

Jo Labanyi

*MYTH AND HISTORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY SPANISH NOVEL*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. 283

Reviewed by Jorge Marbán

In this book Jo Labanyi studies the use of myth or mythical structures in six important novels written in Spain during the 1960s and early 1970s: *Tiempo de Silencio* (1961) by Luis Martín-Santos, *Volverás a Región* (1967) by Juan Benet, *San Camilo, 1936* (1969) by Camilo José Cela, *Reivindicación del conde don Julián* (1970) by Juan Goytisolo, *La saga/fuga de J.B.* (1972) by Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, and *Si te dicen que caí* (1973) by Juan Marsé.

Labanyi refutes the premise on which Northrop Frye's school of criticism is based: that works of literature merely echo the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Labanyi sets out to prove that the literary use of myth in the context of the Franco regime had political connotations.

One particularly difficult problem that Labanyi faces is to establish the conceptual limits of history and myth and their relation to each other. In the first chapter the critic explores the historical uses of myth, from the Romantic period to the modern critical approaches represented by Freud, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Marcuse, the structuralists and the deconstructionists, among others. At the end of the chapter Jo Labanyi contrasts the cyclical recurrence asserted by myth with the lineal progress and continuity represented by historical writing: "Myth is concerned with the eternal and the universal, and attempts to neutralize change, history is concerned with the temporal and the particular, and stresses the importance of change" (33).

Labanyi considers three of the novels studied here to be works that use myths ironically to expose their limitations or distortions. *Tiempo de Silencio* purports that existence is not based on the fixed categories of myth but on the contradictions which make change inevitable. The main character's inability to escape contradiction implies an inability to escape history (92-93). *Volverás a Región* shows that "mythical thought is . . . a failed attempt to impose ordered structures on to an unstable history" (95). The Civil War is used in Benet's novel as an allegory of the devastation caused by the passage of time; language is, in his view, a mythical instrument that serves to make us aware of its failure to recover an absent original (133). Marsé's novel, on the other hand, presents the mythical counterculture of an alienated youth that rejects the static mythical views of the Francoists as well as those of the ageing political opposition (135).

Labanyi studies the remaining three novels (Cela's, Goytisolo's and Torrente Ballester's) in one chapter, and notes that all these writers welcome the divorce between language and reality as a liberation from the nightmare of history. Humor, in all of them, has, together with Eros, the function of release: "In all three cases history is equated with repression, and myth with liberation" (179).

Labanyi's conceptualization and generalizations are sometimes lacking in precision and clarity. The book is occasionally tedious, and the system followed in the grouping or subgrouping of works could be debatable. But all in all, the writer proves to be extremely well informed and knowledgeable about the writers and the works under discussion (*Myth and History* includes more than 300 bibliographical entries). The critic is familiar with each novelist's thought and is particularly skillful in relating ideas expressed by them in essays and interviews regarding these particular texts. This is, as the author notes, one of the very few critical works about the Spanish postwar novel which incorporates abundant textual analysis. *Myth and History* is indeed a very useful book for interested readers in the English-speaking world, as well as for specialists in contemporary Spanish literature.

A.S. Byatt

*POSSESSION*

London: Chatto and Windus, 1999. Pp. 511

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

Now that she has won the Booker Prize for *Possession*, Antonia Byatt is certain to gain the North American reputation she deserves. A more scholarly and less prolific writer than her sister Margaret Drabble, Byatt has published four earlier novels: *Shadow of a Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and *Still Life* (1985); the last two are the first two volumes of a planned quartet. She is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987) and of critical work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American writers, including Iris Murdoch. Like Murdoch, she is an intellectual novelist in the best sense.

One of the two epigraphs to *Possession* (the other, equally apposite, is Hawthorne's distinction between novel and romance) signals one of Byatt's ongoing preoccupations, the transactions between the imagination and its materials. In a passage from Browning's "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," the monologist compares his procedures to those of the poet: What can either do, he asks, "without their helpful lies?" The quotation ends with the question, "How many lies did it require to make/The portly truth you here present us with?"

Byatt's portly but elegant book explores Victorian poetry and poetics, modern scholarly sleuthing, intellectual history, and ordinary (past and present) living and loving, and is engaging on all these subjects. Its genre is elusive: it combines detective story, academic satire, historical novel, fairy tale, epistolary novel, novel of feminist protest, and love story; and it presents the reader with a multiplicity of textual forms—poems, journals, essays, newspaper articles, myths, and legends. Unifying all this material is the idea of possession in all its senses: possession of knowledge and ideas, possession in love,