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'The Stones I shaped endure': Dickinsonian Pastiche in A.S. Byatt's Possession

by Robert Bray, Illinois Wesleyan University

The quoted partial line in the title of this paper, 'The stones I shaped endure,' is from Book XII of *The Fairy Melusina,* an epic poem in blank verse by the little-known Victorian poetess, Christabel LaMotte. So little known, in fact, that the sole voucher for her existence is A.S. Byatt's Booker-Prize-winning novel, *Possession,* published in 1990. Way back in graduate school this critic was warned that novels, being fictions, were outlaws not to be consulted, let alone trusted, as ramifying on the 'real world.' One interpreted *them* in light of history, and not contrariwise. Now, however, postmodern liberation allows us to assert that a source is a source, of course; and I have accordingly been living in *Possession* while trying to assemble a biography of Christabel LaMotte, leaving aside the question of whether she ever existed in the actual world. Here is what I know so far:

Christabel Madeleine LaMotte was born in 1825 and died in 1890. She learned what she learned at home, from her scholarly father, who was a sort of folklorist/philologist of vast knowledge and high repute. Never marrying, she kept a reclusive house in London with a companion who was an artist--Blanche Glover. LaMotte was devoted to writing poetry: yet was very shy, not to say furtive, about her craft and its products: she published little or nothing and was always reluctant to share poems with acquaintances. And, as her only friend was Blanche Glover with whom she lived, the world may be forgiven for not answering the letters she didn't write.

Into this domestic tranquillity, like a seismic tear, intrudes the famous, authoritative, established poet, Randolph Henry Ash, familiar of Tennyson and Browning and presumably all the rest of the eminent Victorians. Sometime in June of 1858 he meets LaMotte and is smitten. Though respectably married, he writes to her, not as a would-be lover and she responds; they begin an extensive correspondence that grows ever warmer as the two engage in first a poet-to-poet, then man-to-woman bout of soul-sharing and melding. Eventually they meet again, this time by assignation, then again, admit they are utterly in love, and decide to have a tryst--their one and only?--and travel to the north of England together, each having a pretext that should keep them safe from exposure. This transpires in June, 1859.

Meantime, Blanche Glover, who seems to love Christabel in an unrequited lesbian way, has discovered the correspondence and jealously tried to head the affair off. Failing, she despairs and a year later (June, 1860) commits suicide by jumping off Putney Bridge, 'with her clothes wetted and her pockets full of big round stones' (235). LaMotte was absent at the time, but where? Later we learn that when she and Ash consummated their love a child was conceived--unbeknownst to the father--and that LaMotte retreated to Brittany to stay with some French relatives until the birth. Still without telling Ash, she gave the baby to her sister in England to raise, then lived with this family dependently the rest of her life, never seeing Ash again but once, watching her daughter unpoetically grow but never making the slightest claim on her, indeed never 'telling' anyone anything--yet for a few years writing poetry as never before, both the most of it and the best.

Including her 'masterpiece,' *The Fairy Melusina.* An epic poem in at least twelve books sounds hardly Dickinsonian--at last to introduce the name that I hope has steadily been on your minds during this exposition--but LaMotte's life story is suggestive of at least one version of Emily Dickinson's. For many of us, I suspect, William H. Shurr's *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson* (1983) is beyond even the postmodern pale--a pale that is theoretically limitless and unbounded by common sense, whatever that may be. Whatever we may think of Shurr's extravagant speculations, it is arguable that Byatt had them in mind for her story of Christabel LaMotte: a woman poet reclusive, unpublished, young-old, with potential passion like a quiescent volcano overgrown by nature and culture; the incursion of a strong man into this settled life, followed by cataclysmic emotional upheaval, wonderfully requited love, sex, mutual guilt, a mysterious sundering or betrayal, even a love child born (or perhaps aborted in Shurr's account), followed by an agony and a poetic efflorescence that run concurrently for several years. LaMotte is 33 years old when she meets Randolph Henry Ash in 1858; Dickinson is 29 when Charles Wadsworth visits her at her Amherst home in March, 1860 (Leyda, *Years and Hours,* 2: 7). LaMotte has a dog named Trey to match Dickinson's Carlo, and she takes Trey to her first covert lover's meeting with Ash, as Dickinson wishes she could Carlo in the second 'Master' letter but claims she didn't in poem 663: 'We *walk*--I leave my Dog--at home--/A *tender*--*thoughtful* Moon/ Goes with us--just a little way--/And--then--we are *alone.*' And the rest, though not history, follows in the roughly parallel fashion already indicated.

Although I agree with Humpty Dumpty that Dickinson biography all depends on who's master, you will be relieved to hear that I have nothing in mind that could begin to clear waters so turbid. Allow me just this harmless

gloss on Wadsworth's candidacy: when the eminent preacher and poet-manqué was preaching in Philadelphia in 1850, the congregation heard 'the plaintive wail of his tremulous voice ' (Leyda 1: 181); thirty-two years later Lavinia announces his arrival at the Dickinson house by saying, 'The Gentleman with the deep voice wants to see you, Emily' (Leyda 2:327). It's the same man, by E.D.'s testimony: yet only a poet and a fantasist could remake a youthful but full-grown pulpit Heldentenor into an aging basso. Do you suppose she worked this magic on anything else that migrated from her life to her letters?

No wonder I would rather dwell on the *poetic* affinities between her and Christabel LaMotte. For Byatt, I shall argue, chose Emily Dickinson and her poetics as the model for Christabel LaMotte, even as she chose Robert Browning as the poetic--though not biographical--template for Ash. Which brings me back to *The Fairy Melusina.* When Byatt tags the line segment, 'The stones I shaped endure,' as from 'Book XII' of the poem, while interpolating long passages from the 'Proem' and 'Book I' into the novel's narrative, she is implying that the poem is as long as and as good as and as authoritative as any dead white male's epic, Randolph Henry Ash's *Ragnarok* in particular. Unless we figuratively take Emily Dickinson's body of poetry, or perhaps the fascicles together, as an epic of consciousness, as a 'modern lyric sequence' or 'sequences' in the phrase of Rosenthal and Gall, no such macroscopic formal claim can be made to place it alongside *Melusina*. Nor is this the only dissimilarity. Even at the microscopic level of the poetic line there are differences. LaMotte's epic is written in blank verse, of which E.D. wrote not a line. Iambic pentameter alone is rare enough in Dickinson, and when she very occasionally uses it she always rhymes it (as in 341 and 662) in couplets; and she *never* sustains iambic pentameter for more than a four-line stanza, after which it diminishes to four- or three-beats, begins to unravel prosodically, and fragments with fragmenting thought--the full line

perhaps to be restored in the end, perhaps not. The stately opening stanza of 341, then its short lines and bent syntax in the middle, and its Shakespearean concluding quatrain form a good example of this:

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes--
> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--
> The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
> And Yesterday, or Centuries before?
>
> The Feet, mechanical, go round--
> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought--
> A Wooden way
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a stone--
>
> This is the Hour of Lead--
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons recollect the Snow--
> First--Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go--

What this proves to me is that Dickinson could have written strong iambic pentameter, or blank verse, had she wanted to. That she did not sets her apart from LaMotte, though not so far as one might think. LaMotte's *Melusina* serves the thematic purpose in *Possession* of promoting poetic gender equality, certainly, but does so in a more complex way than so there, take that! The blank verse line had traditionally been a male implement of the high serious, and Byatt wants her readers to see that LaMotte's employment of it, and in epic form, is the result of her soul-exchange with Ash. Likewise, *his* poetry . . . not exactly softens or sings, but moves off from the self-consciously learned and intellectual, from the dry-minded dramatic monologues, and reverberates for once with representations of love's experience--in other words becomes more lyric. An

instance of this in Ash's poetry, though I can't take time to read it, would be the snippets Byatt teases us with from his love-sequence to the memory of LaMotte, *Ask to Embla* (285). It's not so simple as both moving in one another's directions poetically, as they did emotionally and physically, heart towards mind, and vice versa. Yet it's something like that: after their love their newly engendered poetic muse is an androgyne, invokable by both, but as a single force.

What Byatt crucially borrows from Dickinson and gives to LaMotte is *lyric voice* (along with textual trappings like dashes and capricious capitalization). Consider this unpublished, undated, untitled poem, number 11 in my rough edition of the Lyrics of Christabel LaMotte:

Our Lady--bearing Pain--
She bore what the Cross bears
She bears and bears again--
As the Stone--bears--its scars

The Hammer broke her out
Of rough Rock's ancient--Sleep--
And chiseled her about
With stars that weep--that weep--

The Pain inscribed in Rock--
The Pain he bears--she Bore
She hears the Poor Frame Crack--
And knows--He'll come--no More--

The noun 'pain' and the verb 'bore' are characteristic of Dickinson in her more agonized lyrics, most famously perhaps in 341, before quoted in another context but clearly relevant here. Byatt makes LaMotte an Anglo-Catholic, or at any rate a Christian who likes to argue with her agnostic lover over questions of

divinity, immortality and the role of doubt in making and unmaking faith. The lyric voice in this poem is a kind of multiple personality held within a single consciousness that allows a number of meanings to work simultaneously:

She/Lady (Mary)/LaMotte
He/Jesus/Ash

The personal allegory of 'great pain' and its agonizing transcendence (or the failure to transcend) is as Byatt knows the subject of some of Dickinson's greatest lyrics. She required something similar for LaMotte, who had undergone in the novel's uncovered narrative the very 'crucifixion' that E.D.'s readers have inferred from her poetry. Wherever Dickinson ended up on the question of Christian redemption and immortality, and 'know' is one of her strongest and most frequently chosen verbs but also one of the trickiest, as she was a good epistemologist as well as a great poet, Byatt elects darkness for LaMotte, or at leas the certainty of (k)no(w). Or so it would seem if we read the poem's final two lines darkly: the 'Poor Frame Crack' (the frame of the Cross? of Jesus? of Randolph Henry Ash?) and 'knows--He'll [Jesus? Ash?]--come--no More.'

Another mode of Dickinsonian lyric voice, riddling, informs LaMotte's poems, with number 12 being the best instance:

It came all so still
The little Thing--
And would not stay--
Our Questioning--

A heavy Breath
One two and three--
And then the lapsed
Eternity--

A Lapis Flesh
The Crimson--Gone--
It came as still
As any Stone--

In its narrative context, the poem appears to be about childbirth, since we eventually learn that LaMotte and Ash do conceive a child which she duly delivers (even though only one of them knows it!). It's easy to see how Byatt might have taken her notion from Shurr's 'Pregnancy Sequence' in *The Marriage of Emily Dickinson.* Shurr makes much of the '*it*-ness' of what he believes is the carried child of poems like 491 ['While it is alive'] and 1712 ['A Pit--but Heaven over it--'], which concludes

But since we got a Bomb--
And held it in our Bosom
Nay--Hold it--it is calm

(Shurr 183). The LaMotte poem too riddles on the identity of 'it,' and further on what happened to 'it' when 'it' came: born? stillborn? now still? simply still? Such were the questions Ash might have asked after he intuited that there *was* a child between them, and after LaMotte indirectly attempts to make him think 'it' had died either at birth or in early infancy. 'Eternity' is a huge Dickinson noun; 'lapsed eternity' a Dickinson-like metaphysical paradox. Poem 12, then, is an unfair Dickinsonian riddle: not to be solved by anyone who doesn't already know the answer. Yet not solving the *riddle* makes us readers of a *poem.* To all of us who are not the intended audience of one, Ash or 'Master,' a riddling voice is what matters, not the puzzle itself; a poem and not its cryptogram.

The disparity of action between Victorian men and women, seen from the woman's side, amounts to imprisonment versus liberty. As LaMotte puts the case in poem number 6,

> Men may be martyred
> Any where
> In desert, cathedral
> Or Public Square.
> In no Rush of Action
> This is*our* doom
> To Drag a Long Life out
> In a Dark Room.

Dickinson's reclusion 'at home' may have been voluntary, or pathological, but it was surely a condition she desired to offset by the big bang and expanding universe of her early 1860s poetry. Byatt confirms this for LaMotte: in the beginning she feels Ash's importunities as portending a fatal invasion of privacy, yet she wants and needs his interest in her poems. When Dickinson in April, 1862 first shyly asked Thomas Wentworth Higginson whether her 'Verse is alive?' she did not get the answer she deserved nor, I think, the one she wanted. Partly this was her greatness and his complacency (he thought she had a 'spasmodic gait,' when it was he who marched too regularly, in the army and in literature); but it may also have had to do with her recent (and ongoing?) exchanges with the potent man-of-words Wadsworth, with whom, as some interpreters hold, she was a kind of 'learning equal:' they helped one another as 'rhetoricians' [Leyda 1: lxxvii; Shurr 154]. So it was from the start between LaMotte and Ash. Though she early shows diffidence in communicating at all, and deference she thinks due to his literary status, and mildly deprecates her own poetic gift, she is nonetheless prompt to comment on Ash's work and eager to meet him intellectually as poet-to-poet. In only her second letter to him she reveals her vocation:

> Whereas in verity--I have it in my head to write an epic--

> or if not an epic, still a Saga or Lay or great mythical Poem--and how can a poor breathless woman with no *staying-power* and only a Lunar Learning confess such an ambition to the author of the *Ragnaök?* But I have the most curious certainty that your are to be trusted in this matter--that you will not mock--nor deluge the fairy of the fountain with Cold Water (177).

And a few transactions later she is no longer worried about disturbing or being disturbed by him:

> Now mark--you must write no more of your interest in my work as a possible intrusion. You do not seem aware, Mr. Ash, for all your knowledge of the great world I do not frequent, of the usual response which the productions of the female pen--let alone as in our case the *hypothetick* productions--are greeted with. The best we may hope is--oh, it is excellently done--*for a woman.* And then there are subjects we may not treat--things we may not know. I do not say but that there must be--and is--some essential difference between the Scope and Power of men and our own limited consciousness and possibly weaker apprehension. But I do maintain, as stoutly, that the delimitations are at present, all *wrongly drawn*--we are not mere candleholders to virtuous thoughts--mere chalices of Purity--we think and feel, aye and *read*--which seems not to shock you in us, in me, though I have concealed from many the extent of my--vicarious--knowledge of human vagaries (197).

Dickinson would have written this more obliquely and furtively, no doubt, but would she have agreed with the sentiment? I want to believe it. When Byatt puts words in LaMotte's mouth, she ineluctably spackles the holes in the historically graying Victorian fresco of literature and romance with our own whiter ideology of what should have been and her novelist's prerogative to

make it so. Byatt idealizes Ash more than LaMotte, however. In *Possession* the great poet steps easily from his patriarchal mantle and bestows his love on the beloved unconditionally. LaMotte and her poetry are allowed to be eccentric in the reader's eyes but not to Ash's: he sees a transhistorical 'staying-power' in her work that surpasses his own. And is this not the modern attitude of many first-rate poets, women and men, towards Emily Dickinson? That she is wholly original? That what Seamus Heaney calls 'the music of what happens' happens almost ineffably in her poetry? Byatt might have chosen Elizabeth Barrett Browning of Christina Rossetti for the part of Christabel LaMotte: there are ways of cloaking their 'actual' Victorian existence (as she so deftly did with Ash's models). But she was casting a romance with the poetry as much the hero as the poet. Those others wouldn't do at all. Read them and see. Dickinson it had to be. Which necessitated an extended and elaborated pastiche of lyrics and letters to accompany the fabulous life. Which Byatt did, credibly and creditably. Sufficient to send us from *Procession* back to our tongue's finest poetry of *self*-possession: 'Possession is to One/ As an Estate perpetual/ Or a reduceless Mine' (856).