

Polemical plot-coils: thematising the postmodern in *Possession*

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The postmodernity of A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession* (1990) has been much discussed.¹ However, the novel's formal treatment of postmodernism, through its use of intertextuality, pastiche and textual self-consciousness, diverges significantly from its treatment of postmodernism as a theme. In this essay, I will discuss the relatively neglected issue of Byatt's thematic portrayal of the postmodern, and will show how Byatt sustains a fundamentally humanist impulse from within the novel's framework of postmodern awareness.

Possession is set in a world obsessed with academia and literary research. Its central characters, the dull but lovable Roland, and the icily beautiful Maud, are drawn together through their mutual passion for Victorian poetry. Their scholarly pursuits soon escalate into a Romantic quest, as they discover that their respective objects of study, the poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, not only knew and influenced each other, but may have had a clandestine affair in 1859. Byatt's tale is enriched by her brilliant emulation of Victorian consciousness, delivered through the poetry, letters and stories of her characters. As the novel progresses, Roland and Maud gradually adjust their jaded postmodern scepticism to accommodate the vitality and ardour of the Victorians.

Reinstalling humanist values: using postmodern strategies against the grain

'... what is Randolph Ash's importance to our society now?'

Blackadder heard himself say, 'He thought carefully and didn't make up his mind in a hurry. He believed knowledge mattered –'

'Sorry, I don't understand –' (401)

Despite its recognisably postmodern strategy, *Possession* retains a strong humanist impulse. Like Ash, Byatt thinks carefully and believes that knowledge matters (401). Her Victorian characters firmly believe in the ability of language to capture and keep constant “the Ideal”:

Through medium of language the great Poets
Keep constant the Ideal, as Beatrice
Speaks still to us, though Dante’s flesh is dust.

(Ash, “Mummy Possest”, 409)

These values extend to the contemporary context, in the characters’ reflection on the resilience of art. Roland studies Ash’s poems because “they were what stayed alive, when I’d been taught and examined everything else.” Maud concurs, “Exactly. That’s it. What could survive our education” (55).

Roland’s quest is prompted by his discovery of two unfinished letters, from Ash to an unknown woman. Interestingly, Byatt locates these letters in “Ash’s own copy of Vico’s *Principj [sic] di Scienza Nuova*” (2). Vico “had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend” (3). His historiography is concerned with eternal and universal principles, in direct opposition to postmodern historiography’s focus on discontinuity and randomness of experience. Byatt’s reference to universal experience and an essential human nature goes against the postmodern grain. Indeed, Byatt counters the focus of postmodernism on historical and cultural determinism by drawing parallels between the novel’s mythical, Victorian and contemporary contexts.

While *Possession* emphasises the fallibility of historical knowledge, it concurrently displays a dissatisfaction with the values of postmodern literature, with its tendency towards transience and indeterminacy. Roland, who is “trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject” (9), is disillusioned by literary theory. It prompts “a not uncommon sensation of his own huge ignorance, a grey mist, in which floated or could be discerned odd glimpses of solid objects, odd bits of glitter of domes or shadows of roofs in the gloom” (7). Maud’s envy of her Victorian forebears— “they valued

themselves, they loved themselves and attended to their natures” (254), she says – is further evidence of a nostalgic yearning for the values of humanism.

Byatt’s acute awareness of critical theory is accompanied by a playful writing back to postmodernism and post-structuralism:

Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of ‘self’ as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this. He had no desire for any strenuous Romantic self-assertion (424).

Roland is ironically aware of the fragmentation of the human subject; for him, ontology has become a matter of pastiche. Maud similarly conceives of herself “as intermittent and partial”: “Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I?” (251).

Byatt is aware of the post-structuralist dogma about there being nothing outside the text. So are her characters. Roland “had always slightly despised those enchanted by things touched by the great” (22). He assures Maud, “I’ve never been much interested in places – or things – with associations –” (211). She agrees, “Nor I. I’m a textual scholar.” Maud finds the thought of LaMotte’s actual presence quite repugnant:

I very rarely feel any curiosity about Christabel’s life – it’s funny – I even feel a sort of squeamishness about things she might have touched, or places she might have been – it’s the *language* that matters, isn’t it, it’s what went on in her mind (55).

Similarly, Roland

had never been much interested in Randolph Henry Ash's vanished body; he did not spend time visiting his house in Russell Street, or sitting where he had sat, on stone garden seats ... What Roland liked was his knowledge of the movements of Ash's mind, stalked through the twists and turns of his syntax, suddenly sharp and clear in an unexpected epithet (20-21).

Critical discourse since the 1960s has severed the literary text from its origin, as attention is directed away from the author and into the text itself. In this way, the characters' obsessive quest for traces of the literal author is a witty engagement with post-structural notions of the text. For example, standing astride Ash's grave, Mortimer Cropper, one of the literary researchers, reflects that "at the bottom of the pit he was excavating, lay Randolph Ash and his wife Ellen, or what was left of them" (493) – an ironic response to Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author.

Ironically, the death of the author spurs a flurry of biographical interest. Roland is adamant that he is "an old-fashioned textual critic, not a biographer" (50), but finds that the "dead letters troubled him, physically even" (20-21). He finds the life of the author irresistible: "there was a pleasure to be had from reading the sentences Ash had read, touched with his fingers, scanned with his eyes" (2). His love of Ash marks a return to the real:

Roland's xeroxes were cleaner and clearer than the faded coppery-grey script of the originals; indeed the copy-ink had a black and gleaming freshness, the machine's rollers must have been newly inked. But he wanted the originals (23).

Possession persistently offers its characters a platform from which to denounce contemporary critical practice. Moreover, Maud deplors "the whole tenor and endeavour of twentieth-century literary scholarship" (221-2). Literary criticism is depicted as parasitic, devouring original works: "The footnotes engulfed and swallowed the text. They were ugly and ungainly, but necessary" (28).

In many ways, *Possession* disarms critical theory. Byatt knows that according to post-structuralist theory, the author has been divested of all her authority. Despite knowing that she is only a function, she chooses to behave like a subject,² interrupting the primary narrative as an omniscient presence, appealing directly to the reader, and elaborating on the reception she wishes her novel to have:

... it is probable that there is an element of superstitious dread in any self-referring, self-reflexive, intuned postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognises that it has got out of hand, that connections proliferate apparently at random, that is to say, with equal verisimilitude, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, not controlled by conscious intention, which would of course, being a good postmodernist intention, *require* the aleatory or the multivalent or the 'free', but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some – to what? – end (421-2).

In this way, Byatt ironically undermines her authorial authority. She flaunts her “providential powers” of manipulation throughout the novel in order to emphasise the artificial nature of the fiction. By deliberately constructing her own “plot-coil” and dubbing herself its “ferocious ordering principle”, the authorial function of the realist tradition is inscribed, only to be ironically undercut.³ Byatt’s defiant presence in the novel is especially ironic, given that her characters admit that, lacking a unitary ego, they are merely “conflicting, interacting systems of things” (267).

All this demonstrates that despite *Possession*’s employment of postmodern devices, it concurrently critiques postmodern theory. Is it a nostalgic lament for humanist values? for the grand narrative that art enhances our understanding of life? for an uncomplicated literary theory? for a lost literary innocence? Or is it possible that *Possession* accommodates humanist values from *within* a position of postmodern awareness?

It is difficult to see how a humanist impulse could be reconciled with a postmodern framework. Humanism, Stephen Yarbrough suggests, values deliberation as a means of decision

making: it presupposes some “unquestionable” ground of discourse which is, in actuality, “undecidable”.⁴ Conversely, postmodernism seems to value deliberation as an end in itself. Indeed, *Possession* tends towards endless deliberation, by denying the humanist function of history and narrative, contesting the empirical basis of knowledge and refuting humanist faith in the ability of language to represent the world transparently and objectively. Despite the connections it draws across its various contexts, its pastiche of multiple perspectives undermines the concept of any recognisable human “essence”.

Hutcheon observes that postmodernism is characterised by “a reaction against the liberal humanist suppression of the historical, political, material, and social in the definition of art as eternal and universal.”⁵ Consider how *Possession* responds to such a statement: it retains humanist faith in the value of art, of fiction, of the power of reading and writing and imagining; but at the same time reinstalls historical and political awareness. When Ash creates his characters, he likes “constructing systems of belief and survival from the fragments of experience available to them” (7). *Possession* does exactly this – it constructs meaning from the fragments available.

In what ways does *Possession* reconstruct the humanist bases of discourse from within a framework of postmodern awareness? First, Byatt refutes Jameson’s definition of intertextuality as

the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past. ... In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.⁶

To condemn intertextual practice as “the failure of the new” is to ignore the multiple coding which characterises postmodern fiction. It cannot be regarded as complicit with, or indifferent to, the text or genre it appropriates.⁷ *Possession* reinvents its Victorian context by simultaneously being (therefore affirming) and critiquing (therefore subverting) a Victorian novel.

Storey observes that

rather than a culture of pristine creativity, postmodernist culture is a culture of quotations, a culture of 'intertextuality'. Rather than original cultural production, we have cultural production born out of other cultural production.⁸

Rather than lamenting "the failure of the new", *Possession* recognises that intertextuality forges an essential connection between past and present texts. Rather than regard intertextuality as a parasitic practice, it makes sense to acknowledge that all writers are first readers, and hence that intertextuality is present in all texts, to differing degrees. "Pristine creativity" is no longer a desirable goal. Instead, intertextual practice recognises the weight and value of its preceding intertexts. As Ash writes, "*I have merely words – and the dead husks of other men's words – but I shall bring it off*" (158). Literature is refigured as a continuum, as intertextuality installs an ongoing dialogue between the past and present.

Byatt also makes frequent use of the motif of *mise-en-abîme*, or embedded self-representation. A good example of this is where Roland peers through the bathroom keyhole at Seal Court to check if Maud is in there (147). This detail corresponds directly to LaMotte's epic about the Fairy Melusina, in which the fairy's mortal husband spies her through the keyhole in a great marble bath disporting herself (33). What is the effect of these recurrences? The novel's textual frames are consistently violated as characters and events migrate between each of its narratives. As Roland observes, "everything connects and connects":

Do you never have the sense that our metaphors *eat up* our world? I mean of course everything connects and connects – all the time – and I suppose one studies – I study – literature because all these connections seem both endlessly exciting and then in some sense dangerously powerful – as though we held a clue to the true nature of things? (253)

Through metaphor and intertextual allusion, disparate experiences are woven into patterns. The continuity between the novel's different frames (Victorian, contemporary and fairy tale) in this way forges a link between the present and past.

Intertextuality is paradoxical this way, always connected to its prior intertexts while simultaneously diverging from them. Byatt locates this paradox in readings where "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*" (471-2). She uses the characteristically postmodern strategy of intertextuality to reconfigure the humanist imperative of forging connections between the past and present. By foregrounding similarities between the aesthetics of the past and present, *Possession* presents history as a series of paradigms.⁹ Its use of pastiche does not result in a totally discontinuous narrative, but forges a sense of history as a continuum, in which each experience is unique, but is still linked to its past. (Indeed, LaMotte conceives of history in this way, as "*that forever refreshed Continuum*" (166)).

Byatt also strongly refutes the tendency to regard postmodern culture as evidence of the failure of the historical enterprise. *Possession's* rigorous engagement with the past denies that postmodern fiction can only ever evoke a sense of "pastness" through the incorporation of cultural myths about that past, that the historical dimension of a text must be mere simulation. The texture of the novel is historically faithful, a careful and thorough recreation of Victorian intellect and culture. Popular images of the period are not thrown together in an indiscriminate pastiche. Byatt emulates Victorian poetry and correspondence so brilliantly it cannot possibly be described in Jameson's terms as merely the neutral mimicry of "stylistic twitches" (Jameson 4). *Possession* relishes its Victorian context, and makes a conscious attempt to sustain a poetic tradition. In this way, *Possession* is not a nostalgic parody of Victorian style, but a critical revisiting of a tradition. It is not an attempt to write a Victorian novel. Rather, it self-consciously employs many of characteristics of the Victorian novel – in its length,

plot and characterisation – while foregrounding its fictionality in a characteristically postmodern way.

Importantly, *Possession's* humanism does not compromise its awareness of postmodern historiography. Rather, it embraces it: if postmodern fiction is criticised because it cannot recapture the past, but can only ever incorporate myths and stereotypes about that past, its value lies in its recognition that representation of the past has never done otherwise. The writer of historiographic metafiction “takes on an active role, and ‘does’ the past, participates, questions, and interrogates,”¹⁰ producing a history which is dynamic and provisional. For this reason, *Possession's* deliberate conflation of fact and fiction does not trivialise history, so much as tease the boundary between history and fiction in order to foreground the imaginative element inherent in any historical narrative.

Byatt is well aware of the scepticism of referentiality which permeates postmodern thought. Her characters are affected by the displacement of absolute value by local and provisional truths. As Roland sits in the London Library, he meditates on “the tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge” (4), as seemingly infallible “facts” are systematically reduced to the constructed, and the arbitrary.

Possession comes to terms with this indeterminacy. It examines the way our access to the past is mediated by textuality, and concludes that historical knowledge is fallible. However, its ultimate response to the past is that it is still worth retrieving. No matter how “tiresome” the quest, it remains “bewitching”. *Possession* forges a sense of the past which is vital, complex, and enriches the postmodern present. It attests our desire for historical knowledge. It is aware of postmodern scepticism, but ultimately retains its faith in human curiosity: Roland feels as though he is being “urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge” (82).

Possession recognises that the past exists for us as a series of fragments, as textual traces. Although it cannot be recaptured as

totalised narrative, it can be reconstructed as heterogeneous text. Although it emphasises the difficulty of uncovering historical truths – Roland acknowledges that the discovery of the correspondence “made us all look – in some ways – a little silly, in our summing-up of lives on the evidence we had” (485) – there is always some kind of truth to uncover (Shiller 550) and, as Ash writes, “*that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on*” (104).

Possession demonstrates that postmodern fiction need not wholly abandon the humanist values of truth, reality and history, but must rework them conceptually, and acknowledge the responsibility inherent in making such claims. As Ommundsen explains,

Reading a realist text is ultimately reassuring, not because it reflects the world, but because it echoes the cultural conventions that are familiar to us, those of liberal humanism (closure, objectivity, individualism, coherence). Conversely, the reflexive text, by highlighting the ‘constructedness’ of texts *and* their contexts, liberates the reader to intervene, politically, in these processes.¹¹

Similarly, Hutcheon asserts that historiographic metafiction does not deny the liberal humanist dominant, so much as contest it from within its own assumptions (Hutcheon 187). This is evident in *Possession*. While its strategy of metafictional pastiche tends towards postmodern historiography, the novel’s lasting impression is a celebration of human development – of language, of poetry, of philosophy. It reconfigures the humanist project of enlightenment within the parameters of postmodernism. Historical knowledge is recognisably plural and provisional, but this does not preclude a sense of history as a continuum, as “*the life of the past persisting in us*” (104). In *Possession*, the past is vital. Roland steals the letters because they “were alive” and “seemed *urgent*” (50). Reading them he feels “Primary elation – a kind of vision of the bundle of dead letters come to rushing life like some huge warm eagle stirring” (124). *Possession* restores a humanist sense of the continuity of human experience, without which there can be no knowledge.

In *Possession*, the past is contained in the postmodern present. It shapes the present, and influences the future.

Yarbrough argues that while humanism is often regarded as an outmoded and conservative way of thinking, it is not another “-ism”, but an attitude, so its concerns are compatible with other positions (Yarbrough 18). *Possession* transcends the polar opposition of humanism and postmodernism in this way. It portrays some aspects of contemporary thinking as counter-intuitive, such as the death of the author and the inability of language to represent the external world, but affirms others, such as the dissolution of the boundaries between fact, fiction and criticism.

For Vico, continuity is an essential aspect of civilisation.¹² This is echoed in Ash: “The individual appears for an instant, joins the community of thought, modifies it and dies; but the species, that dies not, reaps the fruit of his ephemeral existence” (4). Ash is obsessed with gemmation, where a new creature forms from the cells of another, because it indicates “a continuity and interdependence of all life” (249). Cropper writes that Ash

turned away, like many, from individual sympathies with dying or dead men to universal sympathies with Life, Nature and the Universe. It was a kind of Romanticism reborn – gemmated, so to speak, from the old stock of Romanticism – but intertwined with the new mechanistic analysis and the new optimism not about the individual soul, but about the eternal divine harmony of the universe (250).

Similarly, a new kind of Romanticism is gemmated in the novel itself, as Byatt intertwines the “old stock” with current postmodern analysis. It affirms the value of history and of fiction, from within a framework of postmodern awareness. It views history not as a series of individual events, but as an immense cultural tapestry (Djordjevic 55), and so creates the conditions which allow the coexistence of postmodernism and humanism.

Ash writes that:

... truths that might have been graspable in the bright
Dayspring of human morning ... are now obscured by
palimpsest on palimpsest ... the lovely lines of faith that
sprung up in the aspiring towers of the ancient minsters and
abbeys are both worn away by time and grime, softly
shrouded by the smutty accretions of our industrial cities,
our wealth, our discoveries themselves, our Progress (164).

This statement is applicable to the postmodern present. Our “Progress” has eroded our faith – in the value of literature, in the recoverability of the past – and left us disillusioned, “whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists” (267). Val is disparaging of Roland’s fascination with the past: “You have this thing about this dead man. Who had a thing about dead people. That’s OK but not everyone is very bothered about all that” (19). But she demonstrates exactly why we *ought* to be bothered. She was once similarly possessed, but abandoned her studies of Ash in order to pursue “menial things” (14). She goes about her “menial way” (14). She sees things from a “menial vantage point” (19). Val’s lack of interest in the past is contrasted with Roland’s artistic inspiration. Forging a connection with the past enables him to resolve his anxiety about being a mere “crossing-place for a number of systems” (424), and become an artistic agent. By the end of the novel, he is a poet, finally embracing the emotional and existential responses his critical education has taught him to reject: “an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real” (475). Maud and Roland are enriched by responding to their humanist urge “to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us” (Epigraph). Through the process of reaching back, they overcome their scepticism, their self-conscious postmodern anxiety.

Buxton argues that in *Possession*’s critical engagement with postmodern theory, Byatt “is using postmodernism – or, at least, post-structuralism – against itself” (Buxton 213), asserting that the novel essentially “offers modernist ideology in postmodernist guise” (Buxton 217). Is this an accurate assessment? *Possession* does not simply cloak a modernist or humanist ideology in the trappings of postmodernism. It

employs postmodern strategies in order to rethink humanist ideology under postmodern conditions.¹³ Djordjevic argues that in writing against the grain, Byatt is

coming to terms with postmodernism. ... If she does deploy the entire paraphernalia of postmodernist techniques and devices, this is in order to hoist postmodernism with its own petard. (Djordjevic 46)

“Coming to terms” is a good phrase to describe *Possession*’s attitude to postmodernism. *Possession* neither resolves nor circumvents the postmodern distaste for history and meaning in fiction. Rather, it restores faith in history and fiction by rethinking them from within a framework of postmodern awareness.

Accordingly, Buxton’s assertion that *Possession*’s ideological project is “a rejection of criticism – or at least certain kinds of criticism – in favour of an outright celebration of the creative poetic sensibility” (Buxton 215) is misguided. Rather than reject criticism, *Possession* takes it on board. It is both a manifestation of and a response to postmodernism. It embraces postmodernism with relish and vigour, but retains something enduring – faith in the value of history and the delights of reading.

In this way, Byatt reconstructs humanist bases of discourse under postmodern conditions, and so is able to accommodate their seemingly incompatible values. Byatt’s adept use of postmodern and Victorian devices is evidence of postmodern awareness – of heterogeneity, of a healthy revisionist questioning of total narratives – but overcomes the debilitating cynicism of postmodern theory.

A return to narrative pleasure

Simpson identifies the emergence of a new genre in the 1980s, that of the “postmodern postdoctoral romance”:¹⁴

It comes into being after the heyday of ‘theory’ in the academy, and even when it takes a negative position about that ‘theory’, its own fictional techniques are often unthinkable without it, and knowingly so (Simpson 169).

It is characterised by a return to narrative pleasure, and marks “the return of fiction, and the relief of fiction” (Simpson 168). Eco similarly identifies “the rediscovery not only of plot but also of enjoyability,”¹⁵ embracing the process of writing “for sheer narrative pleasure.”¹⁶

This approach describes *Possession* exactly. Byatt frequently meditates on the pleasures of reading. Ash reads to fulfil a passionate desire: “*I cannot bear not to know the end of a tale. I will read the most trivial things – once commenced – only out of a feverish greed to be able to swallow the ending*” (176). Similarly, LaMotte tantalises her reader, “you must know now, that it turned out as it must turn out, must you not? Such is the power of necessity in tales” (155).

This pleasure is threatened in the contemporary context. Upon reading the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte for the first time, Maud separates the letters, reading LaMotte’s herself and giving Ash’s to Roland. Roland objects:

He pointed out by Maud’s system they would lose any sense of the development of the narrative and Maud retorted robustly that they lived in a time which valued narrative uncertainty, that they could cross-refer later (129).

He is disappointed, because

he had a vision, which he now saw was ridiculous and romantic, of their two heads bent together over the manuscripts, following the story, sharing, he had supposed, the emotion (129).

And so they separate the letters.

Byatt, however, retains the original order of the letters for the reader’s satisfaction. The reader does enjoy the pleasure of “following the story”, of relishing “the emotion”. Despite the

theoretical climate valuing “narrative uncertainty”, Byatt satisfies her reader’s urge for a “sense of the development of the narrative”.

Later, Maud receives a journal in the mail which sheds some light on the mystery surrounding the poets. The accompanying note reads, “*I made up my mind not to tell you much of its content, as I wished you, perhaps a little childishly, to have the narrative shock and pleasure that I had from discovering it*” (379). By the end of the novel Maud has learned to value narrative pleasure – even if it is a little childish. In discussing the fate of the letters, she says, “I feel, having read them – the letters should stay together. They belong together. It’s not only that they need to be read consecutively to make any sense – they – they are part of each other” (480).

This basic faith in reading is made overt through Byatt’s direct address to the reader:

Now and then there are readings which 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 (471).

Byatt also meditates on Barthes’ notion of the pleasure of the text:

Novels ... do not habitually elaborate on the ... intense pleasure of reading. There are obvious reasons for this, the most obvious being the regressive nature of the pleasure, a *mise-en-abîme* even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy. And yet, natures such as Roland’s are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive (470).

Possession affirms an integrity in reading that is threatened by postmodern indeterminacy. A connection between the past and present is made possible through the power of reading,

writing and imagining. The novel affirms what we are not supposed to believe in – artistic inspiration and poetic vision. Ash writes:

We live in an age of scientific history – we sift our evidence – we know somewhat about eyewitness accounts and how far it is prudent to entrust ourselves to them – ... Do you know – the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination. Whatever the absolute Truth – or Untruth – of that old life-in-death – Poetry can make that man live for the length of the faith you or any other choose to give him ... When I write I know ...

Oh, I have tried to tell you my truth – and have written only dreary quibbles about poetry. But you know – I do believe you know –

Tell me you know – and that it is not simple – or simply to be rejected – there is a truth of Imagination (168-9).

So, too, do we “sift our evidence”. So do we “know somewhat about eyewitness accounts and how far it is prudent to entrust ourselves to them”. With postmodernism’s rejection of “absolute Truth”, it is through reading, writing and imagining that the past lives, for the length of faith we choose to give it. *Possession* critiques but ultimately sustains the desire to connect fiction to our lives. Its solidity defiantly asserts that those who love literature may apprehend the real world more keenly.¹⁷

Byatt’s ability to write a postmodern romance is a testament to her concept of a postmodern humanism. Ironically, the inaccessible past has an immediacy and vitality absent in Maud and Roland’s sterile contemporary world. Passion thrives in an age of repression,¹⁸ while the contemporary context – which views “Celibacy as the new volupté. The new indulgence” (271) – is romantically jaded. Maud and Roland are

children of a time and culture which mistrusted love, ‘in love’, romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language,

linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure (423).

Contemporary knowledge about sex and Freudian theories leads the characters to feel that “the best state is to be without desire” (267). They lament, “we are so knowing” (253). So too does linguistic knowledge have a dispiriting effect on love. Maud muses, “We never say the word Love, do we – we know it’s a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love” (267). Roland is also highly suspicious of falling in love, which “combs the appearance of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot” (422).

Ironically, the anti-heroic Roland and icily regular Maud are drawn together by a mutual distrust of love. While they both claim to be a “devotee of white and solitary beds” (317), their silent, asexual courtship progresses. They are acutely aware of, but ultimately resist, postmodernism’s erosion of faith:

‘I love you,’ said Roland. ‘It isn’t convenient. Not now I’ve acquired a future. But that’s how it is. In the worst way. All the things we – we grew up not believing in. Total obsession, night and day. When I see you, you look *alive* and everything else fades. All that.’ (506)

Byatt invigorates the present by giving it the “kick galvanic” (147) of Victorian passion. The quest fulfilled by Maud and Roland, and shared by the reader, recovers something of significance that contemporary knowledge overlooks. In this way, *Possession* is restorative, affirming the redemptive power of fiction without compromising its critical integrity.

Conclusion: A return to enjoyability

“I think all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire” (267).

What is the effect of all this “*looking-into*”? In *Possession*, the twentieth-century characters seem restricted by an awareness of their contemporary condition. The novel addresses this issue: how can we function with such knowledge? Need we be “exhausted”? (267)

Possession’s critical engagement with history as textualised narrative inevitably renders any historical account partial and provisional. However, its revisionist historiography is ultimately affirmative. In *Possession*, the past is not recoverable in its totality, but is still worth recovering. The novel recognises that reconstructive impulses are far more valuable than deconstructive tendencies:

He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself.

... What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not (473).

Rather than despair about epistemological uncertainty, *Possession* rethinks the limits of historical knowledge in order to restore faith in history and fiction, and the potency of human curiosity. Roland’s epiphanic transformation overcomes Jameson’s scathing description of contemporary critical theory, in which

the mission of theoretical discourse ... becomes a kind of search-and-destroy operation in which linguistic misconceptions are remorselessly identified and stigmatized, in the hopes that a theoretical discourse negative and critical enough will not itself become the target of such linguistic demystification in its turn.¹⁹

Possession comes to terms with linguistic indeterminacy through its self-conscious revelry in “the language of poetry” (473), in the “power and delight of words” (470). It rethinks the connection between art and life, and by doing so validates the power of the imagination. It is rich, earnest and historically rigorous. It is defiantly affirmative. It is alluring precisely

because it is redemptive; it recovers something positive where the postmodern consciousness is lacking.

Possession's high-spirited response to the past triumphs against the paralysis of postmodern scepticism. It demonstrates that a postmodern novel need not result in ahistorical, depthless indeterminacy. Its narrative delights thwart the stifling vexations of critical theory. Roland muses that “coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable” (422). The driving force behind *Possession* is immune from the changing fashions of literary criticism – it is “something more primitive ... narrative curiosity” (238).

Importantly, from an informed perspective, *Possession* refutes pessimism about the decline of the novel. Byatt is well-versed in the fashionable rhetoric of literary criticism. Indeed, by portraying critical theory as plural and elitist, *Possession* demonstrates that “postmodernism is not so much a quantifiable literary phenomenon as a constructed one, reflecting the ideological interests of those who theorize it” (Buxton 203). *Possession* practices postmodernism on postmodernism; by interrogating postmodern theory on its own terms, it exposes its deficiencies. *Possession* warns that critical implements may be inhibitive; they just may result in a “literature of exhaustion”²⁰ which produces “whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists” (267). *Possession* demonstrates that if theory is exhausted and exhausting, fiction need not be.

Most importantly, *Possession* is a great read. It advocates what Eco terms the break down of “the barrier that has been erected between art and enjoyability” (Eco, *Reflections* 175). When Roland and Maud’s research takes them to Filey Brigg, they are “not sure any more what they were looking for, feeling it impermissible simply to enjoy themselves” (251). *Possession* restores this permissibility – to enjoy – while we go on looking.

- 1 For example, see Dana Shiller, “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel”, *Studies in the Novel* 29(4) (1997); Jackie Buxton, “‘What’s Love Got To Do With It?’ Postmodernism and *Possession*”, *English Studies in Canada* 22(2) (1996).
- 2 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 201.
- 3 As does John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*: “What has changed is that [authors] are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority” (London: Cape, 1969), 86.
- 4 Stephen R. Yarbrough, *Deliberate Criticism: Toward a Postmodern Humanism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 1.
- 5 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 178-9.
- 6 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, ed. Perry Anderson (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 7.
- 7 For example, Byatt ironically undermines Freud’s authority by relocating his words in the context of comic excess: “He [Fergus Wolff] used to quote Freud at me at six in the morning. *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. He got up very early. He used to prance around the flat – with nothing on – quoting Freud saying that ‘at no point in one’s analytic work does one suffer more from a suspicion that one has been preaching to the winds than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis’” (271).
- 8 John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 168.

- 9 Sabine Hotho-Jackson, "Literary History in Literature: An Aspect of the Contemporary Novel", *Moderna Språk*, 86(2) (1992), 114.
- 10 Brenda K. Marshall, *Teaching the Postmodern: Fiction and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 151.
- 11 Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafictions: Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 86.
- 12 Ivana Djordjevic, "In the Footsteps of Giambattista Vico: Patterns of Signification in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*", *Anglia-Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 115(1) (1997), 55.
- 13 Perhaps this is what Buxton implies in her suggestion that *Possession* is "doubly metafictional", where she asks, "Does its complicity and critique of postmodernism itself make it *post-postmodern*?" (Buxton 218, note 8).
- 14 David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 168.
- 15 Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver, in *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie (London; New York: Longman, 1995), 173.
- 16 Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xviii.
- 17 Richard Jenkyns, "Disinterring Buried Lives", *Times Literary Supplement* (2 March 1990), 214, cited in Thelma J. Shinn, "'What's in a Word?' Possessing A. S. Byatt's Metonymic Novel", *Papers on Language and Literature* 31(2) (1995), 175.
- 18 Ann Hulbert, "The Great Ventriloquist: A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*", in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 56.
- 19 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), cited in Simpson, 161.

²⁰ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), in Currie 162.

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