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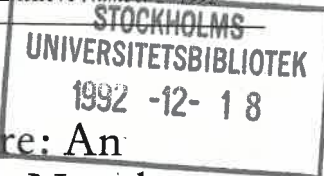
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SABINE HOTHO-JACKSON

Literary History in Literature: An Aspect of the Contemporary Novel

The modern English novel is characterised by a multiplicity of intertextual responses amongst which the deliberate dialogue between present and past literary history plays a significant role. The contemporary novel in particular reflects a widespread "[concern], morally and aesthetically, with its forbears" (Byatt 1979: 21) which manifests itself in a "revival of fascination with parody and pastiche" (Burden 1979: 134). A "critical dialogue with the novel's tradition" (Burden 1979: 143) which highlights the deficiencies of that tradition has been pointed out as one of the main characteristics particularly of the experimental novel (Maack 1984: 1ff). However, the modern novel's response to its tradition is only insufficiently described in terms of such a critical challenge. Rather, a closer reinterpreted look at John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), one of the most widely discussed experimental novels, and a reading of two recent texts which have not yet gained the status of modern classics—Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990)—show how tradition is reinterpreted in terms of a malleable entity which is eventually reconstituted in its own right rather than rejected. It is significant to trace such conventionalism even in texts which at a first reading suggest a deconstructive mode.

Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been read as a "meta-commentary on the theory of the novel from a modern perspective" (Burden 1979: 151) and thus as an epitome of the self-reflexiveness of modern art and its inherent questioning of its tradition. Ultimately, so critics agree, the text has an "undermining and denying" character (Kaplan 1973: 115). This interpretation, however, is only one side of the coin. It seems to be more appropriate to define Fowles's historical sense as compounded of both a sense of continuity and ambiguity. Ambiguity already characterised the process of writing the novel, as Fowles indicates when he comments on his historical standpoint as an artist: "To what extent" he asks "am I being a coward by writing

inside the old tradition? To what extent am I being panicked into avantgardism?" (Fowles 1969 a: 140). Here, a contemporary novelist expresses his historical position as a dilemma: on the one hand, he senses a literary tradition as an obsolete framework he should break free from. Yet at the same time he is unable to yield to the contemporary demands which push him toward a clearcut break with his tradition because he does not wish to relinquish it. Fowles realises that he is determined by the historical moment of the present without being able fully to accept the determinism. He carries this ambiguity into the novel, and in writing the novel and simultaneously reflecting on this project, he tries to overcome his historical dilemma in terms of a quest for the middle ground.

Chapter XIII, informed by Fowles's awareness of his modernist standpoint, plays on and undermines the Victorian convention of an omniscient, even god-like author and the Victorian preoccupation with truth. Fowles's statement that "this story I am telling is all imagination" (*FLW*, 89) swiftly shatters the Victorian ideology. It is, however, interesting to note that Fowles does not present this sudden revelation in terms of a universal aesthetic principle informed by an ontology of doubt conceived of as equally universal—an attitude suggested by some of his critics—but from inside a clearly stated historical perspective which suggests both continuity and cohesion. Change in the socio-cultural paradigm requires a different aesthetic approach and Fowles sees himself as writing from inside the new existentialist framework when he states that "what has changed is that [the novelists] are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing: but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority" (*FLW*, 86). Paradoxically, however, the new—non-authoritarian—paradigm turns out to be similar to the old one in so far as, in spite of its non-authoritative strain, it limits the artist's possibilities. "I must conform to that definition" (*FLW*, 86) writes Fowles, implying that the artist has to move inside his given historical framework in order to gain artistic freedom because then he is "still God, since he creates" (*FLW*, 86).

Fowles thus skilfully conjoins past and present aesthetics in a continuum by defining history as a series of paradigms and by then endowing the artist inside the respective paradigm with the role of creator-God. This implicitly relativistic or historicist view of history allows Fowles to view each image in terms of its inherent values. That he intends to do so in order to affirm and not to reject the Victorian tradition is obvious from his choice of reference. Not only is the labelling of history as theology and of the artist as God in history a linguistic way of endowing each historical paradigm with an inherent value and thus an authority in its own right. Fowles furthermore ironically echoes

Barthes who firmly denies a "theological meaning" (Barthes 1977: 146) or historicist evaluation of literature and the authority of the author. Fowles reestablishes the theological meaning of the text inside its historical paradigm as well as the status of the author as—historically determined—"Author-God" (Barthes 1977: 146) and he can thus resist a contemporary critic who otherwise might have 'panicked' him into avantgardism.

Fowles combines his sequential concept of literary history with the notion of tradition as choice—an ultimately positive relation to history. "Even with artefacts I can choose" he writes (Fowles 1964: 177f), choose, that is, between possibilities of interpretation. Here, choice is not an existential dilemma but a deliberate and liberating interpretative principle which becomes productive when Fowles undertakes to "resurrect" (Fowles 1969 a: 142) a specific literary tradition in the novel which became *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Calling this project an act of resurrection implies an affirmative relationship because what is resurrected must be worth the archeological effort. Fowles's effort focuses on the narrator's voice from Austen to Conrad, that "ironic voice" which "the line of great nineteenth century novelists [...] all used so naturally" (Fowles 1969 a: 141). Again the metaphors are revealing: if "great" implies admiration and "line" a notion of uninterrupted continuity, the reference to the naturalness with which the "great" Victorians used the voice is Fowles's late twentieth century nostalgic comment, an admission of a feeling of loss and an implicit critique of the contemporary novel and particularly the French *nouveau roman* which, as Fowles points out with regret (Fowles 1969 a: 141), refuses to continue that great line.

Fowles's resurrection of the Victorian novel, albeit a critical comment on that paradigm, is at the same time the attempt of a contemporary author to write himself back into that line of great authors, thus reestablishing literary history as continuity. Fowles reverts to the ironic narrator's voice because it allows him to align himself in his chosen literary continuum and at the same time enables him to keep his distance by enveloping both past and present modes in a sphere of ironic doubt. And this is exactly what characterises Fowles's historical sense: by looking at the Victorians from a modernist perspective, he can point out their deficiencies. By continuing a literary tradition yet simultaneously adapting it in a modernist way he can find his own historical niche. Aware that he is rooted in his own time, he returns to literary history as a means of gaining artistic freedom without giving in to the historical paradigm of his own day.

What links Fowles and Ackroyd is the modernist notion of the inescapable presence of literary tradition in the process of literary creation. But whereas Fowles treats tradition in terms of choice,

Ackroyd, in *Chatterton*, presents it as the opposite of rational knowledge, as an obsession, verging, in the case of Charles, on the neuro-pathological, a mere shadow which springs upon the artist in the shape of sudden mysterious discoveries, fictitious yet inescapably real. Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence looms large in this text and a comfortable concept of literary history is denied. It is "a dark world where there is no beginning and no end" (C, 71), threatening and stifling.

Ackroyd brilliantly deconstructs our conventional concept of literary history as a history of great names and achievements—in a way Fowles's concept—, but he also replaces it by a kind of historical continuum which, once it is discovered, proves to be a strong and purposeful historical bond. In this, Ackroyd reaches a conclusion not unlike Fowles's.

For Ackroyd, Chatterton is the epitome of literary history as myth-making, as an elaborate operation of construction and belief. If, according to Ackroyd as the deconstructor of myths, the Romantics' idealisation of their predecessor Chatterton as "the sleepless Soul that perished in his pride" (Wordsworth: I. 43ff) was tantamount to an unintentional glorification of syphilis, all conventional concepts of tradition must be questioned. Suggesting that Chatterton, whom we must interpret as a disturbance in conventional literary history, is "[at] the centre" (C, 164) of all literature and literary history, clearly questions its interpretation as a series of achievements. However, although Ackroyd questions and deconstructs, he does not destroy. The axiom of Charles's friend Philip, "existing as possibility" (C, 127), applies to Ackroyd's reading of literary history as well. Although Chatterton, Charles and Philip establish a distinctly unheroic line of continuity, they also suggest potentiality. Chatterton's life is the story of the poet who is torn between the desire to be one of "the real poets" (C, 205) and the necessity of simply having to earn a living (C, 214). The potential discovery of the poet's true voice underlies this story. Ironically, this potentiality is anticipated and realised in its symbolic quality not by Chatterton but by the reader when Chatterton rescues "the idiot boy" (C, 211), perhaps "a phantom of his imagination" (C, 207), yet at the same time real, an urban version of Wordsworth's idiot boy who symbolises what is lost in others, that mysterious union with God, a hidden truth and harmony from which poetry springs. Chatterton's publisher acts as our voice when he asks him: "You see the poetry of it, do you not?" (C, 211) and thereby suggestively closes the gap between Chatterton, who did not quite see, and Wordsworth who had the chance of seeing. Chatterton thus encapsulates a potential which only needed one more step to be discovered.

The potentiality of the creative partnership between Chatterton

and the idiot boy then becomes one of Ackroyd's *leitmotifs*, culminating in the relationship between Charles and his son Edward. This relationship also recalls Wordsworth's "Anecdote for Fathers" in which the son—who is called Edward—replaces the idiot boy, knowing in his innocence the truth and spirit his father seeks. It is Edward who, on a visit to the gallery, leads Charles to the centre, "taking him by the hands and leading him forwards" (C, 131). In this gallery of time and history the circle closes when Edward pronounces the truth: "Chatterton isn't dead. I was right" (C, 132). The symbolism of the scene is obvious: in a moment when Charles experiences history as a malaise, reducing the modern mind to "mere brooding or unquiet configurations" (C, 131), Edward leads him back to the centre which is the continuity of the poetic imagination, epitomised in one of its unheroic heroes who suggests an unheroic alternative literary history, if not of achievements at least of possibilities.

Ackroyd questions conventional literary history in order to replace it by an alternative strand in history and thus returns to the safe ground of a humanistic affirmation of history. The question of the relation between tradition and the individual talent is dealt with by a similar act of refocussing. In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd completes what Bloom in his influential study of literary tradition chooses to ignore. He does not describe Bloom's "strong poets" who overcome the impact of their precursors and who thus "make history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (Bloom 1973: 5) but the "weaker talents" (Bloom 1973: 5) who struggle and misread without ever freeing themselves. For Charles, tradition becomes an obsession motivated by a need to overcome his own creative impasse; for Harriet, another minor author, it means imitation and anxiety of discovery, and for Philip it means a threat exerted by all the words written before him. What these weak poets share, it seems, is a concept of tradition as an enemy, an alliance of names: "all around us, watching us, Blake, Shelley, Coleridge [...] All of them influencing us" (C, 77). However, when Charles reaches the conclusion of negativity and tries to put into poetry how "time is nothing other than a pattern of deaths which succeed one another" (C, 169) the "other voices" (C, 169) keep interfering. The dead poets will not allow their successor this life-denying view of existence, of art. They can interfere because they will always be alive.

Ackroyd's view of literary tradition, then, is dialectic: it is a constant companion in every poet, as such a riddle and a burden. There is no originality, because history is a palimpsest. The poet is not free from the past but without it there would be no creative work. Ackroyd agrees with Bloom's conclusion that "the precursors flood us, and our imagination can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative

life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded" (Bloom 1973: 154). Where he disagrees with Bloom is in the focus of attention. In placing the weaker talents at the centre, he opens up a way into literary tradition which is touchingly human and extremely democratic because it shows that we are all poets and thus, in so many ways, engaged in making history.

In *Possession: A Romance*, A.S. Byatt rewrites history from the female perspective, simply by shifting emphasis and reallocating meaning to a human being, La Motte, whom retrospective—male—history has denied a place in literary history. She does not, however, intend to replace one genderspecific reading of history by another but to give a fuller picture of history, thus refusing to be categorised under a fashionable label. Byatt's concept of history is on the surface modernist because history is here presented as a process of rediscovery by chance—exemplified in Roland's chance discovery of the letters—and as a text which is constantly in need of being rewritten. Like Ackroyd, Byatt undertakes to show the narrow boundary between history and (male/academic) myth, but, again like her predecessors in the context of this article, she combines a deconstructivist perspective with a conventional attempt at reaffirmation. Less ambiguously than Ackroyd, more obviously than Fowles, she ultimately depicts history as a series of lives of real people, who incidentally are our ancestors. In this world of history outside academic myth-making, a meaningful dialogue between past and present becomes possible.

In writing *Possession*, Byatt put into fictional practice an issue she discussed in 1979 when she commented critically on the modern novelist's unease as regards literary tradition, an unease which attributes to the past an "ambiguous power and restrictiveness" (Byatt 1979: 24), and on the "derivative papery energy" (Byatt 1979: 29) of the modern novel which she links to this attitude to tradition. Byatt is in favour of a return to narrative "solidity" (Byatt 1979: 31) and in *Possession* she clearly attempts this return in a twofold way: by writing, at least partly, in the mode of the narrative novel about the Victorians, she endows the disputed genre with a self-reanimating power not unlike Fowles's resurrection. By using this genre to demonstrate to her fictional literary critics—whose profession, as Byatt sees it, is at the root of the modern novel's malaise (Byatt 1979: 22)—that the past is made of real myth-defying people, she provokes a humanising reassessment of the critics' myths. Parallel to this argument, Roland and Maude change from being critics to Byatt's favoured greedy readers of the truth behind the historical constructs (Byatt 1979:22)—and it is out of this greed that creativity finally stems.

The subtext of the novels discussed in this article is less an anxiety of influence than a positive acknowledgement of tradition. If litera-

ture is a palimpsest, these novels make it a fertile ground of poetic or intellectual creativity. That our view of tradition is not an absolute term but a construction, has been a philosophical topos at least since the early decades of this century. This view leaves us with two options: despair because there is no way of knowing beyond our own epistemological horizon, or recognition that our constant reinterpretations of the past ensure a meaningful dialogue between what is gone and what is now. Fowles, Ackroyd and Byatt demonstrate how the latter attitude lives on in English literature, even in works which on first reading might appear to question the meaningfulness of tradition. These authors are aware of the problematical nature of tradition—and therefore engage in reinterpreting tradition in order to preserve it.

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CURRENT AMERICAN LITERATURE

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| Fannie Flagg, <i>Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café</i> | Terry McMillan, <i>Waiting to Exhale</i> |
| John Grisham, <i>A Time to Kill</i> | Toni Morrison, <i>Jazz</i> |
| Thomas Harris, <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> | Anne Rivers Siddons, <i>Outer Banks</i> |
| | Amy Tan, <i>The Kitchen God's Wife</i> |
| | Alice Walker, <i>Possessing the Secret of Joy</i> |
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