

“The myth in which the gods themselves
were all destroyed”: reading A. S. Byatt’s
Ragnarök: The End of the Gods and Klas
Östergren’s *The Hurricane Party*

Alexandra Cheira

Centro de Estudos Anglísticos, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa

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Retelling myths: the Canongate Myth Series

“Today mythical thinking”, Karen Armstrong writes in her essay on the subject which serves as an introduction to the Canongate Myth Series, “has fallen into disrepute; we often dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent”. However, she also adds in *A Short History of Myth*, “mythology and science both extended the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology... is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it” (Armstrong 2-3).

Armstrong’s essay, published in 2005 as the first title in the Canongate Myth Series, sets the tone for the entire series, which comprises a group of short novels in which ancient myths from several cultures are reimagined and rewritten by contemporary authors at the invitation of the editor of the series, Jamie Byng. Intended to have an international focus, contributing authors in the series have included both established English-writing authors such as Margaret Atwood, Jeannette Winterson, Alexander McCall Smith, Ali Smith, Sally Vickers, Michel Faber, Philip Pullman and A. S. Byatt, and non-English-writing authors whose work is well known in their country, some of it having been translated into English. Russian writer Victor Pelevin, Israeli author David Grossman, Polish author Olga Tokarczuk (whose contribution to the series is the only one not to have been translated into English so far), Chinese author Su Tong, Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, Japanese novelist Natsuo Kirino, Brazilian writer Milton Hatoum and Swedish novelist Klas Östergren belong to this second group. Published from 2005 to the present day, as of 2016 eighteen titles have been published in the series, the last but one of which so far is precisely A. S. Byatt’s *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*, which came out in 2011.

The fact that such different authors have chosen to rewrite a myriad of mythological characters and events — Penelope and Odysseus, Atlas and Heracles, Theseus and the Minotaur, Samson, Iphis, Oedipus and Tiresias, Prometheus, the Norse Gods and Ragnarök among them — in such unique ways attests both to the validity of the project and to the enduring vitality of myth. That is why, despite some mixed reviews on several short novels — Byatt’s and Östergren’s included (see Brown 2009) —, the series has been heralded as an “ambitious, risky project” in which, in the words of a reviewer, “all mythology is a work-in-progress. New myths are being born right now, and old ones reinvented, in decaying buildings, on laptop computers, in hushed rooms around the globe. Canongate is to be applauded for serving as midwife to some of them” (Hand 2005).

For Karen Armstrong, myths “give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life” and “force us to change our hearts and minds, give us new hope, and compel us to live more fully” (Armstrong 10). This essay will thus discuss the way in which A. S. Byatt and Klas Östergren have done just this through their quite distinctive reimagining of the Norse myth of Ragnarök. The only authors in the series so far to have chosen to rewrite the same myth, Byatt roots her retelling in the past whereas Östergren reaches out to the future. In fact, Byatt chooses to merge a quite rare autobiographical account of her reading experience of the Norse myth as a child during World War II with its retelling in a new context, whereas Östergren combines a futuristic dystopian tale and a modern retelling of the *Lokasenna*, one of the poems of the *Poetic Edda* which presents an exchange of insults between the Norse gods and Loki.

2. The thin child in wartime and the Norse gods: A. S. Byatt’s *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods*

Byatt’s lifelong fascination with Norse mythology in particular spans both her critical work and her fiction, and can be traced as far back as her childhood. As she acknowledges in the essay “Fairy Stories: The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye”, her favourite book as a child was the nineteenth-century scholarly *Asgard and the Gods* which her mother had given her (see FS) — just like “the thin child”, *Ragnarök*’s narrator. In fact, I argue that *Ragnarök* merges Byatt’s quite rare autobiographical account of her

reading experience of Norse mythology as a child with its retelling in a new context. “The myth in which all the gods themselves were all destroyed” is framed by the realistic story of the “thin child in wartime” — World War II England, in itself a cataclysmic end of an era. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator is Byatt’s childish self — Byatt was born in 1936 and left for a country town “of no interest to enemy bombers” (*R* 3) — brings the reader close to the text by means of both the microscopic lens of the thin child’s memory and the telescopic lens of the adult Byatt’s imagination. This proves that, for Byatt, Italo Calvino’s words on the permanence of myth in one’s memory ring true:

With myths, one should not be in a hurry. It is better to let them settle in the memory, to stop and dwell on every detail, to reflect on them without losing touch with their language of images. The lesson we can learn from a myth lies in the literal narrative, not in what we add to it from the outside. (Calvino 4)

Byatt terms this creative process “a way old and new” (*OHS* 131) of looking at the ways “old tales and forms have had a continued, metamorphic life” (*OHS* 124). In this case, the frame tale is both clarification of, and counterpoint to, the social and cultural context the thin girl is enclosed in, as A. S. Byatt reveals in the essay “Thoughts on Myths” which comes as an afterword to *Ragnarök*:

I tried once or twice to find a way of telling the myth that preserved its distance and difference, and finally realised that I was writing for my childhood self, and the way I had found the myths and thought about the world when I first read *Asgard and the Gods*. So I introduced the figure of ‘the thin girl in wartime... [S]he is thin partly because she was thin, but also because what is described of her world is thin and bright, the inside of her reading and thinking head, and the ways in which she related the world of Asgard...to the world and life she inhabited. (*TM* 166)

Before she was five years old, Byatt was evacuated to “the ordinary paradise of the English countryside” (*R* 3) and, having started to read very early, she discovered *Asgard and the Gods*, an academic book “full of immensely

detailed, mysterious steel engravings of wolves and wild waters, apparitions and floating women”. The book’s cover “rushing image ... of Odin’s Wild Hunt on horseback tearing through a clouded sky amid jagged bolts of lightning” (R 7-8) intrigued the thin girl, especially when she learnt in the introduction that the book was “about the retrieval of ‘the old Germanic world, with its secrets and wonders...’” (R 8). She did not know then, however, just like her adult self does now, that the picture of Odin and the Wild Hunt was a favourite of Adolf Hitler’s. In fact, the *Führer* was an admirer of Richard Wagner’s particular rendition of the Norse myths in his operas which, for Hitler, symbolically corporealized his own vision of the German nation. The child Byatt knew enough of the ongoing war, though, to be puzzled by the idea of this particular group of Germans she heard about in her daily life, who caused her to have nightmares in which “there were Germans under her bed, who, having cast her parents into a green pit in a dark wood, were sawing down the legs of her bed to reach her and destroy her” (R 8). She was unable to reconcile the old Germans in the book with “the ones overhead, now dealing death out of the night sky” (R 8), because those old Germans made her feel most alive in the midst of the deathly scenario created by their descendants. For her, “they filled the world with alarming energy and power” when she conjured their “unformed faces, peering at herself from behind the snout of her gas-mask, during air-raid drill” (R 10-11) — and made her want to write.

The fact that the thin girl is described throughout with none of the rosy tints of self-complacency usually allowed by the distance between one’s childish and grown-up *personae* enhances both her reliability as the narrator in the frame story and her ability to select significant episodes from the myth which is going to be retold in the embedded story. The first myth the thin child chooses to recount is that of the mythical tree Yggdrasil, the World-Ash which “held the world together, in the air, in the earth, in the light, in the dark, in the mind” (R 13). She starts with the Genesis-like statement “In the beginning was the tree” (R 13), which accurately situates the mythical tree at the centre of the creation myth of the world through ice from the north and fire from the south, whose fusion engendered life in the wide chasm of Ginnungagap. By considering Yggdrasil important enough to be described in detail for three pages, the thin child proves a worthy selector within the wider landscape of the Norse

myths. In fact, according to Norse cosmology, the universe was construed as a tricentric structure, which in turn enclosed nine worlds, held together by Yggdrasil, the mighty ash tree whose branches spread out over the whole world and reached up to heaven while its three roots were sunk in each of the three different levels (see Holland xx-xxiii). The symbiotic relationship between Yggdrasil and the universe it sustained did not escape the thin girl either: "The tree ate and was eaten, fed and was fed on" (*R* 14).

The recounting of this first myth sets the tone for all the chosen ones to be retold with regard to some particulars, namely the fact that the thin child intersperses inner reflections on her reading experience as symbolic interpretation of the real war she finds herself involved in. That is how, for instance, she equates Odin's Wild Hunt, in which "they rode out through the skies, horses and hounds, hunters and spectral armed men [who] never tired and never halted" (*R* 40), with the destruction brought about by real air raids:

She had seen and heard the crash and conflagration when the airfield near her grandparents' home was bombed. She had cowered in an understairs cupboard as men were taught to cower, flat on the ground, when the Hunt passed by. Odin was the god of death and battle (...) Airmen were the Wild Hunt. They were dangerous. (*R* 40-41)

The thin child also enacts a running commentary on the nature of narrative itself, linking once more the frame story and the embedded retelling of Ragnarök. She believes that "the people [in the tales] were not 'characters' into whose doings she could insert her own imagination", so she "neither loved nor hated... them" (*R* 44) and her adult counterpart corroborates this in "Thoughts on Myths" by stating that:

gods, demons and other actors in myths do not have personalities or characters in the way people in novels do. They do not have psychology (...) They have attributes — Hera and Frigg are essentially jealous, Thor is violent, Mars is warlike, Baldur is beautiful and gentle... (*TM* 158-159)

The adult Byatt once again endorses this view by declaring that "When Canongate invited me to write a myth I knew immediately which myth I wanted to write. It should be Ragnarök, the myth to end all myths, the

myth in which the gods themselves were all destroyed” (R 163). In fact, in Norse mythology, Ragnarök is a sequence of future developments which comprehends the heralding of a great battle whose aftermath is the death of several gods and goddesses such as Odin, Thor, Tyr, Freyer, Frigg and Loki, the materialization of numerous natural catastrophes and the subsequent plunge of the world underwater (see Holland 173-176).

In “Thoughts on Myths”, Byatt signals nonetheless a new context for the myth in the twenty-first century, namely the extinction of the natural world at the hands of ambitious, greedy and irresponsible human beings who are ultimately bringing about their own demise. However much she wanted to write the end of our Midgard without sermonizing or resorting to allegory, in the end Byatt realised

the Norse Gods are peculiarly human... because they are limited and stupid. They are greedy and enjoy fighting and playing games. They are cruel and enjoy hunting and jokes. They know Ragnarök is coming but are incapable of imagining any way to fend it off, or change the story. They know how to die gallantly but not how to make a better world. (TM 169)

3. A new rendition of the *Lokasenna*: Klas Östergren’s *The Hurricane Party*

Klas Östergren had reached this precise same conclusion in 2009, two years prior to Byatt’s rendition of Norse mythology. Östergren sets his retelling in a futuristic Stockholm maimed by the environmental and economic collapse foretold by Byatt in her afterword to *Ragnarök*. The city is run by a mysterious family known as the Clan, who are in fact the Norse gods. By placing Norse myth in the context of a dystopian crime story in which a father will investigate the strange death of his son while working for the Clan, Östergren gives a new perspective on the Norse gods and the stories about them, at the same time enhancing the Norse gods’ peculiarly (in)human traces.

Östergren’s novel is divided into three parts. The first part details the protagonist’s life up until the moment he receives the news his son is dead; the second records his voyage to the distant archipelago where the Clan is housed in order to seek an explanation, and revenge, for his son’s

death; the last part chronicles his encounters with two of the Norse gods, Odin and Loki, and the outcome of his purpose of vengeance. The novel seamlessly emphasises the degradation of physical, as well as moral, living conditions in a city in which “the old-fashioned umlauts over the ö and ä [in a shop sign] bore witness to the fact that the shop had been at that site for several generations” (*HP* 14); and where “the market square was filled with rubbish that had been left after the latest clean-up [and] looked like a battlefield after a conflict waged under the worst possible conditions” (*HP* 12). In this city, a whole generation “had died in gang fights or other disputes [and] the other half had been wiped out by a virus that had swept over this part of the world like a wave” (*HP* 20) and there were people who worked outside the city, “out there”, in order to control the access to the city:

“Out there” referred to the entire world outside the city. The border was closed to ordinary citizens. With a certain amount of effort you could get out, but it was much harder to get in. Along the border lay a ring of quarantine areas where most people had to spend a long and vexing waiting period, only to be designated almost without exception as ill and then be turned away. (*HP* 21)

Hanck Orn, the protagonist, is a seller and repairer of ancient typewriters bequeathed to him by a dying man in a world where paper is an extremely valued commodity. In fact, his usual buyer, a shopkeeper who takes pride in being an “obsolete” (*HP* 18) — a word that, for him, meant living off and living for this inheritance from a distant past — takes it as a compliment to sacrifice a sheet of paper whenever Hanck takes him machines to sell. When Hanck leaves home, it is not an unnatural occurrence to pass and partly climb “over six bodies in the stairwell [whom] he had poked ... with his shoe to check they were still alive” (*HP* 12). The social decline is also discernible in the fact that “unlike many of his peers, Hanck decided early on to learn to read and write” (*HP* 28) landing a job in an insurance company as an investigator when he was a young man. In a time of ever-growing social disintegration, the Clan operated like the Mafia, offering protection by first forcing people to resort to their services through violent intimidation, arson being their favourite *modus operandi*. Their control over people’s lives was wide and far-spreading:

The Clan ruled over everything, both big and small, and done so for such a long time that it had become an accepted fact that might even be described as “natural”. Schools and their teaching materials were precluded from presenting any alternatives to this system, since both the schools and their teaching materials were protected and financed by the Clan itself. (*HP* 32-33)

In the midst of the contaminated air, of the random violence that makes it dangerous to be out and of a life regulated and controlled by the dissolute Clan, there is still the possibility of unconditional love though, namely Hanck’s love for his son Toby. Begotten from a casual encounter with a “Sneezer” (a woman who belonged to a religious cult which claimed that when a person sneezed they came close to God), Toby was rescued as a new-born baby from his father when he was handed to a hospital with a business card with Hanck’s name and address and the information that the infant’s mother was dead. Hence, Toby has a very close relationship with his father. Enhanced by Hanck’s narrative power to embellish the past with regard to Toby’s mother, this relationship is not interrupted even when twenty-year-old Toby chooses to leave home and work as a chef in the distant archipelago which the Clan actually honours with their presence. When the Clan’s Communicators, officers whose duty it is to inform the families of the deceased that their loved ones are dead with the accompanying formula that “there is no further information” (*HP* 120) tell Hanck that his beloved son is dead he knows this death is not natural. Therefore, he travels to the distant archipelago where no one enters without an official permit to find the truth about his son’s death. It then transpires that his son had died at the hand of Loki during a banquet for the Clan because he sneezed. A happy occurrence for Toby because it reminded him of his dead mother, it was an unpardonable offense for a god who was already violently excited by the hurricane party which the feast turned out to be, with the attending gods and goddesses drunkenly prone to tale-telling and sexual excess.

If the Clan is physically absent in the first part of the novel and the reader only knows of their power through the narrator, they are very much present in this recounting of Toby’s death in all their magnified envy, cruelty, deceit and rudeness. There is nothing noble or grand about them,

since they are reduced to the size of petty mortals with an increased sense for evil though. This part is interspersed with the description of Loki's most cunning tricks so as the reader will not feel the same amusement with regard to this god as they feel with Byatt's choice of tricks to retell. In fact, Östergren's Loki is nothing more than a selfish, self-aggrandized, despicable crook as opposed to Byatt's lively trickster. A reviewer of Östergren's novel perceptively situates the opposition between the man and the god, both of them fathers, in the realm of Norse mythology itself in which they stand as antagonists in a different figuration:

When Hanck realises that his surname should really be Örn (Eagle), he can appreciate more clearly his own existential position. Here he is in a place where the contaminated air is death-dealing, violence makes it dangerous to be out, and living is regulated by the mysterious Clan. Is that not like being a bird-of-prey with clipped wings? Hanck knows the eagle's fabled history as the only creature who dared defy Loki, most sinister of the Norse gods, who have re-emerged and make up the Clan. (Binding 2009)

The fact that this particular story is told during the gods' party lends credence to the hypothesis that Loki, Toby's murderer, is in fact Orn as the eagle's old opponent. After having been tricked by Loki himself who, disguised as a prostitute, gave Hanck a letter for Odin, aka the Old Man, Hanck meets Odin and asks him to be allowed to see his son Toby so he can mourn him. That wish is granted after Odin asks Hanck to write a book about the love he bore his son, as the word "love" is prone to much confusion in this world. When father and son finally meet in Hel's domains, Toby exacts the promise that his father will comply with the Old Man's request. In addition, Toby reveals that he has met his mother, telling his father that he now knew nothing he had ever told him as a boy was true. His purpose of revenge against Loki appeased by seeing his son, Hanck is able to witness Loki's cruel punishment devised by the Old Man. Loki is bound and, above him, a snake perpetually spits venom over his defenceless naked body. In the meantime, Loki's wife Sigyn holds a bowl under the jaws of the snake to catch the corrosive acid and continually empties it when it is full, a few drops always landing on Loki. The most horrifying detail concerns his shackles though, since they are made of one of his son's

intestines, ripped out by his brother while he was still alive, as the brother was forced into stabbing him by the Old Man's commands. A son for a son — thus is the eagle vindicated. However, whereas Hanck was innocent of his son's death, Loki will perpetually feel guilty about his own son's death, as the boy was killed to punish his father.

4. Conclusion: the Norse gods in modern contexts

The warring gods who know Ragnarök is coming but cannot change the story are thus, for Byatt, the people who were unable to fend off the Second World War and, for Östergren, the twenty-first century human species destroying its own environment along with the ruthlessness and violence which robs them of their humanity. For that reason, A. S. Byatt's *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* and Klas Östergren's *The Hurricane Party* are both a cautionary tale (as one of the characteristics of myth pinpointed by Byatt is its endless repeatability) and a thoughtful gaze through the looking glass at the tradition of storytelling against death.

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ABSTRACT

A. S. Byatt's *Ragnarök: The End of the Gods* and Klas Östergren's *The Hurricane Party*, both published by Canongate Myth Series, reimagine the Norse myth of Ragnarök in quite distinctive ways. Whereas Byatt chooses to merge a quite rare autobiographical account of her reading experience of the Norse myth as a child during World War II with its retelling in a new context, Östergren combines a futuristic dystopian tale and a modern retelling of the *Lokasenna*, one of the poems of the Poetic Edda which presents an exchange of insults between the Norse gods and Loki. Hence, this paper argues that Byatt's *Ragnarök* and Östergren's *The Hurricane Party* are both a cautionary tale and a thoughtful gaze through the looking glass at the tradition of storytelling against death in their modern reimagining of the Norse myth of Ragnarök.

KEYWORDS

A. S. Byatt; Canongate Myth Series; Klas Östergren; Norse mythology; Ragnarök

RESUMO

Ragnarök: The End of the Gods, de A. S. Byatt, e *The Hurricane Party*, de Klas Östergren (ambos publicados pela Canongate Myth Series), re-imaginam o mito nórdico de Ragnarök de modos particularmente distintos. Com efeito, Byatt escolhe ligar um raríssimo relato autobiográfico da sua experiência de leitura do mito nórdico, ocorrida enquanto criança e durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial, com o seu reconto num contexto novo. Por seu lado, Östergren combina um conto de distopia futurista com um reconto moderno do poema *Lokasenna*, um dos poemas da Edda Poética que apresenta uma troca de insultos entre os deuses nórdicos e Loki. Deste modo, neste ensaio apresenta-se o argumento de que os textos de Byatt e de Östergren devem ser lidos como lições cautelares, constituindo ainda um olhar ponderado sobre a tradição da narrativa contra a morte por meio de uma nova visão do mito nórdico de Ragnarök.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

A. S. Byatt; Canongate Myth Series; Klas Östergren; mitologia nórdica; Ragnarök
