A. S. Byatt. *Ragnarök; The End of the Gods*. Melbourne: Text, 2011.

ISBN: 9781921921001

Geoff Berry

The Nordic myths of Asgard have been paid a fair degree of respect over recent years. They were a major inspiration behind Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which received magisterial filmic treatment from Peter Jackson, and were granted a more explicit role in Kenneth Branagh's recent visual feast *Thor*. A. S. Byatt's new novel *Ragnarök* is a much more personal journey than these heroic epics, retelling the core mythic cycle of the Northern Europeans through the thoughts and experiences of a small girl during the Second World War air raids in and around London. Explicitly taking its cues from Dr W Wagner's 1880 book *Asgard and the Gods*, Byatt's reverie also clearly utilises autobiographical details in its telling of "the thin child" during wartime.

The utilisation of traditional mythic material as a way of adding gravitas to a modern tale is of course a perennial artistic technique. When an otherwise contemporary tale alludes to imagery, characterisation, or patterns of behaviour from deep within the residues of cultural history, it can strike powerful chords within the reader. The genre of mythopoeia, especially when it explicitly refers to a mythic tradition, offers the reader qualities such as a preference for ambiguities rather than assurances even when concentrating its storytelling focus on a concurrent preparation for the certainty of death and the end of things. And while there is certainly abundant evidence of these qualities in Byatt's new novel, there is also a fundamental problem with it, and this problem can be summed up in the wise adage passed on to generations of composers and performers: show, don't tell. For while Byatt's example of mythopoeia displays some of the strengths of the genre, it also overbakes the product by pointing so directly towards its source ma-

terials and its driving point.

Byatt's thin child reveals, through her intimate reveries and quite mature reflections on the times through which she must live, a nebulous feeling about the realities of life during wartime: she "knew, and did not know that she knew, that her elders lived in provisional fear of imminent destruction (4)." This is a marvellous evocation of the preternatural wisdom so often displayed by small children when faced with the ultimate questions of life and death. The thin child also displays an ambivalent attitude towards her received tradition, Christianity, which many readers will no doubt share, as lovers of myth often resent the anti-heretic sentiment of a medieval church intent on killing off all other stories of gods and nature spirits as heresies. While the vicar "talked gently of gentle Jesus and she felt *rude* not to believe him", the stories of Asgard "were coiled like smoke in her skull, humming like dark bees in a hive (31-32)." The survival of myth as a compelling force of cultural wisdom, which survives exactly because it transforms paradigms even as it maintains patterns, relies on exactly the kind of immediate, compelling, terrifying world of Wagner's Asgard as reframed by Byatt.

Myth, for Byatt, is supposed to bind the world together with words and thereby prevent "the breakout of chaos and disorder" (52), yet it cannot ever be entirely successful in slaying the monster (53). She displays her mastery of the creative aspect of this theoretical truism when describing Jörmungandr, the giant serpent, and its travels around the depths of the world's oceans, where it creates devastation its wake and is once caught by Thor, at which point: "The sky darkened, clouds piled into black banks, the snake twisted and hissed, the god held fast, as lightning split the cloud cover (74)." An even angrier snake now massacres for fun anything it sees, until it meets its own tail, an underwater Ouroborous "still bad-tempered" who snapped at the wavering form and then rested, "wound round the earth like a girdle" (76).

It is with darkness that this story makes its compact – to resist the false ease with which the Christian hero guarantees regeneration and to confirm the uneasy but seemingly more "real" end towards which Asgard is destined:

> The World-Ash and the rainbow bridge, seemingly everlasting, destroyed in the twinkling of an eye. … [T]he black undifferentiated surface, under a black undifferentiated sky, at the end of things (154).

This bleak conclusion is compared to the promise of nature's regeneration (a promise keenly felt by the thin child) and the comparison makes a direct analogy to the way environmental disasters now threaten our entire eco-

logical system. The book thus suggests an uneasy breakdown in nature's capacity for self-healing that is obliquely associated with the monotheistic and industrial crushing of diversity (whether by war or industry). For the little girl, the fundamentals of myth, the regenerative force of life through death, of nature and the human culture that is part of it, all came together in the world around her:

> It was all one thing, the field, the hedge, the ash tree, the tangled bank, the trodden path, the innumerable forms of life, of which the thin child, having put down her bundle and gas-mask, was only one among many (36).

These are beautiful moments, wherein the child weaves words about her as she walks, observing and naming the vivid life in the meadows, the startling and earthly chorus of dandelions and daisies, skylarks and plovers, the passing of the seasons. The aliveness of her mind and the strength of her inner conviction make the thin girl a likable hero, albeit one that clearly stands in for the author. (This is forecast in the book's opening lines, which place the child at the age of three as the war begins – Byatt was born in 1936 – and reiterated in the epilogue, where she admits to "writing for her childhood self", 166.) The combination of the autobiographical mode, with its evidence of an early passion for powerful stories and the storytelling tradition, and a well-developed relationship with the mysterious psychic and environmental realms out of which myth arises, make this a compelling portrait of Nordic darkness and forlorn hope. When Byatt writes true to this tragic element she is at her best, even when admitting that large portions of the tale are effectively rewrites of the classic original text. In the attempt to make the timeless epic contemporary with current ecological crises – an association that is disturbing, poignant and timely – she does tend, however, to make her intentions so clear as to become blunted. This is especially the case in the epilogue, where Byatt writes of trying to avoid giving a sermon while pointing out that we may not have recourse to our perennial faith in nature's regenerative powers any longer (166-67). Her theme of renewal is thereby complicated in a way that makes good sense, and accords well with the broad aims of mythopoeia. But the book remains a little unsatisfying as an example of the ambiguous artform towards which she clearly aims because of Byatt's added directives as to how and against what it should be read.

Monash University
geoff.berry@monash.edu