

REMARKABLE DEBUT NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF POSSESSION



A. S. BYATT

THE SHADOW
OF THE SUN

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY THE AUTHOR

A HARVEST BOOK

A. S. BYATT

THE SHADOW
OF THE SUN

A NOVEL

A HARVEST BOOK
HARCOURT BRACE & COMPANY
SAN DIEGO NEW YORK LONDON

Introduction copyright © 1991 by A. S. Byatt
Copyright © 1964 by A. S. Byatt

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording,
or any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing
from the publisher.

Requests for permission to make copies of any part
of the work should be mailed to: Permissions Department,
Harcourt Brace & Company, 8th Floor,
Orlando, Florida 32887.

Originally published in Great Britain
by Chatto & Windus Ltd. in 1964 as *Shadow of a Sun*.
First published in the United States
by Harcourt, Brace & World in 1964 as *Shadow of a Sun*.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-077682
ISBN 0-15-681416-1

Printed in the United States of America

First Harvest edition 1993

A B C D E

INTRODUCTION

This novel was published in 1964, when my two elder children were four and three years old, but it was written, at least the first draft, when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge between 1954 and 1957. It is the novel of a very young woman, a novel written by someone who *had* to write but was very unsure whether she should admit to wanting to write, unsure even whether she ought, being a woman, to want to write. It was written in libraries and lectures, between essays and love affairs. I remember getting the idea for it during one of John Holloway's lectures on D. H. Lawrence, and scribbling busily, so busily that the lecturer looked fixedly at what must have seemed to him an earnest female acolyte and remarked sharply 'You don't need to take all that down. It's not *that* interesting.' I have no idea what he was talking about, but the novel does have its ideas about what was and wasn't interesting about Lawrence, in Leavis's Cambridge.

Reading it now, or skimming it and remembering it, I re-experience a kind of fear. I didn't want to write a 'me-novel' as we scornfully labelled them then, literary sophisticates, inexperienced human beings. But I had the eternal first novelist's problem. I didn't *know* anything – about life, at least. I remember thinking out the primitive first idea of it, which was that of someone who had the weight of a future life, amorphously dragging in front of her, someone whose major decisions were all to come, and who found that they had got made whilst she wasn't looking, by casual acts she thought didn't impair her freedom. That the battle fought itself out between sexuality, literary criticism, and writing, was inevitable. The way in which it shaped itself was more instinctive.

My problems were both human and literary. The human problems were to do with being an ambitious woman, in the English version of the world of Betty Friedan's *feminine mystique*.

We wanted marriage and children, we wanted weddings and romantic love and sex, and to be normal. ('Normal' is a word my characters puzzle over in book after book, a word dated now, full of ancient pressures to conformity, backed by a crude psychoanalytic chatter.) We had fought, much harder than the men, who outnumbered us eleven to one, to be allowed to study at Cambridge, and we were fatally torn, when thinking of our futures, by hopes of marriage, and hopes of something, some work, beyond getting to university at all. Men could have both, work and love, but it seemed that women couldn't. No woman of my generation would have expected any putative husband to consider her work prospects when making his own decisions. I myself went on to do academic research, and had my grant taken away when I married. Men in my position had their grants increased, to provide for their households. I always knew, as my heroine didn't, that I must contrive to *work* (to think, to write). It is only now, looking back, that I see how furtive, how beleaguered, how publicly *improper*, I imagined this contriving was going to have to be. I tried to write a thesis at Oxford under Helen Gardner, who believed, and frequently said, that a woman had to be dedicated like a nun, to achieve anything as a mind. I didn't want to be, and wasn't capable of being, an unsexed mind. I meet women now who work in different places from their husbands, and meet at weekends, to talk, and I envy them what I believe to be their certainty that they have a right to this. It was appallingly confusing, the battle to win scholarships, the closed future after them.

My own mother had herself studied English at Cambridge, and I might, in the 1960s, have felt I should have written about the generations of women who faced the same problems. As it was, I avoided approaching her perpetual rage, depression, and frustration, which were, in fact, the driving force that made sure none of her daughters became housebound. We wanted 'not to be like her' and I am only now, some years after her death, beginning to dare to try to imagine what went on in her inner mind. I wrote a novel about a girl with an ideal and unapproachable father, who, being male, could have what she and I felt we perhaps ought not to want, *singlemindedness*, art, vision. Henry Severell has little or nothing to do with my father –

what they have in common is an incapacity, usual enough in the hardworking man, to notice what is going on inside others.

Henry Severell is partly simply my secret self, someone, as a man I was in love with once said to me who didn't 'need drugs or anything because you've got mescaline in your blood, so to speak.' Someone who saw everything too bright, too fierce, too much, like Van Gogh's cornfields, or Samuel Palmer's overloaded magic apples, or the Coleridge of the flashing eyes and floating hair, or the Blake who saw infinity in a grain of sand. Or, in some less satisfactory, and more corrupt and dangerous aspects, the sunworshipping Lawrence. This vision of too much makes the visionary want to write – in my case – or paint, or compose, or dance or sing. The other thing I wrote at Cambridge, over and over, was the story of Cassandra who was loved by the sun god, also Lord of the Muses, and wouldn't give in to him, so couldn't speak, or not to be believed by anyone. Female visionaries are poor mad exploited sibyls and pythonesses. Male ones are prophets and poets. Or so I thought. There was a feminine mystique but no tradition of female mysticism that wasn't hopelessly self-abnegating. There is no female art I can think of that is like what I wanted to be able to do. Virginia Woolf is too full of nervous sensibility. All strung up, like my mother, it occurs to me as I write.

My mother's background, which she had rejected, was non-conformist and Puritanical. The best thing that had happened to her was English literature, but in her misery she was suspicious of it, tended to dismiss artists gloomily as exploiters, self-indulgent, frivolous. In some way these suspicions became connected in my mind, at that time, with Dr Leavis's moral ferocity which dismissed all literature but the greatest, which was great for *moral* reasons. He could show you the toughness of a sentence, the strength and the grace of it, the way another one failed and betrayed itself, but you paid a terrible price for this useful technical knowledge. It went without saying in his world, as later in Helen Gardner's, that anything you wrote yourself would fall so woefully short of the highest standards that it was better not to try. What writing was for was to be taught, in order to make the world better, more just, more discriminating. In his shadow his pupils, would-be critics and

would-be poets and novelists alike shrivelled into writing-blocks. A good kind of teacherly moral seriousness flourished. It went in that place in those days with what I experienced as a good kind of moral classlessness – my friends were not angry young men, the best of them were just sure that the sillinesses of the British Class System were withering into irrelevance. They were the meritocracy, and the literature class was their pulpit, in schools, in evening classes, in colleges. But there were others who felt aggressive, scornful, assertive of 'working-class' values.

Oliver comes out of that – someone with a chip, who can think, who is thinking, who makes too much of literature in one way, and doesn't understand its too-bright aspect. He represents I suppose, if I'm seeing the novel as an allegory of my own life, which it isn't, of course, it has its own – he represents a kind of public vision of what I was about, a scholar, a critic, a *user* of literature, not a maker, a natural judge. In all my novels there are characters whose thoughts the reader shares and those whose thoughts are opaque, who are seen from outside. Oliver is one of the latter, the Other. He would have been the hero of any male version of this story, l'homme moyen sensuel, suspicious of Henry's wilder edges, guilty about his wife and the girl, but essentially 'decent.' This novel doesn't see him quite that way. It is afraid of him, though I only understand now how much.

What I said at the time was that the novel was about the paradox of Leavis preaching Lawrence when if the two had ever met they would have hated each other. It was about the secondary imagination feeding off, and taming, the primary – to use Coleridgean terms, since the one person I was sure I admired and loved at that time was Coleridge.

I had awful problems with the form of the novel. I had no model I found at all satisfactory. I should say now that the available models, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster, Woolf, were all too suffused with 'sensibility' but that I disliked the joky social comedy of Amis and Wain considerably more than I disliked 'sensibility'. I know that there is a considerable stylistic influence from *Bonjour Tristesse*, which I read in

French the summer before Cambridge, and which is against sensibility, and also concerns final decisions made casually and by accident. Between the first Cambridge draft and the final one, made in Durham in 1962-3, I had read Proust and discovered Iris Murdoch, both of whom combine a kind of toughness of thought with a sensuous awareness that is part of their thought. I had also written a partial draft of *The Game* which is about the fear of the 'woman's novel' as an immoral devouring force. But the underlying shape of *The Shadow of the Sun* is dictated by Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann, and a vague dissatisfaction with this state of affairs.

There is also Lawrence, whom I cannot escape and cannot love. His background is something I know, better than Leavis did, having been brought up in the north midlands as he was, of mixed working-class and intellectual lower-middle-class stock, with low church Christianity for myth and morality, with a terrible desire for something *more*. I brooded and brooded about how Lawrence cheated with Birkin, who is only explicable if he is Lawrence and a driven artist (i.e. someone who has to *make* something) but who remains a school inspector driven by a need for sexual honesty and personal freedom. Anna is a descendant of Birkin, a portrait of the artist with the artist left out. I learned from Lawrence that you can stop the action of a novel and move it into another dimension with the vision of a place, or an event, or a ceremony. But I couldn't love the man who wrote the *Plumed Serpent* and I couldn't condone the God of Leavis's creed of wholesomeness and wholeness, partly because I was a woman, and partly because the two didn't in fact coincide, the priest and his creed, the God and his creed. He is violent and savage, as Proust is not, and coercive, as Proust is not, and altogether Proust has more to teach on every page, but is not close to my blood, as Lawrence is. I choose the words advisedly.

I did not know, when I chose my title, just how powerful a metaphor, or myth, personal and universal, I was tapping. I loved the poem by Raleigh, *False Love*, and I thought the verse I chose as an epigraph was a wry comment on the female belief in, or illusion of, the need to be 'in love' which was the danger which most threatened the autonomy of my heroine. All those

desiderata of the feminine mystique, the lover, the house, the nursery, the kitchen, were indeed a 'goal of grief for which the wisest run' and my mother was there to prove it, saying frequently 'What I hope for you is that you will be as happy as your father and I have been.' 'A substance like the shadow of the sun' was a good phrase, and more than that. Coleridge saw the human intellect as a light like the moon, reflecting the light of the primary consciousness, the Sun. My Anna was not even a reflected light, she was a shadow of a light only, who had partial visions in clouds (like the *Dejection Ode*) or stormy moonlight, or the glare of Cambridge's blood-coloured street-lighting. I feared that fate.

The novel was finished when I was a very desperate faculty wife in Durham. I had two children in two years – I was 25, and thought I was old, 'past it'. I was surrounded by young men who debated in an all-male Union from which the women students were excluded, though there was nowhere else for them to meet. I was lonely and frightened, and Cambridge, with its equal talk, and its flirtations, and above all its *library* and *work* seemed like a dream of the earthly Paradise. I began contriving – I sat rocking my son with one hand in a plastic chair on the table, and wrote with the other. I had a cleaning-lady, and ran across the Palace Green to the University Library for the hour she was there to write, fiercely, with a new desperation. The children were human and beautiful and I loved them. Anna and her vague fears took on a useful distance. My husband paid for the heaps of manuscript to be typed, and I sent them, at John Beer's suggestion to Chatto and Windus.

I was invited to lunch by Cecil Day Lewis in the Atheneum. Goddess Athene over the door, women confined to the dark basement, affable poet murmuring 'boarding house food, boarding house food' and swapping quotations from Yeats. Outside on the pavement, in brilliant sunlight, he said 'This has been most enjoyable' and I gathered up all my courage and said 'Yes, but will you be going to publish it?' He laughed at me, and said that of course he would, but the title would sound better if it was 'Shadow of a Sun' and not, as I had it 'The Shadow of the Sun.' I would have agreed to anything, then. Now, I should like to restore my original title. It is more what I meant, and I prefer

its grittiness to the mellifluousness of Day Lewis's version. The sun has no shadow, that is the point.

You have to be the sun or nothing.

What I write is heliotropic. I don't think I knew that when I chose my title, despite being already involved with Cassandra and her inability to contain or transmit molten light. My unfinished Ph.D thesis was partly about the neoplatonic creation myths, where the Sun is the male Logos, or Nous, or Mind, that penetrated inert Hyle, or matter, or female Earth, and brought it to life and form. This is both exciting, because in a way physically true – life does depend absolutely on light – and depressing because false in its analogies – there is nothing intrinsically male about the sun, or female about the earth. There is a Lawrentian version of this in *Sun*, where a city woman bathes naked in Mediterranean sunlight and feels power pouring into her, removing her from the scope of her grey, timid, city husband. This is powerfully moving at one level, at least to a sun-worshipping winter-light-deprived depressive like me. Lawrence's sun shines out with gold and blue and white fire. But 'he' is also 'like a big shy creature' and the woman is convinced that he '*knew* her in the cosmic carnal sense of the word.' Her desiderated state is blind wholesome passivity. There is something also powerfully repellent about Lawrence's sexual imagery for what the sun is doing to the woman.

And then there is the question of the moon, the silver, cold savage moon, a purely reflected light, usually female in Western mythologies.

My subsequent novels all think about the problem of female vision, female art and thought, using these images (amongst others, and not without interest in the male too). In *The Game* I called the character who had taken Helen Gardner's monastic advice Cassandra, and she, like Anna, saw moons through glass. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, the imagery became complicated. The helpless visionary who saw too much light was male and a mathematician. The power figure was female, Queen Elizabeth I, who presides over the pale world of her successor, all ruddy and shining. Elizabeth wrote a poem which is very close to

Raleigh's *False Love* – 'My Care is like my Shadow in the Sunne – Follows one flieing, flies when I pursue it –'. But she was mythologised by her poets and courtiers as a complex virgin moon goddess, not only, as Frances Yates pointed out in *Astraea*, the queen and huntress chaste and fair, Diana, but the Eastern goddesses of earth and harvest, turret-crowned Cybele, Astarte. Because she was born under Virgo, and because Virgo is a high summer sign, she goes with harvest and plenty, she carries sun-ripened corn, she brings in the Golden, not the Silver Age. Raleigh apostrophised her in *The Ocean to Cynthia* as the goddess drawing all to her, like the tides. The novel includes a parody of the comical and magical chapter in *Women in Love* where Birkin apostrophises the full moon, reflected in a pond, 'Cursed Astarte, Syria Dea' and breaks up her fullness with stones, only to see it reuniting, pulling itself together again into wholeness.

There is more power in this image, but it is still on condition of being virginal and moony, reflected if pulling tides.

In *Still Life* the central figure turned out to be Vincent Van Gogh, rather to my surprise, a whole-hearted sun-driven, light-driven maker (but who also had problems about sexuality and work.) Like Cassandra he was mad with too much light, but he got something done, he made something. In *Possession*, where there are two poets, both of whom can and do write, and can and do feel sexual passion, even if tragically, the sun becomes quietly female for both of them. This is because I had noticed – to repay debts – that the sun is female in Tolkien, and this made me remember that in my earliest and first-loved book, *Asgard and the Gods*, the Sun Chariot is driven across the sky by a goddess. In Norse and in German the sun is female. My poets both quietly accepted the personification, destroying the old Nous-Hyle creation myths without even shouting about it.

In writing this introduction to a thirty-year old book, I have realised something else I have never thought out before. The visual image that always went with the idea of 'The Shadow of the Sun' was that of Samuel Palmer's Cornfield with the Evening Star – an image I now associate with Van Gogh's Reaper, working his way through a seething furnace of light

and white-gold corn. The Palmer is nocturnal, warm but bright, lit by a reflected moonlight which nevertheless contains the partial sickle within the possibility of a complete circle of light. I see suddenly that images of harvest are also an intricate part of my private-universal imagery. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Sun* I read a wonderful article in the *Manchester Guardian* about the turbulences in ripe corn, and incorporated it into Henry Severell's vision of harvest fields, including several words I'd only learned from there, such as the 'awn' of the barley (which caused a farmer my mother knew to say he liked the book, the language was accurate, it was clear I knew about agriculture.) I think I was also partially remembering the magical scene in *The Rainbow* where Will and Anna meet in moonlit cornfields, which are a kind of creative paradox. For the ripeness and the growth of the corn, the harvest, are brought about by the heat and light of the sun, and yet here they are seen in this milder, darker, colder light, which I think I did take, at that time, for an image of women's creativity. I wanted my harvest, both in my life and in my work, and I was afraid that my light was a lesser one, a cold one, that could only mildly illuminate, however hauntingly. But I did go on from there, to Queen Elizabeth as Corn Goddess, to Van Gogh's Death the Reaper working happily, to a poem in *Possession* by Randolph Henry Ash about the Norse Creation myth, in which the light that gives life to the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, is a *female* sun. And in his poetry too Ash accepts that the 'golden apples' of the underworld dark goddess Persephone, are, according to Vico, the corn that springs from the furrow. It is interesting to reflect, looking back at those first suns, moons and corn how instinctively they were found, how long, although I had all the material for doing so, they took to understand and work out.

A. S. Byatt
1991

PART ONE

ONE

THE HOUSE WAS in waiting; low, and still, and grey, with clean curtains in the long windows, and a fresh line of white across the edge of the steps. They had repainted the door in the spring, a soft colour, between blue and grey, which seemed to retreat coolly before the sparkle of the wide lawns under the sun. It was very hot; the air hung, rising and shivering in little fountains over the hedges and the gateposts, snaking in busy rivers across the lawns, and curving round past the steps into the shadows, where it suddenly became invisible again. The roses, massed tidily in beds upon and around the lawns, were damp with it, the petals weighed softly against each other where yesterday they had been crisp, standing out as though they were sugared. But the grass, greener here than at the back of the house where it was less shadowed, was violent; it thrust itself into the sun in neat metallic ranks, its blades shorn away and the fine planes of it catching the light, throwing it about on the lawn like crossed threads of spun glass, silver, green and white. There were no daisies; one of their minor tidinesses was this expanse of lawn, formal in front of the formal house. At the back, where some nineteenth-century owner had added an untidy terrace with a verandah, and where they played croquet or badminton all summer, there were hundreds of daisies and a thriving patch of plantains. But it was here at the front, here in the unbroken order of house and garden and drive, that the waiting was apparent – a certain tension in the placidity, the stiffening of the formation before the attack. It was that time between lunch and tea, when everything is very still, and heavy enough to be sleepy; but here, outside in the silence, the brilliance of the sun gave an extra sharpness, an extra clarity to everything, made it all so definite that it had the brittle quality of a mirage, and it was somehow only too easy to feel, given the transitory lucidity of English sunshine, that it might shatter

like a mirage, might flake away and dissolve under pressure, into something grey and ordinary and dispersed.

In the hall, inside, Caroline Severell stood over a white bowl of flowers, and pushed delicately at the blue spike of the tallest delphinium. Her mind ran wordlessly over her preparations; the little tablets of soap, the clean towels, the lavender bags in the drawers, the carafe, the bowl of roses in the spare room followed each other, rapid little pictures across her inner eye. She had collected and disposed of all the books which her husband had scattered across the drawing room, along the landings, in the bathroom. It was only a matter of time until he discovered their loss, and reclaimed them to pile them up again in some more awkward place, but by then the arrival at least would be over. She had removed her daughter's riding crop and boots from the kitchen table, a pile of her dirty underwear from the bathroom floor, two filthy Aertex shirts from the banisters where they were hanging – this with a certain distaste – and her son's electric railway from under the dining table with some compunction – she saw, after all, that it was reasonable for him to need space to play with it – he made so little mess for a boy of his age – but visitors were visitors, and the trains could come out again later. The dinner was prepared, the tea-tray was set, and the kettle was filled and ready on the stove. Caroline thought coolly that that was all; she gave a final organizing twitch to the stems of the flowers, already bitten securely by the wire mesh in the bowl, and untied the strings of her apron. It had all been managed very neatly.

She looked at her watch. Three ten. Time was slipping away. There was an unwritten rule that her husband was *never* to be disturbed when he was in his study, which Caroline took pride in keeping, but she was aware without bothering to wonder how, that he had entirely forgotten that he had promised to fetch the visitors from the station, which was some miles away. She went to hang her apron in the kitchen, to give him time, to make quite certain, and then came back through the house and knocked firmly on the study door.

There was no reply, but she had not expected one. She waited a moment for politeness' sake, and then walked in.

The study, for a study, was very large, and full of light, which

flooded in through a large french window which opened onto the terrace at the back. It had nothing of the dark leather and silver and tobacco comfort of the gentleman's study, no steel cabinets, on the other hand, no deliberate austerity, not even the threadbare untidiness of the don's room, with paper everywhere, and stones collected on odd beaches and brought home because they were interesting. If it had any character, it was that of the outgrown schoolroom – books, on shelves, all round the walls, not glassed in, a huge, square ugly desk in light wood, a wooden armchair, and a desk chair. There was a typewriter on the desk, and a jug of flowers, arranged by Caroline, on one of the book-cases. There was a large fireplace, and a sage green carpet, slightly silky, and nothing else remarkable but space – clear, uninhabited, sunlit space. The study was the centre of the house, and round what went on in it everything else was ordered – by Caroline, because she had decided that this was how her life should be, by the children because they had never supposed that it could be otherwise, by friends and visitors because they were almost always in awe of the idea of Henry Severell, and assumed that his needs must be different from and more pressing than those of others, a feeling which Caroline did her best to encourage. Whether Henry himself was aware of all the protecting and arranging that went on, whether he expected it or took it for granted or never noticed it at all, it was difficult to tell: he spent most of his time, most of the year, closed in the study, and what he did there was his own business. He was not a communicative man.

Caroline looked automatically for him where he always was, at his desk under the window, and felt a tiny flicker of apprehension when she located him, standing in the opposite corner, doing nothing, and looking as though he had been doing nothing for some time. He looked down on her, and blinked, but did not offer to say anything. Caroline looked back at the desk again, and saw that it was unusually littered – with books, with great piles of frayed manuscript, with boxfiles dusty and bulging with notes. She went across, and turned over one or two of the books. Bishop Berkeley's *Siris*, Boehme, Coleridge's *Notebooks*, *Aids to Reflection*, Henry More's *Conjectura Cabalistica*, Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal*. Then she turned back