

**Lejla Mulalić**

University of Sarajevo

Faculty of Philosophy, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Writing/Reading the Victorian Past through Spiritualist Séances in A.S. Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel"

Summary

One of the dominant concerns of postmodern writing is to discuss the importance and modes of knowing the past. The aim of this paper is to explore how the British novelist A.S. Byatt rereads the Victorian past in her novella "The Conjugal Angel" by using Victorian spiritualism as a multilayered metaphor for dynamic communication between the past and present. Spiritualist rituals will also be read as a cultural practice characterised by the playful undermining of gender roles and norms. Finally, the paper will discuss spiritualist séances as a metaphor for the writing and reading of historiographic metafiction seen as a process of restless summoning of and intense communicating with the ghosts/texts from the past.

**Key words:** A.S. Byatt, "The Conjugal Angel," gender norms, historiographic metafiction, metaphor, postmodernism, spiritualism, séance.

## Pisanje/branje viktorijanske preteklosti s pomočjo spiritualnih seans v noveli "Zakonski angel" pisateljice A.S. Byatt

Povzetek

Eno poglavitnih zanimanj postmodernega pisanja je proučevanje pomembnosti in načinov poznavanja preteklosti. Članek se ukvarja z raziskovanjem obravnave viktorijanske preteklosti v noveli »Zakonski angel« izpod peresa britanske avtorice A.S. Byatt, ki vpeljuje viktorijanski spiritualizem kot mnogoplastno metaforo za vzpostavitev dinamične povezave med sedanostjo in preteklostjo. Spiritualni obredi so med drugim predstavljeni tudi kot del kulture, ki jo zaznamuje igrivo spodkopavanje spolnih vlog in norm. Nazadnje se članek posveti spiritualnim seansom kot metafori za pisanje in branje zgodovinopisne metafikcije, ki jo razume kot nenehno prizivanje duhov/besedil iz preteklosti in kot tesno komunikacijo z njimi.

**Ključne besede:** A.S. Byatt, "Zakonski angel", spolne norme, zgodovinopisna metafikcija, metafora, postmodernizem, spiritualnost, seansa

# Writing/Reading the Victorian Past through Spiritualist Séances in A.S. Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel"

## 1. Introduction

In a world profoundly saturated with theories of self-referentiality of language and literature, A. S. Byatt may equally claim the status of an anachronism and an embodiment of postmodern eccentricities and complexities. Specifically, on the one hand, Byatt instinctively rejects the alienation and forced enclosure of language and literature as they are elaborated by postmodern literary theory and chooses instead the warm comfort of the past which celebrates identity of thought and language. Her curious clinging to what is commonly known as the idea of "undissociated sensibility," as well as her obsession with metaphors as flowers which engender her multilayered novels, earn her the status of an anachronism, or even a nostalgist, in an age that mercilessly dissects these remnants of the past out of recognition. On the other hand, both in her novels and critical essays Byatt casually but extremely knowledgeably flirts with various branches of literary theory, thus changing her allegiance from an erudite advocate of tradition to an agent of postmodern and poststructuralist literary theory in disguise. It is in the context of these oppositions that I propose to discuss her writing and reading of the Victorian past through spiritualist séances.

Byatt casually experiments with the notion of spiritualism in her highly acclaimed *Possession* by composing the poem "Mummy Possesst" which, unlike its Browningsque model "Mr Sludge, the Medium," celebrates the power of female mediums. However, it is only in her novella "The Conjugal Angel," published as part of a collection titled *Angles and Insects*, that she unleashes the remarkable potential, both thematic and metaphorical, of spiritualist séances so as to approach the Victorian period through its greatest fears and obsessions. Although in her critical essays on Victorian culture Byatt often invokes the definition of spiritualism as a new religion in an age of materialism, she, nevertheless, uncovers, in these secretive controversial rituals, a place where the material and spiritual world are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, apart from using the subversive energy of spiritualism to reconstruct a period of intense spiritual crisis and attempts made to overcome its looming spectre, Byatt recognizes in séances a powerful metaphor of liminality, which activates intense rethinking of some of the key oppositions in "The Conjugal Angel" such as presence/absence, fact/fiction, sensual/textual experience of the Victorian reality, subject/form and many others.

The first part of this paper will try to elucidate the aforementioned aspects of séance through an analysis of metaphoric nature of language and in reference to Paul Ricoeur's discussion of living metaphor and the iconic element of metaphor, thus once again juxtaposing Byatt's postmodern and Victorian identities and allegiances. The dominance of female mediums in "The Conjugal Angel" and Alfred Tennyson's emotional breakdown under the weight of Arthur Hallam's presence in his poem "In Memoriam" open the space for discussion of instability of Victorian gender norms in the second part. Finally, bearing in mind that all the aforementioned oppositions and discussions related to spiritualism are enacted through Byatt's masterful staging

of the textual encounter of the nineteenth and late twentieth century, I will read “The Conjugal Angel” as an example of “textual haunting” (Wolfreys 2002, ix) in literature. In other words, the spiritualist séance will be considered as a metaphor for the writing and reading of historiographic metafiction seen as a process of restless summoning of and intense communicating with the ghosts/texts from the past.

## 2. The coexistence of spiritual and material reality in séance evoked through the metaphoric power of language

Séance in “The Conjugal Angel” is a fascinating fusion of the spiritual and material experience of death which is exquisitely rendered through Byatt’s delicate postmodern irony. Although a superficial perception of the Victorian cultural and spiritual life may suggest the existence of antagonism between science and spiritualism and define the craving for communication with ghosts as an impulsive response to the impersonality of science, Alex Owen convincingly claims the opposite in her influential book *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989). She writes that the need to communicate with the dead was undeniably fuelled by the desire to overcome the fear of the mere physicality and the materiality of human existence, in addition to attempting to provide *scientific evidence* for life after death. By analogy, séances were seen as experiments in controlled conditions where conversation and exchange of messages with the departed constituted an empirical procedure whereby the materiality of soul, or so-called *spirit matter*, was firmly established after the death of the body. Accordingly, Owen indicates in her introduction that spiritualist literature speaks of “test séances” and “test conditions” in order to lend respectability to the evidence of the spirit’s survival after death. Supporters of spiritualism largely appropriated the language of materialism, which gave their beliefs credibility and made them visible within the social and cultural space dominated by the philosophy of materialism.

Byatt weaves these ideas into her novella and fastens them to its vibrant Victorian core by means of playful postmodern intrusions which unmistakably reveal her narrative stitches without diminishing the reader’s pleasure. A fine example of this is the conversation between two séance participants, Captain Jesse, Emily Tennyson Jesse’s husband, and Mr Hawke, a “theological connoisseur” (1992, 166), about the noxious effects of Swedenborg’s incessant coffee-drinking on his communication with spirits.

... God made the world, and therefore everything in it, including, I suppose, the coffee-bush and the coffee-bean. If coffee disposes to clear-seeing, I do not see that the means injures the end. No doubt seers are as regular fabrics as crystals, and not a drug or berry is omitted from their build, when it is wanted. We live in a material time, Captain Jesse – apart from metaphysics, the time is gone by when anything is made out of nothing. If the visions are good visions, their material origin is also good, I think. Let the visions criticise the coffee and vice-versa (167).

The spiritual crisis in the nineteenth century was largely caused by Darwin’s theory of evolution which dethroned man from his dignified position in the Chain of Being and tied him irrevocably

to the lower links in the chain by means of the “Tree of Life.” Thus deprived of the comforting vicinity of angels and the sphere of pure spirituality, many Victorians took passionate interest in the world of spirits in order to regain their lost spirituality, even if it meant allowing for a curious compatibility of their occult rituals and the emerging scientific ideology. Byatt beautifully captures this advance of man on the realm of the dead in her novella and demonstrates how it turns into a dead race where séance attendees eagerly claim their portion of an alternative reality. On the other hand, Darwin’s use of the biblical metaphor of the tree of life clearly indicates that scientific discourse cannot be cleansed of traces of religious discourse; it cannot control its own metaphoricality since very often the terms on which science is based happen to be metaphors whose figurative nature has long been forgotten. It is precisely these contradictions and intertwinements that constitute the phenomenon of séance as a cultural practice and a multilayered metaphor.

Victorian spiritualists found their inspiration mostly in the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), a Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic, whose ideas are deeply rooted in the text of “The Conjugal Angel.” In his *Heaven and Hell* Swedenborg emphasizes that man is a spirit in human form, whereas the body only serves the spirit as an instrument. Furthermore, the spiritual part of man represents whatever is living and sensitive in man and that is why man continues to *live* even when the body is separated from the spirit by the act of dying, whereas, on the other hand, those who are still alive in their bodies can converse with the departed precisely on account of their *living spiritual* connection. It is known that, apart from theology, Swedenborg took a keen interest in science in the age of Isaac Newton. His scientific and empirical research seems to have curiously resurfaced in his mystic teaching as a firm belief in man’s ability to retain human form and sharp senses of sight, hearing and, particularly, touch even after he leaves the material world (1758/1885, 228–32). Thus, the soul demonstrates its so-called matter quality and spiritualists have the genuine ability to see, hear, and touch the spirits.

These ideas are more than knowingly transposed in “The Conjugal Angel” through Byatt’s delightful invocation of the metaphorical power of language. Her medium in the novella, Sophy Sheekhy, is an ethereal, almost transparent creature who lulls herself into trance by chanting Keats’s poems and passages from the Bible, especially the hymn-like words from St Paul’s anecdote in II Corinthians 12, “whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth” until all the words “were mad and bristling with shiny glass hairs, and then very simple and meaningless, like clear drops of water.” Her smooth transition from spiritual and textual liminality into the palpable materiality of words accounts for the fact that “the creatures and objects called up by poems and the Bible, or the creatures which came from nowhere and stayed awhile, could be described to other people, seen, smelled, heard, almost touched and tasted – some were sweet, some were smoky” (1992, 192).

The liminal area between reality and fiction, or between the power of words to address things and/or some indefinable warm space within themselves, is where Byatt locates “The Conjugal Angel.” Since liminality seems to be taken as a given, Byatt refuses to question the authenticity of Sophy Sheekhy’s mediumship when soon after, in a rather bizarre manner, the dead Arthur Hallam and the living Alfred Tennyson appear to her since “what finally matters is not that they

were *images of the real*, but that they were *real images*” (Levenson 2001, 166). Instead, Byatt focuses all her narrative energy on reconstructing the amazing moment when Sophy chants “The Eve of St Agnes” and “Ode to a Nightingale” to summon Hallam, the artist whose premature death turned into a national memorial and one of the most beautiful and intriguing poems in English literature, “In Memoriam.”

However, their communication is not exhausted by a mere textual exchange. On the contrary, it reaches its full intensity and materiality when Sophy instinctively clings to Hallam’s cold body and words turn into touches, cold ghastly touches with which our conscious being tries to comprehend and possess death. In that moment Tennyson “appears” before Sophy and Byatt materializes him through the strong tobacco scent which always surrounded him, but now it crushes everything under its formidable stale weight: “Perhaps he stank? He lifted the ends of his fingers to his nostrils. He heard the buzzing of little flying fragments of language that hung around his head all the time in a cloud, like the veils of living and dead smoke” (1992, 254). Invoking Tennyson’s presence through the smell of tobacco subtly summons new metaphors so that whiffs of smoke transform into flying fragments of language, or winged angels, which leads us to the powerful metaphor contained in the title of the novella. Thus Byatt’s metaphor-ridden mind transforms the “ruling” metaphor of *séance* not into abstract truths, as one may expect, but into more metaphors (Poznar 2004). Uncanny visions and morbid encounters with the spirits of the dead are reconstructed as mental conditions teeming with life and it is this protean metaphorical dimension of *séance* that enables the reader to inhabit simultaneously several planes of reality.

Byatt’s understanding of the metaphorical nature of language is discussed in her much praised collection of essays *Passions of the Mind* (1993), whose very title indicates her infatuation with the sensuousness of language.

I don’t know how much is known about the difference between those who *think* with mental imagery and those who don’t. I very much do – I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I *see* other people’s metaphors – if there is an iconic content to a metaphor I will “see” a visual image on some inner mental screen, which can then be contemplated more precisely, described discursively (the sap rising inside Milton’s “light” green stalk, like light) (7).

Although her erudite critical and literary writings (very often it is impossible to distinguish one from the other), which move insouciantly from painting and literature to insect societies, may often appear intimidating, Byatt manages to convince even her sadly uninitiated readers of the truthfulness of her coloured, moving, densely textured words. That is what happens when the reader visualizes her words “mad and bristling with shiny glass hairs, and then very simple and meaningless, like clear drops of water” (1992, 192) and allows himself to be taken into her darkened rooms for *séances*.

Byatt’s metaphors are not exhausted in their immediate expression, which explains her fascination with Ricoeur’s elaboration on the iconic element in metaphors. Namely, iconic representation can

point towards original resemblances, whether of quality, structure or locality, of situation, or, finally, of feeling (1975/2007, 224). Accordingly, those previously mentioned “flying” metaphors, begotten by the smoke of Tennyson’s cigar, open up as concentric circles which eventually revert only to meet again in the living metaphor of *séance*, which thus encompasses all the anxieties, illusions, and beauties of the Victorian mind. Byatt’s *séance* is a place and mode of mourning and remembering, and an attempt to both challenge and accommodate the impersonal scientific version of the Biblical history; it is a place where woman’s “innate passivity” unexpectedly transforms her into a perfectly receptive medium between two worlds, and finally, it is a place where the power of language to resurrect the long forgotten meanings and awaken resemblances through the intense rereading of “In Memoriam,” in particular, is more than fully achieved. Thus *séance* becomes what Ricoeur calls a “living metaphor” (225), which demands the reader to follow its clues and identify manifold parallel meanings, uncover the buried sensuality underneath complex cultural layers and thus, feel a genuine pleasure in an enhanced experience of the past.

That *séance* is indeed a *living* metaphor is ingeniously hinted at through the *lively* character of Mrs Liliás Papagay, a widow in straitened circumstances. Her mediumistic powers are limited to automatic writing, which is in her case also a viable source of income. This incredibly earthy woman is fully aware of the new knowledge with which man has unravelled the secrets of both heaven and earth, that is to say the stars and the remote exotic lands of Australia and New Zealand. Still, the advance of science and the colonisation of the Earth’s territories beyond the frontiers of the known do not convince her to relinquish the comfort of her personal angel too easily. However, it is not spiritual comfort or the confirmation of religious truths about the Hereafter that she craves and summons through her passive writing: “But it was not for that, she knew in her heart of hearts, that she travelled to *séances*, that she wrote and rapped and bellowed, it was for *now*, it was for more life *now*.” Unlike Sophy’s textual invocation of the spirit matter, Liliás consciously engages herself into this “traffic with the dead” (1992, 171) and openly claims possession over her own portion of the material world, whereby two aspects of reality are once again locked in a passionate embrace.

### 3. *Séance* and subversion of gender norms

The instability of gender roles is another aspect of Victorian life which resurfaces in Byatt’s *séances*. “Victorian ideology of femininity” established domesticity and motherhood as the only socially acceptable spheres for female activity, thus supporting the thesis of woman’s biological predetermination for the role of passive caretaker. Owen emphasizes that the notion of *innate* female passivity and the representation of femininity as *unchanging* were crucial for determining a woman’s place (1989, 7). However, in the context of spiritualist *séances*, a woman’s innate ability to renounce her own self proved to be vital for development of mediumistic powers. Moreover, female mediums freely transgressed gender norms during *séances* by assuming the position of authoritative guides and embracing dramatic and theatrical forms of behaviour. This transgression was not met with disapproval since it was viewed as a part of the newly appropriated role of mediums (1989, 11). Therefore, the Victorian ideology of femininity proved to be unable to control the dichotomies and gender divisions it initially installed and female mediums were given an opportunity, even if

only for the duration of *séance*, to break free from the limited social space allocated to them upon birth, and freely cross the borders between the so-called male and female sphere.

In “The Conjugal Angel” three extraordinary women, Sophy Sheekhy, Liliás Papagay and Emily Tennyson Jesse, take an active part in spiritualist rituals. Byatt reconstructs *séance* as our unconscious being which does not recognize the mechanisms of our conscious being, or in this case of the Victorian gender norms, and allows the breakthrough of silenced female voices. Liliás Papagay intuitively hears these voices and turns them into stories. After the disappearance of her husband, Captain Papagay, in a sea storm, she finds herself in a very vulnerable and dubious social space, subject to various interpretations, given the fact that her husband’s death has never been confirmed. However, this endows her with an *innate* mediumistic ability or instinct to feel and hear untold stories and fantasies of other women present in *séances*. Liliás is thus positioned in an entirely liminal social space, which, amongst other things, enables her to be acutely aware of her own sexual needs as well as the sexual frustrations of the participants, even in the moments of most intense concentration when she is decoding the troubled messages of the deceased. In spite of Liliás’s authoritative position within the novella, Byatt’s postmodern ironic voice does not too easily allow the imposition of a new woman-dominated hierarchy at the expense of the existing male dominance, but simply exposes the essential fluidity of socially constructed dichotomies. Consequently, Liliás’s stories spun out of her spiritualist experiences prove to be “stilted, saccharine rubbish” (1992, 168) that no one would want to read, whereas her source of historical knowledge is Walter Scott’s romanticised representation of the past.

Although this partly discredits her as a medium or mediator between the readers and the story, it, nevertheless, gives her a peculiar sort of materiality and liveliness in the obscurity of spiritualism, which enables the reader to perceive her as the only *reliable* guide in a story which constantly oscillates between reality and fiction, spiritual and physical reality. On the other hand, Liliás is a somewhat mischievous, not to say manipulative guide, for while holding the hands of expectant attendees and ushering them into the world of spirits, she initiates an eruption of obscenities through her passive writing, thus mocking and banalising Swedenborg’s concept of the conjugal angel i.e. heavenly marriage or what Tillyard identifies in Donne’s poetry as the unification of lovers in a single over-soul (1943/1970, 97). The verses released through Liliás’s mediumship demonstrate what Owen recognizes as the “expressions of the unknowable, unutterable, and forbidden” or the “undermining [of] the normative connotations of feminine passivity” (1989, 215):

The Angel spreads his golden wings  
 And raises high his golden cock  
 And man and his wife together lock  
 Into one corpse that moans and sings (Byatt 1992, 286).

Sophy Sheekhy is the only genuine medium in “The Conjugal Angel” because she incarnates the juxtaposition of two entirely opposite notions of femininity – the one, woman as a mere recipient of spirits’ energy and messages<sup>1</sup> and the other, woman’s surrendering to surreal experience only to

<sup>1</sup> “She was a pure vessel, cool, waiting dreamily” (Byatt 1992, 191).

re-emerge as an authoritative guide who uncovers in Arthur Hallam an immature boy underneath the image of the Victorian most worshipped and mythologized intellectual, or witnesses the emotional breakdown of the aged Alfred Tennyson.

Further on, Byatt explores the instability of gender roles by reconsidering the ghost-like presence of Tennyson and his sister Emily in "In Memoriam." The entranced Sophy watches the weakened poet laureate as he clumsily tries to button his night shirt and at the same time relive his own poem through the words, "the spirit does mean but the breath" (1992, 268) whereby he intentionally invokes the original Latin meaning of the word "spiritus" (breath) only to make death transient. In other words, he uses language to overpower death in such a way that he dissolves the imminence of death into a mere breath while words are unexpectedly transformed into the feeling of eternal *predatory* intimacy which anticipates the pressing weight and discomfort of Hallam's presence in his texts.

... the truth was that both he and Arthur had seeped into his poem, had become parts of its fabric, a matter-moulded kind of *half-life* he sometimes thought it was, something not independent, but not part of each, not a handclasp, but a kind of vigorous parasite, like mistle-toe on dying oaks with its milky berries and its mysterious evergreen leaves (268).

Sophy's final awakening from the trance is preceded by Hallam's desperate attempt to "feed off her life, ... invading the very fibre of her nerves with his death" (274) which, just like the previous passage, represents an utterly deromanticised image of death dominated by the parasitic relationship of the dead towards the memory of the living. Furthermore, a literal decomposing of Hallam's body and the emotional pain of Tennyson which Byatt evokes through intensely realistic and tactile images, as well as her insistence on a faithful representation of the smells of not only death but also life, as in a description of Emily Tennyson Jesse's dog who frequently imposes his presence during séances by releasing "a series of popping little farts, and a rich, decaying smell" (286), make death and life equally real, or unreal.

The interplay of textual, transcendental and physical reality develops as Byatt disperses fragments of "In Memoriam" throughout the chapter, thus reconstructing the relationship between Hallam and Tennyson in the context of not only Tennyson's physical and spiritual suffering, but also his struggle with the uncontrollable sensuous metaphoricity and femininity of his language. It turns out that, regardless of Tennyson's efforts to use language to comprehend the essence of death as a purely spiritual condition, he cannot subdue the materiality of words which mindlessly surrender to the bliss of touch. As the aged poet remembers young Hallam, words of "In Memoriam" conjure up images of male hands in fervent expectation of touch. This transformation of words into palpable images of male hands on the verge of touching is also seen from the perspective of Tennyson's sister and Hallam's former fiancée, Emily Jesse. It is through Emily's participation in séances that the reader can see how this expectation of touch is relocated from the forbidden sphere of the body to the socially acceptable sphere of unhindered artistic exchange where Hallam's and Tennyson's souls are truly *joined* in ecstatic blissful intimacy.

Byatt moves Emily from her marginal textual position and reinvents her out of a glaring absence from biographies and poems so as to enable her to close off her past with Hallam and gain control over her life as Captain Jesse's wife. During séances Emily adopts the role of an interpreter or decoder of all texts with which Hallam tries to communicate with her, but she is also determined in rejecting him as her half-angel and the forced widowhood and the mourning which inextricably tied them together. Nevertheless, she is never raised to the pedestal as an unfulfilled artist and an ignored genius, which Byatt explains in her *On Histories and Stories* (2001): "I found myself troubled about Emily Tennyson herself – she had a dry wit, in what letters of hers I had read, and a rhapsodic note I was less happy with" (105). In addition to that, "there was something unsavoury about Mrs Jesse, as well, of course, as something pure and tragic. . . . she was like a weathered, watching head between gargoyles on a church roof" (Byatt 1992, 183).

To enable both Emily and her brother to face and exorcise the haunting presence of Hallam in their memory/texts, Byatt rereads Victorian views of femininity and masculinity through the subcultural phenomenon of séance by installing and dismantling gender-based binary oppositions and hierarchies and, consequently, unveiling the fluidity and artificiality of these socially constructed categories. Liminality as a psychological and cultural space in which séances thrive seems to be the natural habitat for femininity as a social construct. Julia Kristeva argues that women as marginal beings within the phallogocentric symbolic order come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos. However, their marginality entitles that they occupy both sides of the frontier, plunging mindlessly in the darkness outside or receding into the safe inside, because of which "they share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers" (Moi 1985/2002, 166). Byatt's mediums, who are both passive recipients and manipulative guides and interpreters of the messages from the realm of eternal darkness, embrace liminality as a mode of living as it allows them to seep through the pores of established social frontiers and thus undermine the foundations of the very ideology which begot them.

#### 4. Texts as ghosts

So far séance has been discussed as a metaphor which both generates and reconciles the clash of spirituality and materiality, draws attention to its own innate sensuousness and functions as a liminal social space in which Victorian gender norms are defied. In other words, séance has been largely treated as a subject *matter* of the novella which in itself questions the nature of *matter* and spirit.

In the final part of this paper I intend to look at séance as a metaphor of a particular form, both in the sense of genre and narrative technique employed by the author. Namely, "The Conjugal Angel" may, in many aspects, be classified under the postmodern literary genre of "historiographic metafiction" as it was defined by Linda Hutcheon because it maintains the difference between its formal auto-representation and its historical context, thereby openly problematising the very possibility of historical knowledge, offering no reconciliation but, quite the contrary, nurturing contradiction (1988/2005, 106). This interaction of historiography and fiction raises several important issues, i.e. the nature of identity and subjectivity, reference and representation, intertextuality of the past and ideological implications of writing about history (117).

When applied to Byatt's novella, these postulates of postmodernism prove to be densely woven into the very fabric of the text. As far as the issue of subjectivity is concerned, Byatt's narrator is seemingly traditional and omniscient, whereas the text actually allows for multiple points of view so that even ghosts and texts from the past address, sometimes even harass, the reader directly, and in doing so demonstrate the instability of the traditional concept of the narrator. Moreover, all séance attendees are equally anxious to interpret the voices coming from the other side of reality while the messages of the ghostly visitants exist only in the form and meaning rendered by more than often manipulative mediums. The question of reference or the tendency of the language of texts to refer to a prior textualisation and not to an empirically real object is more than prominent in "The Conjugal Angel." Not only that, instead of *real* objects, the reader is referred to spectres and voices, but the most reliable referent to which the texts-as-characters point is a web of other texts subtly conjured through séances. Intertextuality, as an immanent feature of both fiction and history, is in Byatt's case the *medium* through which the reader is expected to identify the spectres of other texts, while at the same time remaining keenly aware of the author's playful interventions and casually dispersed borrowings. Lastly, the ideological implications inherent to historical fiction are openly problematised in the sense that Byatt does not bluntly invalidate Victorian views of sexuality, gender norms, science, and spiritualism, but she subtly subverts socially imposed dichotomies in order to unveil their inadequacy and point towards manifold unheard voices and alternative cultural practices. She, nevertheless, does not enclose her story within the borders of a newly established hierarchy, but simply articulates ideological nature of all historical writing, including her own.

Having thus elucidated the affinity between Byatt's novella and historiographic metafiction as a genre, I would like to point out another affinity which emerges out of the very narrative structure and technique of the story. Structurally, "The Conjugal Angel" is devised as a series of uncanny visions and spiritualist séances, all of which are enacted through the textual exchange between the medium, attendees and the spirits of the dead in the form of automatic writing or chanting of poems and parts of the Bible. Texts, not people, seem to traverse unhindered between the two versions of reality, unaccompanied by their authors, only carelessly stitched to other invented texts, both fictional and non-fictional, pointing not to the extra-textual reality but seductively offering themselves as the only truly living, palpable matter. Remembering and mourning Hallam is for Tennyson an act of taming and rewriting "In Memoriam" which lets "the ghostly ancestors, Dante, Theocritus, Milton and the lost Keats, sing out again." Their "language was their afterlife. He saw it as a spinning circular cage in which he was a trapped bird, a cage like a globe, rimmed with the bright lines of the horizons of dawn and dusk. ... The world was a terrible lump of which his poem was a shining simulacrum." Rethinking the laureate's poem in a Donne-like way as "a heavy globe, spinning onwards in space, studded with everything there was, mountains and dust, tides and trees" (1992, 269), Byatt initiates a process of genuine textual appropriation and re-evaluation of the past through Sophy's vision of Tennyson, which corresponds to acute historical consciousness and self-reflexivity inherent to historiographic metafiction.

This might also be considered as an act of "textual haunting" (2002, ix) by and within the novella itself, to borrow the phrase from Julian Wolfreys. As he says, the text is not necessarily haunted

by its author or the historical moment of its production, but “the text itself ... haunts and ... is haunted by the traces which come together in this structure we call textual, which is phantomatic or phantasmatic in nature while, paradoxically, having an undeniably real or material effect, if not presence” (2002, xiii). Likewise, the participants of spiritualist rituals fervently welcome apparitions and stories of the departed in order to *hear* and *see* and *feel* that death and past exist only as specific meanings of life and present. It is in these aspects that *séance* becomes a metaphor for the writing and reading of historiographic metafiction because it incarnates the textual, emotional and ideological encounter of the past and the present. The encounter is not merely nostalgic; quite the contrary, it generates a host of counter arguments and quotes which forever change our understanding/reading/writing of the present and past.

## 5. Towards a conclusion ...

Byatt’s reading and writing of the Victorian past through spiritualist *séances* seems to be a delightful blend of the past and the present. On the one hand, her approach to the domain of the occult enables her to remain faithful to the postulates of the realist novel by accentuating numerous details which recreate the physical reality of the afterlife but also invoke recognizable offensive smells of the living. Furthermore, the novella ends with the unexpected return of Lilia’s husband from the dead whereby Byatt determinedly transfers us from the heavenly sphere to our own selves through a voluptuous evocation of the smells and touches of renewed life. Although such an ending offers the closure inherent to the realist novel, if only in a formal sense, the reader cannot but view this unexpected reversion to tradition as an attempt of the author to position her story at what might be termed a narrative threshold or limen. In doing so she allows it both to withdraw into the safety of tradition and surrender to the inviting openness of postmodernity, thus experimenting with what she terms “degrees of ‘realism’ or vision” (Byatt 1993, 167).

Byatt’s exploration of *séance* as a metaphor of the textual and social unconscious concurs to a great extent with her eternal homage to T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis and her unwillingness to subscribe wholeheartedly among the supporters of postmodern literary theory. At the same time her “indecisiveness” leaves her enough space for an endless casual flirt with deconstruction, feminism and poststructuralism so that the reader is continuously impressed by her hidden skills of “theorizing.” The reader is often intimidated by the gravity of her literary quest and an unspoken, though relentless, expectation to recognize all of the fine layers of her filigree-like metaphorical writing. However, even if he fails to trace back most of her textual references, he is bound to be rewarded with a renewed sense of faith which is carefully woven into the very fabric of her writing. As Michael Levenson claims in an article of evocative title, “The Religion of Fiction,” Byatt constantly revisits the issue of belief in all her novels, though not as a religious missionary, but rather as a person who truly appreciates the necessity and beauty of believing.

... Her point is not to confirm religious truth, but to enlarge the religious sense, which locates value not in the infinite but in the yearning for the infinite, not in God but in the search for God. In a more clever analog, Byatt has drawn a connection between the “afterlife” of the Bible and the “afterlife” of the nineteenth century novel. We live in the

shadow of both. But the task, as she sees it, is not to get out from under the shadow into the white modern light. It is to respect and to love our old shadowy needs, to keep faith with faith, and with realist fiction (1993).

Levenson's words touch upon the true essence of Byatt's literary sensibility as they define her not as a Victorian nostalgist who chooses to stay forever in a darkened room for séances, but as an author who feels an organic connection between the Victorian age and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Respecting and loving our old shadowy needs is precisely what Byatt does by constantly invigorating séance as a key metaphor of our transition from "an undissociated paradise to our modern dissociated world" (Byatt 1993, 5).

Further on, she recognizes all too well the sense of spiritual emptiness of the late nineteenth century in the "spiritual swamp" of the late twentieth century when "The Conjugal Angel" is written. In a time when believing in any totalising story, however beautiful, is considered utterly old-fashioned, Byatt wants to bring to life images of Victorian reality when both body and soul are tortured with desire for moments of faith and inner peace. Byatt's own organic connection with the Victorian past is nurtured through "a good and greedy reading" (Byatt 1993, 149) and it is this textual saturation or, should I say, textual craving that miraculously resurrects the past before the bedazzled reader.

## Bibliography

Byatt, A.S. 1992. *Angels & Insects*. London: Vintage.

— — —. 1993. Still Life/Nature morte. In *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*, 3–13. New York: Vintage International.

— — —. 1993. People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to "Realism" and "Experiment" in English Post-War Fiction. In *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*, 147–68. New York: Vintage International.

— — —. 2001. True Stories and the Facts in Fiction. In *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, 91–122. London: Vintage.

Hutcheon, L. 2005 (1988). Historiographic Metafiction: "The Pastime of Past Time." In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 105–23. New York and London: Routledge.

Levenson, M. 1993. The Religion of Fiction. *New Republic* 209, no. 5: 41–4.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12082946&site=ehost-live> (accessed 29 April 2005).

— — —. 2001. *Angels and Insects: Theory, Analogy, Metamorphosis*. In *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, ed. A. Alfer and Michael J. Noble, 161–74. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.

Moi, T. 2002 (1985). Marginality and Subversion. In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 149–72. London, New York: Routledge.

Owen, A. 1989. Power and Gender: The Spiritualist Context. In *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, 1–17. London: Virago Press.

— — —. Spiritualism and the Subversion of Femininity. In *The Darkened Room; Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, 202–35. London: Virago Press.

Poznar, S. 2004. Tradition and "Experiment" in Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel." *Critique* 45, no. 2 (Winter): 173–90.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=12272360&site=ehost-live> (accessed 29 April 2005).

Ricoeur, P. 2007 (1975). The "Iconic" Moment of Metaphor. In *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*. Trans. R. Czerny, K. McLaughlin, and J. Costello, SJ, 222–5. London, New York: Routledge Classic.

Swedenborg, E. 1885 (1758). Every Man Is a Spirit as to His Interiors. In *Heaven and Hell: Also, the Intermediate State or World of Spirits: A Relation of Things Heard and Seen*, 228–32. London: The Swedenborg Society, British and Foreign.

Tillyard, E.M.W. 1970 (1943). The Links in the Chain. In *The Elizabethan World Picture*, 51–102. London: Penguin Books in association with Chatto & Windus.

Wolfreys, J. 2002. Preface. *Victorian Hauntings; Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, ix-xiv. Houndmills, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave.