and twined.
And are these places shadows of one Place?
Those trees of one Tree? And the mythic beast
A creature from the caverns of men's minds,
Or from a time when lizards walked the earth
On heavy legs as large as trees, or sprang
From bank to bank in swampy primal creeks
Where no man's foot had trod?
Was he a dark Lord whom we dispossessed?
Or did our minds frame him to name ourselves
Our fierceness and our guile, our jealous grasp
At the bright stem of life, our wounded pride?
The first men named this place and named the world.
They made the words for it: garden and tree
Dragon or snake and woman, grass and gold
And apples. They made names and poetry.
The things were what they named and made them. Next
They mixed the names and made a metaphor
Or truth, or visible truth, apples of gold.
The golden apples brought a rush of words
The silvery water and the horrent scales
Upon the serpentining beast, the leaves
All green and shining on the curving boughs
(The serpentining boughs) that called to mind
The lovely gestures of the woman's arms
Her curving arms, her serpentining arms,
The forest wove a fence of its dark boughs
For the green grass and made a sacred place
Where the gold globes of fruit, like minor suns
Shone in their shadowy caverns made of leaves
So all was more and more distinct, and all
Was intertwined and serpentining, and
Parts of one whole, they saw, the later men
Who saw connections between shining things
And next saw movements (snatch and steal and stab)
And consequential stories where the Tree
Once stood in solitude and steady shone.

As depicted in these lines, there is a sense of summer hidden from demons of frost and snow, and it conjures up a place that celebrates the warm mortality and brightly everlasting youth. But within this sense of summer, there is still the element of Life-in-Death and the dark lord dispossesses the spirit of this place from future renewal and prosperity. Past and future are intertwined and dissolve all things colorful or colorless into the glassy essence, which reflects, but never fully tells the truth. It is difficult to tell whether the mythic beast is a creature of our mind or not and whether we possess or dispossess the creature to let our own fragile pride occupy the place. The first men named the place, mixed the names, and made a metaphor. All these shining moments of things, and all the tender movements are the memories of the Tree of Life once locked in time. And then comes the last three stanzas:

> We see it and we make it, oh my dear.
> People the place with creatures of our mind,
> With lamias and dryads, mélusines
> And firedrakes, sparking, sliding, wreathing on,
> We make commotion there and mystery
> Hunger and grief and joy and tragedy.
> We add and take away, we complicate
> And multiply the foliage and the birds –
> Place birds of paradise upon the boughs,
> Make the stream run with blood and then run clear,
> O'er grit of precious stones, diamonds and pearls
> And emerald green and sapphires and anon
> Wash these away and leave the pleasant sand
> Holding the traces of the water's flow
> As it has done since time began, we say.
>
> I see the Tree all rugged-thick with bulk
> Of corky bark about its knotted base.
> You see it like a silver pillar, straight
> With breathing skin for bark, and graceful arms.
> The place is at the centre of a maze
> Where men have died in thorny *culs-de-sac.*
> The place is in a desert where men die

From thirst in sight of it, nor know they see
The true place, who have stumbled through a glare
Of mirage upon mirage, vanishing
Like melting ice, in the hot sun, or foam
Breaking at tide's edge, on the sifting beach.
All these are true and none. The place is there
Is what we name it, and is not. It *is*.
(Byatt, 505)

The place is an unfolding of our minds and serves as a mysterious discovery of ourselves. It is a destined land for death and thrives on the flitting moment of observation. It will vanish, like melting ice when the warmth and fire gradually take hold. It could be foaming whose transient nature can best define the moments of being as Life-in-Death. It is at once the mirage and our materialized reality. Its life is pre-given and predestined: It *is*.

This poem is also the prelude to the narration when Roland Michell, a modern scholar of Randolph Ash's poetry, finally understands the true mystery and magic of art: "He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader…He saw too that Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he had understood it, that he laughed aloud." (Byatt 512) Roland Michell's climax of understanding Ash's poetry also mirrors what Nabokov defines as a wise reader:

> It seems to me that a good formula to test the quality of a novel is, in the long run, a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science. In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading. Then with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass (Nabokov, 1980, p. 6).

When Roland Michell is finally fully aware of the enchanting imagery in Randolph Ash's poetry and the magic of art, everything is at once

the same and different in his eyes. When he feels with his spine all the extraordinary ecstasy and imagistic inspiration Randolph Ash once had, he has grasped new meanings of understanding himself, art, and this world. The image of ice, snow, and glass in Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash's poetry in this novel point to a living unity of materialized reality and spiritual transcendence, which serve as "stones of fire" and "points of stars in the dark" in the narrative of *Possession: A Romance.* These images inspire most deeply the two fictional Victorian poets in the novel, and also their creator, A. S. Byatt herself.

A Tentative Conclusion

By applying the methodology, "in the author's own words," we get gradually closer to the author's intellectual thoughts, and by seeing how images arouse a minutely sensuous landscape, and how novels themselves could be simplified into imageries within them, our senses and intellectual thoughts are miraculously merged, just like how an artistic miracle is created by the dissolving of boundaries between ice and fire.

The ultimate function of art is by being "incalculably diffusive," (Eliot 515), and images of inspiration contribute a great deal to this function. Bearing this in mind, we shall see why the new methodology of reading, "in the author's own words," is at once important and not deterministically important, because "these stories are riddles, and all readers change them a little, and they accept and resist change simultaneously." (Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 164)

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