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# Food and Painting in Two Stories by A.S. Byatt

Carolyn Levy and June Sturrock

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- <sup>1</sup> “I am a great artist”, claims Babette in Isak Dinesen’s *Babette’s Feast* (58). As a chef, she is making a bold assertion, for the place of cooking among the arts has always been at best tenuous. As Lisa Heldke, the philosopher and cultural critic says, Western thought has “traditionally valued activity aimed at producing timeless unchanging results” (204, 207), while a meal, however inspired, disappears even as it is enjoyed. In addition, the senses associated with cooking, taste, smell, and touch, have commonly been regarded as inferior to sight and hearing.<sup>1</sup> In the two stories discussed here, however, A.S. Byatt places cooking among the arts. She does so neither by assertion nor by argument but rather by juxtaposition. The proximity of food and great painting is essential to the meaning of both these narratives. In “The Chinese Lobster,” the sensuous pleasures of Matisse’s paintings and of well-cooked Chinese food weigh against—perhaps outweigh—suicidal misery, while in “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,” the chasm between a living engagement with the world and mere existence is realised through the work both of a cook and of a painter—the young Velasquez. Byatt’s love of painting is well-known, and from *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) onwards the visual arts constantly resurface in the work of this “supremely visual contemporary writer” (Terry 3).<sup>2</sup> In these two stories, one celebrating the value of the arts for consumers and the other their value for the artists themselves, food and painting interact to enrich and add complexity to Byatt’s presentation of the vital role of the arts and of the senses—not only eye and ear, but also taste, smell, and touch.
- <sup>2</sup> “Pleasure is *life*,” asserts Perry Diss, one of the two aging art historians whose conversation at an unpretentious London Chinese restaurant is at the heart of “The Chinese Lobster.” The other, Gerda Himmelblau, already knows how intensely Perry values pleasures of every sense and of all kinds: his delight in paintings is such that “he loves them, like sound apples to bite into, like fair flesh, like sunlight,” she thinks (98). Pleasure is indeed almost literally life to Perry; it is, at any rate, life-saving. At the end of the story, Gerda, from whose point of view it is narrated, sees the marks of a suicide

attempt, “the old scars, well-made, *efficient* scars on his wrists” (130, original italics), evidence for what she already knows, that he has—like her—a “chamber of ice” inside him. All three of the central characters in this narrative, the two academics and the student whose future they are discussing, know the drive to self-destruction. Gerda herself has “flirted with lumbering lorries” (129) and taken random handfuls of pills, while Peggi Nollett, the art student, is severely anorexic and has made at least two more direct suicide bids. Against all this misery, Byatt counterpoises aesthetic pleasure, which works doubly throughout this narrative, as does the misery—most obviously through painting, more especially the paintings of Matisse (addressed in the title of the collection, *The Matisse Stories*) but also through food, more especially the Chinese food that Gerda and Perry share (addressed in the title of the story). Byatt represents food here not only as essential to survival but also as among the things that provide life with value—as delight as well as sustenance. Food, that is, functions like art for the consumer in this narrative, as in “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” it functions like art for its creator.

- 3 For Peggi Nollett, though, both food and painting seem to exacerbate rather than to alleviate her suffering. “Nollett” means (in a version of Latin) “she does not want.”<sup>3</sup> Peggi’s rejection of life is wholesale, in that she writes to Gerda (who is Dean of Women Students): “I do slip back towards that way of thinking of thinking [sic] of putting an end to it all” (105). But Byatt represents Peggi’s rejection of life as more specifically directed against the double sources of pleasure and value in this narrative, against the art of Matisse and against food, both of which Peggi perceives as a threat to her female body. Gerda speaks of the anorexia from which Peggi suffers as generally appearing “to stem from self-hatred and inordinate self-absorption. Especially with the body and with that image of our own body which we all carry round with us” (119). Peggi starves herself “almost to a skeleton” (118) in order to prevent herself from becoming the kind of woman that, in the delusion of her illness, she sees in the mirror, a creature of “grotesque bulges, huge buttocks, puffed cheeks” (120). Byatt associates Peggi with disgust, both through the disgust she feels herself—for her own body, for food and for Matisse—and the disgust she engenders in some others, notably Perry. She is, according to him, “obsessed with bodily horrors” (120). Her art-work disgusts, and is perhaps intended to do so (112).
- 4 Peggi fears and rejects food, though disturbingly, she is described in terms of food, of potatoes, moreover decaying potatoes, and of vegetable marrows, while her unwashed hair is, to Perry, “like a carefully preserved old frying-pan” (105). She also fears and rejects Matisse, whom she perceives as painting the kind of woman she dreads becoming. Her written work for her degree is, she says in her misspelled and incoherent letter of complaint to Gerda, directed against Matisse’s “ways of accumulating Flesh on certain Parts of the Body which appeal to Men and tend to immobilise Women such as grotesquely swollen Thighs or protruding Stomachs” (102—original misspellings). Her creative work involves taking reproductions of Matisse’s paintings and smearing them with what is probably excrement, so as either to redraw or to erase the images of women’s bodies.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 Enjoyment is usually more attentive, more detailed, and more discriminating than distaste, and, against Peggi’s wholesale rejection of food and of Matisse, Byatt places the older couple’s shared and relished Chinese meal and their love of Matisse’s paintings, which to Perry Diss are “sacred” (112, 132) and to Gerda Himmelblau “bright

forms” that “go on shining in the dark” (133). Byatt uses Matisse rather than another painter partly because his work is directed purely to the delights of the senses, without the political agenda of, say, the Picasso of *Guernica*, the social agenda of, say, the Van Gogh of *The Potato-Eaters*, or the epistemological agenda of the Surrealists. She uses him, too, because feminists have indeed objected, as Peggy Nollett does, to his treatment of the female nude<sup>5</sup>: as Gerda says, “feminist critics and artists don’t like him because of the way in which he expands male eroticism into whole placid panoramas of well-being” (122). Most of all, Byatt uses Matisse because of his own disturbing words, which Perry quotes:

“What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity, of quietness, without any disturbing subjects, without worry, which may be, for everyone who works with the mind, for the businessman as much as for the literary artist, something soothing, something to calm the brain, something analogous to a good armchair which relaxes him from his bodily weariness.”<sup>6</sup> (123)

- 6 Matisse’s art is a celebration of the beauty of the sensory world and of the creative potential of the visual arts. Such art is a sort of antidote to human misery, at least for Perry Diss and possibly too for Gerda.<sup>7</sup> Gerda, however, is more austere. She is purely a scholar, rather than a scholar-artist like Perry, and her work is on Mantegna, a very different artist from Matisse, and far more academic: “a paradigm of the Renaissance artist-archaeologist-antiquarian” and an exponent of the “hard linear style and bright non-atmospheric colour,” according to the Renaissance historian, J. R. Hale (199). All the same she responds with pleasure to what she calls the “silent bliss” of Matisse’s work.
- 7 Throughout their conversation, as Gerda and Perry discuss Peggy Nollett’s complaint and the work of Matisse, they are enjoying their meal, as Byatt gently and repeatedly reminds her readers. “Chinese food—well cooked of course,” asserts Perry, with characteristic aplomb, “is one of the great triumphs of the human species” (107), and accordingly they enjoy “composing a meal with elegant variations, a little hot flame of chilli here, a ghostly fragrant sweetness of lychee there, the slaty tang of black beans, the elemental earthy crispness of beansprouts” (108). They are “composing” a meal, creating, in conjunction with the unseen Chinese cooks, the kind of experience that Matisse evokes in talking of his aims as a painter. Byatt punctuates their conversation with reminders of the pleasures of their meal, from “These prawns are as good as I have ever had” (116) to “have another spoonful of bamboo-shoots and beansprouts” (117), to their final taste of pure rice, “one of the most beautiful tastes in the world” (118), according to Perry. As they eat, Gerda and Perry are recreating a form of the tranquil refreshment of art that Matisse describes. Byatt describes food with the same relish, precision, and intensity that she applies to painting. Her description of the orange segments that close the meal is a little poem: “they are bright, they are glistening with juice, they are packed with little teardrop sacs full of sweetness” (131). Through the Chinese meal she includes in her narrative the complex of sensory enjoyments—enjoyment of taste, scent, and sight—that comprises the experience of eating good food. In so doing, she gently extends the realm of sensory pleasures that is so important to this story.
- 8 Matisse himself seems to have understood the close connection between food and the sensuous delight he is concerned with in his art. Writing of Matisse’s *Still Life with Oysters* (1940), Kenneth Bendiner says,

Matisse undoubtedly conceived of this oyster painting as his last will and testament, and if it does not proclaim sex, it was probably meant to express what sex is all about, and what most of Matisse's art is about—pleasure and the affirmation of life. (141)

- 9 Hilary Spurling, Matisse's distinguished biographer, sees the same relish in the senses in this painting (one of a series of three). She quotes Matisse as saying he needed to work on something more sensual (after the lyrical *The Dream*), so he painted three plates of oysters in quick succession. "And for that my friend," he writes to a friend, "you need the sensation of appetite." Spurling continues, "*Still Life with Oysters* is a simple lunch for one—plate, knife, napkin, lemons and water-jug served up on a tray—painted with straightforward gusto." (397-8) "Gusto"—for food, for art, for sex (which the oysters inevitably suggest)—is what Perry celebrates in this narrative, with the support of Gerda, dry and fastidious though she is. It is also what Peggy Nollett fears.
- 10 However, Peggy Nollett and her predicament, so Byatt says, "arrived in the story rather late" (Chevalier *Entretien* 23). The germ of it, she says, is rather in a passage about "two people talking about one thing and realising that what is going on in their heads is quite another thing." (Chevalier *Entretien* 23)
- Any two people may be talking to each other, at any moment, in a civilised way about something trivial, or something, even, complex and delicate. And inside each of the two there runs a kind of dark river of unconnected thought, of secret fear, or violence, or bliss, hoped-for or lost, which keeps pace with the flow of talk and is neither seen nor heard. And at times, one or both of the two will catch sight or sound of this movement, in himself, or herself, or more rarely, in the other. And it is like the quick slip of a waterfall into a pool, like a drop into darkness. The pace changes, the weight of the air, though the talk may run smoothly onwards without a ripple or quiver. ("The Chinese Lobster" 126)<sup>8</sup>
- 11 Byatt describes this passage as "the depth of the story" (Chevalier *Entretien* 23), but, for this depth to be sounded and for the moment to register fully, narrative context is all-important.
- 12 The context Byatt creates is the tension between pain and pleasure. In the conversation between Gerda and Perry the "dark river" running under Gerda's words, which Perry glimpses and recognizes, has to do with death. She remembers the suicide of her friend Kay, the only person she has ever loved. In Hans Andersen's story "The Snow Queen" the child Gerda is able to save her friend Kai from the power of the evil Snow Queen, and to help dislodge the splinter of the troll-mirror in his eye, which has made his heart freeze.<sup>9</sup> But this Gerda cannot save this Kay, who falls into a suicidal depression after her young daughter, bullied at school, kills herself. When Kay succeeds in taking her own life, Gerda is left feeling that "she is next in line" (129). Perry, out of his own hard experience, recognizes Gerda's preoccupation. When he describes the suicidal state, he uses the image that perpetually recurs to her of a white room<sup>10</sup> in which "there is only one thing possible" (125). Gerda imagines Peggy as also sharing this preoccupation, seeing "in her mind's eye, the face of Peggy Nollett, potato-pale, peering out of a *white box*" (132—our emphasis).
- 13 The shared experience of pleasure in the meal and the shared memory of pleasure in discussing Matisse are followed by the shared knowledge of mental pain. This three-part process perhaps works to awaken Gerda and Perry more fully to the implications of their task in dealing with Peggy. Suicide, they agree, is a failure of imagination: "Anyone who could imagine the terror—the pain—of those who survive a suicide—

against whom a suicide is committed—could not carry it through,” says Gerda (125)—although she acknowledges that at that point “imagining others becomes unimaginable.” In fact opening oneself to pleasure becomes a sort of moral obligation in that it preserves life. In this case it may preserve Peggy’s life. The process they have undergone during their Chinese meal eventually enables the two scholars to come to some decision about Peggy’s problems, and they agree to let her continue with a different supervisory committee. Both as scholars and as lovers of art, they find the decision unsatisfactory, but it does offer some kind of possible future to the ailing Peggy Nollett, and, as Perry says, “She may see the light. Who knows?”(133).

- 14 All the invocation of sensuous pleasure in this narrative, through art and through food, is addressed in some way to mental pain. Moreover, Byatt subtly reminds her readers of the pain that is potentially involved in pleasure. The *luxe, calme, et volupté* that Matisse, Baudelaire, and Perry Diss invoke are, as Gerda recognizes, intolerable for someone like Peggy Nollett (121).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Chinese restaurant where Perry and Gerda eat produces delightful food but also the glass case in which a lobster together with two crabs, and some scallops, is slowly dying. This lobster gives the story its name and also frames the narrative, described as it is in some detail both at the beginning and at the end of the story. Both Perry and Gerda notice the lobster with some distress, Gerda automatically and tellingly thinking of the wretched creature, who “was, is and will not be, black and glossy” (96), as female. Yet both find it possible to dismiss it, as one does, as something “absolutely appalling” for which at the same time one doesn’t “give a damn” (134), as Perry says.<sup>12</sup> Byatt applies four curiously assorted adverbs to Gerda’s assent to Perry’s words: “She does know. Cruelly, imperfectly, voluptuously, clearly” (134). Gerda responds, that is, with complex and apparently contradictory emotions to Peregrine’s complex and apparently contradictory reaction. This story about pain and pleasure refuses the simplicity of clear binaries. Their reaction to the dying lobster is much like their eventual response to their decision about Peggy: “it matters very much and not at all” (133).
- 15 Five years after “The Chinese Lobster” Byatt returned both to its parallel between food and painting and to its configuration of characters, for “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” is also concerned with the interaction between a man, an older woman, and an unhappy younger woman. In the later story, however, the man, identified only as “the painter,” but evidently Byatt’s version of the young Velasquez,<sup>13</sup> is rather more sympathetic than Perry Diss, whose initial facile dismissal of Peggy Nollett as a “poor little bitch” makes Gerda (and some readers) wince (110). Indeed, whereas in “The Chinese Lobster” it is the older woman, Gerda, whose more compassionate and informed view of the situation will bring relief to the younger woman, here it is the painter’s insistence on the similarity between their arts that reconciles the younger woman, Dolores, to her life as a cook. Through the interaction between the painter and the cook, Byatt presents a narrative that challenges conventional hierarchies, not only of class and gender, but also of the arts and the senses.
- 16 As the two stories relate both to painting, which represents the body, and to food, which builds the body, it is unsurprising that both touch on a concern with “body image,” and by extension on dissatisfaction with materiality. Like Peggy, Dolores is unhappy with her own body, with its size and weight.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the story, she feels herself, in her heavy body and her humble position as a servant in the prosperous household, as being trapped in the material world: “a heavy space of

unregarded darkness, a weight of miserable shadow” (*Elementals* 221); “God had made her heavy and she hated him” (220). She longs for some freedom and intellectual activity, complaining bitterly, “I want to live. I want time to think. Not to be pushed around” (220). Byatt’s narrative suggests that the work that seems to imprison Dolores has, in fact, the potential to liberate her. Whereas Peggi’s relation to food, and by extension to the whole material world, is one of fear, disgust, and withdrawal, Dolores has the creative energy—and the nose, palate, and hand—of the good cook, “filleting fish with concentrated skill, slapping dough, making a tattoo of sounds with the chopper like hailstones, reducing onions to fine specks of transparent light” (221). The diction of such passages suggests that Dolores’ resentment of her work is tempered by her relish in it.

17 Moreover, as the narrative progresses Byatt represents the painter as insisting that Dolores’ work, like his, involves more than the material, the physical, that it is contemplative as well as active. His initial assertion of the likeness between them —“you are a true artist” (223)—merely provokes Dolores to further anger at the disregarded and transitory nature of her work as opposed to his canvases. He explains his claim by telling Dolores the story of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary, which is concerned with the active and the contemplative lives, then by interpreting the story in his own way and eventually by painting both the story and the cook. Indeed Byatt’s story can be read as a meditation on a biblical narrative that many women have found disturbing.<sup>15</sup>

18 Byatt, through the voice of the painter, paraphrases this narrative (Luke 10. 38-42) thus:

They were sisters (...) Jesus visited them (...) And Mary sat at his feet and listened to his words, and Martha was cumbered with much serving as St Luke puts it, and complained. She said to the Lord, “Dost thou not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me.” And Jesus said to her “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” (224)<sup>16</sup>

19 At first, Dolores responds to the bible story with renewed anger and resentment about her place as a working woman. She complains, “There will always be serving and someone will always be doomed to serving, and will have no choice or chance about the *better part*.” (224—Byatt’s italics).<sup>17</sup>

20 Dolores’ fellow-servant, the aging Concepción, reacts to Dolores’ anger conventionally, preaching patience and resignation. As Jane Campbell observes, she “repeats the traditional interpretation, which relegates both herself and Dolores to an inferior place” (211). The painter, however, rejects this position as irrelevant. He provides an unconventional reading of the bible story, one that implies a radically different understanding of the relationship between the physical and spiritual and between the active and the contemplative. In his intense and protracted response to Dolores, he insists that her skilled work as a fine cook does, in fact, give her “choice or chance about the *better part*” and that the biblical “one thing needful,” “the better part,” is something that both she and he have access to through their respective arts. As artists, he asserts, they are involved both in action and in contemplation. Their action involves a form of contemplation. He claims,

“the divide is not between the servants and the served, between the leisured and the workers, but between those who are *interested* in the world and its multiplicity



of forms and forces, and those who merely subsist, worrying or yawning. When I paint eggs and fishes, I am painting the godhead because the world is full of light and life, and the true crime is not to be interested. You have a way in. Take it. It may incidentally be a way out, too, as all skills are" (226)

21 The painter's words here set a value on artistic activity in itself rather than through any possible achievement or lasting result.

22 Through the painter's speech to Dolores, Byatt also addresses the necessary delight in the senses involved in the practice of the arts, whatever art it may happen to be, presenting it as a form of religious contemplation:

"The cook, as much as the painter, looks into the essence of creation, not, as I do, in light and on surfaces, but with all the other senses, with taste, and smell, and touch, which God also made in us for purposes. You may come at the better part by understanding emulsions, Dolores, by studying freshness and the edges of decay in leaves and flesh, by mixing wine and blood and sugar into sauces, as well as I may" (225-26).

23 Through these words, placing cook and painter on the same level, Byatt suggests the possibility of rejecting not only the accepted hierarchies of the arts, in which cooking is almost invariably subordinated to painting, literature, and music, but also the accepted hierarchy of the senses, in which "taste, and smell, and touch" are almost invariably subordinated to sight and hearing. As Carolyn Korsmeyer observes, "these senses are considered cognitively dull, and what is more, pursuit of their pleasures leads to self-indulgence, laziness, gluttony, and overall moral degeneration" (218). The words of the painter, however, insist on the important cognitive role of all the senses and on the important creative experience involved in cooking. The narrative here suggests a point similar to Lisa Heldke's argument that "foodmaking activities are valuable because of, not in spite of, the fact that they ground us in the concrete, embodied present" (211).

24 There is, indeed, a strong anti-hierarchical element throughout this story. What the painter calls "interest," saying, "the true crime is not to be interested," that is, the openness of the mind and the senses to the external world, is essentially an egalitarian phenomenon. All things are potentially of interest, including the eggs and fishes that he paints and the garlic and onions that Dolores cooks. Byatt commented in an interview, "I wrote about that painting of Velazquez, 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,' because I think that he knew that any thing was as beautiful as any other thing, and the fishes and the eggs were objects of beauty" (*Chevalier Sources* 9)<sup>18</sup> She reiterates this point in another interview, in which she is talking about work, by which she means, in this context, something akin to the painter's "interest," an alert and creative awareness of all things:

I suppose what I mean by "work" is not the same as the Protestant work ethic, because it isn't about self-denial and self-betterment. It is a space for a passion that isn't personal and isn't necessarily affection for other people. I've always been interested in why Velazquez' best painting was actually the surfaces, the things--the eggs in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. Similarly, the expression on the face of that very angry servant girl in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* haunts me, and she haunts me partly because she is in the same picture as this perfectly painted egg - they balance each other. This is where the really difficult, complicated, beautiful things are, this contact between oneself and the world (Tonkin *Anglistik* 26).



- 25 The painter's "interest" is this vital and curious contact with the world that does not necessarily distinguish between the objects of its curiosity in terms of traditional value or importance.
- 26 Velasquez' art challenges hierarchies in other, more generally recognized, ways.<sup>19</sup> In his *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, the biblical scene that gives the painting its title is relegated to a small area in the top right-hand corner. In the foreground of this painting, as Byatt describes it, "the light hit four things—the silvery fish so recently dead that they were still bright-eyed, the solid white gleam of the eggs, emitting light, the heads of garlic, half-peeled and lifelike, and the sulky, fleshy, furiously frowning face of the girl" (229)—the girl being, of course, the Dolores of Byatt's narrative. The painter's and the viewer's attention goes to fish, eggs, garlic, and girl—and one might add, old woman, for the Concepción figure also takes the light. The figures of Christ, Martha, and Mary are much smaller and painted with less precision. In such paintings as this and *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus*, in which the biblical scene again is much smaller and less detailed than the foreground scene of a young black woman cleaning a kitchen table,<sup>20</sup> the traditional sense of priorities—the divine before the human, the male before the female, the served before the servant—is challenged. Such paintings also challenge the traditional hierarchy of artistic genres, religious painting and historical painting normally being regarded as superior to genre painting and still life painting, the latter being "the genre historically constructed as the lowest in category of picture-making" (Bryson 9).<sup>21</sup>
- 27 Many artists have discussed the significance of such paintings. Norman Bryson, for instance, in his illuminating study of still life painting, emphasizes the importance of what he calls "rhophography" (from Greek *rhōpos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles), which is "the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks" (61).<sup>22</sup> He respects Velasquez' treatment of the "unassuming material base of life" in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. All the same, Bryson reads this painting as compassionate rather than celebratory, as addressing the suffering of the servants rather than as illuminating their lives. He writes of the two women in the painting:
- In their lined tense faces and in the gesture of an arm so adapted to its mechanical tasks as to be virtually an extension of the pestle and mortar, the women express a life of domestic service and toil so locked into the routines of mundanity that the exalted goings on elsewhere might be fiction, a picture on the wall. The strength and sheer presence of these two women dominate the image, all the more forcefully because offset by the mysterious and impalpable scene behind them (153-4).
- 28 Byatt understands the painting rather differently both from Bryson and from Kenneth Bendiner, who comments, "the kitchen remains the zone of the laborious hard facts of life" (81). Byatt's Dolores does indeed initially feel "locked into the routines of mundanity" but Byatt's painter regards the routines of the kitchen as potentially being a path to experience that is just as exalted as the interactions of the religious scene. For Byatt, Velasquez' foregrounding of the cook and her materials is a celebration of those elements of human experience that are vital to life but too often overlooked.
- 29 Celia Wallhead is surely right in arguing that
- Velasquez' famous decentering of major figures as in this particular painting [*Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*], corresponds to a writer's foregrounding of figures which are, or have been, normally marginalized through class or gender; his use of the *bodegón*, genre painting or still life, through which domestic objects are

illuminated, is at once a form of metonymy and is a metaphor for Byatt's "thinginess" or James's specificity (Velazquez 313).

- 30 Significantly though, Dolores is marginalized not merely by her class and gender. She is not just a woman servant, she is also a cook, and as such she practises an art that is itself traditionally marginalized and that involves the exercise of senses that are traditionally marginalized. Through the ekphrastic treatment of Velasquez' painting with its foregrounding of the cook, her tools, and her materials, and through the words of "the painter" with their protracted parallel between cooking and painting, Dolores' art and the senses through which she practises it find a new value.
- 31 Fiercely intellectual though she is, Byatt never ignores the delights and the necessities of the body that are expressed through food, both "daily bread" and culinary art. Elsewhere in Byatt's fiction, in the less restricted forms of the novel and the novella, she uses food to suggest mood, character, relationship, or place. The short story, though, demands economy. Its necessary exclusions heighten the effect of the material included so that it works with added intensity. Setting, for instance, must function as part of meaning. At a casual first reading a Chinese restaurant might seem merely a likely enough setting for the encounter of Gerda Himmelblau and Perry Diss—as it is. Yet inevitably this setting, and the meal shared there, enhances the sense, which pervades this story, of human culture—the culinary tradition of China, the painting of Matisse—as working against despair. Similarly in "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" the fish, eggs and garlic that figure in the actual painting become materials that both the painter and the cook can transform through their respective arts, for here Byatt writes not of the consumers of art, such as Gerda and Perry, but of its producers, the nameless painter and the cook Dolores, and of the value of their art to those who create it. The kitchen is the inevitable setting for such a narrative.
- 32 By juxtaposition of painting and cookery both from the point of view of consumer and producer, Byatt places the culinary art as art. In both stories, through food and through painting she celebrates the role of the arts in human existence. As with all Byatt's writing, these stories insist on the value of all the awakened senses and on the importance of aesthetic experience, an experience which is not confined to the arts. As she says, "the human condition is horrible; all this beauty is extra" (Stout interview).

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## NOTES

1. Caroline Korsmeyer writes, "touch, taste, and smell are 'bodily' senses, and by the long tradition that ranks mind over body are also considered 'lower' senses" (217).
2. Louisa Hadley in her overview of Byatt criticism notes that her "depiction of the artist is identified as a key feature of her work" (5).
3. Byatt's interest in naming is well-known; see, for instance, Campbell 142-3, 217-8. Examining the naming of characters can lead to over-interpretation, but it is worth noting that Gerda's name has complex implications. A German name for a woman "nearing retirement" in the early 1990s hints at the possibility of a tragic background that might indicate why she has loved only one person in her life (127). Himmelblau, her family name (we comment on Gerda's first name in the text), which means sky-blue or heaven-blue, connects her with joy and beauty. Similarly Perry Diss, as he is most often called in the text, sounds something like "Paraduse" though his full name is Peregrine (pilgrim) and "Diss" alone might have by that period have acquired its later slang meaning of "treat with disrespect," but this seems unlikely.
4. Byatt received much adverse criticism for her treatment of Peggi Nollett. She commented: "it's very hard for rigorous, believing feminists to believe that I have right to depict an anorexic, feminist, bad artist accusing somebody of sexual harassment and being on the whole slightly more in the wrong than he is. They want a straight message. I had a lot of letters from women saying, 'you really shouldn't have done this. Sexual harassment is a very serious matter. You should have made it perfectly clear that he was bad and she was good.' Well, I'm not in the business of Bible Thumping. The lives of women are very complicated" (Miller interview).
5. See, for instance, Duncan 60. Spurling deals summarily with the common misapprehensions about Matisse's relations to women and about his behavior during the Second World War, both of which Peggi Nollett puts forward in her letters to Gerda Himmelblau (xvii-xviii).
6. This seems to be Byatt's own translation of Matisse. Worton (25) quotes Matisse in Jack Flam's translation: "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the business man as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue" (Flam 38).
7. There is a biographical element here. Stout records Byatt as speaking of Matisse as helping her recover from the horror of her young son's death: "If one day you regain the sense that these

colors and this tension are extraordinarily beautiful, it feels like an incredible gift. The human condition is horrible; all this beauty is extra.”

8. Jean-Louis Chevalier, Byatt’s translator and interviewer, sees this passage as “the most meaningful moment, together with the most beautiful piece of writing in the story” (*Entretien* 12).

9. Byatt is deeply interested in images of glass and ice, as is evident throughout “Ice, Snow, Glass.”

10. It is perhaps relevant that white is the colour of mourning in many Asian countries.

11. In another of *The Matisse Stories*, “Art Work,” the painter Robin Dennison finds that Matisse’s paintings teach him “the paradoxical way in which the pure sensuousness of *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* could be a religious experience of the nature of things” (56).

12. Byatt says that “the lobster is death” (Chevalier *Entretien* 22). To us it suggests rather the misery that precedes an inevitable death.

13. Velasquez was nineteen when he painted “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” (now in the National Gallery, London) in 1618.

14. Byatt represents women’s concern with the image of their own bodies elsewhere, for instance in the title story of *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* and in another of *The Matisse Stories*, “Medusa’s Ankles.” In both these narratives the protagonists, middle-aged women, mourn for their lost good looks.

15. D’Angelo shows that some feminist scholars view the Lucan story both as an attempt “to restrict women to a passive role” and “to subordinate the ministry of the table to the ministry of the word” (442). She herself argues, “Luke’s Jesus does not prohibit Martha’s ministry but rather approves Mary’s discipleship... His rebuke to Martha makes clear that she adds nothing to Mary but rather threatens to take away from her. We might imagine that Martha voices an inverted version of the complaint of women ministers of Luke’s time about the diminishing role for women in ministry: ‘My sister has left me to do all the ministry.’ Luke’s answer is that women who have been discouraged from ministry have chosen the better part. The story exemplifies the treatment of women’s participation in the mission throughout Luke-Acts: women’s ministry is not denied for forbidden, but rather avoided” (455).

16. Celia Wallhead notes that Byatt has already used this narrative in *Possession*, where the poet Christabel Lamotte and the painter Blanche Glover call the house they share “Bethany” (Velazquez 311). The house is intended, according to Christabel, as a place “wherein we neither served nor were served... We formed a project... to make ourselves a Bethany where work of all kinds was carried on in the Spirit of Love and His Laws” (*Possession* 204). Byatt also refers to the story of Martha and Mary in *A Whistling Woman* (398, 401).

17. Much of Byatt’s fiction touches on the inescapable nature of domestic drudgery. In *The Children’s Book* (2009) for instance, she represents a bright young working-class girl, Elsie as thinking, “frustrated female thinkers... would always need her, Elsie, or someone like her to carry coals and chop meat and mend clothes and do laundry” (297). Byatt first approaches this subject in *Still Life*, in relation to Stephanie’s acute awareness of the limitations of her life as the mother of two small children and a clergy-wife (308-7).

18. Byatt applies this perception to other painters besides Velasquez, arguing that through Vermeer’s treatment of the sunlight on the stream of milk in the Rijksmuseum’s “The Milkmaid,” “the milk is as interesting as the woman. This isn’t cold; this is wonder” (Tonkin *Independent* interview).

19. Velasquez was not alone in combining sacred scenes with genre elements. Joachim Beuckelaer, who influenced the young Velasquez also places a kitchen scene in the foreground of his *Christ at Home with Martha and Mary* (Prado 1568), but the women are not realized as they are in the Velasquez painting. Birkmeyer refers to Beuckelaer in relation to Velasquez’ “additional background scenes” (67).

20. This painting is in Dublin's National Gallery. A similar painting, *The Black Servant*, without the biblical scene, is in the Art Institute of Chicago.

21. Another painting that falls into this category is *Las Hilanderas (The Spinners)*, which deals with the myth of Arachne—with Greek rather than Christian mythology that is. Byatt writes of this at length in her mixed-genre "Arachne". She draws a comparison between this painting and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*: "What is painted with love in both of these pictures, is the working woman. The angry, sulky cook with her pestle, an embodiment of Martha's indignation at being cumbered with much serving. The spinners, full of movement, displaying their skill, using their bodies unselfconsciously. In both cases, the painting is about the way light catches objects in the world" ("Arachne" 146).

22. Bryson is using the distinction between rhopography and megalography made by Charles Sterling in his *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, 1981. We are grateful to Renée Lynn Haggart for drawing our attention to this useful concept.

## ABSTRACTS

La façon similaire dont A. S. Byatt traite les thèmes de la nourriture et de la peinture dans « The Chinese Lobster » et « Christ in the House of Martha and Mary » est au centre de ces deux récits. Dans « The Chinese Lobster », le rôle joué par le plaisir esthétique dans l'apaisement des maux de l'existence apparaît de manière évidente au travers de la discussion de l'œuvre de Matisse, et le repas chinois. Mais, alors que cette nouvelle se penche sur les joies de la consommation d'art, « Christ in the House of Martha and Mary » porte plutôt sur les bénéfices de la création artistique. Ainsi, dans ce récit ekphrastique, un peintre fait part à un cuisinier malheureux de la différence entre une vie banale et le rapport essentiel au monde qui s'offre à eux grâce à leurs arts respectifs. L'intérêt de Byatt pour les mérites de l'éveil des sens et de l'expérience esthétique s'exprime clairement, dans ces deux nouvelles, par une interaction entre peinture et nourriture qui remet en cause la hiérarchie habituelle des arts et des sens.

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