

The last section of the book is an impressive bibliography (more than 100 entries) with capsule characterization and annotations of bibliographies, biographies, and criticism assisting both novice and devoted readers of James.

This slim, sharp-focused, and neatly produced book brings an interpretative contribution as a veritable "reader's guide" to James's life and literary and critical accomplishments. Despite its diminutive size, it contains many insights. It should meet the needs of literature students, graduate and undergraduate, and can appropriately introduce the general reader to the centralities, the intricacies, and the eccentricities of James's major works.

A.S. Byatt

*Passions of the Mind*

Chatto and Windus, 1991. Pp. 346. \$34.95

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

This collection of essays on nineteenth-and twentieth-century fiction and poetry, appearing after the success of Byatt's *Possession*, will interest not only readers of that novel but those who have followed—or are belatedly catching up with—her progression as a writer of fiction which began in 1964 with *Shadow of a Sun*. Her scholarly and critical work is less well known: she has produced full-length studies of Wordsworth and Coleridge and of Iris Murdoch (whose influence on Byatt's writing is pervasive) and numerous essays, reviews and introductions. Divided into five sections, "As a Writer," "Victorians: Incarnation and Art," "Moderns: Varying Strands," "The Female Voice?" (the question mark indicates Byatt's wariness of feminist assumptions), and "Vision and Reality," the papers in *Passions of the Mind* span the years from 1969 to 1991. After the two essays on Byatt's own work, focusing on *Still Life* and "Sugar," the collection brings together reviews and occasional papers (reviews of, among others, Georgette Heyer, Toni Morrison, Monique Wittig; reflections on judging the TLS poetry competition); more accessible work ("People in Paper Houses," essays on Frazer, Freud and postmodernist fiction, and on D.J. Enright, introductions to George Eliot and Willa Cather); and expanded versions of shorter pieces (on Browning, Ford Madox Ford, Van Gogh) now published for the first time. Linking this apparently disparate material is Byatt's preoccupation with the nature of language and narrative, and especially with the changes in myth and metaphor under the pressures of Victorian skepticism, modernism and postmodernism. Byatt's description of her project in *Possession*, to "explore the continuities and discontinuities between the forms of nineteenth-and twentieth-century art and thought" (6), describes *Passions of the Mind* as well.

Byatt takes it for granted that no boundaries exist between theory and practice. By nature an "agnostic . . . a non-believer and a non-belonger to schools of thought" (2), she shows how writers as diverse as Leavis, Foucault, Pound, and Graham Greene have helped to form her ideas and attitudes. Neither is there a division between her roles as academic and as creative

writer: her unfinished doctoral dissertation, on religious metaphor in the Renaissance, led her to give free rein to the mythologizing, incessantly cross-referential imagination in *The Virgin in the Garden*. For her, reading and writing are inseparable activities. Reading Proust helped her with the problem of combining mimesis and self-reflexiveness, by showing that a text can be (in Coleridge's sense) an imitation of life and at the same time think about its own perceptual and formal processes. She cites the autobiographical title story of her collection of short stories, *Sugar*, as her attempt, following Proust, to explore her own family story and, simultaneously, the ways in which fiction rearranges its material. Poetry, painting, and fiction illuminate each other: Browning, Van Gogh, and Wallace Stevens, poised at successive points along the line of continuity/discontinuity, suggest different responses to Byatt's central concerns, "metaphor, incarnation and the impossibility of pure representation" (6). Two of these three figures are tangible presences in her fiction. In *Possession*, the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash tantalizingly recalls Browning, and Browning himself appears in one of her short stories, "Precipice-Encurled." A character in *Still Life* (the sequel to *The Virgin in the Garden*, in a planned quartet) writes a play about Van Gogh, and both he and Byatt's narrator are concerned, like Van Gogh, with accurate representation of ordinary things in a demythologized world.

Byatt has a gift for succinct definition of the special qualities both of writers very different from herself (Heyer, Morrison, Cather) and those whose visions and methods border closely on her own: she finds in the poems of Enright (to whom her book is dedicated) "the not quite malign energy of modern non-mysterious objects" (198) and describes Elizabeth Bowen's strategy of reaching generalizations by "careful definition, redefinition, judgment, further judgment" (246). She can deftly sum up a literary period or moment. The novel in the 1950s and early 1960s "dealt with the numinous in an almost hectically ordered way" (189), she says, and she identifies the Sixties as marking a point at which even the most skeptical and comic invocations of myth in fiction became problematic.

Throughout the volume Byatt's personal touchstones appear and reappear: William Carlos Williams's "no ideas but in things," which enunciates the challenge she set herself in trying (and, she admits, failing) to find a bare, nonmetaphorical style for *Still Life*; Murdoch's praise of the "hard idea of truth," Stevens's statement "The accuracy of accurate letters is an accuracy with respect to the structure of reality"; Van Gogh's yellow chair. The essays put them in relationship, and reveal a mind in the act of pondering what they mean, for readers and writers.

In "People in Paper Houses" Byatt praises the "primitive gifts" (188) of curiosity and (in the best sense) greed. The essays in this well-named volume show that Byatt has plenty of both.