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WONDERFUL CREATURES AND LIMINALITY IN A.S. BYATT'S SHORT FICTION

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One of the stories collected in Marina Warner's *Wonder Tales. Six Stories of Enchantment* (1994) is Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 1698 "Le Serpentin vert", translated by A.S. Byatt as "The Great Green Worm". This narrative revolves around the adventures of Hidessa, one of the twin princesses whose birth is evoked at the beginning of the story. The central events in these supernatural adventures are the princess's encounters with the wonderful creature that gives title to the story, the Great Green Worm. These moments acquire special relevance because they signal changes in the protagonist's evolution, emerging as symbolic rites of passage or liminal experiences. Indeed, my contention is that the anthropological concept of liminality becomes a fruitful theoretical framework to explore the recurrence of wonderful creatures in Byatt's fiction, and particularly in her short stories. As a genre, the short story has been examined by Adrian Hunter in terms of its suitability for the representation of liminal or problematic identities,[1] while Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann have argued that the in-betweenness of the short story places it as "an ideal terrain for mapping out liminality".[2]

In the light of this, the aim of the present chapter is to examine the presence of wonderful creatures in Byatt's short stories, exploring two types of supernatural beings

from the point of view of liminality: those involving a process of female metamorphosis, in-between the human and the non-human (the lamia in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" and the troll woman in "A Stone Woman"), and those projecting the liminal passage through a traumatic or painful experience in the form of a terrifying monster (the creatures in "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest"). This examination will pay attention to the effects that Warner has found in "wonder", "compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoil, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear".[3]

1. Liminality and Byatt's Wonder Tales

The origins of liminality as a socio-cultural concept go back to Arnold van Gennep's anthropological studies in the early twentieth century. In *Rites of Passage* (1909), Van Gennep developed a tripartite model of transition rites in any society, which was rediscovered in the 1960s by Victor Turner. Deriving its name from *limen*, the Latin word for "threshold", the liminal period or phase was identified as the middle stage in a rite of passage. As Turner argued in "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" (*The Forest of Symbols*, 1967), and later in *The Ritual Process* (1969),[4] any transition or rite of passage follows a three-step process, as the ritual subject or passenger goes through the phases of separation, *limen* and aggregation. The separation implies the passenger's detachment from a state or earlier fixed point in the social structure,[5] whereas the aggregation means the reincorporation of the passenger as a stable subject into the social structure or *communitas*. In this process, the key phase that makes that reincorporation possible is the liminal period, during which the characteristics of the passenger are ambiguous: "he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state".[6] As Turner acknowledged

later on, in his examination of social dramas in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), sometimes the final stage of the transition may result not in the reintegration of the subject or social group, but in the social recognition of irreparable schism.[7]

The image of the threshold is spatial in origin, like that of the margin or the border, although it has the advantage of suggesting movement in terms of the passage from one state to the other. The points of departure and arrival are in themselves "places of transition and transformation,"[8] and the liminal emerges as "'transitional', without being unstable or provisional".[9] In his approach to the processualisation and temporalisation of space, Turner imbued the threshold with temporal attributes,[10] and he emphasised the temporal dimension of liminality by focusing not on the threshold itself, but on the sequential action of passing through the threshold. In this way, the liminal is essentially dynamic, and so fluid and open to change,[11] since it captures the processual sequence of the transition between the phase of break and the phase of reintegration.[12] Therefore, liminality appeals to temporality in its marking not just a beginning and an end, but also "duration in the unfolding of a spatio-temporal process",[13] consequently emerging as a chronological formation.[14]

The dynamic quality of liminality is particularly significant because it opens the way, so my contention goes, to argue that, in its application to the exploration of wonderful creatures in Byatt's short fiction, liminality operates on two main levels: ontological and phenomenological. Firstly, from the ontological perspective, liminality becomes an apt critical tool to explore the in-between condition of the lamia and the woman turned to stone, immersed in a fluid state of metamorphosis. Secondly, from the point of view of phenomenology, the experience of a traumatic event is symbolically depicted as the encounter with wonderful creatures like the dragons or the thing in the forest, and this encounter triggers a change in the character that places the experience as

a liminal transition in the character's evolution. This double quality of liminality as a state or condition, and as an experience or process, can be connected with Bjørn Thomassen's categorisation of the dimensions of liminality from the sociological perspective. As he argues,[15] the liminal can be classified according to different parameters that include not only subjecthood (individuals, social groups, and whole societies), but also a spatial dimension, and interestingly, a temporal dimension, too. In the confluence of the axes of subject and time (moment, period, and epoch), Thomassen distinguishes liminal situations and processes whose duration range from a moment in an individual's life to an epoch in society at large. From this perspective, liminality underlies the individual conditions of the lamia and the stone woman as hybrid creatures (together with the events of their final transformations into a woman and a troll, respectively), and the wars affecting the protagonists and societies of "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest", as well as the psychological consequences that they entail.

Considering the ontological and phenomenological levels of liminality, as explored in Byatt's short stories below, it is possible to discover the convergence of both in "The Great Green Worm". On the one hand, D'Aulnoy's narrative, as translated by Byatt, is pervaded by transformation and change from the very beginning, incorporating several characters (including the protagonists) that find themselves in a condition of metamorphosis or hybridity. If princess Hidessa is transformed into the ugliest creature in the world almost at the time of her birth, the king of Pagody appears under the hideous form of the great green worm throughout the story, displaying human traits such as the powers of reasoning and speech in conjunction with the terrifying aspect of the monstrous being:

> The Green Worm gave a long hiss (this is a serpentine way of sighing) and without reply, plunged beneath the waves. What a loathsome monster, said the princess to herself; he has greenish wings, and his body is all sorts of changing colours – he has ivory claws, and his head is covered with a sort of mane of ugly fronds. […] And yet, she went on, what makes him want to follow me, and by what mysterious agency does he talk like a rational being?[16]

This description of the liminal creature, which both swims and has wings, contains some significant passages in the light of Byatt's wonderful beings: like the lamia, the body of the great green worm is "all sorts of changing colours", while his head "is covered with a sort of mane of ugly fronds", a characteristic echoed in the frightening aspect of the thing in the forest. In the context of Byatt's production, this fragment is quoted in the third volume of the Quartet, *Babel Tower*, as a tale read to a group of schoolchildren.[17]

On the other hand, the story portrays Hidessa's process of maturation and learning in the context of the moral lessons about the value of inner beauty and the dangers posed by curiosity. In this process, the princess's painful encounters with the great green worm trigger changes in the protagonist and her worldview, and so these experiences emerge as liminal transitions in Hidessa's emotional and intellectual evolution. All these changes are necessary for the expected happy ending, which portrays the eventual recovery of the monster's originally human nature, and Hidessa's beauty, as she literally crosses a threshold in her arrival in the underworld.[18]

Hidessa's liminal experiences with the great green worm become therefore revelatory in their teaching of the moral messages of the story. Similarly, the encounters with the wonderful creatures in the narratives by Byatt examined below can be seen as epiphanic in the way they exert an inspiring influence (as the lamia and the stone woman do on the artists depicted in the narratives) or allow the characters to face or overcome the effects of traumatic experiences, like the monsters in "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest". This revelatory or epiphanic quality is particularly significant in the context of the nature of Byatt's wonder tales, following Richard Todd's criterion when preferring the term "wonder tale" to that of "fairy tale". As he argues,[19] the first expression is less constricting than the second one in the light of Warner's analysis of the pan-European and fantastic nature of wonder tales (originating in German *Wundermärchen*) in comparison with the French *contes des fées*. This etymological explanation has been further expanded in the context of Byatt's criticism by Alexa Alfer and Amy Edwards de Campos, who argue that "the German term '*märchen*' also and crucially retains its etymological link to the *storied* event it not only relates but which it itself constitutes".[20]

What I find particularly inspiring in Todd's argument about Byatt's wonder tales, beyond the etymological dimension, is the way in which he resorts to Randolph Henry Ash's incomplete poem "Mummy Possest" in *Possession* (1990). The last lines in this quotation ("I call it artfulness, or simply Art, / A Tale, a Story, that may hide a Truth / As wonder-tales do, even in the Best Book")[21] identify the ability to conceal a message or truth as the defining trait of wonder tales. This definition is taken by Todd as the starting point to examine those stories by Byatt which are embedded in larger fictions, considering how they hide a deeper level of meaning that becomes visible only in the narrative matrix of the longer piece of fiction. My contention is that, apart from such stories like "The Glass Coffin" or "Gode's Story", the terminology of wonder tale can be applied as well to those narratives that are revelatory or epiphanic for the characters in the portrayal or encounter with wonderful creatures, like the stories explored below. Such narratives "contain a Truth" under the form of an aesthetic or vital revelation that is triggered by the liminal existence or experience of the extraordinary being. Considering how the more intense images in fiction "occur in iconic moments that simultaneously function as units of semantic compression and as enablers of mental transgression",[22] the vivid visualisations of wonderful creatures in Byatt's stories foster the characters' creative or emotional evolution, whether in the form of ontologically liminal beings like the lamia and the stone woman, or through the phenomenologically liminal experiences of the encounter with the dragons and the thing in the forest.

2. Liminal Creatures in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" and "A Stone Woman"

The ontological liminality of the lamia and the stone woman is associated with a process of female metamorphosis which also lies behind Byatt's interest in the figure of

the Melusine in *Possession*, as suggested below, in the presence of the whistlers of bird-women in *A Whistling Woman* (2002), and in the writer's attention to the myth of Arachne in her contribution to *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2000). In this narrative, Byatt provides a kaleidoscopic revision of Pallas Athene's transformation of Arachne into a spider, described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* VI, while she argues that "[t]he nature of myth is not to be resolved into one meaning or another. It is a fluid, endlessly interconnected web".[23] The fluidity of myth, together with the hybrid nature of Byatt's tales as mixing fairytale elements with realism,[24] and the relevance of transformation in the liminal space of the text[25] accompany Byatt's fictionalisation of female metamorphoses in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" (from *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice*, 1998), and "A Stone Woman", from *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). Although both stories are told in the voice of the omniscient narrator, they complement each other in the way they follow the points of view of, respectively, male and female characters, from the outside and the inside perspectives of the transformation process: the painter Bernard Lycett-Kean, who becomes fascinated by the liminal body of the lamia in *Elementals*, and Ines, the woman turned to stone in *Little Black Book of Stories*. If this narrative revolves around the processual passage through Ines's gradual metamorphosis into a creature blending the human and the mineral, "A Lamia in the Cévennes" focuses on the hybrid condition of the lamia, in-between the human and the animal, rather than in her eventual transformation into a woman.

Hybridity is already present in the image preceding the story, *Sirène* (1948), one of Henri Matisse's illustrations for the *Florilège des Amours* by Ronsard. Like the mermaid, the lamia fuses traits of a water animal (the sinuous and coiling body of a water snake) with those of a woman, displaying human eyelashed eyes and teeth, and having the ability to speak. The lamia's conflation of female features with the

appearance of a snake is particularly interesting in the context of the recurrence of snake imagery in Byatt's translation of "Le Serpentin vert", and in her fiction as a whole. From the beginning of "The Great Green Worm", the snake imagery is associated with the process of transformation, as the food in the celebration of the princesses' births becomes "snake stew",[26] and the great green worm is consistently referred to as "the serpent-king", with the final stage in the reversal of his metamorphosis being the "unserpenting of the Serpent".[27] Snakes recur in Byatt's fiction, from her early novel *The Game* (1967), and they occupy a central position in *Possession* through the image of the Melusine, one of those "snake-women, La Motte-Fouqué's Undine and Goethe's Melusine".[28] As Christien Franken has argued in her chapter "*Possession*: Melusine or the Writer as Serpent Woman", the image of the Melusine lies behind the structure of *Possession*, where the nineteenth-century plotline "resists an image of Melusine as an evil woman and a monster by emphasizing the fact that Melusine is both a mother and a daughter".[29] Interestingly, the names of the Melusine and her husband Raimondin in the original myth are echoed in the final part of "A Lamia in the Cévennes" in the human name of the lamia, Melanie, and that of her beloved Raymond.[30]

Describing herself as "an enchanted spirit", "thousands of years" old,[31] the lamia is characterised in the light of John Keats's 1820 poem, where she is portrayed as "some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self".[32] Following Keats's attention to the cromatic richness of the creature's body, seen as "[v]ermilion-spotted, golden, green and blue" and "rainbow-sided",[33] the lamia in Byatt's story is depicted in terms of her vivid and changing colours: "a velvety-black, it seemed, with long bars of crimson and peacock-eyed spots, gold, green, blue, mixed with silver moonshapes, all of which appeared to dim and brighten and breathe under the deep water. […] And the colours changed as he watched them: […] the bars and stripes flamed with electric

vermilion and crimson and then changed to purple, to blue, to green, moving through the rainbow”.[34]

The colourful quality of the lamia’s snake body, which is dynamic like the body of the great green worm and Ines’s changing carapace of minerals in “A Stone Woman”, becomes the focus of interest for Bernard, the artist following “a self-drawn road map of artistic growth”.[35] Obsessed with the blue colour, Bernard finds a solution to his creative crisis in the phenomenological encounter with the liminality of the lamia. This encounter takes place in the painter’s swimming pool, where he experiences a mixed reaction to the lamia’s hybrid condition. Bernard, who likes snakes but not women, is fascinated by the “lovely snake”, in its “oddity – in its *otherness*”,[36] but finds the female traits in the lamia’s face, particularly her lips and teeth, repulsive. When describing Bernard’s ambivalent response to the lamia, the narrator quotes the anthropologist Mary Douglas in her characterisation of the human reaction to “*mixed* things, neither flesh nor fowl, so to speak” as “repulsion and prohibition”.[37] In the case of Bernard, however, his repulsion is not mingled with prohibition, but with “aesthetic frenzy”[38] because, as an artist, he is able to perceive the body of the lamia as object of aesthetic wonder: “The painting was getting somewhere. The snake-colours were a fourth term in the equation pool > sky > mountains - trees > paint”.[39]

In Bernard’s eyes, the lamia becomes a source of artistic inspiration, beyond her condition as an enchanted spirit promising beauty and wealth. Although immersed in the fantastic pattern of “[m]agical transformations of beasts into lovers”,[40] Bernard does not feel tempted by the lamia’s highly erotic attempts at seducing him. He avoids kissing the lamia to break the spell, and so his liminal experience with the creature does not result in his integration into the *communitas* of the prototypical ending of the wonder tale. This conclusion is reserved for Bernard’s friend Raymond Potter, who

works for a programme ironically entitled *The A-Mazing Maze of Monsters*, as he kisses the lamia to transform her into a sexually attractive woman with "sweet little pearly teeth between her glossy pink lips".[41] In its dealing with gender relations,[42] the story challenges the reader's expectations with Bernard's anti-romantic refusal of the lamia's seduction, "displacing the usual dynamics of heterosexual desire into his art".[43] For Bernard, the phenomenological passage through the encounter with the hybrid creature enriches his evolution as a painter, leaving him at the end of the story in his initial state of wished-for solitude, although with a new aesthetic challenge, "[a] mystery to be explained by rule and line".[44]

The perception of the female creature in the condition of hybridity or metamorphosis as a source of artistic inspiration returns in "A Stone Woman", which signals Byatt's fascination with the image of the woman turned to stone throughout her fiction, epitomised in the recurrence of intertextual connections with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the Quartet and in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye". "A Stone Woman" depicts in precise, scientific vocabulary, the gradual transformation undergone by a contemporary woman, Ines, as her body metamorphoses into a wonderful statue made of rocks, minerals, and precious stones. The story therefore records Ines's liminal transition from the organic to the inorganic, focusing on the passage through the ontological hybridity of "an indefinite half-life", "a human form vanishing under outcrops of silica, its lineaments suggested by veins of blue john that vanished into crust of pumice and agate".[45]

Ines begins to notice strange changes in her body after the death of her mother, which marks the protagonist's separation from her formerly ordinary self and life. The *limen* of her growth "into a monument"[46] opens with the sprouting of minerals in her body after serious surgery: "One day she found a cluster of greenish-white crystals

sprouting in her armpit. […] Jagged flakes of silica and nodes of basalt pushed her breasts upward and flourished under the fall of flesh, making her clothes crackle and rustle. Slowly, slowly, day by quick day, her torso was wrapped in a stony incrustation, like a corselet".[47] Little by little, Ines's stony transformation affects not only her body but also her mind, with a sharpening of her senses and a new ability to think "human thoughts and stone thoughts".[48] As she witnesses these changes, Ines's reaction to her metamorphosis can be described in terms of Warner's definition of wonder, combining fear and pleasure, as the protagonist's initial horror and passive fear are superseded by curiosity. Instead of focusing on the differences between the points of departure and arrival in her liminal transition, "a move from a world of warm change and decay to a world of cold permanence",[49] Ines is now able to appreciate the implications of her ontological hybridity, becoming aware of the similarities and reciprocities between the human and the mineral worlds.

Ines's hybridity becomes a source of aesthetic revelation for Thorsteinn Hallmundursson, a mason that, like Bernard in "A Lamia in the Cévennes", finds the creature, and the dynamic quality of her body, "beautiful […] beautiful beyond belief".[50] A lonely artist, Thorsteinn mixes an aesthetic delight, Pygmalion-like, in Ines's fantastic transformation, with an objective, detached perspective, derived from his origin, since living in a land of geological wonders, Icelanders are "matter-of-fact about strange things".[51] After becoming a literal passenger on a sea voyage to Iceland, Ines undergoes the final stages of her metamorphosis, while becoming an object of artistic inspiration for Thorsteinn, who explicitly acknowledges the effects of his phenomenological encounter with Ines's liminality: "You are a walking metamorphosis. […] I too, he said, am utterly changed by your changing. I want to make a record of it".[52] Thorsteinn's aesthetic response to Ines's petrifaction manages to discover the

female dimension of her hybridity, "the lineaments of a beautiful woman, a woman with a carved, attentive face, looking up and out",[53] making her happy, as the concluding note in the last moment of Ines's metamorphosis is not one of melancholy or desolation, but of happiness. Ines's body eventually fuses with the Icelandic mountains, bringing together the popular icon of the dances of death and Nordic myths about trolls and stone women. The potentially tragic ending thus becomes "a liberating fantasy",[54] since Ines has developed "a new female identity; one that liberates her from the constraints ascribed to her female body".[55] In this way, whereas Thorsteinn, like Bernard, remains in his initial state of personal solitude though artistically enriched through his experience of the creature's liminality, Ines's assimilation into the geological landscape signals her integration into the *communitas* of the fantastic. If the lamia succeeded in her aggregation into the human world under the form of an attractive woman, the completion of Ines's petrifaction allows her to enter the mythical community of stone women, "figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on huge, lithe, stony legs".[56]

3. The Liminal Passage Through Trauma in "Dragons' Breath" and "The Thing in the Forest"

Transformation also figures prominently in "Dragons' Breath", from *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), and in the opening narrative of *Little Black Book of Stories*, "The Thing in the Forest". In these texts, however, the process of change is not articulated by the extraordinary creatures populating the stories, but transformation is triggered in the characters through their encounter with the terrifying monsters. As Byatt herself has put it, "the Forest and the Dragon call up worlds in which we can think about our own histories and life-stories".[57] From the perspective of liminality, therefore, these narratives operate in the phenomenological dimension since it is the experience of

the wonderful creatures, with a strong appeal to the senses, that fosters the characters' emotional evolution through a process of revelation about their everyday existence. The monsters in both stories have been recurrently identified by Byatt's critics as symbols or metaphors of fear and war. If Celia Wallhead argues that the two tales are about human fear in different places and times,[58] Alfer and Edwards de Campos describe the blending of realism and fantasy articulated in both narratives as an attempt "to reimagine the chaos and horror of war by giving it a mythical form".[59] In this same line, Alexandra Cheira contends that the wonder-tale motifs of the evil monsters work as war metaphors in their embodiment of "the ultimate horror of what can only be grasped bodily by those who have experienced war".[60]

The passage through the traumatic experience of war is therefore projected on the face to face encounter with the monster, which in "Dragons' Breath" takes the form of a dragon or worm that, according to Byatt, "connects the fear with the fear of death and decay, beyond the fear of fire and crushing".[61] This story, commissioned for the Scheherazade 2001 project during the bombardment of Sarajevo in 1994, opens with the formulaic "once upon a time" to set the action in an indefinite village where three siblings, Harry, Jack and Eva, spend their lives in monotony and boredom. This is the prevailing mood in the separation stage of their liminal transition, which is set in motion through the perception of unusual colours and sounds in the mountains, affecting the four elements: "everything was on the move, earth and air, fire and water".[62] Such changes awaken the villagers' wonder in the combination of fear with "excited *interest* […] and with aesthetic pleasure",[63] and they presage the dreadful appearance of the dragons: "great worms with fat heads […] Great fat, nodding bald heads, with knobs and spouts and whelks and whorls on them, and nasty hot wet eyes in great caverns in

their muddy flesh, that glint blood-red, twelve eyes […] and twelve hairy nostrils on blunt snouts made of grey mud”.[64]

Like the creature in “The Thing in the Forest”, the dragons are characterised by their fragmentary quality and, above all, by their pungent smell, “stinking of despair and endless decay”.[65] The dragons’ stench, which induces panic and paralysis, presides over the liminal experience of their encounter, which is described from Jack’s perspective. As he follows his brother, Jack finds himself face to face with the monsters, on the threshold of the creatures themselves, “in the path of that jaw”, until he manages to “put patches of space between himself and the worm”.[66] The nightmare lasts for weeks and months, with the irretrievable loss of lives like Harry’s, until the creatures disappear in the liminal space of the lake, leaving behind a trail of devastation. Shrouded in horror, the passage through the suffering and terror of war under the guise of the dragons contains nevertheless a revelation in the defamiliarisation of the villagers’ everyday experience.

As they come back and discover the ruins of their village, finding “lost treasures and trivia in the ashes”,[67] the villagers are able to perceive their formerly boring existence from the new perspective of wonder, which enables them to “rediscover, and see differently, the fragments of their world, their culture, in the ruins”.[68] Presented from Eva’s point of view, the aggregation phase of their phenomenological liminality is articulated through change operating on two levels. On the one hand, the villagers’ reaction to their homeland and everyday lives is transformed from dullness into amazement, in such a way that “Dragons’ Breath” emerges as “an allegorical tale about the capacity to wonder at the world and not fall under the curse of familiarity and boredom”.[69] The siblings’ house, previously a trap into their monotonous existence, has become a miracle in its survival among the ruins. Eva, who felt wearied by the scarcity

of colours in her ancestral activity of weaving, now feels admiration for her own work and its transgenerational value, “inwardly moved and shaken, also, by this form of her own past, and the past of her mother and grandmother”.[70] As Jane Campbell has put it, Eva will not fulfil her original dreams of enlarged horizons because she cannot change the plot she is in, but she does indeed change her relation to it.[71] On the other hand, the transtemporal memory of the traumatic experience, although partly remaining ineffable like the remembrance of the creature in “The Thing in the Forest”, finds a new and restorative life in its transformation into timeless stories, transmitted from generation to generation, “charms against boredom […], riddling hints of the true relations between peace and beauty and terror”.[72]

The healing potential of storytelling recurs in “The Thing in the Forest”, where one of the protagonists, Primrose, becomes a professional storyteller in her attempt to work through her childhood experiences during the Second World War. The connection between the character of the evacuee and storytelling also lies behind Byatt’s *Ragnarok. The End of the Gods* (2011), where the protagonist, the thin child who discovers *Asgard and the Gods* as Byatt did in her childhood, is portrayed as telling herself tales and devouring “stories with rapacious greed, ranks of black marks on white, sorting themselves into mountains and trees, stars, moons and suns, dragons, dwarfs, and forests containing wolves, foxes and the dark”.[73] As in “Dragons’ Breath”, the trauma of war is projected on a monstrous creature that is encountered in a forest by Penny and Primrose, two evacuees who find themselves face to face with a “shapeless and stinking” thing,[74] a giant worm “like a cross between a monstrous washerwoman and a primeval dragon. […] It was made of rank meat, and decaying vegetation, but it also trailed veils and prostheses of manmade materials”.[75] Like the creatures in “Dragons’ Breath”, portrayed as “stinking of despair”,[76] the thing is “shapeless and stinking”, and

the humanised characterisation of its miserable face hints at the transference of human emotions onto the phenomenological confrontation with the monster. Indeed, its description "resonates with the aftermath of fight and the bloody carnage which gave way to a countless number of colourless and shapeless dead bodies strewn all over and rotting in the deserted battlefield".[77] This terrifying experience becomes a haunting memory in the girls' minds, stored as a liminal passage through the dimensions of reality and unreality: beyond being a "fantasm" or a "delusion",[78] the memory of the thing is associated with the quality of lifelike dreams or nightmares, in-between imagination and reality: "Something which resembled unreality had walked – had rolled, […] had *lumbered* into reality".[79]

The interplay between reality and unreality vividly returns to the protagonists' thoughts when, as adults, they revisit the forest, perceived as a site of wonder: "The wood, the real and imagined wood – […] had always been simultaneously a source of attraction and a source of discomfort, shading into terror".[80] As they remember their disturbing encounter with the thing, and the mysterious disappearance of the little girl Alys, Penny visualises the monster as a creature liminally crossing worlds,[81] an image that later triggers a revelation for Primrose: "She had understood something, and did not know what she had understood. She wanted badly to go home, and she wanted never to move".[82] Primrose's longing for home is particularly significant because, during her adult walk through the forest, her thoughts revolve around the idea of home, in the same way as Penny's thoughts address the dichotomy between the visible and the invisible. This dichotomy lies behind Penny's vocation as a child psychologist, which she associates with her traumatic encounter with the thing: in the short term, the experience curtailed her interest in the unreality of books; in the long term, it transformed her into a psychotherapist: "She had become good at studying what could not be seen. […] The

corner of the blanket that covered the unthinkable had been turned back enough for her to catch sight of it. She was in its world".[83]

The opposition between the visible and the invisible, which recurs throughout the story, becomes particularly peremptory for Penny after her unsuccessful attempt to face the thing again as an adult. The invisibility of the monster contrasts with her conviction about the thing's liminal crossing through her existence, awakening her repetition compulsion to return to the forest and confront the thing: "When it came, she would look it in the face, she would see what it was. She clasped her hands loosely in her lap. Her nerves relaxed. She was ready".[84] If Penny works through trauma by focusing on what cannot be seen, Primrose does so by giving voice to what cannot be said, embodying two different approaches, literal and narrative, to their experience.[85] In the story, invisibility goes hand in hand with ineffability as the unavoidable effects of war and its trauma. As in "Dragons' Breath", Primrose transforms the ineffable into children's tales, and her voice can be heard at the end of the story with the same words that open "The Thing in the Forest", thus becoming an emblematic rendering of the circular and everlasting quality of storytelling.

This quality has been explored by Byatt in several of her critical writings on short fiction, such as "The Greatest Story Ever Told", from *On Histories and Stories*, where she states that "[s]toryteling in general […] consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings".[86] This essay highlights Byatt's view of storytelling as a biological need, an idea that emerges as well in her article on "Fairy Stories", which identifies the primary goal of her own fantastic writing as "the pleasure of entering that other world, a world of imaginary apples and forest paths, greener and darker than any encountered in everyday life".[87] The image of crossing the boundary between two worlds becomes particularly relevant in the context of the centrality of liminality for the exploration of

Byatt's wonder tales. As this chapter has argued, liminality offers an apt critical tool to examine the presence and appeal of ontologically hybrid beings like the lamia and the stone woman, as well as the phenomenological transition through trauma under the form of the encounter with the dragons and the thing in the forest. These experiences result in a revelatory discovery or change for the characters' aesthetic or vital evolution, triggered by the vivid visualisation of creatures that "hide [the] truth" of wonder in their embodiment of "the marvel, the prodigy, the surprise as well as the responses they excite, of fascination and inquiry; [wonder] conveys the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement".[88]

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