

## POSTMODERNISM in POSSESSION

Possession provides a suitable example to discuss postmodern fiction for different orders of reasons:

- its privileged focus on LANGUAGE
- its high density of intertextuality, pastiche and textual self-consciousness (the narrator is perfectly aware of the procedures and effects of writing, text types and the like)
- its focus on research and academia
- the choice of literary characters underlines the role of theory in literary contemporary output
- scrutiny of literary genres (romance, novel, poetry, tales, folklore, etc.)
- mixture of different text types.

At the same time and despite its recognisably postmodern strategy, *Possession* retains a strong humanist impulse. Like Ash, Byatt thinks carefully and believes that knowledge matters.

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 Possesst", 409)

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 di Scienza Nuova*".

Vico "had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend". 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"

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".

Maud's envy of her Victorian forebears- "they valued themselves, they loved themselves and attended to their natures", 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.

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).

The interest in and on language is often present in Maud and Roland's discussion because 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."

"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".

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.

And 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"

– an ironic response to Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author.

*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".

Literary criticism is depicted as parasitic, devouring original works:

"The footnotes engulfed and swallowed the text. They were ugly and ungainly, but necessary".

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?

In what ways does *Possession* reconstruct the humanist bases of discourse from within a framework of postmodern awareness? *Possession* reinvents its Victorian context by simultaneously being (therefore affirming) and critiquing (therefore subverting) a Victorian novel.

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. *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.

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".

Literature is refigured as a continuum, as intertextuality installs an ongoing dialogue between the past and present.

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 brilliantly.

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,"* 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.

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"* 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".*

*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"*

– there is always some kind of truth to uncover and, as Ash writes,

*"that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on" .*

*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. *Possession* transcends the polar opposition of humanism and postmodernism in this way. It portrays some aspects of contemporary thinking as counterintuitive, 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.

*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. *Possession* takes postmodernism 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.

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.