History, Myth, and Nationhood in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*

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Abstract There is a gap in the current research on historiographic metafictional novels; previous efforts have mainly focused on the postmodern treatment of language and narration in these novels: the use of parody, language plays, slippage of meaning, etc. The focus has been mostly upon the formal features of these writings. This article however offers a fresh line of research, because the writer believes that historiographic metafictional novels necessarily reveal a connection to the discourse of nationhood since they evoke shared memories of the past. The present article examines the relationship between history and national identity in A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian novel *Possession* (1990). In this novel, the past is retrieved through a collage of pseudo-historical documents and intertexts. *Possession* is written at a time Britain was involved in negotiating and redefining its post-imperial identity. Here Englishness is mainly reflected in the interaction between history and myth.

Key words Englishness; the nation; history; historiographic metafiction; *Possession*

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> The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.
> — Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

> My sense of my own identity is bound up with the past, with what I read and with the way my ancestors, genetic and literary, read, in the worlds in which they lived.
> — A. S. Byatt's *On Histories and Stories*

These two seemingly contradictory epigraphs are nowhere more masterfully united than in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), a Booker Prize winning novel of excellence in historiographic metafiction by Antonia Susan Byatt (1936-). Written at a time Britain was involved in negotiating and redefining its postimperial identity, *Possession*, like many other novels in that period, falls back on the memory of ancestors. The memory of the past is used to open new spaces for literary creation, for re-invention of an imagined community.

Possession is set in 1980s England and describes the imaginative possession of two academic researchers, Drs. Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject," who, resorting to an archive of letters, poems, and diaries, seek to unveil the clandestine love affair between two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, whom they finally emulate by falling in love (Byatt, *Possession* 13). Here Byatt links two distinct historical periods. But are they really "distinct"? The writer shows that the past is not merely a finished story; it continues to exert its influence upon the present in many a different way, not the least as part of cultural memory.

Byatt's epigraph that opens the novel is a quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Preface" to *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), which mainly asserts that the label of "Romance" allows the author to "attempt to connect with a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* xi). Therefore, we are not dealing with a diachronic narrative, but a "synchronic" one, a *meta*narrative of history, which is a telling example of the postmodern historical novel, not unlike Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, or Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*. Moreover, *Possession*, in the words of the writer herself:

> plays serious games with the variety of possible forms of narrating the past — the detective story, the biography, the mediaeval verse Romance, the modern romantic novel, and Hawthorne's fantastic historical Romance in between, the campus novel, the Victorian third-person narration, the epistolary novel, the forged manuscript novel, and the primitive fairy tale of the three women,

> filtered through Freud's account of the theme in his paper on the Three Caskets. (*Histories* 48)

The novel is a postmodern pastiche of literary styles and genres (romance, satire, campus novel, mystery, etc.); it has many intertexts, literary or nonliterary, making the text "a palimpsest on palimpsest" (Byatt, *Possession* 181). This point will be dealt with later but for now it is advisable to refer to some major critical readings and reviews written on/about *Possession*.

Most of the critical pieces written on the novel are possessed either by the formal, postmodern features of the novel or by its treatment of gender and feminism. To name but a few, Andrew Higson in "Fiction and the Film Industry" examines the novel, as an extended case study, in his discussion of the interaction of the cinema and contemporary English literature; his reading is mainly focused on the formal features of the novel and its cinematic adaptation. Michael Greaney in *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory* examines *Possession* in terms of the relationship between feminism and post-structuralism. The novel, Greaney says, is "conspicuously fluent in the language of post-structuralist theory, but notably ambivalent about its contribution to feminism" (Greaney 101). Louise Yelin describes the novel a "rewriting of the history of post-war criticism that restores to prominence scholarly labors regarded as feminine and accordingly undervalued or, conversely, deemed of little value and accordingly assigned to women" (Yelin 39). Nancy Chinn also views the novel from a feminist perspective and focuses her attention on the characterization of Christable LaMotte, and explores her resemblance to the main character of her finest achievement *The Fairy Melusina*. Jessica Tiffin however discusses self-reflexivity of Byatt's novel and says, "she [Byatt] continuously explores and deconstructs the nature and workings of her own narratives as well as the problematic relationship between narrative and reality" (Tiffin 47). Byatt's fiction, Tiffin adds, betrays an interest in fairy tales and folklore; the structure of the fairy tale "signals an explicitly non-mimetic function, a transition to a different reality from our own … a nonrealist form of representation" (Tiffin 48).

There have been also critics who have touched on the importance of history in the novel though their readings have not been comprehensive. For example, Del Ivan Janik in "No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel" refers to and analyzes *Possession* in order to contest the ideas of "such diverse critics and philosophers as Jean Baudrillard, Francis Fukuyama, and Fredric Jameson [who believed] we are at or beyond the 'end of history', [and] there stands

before or about us only a perpetual present" (Janik 160). Janik argues that "history and the concept of history are alive and well, particularly as subject and theme in recent English" (Janik 160). Janik believes *Possession* and similar contemporary novels have rejuvenated the historical novel as an art form. Nonetheless, his reading is not very profound since he has only referred to the novel as a case to corroborate his point.

Furthermore, what critics and reviewers have recognized less is a reading that foregrounds and links the concepts of myth and nation. Thus, I shall firstly explain why history plays such an important role in the text and then discuss the role of myth in the discourse of nationhood.

History is a vital to any discussion of *Possession* mainly for two reasons. Firstly, following the revisionist literary and historiographical theory of the 1960s and 1970s, English literature "[has] seen an explosion in the sales and popularity of novels set in the past" (de Groot 1), written mainly to problematize representations of history and reinterpret/rewrite the archival history. For example, *Possession* interrogates the certitude of our traditional assumptions about the past and challenges our historical knowledge. The idea that history is just a narrative, one among many, is repeated in the words of Christabel LaMotte in her final letter to Randolph Ash. By creating a false narrative to tell Ash, Christabel managed to hide a piece of history for almost twenty-eight years. She lied to Ash about the miscarriage of their child. In fact, she shaped history to her liking. She says: "*All History is hard facts — and something else — passion and color lent by men. I will tell you — at least — the facts*" (Byatt, *Possession* 542). This is not however the only narrative regarding this event. Christabel thinks she has kept this secret only for herself; Roland and Maud also think they have discovered the whole truth; however, the reader knows the insufficiency of their knowledge. The novel ends with a "postscript" which tells a different story about the main historical event of the novel. Christabel, Roland and Maud were certain that Randolph Ash did not know the whole truth about his child, however, the reader is made aware that their certainty is groundless. All this time, Ash knew he had a daughter. The postscript not only disrupts linearity, chronology, and closure, but also demonstrates that the desire to know the past through and through never ends in fulfillment. As the writer self-consciously and metafictionally comments, "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable," because the novel as "a form of narrative envisages no outcome, no closure" (Byatt, *Possession* 456, 145). Indeed, "[m]etafiction *displays* and *rejoices in* the impossibility of such a resolution" (Waugh 6).

Historical narratives are always open to alternative readings and rewriting. The "Postscript" section — which is an invitation for the reader to participate in the meaning-making process — begins as follows:

> There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. This is how it was. (Byatt, *Possession* 552)

Ash asks Maya to deliver a message to her Aunt Christabel that she "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" (Byatt, *Possession* 555). Maya forgets to deliver the message; therefore, neither Christabel nor the present-day scholars ever know that Maya once met her real father. The postscript withholds closure, exposing the unfulfilled nature of desire to possess the past completely. In the groundless certainty of Roland and Maud as detectives, one can see clearly the idea that even historical documents are not complete and unquestionable. Roland and Maud can only interpret the history from their own perspectives; they have only access to the textual traces of history.

Secondly, the last decades of the twentieth century and the first two of the third millennium have witnessed an ever-growing tendency among British women writers to engage in writing alternate histories, to experiment with literary historiography; Angela Carter, Penelope Fitzgerald, Jeanette Winterson, Zadie Smith, Sarah Waters, A. S. Byatt, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and many other female writers of fiction have chosen "history" as their subject only to reclaim the "ex-centric" voice of women. A voice that has, for a long time, been silenced or at least driven to the margins by patriarchal practices of History. Since history was connected with identity, it assumed the status of a master narrative and barred the door on the possibility of existence of different accounts. Therefore, "the sudden flowering of the historical novel in Britain, the variety of its forms and subjects, the literary energy and real inventiveness that has gone into it" owes a great debt to revisionist works of contemporary female writers of historical fiction (Byatt, *Histories* 9). These revisionist historical novels are mainly written in historiographic metafiction, a form that welcomes dissident readings and alternative realities. Byatt in *Possession* rewrites history from a female point of view.

Moreover, historiography has been in general a fecund ground for British writers of fiction in which to retrieve, or rather to recuperate, "a sense of the nation in the context of millennial anxieties" (Boccardi 61). *Possession* in particular "proposes a form of envisaging national history that is dependent on existing ideological and economic conditions: the fact that they are put at the service of a 'just' cause cannot fully conceal their connivance with the politics of the time" (Boccardi 87). Here *Possession* as a historical novel, as a text that makes an entry into the past and comes out with interpretation(s), serves two roles: imagining the nation and showing the continuity in nationhood through different periods of time.

The historical past is part of the national present. In retracing the past, Maud and Roland come in possession of important information about two Victorian poets that only adds to the already-high prestige of English literature and culture. The nation is, after all, represented by its culture and cultural products.

Myth and Nationhood

Hayden White in his famous book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), asserts that the postmodern self-reflexive narrative forms manifest "a return to a mythic apprehension of the world and its processes" (10). One of myth's functions is to reflect cultural memory, the collective memory of a nation. It functions as the nation's link to its distant past. Many different critics have written on the regenerative quality of myth and mythological stories — the most famous is perhaps the ethno-symbolist Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016). According to Smith in *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999):

> what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular *living past* has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation. (9)

The myths, symbols, traditions, and memories of the past guard the nation and our collective national-cultural identities against forces of oblivion. It is thus vital to trace and understand the formation, the origins, of a nation over time. Byatt's novel moves within such parameters, as if its writer were familiar with Smith's definition of nation "as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories" (*Myths* 11). Also Smith names "continuity" and "reappropriation" as two important national elements that link the past and the

present: "If continuity signifies the forward reach of the ethnic past to the national present, the rubric of reappropriation represents the converse movement, a reaching back into the ethnic past to obtain the authentic materials and ethos for a distinct modern nation" (*Myths* 12).

Byatt regularly employs myths and fairytales as intertexts in her fictional work. In *Possession*, particularly, she reaches for old English mythology. By evoking the memories of a glorious past, Byatt attempts to substantiate a sense of *continuity* and to emphasize national origins. As she puts it eloquently, "[individual/national] identity is bound up with the past, with what I read and with the way my ancestors, genetic and literary, read, in the worlds in which they lived" (*Histories* 93). She is not the only one to think in this way. Brian Finney in *English Fiction since 1984: Narrating a Nation* (2006) argues in the same vein that "the English past is still part of the present state of the nation," and "representations of a national past and present interact with one another in surprising ways" (70).

Historical and mythological themes reappear in Byatt's oeuvre commonly. Her *Possession* makes references to two mythological stories in the main: the pagan Anglo-Saxon myth of Yggdrasil (or an ash tree at the center of the universe) and the myth of Melusina (Ilkhani, "Old" 122-8).

The obvious question is why does Byatt use Anglo-Saxon mythology? As part of the answer, I should refer to the condition of English identity after the Second World War. With the gradual loss of Empire after the Second World War, England lost her high status in the world and also her self-confidence. This catastrophic loss also affected English national identity. Moreover, the influx of large number of immigrants from the former colonies and the subsequent hybridization of society added to this problem and disturbed the sense of Englishness for many English people. It is in this atmosphere that writers like Byatt tried to regenerate a fresh discourse of national identity. Byatt here uses myth for creating the idea of nationhood.

Byatt's novel creates an imaginary Victorian poet named Randolph Henry Ash who always carries a wooden stick made of ash-tree. In Anglo-Saxon mythology, ash tree or Askr Yggdrasil was the Tree of the World, a tree that held the whole universe. William Fairfield Warren in "The World-Tree of the Teutons" (1907) asserts the Askr Yggdrasil is one organic unity that unites celestial, terrestrial, and infernal worlds. The tree has three roots, and some believe it stands as "a symbol of life, universal and human, and that the three roots symbolize the physical, the intellectual and the moral principles respectively. Another attempted explanation has taken the three to mean matter, organization, and spirit" (Warren 126). It was believed

that the first humans were made from a piece of this tree. Textual references to the ash tree are therefore important because they evoke myths of origin, building up a sense of belonging, validating the notion of Anglo-Saxondom.

Another important issue throughout the novel is "cultural imperialism" versus nationalism. A good example is provided by disputes over the late discovery of the Ash-LaMotte letters and whether the correspondence should remain in Britain or be sold to the Americans. There is rivalry between the Americans (represented by Mortimer Cropper) and the English (represented by James Blackadder) over the possession of the said correspondence:

> The Americans have offered my client huge sums for the manuscripts. But the English have got onto it, and are trying to have the whole lot declared of national importance, and stop the export. They seem to hate each other. (Byatt, *Possession* 448)

Cropper "represent[s] capitalist and cultural imperialism" (Byatt, *Possession* 431). As Kate Mitchell accurately points out, "[t]he novel ties Cropper's acquisitiveness to his American nationality. A current of anxiety circulates throughout the novel about the loss, during a period of economic decline for England, of English cultural artefacts to rich Americans like Cropper" (98). As the name-symbolism for the American collector (Cropper) indicates, the writer is both criticizing American materialism (under Reagan's capitalist regime) and warning her own beloved country of the threats of such capitalist acquisitiveness. Counter to "Cropper's large offers of money," the moneyless patriot Blackadder has to ask for charity to keep the Ash-LaMotte correspondence — which forms part of the national heritage and consequently of national pride — where it really belongs:

> "Blackadder had written to every public body he could think of who might be concerned with the Ash-LaMotte correspondence. He had lobbied the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, and had requested an interview with the Minister for the Arts …" (Byatt, *Possession* 430)

Yet Blackadder's attempts to see the Minister "resulted in a dialogue with an aggressive and not wholly gentlemanly civil servant, who had said that the Minister was fully apprised of the importance of the discovery, but did not believe that it warranted interfering with Market Forces" (Byatt, *Possession* 431). The Market Forces! With capitals. The writer reveals her anger at the government's politics.

Therefore, "if the novel parodies acquisitive America, then it also excoriates the compliance of Thatcher's England" (Mitchell 98).

Nevertheless, since "the retention of these old letters in this country is truly in the national interest," the writer "ensure[s] that the papers are kept in this country," but still "without any artificial aid from the state" (Byatt, *Possession* 431). Roland's mentor Professor Blackadder and Maud's friend Professor Leonora Stern discuss this issue in a television interview after the discovery becomes publicized:

> Shushila [the interviewer] sat between her guests and smiled. Blackadder watched the cameras and felt like a dusty barman. [Blackadder:] Now we know who it is — we have discovered Ash's Dark Lady. It is the kind of discovery scholars dream of. The letters have got to stay in our country — *they are part of our national story*.
>
> And Shushila: "You won't agree with *that,* Professor Stern? Being an American?"
>
> And Leonora: "I think the letters should be in the British Library. We can all have microfilms and photocopies, the problems are only sentimental. And I'd like Christabel to have honor in her own country." (Byatt, *Possession* 436, emphasis added)

For Blackadder this dispute relates to Britain's pride and honor in its culture and nationality. This feeling is also visible in Sir George Bailey's conduct towards the American Cropper who trespasses in Seal Court, ignoring the signboard that read: "Private Property. Keep Out" (Byatt, *Possession* 346). Concerning the Ash-LaMotte letters, Sir George tells Cropper clearly, "I don't like English things being bought up by foreigners" (Byatt, *Possession* 347), and later adds, "English things should stay in England" (Byatt, *Possession* 348).

Blackadder also declares that "Randolph Henry Ash was one of the great love poets in our language" (Byatt, *Possession* 348). He thus tells us that language is linked to a sense of nationhood. Notice that Blackadder names only Ash as a great poet "in our language," and leaves out LaMotte, the other Victorian poet. It is because Christabel LaMotte was a hybrid — "half-French, half-English" (Byatt, *Possession* 377). She spoke with her cousin Sabine de Kercoz in Breton — a Celtic language spoken in Brittany, in the north-west of France.

Equally important as language is religion, a matter of moment upon which English national identity is predicated since the Reformation. "*She* [LaMotte] says she is a member of the Church of England in England, but that here the faith of her

fathers is the Catholic faith, in its Breton form" (Byatt, *Possession* 398). Perhaps it is because of this "mystical Breton brand of Christianity" that she is enabled to "dr[a]w on her native Breton mythology, which she had known from childhood," and write poems with strong feminine heroes" (Byatt, *Possession* 41, 148). One such poem is *The Fairy Melusina*, the mythological story of a water nymph who is cursed to take the form of a serpent from the waist down each Saturday. The curse can only be lifted if she marries a mortal who has to swear never to visit her on Saturdays. Melusina marries the knight Raimondin for whom she abundantly exerts her supernatural powers of fertility and creativity. Driven by curiosity, he eventually does not keep his word and spies on her in her bathroom, thus witnessing her transformation. Melusina's curse is fulfilled. Turning into a dragon, she has to abandon her husband and her children. It is very interesting that LaMotte comes to realize that she has been Melusina all these years. The Melusina myth is female-empowering: "feminists see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality" (Byatt, *Possession* 39). Here Byatt supports the idea of female creativity and how much it is suppressed in the male-centered patriarchal society, especially in the Victorian era. This "make[s] it unexpectedly important in thinking about the popular expression of gender in English culture" (Featherstone 159). It is interesting that the first women's emancipatory movements started during that period. Also interesting in the myth of Melusina is that she "built castles": "The image of the hearth runs all through *Melusina.* She built castles and homes; the hearth is the home" (Byatt, *Possession* 258). Castle, as memory space, is amongst icons of Englishness; it embodies peace and security:

> [C]astle with its gardens, though now measurable with pins and fine stitches and thumbnails and thimbles, were lordly and handsome enough for any man to wish to spend his days there. (Byatt, *Possession* 74)

Writing in 1913, James Bone states: "No characteristic of the Englishman is more clearly expressed in his art than his love of a harmonious life within the walls of that much-vaunted castle of his, which is inviolate" (161). Castles are where kings and queens dwelled, where key moments in the history of a nation determined. Having Defeated the Vikings, King Alfred the Great ordered "burhs" (castles) to be built in order to protect his kingdom.

Therefore, in Anglo-Saxon societies, especially England, castles and historical houses are valued because not only are symbols of a proud and prosperous past, but also show the continuity of an ancient culture. Such a valued continuity could also

be seen in heritage sites: castles, monuments, historical houses, etc. For example, Chartwell evokes a sense of pride in Englishness since it was once the residence of Winston Churchill, the legendary Prime Minister of England during the Second World War who outwitted the Nazi Hitler more than once and changed the course of war. These heritage sites nurture a feeling of Englishness, a sense of belonging to a common culture and territory.

The textual example of such a *lieu de memoire*, as Pierre Nora calls it, is "Seal Court," a castle inhabited and guarded by Sir George Bailey. It is interesting that the name "Bailey" signifies the outer wall of a castle. Also, the name "George" makes one think of the name of the patron saint of England, Saint George. The name "LaMotte" refers to a mound in a castle. The word "castle" alone is repeated 31 times.

Seal Court and the Myth of the Garden

English castles are strong markers of power and prestige; they symbolize cultural kinship, a shared national identity that has stood the test of time. Visiting such heritage sites kindles a common feeling of belonging to an imagined community of fellow Englishmen, because they are reminded of their common national identity. However, the way these sources of collective memory are kept over the years is also very significant. It may show the present condition of a nation.

Mariadele Boccardi in her book *The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire* (2009) suggests Sir George Bailey's castle, Seal Court, is "symbolic of the nation with all its tradition and present decline" (*The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire* 79). That the castle is now deserted, Boccardi believes, calls to mind the image of the Gothic castles. Perhaps she is trying to refer to the position of England as a former empire after the Second World War. Whatever her intentions might be, she aptly refers to "the re-enactment of the myth of the Garden … for an imaginative recuperation of the national past" (*The Contemporary British Historical Novel: Representation, Nation, Empire* 81). Myth has the power to unite people and remind them of their togetherness.

Furthermore, I believe Seal Court, the olden castle and its garden, is a kind of chronotopic space which has stood the test of time. The castle as a chronotope, showing the continuity of the Baileys, symbolizes a national space, a space that unfolds a nation's heritage, that connects its past to its present and future. The use of the chronotopic castle becomes then a kind of national allegory.

Influenced by Kant, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) introduced the theory of

chronotope, signifying in brief the inseparability of spatial and temporal dimensions in a literary work (mainly a novel). However, "[t]he main use Bakhtin made of this theory in his own published works was in the study of literary history, where it served principally to demonstrate the 'process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature [. . . and] the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space'" (Best 291). According to Bakhtin:

> the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements — philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect — gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope. (Best 292)

Abigail Wheatley in *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (2004) examines the "extent to which castles were involved in the ideological and mythographic life of the nation" (16), and argues that castles as chronotopes play an important role in "the articulation of [the continuity of] English political power and royal and national identity" (*The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* 144). Seal Court as chronotope both maintains the nation's continuity and moves ahead the symbolic pattern of the novel.

Conclusion

For the postmodernist historical novelist, the past has not ended nor is it sealed for good; instead, the past is an integral part of the present. Historiographic metafiction invites us to change our perception of history and makes us conscious of the limits and shortcomings of represented history. Also, the traditional idea of keeping separated the literary and the historical is challenged in postmodern theory, mostly through attention to the idea of intertextuality. Thus, history and literature function as *intertexts* of each other.

Since postmodern historical novels revisit the past and in a way reconnect the past to the present, we may say they are not simply about history but they *historically* reflect upon the past of a culture or a nation or the lives of the people of a region or a particular community. In this sense, postmodern historical novels are often, in one way or another, related to the general discourse of nationhood. A character's understanding of their national past is shaped through the historical

events in the novel. In A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian novel *Possession* Englishness is reflected in the interaction between history and myth. The memory of the past is used to open new spaces for literary creation, for re-invention of an "imagined community."

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