APPETITE FOR LITERATURE OR A TRIBUTE TO PLEASURE

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Abstract: *The article analyses the culinary journey that John Lancaster presents in his 1996 novel* The Debt to Pleasure. *John Lanchester is a well-known book reviewer and food critic from Great Britain, who surprised the literary world with his 1996 novel disguised as an essay that, in turn, parodies a cookbook, combining the characteristics of the three forms of writing mentioned above.*
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INTRODUCTION

Writers of all times and of various literary genres have used food in their works either through direct descriptions or through metaphors or pretexts that lead to different types of writing. Food has always been a favorite topic, used not only in cookbooks but also in novels, plays, history books or philosophical works. The literary world underwent major changes in 1825, for example, when the Physiology of Taste was published by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, or in 1913, when Marcel Proust entered French literature with his first two volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*. I have chosen John Lanchester's debut novel, *The Debt to Pleasure*, published in 1996, to exemplify the multiple ways in which culinary reflections can be used in a novel that can be read as an essay, a memoir, a travel book or a detective novel.

John Lanchester is a well-known book reviewer and food critic from Great Britain, who surprised the literary world with his 1996 novel disguised as an essay that, in turn, parodies a cookbook, combining the characteristics of the three forms of writing mentioned above.

Tarquin Winot (Rodney), the narrator of this novel, is a hiker on a journey of the senses through France. He tells the story of his life using his main hobby: food. His meditations on the eroticism of repulsion and disgust or on the psychology of the menu start from comparisons such as the one

between vinegar and vermouth and finish with a comparison of cheese as the corpse of milk. Tarquin Winot informs his readers from the very beginning that what they are reading is the diary of a journey through the south of France and includes his reflections on various culinary issues arising from the seasonal menus thought up during the journey. He is a middle-aged man, gourmand "with an artist's ambition, ruthlessness and greed for recognition" (Banville 2015), but also serial killer.

As Brillat-Savarin delighted his readers with "a candy that I give to the readers to nibble, as a reward for their willingness to read me with pleasure" (Meditation XIV), the candies being anecdotes from personal experience, Tarquin also uses various motifs from the menus he invents or various experiences from his trip used to present his culinary knowledge. However, the first line of his so-called 'diary' is meant to attract the attention of both collectors of culinary recipes and readers of fiction: "This is not a conventional cookbook. Though I should straightaway attach a disclaimer to my disclaimer [...]" (xi). The preface, signed by the same Tarquin Winot, is at the same time an "acknowledgment and note on the structure"; an homage to Brillat-Savarin, and surprisingly, for the Marquis de Sade. He praises the type of writing found in cookbooks and culinary books, declaring himself an admirer of culinary recipes for their accuracy: "the omission of a single word [...] can cause a humiliating fiasco" (xii) Cookbooks are similar to encyclopedias and journals, because the recipes are arranged in categories and are very strictly defined, similar to dictionary or encyclopedia articles; frequently they are accompanied by short accounts from personal experience, as happens in Brillat-Savarin's masterpiece, *The Physiology of Taste*. Tarquin's favorite quote from this work is "I have drawn the following inference, that the limits of pleasure are as yet neither known nor fixed" (Lanchester, xiii), which prompts him to seek pleasure in killing, starting with a hamster that is dear to his brother and ending with a couple who wants to interview him about his brother's life.

The preface clarifies the purpose of this fake travelogue, explaining why the form of seasonal menus was chosen and not that of simple recipes: "a menu can embody the anthropology of a culture or the psychology of an individual; it can be a biography, a cultural history, a lexicon; it speaks to the sociology, psychology and biology of its creator and its audience; it can be a way of knowledge, a path, an inspiration, a Tao, an ordering, a shaping, a manifestation, a talisman, a memory, a fantasy, a consolation, an allusion, an illusion, an evasion, an assertion, a seduction, a prayer, a summoning, an incantation murmured" (xv).

THE CULINARY JOURNEY AND CRIME FICTION

The novel abounds in seasonal menus that are garnished with a suite of culinary, literary, historical, philosophical, and geographical contemplations, on top of which the narrator sprinkles autobiographical fragments. Each menu represents a point of reference for the narrative style of the novel.

To begin with, the winter menu is described in terms of danger and threat, opportunity and chance. These four terms lead to a reflection on the British taste for pickles, sauces and ketchup, especially in the winter months, a reflection that leads, in turn, to the narrator's memories of the two visits he paid to his brother, who was at a boarding school. The memory is not related to the Proustian taste of a certain food, bringing back the memory of times long gone, but rather a thought about the British affinity for hostile, inappropriate, self-centred food, especially in the winter months, which attracts his attention and makes him draw a comparison between English boarding schools and the Russian gulag. His aversion to boarding school canteen menus triggers a memory of Roland Barthes' theory about affinities and repulsions, but also Brillat-Savarin's definition of gourmandise.

As far as Roland Barthes' theory is concerned, the affinities and aversions that a person has towards various things are explained with the example of photographs that some individuals like and others reject, distinguishing two main elements in each photograph: 'studium' (the interest aroused by the photographs) and 'punctum' (the detail that remains , penetrates and makes its way into everyone's mind). "I didn't know any word in French that could simply express this kind of human interest; in Latin, however, I think this word exists: it's studium, [...] which means attention to something, taste for someone, a kind of general involvement, kind, of course, but without special acuity." (Barthes, 27) "This [...] element This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum; for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also the cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me (but also hurts me, tears me apart)." (28)

This theory of taste for a certain type of literature or photography can also be applied to taste for food. The human interest is aroused by a certain image of a dish together with the detail that makes its way into the viewer's mind. Studium corresponds to the obvious meaning, the characteristics that can be understood by every viewer. Punctum corresponds to the obscure meaning, which penetrates the social symbolism of the image, on a level that is not collective and thus not part of the symbolism recognized as social

on a general scale. Punctum punctuates the meaning of an image (studium) and, consequently, pierces or penetrates the viewer.

Returning to John Lanchester's novel, Tarquin Winot uses the definition of gourmandise given by Brillat-Savarin to guide him through his culinary journey through the four seasons:

> "Gourmandise is a passionate preference, well determined and satisfied, for objects which flatter our taste. Physically, it is a demonstration of the healthy State of the organs of nutrition. Morally, it is implicit resignation to the orders of God, who made us eat to live, invites us to do so bv appetite, sustains us by flavor, and rewards us by pleasure. Considered from the points of view of political economy, gourmandise is the common bond which unites the people in reciprocal exchanges of the articles needed for daily consumption." (Brillat-Savarin, Meditation XI).

This definition is given by the French writer after he confesses that he was not satisfied with what he found in the dictionaries of the time to explain the word 'gourmandise', as this concept could very easily be confused with 'gluttony' or 'voraciousness'. Tarquin himself fails to maintain a clear line between these concepts and crosses the boundary between them when he starts to kill not for feeding himself but for pleasure. The social gourmand indicated by Brillat-Savarin leads Tarquin Winot to social alienation and to his own theory of the pleasure of taste: "to like something means to ingest it and, in that sense, to submit to the world. To like something is to succumb, in a small but contentful wat, to death" (Lanchester, 1996 7). For him, revulsion towards a thing is not the opposite of what he likes but the barrier between the world and himself. Tarquin always feels the need to be different, so he emphasises the importance of his tastes and his surprising choices during the trip he takes in order to take the path less travelled.

The menus he invents are based not only on English or French dishes, but also on other regional delicacies. For example, in the winter menu, pancakes are presented under the different names they have in different European countries: crèpes, galettes (France), krumkakor (Sweden), tattoriblinit (Finland), brigidini (Italy), nalesniki (Poland), gaufrettes (Belgium), pancakes (Great Britain).

In the spring menu the recipe with lamb is introduced under various names: roast lamb (Great Britain, djuredi (the cuisine of the former Yugoslavia), cwl (Wales), arni ladorigani (Greece), kapama (Bulgaria) and the Romanian food tokana (stew).

The summer menu brings snacks under various names: zakuski (Russia), zakaski (Poland), meze (Greece), Abendbrot (Germany), hors d'oeuvre (France), cold table (Great Britain), and mezeluri (Romania).

Autumn is mushroom season, so the history of the most important mushroom subspecies is presented. Recipes along with serving suggestions are also part of this study by Tarquin Winot. However, their purpose is not to whet the appetite of the reader, as they are concise and to the point, but to introduce notions, ideas or even objects such as the frying pan, also known as the 'placenta'. The menu is compared to the structure of a sentence (130): the syntactic units are linked by grammatical principles that order and control them, coordinating the individual moments of expression in a cohesive and coherent statement.

The fact that inadvertences have no place in a serious recipe and are disastrous from a gastronomic and practical point of view leads to the image of an artist judging the quality of a work of art. Cooking is compared to art because both in art and in cooking there are periods of boredom and periods of deja-vu. Caviar is associated with chess players; yeast is fascinating due to its own chemistry, not yet discovered by scientists; the different types of stew carry a philosophical distinction, depending on the initial process of their preparation - frying, sautéing, or, possibly, neither of the two. The harmony of various flavors and textures in a stew brings to mind the metaphor used in the United States of America to describe the assimilation of immigrants 'melting pot', a metaphor replaced by 'salad bowl', in order to avoid a loss of cultural identity in the melting process. Vinegar is closely related to a vermouth-based cocktail because the vinegar-based salad dressing has the same proportions as the cocktail ordered by James Bond who prefers his Martini shaken, not stirred. The salad for which the sauce is prepared also contains goat's milk cheese, an occasion for a short history of cheeses, starting from James Joice's remark about cheese being the "corpse of milk" (Joyce, 114).

Another short history, besides that of cheeses and mushrooms, is the history of the potato. Vital for mankind, it was brought from South America, where, according to legend, the Incas measured time according to the length of time the potato was boiled. The French opposed the consumption of this vegetable because, they believed the leprosy of the 16th century was caused by the potato. Later, in the 18th century at the court of King Louis XVI, the potato came to be held in high esteem, potato flowers being worn on the lapel of clothes. The 19th century is marked by the famine in Ireland, the death of hundreds of thousands of people and the massive exodus to America, due to the compromise of potato crops. "Every act of civilization

is, at the same time, an act of barbarism" (Lanchester 1996, 37), writes Winot, meditating on the history of the potato.

Feelings are also connected to menus and seasons: the winter menu feels dark, cold, bringing fear, madness and disorder. The dishes that compose it can bring, if chosen wisely, light, warmth, inclusion, comfort, order, safety, and soul balance. (Lanchester, 38)

If the winter menu implies danger and fear, the spring menu is related to the fact that spring is the season of suicides, since T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*. The joy of surviving the winter can turn a balanced person into a weak person, tormented by memories and overwhelmed by thoughts of unhappiness. That is why the spring menu must contain lamb meat, associated with sacrifice.

Summer is free of constraints and full of relaxation liberating the soul, marking the disappearance of windows barricaded against the drought. But the feeling of freedom can be accompanied by stress and pressure: "I have to have fun, I have to feel good, I want to try harder to have fun".

Food is often related to an entire community, thus becoming a collective stereotype. In this respect, A discussion about 'bouillabaisse' provides the opportunity to list soups from around the world, in order to avoid the stereotype that it belongs to the French community. 'Bouillabaisse' combines realism and romance and characterizes the inhabitants of Marseilles, as the inhabitants of the city of Liverpool are pursued by the cliché of their sentimentality, and those of New York by their lack of manners. The British have "a heroic commitment to spices" and a "historical appetite for spicy food", especially for curry, but also for "the overrated cinnamon, the nasty cloves, tasty soporific nutmeg, flashy paprika, historic mustard seed, popular ginger, warm-tasting the cumin, evocatively Middle Eastern coriander, risky cardamom, lurid turmeric" and many others. (Lanchester, p. 113) The list of spices is just the beginning of a reflection on English people who are characterized by:

> "their lack of culture, the terribleness of their politicians, the dreadfulness of their past imperial misdeeds, the badness of their cooking, dirtiness of their cities, absence of significant artists in any of the century's major media, lack of clothes sense, dislike of bright colors, automatic contempt for anything they don't know about or don't understand, failure to learn foreign languages, instinctive conservatism, provincialism and empiricism." (135)

This meditation/ lucubration of an English lady who is Tarquin's guest in his St. Eustace house is triggered by a sunset and a sundowner. The British

are also criticized by the presence of a salad on the dinner table, a simple salad which is “the glory of every dinner in France, but also the shame of every dinner in England” (144). Lettuce, which in France would be elegantly arranged, in England ends up being “shredded by wild dogs”, mixed with whole radishes, with a quarter of a pale tomato and accompanied by a cream (not sauce) for salads.

A final incursion is made into the habits of eating breakfast in various places around the globe, starting from the premise that it is difficult to find a balance between snacking and satiety. Thus, the Mexican worker dips a piece of churro in his coffee for breakfast. The French dips a croissant into a cup of café au lait; the conservative Englishman serves smoked mackerel, a dish of fish, rice and eggs ('kedgeree'), toast and jam; the Australian serves steak, eggs and ketchup whereas the Japanese has a bowl of soup.

The culinary trips and the seasonal menus are in fact a map through crime fiction. *The Debt to Pleasure* is not a detective novel as the main character describes his murders. The action part of the novel depicts all those who caused Tarquin Winot any inconvenience - his brother, his parents, the cook, the governess, the exchange student, a neighbor - dying of less natural causes, after eating various snacks or dishes prepared by Tarquin (for example generous helpings of wild mushrooms on toast). The end of the novel leaves the readers with Tarquin in pursuit of the couple who had interviewed him about his brother’s life and death, showing no interest in Tarquin’s life and personal experience. The same ending and death of not natural causes seem to be reserved for them as pleasure and the methods of finding pleasures have a dark side just as every peach contains a pit with a small amount of cyanide. It is, in fact, the narrator’s obsession and his explanation for his actions when he puts his obsessions into practice and admits to the fact that has become a serial killer.

CONCLUSION

The novel *The Debt to Pleasure* is a tribute to the menu seen as a vehicle for the circulation of information. “The menu is the paper wheel that lies near the center of the human impulse to order, to beautify and to shape." The protagonist of this culinary and murderous journey tries to discover the mechanism that triggers desire, and, at the same time, the nature of human pleasure. Pleasure is an imperfect mediator, but it can lead to understanding the subjectivity of every individual. Tarquin Winot meditates to understand why he takes pleasure in committing murder and he discovers a passion for food and cuisine, he discovers the interest (Roland Barthes’s studium)

aroused by culinary recipes and the detail that remains in people's memory (Roland Barthes's punctum), after its implementation, i.e. the taste of pleasure resulting from moving from desire to action.

As John Banville observes, John Lanchester's novel is a critique of the consumer society and "one in a long, dark series that includes Diderot's masterpiece *Rameau's Nephew*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Gogol's *Diary of a Madman* and any number of Vladimir Nabokov's novels" (2015) as it dives deep into the human mind. The culinary journey through Britain and France is dedicated to the discovery of the sources of pleasure that range from innocent cooking to premeditated murder.

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