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TRACES AND POLYTEMPORALITY IN A. S. BYATT'S SHORT STORIES

Traces of the past pervade A. S. Byatt's fiction. In *Possession* (1990), the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash voices a keen interest in fossils, those "things long-dead but not vanished" that become "traces of time" (256), while the narrator opens the Postscript with a reflection on the presence or absence of traces (508). In the same line, *The Children's Book* (2009) gives special prevalence to the mnemonic function of museums and collections, which preserve collective and personal memory alive in their display of material remains of the past. According to Paul Ricœur in *Time and Narrative* (1985), the trace is that vestige (documentary, affective, or cortical) that enables us to reconstruct the past, being both an effect and a sign: the effect of the passing of time, and a sign of the past that can be recovered. The concept of the trace has been recently revisited by Victoria Browne who, in *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History* (2014), argues that the trace "aptly captures the movement of history between presence and absence" (65), and that the exercise of tracing the past lies behind the configuration of historical time.

In her study, Browne introduces the notion of polytemporality, which relies on a dynamic perception of historical time as a composite of different dimensions. Browne's model of the fluid interaction of time layers becomes an apt critical tool to explore Byatt's lifelong engagement with the past, history, and memory. Significantly, the centrality of time is not restricted to Byatt's novels, but it emerges also in her short fiction, which is filled with traces of the past, from her earliest to her latest works. If the treatment of time in Byatt's novels is determined by her preference for realism in long narratives,

with the prevalence of chronological linearity, the twists and turns of short fiction give her the chance to develop a multidimensional approach to time. Accordingly, my contention is that the short story has provided Byatt with a fertile ground to explore the possibilities of the trace in the articulation of history and memory from a polytemporal perspective. In this context, the aim of the present article is to offer a new insight into Byatt's short fiction, reconsidering the centrality of time from the critical perspective of Ricœur's trace and Browne's polytemporality. This analysis will take into account Byatt's body of short fiction as a whole, focusing on particular narratives from her different collections, together with uncollected stories.

RICŒUR'S TRACES IN BYATT'S SHORT STORIES

Contemporary conceptualisations of memory and the process of remembering the past show a growing tendency to resort to visual and spatial images. Current approaches to memory (historical, personal, or literary) in the field of critical theory attest to the centrality of the visual-spatial interface by resorting to images such as the palimpsest, the archaeological site, or the trace, described by Paul Ricœur as that vestige that enables us to reconstruct the past. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur associates the origin of ruins—"the destruction of archives, of museums, of cities"—with the process of forgetting, which becomes a source of remembering through the concept of the trace (284). As Ricœur argues at different points, the trace is the vestige of what existed, and like the ruin, it invites us to reconstruct the lost past, thus avoiding the effects of forgetting. The image of the trace, which has become a key critical concept in contemporary literary theory, has its origins in the works of Plato (*Theaetetus*, *Sophist*) and Aristotle ("On Memory and Reminiscence") in the idea of the *eikōn* ("sign," "evidence," "mark"). Later on, the concept was further explored by Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*, where he contends that the most effective way to face the past is through its traces or *vestigia*. In the twentieth century, apart from Ricœur, other scholars who have paid attention to the trace are Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, and Emmanuel Levinas, who focuses on the ethical dimension of the trace of the "other." While Levinas resorts to the trace to mark the proximity of human contact, expressed through language, Derrida, who derives his concept of the trace from Levinas's work (70), transcends it by reading the trace as the interaction between presence and absence, and a sign of the multidimensional configuration of time. Developed in the context of "the temporalization of a lived experience" (*Grammatology* 65), Derrida's trace "does not let itself be

summed up in the simplicity of a present” (66). It articulates a play between presence and absence (71). These qualities of the trace foreshadow some of the defining components of the later Derridean concept of hauntology, as explored below: “this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one” (Derrida, *Specters* 5).

In the third volume of his seminal work on *Time and Narrative*, devoted to “narrated time,” Ricœur examines the two-sided dimension of the trace as both an effect and a sign, and questions the relationship between historical and narrative texts. This examination continues in the work mentioned above, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, where Ricœur outlines a typology of the trace that is particularly relevant in terms of the conceptualisation of memory. He states that there are three types of traces: “cortical” or “mnestic” traces, which are the neurological changes produced in the brain by lived experience; “psychical” or “affective” traces, described as those emotional affections or impressions left by events, especially traumatic ones; and “documentary” traces, which are the material remains or vestiges from the past that enable us to recover personal memories and the collective memory of history (*Memory* 415-16). Interestingly, the category of psychical traces echoes Derrida’s interest in the trace as “not more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual” (*Grammatology* 48).

The concept of the trace emerges as an apt critical tool to explore Byatt’s lifelong engagement with the past, memory, and history. As a literary critic, she has examined the renewed interest in history and the past in *On Histories and Stories* (2000), in which she asked, “why has history become imaginable and important again?”, while stating that “we cannot understand the present if we do not understand the past that preceded and produced it” (9-11). Considering her own production retrospectively, Byatt finds the origin of her first novel in her awareness of having behind her “a piece of public history *lived through*” (“Memory” 61). In fact, as Alexa Alfer and Michael Noble have argued, “[t]he relation of our present to the past (and its textual traces) is indeed not a mere subtext but the subject proper of many of her [Byatt’s] works” (3). Armelle Parey has also emphasized “the difficulty of representing the past and the inevitable reconstruction it entails.” The centrality of time and memory in Byatt’s fiction has traditionally been associated with her novels, particularly with the interaction between the postmodernist present and the Victorian past in *Possession*, although history and the past also figure prominently in the Quartet, and in *The Children’s*

Book. However, the dialogue with time and memory also permeates Byatt's short fiction, which is open to a multidirectional treatment of time, and to the discovery of cortical, psychical, and documentary traces, following Ricoeur's typology.

The cortical or mnesic traces left by lived experience emerge in those stories that deal with the process of ageing. The fictionalisation of ageing, female ageing in particular, is recurrent in Byatt's short fiction, from *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987) to *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). "In the Air," from Byatt's first collection, portrays the daily life of a sixty-three-year-old widow, Mrs Sugden, who displays the cortical response to her loneliness as helplessness and fear. This fear is projected on the imaginary trace of "the man," whose absent presence is felt whenever she finds herself alone in the open air: "Every day she feared him a little more, every day the mental encounter took another step into the vividly realized. Mrs Sugden, a sensible woman, knew he was an obsession, but she did not know how to exorcize him" (Byatt, *Sugar* 163). The attention paid to the psychological reaction to the passing of time recurs in "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," from the eponymous collection, whose protagonist is a middle-aged English narratologist who, at the beginning of the narrative, is terrified by the ideas of transience and mortality. During a lecture on storytelling, Gillian Perholt has a disturbing vision of her own ageing and decaying self, an absent presence similar to Mrs Sugden's imaginary man. This supernatural event takes place in the context of a conference in Turkey, where Gillian's encounter with a djinn enables her to overcome her fears through the exercise of storytelling. Gillian reconciles herself with the effects of the passing of time through her contact with the material trace of the glass paperweights that she collects, and with the indelible trace of the timeless existence of stories and their characters.

In the same line, two of the stories in Byatt's *Little Black Book of Stories*, "A Stone Woman" and "The Pink Ribbon," evoke cortical traces in their characters' experiences of ageing. In "A Stone Woman," ageing is imaginatively rendered as the protagonist's fantastic petrification, a metamorphosis that operates on two levels. While Ines's body is gradually covered by minerals and precious stones, her thoughts and feelings slow "to stone-speed, nerveless and stolid" (139), and her memory becomes "vague in her new mind, like cobwebs" (163). Loss of memory, under the unnamed form of Alzheimer's disease, presides over "The Pink Ribbon," where James takes care of his wife Madeleine as her brain turns into "a mass of thick plaques and tangles of meaningless stuff" (236). Their everyday life is one of the "presence of absence" (246), since the absence of the present or the recent past in Madeleine's mind is matched by the vividness of her memories of the

distant past, when she worked in Intelligence during the Second World War. Madeleine, with her Proustian name, lives in the present of her body, and in the past of her mind, which fuses the visible with the invisible traces of wartime ghosts. Significantly, the figure of the ghost fuses time strands in a polytemporal process whereby “past and present cannot be neatly separated from one another, as any idea of the present is always constituted through the difference and deferral of the past, as well as anticipations of the future” (Buse and Stott 10-11). Madeleine’s past begins to haunt James after he receives the visit of a strange woman, self-described as his wife’s etheric body, whose presence reactivates James’s memories “as though only a membrane separated him from the life of the past” (*Black Book* 258). This awakens James’s fear of suffering from Alzheimer’s disease himself, since the cortical traces left by this form of neurological deterioration entail a dual process of forgetting the present and remembering the distant past, thus evoking Derrida’s view of the trace as an “arche-phenomenon of ‘memory’” (*Grammatology* 70). Interestingly, the treatment of cortical traces in this story, as in “A Stone Woman” and “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye,” relies on the recourse to the fantastic, which Byatt has associated with the possibilities offered by the short story form and its ability “to accommodate the strange” (“Entretien” 13).

The ambiguity expressed in “The Pink Ribbon,” resulting from the interaction between the visible and the invisible, the present and the past, echoes that of the opening narrative of the collection, “The Thing in the Forest.” Here, the supernatural fuses with the realistic as the story gives voice to the psychical traces left by the traumatic event of the war in the minds of two girls, Penny and Primrose. During their evacuation in the Second World War, the girls go into a forest and have a disturbing encounter with a dreadful creature, a “Thing” “like a cross between a monstrous washerwoman and a primeval dragon” (*Black Book* 16). The monster evokes the fairy-tale tradition, where “fear and hatred of the ‘other’ or enemy . . . is objectified as some sort of giant worm or dragon” (Wallhead 211). It becomes a projection of the girls’ fears and anxiety about the war, recalling the creature in “Dragons’ Breath.” This earlier story collected in *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* similarly portrays the traumatic experience of the war in the form of terrifying dragons or worms of fire whose stench “induced fear, then panic, then a fatalistic tremor of paralysis” (*Djinn* 83). Although the monsters finally leave the village, they remain present in the psychical traces of terror in the villagers’ minds, and in the documentary traces of their houses in ruins, a mixture of “fear and loss” (91). Ruins convey an unfinished and fragmented temporality (Trigg 131), emerging as “the trace of a past” that fuses “with the ruin’s decay in the present” (133). Thus, ruins become spectral sites displaying the

polytemporal coexistence of time layers as they “foresee the future of decline while retaining the disused aspects of the past” (Trigg 133). As suggested above, ruins are documentary traces that Ricoeur associates with the dual exercise of forgetting and remembering, since they invite us to reconstruct the lost past. In “Dragons’ Breath,” documentary and affective traces interact in the collective memories of the creatures, which stay alive in the people’s imagination, becoming the subject of transgenerational tales with a restorative power.

Storytelling also emerges as a healing exercise in “The Thing in the Forest,” which depicts how adult Penny and Primrose work through their traumatic experience in different ways. On the one hand, as a storyteller, Primrose turns the terrifying memory into a children’s tale; on the other, as a psychologist, Penny tries to find relief in the reproduction of the traumatic experience (Alfer and Edwards de Campos 117): “She needed to see it. Why she needed it, was because it was more real than she was” (Byatt, *Black Book* 49). A symbol of the unconscious, the forest operates as a site of psychological transformation that allows the protagonists to live through and overcome war trauma, even if its psychical trace cannot be fully erased. In this story, as in “Dragons’ Breath,” the indelibility of the psychical trace goes hand in hand with a lingering memory of loss: the disappearance of the girl Alys in “The Thing in the Forest,” and the death of the protagonists’ brother in “Dragons’ Breath.”

The association between the psychical trace left by trauma, and the present memory of people lost in the past, is the background to “The July Ghost,” from *Sugar and Other Stories*. The story illustrates Christopher Hope’s view of the overall collection as containing stories that “deal with loss, bereavement, ghosts—past lives pressing in on the living, altering present ways of being” (2). Indeed, “The July Ghost” depicts the uncanny events in a house haunted by the ghost of a boy that, like Byatt’s own son Charles, was killed in a road accident. This brings to the fore the critical concept of hauntology, as coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, where the spectre or *revenant* is characterised as a liminal entity in-between presence and absence. Like the trace, the spectre articulates “the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible” (Derrida, *Specters* 6), and it entails a process of mourning in an attempt “to ontologize remains, to make them present” (*Specters* 9).

In “The July Ghost,” the boy’s mother is traumatised by the loss of her son, and she lives in “a continuous present tense” (47), trying unsuccessfully to delete all the documentary traces of his past existence. Even if she has the boy’s photos destroyed, and does not visit his grave, the psychical trace of the boy’s absence makes her wait for him every day. Her wish is projected

on the experiences of her tenant, who is able to see the boy's ghost and helplessly witnesses the impossibility of exorcising him to the very end of the story. The attitude of the boy's ghost becomes particularly interesting in the light of Colin Davies's examination of the differences between the spectre and the phantom in his analysis of the sources of hauntology. According to Davies (373-74), apart from Derrida's work, the origins of hauntology can be traced back to psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's studies of transgenerational haunting. As "the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego" (Davies 374), Abraham and Torok's phantom tries to mislead the haunted subject "to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery" (Davies 374). In contrast, the interaction with Derrida's spectre "may open us up to the experience of secrecy as such" (Davies 377), and so the repressed memory of the child's untimely death in "The July Ghost" is revealed by the insistent return of the ghost day after day.

The connection between the personal dimension of the mother's trauma and documentary traces in this story recurs in "Baglady," from *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*. The story narrates the protagonist's tour of the Good Fortune Shopping Mall set in an indeterminate Eastern country, a place that is gradually transformed into a "suffocating Gothic horror castle" (Wallhead 219). Daphne Gulver-Robinson finds herself immersed in a nightmarish dislocation of time and space, in which the gradual loss of documentary traces, under the form of personal properties, will result in the ultimate loss of her own identity. Daphne loses her camera, her money, and a number of objects with symbolic implications: a present from her husband, representing her memories, her watch, standing for time, and eventually, her passport, symbolising her own identity. From a respectable middle-aged English lady, Daphne transforms into a "baglady," "dirty, unkempt, with a bag full of somebody's shopping, a tattered battery-hen" (*Elementals* 193). Daphne's helplessness, and the reader's unrest, are enhanced by the immediacy of the present tense used throughout the story, and by the poignancy of its open ending, which leaves the protagonist in claustrophobic agony, imagining herself trapped in the Mall forever.

Interestingly, *Elementals* contains several stories that evoke documentary traces, like the painting whose composition is ekphrastically rendered in "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary." Haunted by the servant girl's angry expression in Diego Velázquez's eponymous picture, as Byatt suggested in her interview with Boyd Tonkin ("Interview" 26), the writer imagined the circumstances behind the creation of the painting. In the final visualisation of the work of art, the picture emerges as a documentary trace of the servant's anger before her transformation through art, confirming

Levinas's perception of any artwork as a stoppage of time (Gibson 185): "The momentary coincidence between image and woman vanished, *as though the rage was still and eternal in the painting* and the woman was released into time" (*Elementals* 230; my italics). The conceptualisation of artistic objects as documentary traces is particularly relevant in connection with the space of the museum as one of the main sites of memory in contemporary literary creation and criticism. Seen both as "memory triggers and archival resources" (Crane 5), museums address the human need to accumulate and store fragments and vestiges from the past in order to avoid their loss in oblivion, considering how "[w]hat we call memory is in fact a gigantic and breathtaking effort to store the material vestiges of what we cannot possibly remember, thereby amassing an unfathomable collection of things that we might someday need to recall. . . . we feel a superstitious respect and veneration for the trace" (Nora 8-9).

The space of the museum permeates Byatt's production, including not only her novels but also her short fiction, with the portrayal of fictional and factual museums and exhibitions, as in the opening story of *Elementals*, "Crocodile Tears." The setting of the narrative in Nîmes favours the depiction of documentary traces in the form of objects found in excavations, and above all, in the stratigraphic coexistence of past and present in the city and its archaeological remains: "Three or four centuries . . . of dead young men, swordsmen and net-throwers, from all over the Empire and beyond, buried now under cafés and cinemas, pâtisseries and churches" (*Elementals* 43). Putting into practice the idea that "[w]e can read the life of a city, in its monuments" (34), the protagonist, Patricia Nimmo, visits the Maison Carrée with its palimpsestic history since Roman times, the museum full of the documentary traces of ancient burial stones, and finally, the Arènes, where "[o]ver all those centuries, people had come . . . to sit together, festive, and watch death" (66).¹ Patricia's delayed visit to the amphitheatre and its "stone skeleton" gives way to a disturbing dream that mixes the collective history of Roman gladiators with the personal history of her relationship with her now dead husband. After the dream, the protagonist decides to go back to England and visit her husband's grave, in such a way that the documentary trace of archaeological vestiges reactivates the psychical trace of the memory of past "patches of time," "those flickering frames of the continuum that, even at the time, seem certain to be forgotten, pleasantly doomed to nonentity"

1. Interestingly enough, the connection between archaeological findings and the concept of the trace underpins Virginia Zimmerman's use of the multi-temporality of Ricœur's trace in her description of the excavation as raising "that object from the depths of time to the surface of the present" (7-8). Similarly, Stefan W. Schmidt has used the image of "the uncovering of traces and the reconstructing of past lives" in his definition of archaeology as "*the re-appropriation of time through the work at and with places*," "putting together the materialized traces of the past" (309).

(*Elementals* 3). As in “Dragons’ Breath,” the ruin emerges as the documentary trace that simultaneously entails forgetting and enables remembering, following Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of the trace. Patricia’s dream after her visit to the archaeological site retrieves the memory of her husband, and so it exerts a restorative or healing power similar to the exercise of storytelling in “Dragons’ Breath” and “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye.”

BROWNE’S POLYTEMPORALITY AND BYATT’S SHORT STORIES

The interplay of the different types of traces underlies the perception of time in Victoria Browne’s *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. Primarily intended to reassess the configuration of temporality in feminist studies, Browne’s monograph offers a useful critical model for the exploration of contemporary fiction engaged in a dialogue with history, memory, and the past, of which Byatt’s production in general, and her short stories in particular, are emblematic examples. Browne’s notion of polytemporality springs from her conception of historical time as a form of lived time (that is, mediated by experience and socio-cultural parameters) which is not sequential or linear, but multilinear and multidirectional (2). For her, “temporal experience is always a complex blend of presence and absence, retention and protention, recollection and expectation” (28). As a result, historical time emerges as “an internally complex, ‘composite’ time, generated through the interweaving of different temporal layers and strands” (2). This recalls Derrida’s claim about the need for the trace to go beyond the present, enacting “a double movement of protention and retention” (*Grammatology* 66, 84), while also relating to the untimeliness of the spectre’s present (Derrida, *Specters* 201), which “challenges our belief in the unbroken progression of linear time” (Coverley).² This dynamic perception of time in terms of the interaction of temporal layers is particularly relevant because it can be connected with one of the most inspiringly visual concepts in contemporary criticism, that of the palimpsest.

Illustrating a process of spatial transference of memory and remembering, the palimpsest emerges as a visual image of presence in absence that becomes particularly useful to analyse phenomena of historical and textual intersections. As it fuses voices from different periods and authors into one single textual surface, the palimpsest works as a spectral image that

2. The polytemporality of the trace is then intrinsic to the configuration of the spectre in hauntology, considering how, for Derrida, the ghost’s secret “is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davies 379). Likewise, the ruin becomes a site for the convergence of past, present, and future, resulting in this case in a disjointed condition of untimeliness (Trigg 131).

blurs the boundaries between past, present, and future, which is key to the exercise of memory. According to Sarah Dillon in her monograph on *The Palimpsest* (2007), “[r]ecent advances have revealed that ‘brains are evolved not for retrospection and contemplation but for intention and anticipation—for looking forwards rather than backwards, outwards rather than inwards’” (134 n. 9). The temporal fluidity of this process matches the multidimensional configuration of time in Browne’s concept of polytemporality, while the superimposition of the visible and the invisible in stratigraphic layers appeals to the concept of spectrality.

The palimpsestuous quality of temporality in Browne’s model, with the fluid interaction of time layers, becomes particularly relevant when approaching Byatt’s stories such as “Crocodile Tears” and the superimposition of the visible and invisible strata in the history of Nîmes (and in the protagonist’s life), or the simultaneous erasure and reactivation of layers of memory in “The Pink Ribbon.” Similarly, the palimpsestic coexistence of different textual dimensions lies behind the configuration of the multiple levels of Byatt’s short narrative “Arachne,” published in the volume *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2000). This narrative is not a story in the traditional sense, but a kaleidoscopic piece where Byatt weaves different textual threads that range from personal memories in its opening section to the evocations of real and literary spiders in the final parts. These threads are alternated with rewritings of Ovid’s tale, and ekphrases of Velázquez’s version of the myth in *Las Hilanderas*, thus creating a tapestry of autobiographical, ekphrastic, and metafictional reflections and echoes, with the effect “of a patchwork, as if the text was a quilt made up of various pieces and materials” (Martínez Alfaro 149). Focusing on these elements, Byatt provides her own version of the Ovidian story by becoming herself a contemporary Arachne, who weaves different threads of fiction and non-fiction in a multi-layered literary tapestry. Significantly, the image of the weaving woman-spider inspires Byatt to elaborate on her own artistry as a writer: “the intricate knotting and joining and change in tension and direction of a thread, became the image I had in my own mind of the things I wrote; you might have an expanse of rosy and flaming lights, you might have a tree of crimson and golden apples, but always you had *the thread that persisted, connected, continued*” (“Arachne” 138; my italics).

The idea of continuity plays a crucial role in Browne’s concept of polytemporality. According to her, historical time is polytemporal because “shared historical moments are created and forged through the entangling of different histories and temporalities” (44), in such a way that “historical time consists of multiple temporalities and forms of time” (31). In other words, the configuration of historical time is determined by the existence of different

forms of time, which Browne classifies in a four-category typology based on Ricœur's system in *Time and Narrative*. This typology provides the structure of Browne's study, which is organised around the concepts of "the time of the trace," "narrative time," "calendar time," and "generational time" (3). The time of the trace relies on Ricœur's trace and on how this "aptly captures the movement of history between presence and absence" (65), since the exercise of tracing the past connects "our collective presents and futures to our collective pasts, and enables a sense of historical time to come into being" (64). This recalls Ricœur's enquiry into the symbolic functioning of the trace as "the figure of our ancestors, the icon of the immemorial, along with that of our successors, the icon of hope" (*Time* 116). As a result, the time of the trace emerges as a "'two-way' temporality. Traces of the past 'spill forwards' into the present, yet the historical past is also 'constituted backwards' when traces are taken up and configured within a historical narrative" (Browne 51).

This "two-way temporality" of the time of the trace figures prominently in "Precipice-Encurled," from *Sugar and Other Stories*, which "represents the intrusion of destructive chance happenings into the life of imagination and emotion" (Campbell 97). The story foreshadows *Possession* in its fictionalisation of the scholarly process of reconstructing a historical narrative by piecing together and interpreting the traces of the past. These traces pervade the different levels of the story, in the present and in the past, and in the interaction of both: a twentieth-century scholar works on the Victorian poet Robert Browning, imagined as the expected guest in an Italian villa where fictional Juliana Fishwick falls in love with the invented painter Joshua Riddell, who dies in an accident that makes Browning's visit impossible. In the present, the scholar tries to reconstruct the episode in Browning's life by "combing" "filaments of fact" into a "mosaic" (*Sugar* 188), and in this process he uses such remains of the past as letters, or "the traces on the hooded green plane of the microfilm reader" (187). In the past, Browning reflects on his own recreation of the past through the characters in his dramatic monologues ("I catch them, . . . I hold them together, I give them coherence and vitality" [191]), while Joshua Riddell wonders at the age of some stone carvings that he sketches, and muses over the immensity of the geological age of the mountains (205-06). In this way, the narrative depicts the personal traces of Browning's private and public selves, and of Joshua's thwarted relationship with Juliana, as well as the collective traces pertaining to the dimensions of human history in art and the history of the earth in geology. The transience of human life is measured against the timeless traces left by artists in their exercise of art, and the permanent marks left by nature through the effects of geological change. Although human beings vanish (as Joshua literally does, with his fall and untimely death), their traces remain alive

and open to interpretation, like Browning's poems and letters, and Joshua's unfinished portrait of Juliana: "a curious portrait of a young girl, who looked out of one live eye and one blank, unseeing one, oval like those of angels on monumental sculpture" (*Sugar* 214).

The time of the trace, with the presence of objects and spaces imbued with the traces of the past, recurs in other stories like "Body Art," from *Little Black Book of Stories*, "Art Work," from *The Matisse Stories*, and "The Next Room," from *Sugar and Other Stories*. "Body Art" depicts a bizarre collection of medical curiosities and instruments full of the uncanny presence of their past lives and uses. Although the specimens resist classification in several failed attempts at cataloguing, they exert an inspiring influence on the young artist in the story, in the same way as the ordinary objects in "Art Work" become a source of artistic inspiration for Mrs Brown while they retain the memory of their past uses: "She thinks inconsequentially of a ball she once went to, a Chelsea Arts Ball, in the mulberry-coloured dress which is now the dragon-scales" (Byatt, *Matisse* 82). In "The Next Room," the uncanny presence of the past can be felt in the house belonging to the protagonist's recently dead mother: "The house, now her house, was still full of her mother's presence" (*Sugar* 58), "the empty rooms . . . were instinct with her mother's presence and absence in about equal proportions" (59). Here, the correlation between the visible and the invisible, presences and absences, appeals above all to the sense of hearing, as the protagonist, Joanna Hope, begins to hear the voices of her deceased relatives in what she believes to be "the next room," which is in fact her own mind: "The voices were attached . . . to her own blood and presence" (83). In this story, the phantasmagoric experience can be examined in the light of Abraham and Torok's concept of the phantom. Unlike the spectre and its orientation towards "a still unformulated future" (Davies 379), the phantoms haunting Joanna do not return to bear a revelation, but to keep the family secrets hidden.

The absence-presence of the protagonist's dead mother, which triggers Joanna's memories of the past in the form of a kaleidoscopic jigsaw, can be assessed as a recurring motif in the treatment of time in Byatt's short stories, from her earliest to her latest collections. In *Sugar and Other Stories*, the eponymous story follows the narrator's voice on a Proustian journey through the "family myth," an autobiographical narrative in which the memories that the narrator pieces together are filtered through her mother's perspective. In the same way as the narrator acknowledges her mother's genetic presence in her own identity ("I feel my mother's face setting like a mask in or on my own. I have inherited much from her" [*Sugar* 241]), the protagonist of "A Stone Woman" bitterly mourns the absence of her navel after surgery because "the

umbilical cord . . . had been a part of her and of her mother” (Byatt, *Black Book* 132). Significantly, these stories, “Sugar” and “A Stone Woman,” can be taken as a starting point to explore two other components of historical time in Browne’s concept of polytemporality: narrative time and calendar time.

On the one hand, narrative time refers to the process of the narrative configuration of temporality in “beginnings, middles, and ends; flashbacks and flash-forwards; turning points and returns” (Browne 73). In Browne’s view, such narrative configurations are internal to historical time, determining the way in which we live historical events, not only at the time of their occurrence, but also “as they become absorbed and re-lived as part of a broader historical memory” (74). This “broader historical memory” informs the narrative of the family myth in “Sugar,” where the exercise of reliving the past is mediated by the narrator’s metafictional appeals to the reader, with the repetition of “my mother said,” and the use of the metaphor of confection for the emplotment of facts and the creation of fiction. Indeed, the story “foregrounds the role of the narrativisation of events in the transmission of memory as the narrator looks into the fabrication of her family past” (Parey).

The awareness of narrative time recurs in “The Thing in the Forest,” with an ambiguously circular structure that invites readers to imagine a story-within-story configuration, as well as in another narrative that, like “Sugar,” resorts to a first-person narrator: “Jael,” from *Elementals*, with its narrator-protagonist Jess. This story plays with the idea of treachery on different levels, from the intertextual embedding of the Biblical episode of Jael’s murder of Sisera, to the protagonist’s unconscious revelation of her attack on one of her classmates in her schooldays. Throughout the story, in Jess’s remembrance of the past, narrative time comes into the open as she tries to divert the reader’s attention from the implications of her lingering memories of the Biblical episode, the red colour, and the cord that caused her classmate’s fall and injury: “I have a very clear memory of the piece of cord . . . I have the opposite of Alzheimer’s, I remember things I really think didn’t happen. I remember Jael because the story doesn’t quite make sense, . . . I remember Jael because of the delicious red” (*Elementals* 215-16).

On the other hand, calendar time is behind the organisation of histories “into chronologies and timelines through temporal markers such as days, months, years, decades, and centuries” (Browne 99). Browne favours a qualitative approach to this dimension that goes beyond the perception of calendar time as “straightforwardly chronological or ‘linear’” (99), as she contends that calendar time is a socio-cultural construct, “mediated through the temporalities of lived experience and the regulatory practices of social and cultural life” (100). In general, Byatt’s stories are interspersed with references

to this dimension of historical time, under the form of dates and allusions to particular historical events: the date of Browning's birth in "Precipice-Encurled," the multi-layered history of Nîmes in "Crocodile Tears," or the setting of the present strand of "The Thing in the Forest" in 1984, among many others.

Significantly, the non-linearity and plasticity of calendar time can be found in "A Stone Woman," with the distortion of the measurement of time as a consequence of loss ("for minutes that seemed like hours, and hours that seemed like minutes" [*Black Book* 134]), and above all, in "On the Day that E. M. Forster Died," from *Sugar and Other Stories*. Set on the precise date of June 7th 1970, this story follows the protagonist, Mrs Smith, as she envisages the project of writing a novel which "acknowledged both the length and shortness of her time" (134).³ This is, therefore, a story "written by a writer about writing, about a writer writing" (Kelly 42). Revolving around the perception and experience of time, the story portrays Mrs Smith as interested in "[s]tories, plots. History, facts" (*Sugar* 130), and responsive to the influence of collective markers, historical and cultural, on the personal configuration of words and ideas. Calendar time is, therefore, mediated by the historical and the biological dimensions, as Mrs Smith decides to write her novel under the knowledge of how "she had lived through and noticed a certain amount of history. . . . And biological history too" (134). Happy to be "irretrievably middle-aged" in the present, Mrs Smith reflects on her past, reactivated through the encounter with an old friend, and finds herself facing an uncertain future, as the narrator closes the story with an anticipatory comment on the possibility of illness and death, perceived by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* as "neither a present to come nor a present past" (315): she "tried to think of short tales, of compressed, rapid forms of writing, in case there was not much time" (*Sugar* 146).

The polytemporal intersection of present, past, and future finds its way in another of the stories collected in *Sugar*, "Rose-Coloured Teacups," which can be read in the light of Browne's category of generational time. As defined by Browne, generational time is "a relational time, enabling sociocultural and political transmission between people of different ages and eras" (119), implying the logics of "negotiation, repetition, appropriation, and reinvention" (120). She emphasises the centrality of the phenomenon of generational *coexistence* (124), which in Byatt's story is projected on the

3. In her interview with Jean-Louis Chevalier, Byatt stated that she began to write short fiction "for the reasons given by the lady in 'On the Day that E. M. Forster Died': "I suddenly realised . . . that I haven't got enough life to write already the novels I have thought of. . . . And so I started seeing things in this very condensed clear way, as images, not necessarily to be strung together in a long narrative, but to be thought out from" ("Entretien" 26).

images of two traces of the past (the teacups and the sewing machine) that connect different generations of women in the same family. Women's transgenerational continuity also emerges in the presence of the grandmother's generation in the opening and closing stories of *Sugar*, "Racine and the Tablecloth" and "Sugar," and in the ancestral practice of weaving in "Dragons' Breath" (*Djinn* 91).

"Rose-Coloured Teacups" gives voice to the ideas of continuity and repetition by means of the depiction of parallel scenes in which the female character of the younger generation—in one case, the protagonist Veronica and in the other, Veronica's daughter Jane—breaks an object belonging to her mother. While in the past Veronica smashed her mother's rose-coloured teacups, in the present Jane breaks Veronica's old sewing-machine. Recalling her mother's anger, "her own mother's voice in the 1950s, unrestrained, wailing, interminable" (*Sugar* 36), Veronica offers a conciliatory response. Their different reactions reflect divergent attitudes to generational replacement, to the superimposition of time layers in which the present is transformed into the past as the future becomes the present: "Her mother had wanted her to be at the college and had felt excluded, then, by her daughter's presence there . . . The past had been made into the past, discontinuous from the present . . . Veronica's elder daughter . . . had also gone to the college, and Veronica, forewarned, had watched her assert her place in it, her here and now" (37). Significantly, the closing passage in the story, like the opening one, takes place in the past, with an imagined tea party in which Veronica connects the past and the future through the idea of genetic inheritance and the image of the teacups, two of which survived and remain intact in Veronica's present.

The long-lasting presence of the teacups reflects once more the centrality of the permanence of traces of the past, with their polytemporal connotations, in Byatt's short fiction. Indeed, one of her latest incursions into the short story genre, "Sea Story," depicts the image of bottles that travel polytemporally in the sea to bring messages from the past to the present, and from the present to a potential (and impossible) future. In the present setting of the narrative, the protagonist's family keeps a collection of bottles found on the beach, including "a rather sinister looking early twentieth century medicine bottle" (*Medusa's Ankles* 435) that contains an undelivered love message from the past. Mirroring this, the protagonist tries to contact his beloved by sending her a message in a plastic bottle which ends up in the Caribbean Trash Vortex, exemplifying mankind's destructive presence in nature. As in the past, therefore, the love message from the protagonist's present never reaches its future destination, although the remains of the bottle and its contents leave a trail of destruction and death in the sea and its

creatures, “the particular marine ecosystem which eventually tore it apart only to be torn apart in turn by the bottle’s nefarious effects” (Cheira 62). Anticipating the death of the protagonist and his beloved in the course of time, the story concludes with a gloomy mood that springs from the prospect of human death and loss, together with the indestructible nature of the traces left by mankind on the planet: “The sempiternal nurdles, indestructible, swayed on and under the surface of the sea” (*Medusa’s Ankles* 441).

Whether menacing like the plastic debris in “Sea Story,” the vanishing memories in “The Pink Ribbon,” and the distant voices in “The Next Room,” or (re)constructive traces like the archaeological vestiges in “Crocodile Tears,” and the “filaments of fact” in “Precipice-Encurled,” traces populate Byatt’s short fiction. The pervasive presence of the past, history, and memory in her short stories raises the possibility of exploring them from the perspective of polytemporality as the treatment of time in its multiple dimensions. Counterbalancing the destructive potential of traces like the ones in “Sea Story,” storytelling displays a restorative power in its preservation of “things in the earth, things made with hands and beings not made with hands that live a life different from ours, that live longer than we do, and cross our lives in stories” (Byatt, “The Djinn,” *Djinn* 277). As a matter of fact, stories are in themselves indelible traces of our own history, since they “are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the end of our story” (Byatt, *Histories* 166), connecting generations of audiences and readers in the polytemporal continuity of history and time.

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Dans son ouvrage La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli, Paul Ricœur dresse une typologie de la trace selon trois catégories : la trace mnésique, la trace mnémonique et la trace écrite. Victoria Browne a remobilisé le concept de la trace dans Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History pour introduire la notion de polytemporalité entendue comme une perception dynamique du temps historique, qui serait le résultat de l'enchevêtrement de plusieurs courants temporels : le temps de la trace, le temps du récit, le temps du calendrier et le temps des générations. S'appuyant sur la typologie de Ricœur et le modèle de Browne, cet article propose d'examiner les rapports de l'œuvre de Byatt au passé, à l'histoire et à la mémoire. Ses nouvelles, en particulier, sont un lieu unique d'enchevêtrement des traces qui articulent histoire et mémoire de manière polytemporelle.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur outlines a typology of the trace that distinguishes three main categories: “cortical” or “mnestic” traces, “psychical” or “affective” traces, and “documentary” traces. The concept of the trace has been recently revisited by Victoria Browne in *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. Browne introduces the notion of polytemporality, which relies on a dynamic perception of historical time as multidirectional, resulting from the interweaving of different temporal strands: “the time of the trace,” “narrative time,” “calendar time,” and “generational time.” Ricoeur’s categorisation of the trace and its reformulation in Browne’s model of polytemporality offer an apt critical tool to explore Byatt’s lifelong engagement with the past, history, and memory. The article contends that the short story has provided Byatt with a fertile ground to explore the possibilities of the trace in the articulation of history and memory from a polytemporal point of view.