

## *Velázquez as icon in A.S. Byatt's "Christ in the house of Martha and Mary"*

Celia M. WALLHEAD  
Universidad de Granada

### ABSTRACT

The figure of Velázquez informs the protagonist of A.S. Byatt's short story, "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" in her recent (1998) collection, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*. In what are now frequent examples of ekphrasis or pictorial intertextuality in her work, this use of Velázquez performs various functions. Byatt uses both visual and verbal metaphors and icons to comment on artistic creativity. Here, the painter's gaze, the look of the creative artist and the nature of the object of the look are examined through the subversion of socially accepted binary opposites such as man/woman, rich/poor, powerful/powerless, hot/cold, etc. Velázquez is a particularly apt icon for a story about creativity both in the ontological emphasis of his paintings and in his authoritative person, his approach and techniques: slow looking, decentring of major figures and foregrounding of marginalised ones, consummate skill. In the painting in question, the cook becomes the main focus of attention, and Byatt shows how all art has its origin in vision, energy and skill.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: A.S. BYATT AND THE SHORT STORY GENRE

A. S. Byatt is known as a writer of extensive, complex novels, like *Possession* (1990), but she has always written short stories too, having four collections to her credit (*Sugar and Other Stories*, 1987, *Angels and Insects*, 1992, *The Matisse Stories*, 1993, and *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, 1994), and also literary criticism, as editor and commentator of numerous texts. Chosen to edit *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998), she had the opportunity to set out her ideas on short fiction



*Christ in the house of Martha and Mary (Velázquez).*

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in the Introduction. There, she expressed her lack of conviction over certain types of story:

I found, reading in bulk, that I was developing a dislike for both the 'well-made tale' and the fleeting 'impression'. Manuals on how to write short stories, and much criticism, stress unity of form, stress that only one thing should happen, that an episode or incident should be developed, or an emotion caught, with no space for digression, or change of direction or tone [...]

The workmanlike English story is bland [...] even-toned and neatly constructed. (xvi)

These seemingly "perfect" stories, of the generations of Kipling and Wells, Coppard, Bates and Pritchett, in general, leave Byatt cold, for being admirable but uninspiring. For the Oxford collection, she was able to find stories that were, perhaps, less perfect than these, but that were "shocking", or could be, as she said earlier in the Introduction, "startling and satisfying, and if possible make the hairs on the neck prickle with excitement, aesthetic or narrative." (xv-xvi) She has a penchant for stories that transgress these rules of unity of tone and narrative, that do not fulfill the reader's expectations in the conventional way, but offer other, more satisfying, solutions. For Byatt, the stories should not be too transparent, the reader should not be able to see ahead of the writer in terms of the pretended conclusion or effect. Alternatively, the reader should have to work at the ideas thrown up by the story to see what the real theme is.

A hallmark of all Byatt's writing is the search for, or presentation of, connections. In *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories*, she has chosen thirty-seven stories that are united by themes and motifs, either through "threads of connection" (xvii), or through contrast of them, which is a form of connection using opposites. In addition to motifs that recur or coincide in the content, there are repeated examples of different varieties of approach, technique or theme: social realism, but also tales of the supernatural and surreal fantasy; a mixture of settings; menace, and discussions of sensibility and insensibility in various situations. There are two other aspects to the English short story which she chose to comment on in the Introduction: one is Henry James's "solidity of specification" (xviii), which she calls "the thinginess of things" (xix), or the "dwelling on the concrete" (xx). This form of metonymy is particularly useful in the creation of humor by English authors, in such situations as the juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous. But, when necessary, it also focuses the reader's attention, and grounds a situation in the real. The second aspect which strikes her, and which complements "things", is action or activity. As she put it: "I like stories in which energy overcomes inhibitions" (xxiv). The languid, entropic tale is not to her taste.

## 2. BYATT'S *ELEMENTALS*: *STORIES OF FIRE AND ICE*

In her latest collection of short stories, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), we can see all of these factors at work in her own fiction. There is a mixture of settings within and across tales, with not only a north/south axis corresponding to ice/fire, cold/hot, but also a globalising west/east axis with stories from England to one located in the Far East. There are threads of connection relating the binary pairs of fire/ice and their paradigms from the specific to the abstract, like curiosity/indifference, or man/woman, to the theme of artistic and literary creativity. There is social realism, yet also the supernatural, in some stories, like that of the eponymic lamia in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" or that of the princess in "Cold". There is great menace, as when the "baglady" of the title of one story finds herself outside her milieu of the English countryside and unable to cope. And there is, as always, sensibility and insensibility to art, either visual or verbal, and its possible consequences. The stories are about specific things, like a jade egg or an embroidered cushion-cover, like cloves of garlic; and they are, most of all, about energy, male and female. In this paper, I shall concentrate on these last two aspects: "things" and energy, and especially in relation to some of the female characters.

## 3. ARTISTIC CREATIVITY AND THE VISUAL ICON IN BYATT'S WORK

Byatt's fiction, long and short, is replete with metaphors for creativity, whether it is verbal, literary creativity, or the visual, artistic kind. Indeed, the latter, visual creativity, through specific artists and painters, has previously been used by Byatt to explore verbal creativity. Van Gogh, his problems and his techniques, was used in *Still Life*, and Matisse, both painter and author of his paintings, figures prominently in the exploration in all three tales of *The Matisse Stories*. In the latter collection, Byatt employs this ekphrasis or visual intertextuality to work at the interface between the visual and the verbal in language (Wallhead 1996). Byatt may have been influenced in the use of specific paintings in novels by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch had exploited the visual intertextuality of a Gainsborough in *The Bell* (1958), and of a Tintoretto portrait of the biblical figure Susannah in *An Unofficial Rose* (1962). Byatt herself recognised the effect of the use of the visual icon as authoritative and a source of power and value in the text (1976: 22).

In *Elementals*, there are several creative artists, from the (male) painter in "A Lamia in the Cévennes", the (male) ice sculptor in "Cold", through the (female) director of television commercials in "Jael", to Velázquez in the last

tale "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". Also, certain visual works are placed iconically at the head of the story, as in *The Matisse Stories*: significantly, a Matisse drawing, "Sirène" (1948), at the beginning of the lamia story; a school of Rembrandt sketch of "Jael and Sisera" in the "Jael" story; and a detail from the Velázquez painting which gives the last story its title: "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". This story first appeared in *You* magazine, *Mail on Sunday*, and on the BBC Radio 3 program *Word Pictures*. This is hardly surprising, given that it attempts to translate the visual into the purely verbal, a medium which does not always need the support of any visuals. It is not the first time Byatt has shown an interest in the subject of Martha and Mary and the paradigms the context suggests. In *Possession*, the poetess Christabel and her friend Blanche Glover had tried to live a life independent of men—Martha and Mary without Lazarus or Christ—at their house called "Bethany" (344). Christabel was devoted to Christ, her namesake, but rejected the body/soul dichotomy in either a man/woman or a woman/woman framework, for which she can be seen as a precursor of "Velázquez" in the story.

All of Byatt's work is about creativity, and in *Elementals*, not for the first time does she use the concept of the "four elements" to discuss it (Wallhead 1999: chapter IV). Of the four: earth, fire, water and air, it is fire, with its energy, that is most representative of creativity. The element of fire underlies several basic, ontological metaphors in the western world-view and in western literature. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) identify metaphors which are commonly accepted and used for dealing with aspects of our lives which we cannot comprehend totally and objectively, like feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices and spiritual awareness (193). They offer examples in literature of metaphors like LIFE IS FIRE/HEAT/LIGHT, PASSIONATE IS HOT and their opposites: DEATH IS DARKNESS/NIGHT/ WINTER and DISPASSIONATE IS COLD. In *Elementals*, Byatt plays with all the ramifications of these metaphors to discuss the lives, life work, and sometimes loves, of certain creative writer characters. A detail from Edvard Munch's painting "Red and White", functions iconically on the front cover. The fair, nordic woman dressed in white stands with her back to a dark-skinned, dark-haired woman in red, suggesting the diametric opposition of red and white, dark and fair, south and north, fire and ice.

#### 4. QUESTIONING THE BINARY OPPOSITES

Quoting Byatt at the beginning, as she voiced her opinions of short story theory in the Introduction to the Oxford collection, I stressed her interest in

the startling tale, the one with an unpredictable ending. Quite often, in her own stories, Byatt achieves this "surprise element" by subverting the accepted norm. In *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, she has her narrators or characters question the binary opposition between such as fire/ice, hot/cold, man/woman, etc. Here I will confine myself to just one example, albeit a complex one: the questioning of how artistic creativity is achieved by focusing on the beliefs and methods of a specific artist, in this case, the "Velázquez" of the last tale (*Elementals*: 219-230). The painter's gaze, the look of the creative artist and the nature of the object of the look are questioned with subtle variations in "A Lamia in the Cévennes", "Cold", and "Jael", but particularly in "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". The ideas suggested in *The Matisse Stories* concerning creativity in general and the common ground between visual and verbal inspiration, between male and female models, are all taken further in this story. If I place Velázquez in inverted commas, it is because he is not actually named in the story, unlike Van Gogh and Matisse elsewhere. He is "the painter" or "the young artist", since he is a fictional character in a story, but he is a version of Velázquez, for the reader knows that he fills the space of the real Velázquez, in that he is the painter of the picture in question. Also implicitly, if we follow the Martha/Mary paradigm to its conclusions, we find that, in his authority and wisdom, he is a sort of Christ figure. For if the young cook, Dolores, and Concepción, the older servant, correspond together to Martha, and the young mistress of the house, Doña Conchita, to Mary, then the young painter corresponds to the male visitor in the house, Christ (rather than the brother, Lazarus). Furthermore, although it is a story about painting, it is also about wisdom and knowing, as it questions the active/passive, power/powerlessness binary oppositions in relation to life and work, and the role one is called upon to play.

The young painter "preaches" to Dolores about the merits of doing one's work well. He teaches about how to look with intelligence, patience, curiosity, and loyalty. After the looking, there comes the work itself, carried out with knowledge, energy, interest, dedication, and again, loyalty. He covers the other aspects of work and art, such as the purposes of the fruits of one's activity, the consumers to whom it is destined, the problem of repetition and boredom, the man/woman paradigm within the concept of work, and the question of the repositories of culture in general.

## 5. VELÁZQUEZ AS ICON: INTERTEXTUALITY UNLEASHED

Velázquez is a particularly apt icon for stories about creativity, not only through paintings like "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary", but also in his person, and his particular approach and techniques. The different facets

of his work reflect paradigmatically upon the act of creation in the literary context: his life-like painting suggests loyalty, to subject and to principles; his slow looking implies that a writer has to "see" fully before he or she can convert ideas into words; his famous decentring of major figures, as in this particular painting, corresponds to a writer's foregrounding of figures which are, or have been, normally marginalised 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. Finally, his painterliness, his focus on the act of composition or execution, as seen when he includes himself as the creating artist in "Las Meninas" ("The Maids of Honour"), set in the studio, the locus of creativity, for example, is a forerunner of self-conscious or self-reflexive art, found in the novel from Sterne onwards, but particularly popular in contemporary literature. The painterliness places the emphasis upon activity and development rather than on an effortless finished product, and therefore introduces the subject of dynamism and the roles of energy and entropy.

As the reader recognises the figure of Velázquez in "the young artist" of the story, the narrative provides the human subject with a fully-fleshed, historically rich chronotope, or specific deixis, which is the necessary prerequisite for the subject's meaningful intervention in the text and, indeed, the world as projected in the text. While "the young artist" is identifiable as Velázquez, he is at one and the same time both him and *not* him. In the sense that the character *is* Velázquez for us, we can endow him with all the qualities and attributes that we may know the real Velázquez to have possessed, even those not mentioned in the text. The schema conjured up in our minds by the concept "Velázquez" includes all the details known to us in the paradigm. As with all texts which depend upon an intertext, the richness of the reader's reading of them is proportional to the richness of his or her knowledge of the intertext. Thus, for those readers acquainted with Velázquez and his work, there are many nuances that may be added to the subject that the writer, in this case, Byatt, can only partially control in her readers.

Velázquez has been in the limelight recently, since the year 2000 saw the fourth centenary of his birth in Seville being celebrated. Also, several works on his art date from 1960, which was the third centenary of his death. There are several well-known aspects of his character and approach that give authority to the figure and add significance to the themes of the story. Among them figure his remarkable power of observation in portraying both the living model and the still life. Also, the fact that, as he matured, he moved from being a master of faithful likeness, to a master of visual impression unique in his time. His perception as he looked, and his mastery of the materials and tools of his craft, also his creativity in his invention of the composition of the objects of his gaze, enabled him to achieve effects of form and texture, space, light

and atmosphere, through a brilliant diversity of brushstrokes and subtle harmonies of subdued color. All these aspects have their counterparts in the field of literary creativity: they correlate with narrative technique and point of view, choice of theme, strategies of development of its ramifications, combination of elements and control of powers of association. In Van Gogh and Velázquez, Byatt has picked on artists who broke the mold and were precursors —Velázquez being an early precursor of nineteenth-century Impressionism— and thus she hints at literary avant-gardism.

Most of what we know about Velázquez comes from accounts by his master, Francisco Pacheco, most famous for his *Arte de Pintura* (*The Art of Painting*, 1649). Pacheco tells us that he worked notoriously slowly and painstakingly. For his virtue, integrity and great talent, Pacheco married him to his own daughter at round about the same time (aged 19) that he figures in our story, painting "Christ in the House...". The latent eroticism in the story and its suppression by "the young artist" as he controls the painter's gaze through slit eyes (228) in order not to arouse the burgeoning sexuality of its object, Dolores, is complicated by this knowledge. We should not forget, however, that it was the custom in the past for a master painter to marry his most promising apprentice to his daughter, in order, among other things, to protect professional secrets.

Apropos of what Pacheco has to say about Velázquez, certain qualities and strategies emerge that crystallize in our story as pivotal internal components of the discussion of the major theme of creativity. Pacheco affirmed that his pupil worked from life, making numerous studies of his model in various poses, thus gaining certainty in his portraiture. He was engaged in a lifelong pursuit of the truthful rendering of visual appearance. In this sense, Velázquez, or "the young artist" is both authentic and loyal and embroiled with life itself, in all its specificity and "thinginess", as his techniques for attaining what he deemed "truthfulness" matured. Furthermore, his early illusionistic style, closely resembling the technique of dramatic lighting called tenebrism, introduced by Caravaggio, depended upon sharp contrasts of light and shade, a concept which ties in with the light/dark, fire/ice polarities of our story.

The painting in the story, "Christ in the House..." dates from about 1618, and is at present housed in the National Gallery, London. Its brilliant contrasts of dark background and illuminated objects, "things" like eggs, in the foreground, along with the domestic subject itself, lead experts to believe it was contemporary with "Old Woman Frying Eggs", which is now in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. These paintings from the south, dating from the Seville period, have moved north, a fact which no doubt would have surprised Velázquez, and which goes to show that a creative artist ultimately has little control over the consumers of his or her art.

His early painting took as its subjects religious scenes or genre scenes of daily life. Only later, in his middle years, and as court painter to Philip IV, did his focal subjects become more noble. Thus, while still in Seville, he popularised the *bodegón*, a new type of composition in Spanish painting, where a kitchen scene features a prominent still life. In the same way as Byatt's story takes the marginal characters, the servants, and makes them central, in such *bodegones*, Velázquez fashioned the work around the ordinary characters, with the religious or mythical scene relegated to the background. Even in his later, most mature work, the apparently principal subject can be found almost insignificantly included in one corner as an afterthought. This is the case of "Las Hilanderas" ("The Spinners"), a genre scene in a tapestry factory, where the mythological subject it simultaneously represents—the Greek fable of the spinning contest between Pallas Athena and Arachne—is found in the background. This is worth mentioning, since spinning and weaving are a favourite metaphor of Byatt's for creativity. Also, Velázquez's painterliness here suggests that there is no barrier between the world of myth and reality. They are united in an ingenious composition by formal and aerial perspective, feeding each other in a common activity. Even as he painted the goddess Venus, in the so-called "Rokeby Venus", he made no attempt to disguise or idealise his model, so this Venus is exceptional for its time as a lifelike portrayal of a living nude woman. Through her story, Byatt takes us back to the real life behind the "myth" of Velázquez, albeit offering us just one of any number of possible versions. As Charles May pointed out in his "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction": "whereas the novel is primarily a social and public form, the short story is mythic and spiritual." (reprinted in May 1994: 133).

Later in Velázquez's life, he had to produce paintings to order, quite often for the king, so what "the young artist" has to say in the story about the final destination of the fruits of one's efforts is also illuminated by this knowledge. Finally, it appears that Velázquez just left off painting, like Van Gogh (through his suicide), or Michaelangelo (the reason is unknown). He did not sink into mediocre, even infantile, painting, like Picasso or Dalí. For him art was too lofty to betray, so he knew when to stop, and thus remained loyal to his own high standards.

## 6. WISDOM AS REVELATION IN "CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA AND MARY"

For Charles May, the short story "tends towards the universal, having an affinity for the formalistic, the epitome, the essential truth or idea or image that rises above time." (1994: xxiii). Following on from May's—and C. S. Lewis's—idea that the defining nature of the short story is the "state or

quality" that resists, or rises above, narrative temporality (1994, xix), Rachel Falconer suggests that there is an expectation in the short story that knowledge should be received as revelation rather than experience (1999: 452). Certainly, in this story, the short extension —a bare twelve pages— require that the wisdom be revealed, and in condensed form, by the wise figure, "Velázquez", rather than have the innocent young naive character, Dolores, gradually acquire the knowledge through her own observation in her life's experience. Furthermore, from what we know of Velázquez, a master painter at nineteen, his wisdom was probably not acquired by experience in these short years, but contains elements of the intuitive or the revealed, sacred knowledge. Thus, as the story moves to its close, the character of Dolores, along with the reader, moves towards wisdom. But it is not a move from wonder to wisdom, as in early short story closural techniques (Lohafer in May 1994: 308), but a move from a naive world view to a sceptical one. With his subversive advice, "Velázquez" questions active/passive paradigms. He does this not only in relation to gender: male/female activity, but in relation to class, those of servant/served, in a new paradigm of productive/unproductive, interested/ bored, that rises above gender and class.

The ways in which Byatt achieves this questioning through a new look at Christ's wisdom and a new interpretation of it, deserve serious consideration. The explanations given by "the painter" to the young cook who is modelling for him render palpable his choices in different situations. These choices have resulted in the superlative quality of his finished products, his growing fame, and his positive attitude towards work and life. It is the positive attitude that he wishes to convey to Dolores, since he recognizes in her work as cook such quality as to make her a worthy recipient of his advice. It is like sacred wisdom being passed on from one of the initiated to a chosen one, and the wisdom is startling in its lack of logic within the contextual framework.

As we scrutinize the characterization of the female protagonist, we see that, with her "red face", Dolores is representative of fire and anger. She is viewed mostly through the eyes, not of the artist himself, but of the older servant, Concepción. But occasionally, the narration tends towards the omniscient, as in the epigrammatic opening line: "Cooks are notoriously irascible." (219) In addition to the simplistic correlation of "cook" and "fire", the particularization of the fire and anger in this case is gradually revealed. We see that part of the problem is dissatisfaction with her own image: "God had made her heavy, and she hated him for it." (220) Although she is heavy, she is not slow, and her anger expresses itself in energy in her work. The description of her frenzied but highly professional activity is seen in terms of light and dark, as "Velázquez" was to portray it. In the painting, these activities are not seen, but Byatt, in her "alternative" possible version of how the picture came to be painted, shows how the real Velázquez painted a figure *capable* of this work:

She never spoke to him, but worked away in a kind of fury in his presence, grinding the garlic in the mortar, filleting the fish with concentrated skill, slapping dough, making a tattoo of sounds with the chopper, like hailstones, reducing onions to fine specks of translucent light. She felt herself to be a heavy space of unregarded darkness, a weight of miserable shadow in the corners of the room he was abstractly recording. (220-1)

Then "the painter" speaks and belies this marginalization or lack of consideration to which she is so accustomed. He assures her that she is also a "true artist", and the counterpart of his skill with his brushstrokes, control of light and dark, and harmony of color, are "her good nose for herbs", "her tact with sugar and spice", and her "command of sweet and sour, rich and delicate" (223). Thus she learns the importance of doing something well, and is gratified that someone she looks up to has recognized her talents and skill. There is a certain irony in that she reveres him not only for his painting, but because she naturally equates him with the nobility, while all his life, the real Velázquez struggled to try to prove noble blood (only after his death did the king order the red cross of Santiago to be painted on his breast in the self-portrait in "Las Meninas"). Dolores is emboldened to complain to the painter that while his work is revered and kept in a special place where it can be at once viewed and preserved, her dishes are demolished and mangled, or worse, unappreciated, and returned to the kitchen untouched (223). The painter replies with his second piece of wisdom: it is sufficient in itself if work is good, regardless of whether the consumer agrees or not:

What matters is not that silly girls push her work about their plates with a fork, but that the work is good, that she understands what the wise understand, the nature of garlic and onions, butter and oil, eggs and fish, peppers, aubergines, pumpkins and corn. The cook, as much as the painter, looks into the essence of the 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. (225)

This does not mollify Dolores, it is cold consolation, and she proceeds to complain that her mistress, Doña Conchita, and her guests, disdain her work, and hence, her person. She feels the world to be unjust, as she knows that she is more useful to society and therefore more worthy than Doña Conchita. The painter develops his advice into a less obvious piece of wisdom, and that is that it is a privilege to be a worker, and to be interested in life, not bored by it. She must learn to recognize and appreciate this privilege: "the true crime is not to be interested in it." (226)

Thus interest/boredom is a ramification of the energy/entropy or fire/ice paradigms. Dolores learns that her anger has power, and her skills give her power too. She is also given dignity by the painter, since "he talked to the girl

as though she were a colleague, a partner in the mystery of his trade." (228) The story leads us to conjecture whether the artist already had his overt subject—Martha and Mary—or whether it was not by talking to the young cook and contemplating her righteous anger, that the paradigm of Martha/Mary, active/passive, energetic/contemplative, came to him: "Your frown is a powerful force in itself. I have an idea for a painting of Christ in the house of Martha and Mary." (227) As he explains the story to her, he distorts Christ's message, which is that everyone has his or her role in life, and that Mary must be left to contemplate abstractions. Dolores's reaction to Christ's defence of Mary is not very devout: "There speaks a man, for certain." (224) "Velázquez" questions the traditional binary opposites of the active Martha and the contemplative Mary, since he has insisted upon patient looking and intelligent contemplation before attempting any artistic—even culinary—activity. He "interprets" the Scripture for Dolores:

'The Church teaches that Mary is the contemplative life, which is higher than Martha's way, which is the active way. But any painter must question, which is which? And a cook also contemplates mysteries.' (226-7)

He insists that the active way is not inferior. Byatt has "Velázquez" quote St Luke directly, since the evangelist puts into the mouth of Christ the phrase "that good part", which gives rise to the paradigm good/bad in relation to one's role in life (224). To the naive Dolores's mind, the "good part" is not having to serve. What most angers and frustrates her is the lack of consultation or choice in this world, her powerlessness when it comes to obtaining privilege (224-5). In her ignorance, Dolores thinks the socially privileged have somehow chosen their role in life rather than been born to it. The painter's advice is not to accept her lot with as much resignation and grace as possible, but to pause to think, so that she will see that the lot of the servant is not necessarily related to a total lack of privilege. Apparently logical things in life must be questioned. The other servant, Concepción, is a participant in this wisdom-acquiring process. It was she who observed to the reader about the "thinginess" of art, how significance can be conferred on what otherwise belongs to the humdrum and quotidian, whether it be people or objects: "It was silly that oil paint on board should make eggs and fish more real, when they were less so. But it did." (221) What happens with the eggs and fish, also happens with Dolores: great art transforms the prosaicness of the sign into the layered inclusiveness which distinguishes symbol from sign. Hence, just as the "things", the eggs and fish, become a symbol for masterly art (as well as emblems for Christ himself, as "Velázquez" reminds us, 226), so Dolores becomes a symbol for the true artist. She has demonstrated agency by exercising choice and acting upon choices, and this is the source of her power

(at one point she threatens to leave, assured in the knowledge that she will find work elsewhere).

The idea that the young lady of the house, Doña Conchita, should have the "better part" is undermined through the use of metonymy, again using "things". Both the painter and Dolores have noticed how she inclines her neck in such a way that the light will glint on her pearls (222 and 226). But, whereas to Dolores, pearls are superior to eggs, they are not so to "Velázquez". The latter sees and reveals to Dolores that upper-class young ladies like Doña Conchita are seriously limited in their sphere of power and are really divested of choice within the framework in which they live. The pearls are the cold instrument whereby the young lady may or may not attract a rich husband, who may or may not give her the "good part" in life. Though Dolores has to work, she has far greater freedom and personal satisfaction, even control over her life. Her frown becomes symbolic of her naive, frustrated attitude, before she achieves the peace offered by the painter's revelations.

It is the slight frown that is immortalized in the painting, as the essence of her anger and source of her energy. The closure of the story comprises the reactions of the girl to the painting after months of being observed and sketched by the artist. Concepción is fearful for Dolores, as she can see that he had "immortalised her ugliness" (229). As she contemplates the painting, Dolores sees this, but, strengthened by the new wisdom she has been given, is unaffected by it; she is not even disappointed that she has not been made into a sort of goddess of the kitchen. She recognizes the artist's fidelity, loyalty, and wisdom in the execution of the portrait; he has not betrayed her. She merely says: "I see what you saw, how very strange." (230), and then begins to laugh. Her infectious laughter serves two purposes: it transforms her into a beautiful human being, belying her ugliness, albeit momentarily, not permanently, as in fairy stories. It is also enigmatic: we are not told why she laughs, and we have to think back over the whole story to try to detect clues as to why laughter should be her reaction to an ugly portrait of herself. Related as the laughter is to the seeing, it seems bound up in a moment of illumination, if not epiphany. At that moment, she brings together all the strands of wisdom and really understands herself and her allotted role in life. In reviewing her process of maturation, we realize that the laughter is complex; it is not a simple reaction to slapstick, something ugly or funny. It partakes of many elements, such as satisfaction, that the artist has not been hypocritical; joy, at the beauty of the painting in general; and vindication. She sees, on looking at the whole picture, that she has been made into an integral and important part of the entire process. Her food, in real life, has provided him with energy, and he has returned the favor or the compliment by creating an artifact which becomes part of real life, more durable than herself, or real eggs and fishes, and embodying her character, her energy, strength, and usefulness.

Society may relegate her hierarchically to the bottom rung or the remote, dark corner, but here, in great art, the tables are turned. So, in the end, redness, anger, heaviness are all the "better part". LIFE IS FIRE and PASSIONATE IS HOT are seen as good, and DISPASSIONATE IS COLD is seen in all its negativity.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

In this story, Byatt "recuperates" the personal Velázquez "lost" to history, much as she had recuperated a possible version of Tennyson in the novella "The Conjugal Angel" in *Angels and Insects*. She offers a partial, provisional, but plausible account of how one of Velázquez's early masterpieces came to be created. We see how Velázquez did not work in isolation, although in the story we can understand his essential alienation from others, distinguished by his gift and his quiet, solitary, laborious work—an alienation generically peculiar to the short story. We see the almost animal energy that went into the painting's production, and given the parallels in elaboration between painting and cooking, it is appropriate that the sources of energy be recognized, for food creates heat and energy. Food is seen to literally "feed" art; here, art also converts food into an art form. Food belongs to the "thinginess" of real life, but art, as in the *bodegón*, can take it to a higher level and immortalize it, again in real life, but as a picture, with everything transformed. The "things", the models, the craft in all its aspects, fuse in a marvellous combination of human achievement.

Byatt has used words like "brushstrokes" and "harmony of color" not only to trace the parallels between painting and cooking, but to transpose the visual into the verbal. At the same time, she "recuperates" words like those used by the sixteenth-century translators of St Luke: "cumbersome", "careful" (in the sense of "full of care"). The underlying moral, found in all Byatt's work, and also found in this volume in the accompanying story "Jael", upholds the serious nature of art. It argues for "heavy" as opposed to "light" art, with a concern for conserving the great heritage of the past, which is based on slow, intelligent, questioning, illuminated work. "Fast art", like "fast food", is not healthy for either the maker or the consumer of it.

Departamento de Filología Inglesa  
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
Campus de Cartuja  
Universidad de Granada  
18070 GRANADA  
e-mail: wallhead@goliat.ug.es  
fax: 958-243678

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