

REALISTIC RENDERING OF SELF-CONSCIOUS THOUGHT IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*: THE PRESENTATION OF VICTORIAN VERSUS CONTEMPORARY IDEAS OF MAN, FAITH AND LOVE

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ABSTRACT

The realistic rendering of Self-Conscious Thought in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* is an evidence of Byatt's success in making abstract ideas concrete. *Possession*, as an encyclopedia of theories and thoughts, Victorian or modern, is a novel in which ideas are less obtrusive and the author's presence is intrusive. The twentieth-century part of the novel embodies Byatt's confrontation with modern literary thoughts which are different in nature than the ideas incarnated in Victorians i.e. George Eliot's fiction. Although such ideas are difficult to be turned into immediate daily concerns yet in *Possession* they fit into immediate personal dilemmas and gain a sense of urgency. A. S. Byatt, successfully, represents the universal ideas of man, faith and love, with a skeptic twentieth-century background in this novel. In addition, while George Eliot begins to generalize these ideas with an authorial voice, Byatt knows that these ideas have become equivocal, thus overthrowing authority of the author.

KEYWORDS: realistic rendering, self-conscious thought, Victorian novel, Contemporary skepticism, novel of ideas.

INTRODUCTION

Among the British realists, who exhibit diverse points of emphasis in their treatment of reality, George Eliot is a rare case who gives special attention to ideas —moral, religious, philosophical— as essential part of the reality. Since it is more difficult to make ideas as substantial as people and events, George Eliot has fewer followers who succeed in reaching an equally high level of aesthetic and intellectual achievement in the presentation of ideas as reality. A. S. Byatt herself says

she had no real heir as 'novelist of ideas' in England: Lawrence's 'ideas' are comparatively simple and strident, Foster's timid, and less comprehensive and forceful than hers. (Byatt 1991: 76)

Byatt, however, aims to interweave intellectual history with personal struggle and social development, turning her vast knowledge into an integral part of fiction, to make abstract ideas, as well as characters and plots, an immediate concern of the reader. For her, as for Eliot, knowledge and thoughts are no less real than the real people and events. Yet being a century apart from

Eliot, Byatt's characteristic self-conscious realism combines both her admiration for Eliot's novel of ideas and reaction to the new difficulties she encounters.

Byatt's works are the result of her immense interest in the life of the mind rather than just academic concerns as she says "I began to write when I realized what I was interested in was the life of the mind" (Byatt 1997: 145). Such an interest is primarily a psychological curiosity over what is going on in people's mind when you sit next to them at dinner (ibid.: 146), and such a curiosity is shared by other novelists interested in characters as Samuel Richardson and emphasized by George Eliot who insists on mutual sympathy as the ultimate goal. Yet Byatt's interest in the mind goes a step forward as she attempts to transcend the repetitiveness and monotony of the "dailiness" or the "quotidian" of everyday reality (ibid.: 148). Therefore, Byatt takes the thinking mind as the major subject of her fiction following the road paved by George Eliot:

George Eliot was, I suppose, the great English novelist of ideas. By "novelist of ideas" I do not here mean novelists like Peacock, Huxley or Orwell, whose novels are dramatic presentation of beliefs they wish to mock or uphold, whose characters represent ideas like allegorical figures. I mean, in George Eliot's case, that she took human thought, as well as human passion, as her proper subject. (Byatt 1991: 75)

This comment speaks as much of Eliot as of Byatt's own writings as her discrimination between different kinds of "novel of ideas" indicates her own allegiance to Eliot. Gillian Beer makes a similar point when she comments that Eliot "seems to guarantee a whole tradition: that of idea realized in fiction" (Beer 2005: 429). Byatt adheres to the wish to make "idea realized in fiction" or, in Eliot's own words, "to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in flesh and not in the spirit" (Byatt 1991: 98). "Incarnate" is a word with religious connotation and the Christian concept of "incarnation" indicates the embodiment of God in the human flesh (ibid.: 94). However, Byatt uses the word as to describe the embodiment of abstract ideas in concrete form as substantial characters and events. For her, characters in a novel of ideas should not merely be the vehicle for abstract concepts but people with psychological depth whose thought and emotion are engaged with each other, so that the ideas can be apprehended "sensuously, materially, through feeling" (ibid.: 98). Otherwise, a novel would be no different from an academic paper or a political pamphlet.

A master of intersexuality, Byatt is well aware that "a writer's work always echoes voices of other writers" (Meza 2016: 57). Similar to Eliot who "took human thought, as well as human passion, as her proper subject —ideas, such as thoughts on 'progress', on the nature of 'culture', on the growth and decay of society and societies" (Byatt 1991: 75), Byatt wants to fulfill the same task, but the nature of thought she seeks to integrate into her novels is drastically changed from Eliot's time. Compared with the skeptic tendency of the contemporary era, the Victorian age, in which George Eliot produces her

masterpieces, should not be innocently seen as an age of unwavering faith. It is already an age of spiritual crisis and social upheaval no less disconcerting than the twentieth century. The difference is that the crisis of the Victorian age, in Sally Shuttleworth's words, is "a decisive crisis of faith, a sense that the world was shaking under them, an ecstatic agony of indecision", which thus seems more immediate and real, while the skepticism of our age is characterized by "not the loss of a specific belief system, but rather the loss of that sense of immediacy and urgency that comes with true existential crisis" (Shuttleworth 2001: 155).

Such a contrast between the two ages reveals the difference in the nature of ideas in George Eliot and Byatt's works and the difficulties the latter has to resolve. For Eliot, despite the pervasive loss of faith in Christianity, she is still able to look for alternative ways to provide explanations of the nature of culture or the growth of society with the advent of new thoughts like Darwinism. And it is more convenient for her to engage these ideas with individual lives since they are shared human concerns of the Victorian society. The ideas embodied in Byatt's novels, however, are not social oriented and often self-conscious in nature. So it is harder to turn them into immediate and urgent daily concerns and endow them with strong emotional impact. Thus, what Byatt has to consider is the capacity to understand society or individuals and the possibility to find adequate language to express what she thinks.

Her problem has been tackled by the other writers of her time and there are various ways to integrate the self-conscious and skeptic ideas into fiction, but Byatt's choice is different from that taken by many of her contemporaries, especially the postmodernists. Writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon and Vladimir Nabokov represent the skeptic and self-conscious ideas in unsettling fictional forms highlighting the questionable relationship between author and reader. In an interview with Jonathan Walker, Byatt states:

Any good reader ought to have a kind of neutral gear, a kind of [...] wandering, scanning reading which is a reenacting reading. (Walker 2006: 338)

Byatt exhorts readers to overcome their own established notions and search for the intended meaning of the text. Ann Marie Adams discusses the role of the reader and considers "the ideal reader according to Byatt's standards" (Adams 2003: 107). Same is pointed out by Colón, "Byatt's book also reflects a major concern with the activity of reading" (Colón 2003: 77) and by Kate Mitchell, "Her romance of mutual possession between the text and an ideal reader recentres literature as a sensational epistemology" (Mitchell 2010: 116). This role of reader makes Byatt skeptic of postmodern theories that make author dead especially in the case of "novel of ideas".

Many of the postmodern novels can be called "novel of ideas" in the sense that the ideas about art and writing —instead of social ideas— loom large in these books. Byatt protests that "all avant-gardes resemble each other quite

shockingly and they do a very narrow number of things in exactly the same way as other avant-gardes" (Chevalier 1994: 20). Her complaint derives from the fact that the ideas behind many avant-gardes are limited and predictable — the author is dead, the reader is born, art is illusion, language is a game. They fall short of the standard set by George Eliot since without the reader's recognition of the ideas, the major part of the novel may not make sense or seem as interesting as the ideas in themselves.

Byatt is well informed of the structuralist and post-structuralist theories as she "enjoyed reading Derrida and thinking about deconstruction" (Wachtel 1994: 84). However, she never accepts the theories without doubt, "a non-believer and a non-belonger to school of thought" (Byatt 1991: 2). When the postmodern fiction tends to represent the avant-garde ideas, the readers accept the assumptions implied in the postmodern ideology. But the question arises: Are the critical and skeptic ideas, true representation of postmodern society and meant to be accepted uncritically? Gerald Graff raises a similar question: can anti-realistic works provide true understanding of the postmodern society? (Graff 1997: 12). Harboring the same doubt, Byatt avoids the formal illustration of postmodern thoughts but intends to instantiate how such ideas are thoughts by real people and how the skeptic and self-conscious ideas affect the way they live or perceive the world. And what she wants to convey is that "the experience of thinking very hard in abstract terms is just as immediate as the experience of standing next to a rosebush" and she likes "thinking very hard" (Tredell 1994: 70).

So an essential element of her novel is the realistic rendering of the ideas. This study illustrates how she interweaves abstract ideas in characterization and demonstrates those ideas in her fiction. In this matter she follows George Eliot but with a difference that is being discussed in this study by analysis of her representation of Victorians and the Contemporaries in her novel *Possession* (1990).

DISCUSSION: COMPARISON OF THE VICTORIANS AND THE CONTEMPORARIES IN *POSSESSION* (1990)

Since the publication of *Possession* in 1990, Byatt has become more well-known for her reconstruction of the historical past than depiction of the contemporary society, and the Victorian characters, vivid and full of life, figure prominently in her fiction and are said to overshadow the contemporary characters. Byatt's distinct treatments of the Victorian and contemporary characters illustrates the difference between what she can do if she was a Victorian novelist of ideas like George Eliot and what difficulties she has to tackle today in such a presentation.

Possession, in which the Victorians and the contemporaries serve as foil to each other, best demonstrates the distinction. It is a general impression in the

book that the Victorian poets are more living than the modern scholars. Nicolas Tredell asks Byatt,

“That sense of belatedness, of the modern characters as pale shadows compared to the Victorian titans who precede them, comes across very strongly in the novel. Were you happy to achieve that?” “That was wholly intentional”. (Tredell 1994: 58)

In another interview Eleanor Wachtel raises a related question, “Reading *Possession*, one has the sense that the Victorian poets are perhaps more engaged with life than are the modern scholars. Do you favour the Victorians?” Byatt’s reply confirms such favor:

The Victorians, on the other hand, were quite sure that they were real people. They didn’t have modern theories of being no concrete personality.

When my two Victorians either wrote something or fell in love, these were, to them, large and important acts. The poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real. (Wachtel 1994: 82-3)

Thus, according to Byatt, the modern characters, who are burdened with skeptic and self-conscious thoughts, are no less “real” since what they do is representation of what they think.

In *Possession*, apart from the parallel love stories, there exists a parallel discussion on identical topics from the Victorian poets and the modern scholars. The two parallels are interwoven and illustrate the relationship between personal experience and ideas. On the one hand, Ash, LaMotte, Roland and Maud are realistically depicted with psychological depth and freedom to choose; on the other hand, as thinking characters they actualize various ideas and colour the ideas with personal emotions and motives. Thus their differing approaches, to the idea of *man*, *faith*, and *love*, are not abstract thoughts, but determine what they do in life.

What is a *man*? Byatt inserts a possible answer to this age old Sphinx’s riddle early on in *Possession*:

A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love, indifference and dislike; also of his race and nation, the soil that fed him and his forebears. (Byatt 1990: 12)

Thus, a man is the combination of his personal characteristics and communal traits; a moral as well as emotional being, he is the prisoner of cosmic or natural laws; and his life is precarious and transient. This definition of man is an extract from Ash’s writings, and his social, historical and individualistic view of man, putting God aside and getting rid of the notions of predestination, salvation and eternity, is typical of the advanced Victorian intellect. More significantly, it is a precise summary of what Ash is if we consider his passionate but illegitimate love with LaMotte and the “long-silenced battles and struggles of conscience” he undergoes. Yet this paragraph

is an epigraph at the very beginning of chapter two before Ash appears, and Roland's personal history is first introduced in detail after we are told of his theft of Ash's unfinished letter from British library in chapter one. By introducing Ash's definition of man abruptly, Byatt leaves a question to both Roland and the reader: how do we see ourselves?

Roland, "trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject", thinks "if he had been asked what Roland Michell was, he would have had to give a very different answer" (Byatt 1990: 13). Yet his "different answer" is not presented until nearly four hundred and fifty pages later:

Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his "self" as an illusion. (Byatt 1990: 459)

This meditation on the "self" occurs to Roland at the end of his journey with Maud to Brittany when the romance between Ash and LaMotte is gradually revealed to them and he is thinking of his ambivalent relationship with Maud. His meditation on the nature of man, therefore, has some urgency at the moment and will decide what he will do. Roland's theoretical knowledge of human being as "a crossing-place for a number of systems" is typically a post-structuralist notion which deprives man of essence or autonomy. When he thinks that "mostly he liked this", his concept of man is not a belief like Ash's but a choice since he knows that to see him as "a crossing-place for a number of systems" is but one of many possible systems. Consequently, this idea provides an easy excuse for his passivity.

Yet fifty pages later, Roland feels the inadequacy of this notion with a new understanding of Ash after the quest: "He remembered talking to Maud about modern theories of the incoherent self" (Byatt 1990: 513). Roland does not reason or debate with modern theories, but like Byatt whose "first impulse has often been to defy concepts with the senses" (Shuttleworth 2001: 167), he revises his notion of man after he relives Ash's life and feels the passions left out in his own life. As a result of this turn of mind, Roland, no longer retarded in action by his theoretical knowingness, turns to creative writing and starts a romantic relation with Maud.

Byatt's treatment of the different concepts of man is subtle, since she neither criticizes that the modern notion of incoherent self is wrong nor asserts that Ash's idea of man is right, but embodies the different concepts in the actions of the two men. Ash's definition of man is located far back in the early chapter and is easily passed over in the first reading, but read retrospectively it seems applicable not only to Ash but to Roland and awakens interest in the "old" way of seeing what a man is. Besides, Roland's postmodern idea of man is presented not in an impersonal and abstract argument but with effect on his life. In this way, intellectual pressure becomes inseparable from the energies of individual life.

Another idea, actualized with equal subtlety and complexity in the novel is that of *faith*. The following two quotations may serve as prelude to the discussion:

The truth is [...] that we live in an old world —a tired world— a world that has gone on piling up speculation and observations until truths [...] are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest. (Byatt 1990: 181)

Doubt, doubt is endemic to our life. (Byatt 1990: 182)

Readers may take the speakers as the modern scholars rather than the Victorians since the situation described seems to be an accurate commentary on the contemporary world. In fact, the first passage is extracted from Ash's letter to LaMotte and the second an excerpt from LaMotte's reply.

Byatt's does not portray the Victorian era as an age of innocence in contrast to a more sophisticated modern society; instead, her Victorian and modern protagonists share the same degree of doubt that bring the same anxiety and uncertainty. Just as George Eliot mourns in *Middlemarch* the passing away of the heroic age of Saint Theresa, Ash and LaMotte lament the vanishing of "[a] secure faith —a true prayerfulness— [that] is a beautiful and a true thing" (Byatt 1990: 179) in the days when modern science sprouts; with the same nostalgia, Roland and Maud repeatedly complain that they are latecomers haunted by their knowingness and mistrust of everything that used to be meaningful.

Bringing the Victorian poets and the modern scholars together by their shaken belief systems, and consoling the latter with the fact that they are not singular in their skepticism, Byatt however reveals the different roots and consequences of their doubt. Ash and LaMotte, like the characters in George Eliot's fiction but with keener awareness of their own situation and deeper self-knowledge, talk about progress, religious faith and the growth and decay of society in their correspondence —the usual topics of the Victorian intellectuals. When they lament that they know too much to be able to adhere to a simple faith, what they have in mind is primarily the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, especially the theory of evolution, which puts in doubt the religious belief. The skepticism of Roland and Maud, however, does not merely derive from the fact that their knowingness surpasses their Victorian predecessors; instead, it is determined by what they know. Their theoretical questioning of the foundation of language, knowledge, or even humanity leaves them no other enemy to fight with than their own doubt, or doubt over their own doubt.

Sally Shuttleworth, in her discussion of Byatt's neo-Victorian novella *Morpho Eugenia*, comes up with a brilliant comment on the distinction between the Victorian's loss of faith and the skepticism of the postmodern era, which is an accurate description of the difference between the dilemma of Ash and LaMotte and that of Roland and Maud:

For the Victorians there was a decisive crisis of faith, a sense that the world was shaking under them, an ecstatic agony of indecision. For the postmodern era no such form of crisis seems possible, for there are no fixed boundaries of belief. It is an age of 'ontological doubt' without any fixed points of faith against which it may define itself... Many retro-Victorian texts are informed by a sense of loss, but it is a *second-order* loss. It is not the loss of a specific belief system, but rather the loss of that sense of immediacy and urgency that comes with true existential crisis. (Shuttleworth 2001: 155)¹

According to Shuttleworth, "a decisive crisis of faith", "an ecstatic agony of indecision", "true existential crisis" and "the intensity of emotion and *authenticity* of experience" that characterize the Victorian age suggest that just because the Victorians hold firm religious faith, the impact of modern science is felt more keenly and causes real pain when the centuries-old faith is mercilessly shattered and the human life relying on it is broken into pieces. In the postmodern era, however, with any real belief already lost, the "ontological doubt", still fatal as it seems, is like shaking the void which leaves no real damage. So Shuttleworth suggests that it is the real pain rather than the "safe belief" that we are nostalgic for of the Victorian age.

Shuttleworth's comment seems to correspond to the general impression that the Victorian characters in *Possession* are more real, alive and vital while the modern scholars are anemic and papery. Yet while Byatt admits she has the intention to make it such, in practice she still endeavors to endow the "ontological doubt" of the postmodern era with a "sense of immediacy and urgency that comes with true existential crisis" and an "intensity of emotion and *authenticity* of experience". Differing from Shuttleworth who suggests an absence of belief in the postmodern era, Byatt presents doubt as the fundamental belief of our age —if not a belief as deeply felt as the religious faith of the Victorian age, at least a belief taught or informed by theorists and philosophers. In addition, Byatt depicts a reversed version of the Victorian crisis of faith: Roland and Maud's belief in doubt is put in question by the seemingly out-dated belief of the Victorian poets. In reading the poets' correspondence, Roland and Maud not only re-experience their passionate love but their "decisive crisis of faith" and "ecstatic agony of indecision". Like the two passages quoted above in which Ash and LaMotte talk about the "tired world" they live in and the endemic doubt characteristic of their time, Byatt frequently furnishes utterances in the correspondence with double meanings which simultaneously allude to the

¹ In *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, Byatt quotes Sally Shuttleworth's comment on the current nostalgia for the Victorian era and the loss of "crisis of faith" (79). Byatt's emphasis on a different intention does not diminish Shuttleworth's insightful comment which proves that Byatt has successfully resurrected the Victorian thinkers and writers and conveyed "the intensity of emotion and authenticity of experience at that moment". Besides, Byatt's rejection of the parodic attitude towards the Victorian era enables us to see the stylistic or formal imitations in her own novels in a new light, when the critics today tend to see most modern imitations as parodies.

Victorian and contemporary situations. Michael Levenson contends that “the force of these historical fictions is to insist that although our time is not their time, their problems remain ours” (Levenson 2001: 164). In the case of *Possession*, the contrary is also true: though their time is not our time, our problems remain theirs. As a result, the idea of faith is actualized in two dimensions in the novel and the modern scholars, along with the reader, are invited to experience the real pain of the crisis of faith. As a result, the “second-order loss” “of that sense of immediacy and urgency that comes with true existential crisis” is successfully depicted in *Possession* with a sense of immediacy and urgency.

Apart from faith, *love* is another important issue in this novel. When we say George Eliot's works are paradigmatic examples of “novel of ideas” that combine passion and intellect, the passion usually manifests in her passionate characters and their love stories. In comparison, *Possession* has the traditional frame of a love story, but it is characterized by its self-conscious reflection on the idea of love and the subtle comparison between the Victorian and modern approaches to love.

At first sight, the comparison seems to be obvious: the Victorian lover represents passion and spontaneity while the modern lover is symptomatic of self-doubt and mistrust. Here the women have shown more distrust in love as mentioned by Jessica Tiffin who comments on women as marginalized in love (Tiffin 2006: 47-66). Ash expresses his love for LaMotte in his letter in such an ardent language with little reserve or embarrassment:

Never have I felt such a concentration of my whole Being —..and I had to answer [...] I could even call you, with even greater truth —my love— there, it is said —for I most certainly love you and in all ways possible to man and most fiercely. (Byatt 1990: 210)

On the contrary, Roland and Maud, always holding back from expressing love, can only talk about love, and sometime the narrator cannot help giving a hand by explaining or commenting on their mutual silence:

[Maud] We never say the word Love, do we —we know it's a suspect ideological construct— especially Romantic Love. (Byatt 1990: 290)

They [Roland and Maud] were children of a time and culture that mistrusted love, “in love”, romantic love. (Byatt 1990: 458-9)

Their reservedness derives from their shared knowledge that love is an artificial construction and thus an illusion. Besides, the countless ways in which the critics dissect and analyze love and the various kinds of academic jargon in which they talk about love will rise to their mind and diminish what they feel as love the moment they attempt to express such a feeling.

Roland and Maud's hesitation seems to be in sharp contrast to the Victorian's passion, but Byatt further blurs the contrast by providing a similar Victorian version of the modern misgivings about love in the poets'

correspondence² and blending these utterances of doubt with passionate expressions of love:

[Ash] We are rational nineteenth-century beings, we might leave the coup de foudre to the weaver of Romances. (Byatt 1990: 211)

[LaMotte] But we latter-day Reasonable Beings have not the miracle-working Passion of the old believers. (Byatt 1990: 213)

[LaMotte] And you say –so kind you are– “I love you. I love you.” –and I believe– but who is she –who is “you”? (Byatt 1990: 218)

It is curious that when Roland and Maud regard themselves as rational twentieth-century beings and late-comers in history who know too much to maintain the fervor and spontaneity of the Victorians, Ash and LaMotte see themselves in exactly the same light as “rational nineteenth-century beings” and “latter-day Reasonable Beings” who have already lost the belief in Romance and passionate love.³ Besides, LaMotte’s questioning of their identities in love is surprisingly modern and corresponds to the modern scholars’ self-interrogation throughout the book.

For one thing, this strategy offers a more complex portrait of the Victorian poets who are saved from merely serving as the foil to the modern characters. Compared with the passionate heroines in George Eliot’s novels, rounded and complicated, Ash and LaMotte are distinguished for their intellectual knowingness and a corresponding self-knowledge. F. R. Leavis, as much as he admires Eliot, criticizes her depiction of Maggie Tulliver for Maggie’s lack of consciousness of the nature of her own yearning (Leavis 1948: 56) and of Dorothea Brooks for “an abeyance of intelligence and self-knowledge” in her “emotional ‘fullness’” (ibid.: 96) especially in their love affairs. In contrast, while Maggie and Dorothea are guided by their impulses in love, Ash and

² Byatt’s composition of the lengthy correspondence between Ash and Maud in *Possession* is a strategy for several purposes. First, it means to rescue “the complicated Victorian thinkers from modern diminishing parodies” (Byatt, *On Histories* 70) by “writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next” from the two Victorian poets’ perspectives (Byatt, *On Histories* 46) (This point will be elaborated in the discussion of Byatt’s ventriloquial writing in Chapter Three, Part I). Then, the extended correspondence is not merely functional for the modern scholars and the reader to discover what actually happens between the two poets; it is full of surplus ideas and themes that are not functional. As a result, a summary will never do justice to the passionate lover letters that are intermingled with bits and pieces of thoughts. With this style of writing, Byatt emphasizes the texture of the writing rather than what it says and also stresses her attitude toward reading, that is to read and savor every word instead of merely looking for useful information. (See also the discussion of Byatt’s attitude toward reading in Chapter Three, Part I). Finally, with intense interest in the life of the mind and the thinking characters, Byatt finds a way to provide an inner picture of Ash and LaMotte through their writings.

³ The obstacle of Ash and LaMotte’s love is usually understood as a moral one, since LaMotte’s involvement with Ash the married man will turn them into outcasts from society. However, their misgivings and doubt about romantic love itself are always ignored.

LaMotte make their passionate choice with their self-knowledge put aside and their misgivings overcome. Derek Alsop suggests that "*Possession* presents a world as George Eliot sees it, through postmodern eyes" (Alsop 1999: 181). It is true that the self-conscious thought of Ash and LaMotte can only be described with retrospection by a writer of higher knowingness, but their self-consciousness is congruous with their characters and intellectual depth and thus adds to their psychological complexity.

For another thing, Byatt provides a Victorian perspective to see the dilemma of the modern scholars. Roland and Maud's mistrust of love is based on a more fundamental and more completely theorized doubt — the constructed and artificial nature of love — than that of the Victorians, but Byatt brings them together by the identical question they ask themselves: we know we should not love, and then what shall we do? Thus the modern scholars and the Victorians are put into the same shoes. If the latter can get rid of their hesitation and fall in love, the "ontological doubt" can be seen as no more than a papery thought and is to be abandoned. Toward the very end of the book, the long delayed dialogue occurs between Maud and Roland:

"Oh no. Oh no. I love you. I think I'd rather I didn't."

"I love you," said Roland. "It isn't convenient [...] All the things we — we grew up not believing in." (Byatt 1990: 550)

Byatt's success does not manifest itself in the final confession of love but in the negations that qualify the expressions of love. As a result, Byatt's quarrel with modern literary theories throughout the book comes to a stop, and when the quarrel with abstract ideas is intertwined with the advance and regress of passionate love, the "papery" ideas put on weight and gain a vital relevance to the energy of life.

After the brief examination of how Byatt actualizes her reflection on the ideas of man, faith and love in *Possession*, we come back to see her own comment that the Victorians are more living and real than the papery modern characters. Actually, it is not the characters but the modern literary theories that look papery. Thus, Jane Campbell opines rightly,

the very fact that Roland and Maud are painfully aware that language can be an imprisoning force make them accessible to the reader, who shares their self-conscious preoccupation with 'paperiness'. (Campbell 2004: 112)

Besides,

it is his [Roland's] and Maud's ability to accept contradictions — to live as self-conscious postmodern subjects and yet also say 'I love' — that make them realistic characters. (Campbell 2004: 136)

According to Campbell, Roland and Maud's outwardly paperiness is symptomatic of our age and shared by the modern readers who, supposed to be

theoretically knowing, are instead imprisoned in theories, and the successful characterization of the modern scholars depends on the tension between what they know and what they do which is not reconciled up to the end. Besides, some of their symptoms as exhausted theoretical beings are shared by the author and appeal to the reader. For instance, having the same fantasy of being in a clean, empty, white bed, in a clean, empty room with Roland and Maud, Byatt says "I think both these people just want to be left alone to work out who they are, with all these theories of what they are besieging them, like wasps" (Wachtel 1994: 86). In a word, despite the paperiness of their thought, Roland and Maud are as real as their Victorian predecessors. Their paperiness is their reality.

CONCLUSION

Byatt refrains from commenting on the problematized ideas like man, faith and love as Eliot does, but finally gives her comments through her skeptic modern characters, though not without the same degree of negation and qualification in her opinions. It is characteristic of a writer who is supremely self-conscious of the "ontological doubt" of the modern theories and at the same time sensitive to the challenges posed by the theoretical assumptions in her quarrel with the theorists. Moreover, with the paralleled intellectual structure, Byatt represents the equally skeptic views on these ideas from a Victorian perspective. As a result, the problem of skepticism, a modern phenomenon, is generalized into a universal predicament and Byatt provides us an opportunity to see our dilemma against a broader historical background.

Byatt's self-conscious realism can be understood in terms of her representation of ideas such as idea of man, faith and love based on skepticism and postmodernism. When Byatt endeavors to incarnate these ideas in her novels, the fictional characters are often as self-conscious as the author herself. Yet strictly speaking, Byatt's novels are not self-reflexive in the way postmodern novels are, since she does not represent her skeptic ideas with correspondingly disturbing literary forms but attempts to realize them in plausible plots, psychologically complex characters and authentic social settings to achieve a realistic rendering of the ideas and thinking process.

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