

BEYOND BELIEF: THE CRISIS OF FAITH IN A. S. BYATT'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT. *A. S. Byatt's Ragnarök (2011), a retelling of the Norse myth of the downfall of the gods and the end of the world, would seem to be a departure from her fictional narratives set in the nineteenth or twentieth century. However, this book is a natural development from her earlier novels that explored the Victorian crisis of faith resulting from the loss of religious certainty in the face of scientific discoveries. The author's writing over the last twenty years has become increasingly involved with science, and she has long acknowledged her rejection of Christian beliefs. Byatt used the nineteenth century as a starting point for an exploration of twenty-first century concerns which have now resurfaced in the Norse myth of loss and destruction. This paper revisits Possession and Angels & Insects within the framework of her more recent writing, focusing on the themes of religion, spiritualism and science.*

Keywords: A. S. Byatt, contemporary British literature, Victorian spiritualism, science, religious belief.

PASANDO DE LA FE: LA CRISIS RELIGIOSA EN LA FICCIÓN DE A. S. BYATT

RESUMEN. Ragnarök (2011) de la autora británica A. S. Byatt, narra el mito nórdico de la caída de los dioses y del fin del mundo. Parece tener poco en común con sus narrativas de ficción ambientadas en los siglos diecinueve o veinte. Sin embargo, este libro desarrolla algunos de los temas de sus novelas anteriores que habían explorado la crisis victoriana de la fe religiosa enfrentada con los descubrimientos científicos. A lo largo de los últimos veinte años, la obra de esta autora se ha implicado cada vez más con la ciencia, y hace tiempo que ella reconoce su rechazo de las creencias cristianas. Byatt utilizó el siglo diecinueve como punto de partida para explorar varios temas relevantes al siglo veintiuno y que han vuelto a aparecer en el mito nórdico. Este artículo considera las novelas *Possession* y *Angels & Insects* en el contexto de su obra más reciente, concentrándose en los temas de la religión, el espiritualismo y la ciencia.

Palabras clave: A. S. Byatt, literatura británica contemporánea, espiritualismo victoriano, ciencia, creencia religiosa.

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We have a moral responsibility to engage with science, we're destroying the natural world quite rapidly. We are an animal which is destroying our environment with immense ingenuity and beauty and inventiveness and cleverness, and we even love our environment, most of us, but we don't know how not to destroy it. So we will destroy it and then we shall destroy ourselves and that will be all right because something else will happen. But we have two moral responsibilities, one of which is to try and stop destroying those things that are not human beings; the other is to understand the world, even to understand our own destruction. (A. S. Byatt ABC interview with Natasha Mitchell)

1. INTRODUCTION: A.S. BYATT AND THE VICTORIANS

During the second half of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first, many British novelists have been drawn to the Victorian age as a source of ideas for their writing. Nowadays we find the battle lines drawn, once again, between those who depend on religious belief and those who find their source of wonder in science. Scientists such as Richard Dawkins gaze in bafflement at New Agers and believers in the occult, amazed that for many people faith and superstition trump scientific evidence. Atheists have paid for

advertising campaigns to combat the power of organized religions, while thousands of people in the American mid-west still assert the literal truth of Genesis and cling to 19th century calculations that our planet has existed for barely six thousand years. Given this morass of conflicting belief systems in the third Christian millennium it is unsurprising that the Victorian Age exerts imaginative power on writers of fiction.

The nineteenth century was the age of doubt, the period when long-accepted certainties shivered and sometimes crumbled under the impact of discoveries in the natural sciences. However, religions are still with us and arguments still rage, so perhaps twenty-first century uncertainty can be explored within a Victorian framework, at a tactful distance from our own time. Moreover, 150 years ago the discourse of science was still comprehensible to the educated public, whereas in our own time the language of science has become increasingly obscure to those of us who lack a thorough grounding in mathematics and technical terminology. Setting narratives in an earlier time, before the division produced by the “two cultures” referred to by C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis fifty years ago, can effectively sidestep the complexities of modern scientific discourse and more effectively engage readers in the issues that underlay Victorian doubt and which still trouble us in the twenty-first century: the fear of death, the loss of religious belief in conflict with science, the nature of personal identity and concern with the impact of human society on our environment. The British author, A. S. Byatt, has written about the Victorian crisis of faith while also exploring nineteenth century science and literature. In the 1990s, this seemed to be part of a general tendency in British fiction, but can now be assessed within the framework of her growing interest in science and her rejection of Christianity as a belief system.

The “Neo-Victorian” or “Retro-Victorian” novel has become a popular genre of which John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) is considered by Shuttleworth to be one “evident progenitor” (2001: 149). There have always been historical novels, but they have not tended to apply an overtly contemporary perspective to periods in the past. Fowles’s novel presents a post-modern knowingness, a late 20th century viewpoint which distances the contemporary reader from the fictional characters. This very knowingness leads at times to an implicit disdain for the ignorance and absurdity of the Victorians, despite the author’s occasional pleas for an empathetic response on the readers’ part. This apparently disdainful distancing is avoided by Byatt (2001: 78), whose fiction set in the Victorian Age involves a very different approach, one which is much more sympathetic to the writers and fictional characters of that period, despite sharing features of post-modernist fiction. Buxton has analyzed these

aspects, such as: “*Possession*’s generic pastiche, its self-conscious interrogation of literary and historical Truth and a plot that resembles a corridor of mirrors” (2001: 90), but concludes that this novel is more post-modern in appearance than in reality. A large part of its appeal lies in Byatt’s adherence to the traditions of romance while she apparently subverts and manipulates the form of the novel in a postmodernist way.

Although Shuttleworth, writing in the 1990s, saw the interest of her contemporaries (Johns Fowles, Graham Swift and A. S. Byatt) in the Victorian period as a nostalgic longing for a “true existential crisis” (2001: 155) because the late twentieth century lacked “any fixed points of faith against which to define itself” (2001: 155), Byatt disputes the relevance of this to her own work, saying that, in writing about the Victorians: “My own intentions, as I recollect them, were more to do with rescuing the complicated Victorian thinkers from diminishing modern parodies like those of Fowles and Lytton Strachey, and from the disparaging mockery (especially of the poets) of Leavis and T. S. Eliot” (2001: 79). She goes on to explain that she had been impressed by Iris Murdoch’s understanding of the effect on life, and therefore also on fiction, of the loss of a moral sense based on religious belief and connects this with her interest in scientists:

I write about scientists because they do not spend their time deconstructing the world, or quibbling theologically about abstract terms of value. I am interested in the Natural History of religion – unlike many of the Darwinian scientists I meet who are pugnaciously opposed to any interest in this ancient and complex form of human behaviour. My clergyman in “Morpho Eugenia” is trying to believe in both Darwin and the Church, as Charles Kingsley did, and the Duke of Argyll, and many other clergyman naturalists. But my hero is the Amazonian naturalist, based on Bates and Wallace. (2001: 79)

In this paper I am going to deal with the theme of loss in relation to A. S. Byatt’s fiction set in the nineteenth century, specifically with the loss of religious faith, which is linked with the scientific discoveries of Lyell, Darwin and others. Science has become increasingly important in her later work as well, and the roots of this interest are to be found in two of the books considered here: *Possession* (1990) and *Angels & Insects* (1992).

Angels & Insects contains two novellas: “Morphia Eugenia” and “The Conjugal Angel”, both set in the nineteenth century and with one character in common. The first deals with Victorian religious doubt struggling with the implications of scientific discoveries while the second explores the other belief system that encroached on conventional Christian creeds: spiritualism, especially

the Swedenborgian variety. In this novella the dominant textual referent is Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Byatt states that:

“The Conjugal Angel” is a study of Tennyson's doubt and his family's Swedenborgian spiritualism, faced with death – table-rapping was seen as a natural religion for a ‘materialist age’ [...] All this illuminates *In Memoriam*, which I believe to be one of the greatest poems in English, or any language, and which embodies religious doubt in the face of individual death with fears of natural chance, necessity and transmutation derived from science that preceded Darwin. (2001: 79-80)

Tennyson is a link between the three areas of study in this paper: science, religious doubt and spiritualism. Beer quotes T. H. Huxley as stating that Tennyson was “the first poet since Lucretius ... who has taken the trouble to understand the work and tendency of the men of science” (1996: 211) and she adds that Tennyson was the contemporary poet who was by far the most frequently quoted by scientists in his time. Apart from appearing as a character and as an intertextual reference in “The Conjugal Angel”, Tennyson's influence is also present in *Possession*, given that the character of William Randolph Ash is an amalgam of the Poet Laureate and of Robert Browning.

Although here I am going to examine Byatt's writing about the Victorian crisis of faith and the belief in science, these themes are by no means limited to her fiction set in this period. As we shall see in her quartet, both of these topics are also of great relevance to her novels set in the 20th century. In fact, a link between her fiction set in the nineteenth century and that set in her own lifetime is that both involve a move from religious faith (which the author rejected even in childhood), to a conviction that science provides many of the answers that her characters seek, especially concerning environmental issues. Her latest book, a reworking of the Norse myths of the downfall of the gods, *Raknarök* (2011) is the culmination of this process, a tale of the destruction of the natural world as well as of the gods.

2. CHRISTIAN BELIEF, CHRISTIAN DOUBT

When she was still a child, Byatt rejected the Christian story as less convincing than other myths. It was less convincing because she was required to believe it, whereas other myths stimulated her imagination. Also, she was repulsed by the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and was drawn instead to what she felt was an alternative, female myth: that of rebirth. She mentioned this in an interview with Dusinberre: “In *The Virgin in the Garden* I wanted to substitute a female mythology for a male one. The male mythology is the Dying God and the Resurrection. The female one is birth and Renaissance, and that is what the Elizabethans recognized” (Todd 1983:193).

The author's rejection of Christianity appears in her fiction as well as in interviews and essays. In *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), Stephanie Potter (the character who Byatt says most closely resembles herself) goes to church on Easter Sunday to observe her future husband, Daniel Orton, at work as a curate. "Her dislike of Christianity hardened like ice. She realized she had half-hoped to share what was ancient and inherited. Christmas moved her [...] But the dead man walking in the new morning in the garden left her cold" (114). More recently, in *Ragnarok*, the autobiographical "thin child" of the frame story rejects both versions of the Jesus story as presented in the Scripture lessons she has to attend: "Gentle Jesus meek and mild", surrounded by "attentive, cuddly animals" (11) and the cruelly murdered Son of God. "The thin child thought that these stories – the sweet, cotton-wool meek and mild one, the barbaric, sacrificial gloating one, were both human make-ups, like the life of the giants in the *Riesengebirge*. Neither aspect made her want to write, or fed her imagination. They numbed it"(11). Byatt has said that she is, and always has been, an agnostic, despite the strong religious upbringing she had at the Quaker boarding school she was sent to in her teens, and adds "I don't share the Christianity which informs most Quakers beyond contemplation and morality," and adds that although Iris Murdoch would have liked Christianity to have been true if it could, Byatt herself never believed that it was true, and "if something isn't true, you should jettison it, even if you find yourself in a cold, dangerous, empty place" (Newman 2003).

Byatt's admiration for George Eliot has influenced her own writing, and in chapter 4 of *Passions of the Mind* (1991) she explores several aspects of Eliot's thought and writing, including her rejection of Christianity and growing interest in what was then known as Natural History, a science-based understanding of the world. After referring to the Victorians' "partial, progressive and dubious abandonment" (92) of Christian theology and the incompatibility of belief in the Miracles and the Resurrection in conjunction with the scientific laws which govern the real world, Byatt points out that:

[t]he young George Eliot was an evangelical Anglican; the growing George Eliot, compelled by Charles Hennell's Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity, by Strauss and by Feuerbach, was resolutely anti-Christian; the mature George Eliot saw Christian belief and morality as forms of human experience that must be studied and valued as part of our natural history. (1991: 92-93)

This is an approach to religion that Byatt shares.

In Byatt's quartet of novels, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)), the only characters that straddle the religion/science divide are Marcus Potter and his friend Jacqueline. However, their youthful involvement in a religious movement disappears as they reach

adulthood and become focused on careers in science. A childhood friend who leaves her work as a nurse in order to join a religious community dies tragically and needlessly as a direct result of her involvement with this sect. There are several other characters who represent varying shades of opinion within the Christian church, even an absence of belief or faith in the existence of God, but we see none who struggle with their faith and doubt as a consequence of scientific knowledge. By the end of the twentieth century (the quartet is set in the fifties and sixties), religion and science have split apart into opposing, largely incompatible world views, with the author clearly allying herself with the scientists.

3. THE CRISIS OF FAITH IN *POSSESSION*: RELIGION AND SCIENCE

In Byatt's fiction set in the Victorian period, however, we can see the process of opposition between religion and science at work, often within one character. Throughout the nineteenth century the requirement to believe in Christian "Truth" was eroded by the human need to know, to seek a new Truth based on curiosity and understanding rather than faith. In *Possession*, the fictional poet Christabel LaMotte, writing to her future lover, Henry Randolph Ash, declares that his poetry had triggered religious doubt in her:

[Y]our great poem *Ragnarök* was the occasion of quite the worst crisis in the life of my simple religious faith, that I have ever experienced, or hope to experience. It was not that anywhere in that poem you attacked the Christian religion [...] I digress wildly from *Ragnarök* and its pagan Day of Judgment and its pagan interpretation of the mystery of the Resurrection [...] It seemed to me you were saying "Such Tales men tell and have told – they do not differ, save in emphasis, here and there" [...] you made Holy Scripture no more than another Wonder Tale. (Byatt 1991: 160)

Ash takes her concern seriously, revealing that although he had had no intention of questioning Biblical certainties at the time of writing the poem, meaning it "rather as a reassertion of the of the Universal Truth of the living presence of the Allfather (under whatever name) and of the hope of Resurrection from whatever whelming disaster in whatever form" (163), he has come to see that he was on the road "to the parity of all tales... And the existence of the same Truths in all Religions is a great argument both for and against the paramount Truthfulness of One" (163). He goes on to argue that religious teachings have become dimmed by the accumulation of speculations and observations over the centuries "and are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest, by thick horny growths over that clear vision" (163), but he stops short of declaring that he believes in that "Truth" that means so much to LaMotte.

In sending her this letter, instead of the one he had originally written in which he had urged her to “hold fast” to her faith, assuring her that women’s minds were more intuitive and purer than men’s and that they could therefore “hold on to truths securely that we men may lose by much questioning” (163) he has treated her as an intellectual equal, unlike Arthur Hallam in “The Conjugal Angel”. Hallam brushes off Emily Tennyson’s questions about his comments on *The Nature of Things*, saying “Women shouldn’t bother their pretty heads with all this theorizing” (Byatt 1995: 228). Byatt bases this reaction of his on a letter that the real Hallam wrote to Emily:

I do not think women ought to trouble themselves much with theology: we, who are more liable to the subtle objections of the Understanding have more need to handle the weapons that lay them prostrate [...] It is by the heart, not by the head, that we must all be convinced of the two great fundamental truths, the reality of Love and the reality of Evil. (Byatt 2001: 110)

In his own letter, responding to LaMotte’s doubts, Ash questions the literal meaning of the raising of Lazarus: “Do I truly believe that this Man stepped into the charnel house¹ where Lazarus was already corrupt and bade him stand and walk? [...] We live in an age of scientific history –we sift our evidence– we know somewhat about eye-witness accounts and how far it is prudent to entrust ourselves to them” (Byatt 1991: 168).²

LaMotte accepts, to some degree, Ash’s hedging about his religious beliefs as he affirms that there is a “truth of the Imagination” (169) but she still insists on the Truth of Christ’s message. “He said –I am the Truth and the Life– what of that, Sir? Was that an approximate statement? Or a Poetic adumbration? Well–was it? It rings –through eternity– I AM–” (169).

Further letters between them introduce the topic of spiritualism, another manifestation of Victorian craving for certainty about the afterlife, but the importance of science in Ash’s work and his beliefs comes later in the novel through other textual voices: his wife Ellen’s journal, Byatt’s narrative describing the 19th century lovers’ trip to Yorkshire contrasted with her twentieth century scholars’ reading of a biography which details what was known of this visit and, most importantly, a poem attributed to Henry Randolph Ash: *Swammerdam*, which is worth considering within the context of Byatt’s poetic “ventriloquism”.

¹ LaMotte has referred to Ash’s poem on Lazarus which recalls *In Memoriam* XXXI & XXXII both thematically and in its use of “charnel”.

² Chapter 3 of Byatt’s *Passions of the Mind* is devoted in part to Robert Browning and his treatment of biblical tales such as the resurrection of Lazarus.

Possession contains many texts written by A.S. Byatt in the styles of different genres. These include letters, journals, biography and literary criticism as well as Victorian poetry that is attributed to her fictional poets, Ash and LaMotte. The author had originally intended the poetry to be referred to by her academic characters but never read by us, merely glimpsed dimly as a palimpsest through the allusions made to it. Her readers would have had to construct their own versions of these poems. She had also considered using quotations from some Ezra Pound's early "Victorian" verse but was persuaded by JD Enright (her editor at the time) to write the poetry herself. As she had always been "possessed" with the poetry of Victorians such as Browning and Tennyson, those "dead voices" aided her in what became a virtuoso performance of poetic pastiche (Mullan 2009). The inclusion of long chunks of poetry appalled American publishers and her novel was rejected many times, even after its publication in Britain. One publisher accepted it on condition that the poetry was omitted, a condition that Byatt refused but which deeply discouraged her. However, when *Possession* won the *Irish Times* Aer Lingus prize and then the Booker prize, an American publisher finally agreed to publish it unabridged.

She was careful to construct her Victorian poetry so as to provide textual flickering, resonances that would enable her literary detectives in the twentieth century to trace the intermingling lives of Ash and LaMotte, so that the poems served the plot as well as providing depth and character to her novel. The reader's attention is drawn to one poem above all others, but one which does not serve this intertextual plot function. The poem is *Swammerdam*, a dramatic monologue in the style of Robert Browning, purportedly written by Ash. In the trove of letters between the poets there are several references to the poem during its composition. Finally Ash sends a handwritten copy to LaMotte, but this is intercepted by her jealous friend and companion Blanche Glover. The discovery of this theft³ and the shame this causes LaMotte serves to bring about the two poets first meeting since they started their correspondence and so leads to their passionate, though fleeting, love affair. A new copy is made which we read at the appropriate moment in the narrative, making up chapter eleven, shortly before Roland and Maud embark on their retracing of Ash and LaMotte's trip to Yorkshire. The poem deserves close attention, for it acts as a reflection of Ash's religious doubt and interest in science.

Jan Swammerdam was a seventeenth century Dutch naturalist. Despite his ground-breaking work in entomology and the use of microscopes he died in poverty in his early forties, although his immense contribution to science was

³ Not the only time that the snatching away of a poem triggers a jealous tantrum that precipitates the exact opposite of what the jealous thief intends – consider Nigel's reaction to Hugh Pink's poem in *Babel Tower*, which contributes to the breakup of Frederica's marriage.

recognized after his death and the University of Amsterdam's Institute for Life Sciences is named after him. He is also associated with religion. According to the *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (1990): "He finally succumbed to the fanatical mystic influences of Bourignon⁴ and abandoned science."

In Ash/Byatt's poem, Swammerdam is on his deathbed, addressing himself to the cleric who is tending him in a monastic cell and recalling his life and work, including his relationship with God and science. The form of the poem resembles Browning's monologues, but many of the themes and language recall Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850). The Dutchman's catalogued and preserved insect species are "Lovingly entered, opened and displayed- / The types of Nature's Bible, ranged in ranks / To show the secrets of her cunning hand" (Byatt 1991: 202), reminding us of Tennyson's "Are God and Nature then at strife,/ That Nature lends such evil dreams?/ So careful of the type she seems, / So careless of the single life" (LV) and " 'So careful of the type?' but no./ From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone / She cries, 'A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go'" (LVI). Swammerdam acknowledges his debt to Annette Bourignon "Who spoke to me, when I despaired, of God's / Timeless and spaceless point of Infinite Love" (Byatt 1991: 203). He "sought to know the origins of life. /I thought it lawful knowledge" and delighted in the new world that his microscope revealed, "A world of miracle, a world of truth/ Monstrous and swarming with unguessed-at life" (207). Like Lydgate in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, he searched for the basic building blocks of life, cells which all species would have in common: "The more the Many were revealed to me / The more I pressed my hunt to find the One- / Prima Materia, Nature's shifting shape /Still constant in her metamorphoses" (207). He draws parallels between his "images of Truth" and Galileo's conflict with the Church and recantation of his discoveries who " In hope of life, gainsaid his own surmise, /Submitted him to doctors of the Church / Who deal in other truths and mysteries" (209). Although Swammerdam supports the Italian's displacement of Man from "the centre of the sum of things", he draws back from displacing God from his dominant position. Even so, he begins to suspect that on the universal scale Man may be on a level with the swarming, seething motes that are invisible to the naked eye, and wonders whether Galileo had felt the same clutch of fear that he had, one on observing through his telescope and the other studying life on the microscopic level. This is a fear that resonates through *In Memoriam*, the lingering suspicion that Man may not, after all, enjoy eternal life, but may instead be no more important to God than a

⁴ Annette Bourignon (1616-80) – she believed herself called to restore the pure spirit of the gospel (*Chambers Biographical Dictionary*).

microscopic being is to the scientist. There is also a frisson, a shadow of a metaphysical shudder, in the lines “The clue to life lay in the blind white worm / That eats away the complex flesh of men, / Is eaten by the barnyard bird who makes / A succulent dinner for another man / And so completes the circle” (Byatt 1991: 205) that echo Tennyson’s refusal to be horrified (although the reader may be) at the thought of his dead friend’s corrupt body: “I wage not any feud with Death / For changes wrought in form and face; / No lower life that earth’s embrace / may breed with him, can fright my faith” (LXXXII).

That Byatt should place this poem that deals with the themes of scientific knowledge and religious doubt immediately before the part of the novel that describes Ash’s enthusiasm for the natural world and Natural History emphasizes the importance of these themes in *Possession*. From chapter twelve onwards there are many references to Gosse, Lyell, Huxley and Darwin as part of Ash’s reading. Moreover, many of the images in the poem foreshadow the use of insect metaphors in *Angels and Insects*, contributing to what Gérard Genette and Sarah Dillon would term a “palimpsestuous reading” of both books and deepening the connections between them. Rather than establishing a one-to-one relationship between texts and intertexts like the more standard understanding of the term intertextuality, a palimpsestuous reading involves a more subtle and flexible approach which appreciates the resonances between each text (linguistic or not) that we read and those others already created or yet to exist. It is therefore open to the possibility of intertextual links with future writing by the same author or others. Using Julia Kristeva’s terminology of the geno-text and the pheno-text (in which the former corresponds to all the other possible texts and the latter to the one we have in front of us) Dillon points out that: “The pheno-text is inhabited by the infinite possibilities of the geno-text with which it has a one-to-multiple correlation” (Dillon 2007: 87). It is a critical approach which is especially productive with the work of A. S. Byatt. We can see each of her works as a pheno-text, while the geno-text includes all her other work (past and present) as well as her multiple textual references to other writers.

4. ANGELS & INSECTS

Possession is a complex text with many themes, some of which are more fully developed in *Angels & Insects*. From this perspective we can read *Swammerdam* as a prologue to “Morpho Eugenia” (the first of the two linked novellas in this book). Ash’s poem (Byatt 1991: 202-209) refers to aspects of the insect world, such as the relationships of social insects, the discovery that the leader at the apex of the ant’s social hierarchy is “no King / But a vast Mother”,

the “successive forms” of metamorphosing grubs and butterflies and the moth with “Between its wings [...] dark death’s eyeless head”. All these reappear as significant elements of the novella “Morpho Eugenia”, which tells the story of William Adamson, toiling like Psyche to sort and categorize the mountains of specimens that his employer and future father-in-law, Harald Alabaster, has collected. In her collection of essays *On Histories and Stories* Byatt has explained the idea for the story: “A young scientist marries the daughter of an old clergyman-collector and becomes trapped in a country house which turns out to resemble an anthep, in that it is uncertain whether the source of authority is the incessantly childbearing females or the brisk sexless workers” (116). The character of Adamson is based on the Victorian scientists Bates and Wallace, as well as Eliot’s Lydgate, as a representative of the new scientific order. He is a Darwinian agnostic who must politely argue against his father-in-law’s increasingly forlorn attempts to justify belief in an omnipotent God, despite what he acknowledges to be Darwin’s accurate portrayal of life. In effect, Alabaster presents the argument for what is now called “Intelligent Design”.

Both Alabaster and Adamson refer to Tennyson in their discussion. The younger man describes his experiences in the Amazon jungle, where he felt a kind of wonder, but wonder divorced from religious belief:

For the Creation we so admire does not appear to have a Creator who cares for his creatures. Nature is red in tooth and claw, as Mr. Tennyson put it. The Amazon jungle does indeed arouse a sense of wonder at its abundance and luxuriance. But there is a spirit there – a terrible spirit of mindless striving or apathetic inertia – a kind of vegetable greed and vast decay – which makes a mindless natural force much easier to believe in. For I think you will not accept the old deists’ arguments that tigers and strangling figs were designed to prevent the miseries of old age in deer and of rotting tree trunks. (Byatt 1995: 59)

The beleaguered clergyman laments his loss of the certainty in Christian belief that his generation had enjoyed in their youth. It is hard to have faith in this new world “in which angels and devils do not battle in the Heavens for virtue and vice, but in which we eat and are eaten and absorbed into other flesh and blood” (59). He continues to express his mourning for this lost faith, “I know my answer – it is – if God works at all he works in the ape towards the Man – but I cannot measure my loss, it is the pit of despair itself” (60). In contrast, Adamson becomes increasingly delighted by his observations of the natural world, although the cataloguing task is wearisome, as he craves to “observe *life*, not dead shells” (73). In a passage which recalls *Middlemarch* and Dorothea’s growing realization that Casubon’s work is fruitless, Adamson makes the analogy, “sometimes, almost bitterly, between Harald’s

collection of empty wing-cases and empty ribcages, elephant's feet and Paradise plumes, and Harald's interminably circular book on Design, which rambled from difficulty to difficulty, from momentarily illuminating clearing to prickling thicket of honest doubt" (73).

One of Alabaster's errors is that of false analogy, not only between human beings and God, but between the human world and that "other", the world of social insects. Consequently, he believes that insects such as ants exercise apparently human virtues such as altruism and self-sacrifice. Meanwhile, his son-in-law is becoming uncomfortably aware of the parallels that exist between the ant society that he is studying and the web of human relationships he has become part of in the Alabaster household, although he fails to see the logical conclusion of his suspicions: just as all the members of the hive are offspring of the Queen ant, and so all the couplings of the new Queen-to-be are incestuous, his wife has long been involved in an incestuous relationship with her half-brother.

Although the use of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as a textual referent is much more apparent, indeed overwhelmingly important, in "The Conjugal Angel" than in "Morpho Eugenia", Alabaster makes use of the Laureate's work to bolster up his own arguments, but like the poet he can, finally, only resort to his "feeling" that because human beings need to believe in a deity, such a deity must exist. He quotes all of section LIV of *In Memoriam*, "Oh yet we trust that somehow good / Will be the final goal of ill" (Byatt 1995: 87). The clergyman goes on to refer to Tennyson's haunting image of Man as a child crying in the night, needing his father but sure that he will come. Again there is an appeal to the heart, not the head, as Adamson ends by observing "The infant crying in the night receives not enlightenment, but the warm touch of a fatherly *hand*, and thus believes, thus *lives* his belief" (89). Adamson finds comfort, as did so many Victorians (the queen amongst them) in Tennyson's poem because it expressed their honest doubt but finally bolstered up their crumbling faith by declaring that they were right to trust their feelings rather than their new-found troubling knowledge. Not for nothing does the Genesis tale have Adam and Eve cast out of paradise for daring to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, as religious belief often seems to be at odds with rational thought and curiosity.

Byatt's scientist, Adamson, politely refutes Alabaster's arguments, citing Feuerbach: "I would answer as Feuerbach answers, "*Homo homini deus est*", our God is ourselves, we worship ourselves. We have made our God by specious analogy, Sir [...] You may argue anything at all by analogy, Sir, and consequently nothing" (Byatt 1995: 89). The thrust of the story is with the younger man, rather than with his father-in-law, who like Eliot's Farebrother "the clergyman and

collector of pinned dead insects” is the old order (Byatt 2001: 114,116). Adamson embraces the new scientific “Truths” explained by Darwin and others, but is also troubled by the possibility that scientific convictions about the nature of instinct in animals and, perhaps also in human beings, may finally prove to be as constricting as religion:

Those who argue that ants must blindly behave as ‘instinct’ dictates are making of ‘instinct’ a Calvinist God, another name for Predestination [and those who apply the same ideas to human creatures who have lost their wills] are substituting the Predestination of body and instinct for the iron control of a loving and vengeful Deity on a golden immutable throne in a Crystal Heaven. (Byatt 1995: 113)

The references to Calvinism remind us of Adamson’s explanation of his own lack of faith. It is the consequence of the appallingly barbaric version of Christianity to which he had been subjected in his youth. He relates how in one sermon on the subject of eternal punishment “we were given a horribly lively, exceedingly imaginative picture of the infinite torment: the hissing of burning flesh, the tearing of nerves, the piercing of eyeballs [...] millennia of ingenious cruelty –“ (Byatt 1995: 35). He goes on to say that he had felt cleansed when he rejected that God, “free, and in the clear light, as another man might feel upon suffering a blinding conversion” (35).

This ironic use of the imagery of Saul on the road to Damascus must lead us to conclude that the loss of religious belief involves the joyful casting away of a burden that has hampered thinkers for generations. Byatt is intrigued by religious thought as an object of literary and anthropological study, not as a belief system. Shuttleworth (2001) believed that writers of “Retro-Victorian” fiction were seeking a meaningful moment of crisis in the past, due to the lack of ideological conflict in the 1990s, but we can now see that there still exists a conflict between faith and science. Also, although Shuttleworth suspected the popularity of “Natural History” in fiction of being a means of displacing “contemporary fears concerning the indivisibility of man and machine onto the no longer threatening relationships between human and animal life” (2001: 154), a more immediate fear in 2012 is the actual and potential destruction that we are unleashing on our planet. This is one of the areas of science that have come to the fore in Byatt’s writing.

5. SPIRITUALISM IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

During the second half of the nineteenth century, spiritualism (which had started in America) became increasingly popular in Britain. At the end of *Angels and Insects*, as well as in *On Histories and Stories* (104) Byatt has acknowledged

a debt to Alex Owen's study of this phenomenon in her book *The Darkened Room* (1989) but there are also elements of this topic in *Possession*. A society as haunted by bereavement as in the Victorian Age, coupled with the growing suspicion that there was no redemption, no resurrection after death but only bodily corruption in the grave, was ripe for spiritualism, a fact which the author exploits in this novel. The lasting estrangement between the Victorian lovers in *Possession* is worsened by an incident at a séance. Ash misunderstands Christabel's accusation "You have made a murderess of me" as an admission that she has killed their baby, whereas she had been referring to her guilt over the suicide of her friend, Blanche Glover. The occasion leads to a denunciation of spiritualism by Ash and provides Byatt with another opportunity to display her ventriloquist powers, writing in the voices of others, in the form of a poem called "Mummy Possesst" which is a clever variation on the theme of Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "the Medium"'. (Browning's poem is also quoted as an epigraph to the novel). The descriptions of what is referred to as Ash's "Gaza Exploit" (his disruption of the séance) and the medium involved (Mrs Hella Lees) recall several facts detailed by Owen, such as the use of a "Red Indian girl called Cherry (an affectionate abbreviation of Cherokee)" (Byatt 1991: 393) which reminds us that the nineteenth century medium, Miss Wood, had Pocahontas, "a native American child who was usually referred to as 'Pocha' or 'Poka'" (Owen 2004: 57).

It is in "The Conjugal Angel", the second novella contained in *Angels and Insects*, that A.S. Byatt develops the theme of spiritualism in the Victorian Age as the natural consequence of religious doubt. It is both a love story and a ghost story, and the author says it is "revisionist and feminist. It would tell the untold story of Emily [née Tennyson], as compared to the often-told story of Arthur and Alfred in which Emily is a minor actress. I would write the séance in which the angel appeared and was rejected" (Byatt 1995: 104). The angel in question is one of Swedenborg's conjugal angels. According to the eighteenth century philosopher, these androgynous angels would be the manifestation of man and woman conjoined after death. According to Emily's granddaughter, the suggestion made at a séance that her grandmother would be reunited in this way with her dead fiancé, Arthur Hallam, rather than with her husband, was indignantly rejected by Emily herself (Byatt 1995: 103-4). A.S. Byatt was intrigued by the disapproval that greeted Emily Tennyson's decision to marry Captain Jesse, years after the sudden death of her youthful fiancé, Arthur Hallam, which had inspired her brother to write *In Memoriam*. Emily was in the strange situation of being regarded as a widow despite never having been married, and

being generally expected to stay in mourning rather than marrying another suitor.

In order to tell this story, Byatt creates a portrait of two mediums, Mrs. Papagay and Sophy Sheeky, who carry out séances in private homes, amongst them that of Emily Jesse. Liliás Papagay is intrigued by spiritualism and has a flair for passive writing, but the gifted medium is Sophy, who can really see and experience contact with the dead. Much of the factual, social information on which the author has based her portrait can be found in Alex Owen's study. Mediumship became a career opening for many women at a time when most professions were denied them and Byatt's characters have "slipped from the world of the purely amateur and private experiment to the delicately arranged world of the paid mediums" (Byatt 1995: 170). Mrs. Papagay wonders why there should be such a persistent invasion of spirits at that time, trying to push themselves back into the land of the living, but realizes that what truly captivates her is "life *now*", not the Hereafter. Her séance work brings her into contact with new people and in a new way. The following passage reflects what mediumship must have provided for many of the women involved:

For what had lain in wait for her, a dubious widow, in straitened circumstances, but constriction and tedium? [...] And this traffic with the dead was the best way to know, to observe, to love the living, not as they were politely over teacups, but in their secret selves, their deepest desires and fears. They revealed themselves to her, to Liliás Papagay, as they would never have done in usual society. Mrs. Jesse, for instance, was not rich, but she was a gentlewoman, Captain Jesse's family were landed gentry. Mrs. Papagay would not have mixed socially with the Jesses if it were not for the democracy of the Spirit World. (171)

She is a "dubious" widow in a double sense, both socially dubious and uncertain as to her widowhood, for her husband has disappeared ten years before, captaining the ship that bears Adamson and Matty Crompton to their new life on the Amazon in "Morpho Eugenia". Therefore, her situation resonates with that of Emily Tennyson, who also endured an uncertain kind of widowhood.

Whereas the images in *Morpho Eugenia* are largely drawn from the insect world, *The Conjugal Angel* is full of birds. Byatt has commented on the way they link various threads in her narrative: *In Memoriam*, Swedenborg's belief that "the thoughts of angels were perceived in the world of spirits in material form as birds" and the fact that Emily Tennyson kept a pet raven (2001: 107). They also serve to highlight the lively nature of Liliás and her long-lost husband, (another Arthur), Arturo Papagay, whose name derives from *papagayo*, the Spanish for "parrot". Arturo's return to his wife at the end of the story is

satisfyingly sensual and physical, as he draws her into his arms under his greatcoat and “she smelled his live smell, salt, tobacco, his own hair and skin, unlike any other hair and skin in the whole world, a smell she had kept alive when it seemed wiser to let it die in the memory of her nostrils” (289). Our sense of smell is said to be the most primitive, the one most closely and immediately associated with the memory, and this tale deals with memories of loved ones who have disappeared : Arturo, Hallam and five little girls, all called Amy, whose grieving mother fears that she “give[s] birth to death” (180). This sensual reference to smell also recalls Adamson’s awareness of Matty Crompton’s slightly sharp personal odour in *Angels and Insects*, contrasted with the fevered but sterile sweetness of his wife’s bed (96).

The longed-for embrace between Arturo and Liliás is contrasted with the macabre physical contact previously experienced by Mrs Papagay’s friend, the medium Sophy, who “materializes” the equally longed-for, but long dead, Arthur Hallam. His body feels “inert, like a side of beef” (Byatt 1995: 251), crushing her as she accepts his physical presence. He’s accompanied by “a sudden gust of odour, not rose, not violet, but earth-mould and corruption” (249) and when she finally succeeds in rejecting his terrifying need to suck the life out of her “he had no more face, or fingers, only clay-cold, airless, stinking mass, plastering her mouth and nostrils” (274). Sophy vows to herself that she will never again try to contact the terrible dead, a determination that is weakened by the need to participate in another séance. On this occasion she suffers a life-threatening seizure which only Liliás understands is real, not playacting. Her love and concern bring the medium back to safety after she has lain “entranced in the presence of absence, absence made of dripping clay and the dust falling from drooping feathers” (284). The séance disintegrates as a result of some bizarrely erotic and obscene passive writing, and there will be no more such spiritualist encounters in that house. Neither will there be any need for them. By the end of “A Conjugal Angel”, Emily has realized both that it is impossible to love the dead “enough” and also that her true partner is her husband, not the man she was briefly engaged to before his death. So apart from the Papagays’, there is another reunion between husband and wife, as the Jesses finally emerge from under the shadow of mourning for Hallam that had loomed over their marriage for some thirty years.

One curious aspect of this tale of spiritualism in the 1870s is that it is much more concerned with bodies, dead and alive, male and female, than the other novella, even though “Morpho Eugenia” includes references to several sexual relationships, including abusive ones. The author has commented on this, saying that she had become more and more aware of “the Victorian fear that we *are*

our bodies, and that, after death, all that occurs is natural mouldering... Spiritualism offers precisely the reassurance of the bodily identity of the departed – they can indeed touch and make themselves apparent to the senses” (2001: 108-9). Just as *In Memoriam* is full of the desire to touch Hallam, so the grieving mother at Mrs Papagay’s séances longs to feel the touch of her dead children’s hands and lips. As Alex Owen’s study makes clear, this was a longing that many Victorian mediums convinced their “sitters” that they were able to satisfy.

A.N. Wilson has commented on the incongruous connections between spiritualism and science. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 by “a group of intelligent and scientifically-minded scholars” (Wilson 2003: 439), Tennyson amongst them, who sought to establish the possible truth of spiritualist claims. They assessed such supposed “proof” as spirit photography. As Wilson comments: “What seems so characteristic of the age is the attempt to confirm one type of belief by means of an essentially alien mental process: enlisting science to verify the resurrection of the body and life everlasting seeming as inappropriate as appointing mystics to a chair of physics” (439).

Religion and science are issues that appear throughout A.S. Byatt’s work, although the only other one of her books to link them with the Victorian Age is *The Biographer’s Tale* (2002), in which two of the “characters” are Henrik Ibsen and Francis Galton. This book also has spiritual or mystical elements, but no spiritualism. However, her first collection of short stories, *Sugar* (1987) has two ghost stories, one of which “The July Ghost” explores the raw grief experienced by a mother whose son has been killed on the road two years before and whose lodger can see the ghost of the child. But he is invisible to the mother, who knows “there is no boy”. In 1991, Byatt was interviewed by Sue Lawley on BBC’s *Desert Island Discs* and spoke about this story being her first direct exploration in fiction of the death of her own son in 1972. At the time she had been writing *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), into which she had slipped references to another grieving mother whose son died in a playground accident, and her work has an undercurrent of loss that is often associated with bereavement. Her own conviction that there is no afterlife speaks through the character in “The July Ghost”, who says: “I’m too rational to see ghosts, I’m not someone who would see anything there was to see, I don’t believe in an after-life, I don’t see how anyone can, [...] Only my body wouldn’t stop waiting and all it wants is to – to see that boy. *That* boy” (46-7). The nameless woman in the story turns to spiritualist books, fruitlessly, as she, like the author, knows that life comes to a stop with death.

6. SCIENCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND IN RAGNARÖK

There are several religious characters, some of whom are sympathetically portrayed, in A.S. Byatt's quartet, but scientists are increasingly important in these novels. Frederica Potter's younger brother, Marcus, in his mid-teens goes through a troubled phase of religious fervor associated with the paedophile interests of a disturbed teacher, but reaches a much healthier state of self-awareness and maturity as a result of his work as a mathematician. Science leads him out of a mystical, delusive, maze. In an article published in *Nature* in 2005, the author reflects on the impact that science has made on her thinking and writing, (some of these thoughts she had put into Frederica's mind towards the end of the quartet in *A Whistling Woman* after a conference on Mind and Body, an interdisciplinary event which has entertained and informed Frederica, but has made her realize that she is profoundly ignorant about science). Byatt says that her own world "has been changed by all the scientific writers who have made their understanding approximately available to me, in plain English and working metaphors" (Byatt 2005).

A few years later in *The Children's Book* (2009) Byatt temporarily turned away from science to crafts, especially pottery, in this tale of creativity, sex and death: technology rather than science. However, in *Ragnarök* (2011) the author has come full circle. *Asgard and the Gods*, a copy of which her mother had given her when she was a child, was one of her earliest influences. This, together with colouring books of poems by Tennyson and Browning, helped to create Byatt's early feeling for myths and poetry, a blend which contributed to the creation of Henry Randolph Ash and his writing in *Possession*. As we have seen, Christabel LaMotte accuses him of having severely shaken her Christian faith with his version of the myth: *Ragnarök*. This is, in part, a tale of loss and grief that parallels the myth of Demeter and Persephone - a myth that Byatt used as a textual reference in the quartet as well as in *Possession*. The death of the beautiful Baldur, thought to be invulnerable, is alluded to by Ash, who claims that the word whispered by Odin to Baldur on his pyre was intended to be "Resurrection", but by the time the poet meets Christabel he has come to doubt this. The watchman of the gods, Hermodur,⁵ is sent to bargain with the queen of the kingdom of death and bring Baldur back to the land of the living to assuage the grief of his fellow gods, especially his mother:

for she could not live without him. To this Hel replied that mothers throughout time had learned to live without their sons. Every day young men died and came quietly over her

⁵ Baldur and Hermodur are A.S. Byatt's spellings of these names. Some versions of the myth call them Balder and Hermod.

golden bridge. Only in Asgard could they die in battle every day, as a game, and live again to feast in the evening. In the hard world, and in the world of shadows, death was not a game. (Byatt 2011: 105)

Hel sets terms which, inevitably, cannot be fulfilled and there is no resurrection of Baldur the Beautiful. “Baldur went, but he did not come back” (Byatt 2011: 77).

Some twenty years after her partial, poetic rendering of the story according to Henry Randolph Ash, A. S. Byatt’s new reworking of the Norse myth of the downfall of the Norse gods links her childhood self and literary influences with her present fears for the environmental crises faced by the Earth. In her essay “Thought on Myths” at the end of *Ragnarok* the author refers to the relevance of this myth of destruction to what we see all around us if we care to look: “Almost all the scientists I know think we are bringing about our own extinction, more and more rapidly” (167). Because her telling of the myth is framed by the thoughts of “the thin child” who reads the story while she hears the thrumming of bombers flying overhead and fears that her father will never return from the war, the natural world of seventy years ago which forms part of that frame story is contrasted with the increasing destruction of our present habitat. Byatt makes this contrast explicit in her essay: “The weeds in the fields the thin child sees and thinks of as eternal are many of them already made extinct by modern farming methods. Clouds of plovers do not rise. Thrushes no longer break snails on stones, and the house sparrow has vanished from our gardens” (2011: 167). These comments are reminiscent of her references in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman* to Rachel Carson’s seminal work on the environment, *Silent Spring* (1962). In the second half of Byatt’s tetralogy, several of the most significant characters are scientists, whose work Frederica comes to see as more invigorating and challenging than that which is done by her fellow Arts graduates. This is, unsurprisingly, a belief that Byatt shares. In an interview with an Australian science journalist, after commenting on how relentlessly her own education had been focused on the Arts to the almost total exclusion of scientific subjects, first at school and later at Cambridge she commented on the Two Cultures debate:

And CP Snow wrote *The Two Cultures* in which he said the literary culture is shockingly ignorant of the scientific one and people ought to know what the second law of thermodynamics is. And all my friends said rubbish, rubbish and they’re just dry, the scientists are awful. And I thought he’s quite right, and I don’t know what the second law of thermodynamics said. So I put it in train to find some things out. (Mitchell 2010)

Since that initial spark of interest, she has become intrigued by several areas of scientific research, especially genetics and neuroscience and has participated in encounters with scientists such as the neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti as well as acknowledging the inspiration and help provided by the neuroscientist Pierre Changeux and the geneticist Steve Jones.

In *The Biographer's Tale* the protagonist meets a Swedish bee taxonomist, Fulla Biefeld, who is working in the area of paleoecology because of her interest in pollination studies. Although at first she fails to make a very positive impression on Phineas, the unsuccessful biographer, Fulla soon interests him in the crisis facing our crops due to inadequate data on pollinators and their indiscriminate destruction as a result of human intervention and carelessness (119-20). Whereas Frederica Potter comes to straddle the "Two Cultures" through her journalistic work on television, Phineas Nanson moves further towards scientific work, abandoning his academic research and instead becoming involved as a helper in Fulla's experiments, as well as being her lover. Phineas discovers a love of writing which is compatible with his new interests and ends his narrative with a description of Fulla which links her with the Norse myths: "Fulla is the name of a minor Norse goddess- a handmaid of Frigga, who kept the jewels of the Queen of Heaven, and spent her time tending woodland and forests, fruit trees and hives, cloudberry, blackberry and golden apples" (260).

This brings us back to Byatt's latest work, as here we find another character from Norse mythology whom she links with science, for she sees the tricky, devious and creatively intelligent Loki who "was interested in things because he was interested in them, and in the way they were in the world, and worked in the world" (*Ragnarök* 113) as a prototype of the modern scientist. The last page of the book explores this idea: "[Loki] is interested in the order in destruction and the destruction in order. If I were writing an allegory he would be the detached scientific intelligence which could either save the earth or contribute to its rapid disintegration" (170). In a BBC interview⁶ with Mark Lawson, discussing *Ragnarök*, Byatt compared the different apocalyptic scenarios that those of her generation have lived through, such as the Second World War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cold War, but observed that her contact with scientists has led to her to see that the current threat to the environment is greater, and more imminent than those other man-made crises. That awareness of environmental catastrophe haunts this Norse myth of the end of the world through ice and fire. It is satisfyingly, or terrifyingly, absolute. She has rejected the Christian attempts by some mediaeval Icelandic scribes to append another, happier, resurrection of

⁶ *Front Row* September 2011, BBC Radio 4.

the world, favouring instead this bleak image of the end of the world after the last battle: “After a long time, the fire too died. All there was was a flat surface of black liquid glinting in the small pale points of light that still came through the starholes. A few gold chessmen floated and bobbed in the ripples” (Byatt 2011: 143).

7. CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, there is still an ideological conflict between those who support science and those who hold fast to their religious and/or spiritualist beliefs. So, as Levinson (2001) points out in his essay on Byatt’s work set in the Victorian Age: “What animates the historical turn in *Angels and Insects* is not a longing for a past epoch, but a conviction that history is now. We have indulged fantasies of sophistication; we have patronized the past and preened in our modernity. But the force of these historical fictions is to insist that although our time is not their time, their problems remain ours” (2001: 164). Awareness of the human impact on the non-human world is one of the features that separate the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.⁷ It is an awareness that serves to connect our moral sense and the need to engage with science in search of knowledge and solutions. A. S. Byatt’s fiction has been working towards this stance for at least the last two decades and, perhaps surprisingly, has developed it most dramatically in her retelling of an ancient myth: *Ragnarök*. In her essay on Van Gogh, Byatt observes: “We all make meanings by using the myths and fictions of our ancestors as a way of making sense, or excitement, out of our experience on the earth” (1993: 312), which is what she has done in this tale, using a myth to explore old and new fears together.

As the end of the world approached, the gods launched a death ship called Naglfar, “made of a material buoyant and dully translucent, the horny after-life of dead men’s nails [...] It was a ghost ship, bone-coloured, deathly grey, as though all the floating mess in the water, that would neither rot nor disintegrate, had coagulated and clung into this ramping vessel” (Byatt 2011: 138-39). It is a bleakly hopeless vision of lifelessness, and one which the author has explained that she saw as an image of the trash vortex, “the wheeling collection of indestructible plastic in the Pacific, larger than Texas” (Byatt 2011: 168).

⁷ There were some who observed, with dismay, what was happening in the Victorian period. In *Possession* there is a quotation from Edmund Gosse’s description of the havoc that misguided collectors were wreaking on the hapless creatures that inhabited the Victorian sea-shore (247).

In *Possession* and *Angels & Insects* A. S. Byatt explored the crisis of faith that was triggered by scientific discoveries in the Victorian Age. Part of that study involved a reworking of the Norse myth of the downfall of the gods which she has now returned to in order to illustrate the threat that faces us now. As an image of what we, as a species, may leave behind us, the trash vortex is a sobering one.

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