The Historicity of the Texts in Possession

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Abstract. In view of the novel’s complexity of the texts, this paper focuses on the new historical analysis of A. S. Byatt’s Possession. Through studying two epigraphs of the novel, the poem—“The Lady of Shalott” and Gode’s tale, the author scrutinizes the novel from “the historicity of texts” perspectives, and finally makes out modern people’s desire for the past and the reflective effects of the past on the present. The history in the novel provides root for the modern people, meanwhile the present searches the past for love and self-identity.

Introduction

History is conveyed by means of texts. The texts are clarified via language. During these two processes, people from different social classes revised and effaced historical materials. So Hayden White argues that history just like language, from the deeper perspective, is poetic: both of them are essentially fictional [1]. In Possession, all the battles in the present depend upon material from the past. Third-person narrative is used in no more than sixty percent of the novel. The rest comes to us as texts. Thus the author of the paper will explore the deep relationship among texts and history both in broad sense and in the novel.

New Historicism

Since text is the carrier of culture and reflects the mainstream of a society, New Historicism critics consider that all texts are actually social documents that mirror meanwhile echo their historical situation. Also, they center history and state that “any interpretation of a text would be incomplete if we do not consider the text’s relationship to the discourses that helped fashion it and to which the text is a response” [2]. From this aspect, a text becomes a battlefield where the author, society, custom, institutions, and social practices debate, argue and exchanged ideas, ultimately negotiated by the writer and the reader and affected by each other. In New Historicism theory, comprehension of the “poetics of culture” is a procedure that views life in an artistic way. Through their analysis, they declare that the social world of the text will be concealed, furthermore, nowadays there are social forces working upon us.

For New Historicists, the meaning of the texts lies in culture which is composed of the discourses of its writer, text, and reader. To reveal textual meaning, a New Historicist focuses on three aspects of concern: the life of the author, the social rules and dictates found within a text, and a reflection of a work’s historical situation as evidenced in the text [2]. Since each text has a dominate person, the hero or heroine’s actions and beliefs represent not only individual concerns but also those of the author’s social background. Thus text can also be viewed as an artistic works that reflects on these social codes.

The New Historicists maintain that consciously or unconsciously the past is always transferred through the medium of text. In other words, any information of the past submits to the author or reader’s interpretation. Thus any so-called historical source should be understood as a fictional text, rather than be definitely interpreted as a dogmatic material. Apparently the social and cultural circumstances of the reader will influence the process of reading and consequently history may
convey alternative meaning in accordance with changes. Byatt inserts numerous correspondences in both Victorian and modern time. These correspondences carry a big weight in the novel.

The Historicity of Texts

Two Epigraphs of the Novel

Byatt entitled her novel Possession: A Romance, then came Hawthorne’s Preface to The House of Seven Gables and her own explanation: “When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude”[6]. Hawthorne makes a distinction between the Romance and the Novel, saying that “a greater leeway is afforded to the writer of the former who needs to adhere so closely to the structures of Reality” [1]. Hawthorne wrote a Romance with the aim that: “The point of view in which this tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us”, believes that romance is not lawless, that it must be faithful to “the truth of the human heart”. “Hawthorne asserts the prerogative of the writer of romance to ‘present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation”’ [3]. This matches flawlessly with Byatt’s own intention.

The second epigraph from Robert Browning’s monologue “Mr. Sludge, the Medium” questions the construction of any description, in which Sludge defends the mendacity of poets, writers of “plain prose,” and medium like himself.

What any of them can do, he asks, “without their helpful lies?” the supposed purity of truth was questioned by Browning. On the other hand, the role of lies was acknowledged in creating any “portly truth”. What’s more, we can see Byatt believes that: “what does it matter if the truth is bent to a good degree, if people who never existed cavort with those who did?” [1]. Browning’s Sludge plays a role of a medium so as to convince his audience to believe in the past he conjures up, because we would never know what exactly happened in the past.

In Possession, both Byatt and her characters are engaged with the “question of fictive truth as it relates to literature, criticism, biography, history, and moral experience” [3]. For example, though Ash’s poem, “Mummy Possesst”, is mainly written down as an accusation of fraud, the poet regards the actions of the spiritualists as the same as his own. Similarly Mr. Sludge was written by Browning, Harriet Lees was wirtent by Ash. He appreciates her “art” in the way to revive the past.

Ash’s poem echoes Browning’s Mr. Sludge. There exists a direct connection between Browning, Ash and Byatt. Byatt conveys her convictions and fictional creation through Browning’s words. Byatt firmly sticks to the idea that she can speak with the voices of the Victorian dead. This is fully delivered by both Ash and the Browning. We can consider Byatt herself as a type of medium between us and the Victorian past.

Poem: “The Lady of Shalott”

A. S. Byatt shows a great interest in Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott”. When Byatt is asked what literature had a strong impact on her work, Byatt answers that when she was young, this poem was kept in mind. In the story of “The Lady of Shalott”, there is a woman who weaves in a tower. She is forbidden to see the world outside her tower, but she is reliable on the mirror for her art. She weaves magic sceneries in the mirror and finds pleasure in her work. If she look directly down to Camelot, a curse will befall her. One day Camelot comes riding by, the Lady looks down on Camelot and “out flew the web and floated wide/the mirror cracked from side to side/ “the curse is come upon me” cried/The Lady of Shalott” [4]. She dies in a boat floating down the river. “One reads this poem as a portrait of failed female artisthood, of the lady’s inability to experience direct unmediated visions and recreate them into art” [5].

The figures and images through which Christabel constructs her personal identity represent the Victorian and modern dilemmas of the woman artist. To Ash, Christabel presents herself as Arachne, the spider who “must spin out her huge Burden of Silk”; “the silk is her life, her home, her safety—her food and drink too” [6], and as the egg in her riddle, a crystal casket enclosing a gold cushion, “a perfect O, a living Stone, doorless and windowless” [6]. Both of these images underline
her need for solitude to produce her art, and for something else—security from the penetrating male gaze. As she and Ash come close to their decision to go away together.

After she and Ash have met in Richmond Park, her images change to flood and fire, and to a juxtaposition of protection and destruction that Ash's name contains: “Ash the sheltering World-Tree, Ash the deadly Rain/So Dust to Dust and Ash to Ash again” [6]. Near the end of LaMotte’s life, in her last letter to Ash, the problem of the creative woman is still there for Christabel. She regrets her loss of solitude.

As a result, we can conclude, in her portrait of Christabel, Byatt movingly explores the ambiguities of freedom for creative women. In this way, she speaks to twentieth-century women, who recognize Christabel as a victim of Victorian repression. They should also see her as a great female with the qualities of strength and insight, which persist throughout the generations.

**Gode’s Tale**

Sabine relates “Gode’s Story”, which was told every year by the family's female servant as part of the November storytelling. In this traditional Breton tale, the miller’s daughter is made pregnant by a sailor, and her dead child appears as a “little thing dancing” [6] that leads the mother over the edge of the cliff to her death. The sailor, frustrated by the girl’s mysterious behavior and ignorant of her pregnancy, marries another woman. Now, compelled by the power of the mother’s language to hear the dancing feet, he sees the child and in time wastes away and dies.

The story reasserts the tie between sexuality and death while exploring the form of fairy tales that cross the threshold between natural and supernatural. It also, as Byatt points out in Fairy Tales, reiterates an old motif in nineteenth-century literature. Told in the presence of the pregnant Christabel, Gode’s Story inscribes the entrapment of women throughout history. In real life, Sabine recognizes a counterpart of these women—the girl pregnant out of wedlock, is mistreated by nuns at her convent refuge, loses her child, and dies young. As Christabel’s body wells with her pregnancy, we can identify her as potentially another such figure.

**Modern People's Desire for the Past in Possession**

A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* was first published in 1990 and undoubtedly the earliest of these new historical novels. In the novel, Byatt consciously and intentionally quest for knowledge of the past[1]. Those characters pursue that knowledge, as well the quest itself for their whole life and open themselves to history. Proper and improper attitudes toward the past are clearly distinguished. The variety of meanings and implications of the word “possession” reoccur in the same way. Those who seek to possess—power, place, property, the past—are revealed as villains, while those who can allow themselves to be possessed by curiosity, the desire for understanding, history, love—are rewarded richly in unexpected ways [1].

**The Past Possessing the Present**

Like Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, John Fowels’ *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Possession focuses on two points: one is the fictional present (in around 1986); the other is the historical past (the second half of the 19th century). To a large extent, the novel is about the relations between the past and the present, dead minds and living, the ancestors and modern people.

In the book, a large number of modern scholars have devoted almost all of their energy to the dead poet Randolph Henry Ash. Professor Blackadder, a Scottish scholar, runs his Ash Factory, where he indefatigably adds to Ash’s works abundant footnotes. He “had not stepped outside the British Isles for many years, except to attend international conferences on Victorian poetry” [6]. After twenty years of research on Ash, he looks at himself a subordinate of Ash, and feels quite content with his work and subordination. Blackadder somewhat willingly lets the past possess his thought and life.

Professor Cropper, an American scholar, is chairman of the Stant Collection, where “Ash’s relics and those of his wife, family and acquaintances accumulated in the still, regulated air” [6]. His aim is to know as far as possible everything Ash has done, everyone who matters to him and every little preoccupation he has. He always try to dig out almost every detail about the past. He’s not “the lord
and owner of Ash”, but actually possessed by Ash. It is his obsession with the dead past that impels him to dig up Ash’s grave and finally puts him to great abashment.

The Present Searching the Past for Love and Self-Identity

The present searching the past for love is clearly exemplified in Roland and Maud as they gradually become lovers as they unfold the secret relationship of the past lovers. Roland and Maud, “children of a time and culture that mistrusted love” [6], through looking into the past and following the plot of the two romantic lovers in Victorian times, become influenced by the past story, which inspires them to reexamine their present existential conditions and to initiate some change to their unfulfilled life. They amazedly discover that they share a common desire for an empty white bed in an empty room, which reveals their yearning for solitude and freedom in the world where they have been trapped or almost suffocated by dissatisfactory relationships in their respective lives.

During the trip to Yorkshire, a kind of harmony has developed between Maud and Roland before they realize or admit it. They pace well together and they feel the same dissatisfaction and helplessness about modern ideology of seeing everything as human sexuality, which actually imprisons people into themselves, disabling them to act or love, and is actually a sign of modern people’s powerlessness in love. The impassioned love of the Victorian poets triggers their inspection of modern ideology about love and feelings:

We know we are driven by desire, but we can’t see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we—we know it’s a suspect ideological construct—especially Romantic Love—so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things—Love-themselves—that what they did mattered[6].

Finally they decide to “get out of the past story” [6], go and look at something purely for themselves, which makes it possible for them to shift their attention from the past to the present and to enjoy themselves in each other’s company. In a word, the quest of the relationship between the past lovers draws together the two scholars of modern times and drives them step by step to a similar plot to that of the past couple.

Furthermore, the past in Possession provides a strikingly different mirror for the present and a test or standard for the behavior of the heros and heroines, which helps them to find their self-identity.

At the beginning, the poetic style of Ash influences Roland so much that he finally can write poems. One day he finds out other facets and weaknesses of the idolized Victorian poet—Ash and the inhibitions imposed by criticism are finally overcome. During the discovery journey, Roland’s way of thinking and behaving is gradually changed. On the one hand, he figures out the private and personal life of his favorite author—Ash. On the other hand, he varies his attitude towards life and gets rid of laziness and apathy. In fact, Byatt creates effective images to emphasize these disintering literally buried lives of the two Victorian poets. The images are created so concrete and lively that the enthusiasm and the participation of Roland and Maud can be shared by the readers: “Roland felt several things at once. Primary elation—a kind of vision of the bundle of dead letters come to rushing life like some huge warm eagle stirring” [6]. “This thickened forest, her own humming metal car, her prying curiosity about whatever had been Christabel’s life, seemed suddenly to be the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past” [6]. The game of identification between the two couples is going on like this, while it is only possible, because Roland and Maud feel the sincere interest and affinity for them. Besides, Professor Cropper who always seeks fame and ambition will eventually fail without getting what he wants. At the end, through the literary journey, Roland becomes a poem and gets a satisfying job. And Maud retraces her roots and her frigid detachment is given up.

Conclusion

“In many respects, Possession is the quintessential contemporary novel” [7]. The novel is set primarily in the London of the 1980s, when the global trends have great influence on traditional British culture, such as multi-culturalism and consumerism. Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, the main characters, are overwhelmed with many of the problems connected with life in the late 20th
century. They feel unstable towards their own identities and unconfident in love and creativity. They long for the past since people at that time “valued themselves” [6] and felt secure.

Last but not least, this contemporary text is also very traditional, not only in its content but also in its form. Unlike the 20th century couple, LaMotte and Ash obviously feel stable and confident in their own identities and appreciate the values of their own culture. What’s more, they are curious, creative, and passionate in their Victorian ways. A century later, Roland and Maud found out their forbidden love affair, which brings the novel seductive popular attraction. We may say that Possession provides us with a multi-layered plot which involves in the patterns of mythic quest, spy-story and Romance. The heroes and heroines suffer from a series of experiences and discoveries, adapt themselves to the changes of perspective so as to broaden their horizons of understanding and pursue their true selves. As a matter of fact, the influence of the past are so crucial instead of the facts themselves, because we can learn from them, not only in the negative but also in the positive way.

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**References**


