Too Strange for Reality, Too Real for Fairy Tales: Views from Cognitive and Unnatural Narratology on A.S. Byatt's "A Stone Woman"

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Abstract – In "A Stone Woman" (2003), A.S. Byatt centres the story of her protagonist's fantastic metamorphosis around the continuities between the transformations involving the body and those affecting the mind. In this light, her narrative constitutes a fictional exploration of cognition as embodied and of language as a cognitive tool equally rooted in embodiment. While this focus straightforwardly calls for second-generation cognitive narratology as the most suitable theoretical framework, the article proposes to integrate the cognitive approach with insights from unnatural narratology. This combined perspective arguably allows to appreciate and examine Byatt's ambivalent use of embodied cognition as both a shared condition that fosters the readers' capability to relate to the narrated experience, but also as a strategy that interacts with traditional features of the fairy tale (e.g. the lack of psychological introspection) in ways that are defamiliarizing and yet not subversive of the genre.

Keywords – Embodied Cognition; Cognitive Narratology; Unnatural Narratology; A.S. Byatt; Fairy Tale.

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1. A tale of minds and bodies

Included in A.S. Byatt's (b. 1936) collection *Little Black Book of Stories* published in 2003, "A Stone Woman" narrates Ines' supernatural transformation from flesh-and-bone woman to a marvellous creature made of stones. What makes it particularly interesting, however, is its focus on the close interrelation between the metamorphosis experienced by the body and the changes that consequently affect the mind of the protagonist as well as her way of interacting with the world around her. As it represents mind and body as irreducibly entwined, Byatt's story offers a fascinating fictional exploration of the embodied nature of cognition, that is the view according to which our thought processes are inherently shaped by being situated in a physical body able to interact in certain ways with the environment.

Byatt's interest in cognitive studies and neurosciences is well-documented and would provide solid groundings to this claim. To cite only one of the articles published the very same year of "A Stone Woman", in "The Feeling Brain" (2003) Byatt displays an extensive and up-to-date knowledge of the debate around the mind and body, which she approaches from a number of perspectives. Within the domain of literature and history of ideas she discusses James Williams and Sigmund Freud side by side with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and George Eliot – whose *Middlemarch* she regards as «the great novel of the body-mind exploration»; her philosophical insights span from Baruch Spinoza to Antonio Damasio and Daniel Dennett, and she proves to be a keen reader of works in neuroscience as well as in cognitive literary studies, among which she cites Alan Richardson's *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*.[1]

The purpose of this article, however, is less to investigate Byatt's relations with scientific approaches to the mind and more to examine the strategies employed in "The Stone Woman" to represent the body-mind nexus and engage the reader in reflecting on it. The article suggests that the best way to do so is by combining insights from both cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology, as they complement each other in illuminating the deliberately ambivalent effects of familiarity and estrangement pursued by the author. After briefly introducing the two narratological approaches, the first part of the article analyses the representation of Ines' mind as transitioning from human to nonhuman. I will consider the role Byatt attributes to language in mediating such transition and how she highlights its nature as cognitive tool also rooted in embodiment. In the second part, the dynamic interaction between cognitive and unnatural perspective will frame the discussion of Byatt's reuse of the fairy tale: rather than aiming to subvert the genre, I will suggest that Byatt uses the cognitive

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[1] For critical accounts of Byatt's interest in scientific views concerning the body-mind nexus in particular, see among others Sturrock ("Angels, Insects, Analogy") and Walezak ("A.S. Byatt").

focus to reinterpret some of its typical features (i.e. its lack of psychological insight) and thus shedding an unnatural light upon the narrative. The peculiar strategies of engagement activated in Byatt's fairy tale will be examined through the reformulation of dynamics of immersion proposed by unnatural narratology. My overall claim is that in "A Stone Woman" Byatt stages a complex operation that, using the cognitive focus with both familiarising and estranging effects, injects new life into the fairy tale genre while, at the same time, respecting the narrative power she recognises to traditional storytelling practices.

2. Two complementary narratological approaches

In a recent special issue of *Poetics Today* (2018), Jan Alber, Marco Caracciolo, Stefan Iversen, Karin Kukkonen and Henrik Skov Nielsen called upon scholars currently engaged in cutting-edge research in narrative studies to discuss the convergences and tensions between two major theoretical strands: second-generation cognitive narratology and unnatural narratology.

Situating itself in the broader field of cognitive literary studies (see Zunshine), cognitive narratology is typified by the key view of narrative as a discourse genre that aims at the production and co-construction of storyworlds, that is to say mental models, by means of textual cues (Herman 6). More specifically, second-generation cognitive narratology holds at its heart the concept of embodiment, that is the idea that mental processes and strategies have developed in symbiosis with our sensory and perceptual experience of the world (Kukkonen and Caracciolo). Second-generation approaches arose in response to a first-generation in cognitive sciences heavily influenced by research in the field of artificial intelligence and by a computational view of the mind as abstract and based on propositional representations (Lakoff and Johnson 75-6). Acknowledging the embodied nature of the mind, on the contrary, means to recognise that the structure of the mind and the way it works are significantly informed by its being situated in a body that is immersed in a physical and social environment. Moving from cognitive sciences to narrative studies, second-generation cognitive narratology thus tends to highlight the similarities and continuities between the mental processes we activate when we experience fiction and those we implement in our everyday lives.

The scope and goals of unnatural narratology are, in some sense, complementary to those of cognitive narratology. Where the cognitive line of inquiry seeks to emphasize «the body's share in experiencing and interpreting literary texts» (*A Theory Crossover* 433), unnatural narratology aims to foreground those strategies and elements of the text that estrange the reader from the narrative, bringing about an effect of defamiliarisation. In other words, this approach considers how stories thrive on what is alien to the readers' everyday life and expectations. With some variations among its proponents (see Alber et al. "What Is Unnatural", "What Really Is"), narratives – or better, certain elements within a narrative – are deemed unnatural when they violate, challenge or subvert conventional storytelling practices. This latter specification is relevant because unnatural narratives are not necessarily such because they infringe realistic mimetic conventions, but also when they infringe fictional expectations, presenting patently irresolvable predicaments that fail to be explained according to the internal rules of the narrative. It follows that, although seemingly counterintuitive, fairy tales do not usually pertain to the scope of unnatural narratology because their fantastic elements have become conventional features of the genre in a way such that they no longer produce a defamiliarising effect.

On the one hand, the explicit link between Ines' physical transformation and the changes in her way of thinking would seem to straightforwardly endorse the second-generation cognitive paradigm holding that the mind is shaped by its evolutionary history, bodily make-up and sensorimotor possibilities. We have also just noticed that the departure from realistic scenarios is not per se a sufficient condition to determine an unnatural narrative. On the other

hand, though, "A Stone Woman" challenges readerly expectations in disorienting ways which neither fully subvert nor comply with the patterns traditionally displayed in fairy tales, and which could be better understood through an unnatural lens.

Moreover, the methodological question gains further complexity if we consider it in the light of the debate surrounding the representation of fictional minds, an issue on which cognitive and unnatural narratology seem to hold mutually exclusive stances: "[a]n unnatural reading unearths the narrative features […] that cannot be reduced to real-world possibilities, whereas a cognitive approach may focus on what is analogous to real-world cognition, or it may explain how unusual fiction is made sense of in cognitive terms" (Bernaerts and Richardson 523). What happens thus when the fictional mind under scrutiny is not human? The decision to adopt either an unnatural or a cognitive approach would seem to entail an inherent choice as to whether a non(fully)human mind is knowable or not. I believe that, by combining the two approaches, we can foreground precisely the ambiguity of Byatt's (lack of) answer to this question. Indeed, while it is productive to analyse from a cognitive perspective how Ines' "human thoughts" are progressively taken over by "stone thoughts," it is my impression that the reading experience of Byatt's short story is not devoid of a certain defamiliarising effect, which calls for an unnatural lens to examine it in greater detail. In particular, I shall suggest that the transition from human to nonhuman mind offers rich possibilities for reflection not only on the irreducible interconnections between body and cognition, but also on the blurred line between shareable and non-shareable experiences.

In line with the feeling that animated the recent *Poetics Today* special issue, my suggestion is that, far from being in opposition, the cognitive and unnatural approach serve to highlight how strategies of familiarisation and estrangement can be used dynamically at different moments in Byatt's text, so as to achieve a complex, ambivalent and engaging narrative.

3. Human thoughts, stone thoughts and words as things

Thematically underpinning the whole collection, the process of metamorphosis is at the centre of Byatt's short story "A Stone Woman." Its occurrence sets the narrative in motion and its completion marks the end. After the death of her beloved mother, Ines suffers from gangrenous intestine, a condition that immediately strikes the reader as a sort of terrible somatisation of her grieving, which causes her to go through surgery. Once back home from the hospital, Ines' disaffection from her own medicalised body initially prevents her from noticing some changes, starting from the healing wound across her belly: weird mineral encrustations begin to spread from it, and she soon realises that her whole body is turning into an ensemble of minerals.

What readers are facing is clearly a physically impossible transformation (rather than a logical or human impossibility), as it could not take place in a world governed by actual biological laws. Nevertheless, in the first part of the story the hypothesis is still entertained that the metamorphosis – like the disease initially causing Ines' hospitalisation – could be linked to the protagonist's mourning for her mother at two possible levels. Firstly, Ines considers but then quickly excludes that she might be severely deluded due to some unexpected chemical or psychological reaction either to her surgery or to her state of bereavement: "It was . . . theoretically possible that . . . the heaped flakes of her new crust were feverish sparks of her anaesthetized brain and grieving spirit. . . . No, what was happening was, it appeared, a unique transformation" (121). From a narratological perspective, this interpretation would correspond to a case of subjectification: listed by Alber, Caracciolo and Marchesini among techniques conventionally adopted by readers to make sense of unnatural situations, subjectification consists in understanding an unnatural occurrence as the distorted perception of a character (459-62).

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Another way of explaining Ines' metamorphosis is to read it allegorically as the concretisation of a death wish following her mother's passing. And yet, Byatt soon gets rid also of this second explanation, which would be capable of defusing the defamiliarising charge of the transformation. To realise that the process of petrification is not accompanied by increasing stillness casts aside its allegorical reading as an approximation to death:

> After some time, she noticed that her patient and stoical expectation of final inertia was not being fulfilled. As she grew stonier, she felt a desire to move, to be out of doors. […] To become stone is a figure, however fantastic, for death. (123)

By forcing her readers to confront the impossible yet fictionally real nature of Ines' transformation, Byatt forces them to engage with it more thoroughly, to refrain from categorising it too quickly as symbolic or through psychological interpretations. Simple contemplation of the impossibility in itself is not enough: Byatt requires her readers to run the impossible scenario in order to fully understand it, thus suggesting that a more nuanced message may lie in the detailed articulations of this impossible process.

To play with impossible metamorphoses unleashes Byatt's creativity because it allows her to experiment with the fantastic biological features of fictional bodies and to explore the impact of these changes on the character's cognitive life. In her review of Antonio Damasio's book *Looking for Spinoza*, published the same year of "A Stone Woman," Byatt praises the philosopher's reversal of Descartes' principle and the claim that it is "the life of the mind [that] arises from the life of the body" ("The Feeling Brain"). In her conclusions she argues that "the study of embodied consciousness is leading us to reconsider all kinds of aesthetic problems and proceedings." And, indeed, the body-mind nexus lies at the heart of this story, for it is the deconstruction of this nexus that Byatt foregrounds in order to spin meaning out of her narrative. Once it becomes clear that Ines is not immediately heading towards a petrified stasis, she begins to appreciate that a changing body means a changing mind and a different way of approaching the world around her.

Because it is primarily concerned with the subject-world interaction, among the range of theoretical tools offered by cognitive approaches the enactivist perspective on cognition is particularly useful to our case. Elaborated by philosopher of perception Alva Noë, enactivism illuminates not only Byatt's approach to Ines' metamorphosis but also her view of language as something essentially informed by our specifically human way of living the environment around us. Noë's enactivist theory is based on the assumption that cognition can only exist in active engagement with the world, by moving through it. Perception is not something that happens to us but something we do, something we *enact*: "[t]o perceive is (among other things) to learn how the environment structures one's possibilities for movement" (105). The environment, far from being inert and passive, is conceived of as something we learn to understand as a network of "affordances." In the words of James Gibson, affordances are things or properties of the environment which not only are available to us but also shape the environment itself by enabling human use. It follows that the needs and desires of our living bodies shape the way we interact with the world, and consequently inform our perception of it in terms of affordances. In other words, we are bound to conceptualise it in a way that depends on what we can do with it and how it could potentially acquire meaning for us.[2]

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[2] Although I could not expand on this in the present article, "A Stone Woman" may be read as a meditation on co-existing systems, populated by entities tuned to live and function with different chronologies and different scales. By seeking to deconstruct established dichotomies such as biological vs. geological, human vs. nonhuman, transient vs. permanent, organic vs. inorganic, Byatt makes a point about their endlessly interconnected and interacting nature.

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Byatt's adherence to an enactive view of cognition is arguably mirrored in her description of Ines' world as progressively changing as she transforms. Her new body-mind set starts perceiving (at a sensorial and unconscious level) and recognising (at a cognitive conscious level) new elements in it, with which she can now interact:

> She noticed that her sense of *smell* had changed, and was sharper. She could smell the rain in the thick cloud-blanket. She could smell the carbon in the car-exhausts and the rainbow-coloured minerals in puddles of petrol. . . . She could *hear* the water on the cement with a new intricate music. (123, 124; my emphasis)

The metamorphosis of Ines' sensory system is the first step towards a reassessment of the type of information she can take in and process, and which therefore informs her "stone thoughts." While she is initially looking for a final resting place (as she still believes at this point that she will become an inert statue of some sort), Ines visits a cemetery and befriends Thorsteinn, a stonecutter from Iceland who does not question her condition and actually suggests that his native land, being a country very much magically and geologically alive, could be the ideal place for Ines to pursue her metamorphosis. After some time,

> she found it harder and harder to see him. He began to seem blurred and out of focus . . . . He was becoming insubstantial. His very solid body looked as though it was simply a form of water vapour. She had to cup her basalt palm around her ear to hear his great voice, which sounded like the whispering of grasshoppers. . . . And at the same time she was seeing, or almost seeing, things which seemed to crowd and gesture just beyond the range of vision . . . . (151)

Ines' increasing difficulty in seeing Thorsteinn is clearly not due to a numbing of her vision. It is her whole cognitive system that undergoes an overall shift of priorities. As she turns into a creature less and less able to interact with other humans, humans themselves cease to be something relevant to her. "She was interested in his human flesh. She found herself a sprouting desire to take a bite out of him" (141): far from depicting the upsurge of a new desire to kill, the passage captures how it is Thorsteinn who is losing his holistic quality as human being and becoming more interesting for what he is made of. Something similar happens to Ines' fading memory of her beloved mother, which becomes "vague in her new mind, like cobwebs" (140). In analogous ways, one might imagine how humans would look at trees and see wood to carve and fruits to eat whereas from a plant-like perspective we could have seen them as friendly creatures, or again as alluring homes if we were squirrels. Although it is not within the scope of this article to discuss this aspect in depth, I should point out that, by depicting Ines' transforming relationships with Thorsteinn and her mother, Byatt seems to indirectly suggest that friendship and even the mother-daughter bond are not excluded from this restructuring process which, starting from the body, reaches out to affect what we regard as basic human relations as well as the pillars of our moral system. What we are and what we need inform the way we look at the world and how we parse it, not only cognitively but also emotionally and ethically.

The final reference in the excerpt above anticipates the ultimate step of Ines' metamorphosis: her capability to see her new kin marks her full entrance in the unnatural community of stone creatures and the departure from the human flock:

> He looked up the mountain and saw, no doubt what she now saw clearly, figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on huge, lithe, stony legs, beckoning with expansive gestures, flinging their great arms wide in invitation. (156)

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Thorsteinn's and Ines' momentary shared vision arguably represents the last moment of joint cognition, and in fact perhaps the only instance of the human perspective aligning itself with the nonhuman perspective, rather than the other way around. As mentioned before, it is no accident that after that the narrative comes to an end.

So, is Ines' mind an unnatural mind? According to Alber and his colleagues, unnatural minds are fictional minds whose "abilities . . . transgress those of human minds or [deconstruct] one or more of the key elements of a working human mind" ("Unnatural Narratives" 120).[3] In this light, Ines' mind is unnatural inasmuch as it undergoes an unnatural transformation that has it turning from a human mind into a nonhuman mind. On the other hand, however, this unnatural metamorphosis is mediated for both Ines and the reader by the human components of Ines' mind. To spell out the metamorphosing mind in cognitive terms enables Byatt to follow it through its changes, to make sense of them and thus, to some extent, to naturalise the shape-shifting process. More specifically, I argue that one of the main motives for the strong power and originality of Byatt's narrative lies in her choice to describe less the content of the protagonist's thoughts and more the processes of sense-making and how these change throughout her metamorphosis:

> She thought human thoughts and stone thoughts. The latter were slow, patchily coloured, textured and extreme, both hot and cold. They did not translate into the English language, or into any other she knew: they were things that accumulated, solidly, knocked against each other, heaped and slipped. (141)

Even when the narrative voice reports specific thoughts about Thorsteinn such as the one quoted earlier, what is highlighted is in fact *how* the protagonist thinks of him rather than *what* she thinks. Thanks to this strategy, the narrative captures the realistic component of the scenario which is the dependence of the mind on the body – even though a fantastic one. Byatt's full consciousness of this difference clearly emerges in her writing about John Donne and Wallace Stevens, of whom she claims to appreciate their capability to «describe not images, but image-making, not sensation but the process of sensing, not concepts but the idea of the relations of concepts» ("Observe the Neurons").[4]

If experience of the transmutation is often rendered through visual and haptic sensations which are primarily sensory-based, these are however irreducibly intertwined with the exquisitely human and conscious strategy of making sense of them through language. Passion for language dominates Byatt's writing, and the term *passion* aptly grasps the mixture of intellectual and sensual pleasure connected to her interest in language. Taxonomies and nomenclature, language as a way of imposing an intellectual order on reality but also its capability of making the materiality of the world present to the subject – all these facets of language recur across Byatt's stories and play a central role also in "A Stone Woman," starting from Ines' work as researcher for an etymological dictionary. Words had been her profession and they later inform her way of coping with her fantastic transfiguration:

> She learned the names of some of the stones when curiosity got the better of passive fear. . . .
> She sat in the evening lamplight and read the lovely words: pyrolusite, ignimbrite, omphacite, uvarovite, glaucophane, schist, shale, gneiss, tuff. (120)

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[3] Alber, Iversen, Nielsen and Richardson's notion of unnatural mind is analogous in many respects to what Abbott defines "unreadable mind."

[4] The process of meaning-making is irreducibly linked to the broader practice of pattern-making, which is the foundational heart of Byatt's storytelling practices.

The raft of terms almost obsessively classifying colours and materials begins on the very first page with Ines' description of her mother, who "had liked to live amongst shades of mole and dove. Her mother's hair had shone silver and ivory. Her eyes had faded from cornflower to forget-me-not" (111). In her thought-provoking analysis, Emilie Walezak stresses the estranging effect of the proliferation of scientific words and argues that «they mimic the protagonist's metamorphosis in their very excessiveness sprouting suffixes and alien loan words like strange outgrowths» so that the reader «experiences something of Ines' mutation as she gradually becomes inhuman and cannot decipher meaning anymore» ("Female Ageing"). While I may agree with Walezak's registration of their designed overwhelming effect, I do not fully concur with the claim that in this context «scientific words are no longer meant to provide meaning». No matter how disorienting these lists might be, for Byatt language does not play a rhetorical role only but, first and foremost in this short story, a cognitive role.

A key hallmark of human cognition, language is recognised as an excellent strategy the human species has developed and perfected throughout its evolution, starting from its bodily and cognitive make-up. It is the tool that best suits the needs and possibilities of humans. And yet the fact that language is not an inherently superior ability but simply a well-enough-tuned tool is stressed by the view, which runs deep through Byatt's fiction and essays, that "words are literally things" (*Passions* 10). Just like "colours are a way to approach the thing that is the body," as Walezak ("Black Magic") argues, words too are both a means by which one can capture the autonomous material reality of the world and something quite real themselves. In this sense perhaps, scientific words clutter up on the page just like the minerals sprout from Ines' body: they have the same tangible and solid quality. When Thorsteinn tells Ines the story of a man turned into stone by a woman troll, he says that during his metamorphosis the man progressively stops using language, until the last sentence he pronounces to his former fellowmen is "*Trunt, trunt, og tröllin ì fjöllunum*":

> The English scholar that persisted in her said, "What does it mean?"
> "'*Trunt, trunt*' is just nonsense, it means rubbish and junk and aha and hubble bubble, that sort of thing. I don't know an English expression that will do as a translation. Trunt trunt, and the trolls in the fells."
> "It has a good rhythm."
> "Indeed, it does." (154)

Far from denouncing the ineffectiveness of language per se, here Byatt emphasises how, as the priorities and drives of the body do change, language may simply cease to be what one needs. Words become worthless things, tools that one outgrows and drops, losing them. Moreover, the sentence – which will be also repeated by Ines when she finally joins the other fantastic creatures – is not actually meaningless. It hints at how language could be used in different ways, for instance to express a certain rhythm, which cannot be surely deemed to be devoid of meaning. The taxonomical vertigo of mineral names, on the other hand, expresses and is produced by that part of Ines' mind that is still human and continues to mediate the shift towards the unnatural. In fact, the story only ends when Ines' mind in its human shape finally dissolves and she can no longer provide a viable perspective point for the narrative because storytelling itself has eventually lost any meaning for her.

4. A strange fairy tale

As I anticipated earlier, despite being the fantastic genre par excellence, fairy tales are not usually regarded as unnatural narratives. The reasons are to do with the variegated definitions held by unnatural narratologists and above all with the assumption that the 'unnatural' should

be measured against the 'naturalness' of standard storytelling practices rather than against parameters of the real world (see Fludernik).

Brian Richardson, for instance, distinguishes between non-mimetic and anti-mimetic situations, events or entities: the non-mimetic elements are non-realistic whereas the anti-mimetic ones conspicuously violate conventional narrative forms, thus resulting in a defamiliarisation of the narrative (34). Since infringement of storytelling practices is the key point, for Richardson only anti-mimetic narratives are unnatural because simply non-mimetic events, when they take place in the apt fictional context, do not disrupt readerly expectations. A more inclusive view is proposed by Jan Alber, who is interested in the history of the unnatural. He discriminates between postmodern unnatural, which still achieves a defamiliarising effect, and fabulous fiction such as in fairy tales, which constitute instances of conventionalised unnatural that no longer disorients ("Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratologies" 141). Making a sort of compromise and outlining a situation not dissimilar to that designed in Byatt's short story, Stefan Iversen considers unnatural those narratives that present clashes between the internal rules of a storyworld and what actually takes place in it ("What is Unnatural"). The case of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is brought as example, inasmuch as Gregor Samsa's transmutation is the only impossible and unexplainable event in a storyworld otherwise adhering to verisimilar mimetic conventions. Ines' metamorphosis, too, is the only overtly fantastic occurrence in a storyworld where everything else is in fact remarkably realistic. As I will show in this section, this is one of the factors that contribute to make "A Stone Woman" a fairy tale – and yet quite a strange one. Byatt undeniably employs strategies, tropes and formal features typical of the genre, and she does so with neither ironic nor subversive intentions (at least not directed against the narrative genre). Nonetheless, a certain defamiliarisation does arise and warrants further attention.

Fairy tales would indeed seem the ideal frame for impossible events. Byatt capitalises on the naturalness that impossibility acquires in this genre and further reinforces it, for instance, as she advances Thorsteinn's Icelandic origins to explain his matter-of-factness about strange things (135). My suggestion is that to set the fantastic metamorphosis in a context which conventionally admits impossibility creates the conditions for reasserting the reality of the metamorphosing entity itself, that is of the embodied mind. This choice, in other words, arguably encourages the reader to naturalise the transformation and reflect on the impact of the body on cognition. However, it is also true that the text does not work towards naturalisation only, and the resulting dynamics are further complicated by the fact that Byatt resists and violates other conventions of the genre, producing a defamiliarising effect that constitutes an equally important part of her enterprise. Impossibility is exploited in a sophisticated interplay of natural and unnatural operations that, from time to time, breach or enforce the scenarios in which they take place. On the one hand, the cognitive lens allows to reflect on the fact that, even though the specifics of Ines' metamorphosis are impossible, the principles governing it are not fully so: albeit imaginatively articulated, the kind of connections regulating the mutual interdependence of body and mind remains valid. On the other hand, unnatural narratology may serve to examine the ways in which applying a cognitively-informed understanding of the body-mind nexus in a fairy tale creates a thought-provoking dissonance.

Miranda Anderson and Stefan Iversen's reformulation of phenomena of immersion and defamiliarisation is particularly useful to explain such disorienting dissonance, which I believe is significantly connected to how Byatt's story engages its readers. In place of a stark dualism, Anderson and Iversen propose a nuanced understanding of types of readerly engagements as continuums of suspension of disbelief, variably high or low, and directedness of attention, either towards the text or towards the real world (569). To rephrase the phenomenon of estrangement along these lines, Byatt's narrative constructs a situation that encourages suspension of disbelief at a very high level: alternative interpretations that would naturalise

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Ines' transformation (subjectification and allegorisation) are progressively discarded to make clear that, in the fictional storyworld, her impossible metamorphosis is inescapably real. However, the act of foregrounding mechanics of thought, which on the one hand captivate readers with their real-like appearance and arguably lead them deep into the narrative (immersion), is likely to trigger on the other hand a feeling of self-awareness that distracts from the mimetic world and redirects readers' attention towards their own real mind – which is an operation that undermines immersion. The theoretical rethinking of immersion vs. estrangement proposed by unnatural narratology allows to see that this paradoxical contradiction arises because the same technique favours in fact both suspension of disbelief and the redirection of readers' focus outside of the storyworld and on to the literary medium and to genre expectations.

Byatt works with the fabric and within the constraints of the fairy tale but also reshapes them to serve her own motives and interests. To speak of deconstruction or violations of norms of the fairy tale genre is a delicate matter because it can be just too easily framed in terms of postmodern rewriting practice, by means of which many tales have been reformulated as newly aligned with postcolonial or feminist agendas. Byatt sharply distances herself from this formula (*On Histories* 143). Instead, she embarks on a subtler operation whereby she seeks to elaborate her own poetics from within the forms of the fairy tale, in whose traditional patterns Byatt senses a unique strength that must be preserved. We can get a sense of where such strength may lie from a lecture the author gave at Yale University four years prior to the publication of "A Stone Woman" (a speech then re-elaborated for her essay collection *On Histories and Stories* as "Old Tales, New Forms"). Here Byatt talks about the storytelling tradition as something different from the nineteenth-century novel – what she calls the "novel of sensibility" (*On Histories* 124) – and identifies its most powerful features in immediacy, laconicism and lack of psychological introspection.

Our case study is undoubtedly an elegant showcase of such Homeric immediacy – as indeed Byatt groups together under the same category of traditional storytelling myths as well as folk tales and fairy tales –, which entails both directness and quickness. In her essay, she writes to be «increasingly interested in quickness and lightness of narrative – in small discreet stories» (*On Histories* 130), and "A Stone Woman" offers a successful implementation of these intentions. Ines' attitude towards her transformation is represented straightforwardly and with only few plain references to her emotions and feelings, but behind this laconicism it can be intuited that "to tell more flatly . . . is sometimes more mysteriously" (*On Histories* 131). The first time the protagonist looks at her wound,

> What she saw was a raised shape, like a starfish, like the whirling arms of a nebula in the heavens. . . . From the star-arms the red dust wafted like glamour. She covered herself hastily, as though what was not seen might disappear. (118)

Feelings such as horror or fear, which one imagines would arise if an impossible metamorphosis suddenly started changing one's body, are rarely reported; even then, they are not dwelled on but simply mentioned in passing, neatly attached to the precise yet elliptical description of the resulting actions and the phases of Ines' transmutation: "She was surprised at the fatalism with which she resigned herself to taking *horrified* glances at her transformation" or "when curiosity got the better of passive *fear*" (120; my emphasis). The final paragraph, when Ines' metamorphosis is complete and she ultimately joins her fantastic kin populating the fells, is equally simply and directly introduced: "When the day came, it brought one of those Icelandic winds that howl across the earth" (155); Thorsteinn watches Ines dancing up the mountain and then "He went in, and closed his door against the weather, and began to pack" (156). Another aspect that further endorses fairy tale suspension of disbelief as well as Byatt's penchant for immediacy is how mimetic speech conventions are transcended. Ines is

said to have "almost given up speech, for her voice scratched and whistled oddly in her petrifying larynx" (130) and it is later specified that "[s]he had to learn to speak all over again, a mixture of whistles and clicks and solo gestures which perhaps only the Icelander would have understood" (138-9). Nonetheless, the automatic acceptance of an ongoing understanding between the two is given for granted, possibly relying on conventions of the fantastic genre that allow for interspecies communication.

Characterisation techniques, too, are in line with those traditionally adopted in fairy tales. In the Proppian system of functions Thorsteinn acts as a fully-fledged Helper, and to say that the protagonist's vicissitudes are narrated laconically is no overstatement. Most importantly, both Thorsteinn and Ines are unequivocally opaque characters, with little psychological insight conceded to the reader. Yet it is in relation to this last point that Byatt weaves her own ideas about art and the human mind into the classic storytelling structure to produce a highly sophisticated *literary* tale.

Her cognitive focus, indeed, is relevant not only because it generates an interesting narrative representation of the body-mind nexus, but also because of how it is creatively integrated in a highly-codified genre. Turning to the cognitive complexity of the mind becomes a way to eschew psychology while at the same time maintaining the richness and mystery of Ines character, without neither reducing her to a flat figure nor resorting to strict behaviourism. By keeping psychological introspection concise but indulging in the pleasure and craft of exact language and in the representation of the protagonist's thought processes, Byatt creates a new balance between opaqueness on the one hand, and rich phenomenological representation on the other. It may be argued that, without infringing the traditional conventions of fairy tales, Byatt seeks to open a 'cold' way to consciousness. In her essay "Ice, Glass, Snow" (*On Histories*), the writer reveals that since she was a child she recognised a sort of illicit attractiveness in states of coldness and separateness: although these were presented as negative conditions from which female heroines needed to be rescued, she understood that the hardness of intellect and cleverness could allow a woman to achieve that independence and self-fulfilment that were conversely denied by conventional happy endings involving the softness of feelings, marriage, love, and child bearing. Walezak interprets images of stone women in Byatt's narrative as an attempt to substitute geology for gynaecology, and sees her scientific posture as a way to dissociate the mind from the body ("A.S. Byatt, Science, and the Body/Mind Dilemma" 108). On the contrary, I propose that for Byatt cognitive sciences, far from denying the body-mind nexus, strongly reaffirm it; what they also do offer, however, is primarily a way to bracket unbridled emotions. Cognitive-oriented explorations thus constitute a viable alternative to psychological introspection, not only because they creatively circumvent the conventional veto operating in fairy tales, but, more broadly, because they provide a means of reconnecting the "human capacity to think" ("Novel Thoughts") with its bodily origins.

The phenomenological turn also puts the story at odds with the fairy tale tradition in relation to another aspect, which concerns the place assigned to individuality. Byatt acknowledges that the marginality of individual consciousness – and even often the absence thereof – is a crucial discriminating factor between ancient storytelling and the novel as modern narrative form. In contrast to this convention, in "A Stone Woman" Ines' psychology might not be the focus of the story but her experience of her own cognitive and bodily transformation undeniably is so. Thorsteinn informs us of numerous Icelandic legends about stone women but then he singles out Ines' predicament, describing it as a "unique transformation" (121). The singularity and unclear origins of her metamorphosis lead it astray from a certain exemplarity and repeatability – two key features of fairy tales – and reinforce its anomalous and unnaturally uniqueness instead.

Also linked to individuality and to the nature of the metamorphosis portrayed in Byatt's short story, a final observation is to be added about the features that fail to align with genre

expectations and thus contribute to create a defamiliarising effect. While fantastic transformations dominate the history of the genre (*On Histories*), scholars claim that they tend to be functional to the restoration of a disrupted order rather than actual developments. Joyce Carol Oates pointedly observes that fairy tales are more often than not politically and morally conservative, which is the starting assumption prompting so many critical postmodern retelling operations. Changes in status, as for Cinderella, and in appearances, as in the case of frogs turned into princes, happen in order to reinstate a rightful privilege rather than to allow their agents to climb the social ladder. "A Stone Woman," instead, fully embraces metamorphosis as a means for evolution and non-teleological transformation. Its irreversibility, and the breaking of cycles, represents an important aspect in Byatt's approach to fairy tales, which entails both a politically subversive and fundamentally defamiliarising charge.

It is not the purpose of the present article to disentangle and follow each and every thread of Byatt's complex tapestry of traditional and contemporary storytelling, sciences, and literary images. What I hope to have achieved, rather, is to show how defamiliarisation is triggered by the coordinated action of all these diverse and sometimes opposite drives, which resonate with each other in unexpected ways. Psychological opacity is respected and yet the story manages to provide a different kind of insight in the working of the mind by embracing an enactivist view of cognition. The fantastic genre admits impossibility but, as the occurrence of Ines' metamorphosis escapes conventional symbolisations and allegorical interpretations, what is brought to the fore is the verisimilitude of the body-mind nexus. The key role played in traditional storytelling by magical objects and symbolic power of colours (think of the apple and the spindle, of how red, white and black unescapably frame and prefigure the marvellous birth of Snow White) survive in Byatt's accurate love for materials and in her obsession for exact nomenclature. Immersion in the storyworld is both favoured and resisted, often by means of the same strategies, a dynamic illuminated thanks to insights borrowed from unnatural narratology. In so doing, Byatt manipulates standard fairy tale features without however subverting them.

5. Conclusions

The debate opened in narrative studies about the dialectics of cognitive and unnatural narratology attempted precisely to emphasise the number of intersections that may be fruitfully explained through the two approaches combined. Alber observes that a cognitively-oriented look at narrative may in fact help recognise how some texts "aggressively challenge the mind's fundamental sense-making capabilities" (80) and thus it contributes to identify where the unnatural perspective might result useful. It does not seem far-fetched, therefore, to embrace a similar stance and suggest that in the case of Byatt's short story the best insights are produced precisely by the joint critical action of the two views combined and in constant, open-ended dialogue. The cognitive lens foregrounds the centrality of the embodied mind as the content focus of the story, as Byatt's personal interest and as key issue in her literary quest. While it might not generate an equally comprehensive model, the unnatural perspective not only is uniquely responsive to certain peculiarities that distinguish "A Stone Woman" from other fairy tales and forms of postmodern retelling, but it also provides suitable theoretical tools to examine the ensuing defamiliarising effect.

Drawing on the firm belief in the embodied nature of cognition, Byatt uses Ines' fantastic metamorphosis to give us a charming lesson in relativism: as she imagines how a mind that is part of a stone-made body would change its way of thinking the world, she prompts us to pay greater attention to how our own way of conceiving reality is actually determined (and limited) by our human bodies. For her message to be delivered, she has to assume that readers are able

to follow her in this endeavour of the imagination and to mentally simulate an actually impossible condition – a thesis that is for the cognitive approach to support. At the same time, however, I believe that the ethical dimension of her enterprise is further reinforced by the opaqueness that pervades her narrative: although we are granted a certain degree of access to Ines' mind, we cannot fully inhabit her shoes. She remains, at some deep level, unalterably opaque, as much as Thorsteinn and Ines remain unknown to each other despite the life-changing role they play in each other's life. The dynamics of strangeness and defamiliarisation which the unnatural lens brings into focus appear as ever-stimulating signs of mystery and respect of the other.

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