

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,

possession of the past, demonic possession and—relating all these—possession of and by language. Byatt's most obvious helpful lies are her Victorian inventions, the poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel La Motte. Randolph both is and is not Browning. Christabel, while remaining staunchly individual, is suggestive of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti and, beyond these, of all the half-known and unknown woman writers of the past.

In the late twentieth century, there are two British scholars, Roland Michell (an Ash scholar) and Maud Bailey (predictably, a La Motte scholar). Their predictable love story begins with texts, as Roland discovers drafts of a letter from Randolph to Christabel, and Maud finds what they—mistakenly—take to be the entire correspondence. Reinterpreting the now defamiliarized biographies, they stumble on another love story. As they proceed they are brought up against the limits of interpretation, the fragility of personal identity, and the instability—as well as the coerciveness—of language. Driven by narrative curiosity, they must admit incompleteness and indeterminacy. However many clues they track down—and they even profit from their rivals' rummaging in Ash's grave—they can never possess the whole. They also become uncomfortably aware of their roles as characters in a love story; Roland muses, "Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot" (422), although, as good postmodernists, he and Maud are aware that love is "a suspect ideological construct" (267). Here too their subjects have preceded them: Ash wonders whether love is "more than the *kick galvanic*" (273), and he and Christabel, born before and—poignantly—after their affair, interpret each other as semiotic problems.

The reader's experience provides another layer of interpretation. We are given privileged glimpses, withheld from Roland and Maud, of Randolph and Christabel together, of Ellen, the poet's wife, at his deathbed, and of the pathos of Ellen's own life. Byatt's "postscript," an idyllic, delightfully satisfying flashback, shows that even the knowledgeable reader has misinterpreted a clue, and by implication underlines Byatt's point. For all its richness of texture, coincidence, character, and language, *Possession* ends by celebrating contingency and silence, the reality that escapes our grasp, and, on the moral level, the purity of intention which struggles, by avoiding possessiveness, to respect the uniqueness of things and persons. Its best moments are those which convey flashes of wordless intuitive recognition, in love and in art. In one of these moments near the end of the book, Roland, dazzled by a rereading of a familiar Ash poem, begins to compose poems of his own. These, we are led to suspect, are the best poems in the book. But of them we read not a word.