

Book Reviews

Possession: A Romance. A.S. BYATT. London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1990. 511 p. ISBN 0-09-980040-3 \$9.95.

Can literary research lead to true romance? The jury may still be out on the fate of the two contemporary literary scholars, but readers around the English-speaking world, evidenced by the Booker Prize (1990), have emphatically declared that it can be so. A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* is a heady elixir bound to turn the most sceptical archivist or historian into a novel reader. It will even cure those of us disinclined toward mystery stories. But it is bound to upset any lingering sense of the purity of research.

Perhaps only literary studies as practised in England could produce such a tale. It is hard to imagine, for example, Canadian historians stalking, vulture-like, single individuals or archival sources, ready to pounce, possess, and proclaim as their own some shred of the subject's anatomy, the closer to the genitals the better. There is just too much historical space in Canada, our archives are just too modern. A stray letter in an old book would long since have been retrieved, microfilmed, and catalogued; only in the British Library might it actually still be there for a hapless post-doctoral research fellow to stumble upon. As for tracing packets of love-letters via a poem to a cache under a bed in a castle, well, we just don't have the architecture, much less, I fear, the imagination for it.

A.S. Byatt certainly does. She has spun an absorbing tale of researcher-as-sleuth (would that our adventures with *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* characters were as fruitful) combining mythology, poetry, diaries, correspondence, artefacts, literary criticism, and social mores from the high Victorian age to the late Elizabethan (II) one. That Byatt has invented all this has given some historians pause: they'd rather be in the archives reading a "real," first-hand account and yet there is nothing in *Possession* that does not ring true. So much so that some readers have gone to the encyclopedia looking for a nineteenth-century poet Randolph Henry Ash.

Curiously, what they have not looked for is a nineteenth-century poet Christabel LaMotte. Part of Byatt's ability to possess the reader's mind is her clever engagement of our complicity: LaMotte could not be real because she is a woman. And yet she possesses knowledge, without which Ash becomes unreal. At the same time, she is inaccessible. So

too is the young scholar sleuth who needs Christabel's knowledge more perhaps than her male collaborator. Rendered inaccessible is Ellen Ash whose voluminous diaries have been hovered over for forty years by the monumental Beatrice Nest. No one in the grant-endowed "Ash factory," including by now Nest herself, has considered the diaries significant enough to publish. And it is Ellen Ash's grave that has to be violated in order for protagonists and readers to possess the final piece of knowledge.

That's strong stuff coming from a graceful book of time-tumbled fiction to archivists and historians, the self-proclaimed orderly keepers and creators — possessors if you will — of the real and the known. Can knowledge be possessed? Who has the right to possess it? In its documentary form, there are family claims, scholarly claims, national claims — enough to keep copyright lawyers, literary zealots and acquisitive scholars-cum-fetishists wrangling for years. The debate alone precludes secrecy about the existence of the documents (and incidentally heightens their value), secrecy being the antithesis of scholarly enquiry but the very stuff of scholarly careers. As for the knowledge contained in the documents, what lengths are justified to extract it, acquire it, call it one's own? Is a distinct language required, from mythology to theology to feminist postmodernism (Byatt masters them all) to grasp that knowledge? And is the knowledge different because of the nature of its possession? What, ultimately, is the knowledge for? The cast of characters and vested interests is so rich here that the old stand-by — for its own sake — is no longer tenable. But might one contend that historical figures have a right to privacy? Or is that right in itself historically contingent: self-possession may require secrecy in one generation, knowledge in the next. Does archivist or historian dare act as arbitrator?

Perhaps these awkward questions only arise because of the particularly difficult task of creating a *female* person and acquiring *her* knowledge. The women of this novel (including the author) all have knowledge that form part of the mystery and its unravelling but many a critic will still be found to mutter about the insignificance of this knowledge to Henry Ash's literary production. And that very muttering (might it mask an obscure fear of necrophilia?) still prevails in archival and historical circles. It accounts for the still lamentable state of women's archives in Canada, the burying of many papers that do exist among those of male next-of-kin, and the obstinate refusal to recognize the hierarchically gendered nature of the institutions we do so assiduously document.

The number of other recent novelists to take the activity of scholars, be they archivists or academics, as the starting point for a work of fiction — Carol Shield's *Swann: A Literary Mystery*, Daphne Marlatt's *And Historic*, Jan Clausen's *Prosperine Papers*, even perhaps Réjine Robin's *Le roman mémorial* — and the number of our colleagues secretly harbouring the desire to write a novel suggest that the line between real and *rêvé*, between fact and fiction, between history and literature has become decidedly blurred. There may even be an argument here for maintaining the close proximity between the National Archives and the National Library! Be that as it may, why indeed should imagination, empathy, and love be any less real than a gravestone, a lock of hair, or a piece of jewellery in proving that something actually was? Byatt's characters epitomize the former. We have yet to make room for it in our job descriptions, but we might try it to advantage in our jobs.

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