

(DE)CONSTRUCTION OF THE POSTMODERN IN A. S. BYATT'S NOVEL *POSSESSION*

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The Booker-prize winning novel *Possession* (1990) by Antonia Susan Byatt is generally regarded as an emblematic postmodern novel in which texts, authors, literary movements of the past are transformed and reflected; they are presented in the form of metafictional narrative, of rewriting, of parody and pastiche, giving them a reinterpretation and recoding in a totally different cultural and literary context. However, it seems to me that it is possible to detect the writer's ambivalence towards and unease about the postmodern, inscribed in the novel's text. My proposition is that although Byatt's play with conventions of metafiction, the use of parody and pastiche which is one of the most important features of postmodern art, are instrumental in the construction of the postmodern, on the other hand, this postmodern move eventually results in the critique and deconstruction of postmodernism itself. Byatt's parody is also very explicitly directed at the modern critical theories, particularly poststructuralism and feminist criticism. My argument will be based on a discussion of Byatt's *Possession*.

It is a truly complex, intricate and multi-layered novel both in terms of its structure and themes, blatantly intertextual and can be

read through other texts incorporated into the author's narrative, referring to transtextual relations.

The novel's subtitle – *A Romance* – points to its architextual relations with the genre of the romance and guides the reader into the reception and interpretation of Byatt's novel as a romance. However, the metatextual layer testifies to Byatt's novel being a postmodern double-coded text: it is both the imitation of the romance and Victorian poetry as well as their critical reconsideration and reappraisal from the perspective of the contemporary context. It is metafiction in which the writer resorts to parody, pastiche and the narrative-destabilizing intertextuality, the moves which foreground fictiveness. In her book of literary criticism *Passions of the Mind* (1992), Byatt points out that “parody and pastiche are particularly literary ways of pointing to the fictiveness of fiction, gloomily or gleefully” (Byatt, 1992, 157).

The novel's thematic complexity is programmed in its paratext – the title and two epigraphs. The twofold possession implicated in the title and defining the duality of presentation and interpretation saturates and connects the past and the present as well as two plot

stories: the novel features the Victorian and present-day lovers possessed by love and passion for each other as well as for poetry; on the other hand, it parodies contemporary academics, literary scholars, and biographers possessed by the object of their search and research. Sparing no effort to find the missing manuscripts of a famous nineteenth-century poet, in their maniacal search they resort to any, even the most unscrupulous means, for the sake of their academic career.

The novel's first epigraph is taken from the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* by Nathaniel Hawthorn:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need
hardly be observed
that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to
its fashion and
material, which he would not have felt himself en-
titled to assume,
had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter
form of
composition is presumed to aim at a very minute
fidelity, not merely
to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary
course of man's
experience. The former – while as a work of art, it
must rigidly
subject itself to laws (...) – has fairly a right to
present that truth
under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's
own choosing
or creation... The point of view in which this tale
comes under the
Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a
bygone time with
the very present that is flitting away from us.

(Epigraph)

This paratextual reference to the text of the American romantic writer N. Hawthorne highlights the creative powers of the genre of the Romance, its inherent potential to transform reality, the writer's freedom to construct

the world according to his wish and fancy, as well as the attempt to connect the past, which in Byatt's novel is recurrently reawakened, with "the very present that is flitting away from us." This way Byatt's intention is stated, and the romantic context of *Possession* is mapped and validated. This paratext also points to the relationship between truth and fantasy, reality and fiction, to the fictiveness of the world constructed by the writer. Byatt's double-coded text plays with the tension between reality and a fictionalized construct. The fictiveness of *Possession* is also emphasized by the other epigraph to the novel – a long excerpt from the Victorian poet Robert Browning's poem *Mr Sludge, "the Medium"*, which closes with the following lines:

How build such solid fabric out of air?
How on so slight foundation found this tale,
Biography, narrative?' or, in other words,
'How many lies did it require to make
The portly truth you here present us with?'

(Epigraph)

The secret and extremely passionate relationship of the fictional Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash with the poetess Christabel LaMotte, who remained sunk in obscurity, unfold in parallel with the romance of the two modern lovers Roland and Maud (whose names are derived from the Medieval romance and its Victorian rewritings – *The Song of Roland* and Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem *Maud*) – connecting the past with the present and producing the duality of vision. The author plays with time, constantly moving between the past and the present. These dislocations of time shatter the illusion of reality and highlight metafictionality of Byatt's text. The same function is performed by the duality of presentation: the novel's narrative structure urges the reader to interpret the love story of the Victorian poets Ash and LaMotte from the twentieth-century perspective; the modern

lovers, literary scholars Roland and Maud, whose research focuses on the writings, biography, letters and diaries of the two Victorian poets, often comment on the love story of the nineteenth-century heroes, trying to reconstruct from the fragments of their poems and letters the past, the poets' personalities and their love story.

The Victorian poets' love story is interwoven with various other stories, myths, fairy-tales and fables, taken from the tradition of the Medieval romance and its nineteenth-century rewritings. In *Possession* Byatt concentrates on Victorian literature and culture, as it is in that age that the plot-stories and the forms of the medieval romance were elaborated and transformed in prose and poetry. Thus Victorian fiction, poetry and culture is a major intertext of Byatt's novel, mapping, contextualizing and unfolding the themes of love and creation, inspiration and poetic tradition. A vast intertextual web of references points to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which cultivated the artistic spirit of the Middle Ages and favoured medieval romances rewriting them. Byatt in her turn rewrites the poetic texts of the Pre-Raphaelites, such as William Morris and Christina Rossetti. Thus another important intertext testifying to the author's play with the generic conventions of the romance and their transformation is Medieval literature and myths. In *Possession* there are obvious references to the Arthurian romance refracted through the Victorian rewritings, such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and William Morris's *The Defence of Guinevere*. Byatt rewrites the legend "The Glass Coffin", as if it were the work of Christabel LaMotte, containing allusions and references to numerous medieval fables. The author introduces the myth of Melusina, connected to the female protagonist, as narrated by the medieval poet Jean D'Arras and presented as the best

poem of Christabel LaMotte *The Fairy Melusine*, a retelling of the old tale of the magical half-woman, half-snake, which is one of the key pastiches of Victorian poetry in Byatt's novel. (Byatt, 1991, 289–298; further quoting from this novel only the pages are indicated). These mythical parallels as well as numerous references to the Romantic poetry in Byatt's text map the novel's main themes and organize the characters' relations. In her last letter to Ash, Christabel identifies herself with Melusine: like Melusina, she is punished for her passion, for keeping their daughter from him and giving her away for adoption: "I have been Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not." (501).

Christabel LaMotte is a typical romantic heroine, associated with mystery and imagination; her name and character was obviously inspired by S. T. Coleridge's poem *Christabel* and J. Keats's poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Keats's poem is echoed in the "Postscript 1868" of *Possession* in the scene when Ash encounters his little daughter who does not know her father:

'There', he said, crowning the little pale head.
'Full beautiful, a fairy's child. Or like Proserpine.'
(510)*

Then adds in farewell:

'Tell your aunt', he said, 'that you met a poet,
who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans
Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends
her his compliments, and will not disturb her,
and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures
new.' (510)

* The fourth stanza of Keats's poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* reads like this: "I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful – a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild." (Smith, 1957, 369).

The play of associations and references obviously connects the novel's female protagonist Christabel both with the heroine of Keats's poem and with the fairy Melusine of her own poem, and fills the narrative gap by alluding to the little girl as the fruit of the two poets' love ("fairy child" and "Proserpine"). Byatt's pastiche *The Fairy Melusine*, which in a way is a rewriting of Christina Rossetti's poem *Eve*, contains the image of a serpent which is the central symbol of *Possession*. In the first place, it stands for Christabel, "half-woman, half-snake", who casts a magic spell on Ash, charms him and even becomes an influence on his writing. The parallel with the Biblical myth is also obvious: the serpent seduced Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden thus bringing on punishment and death. This symbol can be also interpreted through the dialogue with the Romantic poetry. In Keats's poem *Lamia* (1820) a serpent is transformed into a beautiful girl who fascinates a young Corinthian, Lycius. In ancient myth a lamia was a female demon, enticing young men in order to devour them. In Keats, Lamia, a serpent, stands for imagination and love. In Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) which is echoed in Byatt's text the Serpent is the symbol of imagination. In one of Byatt's pastiches of scholarly discourse, Christabel LaMotte's poem *The Fairy Melusine* is compared to "Coleridge's Serpent who figured the Imagination, with its tail stuffed in its own mouth." (37) As *The Dictionary of Literary Symbols* points out, a serpent with its tail in its own mouth is an old symbol of eternity, going back to ancient Egypt (Ferber, 2004, 323). Hence one can assume that Christabel LaMotte, who is associated with the symbolic serpent, epitomizes the eternal creativity and love.

The fictional character of Christabel LaMotte is a textual mosaic in which the great nineteenth-century poetesses – Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson – are recognizable and their voices are echoed in Byatt's pastiches. In the beginning Christabel's character is constructed by the correspondence between the two poets, in which she stands as a passive, obedient woman who undervalues herself and her poetry, thus fully conforming to the image of the Victorian woman-angel in the house. However, later on she reveals herself as an educated beautiful poetess whose belief in the female creative powers is epitomized in her most famous poem about the fairy Melusine, which influenced Ash's poetry. In her letters to Ash, she mentions her interest in the myth of Melusina because of the female duality inscribed in it: "(...) I am interested in other visions of the fairy Melusine – who has two aspects – an Unnatural Monster – and a most proud and loving and handy woman." (174). Christabel LaMotte is an incarnation of the female creative power: she tries to retain her poetic identity in the unfavourable for women Victorian age. Although while alive she and her poetry did not win such a critical acclaim as Ash's did, it is Christabel who is presented as the greatest creative force in the novel.

"The constructed" poetry of Randolph Henry Ash is an imitation of the themes and style of several famous nineteenth-century male poets, such as Robert Browning, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne. In these poetic pastiches one can trace allusions to the Romantic visionary poetry imbued by fantasy and mysticism with the underlying motifs of transience and death which anticipate the birth of Symbolist and Modernist trends. Walter Pater's emphasis on the present moment, his urge to make the most of the ecstatic and passionate possibilities of experience, Keatsean conviction of the interrelationship between pleasure and pain, Swinburne's moments of

extreme pleasure and delirious ecstasy are actualized in the love story of the Victorian poets. The context of Decadence and Aestheticism is undoubtedly introduced by one of Byatt's major poetic "forgeries", Ash's poem *The Garden of Proserpina*, a pastiche, both in themes and in style, of Swinburne's poem *The Garden of Proserpine*. In this poem the novel's semantics is encoded, and major themes – like seduction, passion, love and the accompanying pain and anguish, poetic imagination, creativity – are mapped which are developed in Byatt's text. The poem is based on the ancient Greek myth about Persephone (Proserpine), a radiant beautiful goddess of spring and autumn. But all the while Persephone knew how brief that beauty was, as it must end with the coming of the cold and pass like herself into the power of death. The myth of Persephone highlights the motif of love and sorrow in Byatt's novel. The poem's central image of Persephone (Proserpine) stands for sorrow and pain caused by the awareness of the transience of beauty, love and life. On the other hand, the poem is ambivalent: the word "garden" in its title can be interpreted as a metaphoric space of love encounters, an erotized space of pleasures, in which the love story of the two protagonists flourishes. *The Garden of Proserpina*, as a major poetic pastiche in the novel, both structurally and semantically frames the love story of the nineteenth-century poets and its development, their poetic search, articulating the themes of poetic imagination, death, ecstasy, passion and the transience of love. The love story of Ash and LaMotte was short-lived, passionate and wrapped in mystery. Their correspondence developed into a passionate love affair which lasted only one summer of 1859 in Yorkshire. Much later Ash will confess to his wife Ellen: "For the last year perhaps I have been in love with another woman. I could say it was a sort

of madness. A possession, as by daemons. A kind of blinding. At first it was only letters – and then – in Yorkshire – I was not alone." (453).

Christabel, however, all of a sudden mysteriously disappears from Ash's life and does not answer his letters in which he implores her to tell him what became of their child. This narrative enigma is disclosed only at the end of the novel, in Christabel's last letter to Ash written after thirty years when the poet was dying and was never shown the letter. In Ash's poem *The Garden of Proserpina* the same recurrent image of a serpent symbolizing imagination taken from Christabel LaMotte's poem *The Fairy Melusine* is used, which connects the two lovers as well as their poetic search.

Through the fictional characters of the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte constructed from the textual fragments (letters, diaries, poems, fairy-tales), and the pastiches of the poems, Byatt reconstructs, revises and revalues the Victorian poetic tradition from a different twentieth-century perspective, paying tribute to the poetry and poets of the past. In an interview, Byatt mentions that what moved her to create these literary characters was the realisation that "the great Victorian poets have never been seen to be as great or as complex as they are" (Tredell, 1994, 59). It is obvious that Byatt gives a positive appraisal of the Victorian poets, such as Robert Browning, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne whose poetry she imitates in her pastiches. Randolph Henry Ash is presented as a literary celebrity, "the great ventriloquist", a poet of many voices, an outstanding personality with many diverse interests: "Ash had been interested in everything. Arab astronomy and African transport systems, angels and oakapples, hydraulics and the guillotine, druids, and the grande armee, catharists

and printers' devils, ectoplasm and solar mythology, the last meals of frozen mastodons and the true nature of manna." (28). The greatness of the Victorian poet stands in contrast to the parodic image of contemporary critics and academics like Mortimer Cropper, Beatrice Nest, and James Blackadder, a disciple of F.R. Leavis, who burn their lives in futile obsession to get a share in the modern 'Biography Industry'. The "forged" literary and scholarly discourse in *Possession* turns into a parody of modern critical theories. Byatt's irony is directed particularly at poststructuralism and feminist criticism. The evidence of it is satirically described modern critics Leonora Stern and Fergus Wolff, as well as the parody of deconstruction and feminist criticism's texts. The feminist interpretation of LaMotte's poem about Melusina borders on absurdity: "The feminists are crazy about it. They say it expresses women's impotent desire. (...) the new feminists see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males. I like it, it's disturbing. It keeps changing focus. From the very precise description of the scaly tail to cosmic battles." (34) Fergus Wolff is presented as a disciple of Barthes and Foucault; at the moment he "was writing a deconstructive account of Balzac's *Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu*" and facing the challenge "to deconstruct something that had apparently already deconstructed itself" (32). In the character of Leonora Stern and her "forged" text, the French feminist critics Helene Cixous and Lucy Irigaray and their rhetoric are recognisable. Leonora's "first major opus, *No Place Like Home*, a study of the imagery of home-making in nineteenth-century women's fiction" was "written before Leonora's militant middle and later Lacanian phases" (311). The bombast and the double-Dutch of the chapter absurdly titled "From the Fountain of Thirst

to the Armorican Ocean-Skin" in Leonora Stern's book *On Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte*, which imitates the style and themes of the poststructuralist feminist discourse, turns into a scathing parody. The imitated scholarly jargon is hilarious indeed in its inanity, pretence and nonsensicalness.

The tension between the past and the present, the duality of presentation in *Possession* is conducive to the critique of postmodern critical theories, poststructuralism in particular. Glorifying the great poets of the past in contrast to the modern critics and literary scholars presupposes the opposition between "the creative consciousness", the authority of the writer, versus the poststructuralist ideas of anonymity and "the death of the author". This opposition is deconstructed in favour of the author who is back and whose presence in the text seems to be vital. Even if Byatt's text in *Possession* is intertextual (as I have previously argued in this essay), constructed of various textual fragments, pastiches of poems and scholarly essays, even if it may conform to Roland Barthes's definition of the text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Lodge, 1988, 170), even if Byatt does play with the narrative conventions for imitation and parody, all the metafictional strategies as if backfire: in fact, Byatt seems to be trying to restore the author back to the text, displaying her belief in individual creativity against the anonymity advocated by poststructuralist theories. She stresses the strength of the creative author as contrasted to the impersonality and the loss of subjectivity of the modern critics. Even the most sympathetically described characters in the novel – the modern critics and lovers Roland and Maud – are "symptomatic of whole flocks of exhausted scholars and theorists"; they can theorise love and desire, romance,

sexuality and body, but those theories in which they are so well-versed – poststructuralism, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis – left them in emotional vacuum: “We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too – about how there isn’t a unitary ego – how we are made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things – and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can’t see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we – we know it’s a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love – so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things – Love – themselves – that what they did mattered – “ (267).

Metafiction entails the contemporary philosophical predicament: the crisis of literature, the crisis of language, the crisis of communication, the crisis of knowledge. Byatt’s novel, however, does not question the pretensions of literature and art to Truth and stable human values. Moreover, it promotes those values, raising the question about the emotional state of contemporary academics, parodying their clichéd mentality and their acquired scholarly jargon. Furthermore, there is a desire for truth, for “knowledge”, for the origins, a need for answers inscribed in the text, which *per se*

contradict postmodern thinking. The romance plot in the novel is structured by the desire to know which is satisfied by coherence and by the deferred closure. The literary parody in *Possession* articulates the questions that postmodernism has rejected as realist: “Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable” (422). Roland and Maud, like Ash and LaMotte, find themselves caught in and driven by a coherent plot of a Romance: “All *that* was the plot of a Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectation of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another.”(425). And they do finally arrive at some knowledge. There is a solution to the mystery in the novel, there *are* answers in the final sex scene and in the “Post-script 1868”.

Thus we have to suspend a sense of alienation, discontinuity, fragmentation and endless multiplication and turn, according to Ihab Hassan, “toward an aesthetic of trust”, i.d., we have to be committed to truth, to the belief there is truth. This is probably the only solution.

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