

REVISITING NORSE MYTHOLOGY: THE CASE OF A.S. BYATT'S *RAGNARÖK*

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ABSTRACT. *Revisiting Norse Mythology: The Case of A.S. Byatt's Ragnarök.*

In 2011, British author and Booker-prize winner A. S. Byatt publishes *Ragnarök*, her rewriting of the Norse myth about the death of the gods. Seen through the eyes of a thin child who is forced to witness the terrors of World War II, the story and characters of the Norse myth are reinterpreted and retold in accordance with the child's vision, imagination and feelings. The paper here focuses on the association of the Scandinavian imaginary with specific moments in A. S. Byatt's personal history, and highlights the use of certain patterns and ideas that are present in both, trying to pinpoint the elements that make possible the transformation of the mythical into the actual. The aim of this study is to explore the evolution of the mythological events as they are rewritten in Byatt's 21st century book, in close connection with the main character's personal development. To that end, the paper will also dwell upon the comparison drawn by Byatt herself between the Norse and the Christian mythological imaginary – a vision filtered through the eyes and thoughts of the focalizer of the text, the thin child.

Keywords: *Ragnarök, A. S. Byatt, reinterpretation, Norse myths, death of the gods*

REZUMAT. *Explorarea mitologiei nordice: cazul cărții Ragnarök, de A.S. Byatt.*

În 2011, autoarea britanică A. S. Byatt, câștigătoare a Premiului Booker, publică *Ragnarök*, o rescriere a mitului scandinav în care se vorbește despre moartea zeilor. Privite prin ochii unui copil slăbuț care e forțat să fie martorul

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ororilor celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial, povestea și personajele din mitologia nordică sunt reinterpretate și repovestite prin filtrul viziunii, imaginației și sentimentelor copilului. Articolul de față se concentrează pe asocierea imaginarului scandinav cu momente specifice din istoria personală a lui A. S. Byatt, și evidențiază anumite tipare și idei care sunt prezente în ambele cazuri, încercând să identifice acele elemente care fac posibilă transformarea miticului în real. Obiectivul acestui studiu este acela de a explora evoluția întâmplărilor mitologice așa cum sunt ele rescrise în cartea din secolul al 21-lea a lui Byatt, în strânsă legătură cu dezvoltarea personală a personajului ei principal. În acest scop, lucrarea va insista și asupra comparației făcute de Byatt însăși între imaginarul mitologic nordic și cel creștin – viziune filtrată prin ochii și gândurile focalizatorului textului, copilul cel slăbuț.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Ragnarök*, A. S. Byatt, reinterpretare, mituri nordice, moartea zeilor

Throughout the history of humanities and arts, Norse mythology has proven to be an invaluable source of inspiration for creators and artists of all types, from musicians such as Richard Wagner to 21st century writers and filmmakers. All those artists have explored the Scandinavian imaginary in an attempt to search for lost or half-revealed stories, images, emblematic figures and, eventually, restore, reconstruct or reinvent a space and a culture that have fascinated both themselves and their audience, starting from the various bits and pieces they did find. Norse gods and goddesses, giants, magical trees and animals, all converge to the zero point that defines Scandinavian imaginary as challenging and unique – the moment the whole world (irrespective of their status, mortals and gods alike) comes to an end, or *Ragnarök*.

Byatt's *Ragnarök* is one of her least examined texts, with studies that have focused either on motif differences between *Ragnarök* and the Christian *Book of Revelations* (Wijianto 2020, 50-63), or on ecopoetics (Cheira 2020, 44-67). Since this paper intends to analyse A. S. Byatt's intertextual lines drawn in the 21st text as a postmodern and personal(ized) interpretation of the old myth, a clarification of the terms *rewrite*, *revisit*, *reinterpret* used in association with it may be in order. Although, in most contexts, they may be considered interchangeable, the terms above could imply nuances in meaning², which is

² The Cambridge dictionary defines *to rewrite* as "to write something such as a book or speech again, in order to improve it or change it", which is almost identical to *revisit*, defined as "to talk about or think about something again, with the intention of improving it or changing it", whereas the Oxford dictionary defines *to rewrite* as "to write something again in a different way, usually in order to improve it or because there is some new information", and *to revisit* as "to return to an idea or a subject and discuss it again". *To reinterpret* is defined in the former dictionary as having

why the paper tries to carefully juggle them, while still admitting to favour the term *reinterpretation*, which is a core concept in postmodern literature and criticism. The paper inspects Byatt's *Ragnarök* from a narratological and cultural perspective, in relation to ideas and themes that have contributed to the shaping of the Norse myth into a 21st century manifest against pollution, while, at the same time, discussing women's emancipation issues. Starting from Barthes' view³ of the reader as both the receiver and the decoder/(re)interpreter of the text, this paper is trying to determine whether Byatt's *Ragnarök* may qualify as a valid text in its own right, and, at the same time, to identify the details that turn it into a personal, almost autobiographical text.

The original piece of writing about the end/judgement of the gods is traced back to a 12th century text, as Schjødt explains: "The most important work belonging to this group concerning Ragnarök, however, was written by the Icelandic chieftain and historian, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). The work is called *Edda* and consists of four parts, among which the relevant part for information about Ragnarök is called *Gylfaginning*." (Schjødt 2019, 367). The first part of the *Edda*, devoted to the creation of the Norse world, introduces the reader to the mythical beings that are central to the Scandinavian imaginary; thus, the primordial entity, and the ancestor of all *jötnar*⁴, Ymir, born from the icy drops of the ocean, is killed by the god brothers Odin, Vili and Vé, who, then, create the whole world from dead Ymir's body, with his skull forming what we would call the heavens, and with Midgard (the middle garden or the realm of mankind) formed from his eyebrows. The god Odin also creates Ask (the first man) from an ash and Embla (the first woman) from an elm, as well as the mythical tree of life (or the tree of the universe), Yggdrasil.

For British author and critic A. S. Byatt, who may well claim to have been introduced to Norse mythology from an early childhood, the opportunity presented to her by Canongate⁵ – to write a book for the series on myths they

two meanings – "to *change* what you think the meaning of something is", and "to perform a play, piece of music, etc. in a way that expresses *your own new ideas about it, or to create something again using new ideas*" – which apply beautifully in the case of the text we are discussing.

³ Barthes expressed his idea that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader" (Barthes 1977, 148).

⁴ Giants, the enemies of the gods.

⁵ The whole collection of rewritten myths published by the Scottish publishing firm Canongate Books includes 18 titles, from which, apart from A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarök*, one may distinguish, among others, Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth*, Jeanette Winterson's *Weight*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, David Grossman's *Lion's Honey*, Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*, and Alexandre McCall Smith's *Dream Angus*.

intended to publish – represented the fulfilment of a dream. Byatt’s fascination with the Scandinavian imaginary started the moment her mother came home with what would become Byatt’s favourite book, *Asgard and the Gods*, which, the writer remembers, her mother “had used as a crib in her studies of ancient Norse” (Byatt qtd. in Tatar 2012, xvii). In the very same *Introduction*, Byatt confesses her propensity for “the more than real” that Norse mythology seemed to promise to the young voracious reader that she was at the time: “I never really liked stories about children doing what children do – quarrelling and cooking and camping. I liked magic, the unreal, the more than real. I learned from the *Asgard* book that even the gods can be defeated by evil.” (xvii). The refusal to accept the standard child’s attitude is, with Byatt, translated into the quest for magic, which is, later in life, re-imagined and fully exploited in novels like *Possession*⁶, *The Children’s Book*, or in the reinterpreted myth under scrutiny here, *Ragnarök*.

From the very first reading of A. S. Byatt’s text *Ragnarök*, which ends with the author’s *Thoughts on Myths* in the last chapter, one may notice that the book becomes even easier to comprehend and to absorb, since all mysteries are so eloquently unravelled by the author herself in that last part of the book. That habit of explaining her own literary creation to her readers, instead of letting them struggle to get to the root of her creative choices, may well be considered one of the British author’s trademarks, with Byatt’s authorial writing hand being doubled by her critical voice. A possible explanation for Byatt’s propensity to carefully guide her readers on the right path to follow in their quest for the meaning of her texts might come from her own personal history, as the eldest daughter of two people who used words as their daily tools in their professions: her father, John Frederick Drabble, was a barrister, and her mother, Kathleen Marie Bloor, was a schoolteacher. In appreciation of her mother’s efforts to educate her daughters in the spirit of becoming independent, voracious readers, and also as a sign of acknowledgement of her difficult life as a thinking woman, A. S. Byatt dedicates *Ragnarök* to the former, writing, at the beginning of the book, “For my mother, K.M. Drabble, who gave me *Asgard and the Gods*” (Byatt 2011, 14).

To further emphasize the complex connection between life, war, myth, the thin child’s evolution and gender inequity⁷ at the time World War II started,

⁶ In *Possession*, one of the characters, Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, is depicted as being fascinated by Norse mythology and writing an epic poem entitled *Ragnarök*, which represents Byatt’s first published version of the famous Scandinavian myth, produced and presented in a ventriloquist’s voice.

⁷ The idea will be reinforced in the final part of the book, in the chapter “The Thin Child in Peacetime”.

in the first chapter of the book, Byatt sets the stage with a few simple sentences; thus, the thin child, who was a sickly, asthmatic child, only lived because, since "Life was a state in which a war was on" (Byatt 2011, 20), her family had to take refuge "in the ordinary paradise of the English countryside" (20).

In the same vein, the thin child's mother shared that paradoxical life, in the sense that the state of war liberated women from their social/occupational bonds and allowed them to work and think for themselves: "Because there was a war on, it was legally possible for her to live in the mind, to teach bright boys, which before the war had been forbidden to married women" (Byatt 2011, 21), which led the thin child to the discovery of her mother as an interesting and challenging new person: "Her mother was more real, and kinder, when it was a question of grouped letters on the page." (21).

As Nicholson remarks in her 2018 article in *The Guardian*, "Britain's wartime women gained a new sense of power" – and Byatt's setting the stage for her rewritten version of *Ragnarök* at that exact time is relevant for the point she is trying to make, connecting the evolution of things and people at all levels – imaginary and real –, still, without being able to escape her own fate in real life. Educated at a Quaker school in York and at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English between 1954 and 1957, A. S. Drabble⁸ began her studies as a postgraduate at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, and Somerville College, Oxford, in 1957, but, since she was a woman, she had to give up her studies and scholarship in 1959, when she got married to Ian Charles Rayner Byatt. Not long after she became A. S. Byatt, she realized that her life mission was to think and write, not to function as a mere housewife, and she eventually got the divorce⁹ from her first husband, but kept the name "Byatt" as her professional name even after she got married to her second husband, Peter John Duffy.

In his study *Language, Counter-Memory*, Michel Foucault states that "A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships among texts." (Foucault 1977, 123), which in the case of Byatt's *Ragnarök* raises a number of questions in relation to the originality and the credibility of the literary version of the Norse myth as it is rewritten in this writer's text. In other words, one might easily consider the literary work produced by the British author under the title of *Ragnarök* as mere pastiche of the story of the end of the world recounted in the *Völuspá*¹⁰, had it not been for the personal details and

⁸ Byatt's maiden name.

⁹ The divorce was described as Byatt's own personal war, exquisitely mirrored in her 1996 novel, *Babel Tower*.

¹⁰ *Völuspá*, which is translated from the Old Norse as "Vala's Prophecy" or "Sibyl's Prophecy", is a poem consisting of about 65 short stanzas on Norse cosmogony, the history of the world of gods, men, and monsters from its beginning until the Ragnarök.

incursions in Byatt's personal life that have made her text ring true and valuable. The author confesses in *Thoughts on Myths* that the Norse story of the end of the gods was her first and only choice when Canongate invited her to (re)write a myth for their series: "I knew immediately which myth I wanted to write. It should be *Ragnarök*, the myth to end all myths, the myth in which the gods themselves were all destroyed." (Byatt 2011, 182).

The process of rewriting a text, in general, and a well-known myth, in particular, as it is the case here, requires a careful process of re-imagining and re-wording the respective text, as well as an equally careful selection from the writer's previous reading of other literary or scientific texts. In this respect, Barthes's famous *The Death of the Author* (1968) suggests that an author's words do not originate from their own unique consciousness, but from a permanent process of reading and re-writing, with the author placed in the role of a compiler or arranger of pre-existent possibilities within the language system. In Barthes's opinion, there are a number of intertextual codes that help and inform one's reading (Barthes 1970), contributing to the author's finding their personal, unique way of expressing their view.

In search for the best voice and perspective that she may use in expressing her creative vision, Byatt tried "to find a way of telling the myth that preserved its distance and difference" (Byatt 2011, 182), only to realize that her narratee was her "childhood self, and the way [she] had found the myths and thought about the world when [she] first read *Asgard and the Gods*" (182). Considering that narrative stand – to write about and for an instance of herself at some point in life (a position which Byatt has taken in many books she has authored) –, one may perceive *Ragnarök* as a story in which the narrator's orientation towards herself, and her telling a story that concerns herself suggest the existence of a function that reflects on the narrator as a character in those chapters that describe the thin child's actions, thoughts and evolution. The events and the characters in the book on Norse mythology, which the thin child reads and cherishes, help her understand and accept her own life as being finite: "The thin child knew, and did not know that she knew, that her elders lived in provisional fear of imminent destruction. They faced the end of the world they knew." (21).

In *Ragnarök*, the book analysed here, although Byatt does not write the text in the 1st person but pretends to keep her distance from that young innocent self by recounting facts, feelings and thoughts in the 3rd person, the view taken by "the thin child" makes the reader think about what Gerard Genette calls "the function of attestation". In his study *Narrative Discourse*, in the chapter in which he defines and discusses autodiegetic narratives, narratologist Gerard Genette remarks on the importance of the emotional and intellectual relationship

between a narrator who is also the hero of the story and the events recounted by that narrator. Genette defines that function as “the one accounting for the part the narrator as such takes in the story he tells, the relationship he maintains with it – an affective relationship, of course, but also a moral or intellectual one.” (Genette 1980, 256). In that regard, since the narrator recounts a story of something that she experienced or witnessed as a child, “we have here something which could be called *testimonial function*, or function of *attestation*” (256).

Considering the case of Byatt's *Ragnarök*, one may remark on the technique employed by the writer in finding the best way to obtain that testimonial function that establishes the relationship between her “thin child” heroine and the events recounted, while, at the same time, rewriting the Norse myth in its 21st century postmodern version. Byatt's comments on the introduction of “the thin child” character as a focalizer of the narrative shed more light both on its role and on the general concept of the rewritten myth:

This is not a story about this thin child – she is thin partly because she was thin, but also because what is described of her world is thin and bright, the inside of her reading and thinking head, and the ways in which she related the worlds of *Asgard* and *Pilgrim's Progress* to the world and the life she inhabited. (Byatt 2011, 184).

From the very beginning, the narrator establishes a very special, personal link between the Norse mythical world that is encapsulated in the book that is revered by the thin child, *Asgard and the Gods*, and the child herself, who learns from the description of the book that she herself, as a member of a family that came from the North of England, may call the stories her own: “The book also said that these stories belonged to ‘Nordic’ peoples, Norwegians, Danes and Icelanders. The thin child was, in England, a northerner. The family came from land invaded and settled by Vikings. These were her stories.”, and, because of all that, “The book became a passion.” (Byatt 2011, 24).

In Byatt's *Ragnarök*, fragments taken from the *Eddas*, culminating with the Norse myth of the destruction of the gods, are told and interspersed with bits from the story of the thin child, who, in her turn, reads over and over again *Asgard and the Gods* in parallel with John Bunyan's Christian story *Pilgrim's Progress*. The thin child considers the plot and the narrative thread of the Norse myth she is so keen on in parallel with her Christian readings and the events in her own life, and forms her own opinion as to what ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ may mean to her. The idea of sin (or even the Old Norse word for it) appears as irrelevant in Scandinavian mythology: “The deities of those early Scandinavians were not

ethical beings. Ethics was the province of man, and the law. The Christian idea of sin [...] would only have struck them as absurd.” (Ferguson 2018, 8-9).

Comparing Norse and Christian views on the end of the world, in a study that analysed both *Ragnarök* and the Book of Revelation in the *Bible*, Agung Wijianto remarks that “one work conveys that death is an achievement and the other work gives the message that death is a horrifying event” (Wijianto 2020, 61) – a difference that becomes more emphatic once another distinction is made clear: in the pagan myth, all gods die, “which is crucial to their belief of fatalism” (Winterbourne 2004, 187) whilst in the Christian story, all people die as they receive their just punishment for their sins from God Almighty, an entity that cannot die, and that will resurrect the faithful ones.

A similar comparison is drawn, inside the story told in Byatt’s book, by the thin child, who comes to the conclusion that the end, “A Real End. The end” (Byatt 2011, 26) sounds perfect, since it makes sense, and is both logical and believable. The imagined/imaginary past – with its mythological wonders and crises, and with its inevitable end – is deliberately granted more intensity, which transfers in part to the present, where a war is on and things are uncertain, but which become, by association, valuable, unique and worth remembering by the thin child. In a way, what Byatt artfully constructs here is an instance of intertextuality which Matei Călinescu calls “textual haunting” (Călinescu 1993, xi), with the character of the thin child focalizing and making sense of her world and the war that she and the people around her are going through with the help of the Norse stories and characters: “The war might well have destroyed the thin child’s world. She built her own contrary myth in her head. Even if – indeed when – she herself came to an end the earth would go on renewing itself.” (Byatt 2011, 184).

In the Scandinavian imagery, the thin child discovers characters and symbols that she may believe in, which, although they may be described in many different ways, as either beautiful and peaceful (Baldr), powerful and all-knowing (Odin – from Proto-Germanic **Wōðanaz*), kind (Freyja), cruel and greedy (Jörmungandr), violent and menacing (Fenrir, Hel, the Jötnar or Frost Giants) or brilliant and sly (Loki, the trickster), they all share a trait that makes the thin child favour them over the Christian ones: they are human-like, ergo they may all die – and that makes them irreplaceable, unique and extremely valuable. The thin child reads with awe about the end of the fantastic world of the Norse; the final battle, happening on doomsday, annihilates all life in Asgard and in the world that inhabits Ymir’s dead skull¹¹. She learns that, once Loki and

¹¹ After the three god brothers Odin, Vili and Vé defeat their enemy, the primeval being the jötunn (frost giant) Ymir, they create the whole universe from his body, and the skull is populated by the gods themselves, who live at the center of Midgard.

his monstrous children Jörmungander, or the Midgardsormr, and the Fenris-Wolf, set out in front of the hosts¹² of Muspelheim, that are armed with white-hot weapons and slings of flame, to march and fight against the Asgard gods, the beautiful world comes to an end. The sun and the moon are devoured by the wolves that kept chasing them since the beginning of time, Odin is killed by the Fenris-Wolf, which, in his turn, finds his end at the hand of Odin's son Vidar, Thor and the Midgard Serpent kill each other, Tyr and the hell-hound Garm die exhausted by their strenuous fighting efforts, Loki and Heimdall fight to the death against each other, and, in the end, Surtr sets the whole world on fire with his flaming sword. As the thin child finds out, "After a long time, the fire too died. All there was a flat surface of black liquid glinting in the small pale points of light that still came through the starholes." (Byatt 2011, 162).

The same inescapable destiny – death – seems to be the fate of the thin child's father, since, in the beginning of the book, the reader learns that the father "had red-gold hair and clear blue eyes, like a god" (Byatt 2011, 21,) and seems most likely to be doomed to an imminent death: "In her [the thin child's] soul she knew her bright father would not come back" (*idem*) – an idea that is repeated at the end of the book, in the chapter *The Thin Child in Peacetime*: "She had stored Ragnarök against the time when it would become clear that her father would not come back." (167). The father's eventual survival, which turns him into a real person, an RAF hero who returns to his family unscathed, comes to contradict the child's scenario, without actually erasing the strong impression of the Norse myth on her mind and soul: "Walls of defence against disaster crumbled in the thin child's head, but the knowledge of Ragnarök, the black disk, held its place." (167)

In actual fact, to keep things in balance, Byatt explains to her readers that the father's survival triggers, in the thin child's new reality which was peacetime, the mother's "fall into the quotidian" (Byatt 2011, 168), or her symbolic death: "The long-awaited return took the life out of the thin child's mother, the thin child decided many years later. Dailiness defeated her." (170). As Byatt herself came to discover during her first marriage, a thinking, ambitious woman who gradually and unwillingly turns into a housewife for the sake of her family, will most likely die inside, and perceive her own home as a suffocating space from which there is no escape¹³. In presenting the case of the thin child's disillusioned mother, in the book, Byatt describes the situation of the majority of the British women who did their bit during World War II: they supported the war effort by taking up the jobs that men had to leave behind

¹² An archaic word for *army*.

¹³ A similar view of disappointment with gender roles was also expressed clearly in Byatt's *Introduction* to her own book *The Shadow of the Sun*, reprinted in 1991.

when they joined the army, and were encouraged to better themselves in the process only to find out that, on the return of their men, they were to be given the sack, and told to return to their traditional roles – to cook, raise their children, and look after their heroic husbands. The idea of the post-war home as a cage or a dungeon for the British women is depicted in Byatt's *Ragnarök* in the fragment where the child-focalizer compares the status of her parents in peacetime, and comes to a conclusion: "The thin child came to identify the word 'housewife' with the word 'prisoner'. Fear of imprisonment haunted the thin child, although she did not quite acknowledge this." (170).

Determined not to lose her father's love or his good opinion of her, the thin child does nothing to prevent him from chopping down the wild ash-tree that planted itself on the sill of the urban garden shed in the family's steel city house: "The child loved the tree, and loved her father, who had been restored to her against all her grim expectations." (Byatt 2011, 171). Despite that conviction and effort imposed on herself "to live in dailiness" (idem), the thin child suffers from a loss of the magic that she had experienced in war time, when she lived roaming freely in the great outdoors of the English village, whilst in the mind she was witnessing the world ending in her fantastic world, the Norse mythical time of the gods, "A gate closed in her head." (172). The ash tree that her father considers to be out of place in an urban garden and that he makes it his job to cut down and chop into logs for fire is similar to the Scandinavian imaginary tree of life that supports the universe, Yggdrasil, which is similarly destroyed during Ragnarök. The ash tree in the real world comes down as a symbol of the child's loss of that kind of freedom that she was used to having during the war, when there was not enough food for one's belly, but there was plenty of food for one's mind and soul: "But on the other side of the closed gate was the bright black world into which she had walked in the time of her evacuation. The World-Ash and the rainbow bridge, seeming everlasting, destroyed in a twinkling of an eye. [...] the black undifferentiated surface, under a black undifferentiated sky, at the end of things." (172-3)

As readers are informed by the writer herself, the end of the Norse mythological world, with its gods, people, and their whole ecosystem supporting life – the Ash-tree Yggdrasil – is reinterpreted in Byatt's *Ragnarök* with the aim of raising the alarm about the dangers of pollution, deforestation, aggressive agriculture, plundering the ocean through industrial fishing etc. Transforming the Scandinavian myth of the end of the world into a 21st century book about the current world unwittingly causing its own end to draw nearer and nearer registers the level of involvement and concern for the fate of humankind that is typical of Byatt. As it happens, the reinterpretation of the myth comes with a twist, which the writer herself explains in *Thoughts on Myths*, at the end of the book:

If you write a version of Ragnarök in the twenty-first century, it is haunted by the imagining of a different end of things. We are a species of animal which is bringing about the end of the world we were born into. Not out of evil or malice, or not mainly, but because of a lopsided mixture of extraordinary cleverness, extraordinary greed, extraordinary proliferation of our own kind, and a biologically built-in short-sightedness. (Byatt 2011, 186-7)

Coming in support of this view, in an article devoted to (proto-)ecocriticism in A.S. Byatt's fictional and critical work entitled "I Have This Kind of Grief for the Earth", Alexandra Cheira argues that "Byatt can be said to participate in this affective crusade for the planet by calling attention to its progressive destruction due to human action as opposed to blooming natural life when left untouched." (Cheira 2020, 46). Indeed, in real life as well as in Byatt's fictional world, the death of the planet is foreseen and deplored, but, apparently, it cannot be prevented, the same way the Norse gods themselves cannot escape their own death, but march valiantly to face and embrace it. In Byatt's view, the lives of the Scandinavian gods are ruled by a mixture of ignorance and fatalism, which has also been one of the foundation stones placed at the creation of that world. Willing to make a point, the British author may choose to exaggerate the flaws of the Asgardians, in order to achieve a more striking resemblance between the situation created by those gods and the contemporary ecological disaster caused and amplified by humankind. She remarks that "the Norse gods are peculiarly human [...] because they are limited and stupid, [...] greedy, [...] cruel and enjoy hunting and jokes. They know Ragnarök is coming but are incapable of imagining any way to fend it off, or change the story. They know how to die gallantly but not how to make a better world." (Byatt 2011, 188).

It is a view as fatalistic as the gods', and it may not give justice to them, but the point the author tries to make may get to the audience more easily that way. Going beyond the pages of the book, Byatt sadly concludes that, due to our human nature that is neglectful, ignorant and greedy, there is limited scope for the saving of our planet, the world that we currently inhabit, "Almost all the scientists I know think we are bringing about our own extinction, more and more rapidly." (186). As for the indomitable fate of the Asgard gods in the Scandinavian myth of the end of the world, although she confesses – both in the voice of the thin child and in her own, authorial and critical voice – to sympathise with the brilliant, ingenious and curious Loki, in whom she identifies the "detached scientific intelligence which could either save the earth or contribute to its rapid disintegration" (188), Byatt comes with a definitive judgement: "As it is, the world ends because neither the all too human gods, with their armies and quarrels, nor the fiery thinker know how to save it." (188-9).

Conclusions

In this paper, the focus on Byatt's *Ragnarök* has intended to demonstrate that the rewriting of the Scandinavian myth of the death/judgement of the Norse gods does take on a contemporary tone, which resounds with warnings concerning the destruction of the world through pollution, neglect, disrespect for other people's passions or interests. The analysis was aimed at pointing out the association of the Scandinavian imaginary with specific moments in A. S. Byatt's personal history, while highlighting the use of certain patterns and ideas that are present in both.

In the voice of one of her characters, the British author remarked that "A book is a passionate thing [...], it is more immediate than reality. [...] I think if most people were honest, they would admit that imaginary experiences are more real than the actual ones." (Byatt 1996, 574) – and that expresses, in a nutshell, the main idea of the book under discussion here, as well as the point that the paper is trying to make. By exploring the evolution of the mythological events as they are rewritten in Byatt's 21st century book, in close connection with the main character's personal development, the study shows that the imaginary – the Scandinavian myth recounting the death of the gods – sheds light on the real – the events taking place during World War II. To that end, the paper has also made use of the comparison drawn by Byatt herself between the Norse and the Christian mythical imaginary.

In the part discussing what is currently called ecocriticism, the paper has shown that the two parallel universes – one of the mythical events and the other imagined by Byatt as taking place during WWII – revolve around the same fragmented axis, and they both end in the same disastrous way – with the world coming to an end. The conclusion to be drawn is disconcerting: humans are incapable of learning their lesson and the Western, linear thinking, based on chronology and historization, is invalidated from the start here. As the book states, and the paper here underlines, the main idea is that proof has shown that humankind follows the ancient, mythical thinking process, based on cyclic movements¹⁴, with the Biblical statement in the Ecclesiastes: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." (Holy Bible 1989, 614, v9). The thin child is forced to witness the terrors of World War II, but is rescued in part with the help of the story and characters of the Norse myth, which she herself reinterprets and understands in accordance with her own vision, imagination and feelings. The pity is that, in spite of the repeated warnings in the book(s), the fatalistic conclusion ruling

¹⁴An idea mentioned, among others, by Freeman (1998).

supreme in the Scandinavian way of thinking prevails: destiny is all, nothing improves. Even if it all comes to a tragic end.

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