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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by Jean-Louis Chevalier, Conference on the English Short Story since 1946, December 4, 1993, First published in *J SSE* n°22, 1994 Entretien revu par L. Lepaludier

A.S. BYATT: "The Chinese Lobster" is the most recently completed of my stories, and one I'm rather pleased with technically. Like most of my work I've been brooding about it for about 8 years or so before I wrote it and I will tell you how it began later, but, it's a story which isn't about what it appears to be, when you first meet it, which since I'm going to read the beginning, you need to know.

J.-L. CHEVALIER: I knew you would read from "The Chinese Lobster", but not where you would stop, and I would like to start from the same short story myself, since I think it is one of your finest and most recent ones. It contains what is, at least to me, a touchstone, or should I say a "philosophical stone", a gem of many radiances, which says, "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". This is the most meaningful moment, together with the most beautiful piece of writing in the story. My point is that words, concepts, semantic and syntactical correspondences, drama, emotion, wisdom, voice, thematic magnetism, structural points, narrative expression – all that concerns matter and manner – contribute to the sudden triumphant emergence of poetic truth. This is to me a miracle of writing, and I could happily spend the rest of the day taking it to pieces and putting it together again, like the archeologist or curate in Randolph Ash's poem. But I am not here to speak, only to make you speak. What I would like to suggest is that this paragraph, which also forms a whole unit in the structural development of the story, may be something you would like to speak of at length. My reason for thinking so – and I shall ask whether you agree with it or not in

a minute — is that it is for the sake of such passages that you write at all. I shall then ask you to discuss the passage from the point of view of theme, structure and narrative. But would you first acknowledge — or not — that this passage is the kind of writing you care and write for?

A.S.B.: Yes, I think specifically this kind of moment is the reason why I write short stories. It is a form I took up very late, and only after reading the short stories of Alice Munro, who changes direction suddenly in the middle of a story and is doing something else. And, I suppose the other thing about this passage is that the whole of my life has been spent in consciousness of the fact that what is going on inside one's head — which is the reason why one writes — now and then makes contact with life as it is lived, life as it is observed and one is suddenly in the same place as oneself completely, very briefly; which my characters in my early novels always wanted to be and usually didn't manage to be. And also, I suppose, this passage is a bit of non-mimetic writing, writing thinking, which is something also writing is for. It's something drama can't do, television can't do, no other form can do, no other form can think; but I think most people don't think of short stories as a thinking form: a novel is discursive, thinking in a very short text is a difficult thing and technically rather frightening.

J.L.C.: It seems to me that it is also interesting from the point of view of theme, because it introduces something unusual; and from the point of view of structure, because it is a unit in itself: from that moment the story takes on another dimension, which it never loses, as it is from this paragraph that the story becomes not the story of the girl, but of the adult people. There is also the question of the narrative beauty, which you have just spoken of.

* * *

— A common theme in your stories is the weird, or the strange, the unusual, the eerie, the extraordinary. If one takes "The July Ghost", it is of course the story of a boy ghost. And "The Next Room" is about parents' voices speaking in the next room, after their deaths; and this is continued by a Red Indian chief discussing spirit-voices of ancestors on television; and then there is the chance meeting with a funny lady, called Mrs Roote, who runs an "Academy of the Return — Thanatology and a study of the Afterlife". As for "Racine and the Tablecloth", there is in it, right in the middle, "le songe d'Athalie", which has something to do with the unusual. While "Rose-Coloured Teacups" has to do with a vision. What about "The Dried Witch?" How would you define the strange in "The Dried Witch"?

A.S.B.: How would I define the strange in "The Dried Witch?" Ah! I'm very frightened of "The Dried Witch". I think again I took up writing short stories in order to accommodate the strange. I think.

I began some time before writing *Possession*. I am a person without religious beliefs and without any experience of ghosts or odd things of that kind, but the older you get, the more you see that human consciousness is completely preoccupied with what is not seen, with what haunts, and the stories we tell each other are rather like the ghosts we tell each other about, around the fire, which again are rather like, as one gets older, the memories of people one knew, who were alive and are now dead, a child or one's parents—and my own mother, just before she died, became completely obsessed by the fact that she could hear the voices of her parents quarrelling in the next room, and I at the same time read a thanatological book, saying that when you died, you went through a tunnel into the bright light, where your parents were waiting for you — I wasn't sure I wanted either my mother's parents or my own mother to be waiting for me at the end of the tunnel. But in "The Dried Witch" it was partly the impulse that was much more

metaphoric, curiously, because it appears to be a story much more about witchcraft. It's a story about oriental womanhood and life in a very structured oriental village, which I put together largely out of the Chinese stories of Shen Tsunh Wen. The impulse was about equally aesthetic and very personal — I wanted to write a story because those Chinese short stories had moved me in a way I didn't quite understand. The shape of Shen Tsunh Wen's Chinese short stories was unlike anything I had read. Although it did resemble Alice Munro in appearing to be inconsequential, it wasn't beautifully constructed, it just strung a little bit next to the other, and yet the whole was a complete whole, from which you could neither take anything away or add anything to. But it was towards the end of my days in the department of English in University College, London, and several women there were agreeing that we had all observed that women, once they got over the age of 45, began to be persecuted by groups of people, and, obviously if you want to write a story about that, you do better to choose a metaphor a long way away, the life of a Chinese lady, or possibly a Burmese lady, or possibly an Indian lady in a village seemed quite a good metaphor. So it was partly a story about the persecution of post-menopausal women, and the strange, somehow, became a metaphor in that case for both things, for my response to Shen Tsunh Wen. The oddest thing that happened to me was that when it came in book form, a Chinese scholar approached me at a reading I gave and said: "Do you realise you've written a perfect Chinese short story?"

J.L.C.: Anyway, what I like in your stories is that one can always connect them with other things. What you have just explained about those ladies who inspired you into writing "The Dried Witch" is more or less what Beatrice Nest says in *Possession*, and she is a sort of good witch. What strikes me is that all the unusual, weird, strange people tend to be either grown-up ladies or very young children — sometimes girls, but mostly boys. "The Changeling" is a child of the fairies of course, and Josephine's subject is fear; it so works that one is sure something is to be wrong with the boy, because he is already inhabited by some sort of strangeness. It is a thing you find rather often — or rather I find rather often in your stories — that the strange, the weird, does not concern, I should say, the ordinary man or woman, married and thirty or forty years old, but characters who are preadolescent or nearing death. Is that a correct reading of your stories?

A.S.B.: I think it is, and I think I got interested in the strange as I reached the stage of contemplating the death of my own parents, which means always contemplating your own death, which makes you think about the continuous life of the dead in a much more immediate way than you think of it, when you're in your twenties or so...—

You did have a question?

J.L.C.: When you mentioned what this Chinese critic said to you — I'm not well versed in Chinese literature at all — but I'd be interested in knowing what he actually meant by "this is a perfect Chinese story, you've written a perfect Chinese story?" Did you ask him to tell you exactly what he meant? Because I'm not quite sure...

A.S.B.: It was a woman in fact...

J.L.C.: I'm sorry.

A.S.B.: But, well, the trouble was, that there were hundreds of people gathered round, and she did send me another Chinese story, in an envelope, but she didn't really explain. I was — I said I'd been reading Shen Tsunh Wen and she said, "Ah, that explains it", because a lot of other people have thought the story, which doesn't specify where it's set, was in other parts of the east, and it can't be to do with inconsequentiality, which is what I felt was the shape of Shen Tsunh Wen's. Because it's not an

inconsequential story, it is a very tight one. So it may be simply to do with the fact that it's about the sort of phlegm with which the woman faced the fact that she had always been condemned to death and would be left to die; it's the Chinese temperament, that's my guess again, so that's not terribly helpful.

J.L.C.: But it's more content than form.

A.S.B.: I hoped it was form, and that's more or less what she said, but I still can't understand it.

J.L.C.: Before we leave the weird, I would like to say that it goes on with your most recent work. "The Chinese Lobster" has to do with forms of mental illness and the fascination of suicide. "Art Work" shows how a couple of artists may be inhabited and, as it were, haunted by their cleaning lady: the art work, which is the secret art work of the cleaning lady, from the moment it is revealed and becomes famous, completely changes their outlook on art — and the lady artist starts writing books — "A Book of Bad Fairies" and "A Book of Good Fairies", the cleaning lady becoming a fairy and/or a witch in spite of herself. As for "The Conjugal Angel", it deals with seances, another form of the unusual and the weird, which works beautifully between people who believe in seances and people who do not. One may quote the evocation of a bevy of little girls, and then the evocation of the most important dead man in the whole 19th century, Arthur Henry Hallam. Could you explain why you took up all those different threads about seances and mediums, which appear in your short stories before and after *Possession*?

A.S.B.: My primary impulse with things like seances and mediums is a perfectly pragmatic English empiricist intellectual desire to understand something that appears to me completely irrational and odd, but I have to admit that the desire to communicate with the dead, which at first appears to people with my kind of upbringing as a kind of Victorian crankiness, is, in fact, a much more usual aspect of human nature than 20th century rationalism. It did fit on reading Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and Frazer's *Golden Bough*; and I was particularly struck by Freud quoting Frazer, who said that the recently dead appeared to primitive people as demons — and I can only think of the French word "apprivoisés" — and when they are "apprivoisés", they become respected ancestors, who are even thought of as helpful spirits, but they have to be distanced. And you can see this is a metaphor for mourning, but I think it isn't only that — because culturally in the whole of human society it hasn't been that; things have been so personified or felt to be so immediate, that they have been experienced as forces or beings; and literature in a way is also a way of taming such violent persons or beings, of giving them form. There is a wonderful book by Dr Alex Owen (who is a professor at Harvard, a woman) called, *The Darkened Room*, which is a study of the Victorian medium as a professional woman — it was one of the professions open to women in the 19th century, for all sorts of reasons which I reject, which my kind of feminism doesn't like, because women were "passive" and "receptive" and "irrational" and "able to take in airwaves" and "see the unseen", because they were simply "vessels" which "needed filling up". One doesn't like that, at least I don't like that set of imagery, but again you have to see that it exists, and I think it took me some time to see that my interest in these things was actually turning into a metaphor for fiction, a seance is a fiction. So when I wrote "The Conjugal Angel", which is based on a Swedenborgian seance, which was held by Tennyson's sister, Mrs Jessie, who had been engaged to Arthur Henry Hallam, who had been dead when she held it, for many years, I invented two mediums, and these two mediums were the voices of the writer in me, and I came to need two: there was one woman who was a novelist manquée, who went to seances out of human interest, she wanted to know the stories of the little dead

children and why the other women were grieving, it made her daily life more interesting, because she got closer to real people, which one does, if you're at the point of their terrible grief and anxiety; and the other one, a woman who would have been a poet, if she hadn't been a medium, who saw a very intense, precise image of the nature of things; and she, of course, is the one, who finally does in my story, since it is literature and not spiritualism, see Arthur Henry Hallam — because it's literature. Yes?

J.L.C.: I took the uncanny, for example, in "The Next Room", when you talk about the miners in England as "self-starved deadmen", or something like that, I took it to be a sort of discontinuity of history in the ability to go on — a metaphor for the state of England or something like that.

A.S.B.: There is a little of that. I don't know quite where I got that from. It came in rather by accident.

...What I really wanted, and this is partly a sort of rather small technical problem, I have to find professions for my narrators, which are not always my own. One of the great hazards for any writer is to go on writing about writing and one of the things I could make the heroine of "The Next Room" into, was a job which in fact my present husband had had, which was a kind of economic intelligence researcher. And then I suddenly realised that, in fact, the miners in the North of England do think of themselves as "dead-men in a dead profession" and everything is a ghost town — but I discovered it was an "objet trouvé", that metaphor really. It wasn't the original push behind the story, which was my own mother's story about how she heard my grandmother shouting at my grandfather in the next room...

J.L. C.: But it also means that the woman who runs away from the house where her mother has just died, wants to see the real world, and the real world is represented by a man who says, "I'm dead" — so that she finds herself in the next room long before she is dead.

J.L.C.: We should now make a complete move and turn from the strange to civilisation, or rather to the "civilised". In "Sugar" — a story I shall not discuss because I do not think it is a short story at all — it is either a *récit* or a poem — anyway, in "Sugar" — here I have to say "your father", because it is the one story in which you say, "I am the person who says I in the text" — your father, then, defines his journey to the Rhine, which is to be his last journey as "civilised": "It was civilised", he said with satisfaction of his last painful venture, he described cranes and herons and castles and the moonlit water and his own defeat by a brief climb from the mooring place to the town centre. He was also a good raconteur, not like my mother, deliberate, weighing his words, judicious, telling you some things and holding back others". This means that when he uses the word "civilised", he is not saying something that he does not control. This is confirmed by your own description of the Dutch hospital: "It was a spotless and civilised hospital, full of seriously gentle doctors and nurses, all of whom spoke an English more perfect than might have been found at home. My father disliked his dependence and they made it decorous for him". Later on, you describe what was to be your last conversation with your father, and you say, "During these weeks, during that unaccustomed talking, which despite everything was pleasant and civilised as he meant it to be, he did try to construct a tale, a myth, a satisfactory narrative of his life". What there is to conclude from these occurrences of the word "civilised" in the dramatic context of the last illness of your father — and in a story whose emphasis is laid on truth and respect for truth—is that, when you speak of "civilised" being so important, you are being truthful. It seems that being and acting "civilised" is a kind of saving grace, both in living and in dying. And I may further prove my point by adding that "civilised" is also a saving grace in writing. In "On the Day that E.M. Forster Died", one finds: "Forster, much more than Lawrence, corresponded to Mrs Smith's ideal of the English novel, he wrote civilised comedy about the value of the individual and his responsibilities". Finally, "civilised" is a saving grace in any ordinary human intercourse. In the text quoted from "The Chinese

Lobster" one also finds, "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". Those are not all the instances of "civilised" that I could pick out in your works, but I think they are representative. What do you make of them?

A.S.B.: They cause me temporarily to try and think about myself as I would think about any other writer—what does she mean? It does matter to me increasingly, that word. I know where I found it, when it started to glitter at me, the way words do, when you suddenly realise they now have a meaning for you; I found it in Willa, and Willa Cather also uses it rather obsessively, and she uses it about the settlers in America or in Canada, moving out into land, it's not in opposition to the native people that are found there, but in opposition to nature, really, and building little communities, and she uses it about the archbishop in "For Death Comes the Archbishop", against all odds building a beautiful French church in the middle of the 'pueblo'. And she uses it also most beautifully in "Shadows on the Rock", which is a novel about Quebec, in which, all through the deep winter a French Huguenot émigré family keep alive a pot of parsley, and I she says, "as long as people continue to make civilised food and offer it to each other, human beings will be all right on the surface of the earth". I think I have a very complicated image of the human community holding itself together by decorum, by good manners, by handing each other carefully cooked food, by talking to each other with consideration, by keeping certain rules, and beyond that is violence and terror and the opposite side of human beings, like going through the Gulf and covering it with tanks and pollution and oil and awful things. I did admire my father, because he sat there and he was dying and we both knew he was in pain, and what he was doing was, in a sense, very very artificial: he was making a good death, as I read that the Bretons used always to do, when I put that into *Possession* and into the short story in *Possession*. He was making a good death, and he was talking away about the history of the human times he had lived through, the First War, the Second War, Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, the interesting conversation of the Dutch doctors, who were civilised because they didn't simply come and poke him and go away, they stood and stopped to talk to him about books. It didn't make his death any less awful but it did make us human, and that's what it really means. It was only at lunch today that I realised that it might have been taken to do with the imposition of the power of certain states on others, or Roman civilisation, or colonialism. I don't mean that, I mean civility, I mean good manners, which matters very very deeply.

J.L.C.: Both, civility and civilisation then, I suppose. Is this the reason why there are so many writers as characters in your stories and books? Is it because writers are civilised people?

A.S.B.: No, the reason there are so many writers is because like all writers nowadays, I don't know enough about any other profession.

J.L.C.—I do not believe you, I do not believe you —

A.S.B.—There are all sorts of things I want to know about, but I like writing about people when they are thinking at top speed, and I cannot write about what a captain of industry is thinking at top speed — to save my life — though if I could I would.

J.L.C.—Could we come to the stories within the stories? It is not an infrequent feature of your stories that they themselves include stories. Sometimes we do not read the story which is only alluded to, and sometimes it is there for us to read. In "Morpho-Eugenia" we are given to read Matty's story, called "Things Are Not What They Seem". In *Possession*

there are stories by Christabel LaMotte that come into the text. Do you write those short stories within long stories in a different way from "straight" short stories?

A.S.B.—Yes, I think I do — I think the story within the story always represents a different kind of grip on the world, a different kind of reality, and also it's always of course about a reading experience; it turns the writer into a reader and it turns the reader into a reader of a reading; and it somehow lines the reader up with the writer as the reader of this text within a text — I think that's what it does. Also one of the things that most moved me as a reader of other people's writing was *The Golden Notebook*, in which Doris Lessing has a novel within a novel, and she says, "I could turn my serious novel" — this is a paraphrase, it's not what she says — but she says, "I could turn my serious novel into a banal romance by taking out about 10% of my vocabulary." I like writing something constructed on a different principle of vocabulary into one text from another text, I like writing the narrative expectations of a fairy story into a realist short story for instance. I hadn't expected to write a Victorian fairy story into my Darwinian fable. It all grew out of my observations that a particular kind of caterpillar was a walking metaphor, and then I did some etymological research on its name and discovered that it was about six metaphors and then the story couldn't help being written.

J.L.C.—Shall I ask you about titles now? It is known, because you mentioned it several times, that *Possession* is the only one of your novels whose title imposed itself on you before it was written or even started. And in *Possession* there is an instance of poetic inspiration, when Roland, towards the end of his adventure, collects lists of words and starts using them and giving them titles: "Tonight, he began to think of words, words came from some well in him, lists of words that arranged themselves into poems. " The Death Mask", "The Fairfax Wall", " A Number of Cats"... He added another, "Cats' Cradle"... Tomorrow he would buy a new notebook and write them down. Tonight he would write down enough, the mnemonics". Granted that a short story is neither a novel nor a poem, is there a habit or a system of inspiration as far as titles are concerned when you are writing short stories? And what should a good title be?

A.S.B.—I think a short story in my mind is much closer to a poem than a novel is, and since it has fewer words, the title is a much more integral and less accidental part of the whole text, and if I've got the title, even the provisional title, wrong, the style of the story starts slipping sideways. I thought of a story in the train, as I was coming here. We were talking about the awfulness of deciding that your dog has to die, and I was thinking you could write a story about somebody preoccupied with some quite other death, who has to make this decision, and then I thought of about eight titles. I thought of, you know, "Dog's Day" and "A Short Life" and neither of those was right, and then I thought of "Death of a Dog", but you can see that defines it wrongly. When you've got anything as small as that, where the form has to be imposed from the beginning, you can't find it by starting writing, because there isn't room in this short story to find it. If you get the wrong note in the title, you're lost, so I have to find them early, whereas a novel can wander along with several possible titles, and quite often has been published under a title that had nothing to do with the running title that it was being written under. *The Virgin in the Garden* was called *A Fugitive Virtue* until it went to press, and then I thought, "No, no, it's really called *The Virgin in the Garden*" which was a title I had found out of all of those words, but you can't do that with a short story, it is a different animal.

J.L. C.—Exactly! This is the reason why I would like you to explain why "The Chinese Lobster" was called "The Chinese Lobster". I have my own interpretation, but I would like to

have yours, because is not mainly, primarily, focally, about a Chinese lobster, as you might say that "The Changeling" is about a changeling, "The July Ghost" is about a ghost in July, "Rose-Coloured Teacups" is about rose coloured teacups, and even "Medusa's Ankles" is about the ankles of a lady who sees herself as a Medusa. But as a title, "The Chinese Lobster" is, in my opinion, *une fausse piste*. Why did you choose it? It is the only one of your stories which has a *fausse piste* title. Are you aware that it is so? Did you do it on purpose? Why did you do it?

A.S.B.—One of the obvious reasons why I did it is to do with Beckett, because there is "Dante and the Lobster", which I think is one of the greatest short stories. It's one of the greatest short stories of all time in my view, and the last two sentences about the lobster being put in the pot to be boiled, are: "It is a short death. It is not." And there is a kind of resonance between these two perfectly true observations and the whole thing that goes with it. The other reason it's called "The Chinese Lobster" is because the lobster existed exactly as it is described in exactly that restaurant and it was about to be turned into a Chinese lobster dish, and, beyond that, it rather pleased me because of all Matisse's oriental images, which are in fact very western, and all those cheese plants going up the windows of the restaurant, which no longer exists, always reminded me of Matisse, but they were terribly Chinese cheese plants and they were stuck, and the little Chinese idol which also exactly existed in exactly the colours as I described it. Matisse might well have painted, if he could have seen it, because he would have liked those, that balance of colours, but it remained resolutely a Chinese... god.

J.L.C.—I'm sorry to differ, but you are discussing this title as if it were not a *fausse piste*.

A.S.B.—Perhaps it is not a *fausse piste* (laughter). It's a kind of dissonance and the story's about a kind of dissonance. And it isn't the same lobster because the lobster is death...

J.L.C.—Yes, I agree.

A.S.B.—But I did see it and it wasn't dead when I saw it. That was the horror of it.

J.L.C.—It seems to me that the slowly dying lobster is a sorry animal in itself, but it is also a symbolical representation of Peggi Nollett with the two teachers, the two crabs on both sides. But if one accepts this symbolical representation, that the lobster is Peggi and the two crabs are the old fogeys, Gerda and Perry...

A.S.B.—Oh, no, no! It isn't the case at all, there simply were two crab –

J.L.C.—...then she is, in that structure, the central character, – which she is not!

A.S.B.—She isn't, and in fact... I... and she didn't... and... oh dear!

J.L.C.—This is exactly what I mean, it is a foil.

A.S.B.—The trouble with being the author is that you can always tell the generation of the story, which is a cheaty way of getting out of commenting on what is now before you. The truth is, there *were* two crabs.

J.L.C.—Never doubted for one moment that there were two crabs. If there are not two crabs, there is no symbol.

A.S.B.—And the story existed in my head for quite a long time without Peggi Nollet, because the actual conversation was about Ruskin, not about Peggi Nollet.

J.L.C.—...Who became Matisse...

A.S.B.—Yes, and people become totally different from each other, but it isn't about Peggi Nollet, and I think that Peggi Nollet arrived in the story rather late. I mean the depth of the story is about that passage you read out, about two people talking about one thing and both realising that what is going on in their head is quite another thing,

and, as it were, courteously or in a civilised way, acknowledging this. There were two sentences, which were spoken by the man in the restaurant, one of which was the sentence about: “Yes, it seems perfectly clear, when you get round to committing suicide, that this is what it is to do with and it's nothing to do with the feelings people think you have, when you get round to committing suicide, if they're not trying to commit suicide”. And the other one was truly said by somebody looking at that unfortunate lobster as he left the restaurant “I find that absolutely terrible, and I don't give a damn”.

J.L.C.—Exactly, which shows it not to be a *fausse piste*, but one has to come to the very last sentence.

A.S.B.—I meant that it wasn't a *fausse piste*.

“Any two people...” [reading]

J.L. C.—When you choose a title for a short story, what do you have in mind? Do you want to help the reader find a real clue to the story, do you want him to get a good start at the beginning, or do you try to satisfy yourself, your instinct?

A.S.B.—I think most of the titles are somehow, as it were, the metaphor in the story.

J.L.C.—I could give them to you.

There are titles quoting from the text. “The Next Room”, “Loss of Face”, “In the Air”, are phrases in the text, aren't they?

Then there is one instance of a title which is a quotation from a poem quoted in the text — “Precipice-Encurled” — which becomes entirely understandable only when it is quoted. There are also titles focusing on central occurrences — “On the Day that E.M. Forster Died”, “Racine and the Tablecloth”. Or else they focus on the central objet — “Rose-Coloured Teacups”, “Art Work” — or on the central character — “The Changeling”, “The July Ghost”, “The Dried Witch” — or on a particular feature of the central character — “Medusa's Ankles” — but Medusa is not a character in the story, she is a metaphor for the central character.

And there is “The Chinese Lobster”, who is not the central character, but again a metaphor.

That doesn't quite answer my question. My question is: Do you do it to satisfy yourself, or with an idea that somebody is going to read it and maybe make something of it before reading the story?

A.S.B.—I do it partly to tempt the reader. In so far as it has any relation to the reader, it's terribly important. That a title of a short story shouldn't look like the title of another short story, which is why none of my dog titles will actually do, and I think I try very hard to avoid rather delicate, fading kind of titles that don't attract you in, because I have noticed this sounds banal. But it does matter. If you ruffle through a book of short stories you actually read the one that you like the title of first, which means it's like looking at a lyric and seeing if the shape of it pleases you. Beyond that, I do it in order to get some kind of image for myself, that I, as a writer, think that I might form as a reader, if I saw that title. You know, it has to look interesting as though somebody's thinking, as though you don't quite know what it is. I think it's more important that you should look as though you don't know what it is, that it should look as though you know exactly where it's going. It struck me when Jean-Louis Chevalier read out “Racine and the Tablecloth” — that that actually goes with “The Chinese Lobster”, because it's got the rhythm of the Beckett story, again, “Dante and the Lobster”: “Racine and the Tablecloth”, and it's a kind of another homage to the impossibility of writing short stories as good as that one — ever. And “On the Day that E.M. Forster Died” reminds me of the text which French people wouldn't be able to pick up because there's no equivalent French Bible to the English Bible, but it's the vision of

Isaiah, “On the day that King Uzziah died, saw I the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple”. And I want the rhythm of that to sort of get a kind of rather large image of things, or echo, in people's minds. I mean titles obviously do matter with novels, but novels are such substantial objects that you can give them quite banal titles and they will survive them. I think a short story can be sunk by... you know you can never call one “A Clear Morning”, even if it was exactly the right title, or one can no longer ever call a short story “Happiness”, although Katherine Mansfield once called one “Bliss”, but you couldn't do it again, or you shouldn't, I think, do it again.

J.L.C. – You were talking about the reader, how much do you think of the reader when you write – and do you?

A.S.B.—Jean Louis Chevalier read out a quotation from me about how there were writers who never thought about readers — I think this must change over a lifetime. When I began to write I had a sort of despairing sense that there wasn't a reader, and I set up one. One appears indeed in “Racine and the Tablecloth”, a kind of hypothesised ideal reader, who is known as “the reader”, who will read the exam papers and understand every word you have written. My image of that person was somebody rather like Henry James — I used to write novels because I thought Henry James saw what I was trying to do—

J.L.C.—I am sorry, but your Reader with a capital R, who was like James, is an invention of a character in the story, he is not the actual reader of the story.

A.S.B.—No, no, but he did exist. No, no, it isn't to do with the reader of the story, but the reader of the story I don't know...

J.L.C.—But you speak to him in “Racine and the Tablecloth”.

A.S.B.—To the reader?

J.L.C.—You tell him: “You might suppose that grown-ups...” — “You also almost certainly know that...” — You can believe, I hope you can afford to believe that...— etc.

A.S.B.—It's very interesting to have a second person in the stories, because I don't believe any single reader has ever identified himself or herself with that “you”. I don't know if any of you do, but if I see a sentence saying “you might believe”, I identify myself with the speaker, not with the hearer, you know, it's a kind of — I can't think of the right word—but it's a kind of falseness in it, always. It's like John Fowles's endless interpretations telling me what to think. You don't identify with the person who's being told, — but I do now have a strong sense of real reader, simply because, as you get older, you get more and more real responses to your texts, with which you have to deal, real people talk to you about the way they've read them, and this changes the way you feel about them, it just does. I used to think it wouldn't at all, but it does, one should be honest.

J.L.C.—So you said at the beginning that you took up writing short stories quite late. Could you tell us if novel writing and short story writing are related for you in some way?

A.S.B.—I took to writing short stories for the reasons given by the lady in “On the Day that E.M. Forster Died”, and I suddenly realised that there were more and more and more things in the world that I noticed, and that I haven't got enough life to write already the novels I have thought of, without any more novels. 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. And when I was in my

twenties, if I looked at anything and suddenly — you know, if you are a writer, even a potential writer you look at something, you think: “That's for me”, and the next thing, is just something you happened to have seen — I was driving through Texas with two Texan ladies, one of them suddenly told me the story of a friend of hers, who had had a ranch in Montana, and had had to come back to Texas, and had a whole sitting-room full of paintings of the skyline in Montana, the whole of the house was simply full of paintings with no people, just the sky in Montana — and I thought, that's for me, that's all I know about that at the moment, but it's for me, I can do something with it. But when I was twenty, anything like that, I would wait till it fitted into the shape of a big novel. Now I start making it into a thing much more like a poem, which is a story, and it can have people attached to it, who don't have to have immensely complex characters or histories. It's for the image — And I think I shall write a story about the lady in the room with this wonderful Texan skyline, surrounded by images of Montana, because it's so terribly moving, but I haven't yet worked out quite why it belongs to me, I just know it does. — Or the dog... — I don't actually want the dog in a novel, I should try and keep him out of a novel, he can stay small.

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ABSTRACTS

A.S. Byatt était l'invitée d'honneur du colloque. Les participants ont pu apprécier la double qualité d'A.S. Byatt : en effet, elle a su apporter sa sensibilité d'écrivain, ainsi que son expérience d'universitaire et de critique littéraire.

Écrivain, elle a publié romans et nouvelles: *Shadow of a Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Sugar and other Stories* (1985), *Possession* (1990), qui lui a valu le Booker Prize et le prix Irish Times/Aer Lingus, *Angels and Insect* (1992) et, tout récemment, *The Matisse Stories* (1994) dont elle a lu des extraits de la nouvelle intitulée “The Chinese Lobster”.

Universitaire et critique littéraire, elle a publié plusieurs ouvrages critiques: *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Time* (1970) et *Passions of the Mind* (1991).

Evoquant sa jeunesse dans *Passions of the Mind*, elle lie écriture et lecture dans une dialectique de désir et de plaisir: “Greedy reading made me want to write, as if this was the only adequate response to the pleasure and power of books. Writing made me want to read.”

Les questions de cet entretien sont posées par Jean-Louis Chevalier, professeur à l'université de Caen, traducteur du roman *Possession* et de plusieurs nouvelles de A.S. Byatt.

L. Lepaludier