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"I Have This Kind of Grief for the Earth": A.S. Byatt's
Ecopoetics in *Ragnarök*, "Thoughts on Myth" and "Sea Story"

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Abstract

A.S. Byatt has expressed deep misgivings regarding the role which the human species has played in mis/shaping the natural world due to the wilful blindness which guides human behaviour in this respect. In fact, Byatt has focussed on the destruction of the planet caused by greedy and environmentally-unaware human beings in fictional texts such as *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* (2011) or "Sea Story" (2013), as well as in critical pieces such as "Thoughts on Myth" (2011). Hence, I am particularly interested in investigating how Byatt's texts have been shaped by environmental concerns, as expressed in both her fiction and her critical work. My reading of Byatt's ecopoetics will therefore be set within the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. Finally, I will also examine Byatt's argument that in a way her early fictional work was "a questioning quarrel" with her former Cambridge teacher F.R. Leavis's, whose "vision and values" she nevertheless "inherit[s] and share[s]" (*Passions of the Mind*, 2) in light of Leavis's discussion of "the organic community" as proto-ecocritical writing.

Keywords: A.S. Byatt; contemporary fiction; ecocriticism; F.R. Leavis; the organic community; the narrator's fixed gaze; proto-ecocritical writing; *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*; "Sea Story"; verbal painting

Ecocritical Concerns in A.S. Byatt's Fictional and Critical
Work: *Ragnarök*, "Sea Story" and "Thoughts on Myth"

A.S. Byatt has expressed deep misgivings regarding the role which the human species has played in mis/shaping the natural world due to the wilful blindness which guides human behaviour in this respect. In fact, Byatt has focussed on the destruction of the planet caused by greedy and

environmentally-unaware human beings in fictional texts such as *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* (2011) or "Sea Story" (2013), as well as in critical pieces such as "Thoughts on Myth" (2011).

Hence, I am particularly interested in investigating how Byatt's texts have been shaped by environmental concerns, as expressed in both her fiction and her critical work. My reading of Byatt's ecopoetics will therefore be set within the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. This term has been coined in a relatively recent past to designate the study of literature and the environment as informed by the interdisciplinary fields of literary, social and scientific study, as Simon Estok points out in his brief yet illuminating historical discussion on the theoretical framework, aims, and methodological approach of the concept of ecocriticism in his 2001 article "A Report Card on Ecocriticism." Consequently, ecocriticism is carried out by literary scholars who examine texts that illustrate specific environmental concerns in addition to examining the general thematic treatment of nature in literature. Unlike other forms of more politicised criticism, there has not been significant disagreement concerning the ethical and philosophical purposes of ecocriticism. Hence, several scholars agree with Estok that "ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections" (220).

More recently, in the suitably entitled introduction "Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene" to the essay collection *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018), Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino have conceptualised the intersection between affect theory and ecocritical studies as "affective ecocriticism" to describe the "range of emotional forms, such as anxiety, fear, sorrow, and more complicated responses like 'climate grief' or other 'Anthropocene disorders'" (2) which audiences are faced with when they read or listen to stories which "cast environmental catastrophe in affectively striking terms" (1). This critical term, Bladow and Ladino argue, encompasses affect theorists' tendency to "prioritize affect within and in relation to bodies" as well as ecocritics' "eagerness to champion

greater attention to the more-than-human world" (4). In the case of "Sea Story," *Ragnarök* and "Thoughts on Myth," I would argue, affective ecocriticism is a particularly relevant critical tool to examine the way Byatt articulates an overwhelming sense of environmental loss with the corresponding emotions of sorrow and distress for that state of affairs vis-à-vis the suggestion of a course of action that might stop what Byatt tellingly terms "a kind of grief for the earth" in a 2011 interview by Tanya Harrod and Glenn Adamson (68).

In light of the goals set by environmental humanities scholars such as Bladow and Ladino, namely finding "new, more compelling ways to foreground connections between environmental and social justice," and reaching "across ideologies, species, and scalar boundaries to find common ground in this new geologic epoch" (3), 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. If, as Bladow and Ladino argue, "affect theory can help with both [proposed aims]" due to the fact that "both climate and social justice activists require altruistic emotions as a foundation for action, a clearer sense of what those emotions are and how they work might reconnect environmental and social justice" (3), then ecocritical fiction such as the three texts under discussion may play a decisive role in raising the environmental and social awareness which could set the basis for action.

Given the fact that "[t]he moral seriousness of A.S. Byatt's fiction derives much from her concept of responsibility; and responsibility, for her, is most importantly the business of marshalling and applying one's intellect to every area of one's life" (para. 1), as Alex Clark remarks in his 2009 review of Byatt's *The Children's Book*, then the ethical stand of ecocritical analysis is particularly significant in the context of my discussion. My analysis of Byatt's environmentally-concerned texts will be informed by a few select key terms of ecocriticism, albeit in a necessarily brief and preliminary way. Given the scope of this article, the subtler complexities and internal debates of this theoretical approach will not be examined here. Finally, in light of Leavis's discussion of "the organic community" as proto-ecocritical writing, I will also examine

Byatt's argument that in a way her early fictional work was "a questioning quarrel" with her former Cambridge teacher F.R. Leavis, whose "vision and values" she nevertheless "inherit[s] and share[s]" (*Passions of the Mind* 2).

Ecocritical Forefathers: F.R. Leavis's Proto-ecocritical Writings

There are literary texts – namely Romantic poetry, Thoreau's *Walden*, or F.R. Leavis's writings on the "organic community" – which can now be read as proto-ecocritical texts within a critical framework that did not exist at the time of their creation. The latter are particularly relevant to the context of my discussion, given my premise that Leavis's writings on the deleterious effects of progress and the consequent disappearance of what he termed "the organic community" have also decisively shaped Byatt's environmental concerns.

Leavis's 1933 essay "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture" is a good example of his affinity with Matthew Arnold's discussion of culture, as well as a meditation on the nefarious social and religious effects of "the machine." Currently, this can be construed as a critique of the exclusively anthropocentric interpretation of the world in terms of human standards, which many ecocritics deem to be the primary cause of human-made ecological problems. In this light, Leavis approvingly quoted Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* to open his discussion on the relation between culture and civilisation which, he agreed with Arnold, was being severed by industrialisation. In the quoted passage, Arnold argued that culture "has a very important function to fulfil for mankind" (Arnold 48-49) vis-à-vis the ever-increasing mechanisation of his contemporary civilization. Since Thomas Carlyle held a similar view in his essay "Signs of the Times," I would argue that Leavis drew upon both Arnold's and Carlyle's theories about the dismal consequences of industrialisation. Leavis would certainly agree with Carlyle that mechanisation had a profoundly negative impact on their contemporary social, intellectual and moral life since "[m]en have grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand" (Carlyle 34).

Before industrialisation had irredeemably changed the social and cultural life of English people ever since the Victorian age, Leavis and Thompson claimed that the organic community existed in the villages of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England (*Culture and Environment* 1-2) and bore the unique traits of a solidly established, locally self-reliant “national culture rooted in the soil” since “the popular basis of culture was agricultural,” which accounted for “the strength and subtlety of English idiom” as it derived “from an agricultural way of life” (Leavis, *For Continuity* 216). Such was the importance of this particular type of community on cultural development and literary undertaking in Leavis’s view that, as he had put it earlier in an essay on Bunyan included in *The Common Pursuit*, “[t]here would have been no Shakespeare and no Bunyan if in their time, with all its disadvantages by present standards, there had not been, living in the daily life of the people, a positive culture which has disappeared and for which modern revolutionaries, social reformers and Utopists do not commonly project any serious equivalent” (*The Common Pursuit* 208).

Conversely, Leavis’s writings on the lost organic community may be argued to have a distinctive reverberation of the mythos of “Merrie Olde England” in their shared utopian conception of an English society and culture whose idyllic, bucolic lifestyle would be severed by the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Hence, both the myth of Merry England and Leavis’s view of the organic community can also be read in the light of the ethical concern with a physical environment increasingly ravaged by destructive human action which characterises modern-day ecocriticism.

However, even a brief look at the work of historians, folklorists and cultural theorists suffices to understand the way both the myth of Merry England and Leavis’s views on the organic community need to be qualified. Folklorist Roy Judge described the world of Merry England as “a world that has never actually existed, a visionary, mythical landscape, where it is difficult to take normal historical bearings” (131). Likewise, in his study *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis* (1979), R.P. Bilan offers a detailed analysis of both Leavis’s literary sources for the definition of the organic community and of two historians’ description of the actual nature of life in seventeenth-century England. Consequently, Bilan argues that

Leavis's view of the seventeenth-century life was incomplete, since by relying exclusively on literature, it failed to be supported by historical data. Bilan therefore discusses Leavis's picture of the daily life of working people as seemingly too idyllic in the light of historical accounts of the stark grimness of poor people's lives in the early seventeenth century, physically stained by famine, pestilence and sudden death, and politically blemished by the total lack of any rights (12-13). Finally, and despite writing in *Culture and Society* that "few men have done more [than Leavis] to extend the depth and range of literary studies, and to relate them to other interests and other disciplines" (255), Raymond Williams qualifies Leavis's views of the organic community as a "version of history [which] is myth in the sense of conjecture," since "[i]f there is one thing certain about the 'organic community', it is that it has always gone" (259).

The Leavisite Vision of the "Organic Community" in A.S. Byatt's *Ecopoetics*

Leavis's views on the organic community have quite recently been readdressed in an unexpected conjunction with Byatt's fictional work. In her "Interview with A.S. Byatt" for *The Journal of Modern Craft* (2011), Harrod and Adamson convincingly link Leavis's organic community with Byatt's *The Children's Book* by stressing the melancholy sense of a lost world which is common to both (68). In fact, Byatt's novel – set in the period from 1895 to just after the Great War – compellingly portrays the Edwardian age as a transitional period of pleasure in-between the great social and political achievements of the preceding Victorian age and the catastrophe of World War One. In her answer, Byatt pointedly draws on the late Victorians' and Edwardians' perception of a lost world they thought they might be able to create anew:

[I]t was a world that they felt was lost, but I think they really felt they could recreate it. I don't think they felt, as I now do, it was lost forever. I am as a writer in mourning for the earth I grew up on, which won't exist for my grandchildren. I am in mourning for walking out in the fields and woods and seeing thrushes on the lawn. We have no thrushes here now. We have no house sparrows. They were here when we came. We had

green finches. I have this kind of grief for the earth. I don't know if I have a grief about human societies. (68)

This narrative structure serves a dual purpose. First, it metaphorically anticipates the darkening of the times via Byatt's calling into play of Greek mythology and legend in the novel's reference to three of four (or five) of Hesiod's Ages of Man (in which the Golden Age is first, followed in sequence, by the Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and then the present Iron Age, which is a period of decline, sometimes followed by the Leaden Age). Not least, this narrative structure allows Byatt to convincingly charter the characters' progress from a Golden Age of peace and prosperity very akin to Leavis's view of the organic community to the Age of Lead of the Great War, which would correspond to the demise of the organic community via the Industrial Revolution. In this light, to Bilan's assessment that "Leavis wants us to understand not just the nature of the past, and what he thinks has been lost, but the nature of the changes that have produced our modern civilization" (13), I would add Byatt's name as well, in what I read as another theoretical tie between Leavis and Byatt.

And yet, in the last two sentences of her answer, Byatt subtly detaches herself from Leavis's Lawrence-like sympathy for a rural way of life and, more importantly, the general loss of the sense of community proper that Leavis lamented. In fact, this disengagement from the Leavisite view of the organic community is quite apparent in Byatt's declaration that she has a kind of grief for the earth, in its ontological meaning of natural environment, which she is not sure that she feels with regards to human societies, organic or otherwise. This position can be situated within the rejection of an anthropocentric conception of the world, which many ecocritics subscribe to on the premise that ecological crises are increasingly the result of either wilful, or else stupidly careless, human actions. Worse, these are not even concerned with the maintenance of the sustainable environment which is necessary for human welfare, let alone for its own sake.

Likewise, these two sentences may be read as Byatt's un-Leavisite assertion of Wordsworth's ecological poetics as illustrated in his poem "The World Is Too Much With Us." In fact, in the poem's opening lines "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we

lay waste our powers" (122), the poetic persona explicitly rebukes humankind for severing their connection with nature to favour human-made consumerism instead. The next four lines are an enumeration of the natural elements with which "we are out of tune," since neither "[t]his Sea that bares her bosom to the moon," nor "[t]he winds that will be howling at all hours," not even the winds that "are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers" can move us. The poem ends with the poetic persona's ultimate rejection of such a degenerate society in favour of his marked preference for an idyllic past culture which duly celebrated nature as expressed in his evocation of himself as "[a] Pagan suckled in a creed outworn," in which he might "[h]ave sight of Proteus rising from the sea; / Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn" (122).

In this sense, Byatt can be said to take a more radical view of ecological affairs since she is concerned with the future of the planet rather than what can also be read as Leavis's nostalgic revision of a paradisiac, lost past. In this light, *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* and "Sea Story" fully illustrate Byatt's ecological concerns.

Creation and Destruction in *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*

In his 2019 article "Byatt, 'Fiction and Biofiction'," Max Saunders convincingly reasons that in *Ragnarök* Byatt achieves a delicate balance between the depiction of the fast disintegration of the natural world due to bombing and its blooming survival notwithstanding. "One reason the Norse stories resonate," Saunders argues, "is clearly because this child's world is destroying itself all around her; and the picture of a young mind beginning to comprehend the scale of that destruction is immensely poignant" (99). More importantly, however, is that "what also comes across so strongly is *life*". In fact, Byatt juxtaposes long descriptive passages brimming with colour, movement and sound to the narrative sequences concerned with the devastating effects of war on human lives:

Life was a state in which a war was on. Nevertheless, by a paradoxical fate, the child may only have lived because her people left the sulphurous air of a steel city, full of smoking chimneys, for a country town, of no interest to enemy bombers. She grew up in the ordinary paradise of the

English countryside. When she was five she walked to school, two miles, across meadows covered with cowslips, buttercups, daisies, vetch, rimmed by hedges full of blossom and then berries, blackthorn, hawthorn, dog-roses, the odd ash tree with its sooty buds. (*Ragnarök* 3)

Hence, Byatt strikingly contrasts the ephemeral nature of plants whose life cycle is nevertheless seasonally renovated as opposed to the longer span of human life which is unable to emulate the natural world in that respect. In fact, as the narrator noticed, “[t]hey flourished and faded and died and always came back next spring” (35) since plants, unlike human beings, “always would [come back next spring], the thin child thought, long after she herself was dead” (36).

Consequently, I agree with Saunders that “*Ragnarök* thus shows the elemental aspect of creating life as well as destroying it.” In fact, as Saunders remarks, “[f]or Byatt it is not merely a matter of imagining a few human characters, but of imagining them in the context of all life; of the natural world, but also of the evolution of that world” (99). This argument is particularly relevant in light of the sense of communion with nature as experienced by the thin girl, which emphasises her sense of belonging in the natural world by placing humankind on an equal footing with non-human species: “It was all one thing, the field, the hedge, the ash tree, the tangled bank, the trodden path, the innumerable forms of life, of which the thin child, having put down her bundle and gas-mask, was only one among many” (*Ragnarök* 36). Moreover, Saunders emphasises, Byatt is also “highly aware of the threat to all life in the Anthropocene period, as the planet warms, bee numbers fall and human violence threatens ever new and lethal assaults on the environment” (99).

Byatt’s above-quoted passages, I would argue, additionally illustrate what Ralf Hertel aptly describes as “literature’s capacity to evoke visual impressions in the reader” via its “verbal power to create mental images” (49). In fact, in his 2005 study *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s* (in which he briefly analyses Byatt’s *Still Life* and *The Matisse Stories*), Hertel focusses on the “literary devices employed to create visual impressions, on the capacity of the words visually to evoke objects that are not there” (49). In the context of my discussion of Byatt’s ecocritical texts, the most

important rhetorical device "through which the texts assume pictorial qualities" (44) is the one which Hertel terms "the narrator's gaze." This descriptive technique is expressed by the immobility of the narrator's fixed gaze, which "creates descriptions that resemble film stills" since "[t]he narrative development of the plot is frozen for a moment and gives way to a detailed and elaborate observation of scenes" (35). In other words, Hertel argues, "*descriptio* replaces *narratio*" (35): the narrator's fixed gaze seems to empty his/ her narration "of time and movement and heightens the awareness of details" (35) in which "the narration of events gives way to the description of figural arrangements" (44). Hertel's central argument that "it is as though the flow of events was turned into the stasis of a verbal painting" (35) is particularly relevant given Byatt's pictorial writing, as the following passage from *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* clearly evinces:

She liked seeing, and learning, and naming things. Daisies. Day's eyes, she learned with a frisson of pleasure. Buttercups, glossy yellow, a lovelier colour than gold, and the ubiquitous dandelions, fiercely yellow with toothed leaves and seedheads finer than wool, their seeds black dots like the tadpoles in the clouds of jelly-spheres in the pond. In spring the field was thick with cowslips, and in the hedgerows, in the tangled bank, under the hawthorn edge and the ash tree, there were pale primroses and violets of many colours, from rich purple to a white touched with mauve. Dandelion, dent-de-lion, lionstooth, her mother told her. Her mother liked words. There were vetches and lady's bedstraw, forgetmenots and speedwells, foxgloves, viper's bugloss, cow parsley, deadly nightshade (wreathed in the hedges), willowherb and cranesbill, hairy bittercress, docks (good for wounds and stings), celandines, champions and ragged robin. She watched each one, as they came out, in clumps sprinkled across the grass, or singletons hidden in ditches or attached to stones. (34)

Therefore, Hertel emphasises the role played by the imagination in this theoretical framework which envisages the act of reading as a creative process which, in the particular field of sensations, aims for the evocation of visual (and olfactory, auditive, tactile or gustatory) impressions in the reader:

It seems that the imagination provides a 'mysterious unity between the intellectual and the sensory' and bridges the gap between fact and fiction. It is commonly considered "the 'missing link' between sensory enjoyment

and intellectual understanding.” Literary theorists connect it to the creation of illusion, i.e., ‘the semblance of reality and verisimilitude in art which most writers seek to create in order to enable readers to think that they are seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting and smelling, or conceivably, having some extra-sensory or kinaesthetic experience’. In other words, they define imagination as the ability to conjure up objects that are not actually there through simulated perception. (19-20)

If “[in] creating these quasi-sensuous feelings the act of reading is of crucial importance” (Hertel 21), it is also true that the literary text must first be able to evoke these feelings in the reader via sheer verbal power. This is evinced in Byatt’s lively descriptions of the natural world which capture the colours, sounds and movements of the plants and animals which fill the countryside in which the thin child freely rambles despite the ever-present, looming background threat of the war that rages elsewhere:

The tangled bank was full of life, most of it unseen, though it could be heard, rustling in dead leaves, or listening to the child listening. You could hear the attention of a hidden bird, or a crouching vole. She watched the spiders weave their perfect geometrical traps, or lurk under an inviting thick silk funnel. There were, at different times of the year, clouds of butterflies, yellow and white, blue, orange and velvet black. The fields were full of sipping, humming birds. The branches and the sky were inhabited by birds. The skylark went up and up out of the bare earth into the blue sky, singing. Thrushes banged snails against stones and left a crackling carpet of empty shells. Rooks strode and cawed and gathered in glossy parliaments in the tree-tops. Huge clouds of starlings went overhead wheeling like one black wing, coiling like smoke. Plovers called. (34-35)

The Narrator’s Fixed Gaze and Verbal Ecocritical Painting in “Sea Story”

In “Sea Story” (a short story which launched an exclusive series of stories commissioned by, and published in, *The Guardian* in March 2013, in which water was the thematic link), Byatt uses the same descriptive strategies she used in *Ragnarök* to achieve a delicate balance between the depiction of life and death as respectively epitomised by the wild waters

of the Filey Brigg river and the polluted waters of the Atlantic Gyre or the Caribbean Trash Vortex.

Fittingly described in *The Guardian* as "a tale of love and environmental disaster," "Sea Story" tells primarily a tale of love for the sea. Adapting Hertel's words in a different context, I would argue that this "all pervasive subtext [...] strengthens the impression of timelessness: the narrator's individual story appears to be part of a more general, universal tale" (Hertel 43). This is the more evident in the story's description as a tale of environmental disaster, since "[f]rom a distance, the characters are not only entangled in their individual struggles but share an eternal fate as emblematically expressed in the underlying" environmental subtext (Hertel 43). Finally, I would add, the fact that the male protagonist's name is omitted until the very last paragraph in the story contributes to the overall impression that the sea story is more important than the human story.

In fact, and quite significantly in the context of her characteristically loaded name choosing, Byatt chooses to give her protagonist a name she has already used in the novella "Morpho Eugenia," albeit with a slightly different spelling. Hence, the protagonist's name in "Sea Story" is furthermore stippled in historical and literary meaning in true Byattian fashion. The given name "Harold" (as well as its Old Norse cognate Harald, used in "Morpho Eugenia") is the name of five kings of Norway and three kings of Denmark. Derived from the Old English name Herewald, in which "here" means "army" whereas "weald" signifies "power, leader, ruler," it thus suggests a powerful combination of fight allied to leadership. Additionally, Harold was also the name of two kings of England who were both from mixed Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon backgrounds: Harold Harefoot, or Harold I (circa 1015-1040), King of England from 1035 to 1040; and Harold Godwinson, or Harold II (circa 1022-1066), the last Anglo-Saxon king of England since he lost, and was killed in, the Battle of Hastings, which would lead to the Norman Conquest.

In addition to its historical implications, Harold is also the name of the protagonist of Lord Byron's long narrative poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," published between 1812 and 1818. Byron's "childe,"

a medieval title to designate a young nobleman not yet knighted, seeks distraction from his disenchanted pursuit of pleasure by going on a solitary pilgrimage to foreign lands. In the first three cantos, Byron conjures up synchronous historical events and people in addition to the description of Childe Harold's travels through Portugal, Spain, the Ionian Islands, Albania, Belgium, the Rhine Valley, the Alps, and the Jura. Conversely, in the fourth canto the poet himself replaces the imaginary pilgrim by speaking in the first person about the Italian cities of Venice, Ferrara, Florence, and Rome, as well as their coeval artists and native heroes.

In this light, Emily Rodriguez's argument in her 2019 entry for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" could also be relevant in the different context of Byatt's "Sea Story":

To Byron's literary public, the work offered a poetic travelogue of picturesque lands and gave vent to the prevailing moods of melancholy and disillusionment. The world-weary Childe Harold came to personify the so-called Byronic hero, thus becoming one of the best-known types of the age. The work also voiced with a frankness unprecedented in the literature of that time the disparity between romantic ideals and the realities of the world. (n.p.)

In fact, I would argue that Byatt's Harold may be said to retain one of the Childe's characteristics, namely his implied status of initiation as he has not been tried in battle yet. In "Sea Story," though he is not world-weary, the one who wields the Romantic power of being at one with the sea is yet unable to gather his figurative armies to fight the very literal war against ocean pollution. At the narrative plan of the individual story, Byatt's Harold's "prevailing moods of melancholy and disillusionment" can be suggested to correspond to the utter absence of communication between him and Laura; at the same time, they are replicated in the pervasive sense of pending environmental disaster in the wider story of the sea. In this sense, "Sea Story" might also be read as a modern example of "the disparity between romantic ideals" of a pantheistic appreciation of nature as the vital source of spiritual, almost mystical restoration and repose, and "the realities of [a] world" whose scientific and technological advances have steadily increased the degradation of the natural world, a Romantic

worldview Byatt clearly endorses in her beautifully-crafted paragraphs on the global destruction of the oceans.

At the narrative plan of the individual story, "Sea Story" tells the tale of the male protagonist Harold, who was born to parents related to the sea in different ways (his father was an oceanographer and his mother "taught English at a high school and wrote fierce little poems about waves and weather"), in a Yorkshire fishing town next to the Filey Brigg river. The family's hobbies were walking along the beach and collecting bottles "picked up by sailing vessels and along coastlines," several of which "were numbered bottles, sealed and weighted to bob along the seabed, designed by the Marine Science project to map the movement of currents around the coast." One of the bottles, though, had a romantic background as opposed to the main scientific purpose evoked by the others: it contained "a lined sheet of paper. This read 'Dear Mary' and was followed by the phrase 'I love you, I love you, I love you [...]' repeated until it filled both sides. It was meticulously signed Robert Fisher, with an address in Hull" ("Sea Story," n.p.). Quite significantly, in view of the story's later revelations, the message in this bottle was important enough for the protagonist to want to know the end of that story. Sadly, however, the narrator lets us readers know that there was no happy ending since "the house turned out to have been demolished by bombs in 1944" ("Sea Story," n.p.).

Hertel's remark that the imagination mysteriously unites sensory enjoyment and intellectual understanding is particularly relevant here since both the material and the literary sea exert a duly influence on the protagonist. In fact, the rushing waters he contemplates every day find their literary equivalent in John Masefield's 1902 poem "Sea Fever" that his mother used to recite to him. In this light, it can be suggested that the call of the real, "unique Filey Brigg, a mixture of many rocks, beginning at Carr Naze, and stretching out in a long peninsula into the North Sea, full of rock pools and rivulets, harsh and tempting at once" ("Sea Story") imaginatively reverberates in "the call of the running tide / [which] Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied" as captured by Masefield, the English Poet Laureate from 1930-1967 who trained as a

merchant seaman and would later use his memories of that time to write poems describing his experience at sea (Masefield 155).

Byatt eerily captures the protagonist's sense of communion with his surrounding seascape by emphasizing the peculiarly non-human characteristics of his being one with nature in what might be construed as reverse anthropomorphism, by which I mean attributing non-human traits to human beings:

The space inside his skull was composed of an almost abstract form – the sweep of sand, the black protuberance of the Brigg with the waves licking it or crashing over it, and most of all the huge curve of the horizon. It was an empty line, and it signified the inhuman. That is, it was the limit of human vision. Beyond and beneath it were spaces and moving things unknown to men, unseen and unimaginable. (“Sea Story” n.p.)

Such is the power of the imaginary waters that “[i]t was something set in motion by that poem, more than any other, which led him to follow his mother, to study English literature, and to teach” (“Sea Story” n.p.). However, in Oxford, the tame river “was a place for punts and rowing boats,” quite unlike the expansive, sometimes menacing rushing of the Filey Brigg, with its “sweep of sand, the black protuberance of the Brigg with the waves licking it or crashing over it, and most of all the huge curve of the horizon” (“Sea Story” n.p.).

“[T]he call of the running tide” merges with the “peculiarly painful” absence from the sea so that, his Oxford days over, Harold returns to Filey, where he spends his days in quiet enjoyment of the real sea in which he fishes in his rowing boat, and of the literary sea he teaches and reads about in “a kind of anthology of the sea” he kept from his college days, notably *Moby Dick*. It is thus quite significant that “[w]hen he fell in love it was an immediate shock which was at once absorbed into his inner landscape,” since that is almost exclusively occupied by the sea (“Sea Story” n.p.). His first encounter with the object of his affections is quite memorable since, I would argue, Byatt expertly combines the mythological figuration of the siren with the literary figure of Petrarch's Laura in her portrayal of her eponymous Laura:

He was fishing from his boat, beyond the end of the Brigg when she rose up beside him, a pale woman in a sleek black wetsuit, like a seal, her long, lovely face streaming with sea water. She trod water and smiled mildly at him and stayed to speak about the weather, the beauty of the bay. Her name was Laura and she had just sat her final exams in marine biology in Aberdeen. She was on a holiday with a group of fellow students staying in the Three Tuns pub. He could see that under her cap her hair was long and white-gold. She was mild, she was sunny. Love at first sight was not something he had believed in until it happened. His own side of their conversation was shocked and hesitant. He feared to say anything that would break the spell or cause her to frown. He drew in his line, so as not to entangle her when she dived again. ("Sea Story" n.p.)

Like Petrarch's Laura, Byatt's Laura is also fair-haired and twice described as "mild," a personality trait believed by some critics to be embodied by the ideal Renaissance woman which is also much lauded in Petrarch's sonnets. Quite significantly, this encounter takes place when Harold is fishing from his boat and notices a siren-like figure rising from the water to address him in a decidedly uncharacteristic benevolent, un-siren like fashion. In fact, the sirens in Greek mythology, and notably in Homer's *Odyssey*, were believed to be treacherous creatures who enticed unsuspecting sailors with their lovely songs in order to make them drown near the deadly cliffs of their rocky islands so they could loll "there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses rotting away, rags of skin shrivelling on their bones" (Homer 12.45-6). Yet, unlike the Greek sirens, and in addition to her Petrarchan charms, Byatt's siren-like figuration further enchants the male protagonist by metaphorically singing about their shared love of the sea when she reveals she is a marine biologist. Additionally, there is also an ingenious hint to the timelessness of the wonder-tale universe as expressed in the protagonist's fear to "break the spell" which mingles with the reinforced suggestion of the siren-like Laura when she dives again.

From this point on, the Petrarchan theme of unrequited love is fully explored in the protagonist's asking for Laura's address on their first proper meeting at the local pub in the aftermath of her announcement that she is off to the Caribbean the following week in pursuit of her professional dream, since he is unable to reach her despite his best efforts by post and email. Like Petrarch, Harold had had little personal contact

with his Laura until “[o]ne day he remembered the love letter in the drift bottle on his mantelpiece” and decided to metaphorically unbottle his feelings by literally bottling them up in a love poem which he then bottled “tightly, and rowed out in his boat to where he knew, from his grandfather’s work, that the currents could possibly take the message as far as the Sargasso Sea” (“Sea Story” n.p.). In true Petrarchan form, Harold’s poem exalts his love without trying to persuade its object to love him in return. While Byatt’s male protagonist in his capacity as suffering poet does not emulate Petrarch’s stylised word game in many of his sonnets between *l’aura* (the wind) and his beloved Laura, Harold still uses the Petrarchan technique of describing his love through references to the natural backdrop, in this case the sea.

Paragraphs 19, 20 and 21 are perhaps the best examples in this story of the juxtaposition of descriptive passages which appeal especially to the senses of sight and hearing via the use of colour words and the depiction of the fluid movement of water in rivers and oceans to suggest the opposition between life and death I have already discussed in *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*. Paragraph 19 depicts the water journey of the bottle containing Harold’s love letter to Laura by alternating passages dominated by movement verbs to indicate the bottle’s crossing of the oceans, and descriptive passages which list in detail both the human plastic waste that can be found in every ocean vis-à-vis the narrator’s fixed gaze, whose initial suggestion of colourful beauty from afar turns into desolation upon closer inspection:

It travelled far. It rode south to North Anglia, and was then carried north past Holland to head round Denmark, past Norway to the Arctic Ocean. It survived the wet and the cold and lost some of its brilliant greenness, becoming smeared with a thick brown algal slime. In the Arctic it was arrested for a time, and moved in circling swirls before being blown again back onto the current which took it south and then round the coast of Greenland. It bobbed and slopped across the Atlantic Ocean, past Newfoundland and Nova Scotia; it was snapped at by seabirds off the coast of Massachusetts, where a stream of cold water took it south into the Caribbean. Here it was arrested at the fringe of a slowly swirling carpet of floating fragments. They were all shapes and sizes and some of them were in jewelled colours, emerald, opal, crimson, cobalt, ultramarine. But the overall colour was a colourless all-colour of stained whiteness, deathly

pale. This was the Atlantic Gyre or the Caribbean Trash Vortex. It is said to be the size of Texas and moves slowly in the ocean. It is composed of human plastic waste, and beneath it, hidden under the movement of the sea surface, vast curtains of tiny particles hang fathoms deep. ("Sea Story" n.p.)

In paragraph 20, the narrator's gaze closes upon the deleterious effects of human waste on the marine habitat and its dire consequences on animal life. Hence, the fact that Harold threw a bottle into the ocean is now suggestive of an irresponsible, thoughtless human action which will play a part in damaging and even killing animal life, rather than the romantic gesture it was meant to be, of sending a love letter to someone who would most likely never read it (even if it were not for the fact that in all likelihood it would be stopped in a gigantic waste pool). Therefore, the bottle is just added waste which the one who wields power is unaware he unleashed into the ocean:

The bottle sidled between an ethereal shopping bag and a cracked shoehorn, was sucked down and spat up, its green sides glittering in the sun. A mollymawk snapped at it. It was beginning to disintegrate, its walls furring and feathering. The mollymawk tore at it, and carried away a smeared strip to feed to its chicks, who would die with bellies distended by this stuff. The cap detached itself, and was swallowed by a green turtle which mistook it for a glass eel. When this turtle choked and died, the cap was picked from its remains by another turtle, which also choked. The signet ring was heavy enough to plummet down to the ocean floor, where a hagfish lunged at it, swallowed it and choked. A fat eel took the letter with its weeping words, and excreted it. Paper decays, the letter decomposed itself. The body of the bottle separated into shreds of green-grey floaters. Some of these were mistaken for small squid by hungry fish and swooping gannets, whose guts were already swollen with waste. What remained was washed and rubbed into nurdles which joined the mass of other pale beads. ("Sea Story" n.p.)

Fragments of the letter, the reader is told in paragraph 21, would indeed reach Laura under the form of nurdles, which she studied under the microscope only to read a message quite unintended by Harold:

Parts of this mess did in fact reach their intended destination. Many of the nurdles were caught in vast trailing micronets, attached to boats, once designed to study plankton, now part of a long and painstaking experiment

to examine the bulk of nurdles and the diminishing bulk of the plankton. There she was, Laura, sleekly blackclad, bright-haired like some marine goddess gathering in the tears, the beads, the microscopic living things. She looked at them in a glass dish under a strong microscope. The message she read was the human occupation and corruption of the masterless ocean. ("Sea Story" n.p.)

In this light, I would argue, there is a definite cinematic quality in these paragraphs since they suggest the narrator's gaze progressively zooming in upon the elements it depicts in the same way a camera would do in a film sequence (Mercado 29). Hence, paragraph 19 emulates the cinematic extreme long shot as a study in scale and majesty to convey the relative invisibility of individual scraps of rubble in the geographic magnitude of the Atlantic Gyre. From the stained white yet indistinct mass of floating objects and fragments in the Caribbean Trash Vortex, in paragraph 20, the cinematic narrator closes up on Harold's bottle as a particular piece of debris that has caused massive destruction upon the particular marine ecosystem which eventually tore it apart only to be torn apart in turn by the bottle's nefarious effects. Like the cinematic technique of close-up it mirrors in writing, this is meant to engage the reader in a direct and personal manner by starting to focus on each particular animal affected by Harold's bottle in a more intimate and impacting way to the detriment of imparting visual information about their surroundings. Finally, in paragraph 21, the narrator's gaze meticulously zooms in upon microscopic living beings and the way they too are affected by microscopic particles of waste, namely from Harold's bottle, so as to amplify emotional intensity by letting the reader focus on visual details which significantly add to the progressively more dramatic *mise-en-scène* due to the symbolic as well as literal meaning of the tiny fragments of debris.

The last paragraph resumes the individual story by succinctly stating the fate of the two main characters many years from the events described before, and unites it to the universal story of the sea in their shared unhappy ending:

Harold married a fellow poet, had three daughters whom he loved, strode along Filey Beach collecting plastic bags and debris, retired and died. Laura had died long ago, caught in the micromeshes of her netting when her boat capsized. Fires raged and floods drove through streets and houses

as the planet became more and more inimical to human life. The sempiternal nurdles, indestructible, swayed on and under the surface of the sea. ("Sea Story" n.p.)

While Harold finally did justice to his name as an eco-warrior, albeit a very minor one, Laura drowned in the course of her duties as a marine biologist due to the debris that littered the oceans she studied and protected, an infinitesimal part of which was ironically brought about by a bottle containing a love letter she would never read. The last two lines seem to suggest even the ultimate rebellion of the planet against the human beings who brought about its increasing destruction, fictionally corroborating Byatt's declaration that she has "this kind of grief for the earth," whereas she does not know if she has "a grief about human societies."

"We are a Species of Animal which is Bringing about the End of the World We Were Born into": Ecocriticism and "Thoughts on Myth"

In her essay "Thoughts on Myth" (which comes as an appendix to *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*), Byatt has further written about her concern for the documented ever-growing destruction of Earth via the detrimental human agency. Conversely, in Leavis's vision of "the era of the seventeenth century that includes both Shakespeare and Bunyan [as] the time of the fullest cultural vitality of English life" (Bilan 7), people were able to engage in a rich cultural life which was the social expression of the "responsive adjustment [...] to the natural environment and the rhythm of the year" (*Culture and Environment* 1-2). To Leavis's emphasis on the fertile cultural and social life of the organic community anchored in a rural environment, Byatt juxtaposes her vision of an organic (in its biological meaning) natural environment which pre-exists and is unspoilt by the human race; to Leavis's insistence on the destructive power of the Industrial Revolution on human society, Byatt opposes the examination of the destructive power of human society on the environment:

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. Every day I read of a new extinction, of the bleaching of the coral, and the disappearance of the codfish the thin child caught in the North Sea with a hook and line, when there were always more where those came from. I read of human projects that destroy the world they are in, ingeniously, ambitiously engineered oil wells in deep water, a road across the migration paths of the beasts in the Serengeti park, farming of asparagus in Peru, helium balloons to transport the crops more cheaply, emitting less carbon whilst the farms themselves are dangerously depleting the water that the vegetables, and the humans and other creatures, depend on. ("Thoughts on Myths" 167-168)

Regardless of the ontological differences concerning Leavis's and Byatt's concept of environment, this long passage still manages to quite paradoxically echo Leavis's concern about the role of progress. In fact, Byatt might well conclude this denunciation of ecological misdeeds by borrowing Leavis and Thompson's already quoted words on progress in the volume *Culture and Environment*: "How did this momentous change – this vast and terrifying disintegration – take place in so short a time? The process of the change is that which is commonly described as Progress" (87).

Despite this affinity, Byatt does not share either her former teacher's nostalgia for what he envisaged as the lost organic community or his strong reservations regarding Romantic poetry. In fact, while discussing Leavis's views on the organic community in his 1997 article "The Messiah of Modernism: F.R. Leavis (1895-1978)," George Watson emphasises Leavis's well-known controversial streak to explain why, in his view, Leavis would passively look back to an idyllic rural England without actively engaging in any practical action "to create a programme or evolve a creed" (235):

[Leavis] was nostalgic for a pre-industrial England before it had been ruined by what he bitterly called technologico-Benthamism: in short, he hated the industrial Revolution and its alleged cultural effects. Perhaps he was a Green before the Greens ever thought of having a party. But if they had he would probably have found a reason for not joining it. (235-236)

Though ironically formulated, Watson's closing remark is however accurate inasmuch as Leavis himself lends credence to it by his dismissal of the Romantics, whose poetry nonetheless expressed the same appreciation of a pre-industrial world in which Nature was revered that Leavis conveyed in his critical writing on the organic community.

And yet, despite this seemingly shared attitude, Leavis wrote in *The Common Pursuit* that "the significance of Wordsworth's kind of interest in rustic life [...] is [...] an interest in something felt as external to the world to which he himself belongs, and very remote from it" (192). In this light, Leavis concluded, "the reaction that Wordsworth represents against the Augustan century doesn't mean any movement towards re-establishing the old organic relations between literary culture and the sources of vitality in the general life" (192), an accusation which would be levelled against Leavis himself as discussed above. Moreover, if one agrees that both Romantic poetry and the Green movement can be argued "to express an ecological point-of-view" in which "preferring what nature can teach to what man has taught, finding true and unalienated life in rural, pre-industrial communities" (Pite 358), Watson's comment is even more justified; at the same time, one has to wonder about Leavis's seemingly paradoxical rebuff of the Romantic tradition which Byatt does not endorse, as illustrated in my discussion of Byatt's reading of Wordsworth.

Finally, Byatt's ecosophic approach to terrestrial and marine environments as a critique of the Anthropocene can be argued to tune into post-millennial fictional renditions of protracted environmental destruction. In fact, novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) or Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) amply illustrate Nicole M. Merola's argument that "the Anthropocene is fundamentally estranging: what we thought we knew about the continuance of a habitable biosphere for currently evolved creatures has turned to be a mirage" (26). Likewise, these novels illuminate the fact that "[t]he knowledge that we have fouled our only form of life support positions humans in an alienated relationship to the earth" (Merola 26).

In this light, Byatt's *Ragnarök*, "Thoughts on Myth," and "Sea Story" can be argued to share what Astrid Bracke and Marguérite Corporaal describe as Atwood's rendition of "the inability to live sustainably" (710) in their 2010 article "Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction." If Byatt's work is likewise read through the lens of sustainability, "the Romantic idea that humankind can live in harmony with nature, hereby providing an anthropocentric rather than an ecocentric approach to literature and environmental crisis" (710) must also be challenged. Hence, Merola's conclusion that "[w]e have made the irrevocable shift from reading 'the great stone book of nature' to writing it" is demonstrated in fictional work which questions "the epistemological and ontological pressures that accrue to the newly self-reflexive, anxious position into which the Anthropocene interpellates us," such as the three texts under discussion (26).

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