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# Three Approaches toward Historiography: The French Lieutenant's Woman, Possession, and Waterland

## Abstract

Critics have widely explored John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, Graham Swift's Waterland, and A. S. Byatt's Possession. These novels are generally treated as outstanding historiographic metafictions since they self-consciously adopt the notion of history and simultaneously problematize historical understanding. For Hayden White, the historian is inevitably impositional and every narrativized history is relative. Following White, Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern historical fiction as the type of fiction that self-reflexively and paradoxically makes use of the notion of history and simultaneously denies its truthfulness. The present article attempts to analyze, compare, and contrast John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, Graham Swift's Waterland and A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Romance in light of the theories of White and Hutcheon to show that in spite of problematization of the possibility of recovering the past as it actually was, these novels treat the concept of history differently.

Keywords: Fowles; Swift; Byatt; The French Lieutenant's Woman; Waterland; Possession: A Romance; postmodern historiography; historiographic metafiction

## 1. Introduction

Theoretical discussions regarding the relationship of historiography and fiction have been very widespread among philosophers of history since the 1960s. The 1960s confronted the Enlightenment values of the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century when historiography

was institutionalized and professionalized and was introduced as an academic discipline (Lorenz 393). According to the Enlightenment way of thought, the origin could be discerned through research and, as a result, it could prove the notion of progress of civilization from primitivism to its "increasingly perfected state in modern Europe" (Brown 45-46). This idea was later challenged by the historians of post 1960s (Brown 147). The prevalence of historiographic metafiction has demonstrated the strong influence of postmodern historiography upon literature of the time. Since the late 1960s, the philosophy of history has been faced with the question of the possibility of reconstruction of the past by means of the narrative. Such problematization has been accompanied by the practice of the theories of structuralism and poststructuralism on historiography and has led to the emergence of postmodern historiography. In line with this trend, there has developed a widespread reference to the conventions of the Victorian past in British culture. In the realm of literature, the result has been proliferation of historical novels – especially up to the first half of the 1990s – which thematically and/or structurally resemble, reflect or reconstruct Victorian literature. The writers of such novels have mostly attempted to expose the deficiencies of historical narratives and to challenge the idea of knowing the past through employing and then subverting the Victorian literary conventions including historical fiction and mimetic realism. In their self-conscious reinvention of the Victorian epoch and literature, the neo-Victorian writers have made frequent use of the techniques of the kind of fiction which was later termed as "historiographic metafiction" by Linda Hutcheon. John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman is today regarded as a canonical work in this field. Throughout the following years up to the present, several British authors including Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Charles Palliser, A. S. Byatt, and Sarah Waters have tried their hands in writing neo-Victorian novels in the mode of historiographic metafiction. The present study focuses on John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, Graham Swift's Waterland (1983) and A. S. Byatt's Possession (1990). These novels are meant to represent a number of the most important ways of addressing the problematics of history in fiction; moreover, they are generally treated as outstanding historiographic metafictions since they self-consciously adopt the notion of history and simultaneously problematize historical understanding.

Different theories of literary criticism have been employed by critics for the analysis of The French Lieutenant's Woman: Joanne V. Creighton applies Reader-Response theory to the novel; Deborah Bowen adopts a narratological approach; Dwight Eddinsviews the novel in terms of its existentialistic overtones; focusing on Chapter 35 of the novel, Robert Siegle studies the metafictional implications of the novel based on the poststructuralist views of Barthes and Foucault; Silvio Gaggimakes a comparison between Fowles' fiction and the plays of Brecht and Pirandello with regard to their metafictional/metatheatrical tendencies; and according to Frederick M. Holmes, the metafictional layers of the novel cause the paradoxical trait of the narrator in blending the real and the artificial self-consciously. In Patricia Hagen's view, in its "construction of meaning," the novel follows "the processes of reading and writing" (439). Furthermore, she states that the fictional world of the novel is like our textual world in the sense that "we are all readers and writers of our lives, constructing and deconstructing our worlds in light of our experiences, knowledge, beliefs, conventions, and … needs" (439). She describes Sarah as a writer who writes her future by fictionalizing her past (444).

Mitchell maintains that instead of the Victorian faith in progress, Waterlandexpresses the "counter-narrative of doubt in progress and the desire for return" (178). In Chelsea Kern's view, because in Waterland the "factual" spaces are joined with "the magical and unreal" ones, the reader doubts the "integrity of historical truth" (2). In Melanie Ebdon's view, Waterland criticizes postmodernity by reconstructing "subjectivity," "realism" and the value of history (15). Robert K. Irish employs White's theories of postmodern historiography to discuss Waterland. Eric L. Berlatsky relates Tom Crick's historiography and his attempt to "blur[s] the distinctions between history and fiction" to Hayden White's theories of history (237). The researches of the present article agree with him in the novel's both criticism of and adherence to narrative. However, his idea that Waterland maintains the possibility of acquiring the past is not convincing. This is not the "historical data" that the narrative attempts to convey in Waterland but a fictional construct that gives a sense of solace to both the teller and the listener (248). Jonathan Mathew Butler highlights "mimetic significance" or reference/referentiality in historiographic metafictional novels like Waterland (5). He calls historiographic metafiction a kind of "mimetic fiction" that is a response to "the historical circumstances out of which it has emerged" (9). But the point is that, as he says, multiple

narratives may emerge out of “the same raw historical event” (9). The notion of “referent” in historiographic metafiction deviates from the conventional concept in that this type of fiction “self-consciously acknowledges its own existence as representation [. . .] of the referent by drawing attention to its inability to offer direct address to the ‘real’” (27). Furthermore, it is “its own contingent process of assigning meaning to a world” that is addressed in historiographic metafiction, the world that is knowable by means of “the discourses we construct to represent it” (27). Therefore, it does not value or decline the referent in the shape of “the empirical reality of historical events”; instead, it exposes “the textualized form in which knowledge of these events is [. . .] obtained” (29). As Butler puts it, the “transient and erratic” “Here and Now,” as the referent, has obsessed Tom Crick and because he cannot stabilize it, to compensate, he tells stories (29). In John Schad’s view, the grand narrative of history is already rejected in Waterland with its reference to the French Revolution, with Price’s agitation with regard to Tom’s historical accounts, and with Tom’s own deviation from the assigned syllabus. Seenhwa Jeon says that Tom vacillates “between memory and hope, between nostalgia and utopianism” (5). He calls Tom a modern allegorist who tells stories to “cope with the threat of the ‘end of history’” (42). In addition, Jeon contends that Tom’s reconstruction of his own past leads to recovering the lives of those who are marginalized in official history (42). Rufus Cook argues that Tom cannot get to “the complete and final version” of the story of his life because of his regressions and repetitions which, in turn, arise out of his entrapment within the symbolic order. In Del Ivan Janik’s view, Swift’s novels both adhere to and warn against the awareness of the association between history and the present time. Moreover, he argues that Waterland is “a manifestation of man’s need to tell stories to keep reality under control” (83). According to Ronald H. McKinney, Waterland both employs and subverts the diverse genres of the Victorian novel in Waterland: “the gothic novel, the family saga, the business saga, the detective story, and the provincial novel” (822). He argues that the novel is not pessimistic since it is dominated by “the art of loving and the making of fictions” that are the essential principles in histories (832). He further mentions that Swift’s life is full of “radical curiosity, which continually challenges the status quo without giving in to the illusion of being able to make radical progress” (832).

Shiller takes advantage of LaCapra's view to describe the discoveries of the past in Possession. According to LaCapra, the past is "not simply a finished story to be narrated but a process linked to each historian's time of narration" (qtd. in Shiller 547). Therefore, Shiller argues that the present researches of Roland and Maud prove to be determining factors in understanding the past but such understanding is inevitably partial. Possession, in Shiller's view, highlights the insufficiency of the documents and biographies in reconstructing the past and the issues "out of" these sources must also be taken into consideration (547). As a result, in this novel, the "historical 'truth'" of the past is not thoroughly discovered; instead, what we face is "interpretation" of the past (552). Furthermore, she states that this novel emphasizes "the process of attempting to assimilate historical data, and the necessity of literary and historical conventions to make a coherent and satisfying narrative out of the raw details of past lives" (552). Mitchell has studied a number of neo-Victorian novels – including Waterland and Possession –to expose their "representation of Victorian strategies of history-making" (178). He states that these neo-Victorian novels look back at the nineteenth century with a desire to materialize it by means of memory and with the literary text as the medium (178). In other words, these novels show the presence of the Victorian past in the forms of "textual traces" and "memory" (178). For Heilmann and Llewellyn, the fascination of the present world with "the materialist and expansionist cultural hegemony of nineteenth-century Britain in the popular imagination and public memory" is much more than what can be found in the neo-Victorian novels like The French Lieutenant's Woman and Possession (8). Describing the neo-Victorian characteristics of a novel like Possession, they point to the recurrent plots of "a misplaced, hidden, or disrupted legacy" and the attempt to recover the "broken lineages" (35). Moreover, there are the "familial records" within the ancestral house that used to belong to an alienated and betrayed woman (36). In addition, the characters of the present time acquire "a deeper level of self-knowledge" (36).

As demonstrated by this review of literature, in spite of the wide scope of studies on each of the novels, as far as the researchers of the present article know, the three novels have not been compared with each other in terms of their similarities and/or differences. The above-mentioned scholars have practiced different theories in their analyses of the novel but the relationship between its narrativization and historiographic strategy has not been fully explored. Therefore, the

present study will try to show the extent to which the selected historiographic metafictions incorporate the textuality of the past. In addition, the study attempts to address the similarities and/or differences among the novels in terms of the idea of history.

## 2. Postmodern Historiography and Historiographic Metafiction

The theoretical framework of the present study will be mostly based on Hayden White's notion of metahistory and Linda Hutcheon's explication of the concept of historiographic metafiction. This study aims to explore the significance of the employment of historiographic metafiction in a number of so-called neo-Victorian novels of post-1960s British fiction – John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, Graham Swift's Waterland and A. S. Byatt's Possession. The problem this article will address is related to different approaches toward the notion of history in post 1960s British fiction. There is a general assumption that postmodernism has lost its faith in the possibility of knowing the past; such a skeptical view is joined with the inevitability of the presence of the past in the present. Drawing on a hybrid of Victorian and postmodern techniques, these self-reflexive novels are shown to portray different outlooks toward the past and its significance in the present. An attempt will be made to shed light on how in these instances of historiographic metafiction, the authenticity of a realistically represented fictional world is questioned through exposing the fictionality of history-writing. Meanwhile, this article will highlight the extent to which each of the selected novels adheres to such questioning. The French Lieutenant's Woman, Waterland and Possession attempt both to depict language as a means by which historical truth is constituted and to show textual meaning to be indeterminate. However, this is done in different ways. By focusing on the selected works, the objective in this study is to shed light on the modality of these different ways of addressing the problematics of history in fiction.

Nietzsche asserts that "[t]here are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact" (qtd. in Brown 4). Likewise, in his historical narrative, the historian shapes the fact which is a representation of the event that has occurred. Postmodernism does not deny that events happened in the past; however, it denies the possibility of attaining the ultimate historical truth. Brown says that the most important reason for postmodernism's disbelief in empiricism's "certainty about the past" is that the past is depicted by

means of “narrative” (29). Like event and fact, the past and History are distinguished from each other in postmodern thought. Whereas the past is our remembrance, History is sublime because it is “untouchable, ultimately unknowable, and excruciatingly tantalizing as well as terrifying, for there resides Truth” (Elias 53). In Kate Jenkins’ words, History “in all its sublimity can never be grasped fully in narrative form” (qtd. in Brown 113).With reference to Derrida’s ideas, Jenkins states that understanding the past via the act of reading means that the past can be and must be read as a text (25). Therefore, in studying the past as a “text,” the postmodern historiographer looks for its impermanent possible meanings and not the past itself. In postmodern historiography, it is not the existence of the past event but consideration of the narrative representation as a means of understanding the past event that is challenged. Postmodern historiography is no longer dependent on definite concepts of “truth, objectivity and factualism”; instead, it focuses on how we gain knowledge about the past (Munslow 17-18). So, no longer does the historian seek truthful historical knowledge since, as Munslow puts it, “facts neither measure nor produce” such knowledge (65).

Following Nietzsche, Foucault and Barthes, in the 1970s, Hayden White opposed the scientific approach towards history. He is considered as the most prominent postmodern historiographer and regards history as a literary discipline. For White, it is the narrative structure of historiography that gives meaning to the past. He does not deny the existence of the past; however, in his view, since the past is devoid of order, there is no possibility of discovering it. In this way, our access to the past becomes restricted to a historical narrative whose ordering and meaning are imposed by the historian. For White, the past – History – and history are not the same and historiography is a literary enterprise; as a result, narrative form becomes the determining factor in understanding its data. In his view, because History, as a discipline, is not narrativized or structured, it is not possible to know it or present it. In other words, History is sublime. However, according to White, although not able to understand the world, we should not avoid writing about the past. Instead, he suggests that reflexive writing of the past shows our awareness of “the power of narrative to shape us ideologically as well as recognizing that the past we are construing in narrative is not reality,” as Munslow puts it (137). In fact, as Munslow also agrees, the quality of history would be improved if it were approached as literature (71). However, because historiography is never complete, it is not

possible for the past to be totally recovered and presented in the narrative. The point is that the narrative explanations do not reflect the ultimate reliable truth; therefore, White acknowledges relativity in every presentation of history (Jenkins, Refiguring 43). However, this does not mean that White devalues narrative; instead, for him, narrative is the focus of history (Munslow 66). It is only through the "explanatory power" of narrative that the historian can acquire historical understanding (Munslow 69).

Linda Hutcheon argues that Aristotle prioritizes poetry over history because of the historian's engagement with the particularities of the past and the poet's dealing with universalities (Poetics 106). Although Hutcheon admits there is a distinction between history and literature, in her view, they have "social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as well as formal techniques" in common in the sense that while literature "incorporate[s] social and political history," historiography, is "as structured, coherent, and teleological as any narrative fiction" (Poetics 111). She defines postmodern fiction or "historiographic metafiction" as the metafictional and self-reflexive fiction that problematizes history (Poetics 5). For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction installs and then withdraws what it is contesting in order to problematize "any bases of certainty (history, subjectivity, reference)" (Poetics 57). Therefore, in historiographic metafiction, "multiplicity and disparity" replace "narrative singularity" (Poetics 90). As far as postmodernism is concerned, knowing the world is possible only through our past and present "narratives" of it; likewise, historiographic metafiction does not deny the existence of the past; instead, it lays bare its inevitably narrativized nature due to our exclusively textual knowledge of the past (Poetics 128). With reference to White's challenge of the knowledge that is acquired through historical narrative, she says that historiographic metafiction paradoxically uses and problematizes both "the documentary sources" and "the narrative form of history" (Poetics 56). The novels discussed in this study expose such problematization in the sense that they simultaneously employ and question the authenticity of historical narratives. However, the point is that these novels differ in their treatment of the relationship between historiography and narrativization.

## 3. The French Lieutenant's Woman: Multiple Histories

As a neo-Victorian novel, The French Lieutenant's Woman rewrites the nineteenth century with a critical outlook towards both the Victorian past and the contemporary time. The novel's critical approach is reinforced by its historiographic metafictional techniques. In her definition of "historiographic metafiction," Linda Hutcheon points to the novels that are "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Poetics 5). On the surface, The French Lieutenant's Woman is the story of Charles and Sarah, the nineteenth-century characters whose life is rendered through the narrative of a narrator who makes use of the observation of an observer. Going through the story, the narrator intervenes from time to time to assert his ideas, make a comment or elaborate on a concept or a situation. Gradually the reader comes to understand that the story is less about Charles and Sarah than about story-telling and history. The point is that the storyteller's emphasis is upon the process of story-telling rather than the product which is the story of Charles and Sarah. Moreover, it is the authenticity of the narrativized history that is severely challenged in this novel. The novel is made up of several interwoven plotlines that are structured by diverse "writers" – Sarah, the impresario, and the narrator. Meanwhile, each of these writers takes the role of a historian who is not free from impositionalism, each with a different approach. Sarah fictionalizes her own past in order to authorize the Victorian present and satirize its inherent paradoxes. Like a writer of parody, she employs the very characters whose paradoxes she intends to subvert. In this process, she takes advantage of the practitioners of the two opposing ideologies of the Victorian Age, the Darwinian and aristocratic Charles and the puritan bourgeois Mrs. Poulteney. Her 'narrative' exposes the hypocritical stance of both. The twentieth-century impresario acts like an eye-witness who in order to reconstruct the past as it actually was, locates himself in the Victorian Age and accompanies the characters in their daily lives. But it is gradually shown that his account is not free from manipulation. And the narrator who emplots the impresario's reports of the 'events' to turn them into narrativized 'facts' explicitly exposes his own impositionalism and inauthenticity as a writer/historian by his heavily ironical accounts and by providing the reader with three endings to the story. Through his multiple endings, he devalues the comprehensive and logical consequences to highlight the role of writers/historians in representing the worlds. The storyteller takes the role of

a postmodern historian who in his portrayal of the events related to the fate[s] of Charles and Sarah, verifies the impossibility of recovering the past by means of narrative.

The researchers of the present article agree with Hutcheon in her differentiation between the narrator of The French Lieutenant's Woman and the twentieth-century observer who is present in the nineteenth century (Narcissistic 58). Hutcheon argues that the novel is structured upon the interwoven narratives of several writers – Sarah, the impresario, the narrator, and Fowles – whose narratives create the interwoven worlds of the novel (Narcissistic 57). Each of these "writers" writes the "text" of the past by means of his/her narrative. Sarah invents a fake past for herself in order to lay bare the hypocrisy of Victorian society. Like a writer of historiographer metafiction, she employs the very notions she attempts to subvert. So she makes use of Mrs. Poulteney and Charles, two representatives of religious and secular ideologies of the Victorian Age, to expose the deficient "truth" that they exhibit. As with the impresario, Fowles' narrator attempts to impose meaning and order on the events that are reported by this twentieth-century observer who puts himself in the nineteenth century and who is introduced by the narrator as "a person of curiosity" and "a local spy"; attributions which signify his intentionality (4). Later on, the narrator goes through the probably biased outlooks in the evidence that the observer has provided him with. He describes the observer as "the sort of man who cannot bear to be left out of the limelight, the kind of man who travels first class or not at all, for whom the first is the only pronoun, who in short has first things on the brain" (461). The observer, according to the narrator, "very evidently regards the world as his to possess and use as he likes" (462). The narrator further recounts the way that the observer changes the time to bring another ending about. He says that the events did not happen in the way that the reader had been "led to believe" because he – the narrator – has put them in a "detailed and coherent narrative" (339). He has emplotted the evidence – the impresario's account – to convey his critical views towards the Victorian Age and the present time. He uses Barthes' notion of "reality effect" which is the result of the claim of historical objectivity. He contends that he has not "broken the illusion" and the reality within which his characters live is as real as the one he has already broken since all reality is fictional; as a result, he says that he is not able to make his characters be fully under his control (97). He tries to problematize the reader's conception of reality by questioning the distinction between "real" and "imaginary" (97). In his view, even one's past

cannot be real since, in order to be turned into a book or an autobiography, it is fictionalized: “you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it”; moreover, “the real reality” is something we are “in flight from” (97).

Hayden White points to the matters of selection of the narrative form and emplotment of the accounts of the past on the part of the historians (Southgate 541). The narrator of FLW repeatedly imposes his presence upon the narrative through his intervening emplotment – although he introduces himself as “the kind of man who refuses to intervene in nature” (461). From time to time, he intervenes to mention his own ideas or experience, ask an ironic question, add some information, display his awareness of future incidents, correct his previous judgments, anticipate the reader’s reaction, problematize the reader’s conclusion based on his modern outlook, confess his doubt, lack of adequate knowledge, or limitations, provide the reader with a clue or a clarification of the setting, criticize his own way of writing, reinforce his own position as an author, or justify his way of narrativization. He even says that as an author, he is not possessed of full control over his characters; for instance, he refers to the part of the story in which Charles disobeyed his order to go back to Lyme Regis by going to the Dairy (96). Later on, he explicitly confesses that he has hidden something in his narration. When the narrator reveals the identity of the Rossettis, he says: “I will hide names no more” (456). In the last chapter, he admits that new characters must not be introduced at the end of the novels but he adds that the observer has appeared before in the train. The point is that in all these cases, his ironic tone reveals his heavy impositionalism that leads to distraction of the reader.

Although the narrator practices his power by his impositionalism, in some cases he acknowledges his own shortcomings. In chapter 13, the narrator says that he does not know who Sarah is. He says that everything there is the product of his imagination and if he claims that he is aware of what goes on in his characters’ thoughts, it is because conventionally “the novelist stands next to God” (95). Even if the novelist does not know everything, “he tries to pretend that he does.” But, as a novelist who lives “in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes,” he cannot be a traditional novelist (95). Then, he directly mocks the literary conventions of the Victorian Age like autobiographies, the characters who represent their authors, and the entitled chapters (95). Next, he points to the readers’ expectation of the author to make his “puppets” act realistically (95). He

says that in this part of the story, he intends to write like that: “Chap. Thirteen – unfolding of Sarah’s true state of mind,” but as a “novelist” and not a man in the garden looking up at Sarah, he is not permitted to follow her everywhere according to his own wish (96). He finds a shared contradiction among all novelists: “we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is” (96). He continues that novelists cannot plan the world of their novels since they know that “a world is an organism, not a machine,” so, in order to be genuine, a “created world” must not be planned by its creator; otherwise, it is “dead”: “It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live” (96). He refers to the part of the story in which Charles disobeyed his order to go back to Lyme Regis by going to the Dairy (96). He anticipates his reader’s reaction, too: “Oh, but you say, come on” (96). Then he claims that he is “the most reliable witness” (96). In his view, if he wants to show “real” characters, he has to give them “autonomy” and “freedom” (96). In making parallels between God and author, he defines God as “the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist” (96). He continues that even in the case of the most avant-garde novels, the author is still there to create, but the point is that he is not that “omniscient and decreeing” creator of the Victorian Age (97).

FLW revisits the Victorian Age to criticize its social and literary defects. In its revisiting of the Victorian Age, the novel simultaneously employs and subverts its social and literary conventions. It parodies the contradictions of the age that become visible to the reader by means of portrayal of the Victorians’ taste, their codes of behavior, and the way the progress of the age is shown. The narrator’s ironic account reveals his intentional concealment of the paradoxes of the age. The point is that irony plays an essential role in establishment of meaning in this text. So, in several situations, the characters say something that they do not believe in or do not act according to. The novel copes with the standards of postmodern historiography. It evades final ending, directly or indirectly conveys the impositional outlook of its historiographers, describes the way the past is emplotted and prefigured by the historian/narrator, and points to the shortcomings of narrative to recapture the past truthfully. In addition to portrayal of the contaminated nature of the source and historiography and the inevitably textual nature of the past, Fowles problematizes “narrative singularity” through offering multiple endings which address the failure of narrative to recover the past truthfully. The consequence is that the reader becomes aware of the limitations of

understanding the past as it really was as he faces three versions of the consequence of the story which signify the unstable implications of the past and not the past itself. The illusive and fictional nature of history causes the emergence of multiple truths. The novel does not deny the existence of the past event but creates a correspondence between the past event and its narrative representation.

## 4. Waterland: Why History?

In its historical self-consciousness, Waterland exposes the paradoxical union of the necessity of stories and the awareness of their fictiveness. As a historiographic metafiction, the novel blurs the boundary between history and fiction; therefore, while it overwhelmingly deals with the notion of history and provides the reader with several historical accounts, it problematizes the very historical accounts that it offers. In other words, it both criticizes and values history. Moreover, making no distinction between history and story, the novel necessitates the existence of story for understanding the world, knowing that every understanding is inevitably provisional. As a result, in order to address the limitations of understanding the past, the novel is also structured provisionally. As Tom oscillates between disrupting and privileging history, his narrative oscillates between the past and the present. Furthermore, the novel both destabilizes and supports the significance of narrative in understanding the world. It portrays history as a construct of narrative. It affirms that story gives meaning to the world and that narrative, in the shape of history or stories, guarantees human survival in the world. Therefore, while it highlights narrative as the only means by which one can make sense of one's past, it addresses its provisional nature. Moreover, despite his emphasis upon the necessity of stories and explanations, Tom comes to understand that acquiring a comprehensive outlook towards the world is impossible. So, like a postmodern historiographer, he does not distinguish between history and fiction; he accepts that history is fictional. He maintains that the meaning is attributed to the world by means of histories and fairytales, and in his metafictional seeking of history, he presents a mixture of private and world histories, along with the fairytales. His narrative covers different epochs, the IceAge, the Victorian Age, and the days of the loss of empire.

The limitations of historical understanding are shown from the very beginning of the novel as three meanings of the word "Historia" are offered in the epigraph and the point is that all three definitions are applicable to the story: "1. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story." Tom Crick both investigates the past and relates the stories of his past and present. Meanwhile, to access the past, he takes advantage of the evidences such as his grandfather's journal, his and the others' speculations, his parents' fairytales and stories, and the literal keys, but the ending proves to be provisional and inconsistent. Tom's narrative is composed of three episodes: the history of the Fenland that covers the span of time from the seventeenth century to the end of World War I; the period of his adolescence during which Dick murdered Freddie, Mary aborted her child, and Dick committed suicide; and the present time in the 1980s in which Mary has kidnapped a baby and Tom is forced to quit his job. These episodes are arranged in the same way that Tom describes history: "It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours."

In the process of reconstruction of the past, Waterland paradoxically highlights both the significance of the narrative and its fictionality. Tom Crick goes through the process of his acquaintance with history. He says that during his childhood period when he was afraid of the darkness, his mother used to invent history in the shape of stories (61). Later on, studying history at school, he still regarded history as a "myth," until "the Here and Now" informed him forcefully that he had become part of history and that "history was no invention but indeed existed" (62). As a result, he started studying history, and now after forty years he has recognized that "history is a yarn" (62). But, according to Tom, such fictionality of history is not its shortcoming; in fact, he necessities the presence of history/story for survival of both the teller, who needs to tell stories "to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales," and the listeners, here the children, "to whom, throughout history, stories have been told [. . .] in order to quell restless thoughts" (7). Therefore, he comes to understand that what he seeks to learn from history is "History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark" (62). In other words, being aware of the artificiality of history, man looks for meaning within it so that he may acquire a sense of solace. In Tom's view, "pity," "curiosity," and "fear" are the "tangled stuff" for making stories (248). He relates man's achievements in knowledge to the insatiability of curiosity and states that

the time that man's curiosity is gone, "that is when the world shall have come to an end" (203-04). In other words, as long as there is history, there is the world. He asks the children not to stop their curiosity: "Nothing is worse [. . .] than when curiosity stops" (206). Furthermore he states: "People die when curiosity is gone" (206).

Tom wishes to provide the students with "the complete and final version" of his life (8). The novel depicts the impossibility of the fulfilment of such a desire. Tom argues that the question "why" arises at a time of dissatisfaction with the present time and it is at this point that "history" begins because it changes the word "Why" to "If": "If only we could have it back. A New Beginning. If only we could return. . ." (106-07). He continues that "Historia," meaning "inquiry," makes us "learn [. . .] from our mistakes so it will be better, in future" (107). Therefore, due to "our pressing need to ask the question why" and due to our "sense of wrong," we need history (107). But the point is that the answer to the first why leads to the following whys so that we get to the question, "When-where-how do we stop asking why?" (107). In other words, "When are we satisfied that we possess an Explanation (knowing it is not a complete explanation)?" (107-08). He reiterates his idea that there is no end to the question why because "history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge" (108). In his view, history does not teach us how to get to "Salvation" or "A New World"; it only teaches us "the patient art of making do" (108). Moreover, such an attempt for explanation makes us aware of "the limits of our power to explain" (108). But it is "folly" to "ignore" history because "what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make-believe"; it makes us be "realistic" (108). Tom asks his students to continue asking "why": "Though it gets more difficult the more you ask it, though it gets more inexplicable, more painful, and the answer never seems to come any nearer, don't try to escape this question Why" (130). He adds that we may learn "how," "what," "where," and "when," but "will we ever know why?" (204).

Waterland is a historical novel that is about history. It covers the wide span of time from prehistoric to postmodern. Like a postmodern historiographer, Tom Crick recounts both the public and his own private histories and in this process demonstrates his inability to offer a well-made one. His accounts are full of regressions, contradictions, speculations and questions. Paradoxically, as a history teacher, he is unable to offer an ordered and logical historical perspective to his students. In

his investigation of the past, Tom relates the events happening centuries ago to the contemporary time; in other words, in his view, he shows the present condition to be the outcome of past happenings. But the point is that his own historical account does not show such continuity. He then goes through the functions of history and says that it is both the cause of man's survival and his acquiring of a realistic view. Coming to consider history as story, Tom relates it to the only way through which one can survive. He parallels man's position by the end of the world with that of Scheherazade whose sole reason of survival was her ability to tell stories. Utilizing fictional strategies for explaining the past events, Waterland refutes the modern notions of historiography with respect to progress. In fact, going through the story, the reader comes to regard the process of the formation and decline of the Atkinson Brewery as a metonymy of the rise and fall of the British Empire. From another perspective, similar to the arguments of postmodern historiographers, the concept of History as a discipline looks frightening to Tom since he sees no order in it; as a result, he attempts to impose order upon it through his stories. However, the reader comes to see that he is not successful in this process since gradually his stories tend to be more and more plotless and disorganized.

Waterland emphasizes the fictional aspects of historiography but, unlike FLW, it finds some healing functions in the relationship between history and fiction, in the sense that loss of the past is less regretfully treated than before. As a historiographic neo-Victorian fiction, the novel exposes the process of formation and decline of imperial England. The novel undermines the teleological and progressive views of history by means of the employment of the fictional strategies for historical explanations. In Tom's view, stories – and, subsequently, histories – originate from man's conception of truth as a chaotic and frightening notion that is devoid of meaning and order. So man tries to attribute order to the chaotic truth by means of stories. However, the poignant fact is that such illusive order is not permanent and the "waters return." Moreover, man needs to tell stories because "the here and now" is both empty and strange. Stories give him comfort amid the traumas he is doomed to experience in life. In addition, the novel highlights the constructed nature of both memory and history. He is preoccupied with the process of the remembrance of things past and not with the scientific product of historical survey. Like the River Ouse, the direction of memory and history is subject to change. The novel challenges modern historiography and its claim of

objectivity through presenting multiple narrative forms including private and public histories and fairytales that originate from the need to fill the "wide, empty space of reality." Tom says that he wants to fill the gap between him and the world with books (47). In the last phase of his attempt, he no longer treats history as a science; instead, he relies on his speculations. As a postmodern historian, Tom attempts to discern Dick's – and mankind's – origin, not through research, as the Enlighteners do, but by means of narrative. Ironically, the idea of progress is severely limited in the case of Dick who stands in opposition to the Darwinian notion of the progressive movement of mankind to the present perfect state in history.

## 5. Possession: Provisional History

As discussed in the previous parts, both The French Lieutenant's Woman and Waterland, using different approaches, problematize the authenticity of the referents and the objectivity of the author/historian and, as a result, the possibility of recapturing the past as it actually was. This part of the study tries to probe the way in which A. S. Byatt's Possession treats the notion of historical understanding with regard to the significance of the archive, the author/historian and the reader.

Byatt's knowledge of contemporary literary theories and Victorian literature enables her to portray past genres in a new form. She revitalizes the traditions of fairytale, romance, gothic and detective stories both to expose their hollowness and to challenge the dryness and superficial sophistication of postmodern literature. The highly intertextual nature of history is shown by means of numerous allusions to other literary works and genres of prose and poetry to lay bare its own fictionality. The way that Roland and Maud are connected to Ash and LaMotte is shown by frequent intertextual references which make Possession a pastiche of several literary genres including gothic, romantic and detective literature. The narrative includes different forms of poetry, fairytale, correspondence, and journal. With reference to The French Lieutenant's Woman, Patricia Waugh states that novels like this self-consciously parody the "structures of nineteenth-century realism and of historical romance or of fairy-tales"; however, they "defamiliarize such structures by setting up various counter-techniques to undermine the authority of the omniscient author, of the closure of the 'final' ending, of the definitive interpretation" (13). The significance of Possession lies in the fact that although it employs explicit metafictional techniques such as intertextual parody, intruding narrator

and commentary on the process of writing, it welcomes both the authority of the author and "the closure of the 'final' ending" (Waugh 13). As a metafictional novel, Possession thematizes the acts of reading and writing and offers the intrusive commentary of an author-like narrator – the author-narrator intrudes in the middle of the narrative in three parts of the story. In this way, it exposes the process of construction of meaning and, subsequently, its fictionality. Metafiction is directly related to intertextuality, the theory which makes infinite connections among texts. Intertextuality relates a text to other texts, including literary or social ones and proves the plurality of all the texts. From the very beginning, the subtitle "romance" gives the novel a metafictional overtone. Possession takes the middle ground between realism and romance in the sense that the medieval theme of quest is shown in a new form. In contrast to its realistic incidents and settings, the subtitle "romance" provides the novel with a romantic atmosphere; moreover, the subtitle eradicates any expectations of a realistic portrayal of life. The fictiveness of the world is foregrounded in the metafictional novels; likewise, the fictiveness of the novel is emphasized by the subtitle and the epigraphs to the novel:

"How build such solid fabric out of air?
How on so slight foundation found this tale,
Biography, narrative? Or, in other words,
'How many lies did it require to make
The portly truth you here present us with?' (Epigraph)

Possession starts with Roland Mitchel's discovery of a secret affair between Randolph Ash and a lady who is later identified as Christabel LaMotte. Accompanied by Maud Bailey, Roland starts an academic and detective investigation that leads to a noticeable alteration in the Ash and LaMotte scholarship. The "urgent," "unfinished" and "shocking" letters make him feel ready to acquire the truth of the past but the sublimity of the Truth seems terrifying to him (21). Roland's previously exclusive preoccupation with "the movement of Ash's mind," and now his dislike of the method of the biographers like Cropper, is replaced by his present obsession with "these dead letters" (25). Even later on, "Randolph's vanished body" – what he believed Cropper was busy with – acquires a significant role in his recognition of the past events (24-25). But such fascination does not last long.

Gradually, his "habitual pleasures of recognition and foresight" in reading Ash's work are replaced by his present "mounting sense of stress" as he reads the letters (145). Furthermore, identification of the true identity of the reader becomes significant to Roland. He specifies letters as "a form of narrative that envisages no outcome, no closure" (145). Moreover, because the letters do not tell stories – "because they do not know [. . .] where they are going" – narrative theories do not apply to them (145). In addition, letters are written for "a reader" and not for "the reader as co-writer" or "reader" (145). Roland understands that Ash's other correspondence – even his letters to his wife – seems to be "without urgent interest in the recipients" but these letters had been specifically written for LaMotte (145-46). As the rivals enter his academic quest, Roland comes to think that his possession of the letters is lost. Then, with letters of invitation coming from different universities in response to his article "Line by Line," he recognizes that the letters have paradoxically caused his distance from Ash although they have made him closer to his life (510). Feeling that he has lowered himself to the position of Cropper by being turned from a "reader" to a "hunter" and feeling that what he has found has "turned out to be a sort of loss," Roland starts to reread Ash's poetry full-heartedly (510). He even acquires the ability to compose poetry; therefore, he starts with history and ends with poetry (515). Maud also initially rejects the idea of LaMotte's fascination with Ash's poetry due to its "cosmic masculinity" (48); furthermore, she shows her lack of curiosity about LaMotte's life, objects or places. She argues that "it's the language that matters"; but, as she says, Roland has "stirred something up" (62). Roland and Maud go through several narratives but they notice shortcomings in each of them due to the reporter's misconception or lack of adequate knowledge. In Maud's view, there is always some crucial thing missing in biographies (100). To prove their suppositions, Roland and Maud juxtapose different, and sometimes overlapping, narratives together to acquire some common points. It is in Crabb Robinson's diary that Roland identifies Christabel LaMotte – he finds it a fault that it does not point to LaMotte's knowledge of Ash's poetry. Later on, Maud shows him a journal of Blanche Glover in which there is a reference to the breakfast that was mentioned in the diary. Roland is puzzled that in spite of the fact that Cropper has described Ash's holiday in detail, he has not guessed the presence of a companion. In Maud's view, only a textual critic could understand that because of the absence of a phrase like "Wish you were here" in Ash's letters to his wife (235). Reading the other correspondence that they find in Sir George Bailey's house, they gradually come to understand that Ash and LaMotte's

poetry was influenced by their romance. To attest to their speculation of Christabel accompanying Ash on his natural history expedition, Roland and Maud travel to Yorkshire where they go through the poets' works that had been composed during that time and find common images in their poetry; for instance, Roland observes and points to the effect of light as he is sitting near the pool and Maud tells him that exactly the same images are there in Melusina (287-89). They exchange their ideas after Roland reads Melusina and Maud reads Ash's poetry (290). In their investigation of the motivation of Blanche's suicide, whether or not it has had anything to do with Ash and Christabel's relationship, Roland and Maud think of the help of Beatrice Nest (236). In Ellen's journal which is shown to her by Beatrice, Maud reads two letters from Blanche to Ellen, based on which they assume that the evidence that Blanche had referred to was Ash's "stolen letters" (257). Maud seeks to understand the way in which LaMotte spent the time between her Yorkshire journey and her inquest by the police. In Brittany, Ariane Le Minier – who works with Leonora Stern on LaMotte – gives Maud a part of Sabine de Kercoz's journal which makes it clear that LaMotte had been living at her cousin's house during her months of pregnancy. However, there are still questions about the fate of the child, the way and the reason Blanche had been abandoned, the way Ash and LaMotte parted, and if Ash knew there was a child (457). With the archive that they acquire from Ash's grave, they are close to their final discovery of truth. The scholars know that they have to "reassess everything" because all Ash's post-1859 poems were influenced his affair with LaMotte (526). They feel they need to reconsider their perception of LaMotte as exclusively lesbian and also they need to reread her works (526-27). However, the 1868 postscript problematizes the state of certainty of their scholarship since while they acquire the buried letter that clarified the identity of Ash and LaMotte's daughter – the ancestor of Maud Bailey – they can never know that Ash had seen his daughter and also they can never have access to Ash's letter that was never delivered to Christabel.

Possession is a parody of postmodern theory and fiction. In its rewriting of the Victorian Age, Possession vacillates between the Victorian past and the present time by blurring the distinction between the two worlds. The novel draws parallels between the characters and the literary conventions of the Victorian Age and the contemporary time of the novel. In its exploration of the Victorian era, the novel goes through both the continuities and discontinuities of the present time

concerning that age. In comparison with the grandeur of literary figures of the Victorian Age, contemporary academics of literature are shown to be devoid of enthusiasm and freshness of mind. Unlike the passionate world of the Victorian lovers, the world of the academic lovers is shown to be lifeless and dry and it is the discovery of the past that makes their life lively. The richness of the Victorian past is shown in opposition to the dryness of the contemporary discourse. In other words, discovering the past, the academics whose passions have been dried by postmodern theories are revitalized. Roland and Maud come to lose their trust in literary theories as they notice the destructive role of deconstructionism on their feelings of desire and love and the power of passion in their Victorian counterparts. The point is that they become deeply involved with the Victorian Age. They are obsessed with the Victorian past due to their personal and professional motivations.

In order to make connections between the past and the present characters, the novel vacillates between Victorian and postmodern literary conventions. In terms of continuities, the novel moves away from postmodernism in Byatt's representation of the past due to its employment of the realistic conventions that represent Victorian fiction. In an age that values narrative uncertainty, she glorifies a literary type that seeks reality in fiction. In contrast with the spirit of the age, Byatt shows her adherence to the conventions of realism but, simultaneously, her portrayal of the convoluted time breaks the illusion of reality. She offers readers an appropriate closure: "coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (422). Moreover, there is a parallel between the religious doubts of the mid-Victorian era and the skepticism towards the historical truth on the part of the academics of the story.

As a novel made up of a number of genres and styles along with its textual self-reflexivity, the novel is identified as a postmodern one. The postmodern tendency of the novel lies in its imitation of postmodern conventions and its criticism of this mode. Byatt employs the very postmodern conventions that she subverts; in this way, the novel exposes the limitation of postmodern theories, specifically poststructuralism. She shows that postmodern literary theories, which dominate Roland's and Maud's mentalities, have brought about a distance between the reader and the text. Roland and Maud's conception of self is heavily influenced by poststructuralism, which devalues

subjectivity and distances man from his self. Roland comes to define "self" 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, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones" (459). Now he devalues the skepticism of the poststructuralists in contrast with the Victorians' faith in the self. Maud also thinks that in the postmodern age, there has been an alteration in man's trust in his own capabilities since the postmodern theories attribute illusive qualities to everything in the world (277). Being fed up with this trend, when Roland shows the letters to Maud, she also wishes to "know what happens next" (50).

In her agitation, Val says that Ash is dead and what he wrote will not improve their situation: "Forgive me if I don't care what he wrote in his Vico" (24). Ironically, such a seemingly simple-minded outlook becomes truth since it was not what Ash had written on Vico but his personal life that caused an improvement in their conditions, albeit in different ways. In Possession, Byatt questions both modernist and postmodernist historiography concerning the former's certainty in recovering the past as it actually was and the latter's rejection of any possibility of understanding the past. Through portrayal of the scholars' academic quest, Byatt suggests that a partial possession of the past is possible if both the textual and contextual narratives are investigated by means of different approaches of historiography. So Roland and Maud use their own textual studies, take advantage of their own speculations and the studies of different scholars of the poets such as feminists and biographers, visit the places the poets inhabited, take on the role of detectives, read the diaries of several people, and get to their final evidence, which is in Ash's grave. However, the postscript makes it clear that in spite of all their attempts, they never understood that Ash had visited his daughter and had written an undelivered letter to LaMotte.

In response to Roland's objection to her proposed system of studying the letters – that "they would lose any sense of the development of the narrative" – Maud says that today "narrative uncertainty" is valued (144). Byatt deviates from such a fashionable trend of the time by showing a sense of ambivalence towards narrative, in the sense that, unlike Fowles, Byatt does not dismiss the narrative as totally unreliable and fictional; rather, she foregrounds both the liability and referentiality of the narrative. She recommends that scholars fill in the inevitable gaps within the

narrative by adopting flexible approaches and techniques, meticulously studying different sources, making speculations, and even taking advantage of accidental chances. The morning after their accomplishment of their task, life for Roland and Maud smells “fresh and lovely and hopeful” although it accompanies “the smell of death and destruction” (551). For Byatt, revitalization of the dead authors brings forward “fresh” conceptions of their writings, “lovely” relationships between the readers, and “hopeful” views towards future disentanglements of further truths.

## 6. Conclusion

By blurring the distinction between historiography and fiction, the novels highlight the role of narrativization in depiction of past events. Along with their emphasis on the significance of the narrative as the only means through which historical understanding can be acquired –because narrativization imposes meaning and coherence on the chaotic events of the past – they expose its failure in leading to complete acquisition of the past since inevitably the past is both written and read as a text. In other words, in their portrayal of the textualized past and the process of acquiring the knowledge of the past, the novels question the authenticity of narratives in the truthful presentation of the past; meanwhile they show that history is not comprehensible without narrativization. The historian’s narrativization gives order to the chaotic past; however, such order is unavoidably accompanied by the historian’s impositionalism and intentionality and the result is the relativity of every historiography. In fact the novels self-reflexively expose both the explanatory power of narrative and the reality-effect that it conveys. As historiographic metafictions, the novels lay bare the exclusively narrativized nature of historical understandings by their simultaneous self-reflexivity and historicism; they both employ and subvert narrativized history through offering multiple or inconsistent narratives to challenge the claims of its truthfulness. While in these three novels the past is shown to be inevitably textualized by the imposition of the historian or the narrator, the extent to which each of the novels addresses such textuality and the possibility of acquiring the past differs from one to another. In the case of The French Lieutenant’s Woman, this problem becomes extreme and the past is shown to be directly written by the hegemonic ideology of the past and the present. The result is that the truthful recovery of the past is totally impossible. As with Waterland, the novel probes the necessity of reading and writing the past for the individual

who faces the hardships of “the here and now.”The frequent contradictions in Tom Crick’s narrative/historiography convey both the impossibility of acquiring truthful historical explanation and the necessity of the attempt to understand the past. For Tom, and Swift, the process of historical investigation causes man to be away from the pressures of the present time, what Tom calls the “Here and Now.” The difference between FLW and Waterland lies in the fact that in the latter, narrative becomes a means of escape while in the former it becomes the instrument of entrapment. In FLW, Charles is entrapped within the historiographical endeavor of Sarah but in Waterland, it becomes the only thing left to Tom to be attached with and find solace.

Possession adopts a different outlook by showing an ambivalence concerning the totally constructed nature of the past. In Possession, decoding of many mysteries of the past is possible if several strategies of investigation are taken into consideration. As a manifestation of the paradoxical nature of postmodernism, for some neo-Victorian historiographic metafictions, A. S. Byatt’s Possession for instance, rewriting the Victorian past is not exclusively text-centered anymore and they return to empirical and referential historiography that is produced by an author. In its rewriting of the Victorian Age, Possession restores the position of the author through portrayal of the process of writing history and the limitations that the author / historian faces. In other words, the novel shows a renewed interest in the author which concerns the process of authorship together with attention to the limitations of compromised writing. Poststructuralism’s adherence to the idea of “the death of the author” is criticized in favor of the glorification of the author in Victorian literature. Byatt reacts again the skepticism of contemporary theory, about the controlling power of the author in historical or fictional texts. Byatt is in line with Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in their conception of the author as not the only source of the creation of meaning and in their emphasis on the birth of the reader. But she does not go to the extremes that poststructuralists do in their postulation of “the death of the author.” Opposing the Barthesian notion of the death of the author, Possession reclaims the authority of the author and the process of writing; furthermore, it explores the problems that an author faces in the act of writing, in his construction of his fictional work. The epigraphs signify the presence of an organizing author that directs the attention of the reader from the text to himself. Moreover, the characters within the narrative come to enjoy reading the lives of the “dead authors” who are figuratively brought back to

life. In fact, the authority of the author is reclaimed in this novel. Possession further rejects poststructuralist indeterminacy through its exhibition of a new interest in the pleasure of reading. For Byatt, both reading and writing can direct one to a clearer understanding of the world. Although their age, in Maud's words, values narrative uncertainty, Possession deviates from such value by insisting on the significance of the narrative of the author. The originator of meaning is of significance to Byatt. As far as the neo-Victorian tendency of the novels is concerned, The French Lieutenant's Woman shows its critical approach towards Victorian novels and conventions. Waterland, although it does not locate its main setting in the Victorian Age as Fowles' and Byatt's novels do, shows the influence of the Idea of Progress of the Victorian Age upon the present time. Possession, again with ambivalence, does not stand in complete opposition against the age. Although Byatt criticizes the anti-feminine society of the time, she nostalgically views the pleasure that the reader was provided with due to the fictional conventions of the age. However, generally speaking, historiographic metafiction lays bare the process of construction of the past. Likewise, by means of the employment of historiographic metafictional techniques, these neo-Victorian novels expose the artificiality of the Victorian Age.

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