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Book Review: A.S. Byatt's *Art of Memory* by Mara Cambiaghi (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020). ISBN: 9783631814222, 215 pages. E-book price £41.00

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Mara Cambiaghi's monograph is the latest of the growing number of book-length publications analysing A. S. Byatt's extensive body of work, and a recent addition to Peter Lang's multi-language series, *Literary and Cultural Studies, Theory and the New Media*. Aimed primarily at scholars and advanced readers who are already familiar with the novelist's work, Cambiaghi's book studies the four volumes of Byatt's tetralogy (comprising *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)) and *Possession: A Romance* (1990) within the broad and multifarious context of memory and the long-standing tradition around the art of making memory. Her readings are informed by a number of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic theoretical approaches including cognitive memory, cultural and collective memory, 'blending theory', and highlight, at relevant points, the novelist's extensive use of intertextuality, ekphrasis, intermediality and interdisciplinarity. This focus, both theoretical and aesthetic, allows Cambiaghi to provide original insight into the five central novels of Byatt's career, and to establish a much-needed bridge between Anglophone approaches and the English translations of post-structuralist French theory, which have been predominant critical frameworks throughout contemporary studies of post-war and postmodern fiction, and continental critical and philosophical traditions to which Byatt herself has paid homage time and again.

In this sense, Cambiaghi's extensive and exhaustive Introduction (covering 31 pages) guides readers through the key themes and stylistic features of Byatt's whole *oeuvre*, such as her multidisciplinary engagement with literary canons, forms, visual and textual cultures, and how they operate in recreating history. Her theoretical framework is informed by the Francophone and Germanophone lineage of collective and cultural memory studies (Halbwachs, Warburg, Nora, Jan and Aleida Assmann), which she combines with cognitive approaches by authors such as Frances Yates, and, finally, with Turner and Fauconnier's 'blending theory.' At the same time, the introduction provides a thorough and useful assessment of existing scholarship on Byatt, in a literary review that recognizes the polyglot and multicultural dimension of academic research conducted on Byatt's writing, as well as of Byatt's work *per se*.

Despite its necessary and innovative theoretical engagement, however, the aim of the whole book can be summarised as an attempt 'to highlight the subtle craft intertwining disparate strands of the narrative in order to create an artistic *vision* of a given time, informed by a vast range of ideas and patterns of thought' (Cambiaghi, 2020: 83 n. 32). Throughout her Introduction and her five analytical chapters, Cambiaghi engages in uncovering the vast textual and intermedial web underpinning Byatt's writing from a taxonomical, structuralist and narratological perspective. The advantage of this approach is its fruitful translation of the multi-layered essence of Byatt's work to the reader,

enhanced by Cambiaghi's thorough knowledge of the primary material, but this comes at the cost of a truly cohesive, original argument running throughout the whole monograph.

Chapter One looks at the first volume of the Quartet, *The Virgin in the Garden*, through the perceptive and convincing lens of Renaissance memory theatre. The parallels between the Elizabethan era and the coronation of Elizabeth II, amply explored by the novel, are emblematically symbolised by the fifteenth-century mansion at the centre of the action, which Cambiaghi views as a veritable memory theatre, as well as the stage where the neo-Elizabethan Shakespearean re-enactments around the Potter siblings play out. The monograph correctly identifies the televised coronation as a pivotal moment of national importance not just for its intrinsic historical relevance, but also as the inaugural point of a new, increasingly visual culture which will increase throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as the remainder of the tetralogy shows.

Because of the novel's direct engagement with a clearly defined historical era (the Renaissance), it is also the first where Byatt examines the relation between past and present, a concern which will be paramount in her neo-Victorian and neo-Edwardian fiction. Cambiaghi argues that *The Virgin in the Garden* displays a 'retrospective glance that also suggests an invitation to review and assess the national past by comparing it with the present' (68; my emphasis), while underlining the 'hindsight [through which the protagonist] Frederica will also fully acknowledge the pastness of the past' (68). Given this novel's publication in 1978 and its self-aware engagement with Renaissance history as the past which its 1950s characters seek to recreate, it is surprising that the monograph does not comment on how Byatt's retrospective glance challenges her late-twentieth-century readers to engage with the pastness of the 1950s past, just as much as her characters look retrospectively to the Elizabethan era.

Chapter Two unpacks the intermedial language of *Still Life*, by highlighting its blending of realism with avant-garde techniques (the fragmented narrative, intertextuality and ekphrasis). Memory here is presented through its cultural, but mostly its visual dimension, notably emphasised by the central function played by Van Gogh's persona, work and afterlife within the action of the novel, and by the ekphrastic feast that is the novel's Prologue, set at the Royal Academy's post-Impressionist exhibition of 1980. Cambiaghi's attentive analyses of key scenes from the Prologue and beyond are interspersed with reproductions of relevant paintings by Gauguin and Van Gogh. This strategy reproduces the visual pleasure enabled by the novel, enhancing it by adding images where the narrative makes the paintings, and the questions on light and memory they elicit, speak out through words only.

Particularly original is Cambiaghi's reading of the character of Alexander Wedderburn's androgyny (the playwright and long-time friend of the Potter family).

This is an interesting hint at the fluidity of gender roles and sexuality in the second half of the twentieth century which Cambiaghi will examine in greater detail in the fourth chapter. In my view, this point deserved even more attention, especially at the intersection with the question of gendered gazes that western art has long bestowed upon non-western cultures (as in the case of Gauguin's Tahitian work), and which Byatt's prose mobilises.

While *Still Life* is, notably, Byatt's attempt to write without metaphors on the relation between things, life, and art (Byatt, 2003: 301), *Babel Tower*, examined by Cambiaghi in Chapter Three, is a claustrophobic yet 'expansive novel' (Cambiaghi, 2020: 97) with deeply innovative and unapologetically postmodern features such as multiple embedded narratives, changes in focalisation, and allegorical language throughout. At the same time, this monograph sets it firmly within crucial historical moments interrogating the relation between the personal and political aspects of cultural memory. These include the two-cultures debate juxtaposing scientific culture to literature; the 1960 trial against *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the counterculture movements sparked in academic and artistic environments in 1968, and continue the discussion around recreating the atmosphere of a historical past, while rethinking and redefining it from a turn-of-the-millennium perspective.

The ruling metaphors of the novel that Cambiaghi analyses are the spiral shell, the tower of Babel and the tongue (hence, language); the shell, moreover, sets the tone for the whole monograph, since Cambiaghi chose the beautiful *Helikoides* as her cover image, a drawing commissioned especially for this book and designed to recall not just the shell it represents, but also the spirals of the tower of Babel and, by extension, Byatt's entire corpus of fiction in relation to language. Therefore, Cambiaghi would have done well to dwell more on this key image, the more so since this chapter is a good ten pages shorter than the other three devoted to the tetralogy. Indeed, the shell imagery is quite pervasive in *Babel Tower*, as it is evoked from the novel's opening through the reference to the thrush crushing a shell on a stone, the paratextual occurrences as a separation between narrative sections, up to the snails researched by the trio of scientists, Markus Potter, Jacqueline Winwar and Luk Lysgaard-Peacock.

The geological memory of shells and snails becomes, in *A Whistling Woman* (analysed in Chapter Four), fully visual, all-encompassing and truly cross-disciplinary, resembling the 'memory-bank' (Cambiaghi, 2020: 122) of a computer. Cambiaghi persuasively argues that television culture, in which protagonist Frederica Potter plays a primary role as a talk-show host, is intersected with collective memory, and the collective memory of women in particular. Indeed, this chapter deals more thoroughly and consistently than the previous ones with 'memory as a framework of knowledge and

acquired conventions collectively shared by women, as well as memory as a cognitive function intertwined with the feminist critique of rationality' (Cambiaghi, 2020: 117). By putting (second-wave) feminism and gender at the centre of her analysis, Cambiaghi identifies the connections the narrative establishes between humans and animals (the bird imagery, the snails, the feminised supernatural Whistlers in the embedded children's story, *Flight North*), but I wonder whether she could have carried her analysis even further, by including an assessment of changing paradigms of masculinity as well. After all, the birds and feathers, which are of primary importance in Byatt's oft-cited essay 'Memory and the Making of Fiction' (1998), as well as the snails, are linked to Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, geneticist and Frederica's partner by the end of the novel, just as much as they are associated to the Quartet's protagonist.

The final chapter is devoted to *Possession: A Romance*, Byatt's best-known novel and the flagship text of all existing scholarship on her work to date, rightly touted by Cambiaghi as 'a significant watershed in her career as a writer, evolving towards increasingly more experimental forms of narrative and a variety of genres' (97). This chapter is by far the longest in the monograph and, indeed, would work as a stand-alone reader's guide, with sections devoted to the title, the Victorian plot, the 1980s plot, as well as the use of fairy tales and mythologies.

Despite this quite schematic division into separate areas of enquiry, the chapter makes the overarching point that palimpsests of intertextuality become the memory of the text itself (Cambiaghi, 2020: 139). While this aspect may be most obvious in the Victorian rewriting that Byatt engages in, it also stands for a powerful cluster of intertexts across Byatt's fiction as a whole. Indeed, the author's assessment of the history of the novel's publication (notably the differences between the UK and US editions), of Breton fairy lore and of Norse mythology in connection to her (neo-) Victorian poets Christabel LaMotte, and Randolph Henry Ash, respectively, is persuasive and wide-ranging, while complementing previous readings on the 'paperiness' (Mundler 2003: 366) of the novel, or its status as a campus-novel version of detective fiction.

A further avenue that Cambiaghi might have wanted to pursue could have been establishing how *Possession* stands at the centre not only of Byatt's career, but also of the intertextual webs she draws throughout her fiction: in this respect, identifying the connections between the mythical and fairy-tale tropes present in *Possession* and their reappearance in her other fiction would have proven fruitful. 'Gode's Story' and 'The Glass Coffin', notably, are published as stand-alone pieces in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), while the myth of Ragnarök is firstly developed in the eponymous, autobiographical story 'Sugar' before becoming the subject of Byatt's latest book of fiction, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011). This would also have broadened the scope

of Cambiaghi's argument on memory, in that it would have shown Byatt's corpus as a self-contained body of memory, interlinking and engrafting its own clusters of memory.

With this monograph, Cambiaghi shows how 'the novelist acts as a mnemonist engaged in mapping the orderly arrangement of memory traces along the path of an archaeological site' (190): through her intelligently combined use of primary sources alongside critical essays by Byatt, she provides a broad map of memory across these five key novels. Indeed, together with 'Memory and the Making of Fiction' (1998), extensively referenced throughout the book, Cambiaghi uses 'Still Life/Nature Morte' from *Passions of the Mind* (1991) and 'Ice, Snow, Glass' from *On Histories and Stories* (2000) to further enhance her readings in Chapters Two and Five, respectively, as well as extracts from interviews, emails, and other more personal pieces by the novelist. If this book aims to be a 'more encompassing account' (Cambiaghi, 2020: 189) of Byatt's work, the use of these secondary sources provides an important opportunity, which Cambiaghi used with attention and care, to show how Byatt's fictional and non-fictional outputs speak to, and enhance, one another.

The main weakness of this monograph is that, despite this successful intermingling of forms and discourses, it is surprising to note how little space is devoted to how Byatt engages with historical fiction as a genre in her renditions of the interlinked layers of historical memory and heritage. After all, as Cambiaghi correctly notes, the Quartet can successfully and convincingly be read as a Bildungsroman of Victorian scope and ambition but with modernist (and postmodernist) vision, and told from a twentieth- and twenty-first-century viewpoint. Similarly, *Possession* is commonly defined a piece of historiographic metafiction, not to mention a canonical text in neo-Victorianism: all five novels thus posit fundamental questions on the representation of history, on the relationship between past and present, and on how history is interpreted, re-evoked and shaped in contemporaneity. If *Possession*'s stance as a historical novel proper is open to debate (after all, most of the past plot is evoked intertextually through the letters, poems, diaries that punctuate its development), the Quartet is a 'condition of England' novel set to unpack the social and cultural zeitgeist of the 1950s and 1960s. Since Cambiaghi's bibliography includes scholars such as Mariadele Boccardi and Christian Gutleben, who have written extensively on the topic and who have shaped the growing field of neo-Victorianism and neo-historical fiction, a more thorough engagement with these perspectives and their natural connection to the questions of historical and collective memory would no doubt have led to productive readings of Byatt's fictional accounts of Elizabethan, Victorian, neo-Elizabethan and neo-Victorian England.

To conclude, this book is a welcome and innovative addition to Byatt scholarship and, indeed, to studies of post-war fiction in conversation with Renaissance traditions of memory-making and twentieth-century theories of memory alike. With her perceptive textual analyses, and the extensive dialogue she establishes between the novels and the social, historical and cultural questions they mobilise, Cambiaghi does justice to the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural aspects of Byatt's fiction, in a volume that will no doubt become essential reading to scholars, students and perceptive Byatt fans alike.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

References

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