



Beyond the Human/Nonhuman Binary: Fluid Borders in A.S. Byatt's *Onto-Tales*

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I INTRODUCTION

Border phenomena and border imaginaries have become increasingly relevant in contemporary literature and culture. As Barbara Korte and Laura Lojo-Rodríguez explain, borders have invited attention for quite some time across a broad range of disciplines. And yet, it is the increasing “topicality of borders in both the mind and in contemporary policies” that accounts for the rise and relevance of “‘border studies’, an interdisciplinary field that studies borders [...]—and related concepts like ‘boundaries’, ‘thresholds’ and ‘liminality’—[as] central in organising the human life-world, people’s experience, and thought” (3). Understanding the human world also requires to rethink what has traditionally been conceptualised as its “other.” In important respects, nonhumanity is still carved in the negative space of humanity, but here, as happens with other kinds of demarcations, borders separate and divide but they can also be fluid, spaces to be reconfigured through “exchange” and “transformation” (Gardini

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et al. 3). Addressing the nonhuman inevitably results in reconfiguring the human, and this may in turn favour a more pluralist ethos away from anthropocentric approaches and hierarchies. There is a feeling of urgency attending this field of inquiry, a shared conviction that “[t]he time has come for human cultures to seriously think, to diligently conceptualize, and to earnestly fabulate about all the nonhuman critters we share our world with, and to consider how to strive for more ethical cohabitation” (Karkulehto et al. 1). Literature, among other disciplines, is meeting the demand and exploring what Rosello and Wolfe call “a liminal way of seeing” (10) that recreates borders as permeable and interrogates divisions and hierarchies.

In her essay “True Stories and the Facts in Fiction,” first given as a lecture in the early 1990s, Byatt already expresses her conviction that “we ought to think about the not-human, in order to be fully human” (115). This concern with the nonhuman and its relation to the human runs through the author’s work, as Astrid Bracke (2006) proves in her discussion of the *Frederica Quartet*¹ and *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000); or as Alexandra Cheira (2020) explains when dealing with Byatt’s related environmental concerns in a novel—*Ragnarök* (2011)—, an essay—“Thoughts on Myth” (2011)—and a short story—“Sea Story” (2013).² It may be the case that the above-mentioned texts do not fall all squarely within the category of what Patrick D. Murphy terms “environmental literature”—works that explore “transformational themes” and “[advocate] political and ethical values” (11)—but, as I will try to show in what follows, there was an evolution in Byatt’s fiction towards a more sustained attempt to dissolve the onto-theological binaries of human/animal, life/matter, organic/inorganic that may act as impediments to a more ecological and environmentally aware engagement with the world.

Byatt’s writing is naturally inclusive in that it combines disciplines like literature, philosophy, history, painting, biology, geology, biography and law. According to Emilie Walezak, this “epistemological re-assemblage concurs with the parallel ontological remodelling of the human and the everyday” in Byatt’s fiction of the 2000s, which has increasingly shaped “a posthuman subject by delivering ‘onto-stories’” (3). “Onto-story” and “onto-tale” are terms used by political theorist and philosopher Jane

¹ *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002).

² See also Walezak and Franchi on this.

Bennett to describe her project in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), as well as the specific narrative that she develops throughout her study. The goals of this narrative are, in the author's words, to "highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap," to "enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us," and, ultimately, to "generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies" in a way that hopefully "enable[s] wiser interventions into that ecology" (4). This description also applies to fictional narratives built on the same premises as Bennett's study, which could equally be labelled as "onto-stories." In this light, this chapter will trace the evolution of Byatt's short fiction towards the "onto-story"/"onto-tale" by focusing on three short narratives of the 2000s—"Arachne" (2000), "A Stone Woman" (2003), and "Sea Story" (2013). In different ways and with varying emphases, the three tales challenge ontological demarcations by delving into the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman.

2 "ARACHNE" AND "A STONE WOMAN": METAMORPHOSIS AND UNIVERSAL CONTIGUITY

"Arachne" is part of the anthology *Ovid Metamorphosed*, where different authors variously rewrite Ovid's work. In the Introduction, the volume's editor Philip Terry suggests connecting what he sees as a late-twentieth-century Ovidian "boom" that has to do with typically fin-de-siècle anxieties with the fact that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* emerged from the psychological gulf that opened at the end of an era—a time when belief in the Roman gods had collapsed and Christianity was still some way off (15). Metamorphosis happens at critical moments in Ovid's poem and, likewise, tales of metamorphoses seem to recur through the ages as vehicles for expressing conflict and uncertainty.

In "Old Tales, New Forms" Byatt approaches the late-twentieth-century resurgence and rewriting of ancient myths and tales. This is something she found out as early as 1990, when she was chairman of the judges for the first presentation of the European Literature Prize, which fascinated and excited her interest in the way "old tales and forms have had a continued, metamorphic life" ("Old Tales" 123–124). She mentions here Italo Calvino and his approach to certain aspects of storytelling as related to "'combinatorial games'—art derived from the formal exploration of the possibilities of permutation and transmutation implicit in language"

(139). Calvino deals with this theme in an essay on Ovid entitled “Ovid and Universal Contiguity.” Although it was published in the late 1980s, this essay puts forward an idea—the “universal contiguity” already mentioned in the title—that recurs throughout Byatt’s work and that, in its more recent manifestations, blended with cultural, critical and literary concerns that relate to Anthropocene awareness and Anthropocene anxiety.

The poetry of the *Metamorphoses* is mainly rooted, Calvino says, in the “indistinct borderlands between diverse worlds” (147). Terrestrial forms and stories blend time and again with celestial forms and stories. Yet this contiguity between gods and humans is just “a particular instance of the contiguity between all the figures and forms of existing things, anthropomorphic or otherwise” (147). Moreover, the connections between divine beings, human creatures, fauna, flora and mineral kingdom do not imply “an unequivocal hierarchical order, but an intricate system of interrelations in which each level can influence the others [...]. Myth, in Ovid, is the field of tension in which these forces clash and balance” (150).

“Arachne” is built upon a similar field of tension brought about by the interrelations between the elements that make up Byatt’s piece. There are four main narrative threads in “Arachne,” distinguishable by the use of different typefaces in sections of varying length, each separated from the next by a blank space. The first thread is that of autobiography in sections where Byatt tells about her schooldays, her interest in Greek myths, her grandmother’s skill at embroidery, etc. The second thread is the scientific one: species of spiders, the properties of spiderweb, its possible uses, etc. The third thread is that of myth, as the conflict between Athena and Arachne is narrated here as presented in the *Metamorphoses*. The fourth thread consists of a description and interpretation of Velázquez’s painting *Las Hilanderas/The Spinners* (1657), also known as *The Fable of Arachne*.

In a sense, then, one can say that the change in typeface is also a change of subject. In another sense, as I have shown elsewhere, there are noticeable differences between the sections in which the same typeface is used, just as there are also all kinds of connections between what is told in sections written in different typefaces.³ Boundaries are established to then show their permeability. Thus, the sections retelling the myth are closely connected with those on *Las Hilanderas*, as the figures and the tapestry in the background of the painting take the reader back to Ovid’s poem.

³For a detailed analysis of the four narrative threads and their interaction, see Martínez-Alfaro (2005).

Women weaving appear in the myth and in the painting, but they are also part of the author's family. The colours and the brightness of these women's embroidery are the colours and chiaroscuro in *Las Hilanderas*, and also the colours of the different species of spiders and the varying brightness of their webs, described in detail in the more "scientific" sections of the story. Arachne's thread is the writer's narrative line, her skill at weaving is the author's (Ovid's, Byatt's) skill at writing. Indeed, Arachne's tapestry stands metonymically for the tale, and the tale for the world.

Where Byatt describes the girl's tapestry as "a rush of beings, a rush of animal, vegetable, and mineral constantly coming into shape and constantly undone and reforming" (A 141),⁴ her own story results from the writer's art "to draw analogies between the inhuman world of the gods, the animal world of the spiders, and the human endeavours to make sense of this web of interrelations" (Walezak 5). Byatt claims that there is more in Arachne's tapestry—more forms, human and nonhuman, and more flux—than there would be space for in any work of shuttle and wool (A 141), and the same holds true for her tale. Human and animal, art and nature, myth and reality, male and female, fact and fiction, science and story-telling, writing and weaving, painting and literature, each different and each blending with the other, as the sections in "Arachne." This is nothing but Byatt's version of universal contiguity, which escapes the confines of paper and ink.

The central figure and metaphor of spiders and spiderweb, together with the content and formal features of the narrative and its criss-crossing threads, also account for linking "Arachne" with the non-linear relationality that is key to the understanding of today's world, described by Braidotti as "web-like, scattered and poly-centred" (*Posthuman* 165). If the self is relational and connected with multiple others in complex ways, then the humanist idea of otherness must be rethought through strategies like "defamiliarization, estrangement, and disidentification" (Braidotti, "Animals" 526–527) that interrogate the nature/culture dichotomy and the subject/object distinction. In true posthumanist vein, and still recalling Ovid's stories of metamorphosis, Byatt's "A Stone Woman" points out these oppositions and rewrites them through the petrification of a protagonist for whom disidentification and becoming other also mean, to use Braidotti's words, to "increase one's capacity to enter into further relations and to grow" ("Animals" 531).

⁴In parenthetical references, A for "Arachne," ASW for "A Stone Woman" and SS for "Sea Story."

“A Stone Woman” is part of Byatt’s fifth short-story collection, *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). It blends the magic transformations typical of fairy tales with myths and legends of female petrification, where turning into stone may occur for different reasons but ultimately becomes a reminder of death as the final destination of every living creature (Irving 138). Stone in “A Stone Woman” similarly functions as a metaphor for death, and yet, this connection is questioned by describing Ines’s gradual metamorphosis as an entanglement of all the human and the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate. As a result, the protagonist’s transformation is and is not her death, as she ends up feeling more alive than ever although she is dying in biomedical terms.⁵

While still in mourning for her mother’s death, Ines has to undergo an emergency operation that saves her life but destroys her navel. Her petrification begins where her navel used to be, as if the loss of the navel announced not only the erasure “of her physical and symbolic continuity with her mother, the past and human kind,” but also the reforging of “an imaginary umbilical cord between the human world and the world beyond it” (Sako 91). Little by little, Ines’s body toughens and crystallises. She encounters “jagged flakes of silica and nodes of basalt” (ASW 119) under her breasts, while her collarbones look like “a necklace of bailed swellings [...] which broke slowly through the skin like eyes from closed lids, and become opal—fire opal, black opal, geyserite, and hydrophane, full of watery light” (ASW 120). And so, as the petrification process advances, the narrative incorporates more and more names of rocks, minerals and gemstones that make the text strange to the reader just as Ines struggles with the strangeness of her own body. Being a lexicographer, she is at first comforted by finding the right names and studying the properties of the stones as they spread over her body. Fear is also counterbalanced by other discoveries, which have to do with how she sees, feels and categorises what surrounds her once “her human perspective expands to include the mineralogical one” (Ivanchikova 15). Her sense of smell grows sharper, for instance, and she also relates to the elements in new ways, as when she is caught in the rain and is surprised by her ability to taste minerals in rainwater (ASW 124). Eventually, and taking the body-mind connection to its logical consequence, Ines “thought human thoughts, and stone thoughts” (ASW 141).

⁵ For an analysis of “A Stone Woman” from the perspective of trauma studies, see Martínez-Alfaro (2023).

Although she is aware of her impending death, it is Ines's evolving perspective on the mineral world that eventually changes her views on what awaits her since, she concludes, "all the stones [...] were works in progress, or potential works, or works finished for the time being" (ASW 146–147). The finality of death dwindles just as borders dissolve and previously distinct categories are replaced, to use Braidotti's phrase, by "multiple ecologies of belonging" ("Animals" 530). The more she thinks about it, the more convinced Ines is that there are "reciprocities" everywhere, "both physical and figurative" (ASW 126). There are, she reflects, a whole range of rocks and stones that are formed from things that had once been living, pearl, coal and fossils, but also chalk or opals. Language itself bears witness to the same transfer from the organic to the mineral that affects her, as she realises when pondering on how "[w]ords came from flesh and hair and plants. Reniform, mamillated, botryoidal, dendrite, haematite. Carnelian is from carnal, from flesh. Serpentine and lizardite are stone reptiles; phyllite is leafy-green. The earth itself is made in part of bones, shells and diatoms" (ASW 126). As Bennett argues, we are Earthlings not only because we need other bodies ("the planet") to live, but also because "we" are made of the same elements as is the planet—an idea she expresses by quoting scientist Vladimir Vernadsky when he declared we are "walking, talking minerals" (Bennet 11). This throws light on Byatt's stone woman as a representation of the same concept, which becomes literal through the protagonist's petrification.

The borders between bio and geos definitely blur at the end of the narrative. Ines chooses Iceland as her final destination on meeting a stone-cutter called Thorsteinn that speaks of his homeland as a country where the marvellous is part of everyday life, like the stone women that crowd Icelandic legends and folklore and that are believed to exist. Thorsteinn's sculptures and tales make her feel that her place is in that country of wonders and volcanic stone, and it is there that an Ines almost entirely petrified finally feels the call of the "dancers" from the mountains (ASW 152), trolls and other nonhuman creatures invisible to the human eye and full of a wild energy that pulls her towards them. The loss that initially terrified her, of her capacities and ultimately of her life, is gradually counterbalanced and finally overcome by a life-giving reconnection with all there is, celebrated here with Ines's dance in and with nature, myth and the enormity of geological deep time. Another version of universal contiguity.

Ultimately, Ines's transformation becomes an instantiation through fiction of Stacy Alaimo's "transcorporeality," which she defines as a view of

human corporeality according to which “the human is always intermeshed with the more than human world” and is therefore “ultimately inseparable from “the environment”” (2). Ines becomes, to use Alaimo’s phrase, a “map of transit” (11), a site where natural things are literally shown to be the substance of the human body, composed and recomposed by other bodies. And so, as the flesh of Byatt’s protagonist turns into stone and her blood into “molten lava” (ASW 134), “small gardens” grow “in the crevices of her body, trailing grasses, liverworts,” and she becomes home to animals too, “insects first, a stone-coloured butterfly, [...], foraging ants, [...] even fine red worms, the colour of raw meat” (ASW 155). From the space of a fictional narrative, Ines and her story emerge to throw a challenge to the reader that is similar to that posed by Alaimo and other material ecocritics and new materialist theorists who encourage a more complex understanding of materiality and a sustained exploration of “the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” (Alaimo 2). If, as Bennett claims, the view of matter as dead or thoroughly instrumentalised must be debunked because it feeds our destruction and consumption of the earth (ix), if voice must be given to the vitality intrinsic to materiality (3) as shared by human bodies and the more-than-human world, then Byatt’s narrative of Ines’s metamorphosis seems to afford the reader a good opportunity to train his/her capacity to think about “vibrant matter,” as Bennett urges to do, so that nature can really matter. This claim is equally apposite for “Sea Story.” Published in *The Guardian* in 2013 as the first in a series of tales by different authors commissioned to write water stories, “Sea Story” constitutes a more recent exploration of universal contiguity aimed at delivering a clear environmentalist message.

3 “SEA STORY”: A NURDLE APOCALYPSE

“Sea Story” is rightly described in *The Guardian* as “a tale of love and environmental catastrophe” (Byatt). Indeed, the narrative starts as a love story and centres on young Harold, his long-life love for the sea and his unfulfilled love for Laura. The tale links the protagonist’s two objects of passion while also weaving intertextual connections with literary representations of the sea and of unrequited love in the courtly love tradition. Then the focus changes to the depiction of the drastic consequences of an apparently harmless romantic gesture: Harold’s sending a message in a bottle to Laura where he declares his love for her. This second part of the

story rewrites the romanticism of the first part and its intertexts in order to issue a warning about humans' destruction of the planet.

The opening of "Sea Story" introduces Harold and his parents in terms of their love of and closeness to the sea. He was born in Filey, a fishing town on the east Yorkshire coast. The family had a collection of bottles picked up by sailing vessels, most of them designed by the Marine Science project to map the currents, but there was one that was different in that it contained a message. It read "'Dear Mary' and was followed by the phrase 'I love you, I love you, I love you...' repeated until it filled both sides."⁶ This message—signed by a Robert Fisher, with an address in Hull—will later inspire Harold to do the same as Mr. Fisher did. The latter's romantic declaration, however, is oddly flanked in the narrative by the description of its container as "a rather sinister-looking early 20th-century medicine bottle" (SS) and the explanation that the house on the mentioned address was destroyed by bombing in 1944. Romantic love (the message), hints at danger (the sinister-looking bottle), and expressions of utter destruction (the bombed house) make up the story of the old bottle, which anticipates the way in which the beautiful and romantic will blend in "Sea Story" with the dangerous and deadly, to both the earth and its inhabitants.

Harold's days as an Oxford student of English literature filled him with nostalgia for the sea, like that felt by the poetic speaker in one of the poems his mother recited to him—John Masefield's "Sea-Fever," partially inserted in the story. No wonder that Harold should return home as soon as he graduates, bringing with him a kind of anthology of the sea compiled during his years away from Filey and where Melville's *Moby Dick*—also quoted from in the text—occupies a special place.

Just as Harold's love of the sea is conveyed in literary terms, so is the description of his falling in love with Laura, a Maritime Biology graduate on holiday in Filey. She combines the traits of Petrarch's beloved—her name, her mild beauty and her unattainability—with those of the mythological mermaid (Cheira 59). Indeed, Laura's beauty and love of the ocean put Harold under a spell the moment he sees her emerging from the sea, but, as in the Petrarchan tradition, his love is not requited as she leaves before he even has time to let her know about his feelings. "I've just been offered my dream job," she excitedly tells Harold, "I'm going to be part of a team studying the life-cycle of eels. [...] I'm off to the Caribbean next week" (SS). Threatened with extinction, eels are regarded by some

⁶Page numbers are not given after quotations as the source is an internet publication.

specialists as “an Anthropocene syndrome” (Jensen). This has much to do with the kind of study conducted by Laura and the team she is part of, and this is also the conclusion she reaches: as the external narrator ironically explains, she does not get Harold’s declaration of love but rather the far-from-romantic message she reads with the help of her microscope as a cry from the environment and a proof of “the human occupation and corruption of the masterless ocean” (SS).

Neither the eels nor the sea are immune to human actions, contrary to what its most famous literary renderings suggest. What Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* is to the sea and the whale, Graham Swift’s *Waterland* is to the Fens and the eel. A whole chapter of Swift’s novel (Chapter 26—“About the Eel”) is devoted to eels—their life, their scientific history, their mysteries and the men that tried to solve them—but eels do indeed recur throughout the whole work, described by Svensson as “the eel’s greatest performance” in literature. As protagonist Tom Crick, a history teacher, discusses the cyclicity of history and that of nature, he refers in the above-mentioned chapter to the way the European eel leaves to spawn in the Sargasso Sea and then returns to the Fens in East Anglia, reproducing themselves so efficiently that the supply never seems to diminish. Eels will carry on with their life cycle as they have over countless millennia. Or so Crick thinks. But will they? Since *Waterland* was written in the early 1980s the population of the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) has steadily declined and it is an endangered species at present. “The eternal eel” of *Waterland* is a myth no more sustainable in our Anthropocene age than “the eternal whale” of *Moby Dick*.⁷

When the narrator of “Sea Story” summarises Laura’s findings by referring to “the human occupation and corruption of *the masterless ocean*” (SS, emphasis added), the reader cannot but recall Melville as quoted earlier in Byatt’s tale:

⁷To Ishmael, the whale is like a god “which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over” [Ch. 104]. In the last paragraph of the final chapter—“Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish?—Will He Perish?”—the narrator concludes that, even if the world is to be flooded again, “the eternal whale will still survive” [Ch. 105] (Melville, *Project Gutenberg*).

The sperm whale has been listed as “Endangered” under the Endangered Species Act since 1973 and “Depleted” under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (*NOAA Fisheries* 2023). It is classified as “Vulnerable” in The Red List of Threatened Species issued by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, where the European eel fares even worse and appears as “Critically Endangered” (*The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2022).

There was a moment of pure glee when he [Harold] read for the first time chapter 58 of *Moby Dick*. This is the chapter about Brit, “the minute yellow substance upon which the Right Whale largely feeds.” [...] It ends with a rhetorical comparison of the land and the sea. The land is “green, gentle and most docile earth.” The sea is violent, dangerous, inimical. “Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, *the masterless ocean* overruns the globe.” (SS; emphasis added)

“The masterless ocean” in “Sea Story” is not “the masterless ocean” in *Moby Dick*. Indeed, the latter is used in Byatt’s narrative to throw light on the way in which the romantic construction of nature, as in the view of the sea as untameable, immune and apart from man, is not only false but also damaging, since this idea has fuelled human sustained disregard, misuse and destruction of the sea/of nature.

It is into the sea he loves so much that Harold decides to throw a bottle with a love message to Laura. Then Robert Fisher comes to his mind, so he writes a declaration of love—a succinct “Laura, I love you”—that he completes with stanzas from Robert Burns’s “A Red, Red Rose.” Significantly, this poem includes references to an improbable cataclysm affecting earth and sea in order to reinforce the unalterability of the poetic speaker’s love: he will love his beloved “Till a’ the seas gang dry [...],/ And the rocks melt wi’ the sun,” that is, he will love her forever because the sea and the rocks are as strong and resistant and unalterable as Melville’s “masterless ocean.” Harold chooses a green plastic Perrier bottle because this was Laura’s preferred drink, puts his love message inside and solemnly drops it into the water. This moment constitutes a turning point as the human romantic plot gives way to the narrative of environmental disaster—the bottle’s disintegration and contamination of the ocean—that *The Guardian* announced after the story’s title.

Every year, eels leave European rivers to travel to the Sargasso Sea, where they breed for a single time and then die. Harold expects the Perrier bottle to make the same journey, which ironically points to some of the reasons why the seas have become deadly for eels and other living creatures. After overcoming a number of obstacles on its route, minutely described by the narrator, the bottle is arrested at the Atlantic Gyre/the Caribbean Trash Vortex. The narrative progressively zooms in the bottle to produce paragraphs that have, as Cheira puts it, “a definite cinematic quality” (62). She draws on Ralf Hertel to explain the story’s most important rhetorical device in the light of what Hertel calls “the narrator’s

gaze”: the narrator fixes its gaze and narration is replaced by descriptions that recall film stills (Cheira 53). In this way, the reader follows in close-up the transformation of the bottle, which fragments and kills on its way:

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 [...] choked and died [...]. 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. (SS)

The role of these tiny nurdles, the raw material of the plastics industry, is maximised in the narrative as these small plastic pellets are also one of the biggest sources of pollution. Each year 230 billion kilos enter our oceans. Their effect is devastating, and their size and persistence make them impossible to remove, but they are yet to be classified as hazardous (Jaay). The first time nurdles are mentioned in “Sea Story” is in the paragraph quoted above, as part of the description of the Caribbean Trash Vortex, which, the narrator reflects, “could be compared to Melville’s sea of golden brit where the whales fed” (SS) were it not for the fact that the nurdles are little by little replacing the fish that made up the brit. The narrator adds that nurdles are “poetically known as mermaids’ tears” (SS) just before a whole array of fish are described as dying because they eat or choke with parts of the Perrier bottle. Thus, the metaphor is shown to work in the same way as the romanticisation of nature and of the sea in particular, that is, as a conduit for people’s blatant disregard and a mainstay of the careless attitude that is an important cause for the destruction of the environment.

As Michelle Neely points out, “Sea Story” subverts the idea that nature can be defined as “spatially and temporally beyond humanity’s ken” (108) at the same time that it questions “the aesthetic as a category useful or appropriate for evaluating environmental impact” (112). I agree with her that this is the point of, and the critique behind, all the beauty in the story and in the language Byatt uses to describe environmental catastrophe: the enchanting alliterations and sonority in the description of the Trash Vortex as “a slowly swirling carpet of floating fragments” (SS) that is nevertheless deadly; the colours in this carpet of sea rubbish, “emerald, cobalt, crimson, ultramarine,” as well as “the colourless all-colour of stained

whiteness” (SS) that recalls and subverts the metaphysical depth of Melville’s white whale (Ch. 42: “The Whiteness of the Whale”); the cute Perrier bottle and the romantic message it contains, which nevertheless contributes to devastating plastic pollution; the metaphor of the mermaids’ tears, whose poetic force dramatically obscures the crisis of the ocean... The story’s intertwining of beauty and destruction, romanticism and environmental catastrophe is nowhere more clearly epitomised than “in the combined effect of Melville and Byatt” (Neely 112): *Moby Dick* recurrently pops into the narrative through quotations and allusions that ultimately confront what is being told in Byatt’s tale with the kind of romantic conception of the masterless ocean’s unperishable beauty in Melville’s novel. “Sea Story” undermines the fantasy that there are things in nature that can escape human impact and reasserts the reality of inter-species entanglement.

In parallel with the already-mentioned technique of “the narrator’s gaze,” the narrative can be said to play with time for related purposes, affording the reader a glimpse of deep time that echoes the way in which “A Stone Woman” eventually repositions Ines against the background of geologic time and the large time scales of nature and myth. Thus, the spatial zoom-in in the central part of “Sea Story”—describing in close-up the bottle’s journey and the lentil-size nurdles—is followed by a temporal zoom-out in the final part of the narrative that similarly decentres the human subject. This can be clearly seen in the tale’s closing paragraph, containing a brief and impassionate summary of the main characters’ fate that definitely puts forward a view of humanity as a brief blip in the universe:

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. (SS)

If *Moby Dick* ends with an imperturbable sea that “rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Ch. 135: “The Chase—Third Day”), “Sea Story” closes with the indestructible plastic pellets in a note that definitely drives all beauty and romanticism away, having succumbed, like humans themselves, to a nurdle apocalypse of sorts.

4 CONCLUSION

According to Brian McHale, there is a mechanism at work in literature that explains its evolution through time, and which has to do with the ability to renovate or replenish itself “by shuffling the hierarchy of its features, subordinating the features that had formerly been dominant and promoting formerly subordinate features to positions of dominance” (“Afterword” 358). This model of the change of dominant, which McHale acknowledges to be ultimately Jakobson’s, was the one he used to discuss the internal logic of postmodernism’s emergence in fiction (1987, 1992). McHale revised his views years later (“Afterword”), at a time when there was already general agreement that postmodernism was over, but I think there is still much in this model that makes it applicable in different contexts. My discussion here of three stories by Byatt has tried to highlight concerns and techniques that recur throughout her fiction, but that were promoted to positions of dominance in the 2000s and that, having always been there, were lately dealt with and written about in a way that gives expression to a changing *Weltanschauung*. Thus, critical studies of Byatt’s work such as those by Walezak and Franchi put forward the view that the fiction she wrote in the last part of her career “testifies to a growing interest in approaching the human in nonhuman terms” (Walezak 1) and increasingly speaks to “debates around the post-human and more-than-human embodiments, as well as to the growing preoccupation on inter-species coexistence” (Franchi 68). At the same time, though, they both claim that these questions feature in earlier fiction by the author, albeit in different guises and with different emphases that can be now put into perspective with the hindsight of Byatt’s last works.

Byatt writes in “Arachne” that “[t]he nature of myth is not to be resolved in one meaning or another. It is a fluid, endlessly interconnected web” (143). This fluidity of myth, of metamorphic change in the story, of the net made up by the tale’s narrative threads, highlights the permeability of borders and of no longer discrete spaces—for the body, for the text, for meaning—in order to explore, and exploit, hybridity and liminality. The story in “A Stone Woman” develops within the same frame and plunges the reader further into universal contiguity, as it recreates the protagonist’s transition from the organic to the inorganic in a way that aligns her crossing into/over the nonhuman world with mobility, reciprocity, transcorporeality and ontological instability. “Sea Story” gives us a glimpse of ecosystem collapse and proves stories to be a vital site for the articulation

of the Anthropocene, as well as a vehicle for the development of a new Anthropocene subjectivity.

As Vincent Blok puts it, the emergence of the Anthropocene is primarily an ontological phenomenon, namely a shift in our “being-in-the-world” (33). As I hope to have shown, the onto-story espouses the view that nature is us, that is, it takes issue with the boundaries that still seem to separate human from nature in certain contexts, and puts forward a (posthumanist) view of “human corporeality and textuality effortlessly extend[ing] into the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 14). Derrida famously declared that “there is nothing outside the text” (158) to convey the idea that there is no getting outside representation. There is no way, that is, of retreating to a pre-textual or extra-textual space as we cannot extricate ourselves from the infinite text. Byatt’s (highly intertextual and transdisciplinary) stories seem to take us to a standpoint where Derrida’s well-known dictum about the impossibility of living outside the text becomes also the impossibility of living outside “the mesh.”⁸

That the Anthropocene has brought with it a new imaginary finds evidence in fiction, and in the way in which certain authors like Byatt have given more relevance to issues that are spreading well beyond genres such as science fiction, the thriller and the disaster novel, which have been addressing them for a long time. Her onto-stories bear witness to literature’s ability to see the world differently so that we can relate to it in a different way too, they sound the alarm about things that may not be visible, but that are already coming to pass, and they may even be said to take issue with our indolence at best, and our complicity at worst. In the stories analysed above, Byatt imaginatively narrates “the mesh” in a way that complements scientific, philosophical and political discourses, initially recreating existence as interconnected and eventually urging us to act, since each of us is part of, as well as partly responsible for, the present and the future of world.

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⁸Timothy Morton’s coinage to describe the interconnectedness of living and non-living things, the entanglement of human and nonhuman realities and processes (28–38).

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