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Stefan Č. Čizmar *

University of Novi Sad

Faculty of Philosophy

THE SUBVERSION OF POSTMODERNISM IN A.S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION* AND *THE BIOGRAPHER'S TALE*¹

Abstract: A.S. Byatt's works have had an intricate relationship with postmodernism, and this relationship is probably best exhibited in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*. Both novels display complex webs of allusions, references, play with genre and form, as well as intense self-reflection, all of which can be seen as typical postmodern features. However, it can be argued that both novels go beyond that, and instead of merely being self-reflexive, they are primarily intensely reflexive of their status as postmodern works. In other words, both novels seek to examine and parody postmodernism from the inside, thus subverting it and transcending it by going beyond its typical features. This approach to writing can be referred to as meta-postmodern since the novels essentially use postmodern techniques to discuss postmodernism, as well as to contrast it with some other periods of literary history and/or approaches to literature and scholarship in general. The aim of the following paper is to examine these characteristics of the novels and to find an apt description of Byatt's narrative style.

Keywords: A.S. Byatt, postmodernism, metafiction, historicity, neo-Victorian, sexuality, parody, subversion

* stefan.cizmar@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Dame Antonia Susan Duffy, known under the pseudonym of A.S. Byatt is a British novelist, poet and a winner of the Booker Prize. Her works have enjoyed great critical acclaim and have widely analysed and discussed in the academic context, while also enjoying a solid degree of commercial success and success within the wider audience. Her novel *Possession* and novella *Morpho Eugenia* have also been adapted into critically acclaimed films. Byatt's works are marked by their complexity and the wide webs of cultural, historical and literary references, as well as intertextual networks that provide layers of meaning. She is generally seen as a postmodern author, although that classification is not without problems, considering her toying with postmodern forms and her tendency to parody postmodernism in terms of theory, as well as literary creation. Some of her works have been translated into Serbian, most importantly her acclaimed novel *Possession*, as *Zanesenost: viteška priča u prozi i stihu*, as well as her fairy tale collection *The Djinn in Nightingale's Eye*, and two short stories, 'Medusa's Ankles' and 'A Lamia in the Cévennes' as 'Meduzini gležnjevi' and 'Lamija u Sevenima', respectively.

Possession and *The Biographer's Tale* are both rather successful novels, especially the first one, which has been the subject of many an academic discussion and has been extensively analysed because of its creative and innovative approach to story-writing. Both novels deal with roughly the same topics, in relatively similar ways. In the centre of their stories, they put disenchanting literary scholars who find themselves too deeply immersed in the complex webs of postmodern scholarship and theorising, which causes them to be dissatisfied and unable to form firm, coherent identities. This leads them on quests for breaking away from the postmodern way of thinking and of finding their identities and becoming fulfilled. In the case of *Possession*, there is the quest of Maud and Roland for uncovering the true nature of the relationship between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel La Motte, which leads them to start their own relationship. This is presented as a vehicle for their personal development and maturation, alongside the search for the truth about Ash and La Motte. In *The Biographer's Tale*, there is a similar story; a young postgraduate student, Phineas G. Nanson finds himself deeply disappointed with the way postmodern scholars approach literary studies and decides to turn his back on it and focus his attention on facts and things. This leads him to read a biography of Elmer Bole, a Victorian polymath, by Scholes Destry-Scholes, and, impressed by Scholes' writing style, decides to write a biography of his, which ultimately fails. However, he still manages to succeed in his quest for things and facts.

Both novels use typical postmodern techniques such as polyvocality, intertextuality, pastiche, parody, genre-mixing, mixing of different narrative styles, non-linear plots, and operate in the frameworks of historiographic metafiction and

biographical metafiction. At first sight, they may seem to be typical postmodern novels which are deeply self-conscious and serve to question and deconstruct the dominant narratives and ideas, to question the objectivity of scholarship, science, and history, to draw attention to the constructedness of both history and fiction and the ways they are similar, to explore the process of writing itself, etc., which postmodern novels typically do. To a certain extent, that might be true, as using such techniques of writing necessarily questions these ideas at least somewhat. However, it seems, upon closer inspection, that what these novels put in the centre of their stories is postmodernism itself, as well as literary studies in general, and thus they use the postmodern style of writing to analyse and subvert it, and to draw attention to its flaws as a tool for discussing literature and history. This goes in line with the characterisation of Byatt as a “practitioner of self-conscious artistic discussion in her stories (Wallhead, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, at least when it comes to *Possession*, the novel retains the hope that it is possible to attain the knowledge of someone as a unique person (Steveker, 2011, p. 26), which drifts far away from typical postmodernism, which strongly denies this idea.

By creating a web of colourful, but mostly parodic characters, who can be more easily read as caricatures, making them speak long, complicated, mostly nonsensical paragraphs dealing with complex theory which is presented as devoid of real life, as well as by giving them super-close specialisations and describing their intellectual quirks which can hardly actually contribute to scholarship, and contrasting it to the Victorian era, which is especially emphasised in *Possession*, Byatt essentially mocks postmodern ideas and their proponents, precisely by utilising their most valuable tools: parody and pastiche, and turns postmodernism onto its head, and either bringing it to its logical conclusion, reacting against it, or probably both. This kind of emphasis on postmodernism inside the context of a postmodern work has mostly been ignored, and at best, glanced over in passing, sometimes even jokingly. Steveker (2011, p. 27) noted that “in recentring the subject, *Possession* crosses the boundaries of postmodernism, and moves into post-postmodernism, while Buxton playfully asks whether Hutcheon would consider *Possession* doubly metafictional“ and if its “complicity and critique of postmodernism itself would make it post-postmodern” (qtd in Mitchell, 2010, p. 115). However, this problem was never thoroughly explained and was largely ignored, so thus, this paper aims to shed light on Byatt's relationship with postmodernism on the example of *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*, the way she uses and subverts its typical techniques, and to also find a suitable category for her poetics.

The novels discussed shall be analysed via a theoretical framework mostly based on *A Poetics of Postmodernism* by Linda Hutcheon, *History and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A.S. Byatt* by Lena Steveker, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* by Kate Mitchell, and *A.S. Byatt* by Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos, with several insights from shorter works.

Beyond the Postmodern: Postmodernism and Meta-postmodernism

The status of postmodernism as a contradictory artistic and literary movement was pointed out by one of its greatest theoreticians, Linda Hutcheon, who stated that “postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography” (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 3). This stance of Hutcheon’s is rather true, and it should also be added that, like all contradictory systems of thought, it is bound to implode and turn upon itself; its contradictions will inevitably turn against each other and eat up the system from the inside, and it will sooner or later come to its logical conclusion, deconstruct itself, to use its own terminology, transcend its form, and inevitably become something else. Hutcheon (2003) also maintains that “postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy. It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (p. 42). However, while that might have been true early on, although it is rather questionable, it is quite possible to maintain that postmodernism has become precisely what it tried to subvert – a centralised, hierarchical system of thought. It has been the most dominant current in literature and academia, essentially mainstream for more than several decades now, and it became a sort of a necessity, a must, in literary studies, and as such, it had to be questioned, examined, and ultimately abandoned at one point. Such a sentiment is perfectly described by Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale* when he says the following:

One of the reasons why I abandoned—oh, and I have abandoned—post-structuralist semiotics was the requirement to write page upon page of citations from Foucault (or Lacan or Derrida or Bakhtin) in support of the simplest statement, such as that a scene of Shakespeare may be simultaneously comic and tragic—which earlier critics were able to say without all this paraphernalia (Byatt, 2018, p. 114).

Essentially, Phineas criticises the dominance of the postmodern thought, which has, specifically in the field of literary studies, drifted away from the subject it was supposed to study and became a self-centred system of thought which is focused on itself instead of trying to shed light on the texts it is supposed to analyse. It became a system focused primarily on itself, focused on developing its own ideas and imposing them on the texts, while simultaneously trying not to impose its own ideas; to constantly ask questions, but to seemingly never give answers, and it ultimately removed the simple joy of reading and writing and replaced it with theoretical musings. It can furthermore be said that these words imply that postmodernism has become a kind of metanarrative, as a story that ‘claim[s] to be able to account for, explain, and

subordinate all lesser, little, local narratives' (Powell, 1998, p. 29). Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv), those 'universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimise various projects (Appignanesi et al., 2004, p. 103). However, here Byatt frames postmodernism as another such story, one that is overarching and stifles critical reasoning and thinking and merely reproduces itself. This attitude is also illuminated by Phineas in one of his explanations of why he abandoned his theoretical background and decided to switch professions.

One of the reasons I had given up post-structuralist thought was the disagreeable amount of imposing that went on in it. You decided what you were looking for, and then duly found it—male hegemony, liberal-humanist *idées reçues*, etc. This was made worse by the fact that the deconstructionists and others paid lip-service to the idea that they must not impose—they even went so far as half-believing they must not find, either. And yet they discovered the same structures, the same velleities, the same evasions quite routinely in the most disparate texts. I wanted most seriously not to impose that sort of a reading, and, more primitively, not to impose my own hypotheses about who Destry-Scholes was, or what he was doing. This was not difficult, as my hypotheses were very ghostly, thin air, no more (Byatt, 2018, p. 144).

Such an approach to literary studies "has led critics and theorists to make writers fit into the boxes and nets of theoretical quotations which, a writer must feel, excite most of them at present much more than literature does" (Byatt, 2002a, p. 6). The characters of both *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* go against such tendencies, and in the end, transcend them and focus on more tangible things, on regular life, which seems fuller than before. In that sense, *The Biographer's Tale* is a more open critique of postmodernism, as it makes quite open and blunt sentences directed at it, such as one of Phineas' first lines, which says 'I have decided to give it all up. I've decided I don't want to be a postmodern literary theorist' (Byatt, 2018, p. 3). On the other hand, *Possession* is a more subtle critique, and a more complex web of different genres, forms, and narrative techniques, which make it look like a more conventional postmodern novel. However, it still includes the incredulity towards postmodernism, and a parodic relationship towards literary critics and professors, as they are all portrayed as being too deeply into very specific things and obsessed with minute details instead of the larger picture. Most importantly, however, in the narrative sense, it transcends postmodernism since it provides a satisfying, logical ending which is a trip back into more conventional styles of writing. The same can be said of *The Biographer's Tale*, in which, despite failing in his main quest, the main character thrives, develops as a person, and fulfils his goal of dealing with material life.

As said above, *Possession* presents a return to the more traditional ways of writing, and thus transcends the typical postmodern style. However, by parodying literary scholars and the ideas they present and represent, as well as their approaches to studying literature, the novel essentially discusses postmodernism, and in essence, creates a postmodern text which deals precisely with postmodernism itself, mocking it and subverting it. In other words, it can be said that it is aware of its postmodernity, of its status as a postmodern text, and as such can be called meta-postmodern, analogous with the term “metafiction”, and in lack of a better term which would suitably describe Byatt's style here. The analogy with metafiction can be useful to define meta-postmodernism closer. If metafiction is ‘writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’ (Waugh, 2001, p. 2), then meta-postmodernism would self-consciously and systematically draw attention to its postmodernity in order to ask questions about the relationship between postmodernism and reality, as well as its contradictoriness and its success at dismantling the structures it claims to dismantle. In the simplest terms: postmodernism about postmodernism. A similar concern was raised by Buxton in her statement that “if *Possession* is a postmodern text then it is one that is deeply suspicious of postmodernism, whether it is construed as an aesthetic practice or as an historical condition” (Buxton, 1996, p. 216). This statement largely rings true; and it should be added that it is also suspicious of postmodernism’s suitability as a means of studying literature and of its theory in general, especially when it comes to history.

A similar attitude was put forward by Holmes, in the statement that “if it is true . . . that Byatt’s postmodernism renders her treatment of the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel ironic, it is also true that the Victorian subject matter can be seen as a critique of the postmodern condition.” (Holmes, 1994, p. 324). However, this statement is rather dubious and may be considered only partly true. On the one hand, her recreation of the Victorian era can barely, if at all, be seen as ironic, unlike typical postmodern pastiche, which implies a sort of ironic distance. Byatt “recreates the Victorian era respectfully – her pastiches are used to highlight the inner life of her protagonists, showing them as sincere and earnest. She does not do it for the purpose of parody or irony, but to playfully and creatively give them life, i.e. to tell a story” (Primorac and Balint-Feudvarski, 2011, p. 223-224). However, this can serve as a critique of the postmodern condition as well as of postmodern scholarship, and it can also be said that precisely this retreat from the conventions of postmodernism makes it transcend it and become something new, and it is therefore not simply “postmodern and

metafictional” (p. 224) as Primorac and Balint-Feudvarski (2011) maintain.² Thus, it can be claimed that postmodern conventions in the novel are actually the ones used ironically, which is an example of how postmodern techniques are used to subvert postmodernism. It is also subverted by adding a typical realist ending, in which the piece of the story which is unknown to the characters is laid out to the readers, who are provided with a complete story and a traditional ending in which everything is brought to its place, both in the Victorian storyline and in the contemporary one.

Desire and Identity in *Possession*

In terms of critiquing the postmodern condition, the juxtaposition of the contemporary and the Victorian world plays a crucial role. The Victorian plotline, through the medium of Randolph's and Christabel's relationship, presents the Victorian world and time as drastically different than it is usually seen; instead of being presented as dry, emotionless, cold, and distant, it is presented as a world of honest, passionate feelings and devotion, as a place where there is an ability to connect to other people, despite all odds and social constraints. It is also interesting to note how scholarship is portrayed in it; Randolph Ash is not merely a poet, but an amateur scientist with various interests, similar to Elmer Bole from *The Biographer's Tale*, who is a polymath, and seemingly well-versed in every major area of scholarship. On the other hand, the contemporary world is presented as dry and drab, devoid of passion and feeling, marked by a profound inability to connect to other people and to find one's own identity. As Steveker (2011, p. 10-11) says “poststructuralism leads to a deep crisis of identity in both Maud and Roland, they are very theoretically knowledgeable, but that just leads them away from their true selves and makes them sexually inhibited.” As Roland comments: “[W]hat I *really* want is to – to have nothing. An empty clean bed. I have this image of a clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked,” with which Maud agrees: “How good it would be to have nothing. An empty bed in an empty room. White.” (Byatt, 1990, p. 291)

The white bed and the white room become a symbol of sterility and a lack of desire as both Maud and Roland are completely caught up in the web of intellectual musings and theorising that they become separated from the actual world, and while searching for the truth about the relationship between Randolph and Christabel, they search for their own identities, and one of the main vehicles for that seems their own

² The quotations cited here are related to Byatt's novella *Morpho Eugenia*, but they are also suitable to comment on *Possession* as well, since the poetics are rather similar.

relationship, through which they learn how to communicate and connect to other people and grow out of their intellectual shells.³ This points to the fact that the Victorian period is favoured in the novel. This is also an ideological step away from postmodernism, which is more closely tied to Romanticism than realism, in its insistence on the subjective and the irrational, unlike realism, which favours the objective and the rational.

Furthermore, Byatt also satirises literary scholars by creating caricatural characters whose dedication to their subjects of study makes them so invested that they start to drift away from them and remain unable to produce anything useful. A prime example is the character of Mortimer Cropper, who is an esteemed Ash scholar, but seems to be more invested in collecting Ash's personal belongings, which he either stores away, or keeps them with himself at all times, and fetishises them rather than studying them or allowing them to be in the public domain, as they should be as cultural artefacts. As Buxton says: "His interest in Ash is implicitly necrophiliac and ghoulis; he wants to imprison his artefacts in the airless glass mausoleum of the Stant collection, and his grave-robbing pulsates with sexual undertones." (Buxton, 1996, p. 206). As such, Cropper is not related to the critique of postmodernism *per se*, but rather to the way in which culture was perceived and related to at the time. As Mitchell (2010, p. 93-94) states, during Margaret Thatcher's reign "English heritage was to become a commodity, preferably one bought and sold by the private entrepreneur" and thus "[h]istory becomes its tangible objects, which are bought and sold to decorate homes, or to boost tourism. The past becomes a possession." Cropper is precisely such a private collector of Victorian memorabilia, and to make matters worse, he is also an American, which shows the actual disdain for cultural heritage – as long as it is sold and makes a profit, it is not important whom it is sold to. On the other hand, his arch enemy, Blackadder, is so utterly devoted to grasping every detail, that the core of the matter he studies escapes him, and "minute fidelity to identifying the possible sources of each poetic image drains Ash's text of its language, its poetry, and makes Blackadder's text full of footnotes that engulfed and swallowed the text" (Mitchell, 2010, p. 96). He represents an overly scientific approach to studying literature, which pays more attention to relatively insignificant details instead of to the central point of the text studied, and this "obscures and obfuscates rather than explicates" (Mitchell 96). The quest of finding out the true nature of Randolph's and Christabel's relationship, on the other hand, presents stepping back from this kind of scholarship and stands as an honest,

³ This would also put the novel in the genre of bildungsroman, in the more traditional, conventional sense, without an ironic distance which is present in (post)modernism.

passionate drive to learn facts about history, and to come to certain conclusions.

Eventually, Maud's, and especially Roland's, *bildung* comes to an end which is a rather traditional satisfying one; they manage, at least to an extent, to turn away from the web of theoretical readings of life, and to get in closer touch with actual life as well as literature as something that should be enjoyed, and not used as a background for quasi-scientific musings and endless theoretical discussions. This is mostly exemplified by Roland, who abandons postmodernism, starts enjoying poetry, and contemplates writing it, which is contrasted to his previous deeply theoretical concerns with poetry, while also getting multiple job offerings, which stands for fulfilment in professional terms, in a typical bildungsroman manner. Maud goes through a similar process of discovering herself based on the juxtaposition with the Victorian storyline and questioning her theoretical foundations which prevent her from forming a stable identity, precisely because she believes that such a thing is impossible. "She is too deeply insecure about her identity because her conception of herself depends on the paradigms of poststructuralist theory such as the decentred self and the deconstructed subject" (Steveker, 2009, p. 10). As Bronfen (1996, p. 125-126) states, "by discovering Ash's and LaMotte's relationship, Maud and Roland succeed in freeing themselves from the inhibiting discourses of postmodern literary theory." This also points to the novel's awareness of its status as a postmodern text and is an example of the meta level of postmodernism, that is, it is an example of how the novel discusses and subverts postmodernism inside the framework of a postmodern text. Furthermore, this discussion frames postmodernism as a constraint to both one's forming a stable identity, and to an adequate reading of literature as it does more to obscure than to shed light.

Identity Construction in *The Biographer's Tale*

The Biographer's Tale features a character development with more or less the same goals, and via the same means. As mentioned above, Phineas G. Nanson is another scholar who is trying to break away from the postmodern systems of thought and to start dealing with more tangible, factual things, which leads him to try to write a biography of the elusive writer Scholes Destry-Scholes. The main vehicle for his development as a character is his sexual relationships with Vera Alphage and Fulla Biefeld. These relationships serve the purpose of his getting in touch with sensuous feelings and his own sexuality, just like in *Possession*, even though the Victorian period is present only in traces in this novel. Furthermore, his personal development is driven by the desire for gathering biographical data, just like in *Possession*, and "through his research on his biographee he gets to know both Vera and Fulla" (Steveker, 2009: 17). However, this quest to write a life story of his subject essentially leads him on a quest of self-discovery, as he is unable to find any facts about Destry-Scholes, and almost no verification of his existence, apart from Vera's testimony. This is, paradoxically, not

entirely a failure as he does manage to break away from the constraints of postmodern thought, and starts researching bees in the end, which is presented as a subject matter dealing with hard facts and objective material reality, and an opposite to the abstractedness of postmodernism, just like biography is presented at the beginning of the novel.

From the very beginning, Phineas shows discontent with his current life as a postmodern literary theorist, and explains to his new advisor Ormerod Goode, an expert on Anglo-Saxon place names, that he “felt an urgent need for a life full of things... Full of facts” (Byatt, 2018, p. 4). Phineas is resolute to abandon postmodernism for biography, and in that, he is encouraged by Goode, who says that “the art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts. By far the greatest work of scholarship in my time, to my knowledge, is Scholes Destry-Scholes’s biographical study of Sir Elmer Bole. But nobody knows it. It is not considered. And yet, the ingenuity, the passion” (Byatt, 2018, p. 5), which sets the dichotomy between a field of study focused on facts, and postmodernism, which shuns facts and is framed as a lower field of study, which also lacks passion. Thus, similar to the characters from *Possession*, Phineas is a character who turns towards the people from the past to answer the question of “who am I” (Steveker, 2009, p. 17) These people function as “models of identification stabilising Maud’s, Roland’s and Phineas’s processes of identity construction” (Steveker 2009, p. 17). He strongly identifies with Scholes’ minute precision and his writing style which manages to convey the information in a direct manner, but also to maintain the reader’s attention and captivate them. He desperately tries to imitate this kind of style and sees Scholes as a figure to look up to, thus identifying with him. However, in a manner which is typical for historiographic and “biographic metafiction” (Steveker, 2009: 20), the information about him remain elusive; the house he was born in is now occupied by someone else, nobody seems to know what he looked like, even Goode, who met him a few decades ago, his face is impossible to see, nobody is sure how he died, and the only traces of him are assorted index cards, some marbles, family photographs, and a few tools, neatly stored away in Vera’s attic, as well as some manuscripts related to Carl Linnaeus, Henrik Ibsen, and Francis Galton. Phineas embarks on the quest of trying to find out facts about Scholes through photographs and index cards, but manages to make no sense of them, since they are not even numbered, and seemingly about completely random subjects.

If this section were to be read in isolation, it might seem like a typical postmodern story that points attention to the fact that history can only be accessed through text, and that there is, therefore, no singular truth about it. However, it must be noticed that his primary quest is one of self-discovery and a desire to invest himself in the material world and sensuous experience, rather than to simply write a biography. In light of that, it can be maintained that Byatt here uses postmodern tropes only to subvert

them and skilfully employ them for unconventional and subversive means, which, combined with numerous direct references to postmodernism itself, makes the novel aware of its postmodernity, and, like *Possession*, it can be said that it is postmodern on a meta level. Furthermore, it also transcends postmodernism, not only by its' protagonist transcending it, but also by returning to previous styles of writing; it provides a closed, meaningful end, and also plays with the modernist trope of epiphany at several instances, and at one openly discussing it and drawing attention to it in a metafictional way. Those epiphanies serve to drive the plot forward, but they also present a retreat from typical postmodern writing.

As mentioned above, his quest is marked by sexual encounters which can serve as metaphors for getting to know the real world as opposed to the world of theoretical readings and musing, and serve as a sort of rite of passage from innocence to experience. Some of them could be described as epiphanic or quasi-epiphanic. One such experience is a scene in which Phineas suffers from an attack of claustrophobia while attending a gathering dedicated to Linnaeus at a public library, faints, and wakes up under the skirt of Fulla Biefeld, which he describes in rather sensuous terms: "I felt it coming over me and went along with it, it seemed the best thing. My nose was alive with Fulla Biefeld's sex" (Byatt, 2018, p. 117). This scene can be seen as a metaphor for his transformation that is to come; he faints under the pressure of his scholarly attempts, but comes to his sense driven by a sensuous urge, and decides to give in to it. In the story generally, Fulla is represented as the main driving force for his transformation; she constantly turns his attention to problems with the bee population, which can be seen as a metaphor for the real-life problems which she sees as much more important than his scholarly endeavours, and stands in stark contrast with his initial postmodern tendencies. She also teaches him to immerse himself in the natural world, by both leading him to examine bugs, and by engaging in a sexual relationship. Her efforts eventually lead him to become a bee taxonomist, which marks his final transformation. His relationship with Vera, despite not being so prominent, serves a similar purpose, of connecting with one's sensuous drives and urges, and has a transformative effect. In Phineas' own words: "It's becoming more difficult to know what sort of writer I *am*. Also afterwards, I was not the same person" (Byatt, 2018, p. 187). Even though it is maybe not narratively necessary, it serves the purpose of accentuating his metaphorical coming of age and maturation, as well as a turn from postmodernism to more objective and scientific views of approaching the world, coupled with the ability to enjoy the experience of living in the world. Thus, Phineas ceases to be a postmodern subject which lacks identity and becomes a person with a stable identity, rooted in material reality.

Conclusion

By creating a network of typically postmodern literary and scholarly allusions and storylines which at first might seem also typically postmodern, only to subvert them and create out of them something that is antithetical to postmodernism, Byatt essentially manages to create a poetics which upon closer inspection differs vastly from the one which is typical of postmodernism. The two novels discussed above are both marked by an awareness of their status as postmodern texts, but also display an open incredulity towards postmodernism and manage to subvert it and go beyond what postmodern novels usually tend to do. Instead of limiting herself to the already well-known and well-used idea that history cannot be known for certain, that there are multiple true histories, and that history and fiction are close and almost the same thing, Byatt manages to subvert these ideas, and to go beyond them, paradoxically, by revisiting older forms of writing and creating works which provide closure and a satisfying ending. In essence, *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale* are centred on discussing postmodernism a means of accessing and assessing literature as well as a means of creating, precisely by creating a meta-postmodern parody which manages to subvert postmodernism, and seemingly to suggest a return to older, more traditional forms of writing.

By doing so, Byatt manages to tackle the contradictions of postmodernism, and to bring them to their logical conclusion, as is mentioned in the introduction; both novels discussed here are aware of the contradictions and try to escape them, by overcoming them in the sense of the storyline, that is, their characters abandon postmodernism, and in the sense of the narrative style through which the story is told, that is, by resolving all the mysteries and uncertainties which the characters try to unlock, and driving them to fulfil their quests. However, the novels are also a reaction to postmodernism, to what Byatt felt “was the increasing gulf between current literary criticism and the words of the literary texts it in some sense discusses” (Byatt, 2002b, p. 45). This is evident in her caricatural treatment of the majority of the characters, which is especially pronounced in *Possession*, but also present in *The Biographer's Tale*. Both novels draw attention to the overthinking, imposing, and redundant and self-absorbed theorising present in the literary academia, which as such turns away from its purpose of studying, appreciating and enjoying literature, and turns its scholars away from it. This furthermore, draws attention to the idea that literature should be enjoyed, not only studied, which is mirrored in both novels by the simple fact that both stories are simply great stories to read, apart from being an intelligent and intellectual critique of the dominant modes of thinking. Apart from that, these novels seem to imply that “the postmodern critics must sacrifice the purely cognitive pleasure of armchair detection... and enter the messy arena of love and life” (Hennelly, 2003, p. 466). This way, Byatt creates works which drift away from what would typically be considered postmodern

and raises important questions both about this literary movement and philosophy, as well as about what is to come after it, and what form and shape it should take.

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Stefan Č. Čizmar

**SUBVERZIJA POSTMODERNIZMA U ROMANIMA ZANESENOST I
BIOGRAFOVA PRIČA A.S. BAJAT**

Rezime

A.S. Bajat je spisateljica čiji je književni rad oblikovan u periodu postmodernizma, koji odlikuju kompleksna dela premrežena aluzijama i referencama, kako iz književnosti, tako iz kulture i istorije. Takođe, ovaj period odlikuje oslanjanje na metafikciju; mnoga dela ispituju odnos između fikcije i realnosti, kao i sam proces stvaranja fikcije. Dela A.S. Bajat svakako poseduju ove karakteristike; *Zanesenost* (*Possession*) i *Biografova priča* (*The Biographer's Tale*) su satkana služeći se različitim formama, od tipične prozne naracije, preko pisama i poezije, do dramskih sekvenci; sadrže brojne aluzije na razne ličnosti iz istorije književnosti, kulture i nauke, te prikazuju širok dijapazon kompleksnih i detaljno razvijenih likova koji se bore da steknu i očuvaju stabilan identitet u periodu koji podozrivo gleda na takve koncepte. Uzevši ove karakteristike u obzir, moglo bi se reći da su ti romani tipični predstavnici postmodernističkog pisanja. Međutim, pored ovih karakteristika, pomenuta dela su takođe okrenuta posmatranju njihovog statusa kao postmodernih tekstova i podrivanju teorijskih i književnih okvira postmodernizma. Sa jedne strane, oba romana se konstantno osvrću na postmodernizam sa parodičnim tonom, prikazujući likove poput Mod i Rolanda, kao i Fineasa koji su detaljno upoznati sa postmodernom teorijom. No, ti likovi ne pokazuju mogućnost da se snađu u stvarnom svetu, koji ih udaljava od teorijskih razmatranja ka otkrivanju stvarnih strasti i pronalasku čvrstih identiteta i ispunjenih života. Sa druge strane, oba romana poseduju zaokružen kraj, koji kulminira formiranjem stabilnih identiteta i okretanjem glavnih junaka od apstraktnih teorijskih razmatranja prema saznavanju stvarnog sveta. Zbog ovakvog kritičkog odnosa prema postmodernizmu, koji koristi postmoderne tehnike pisanja da podrije postmodernizam iznutra, ovaj rad pomenute romane naziva meta-postmodernim.

Ključne reči: A.S. Bajat, postmodernizam, metafikcija, istoričnost, neoviktorijansko, seksualnost, parodija, subverzija.

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