The Semiotics of Food in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Generating a Fertile Liminality

Ingestion constitutes a complex sign language which " metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience " (Hinz v). Scholars from Northrop Frye to Claude Lévi-Strauss have recognized that gustatory discourse constructs the emergence of a textual pattern of relations and, essentially, a covert network of normative evaluation, designed to be decoded by the receptor. As Lévi-Strauss has argued in his four-volumed work *Mythologiques*, cooking is what makes the human being a social animal, and the symbolic function of cooking is that of mediator between the subject and the physical world. Writers have accordingly resorted to certain traditional paradigms of consumption, which include employing phagic metaphors to transmit the notion of the sexual act, and equating the female body with edible objects. Undeniably, many contemporary Canadian writers, from Leonard Cohen and Nancy Huston to Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood have subverted such conventional paradigms in diverse modes. Constance Rooke has judiciously analysed the language of food in Munro's fictional practice, and extensive critical attention has been paid in this respect to Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman*.

In the novel, Atwood already clearly subscribes to the notion that food is the universal basis of cultural identity and social order: when shared, it generates understanding, when unshared, it generates or reflects conflict. Interestingly, the writer moreover resorts to alimentary dynamics to explore the grey areas in-between, fraught with aporia. Like all ironists, Atwood produces texts with double or multiple layers in opposition with one another, implying a process of asserting and undermining, validating and invalidating. In this paper focussing on *Cat's Eye*, I shall explore the role Atwood's culinary discourse plays in this process, notably the manner in which it generates borderlands or liminal zones. I shall argue that Atwood's transgressive

semiotics of food functions both vertically and horizontally, in a complementary, aporetic fashion. It entails a displacement on a paradigmatic axis superimposing oppositional signifying layers, as well as on a syntagmatic axis involving systematic deferral, which in turn constructs liminality. I shall demonstrate that this rhetorical network serves as a vehicle for complex social commentary.

In the fictional fabric of Atwood's novel*Cat's Eye*, the conjunctive function of food is foregrounded when the child protagonist Elaine spends all her babysitting money on candy to share with her tormentors, realizing as she " doles them out equally, these offerings, these atonements " that " in the moment just before giving, " she is loved (145). Yet, as well as serving to create a community, food also performs a disjunctive function in the novel, operating as a boundary marker, separating the sexes, as well as separating cultures. Only recently having come into contact with the company of other little girls, Elaine visits her father's biology laboratory with her brother Stephen and her new girlfriend, Carol. The three protagonists' attitudes towards the rules regulating what is proper for consumption serves to mark gender difference.

> (Stephen) tries (Carol) out on the jars of lizards and ox eyeballs. "Ew", she says. "What if they put one down your back?" My brother says how would she like some for dinner? He makes chewing and slurping noises. "Ew,"says Carol, screwing up her face and wriggling all over. I can't pretend to be shocked and disgusted too: my brother wouldn't be convinced. Neither can I join in the game of making up revolting foods such as toadburgers and leech chewing gum, although if we were alone or with other boys I would do it without a second thought. So I say nothing. (53)

The sequence suggests that socialised males and females belong to different cultural communities, or rather that in the male sphere, cultural comportment is equated with natural behaviour, while in the female sphere, a displacement

is required. The unsocialised child protagonist is in effect caught between two oppositional codes or layers. She is enclosed between the provocation and ludic activity of Stephen, which puts males firmly within the imaginative sphere of daring creativity or action, and the spuriously squeamish re/action of Carol to the suggested alimentary transgression, which places females within the sphere of passivity and helplessness. Elaine has significantly been endowed with a paradigmatic function allowing her to slip from one syntagmatic level to another, depending on the binaries of her environment: city/wilderness, natural/artificial, family/society, or masculine/feminine. Yet when the horizontal axes of the masculine and feminine worlds are superimposed, she can play neither role: reduced to saying " nothing ", she is a zero, or rather a " neither/nor " inhabiting a liminal space. Such liminality clearly intimates that gender differences are culturally acquired, much as are our attitudes towards foods or even vestimentary codes, also serving to separate the sexes. Ingestion as gender marker is linked, of course, with Atwood's illusion/reality isotopy, as we shall see. Suffice it to mention here that the writer puts forward the notion of masquerade when in the subsequent co-text Elaine confesses her discomfort at playing with her own sex: "Playing with girls is different and at first I feel strange as I do it, self-conscious, as if I'm only doing an imitation of a girl."(55)

Signalling demarcation and grounded in issues of power, food divides cultural communities just as it separates gender roles. One has but to look at the narrative sequence in which Mr. Banerji, the student from India, has been invited for Christmas dinner, and in which food is the dominant semiotic sign of alterity:

> He's polite and ill at ease and he giggles frequently, looking with what I sense is terror at the array of food spread out before him, the mashed potatoes, the gravy, the lurid green and red Jell O salad, the enormous turkey: my mother has said that the food is different there. (137)

The colourful, sweet jellies that North Americans of Anglo-Saxon origin eat with their main course can be daunting even to a continental European, but the supreme cultural shock for a South Asian resides in seeing the turkey being carved right on the table, instead of being presented already cut up into bite-sized pieces and in no way resembling a dead animal. The culinary dynamics place the receiver firmly within an aporetic equation: the meal that Westerners equate with festivity is equated by South Asians with terror. The aporia once more functions within a layered horizontality involving the overlapping of parallel realities. These strata are connected vertically through a set of correspondences which generate liminality.

The paradigmatic agent of liminality is fundamentally once more the child protagonist, Elaine. A strategy of systemic instability superimposes onto the voice of the older narrating I the point of view of the younger narrated self, blurring borders and shifting, even reversing, the positioning of communal ipseity or alterity. The point of view of the child narrator is notably an alien one, coinciding with that of Mr. Banerji, rather than with that of members of her own community. The vision that the addressee is invited to share is one incongruous to Western perception: the turkey "resembles a trussed, headless baby"; it has "thrown off its disguise as a meal and has revealed itself... for what it is, a large dead bird" (140). The incongruous phagic imagery signals Elaine's non-belonging, performing a disjunctive function with respect to her own family, and a conjunctive one with respect to the Other: "He's a creature more like myself: alien and apprehensive" (138). Identifying herself with a character further marginalised by the reifying term "creature" given alliterative emphasis, Elaine notes a corporeal similarity: "his hands are ragged around the nails, like mine", and multiplies the synthetic parallelisms: "I sit picking at my Christmas dinner, as Mr. Banerji is picking at his" (138).

The flux and shifting allegiances governing identity construction are further complexified when Elaine's father and his foreign student manage to find a common ground of understanding through the very network of nutrition that served to divide them. Both of them deplore the technological tampering with

nature, and denounce the perverted practices of agribusiness producing square tomatoes, naked chickens, and four-legged turkeys. The food industry's privileging of logistics over nutrition is presented as aberrant. Resistance to a Promethean society's radical transformation of natural products, viewed as adulteration, transforms Elaine's father and Mr. Banerji into allies.

The leitmotif of food consequently functions on multiple levels. It serves to signal the composition of the separate cultural tiers, but also functions vertically, crossing the overlapping horizontal layers either to efface or displace alterity. Simultaneously, it generates a liminal space between two territories, blurring notably the distinctions between illusion and reality, life and death, nourishment and poison.

Evocative of the ersatz meals in Katherine Mansfield's short story " The Prelude ", made up of daisy heads, fuschsia petals, and dandelion seed patties served on geranium leaf plates, with pine needle forks and twig knives, Atwood readers find the "flower meals" (80) that Elaine and her friends play with, composed of weed flowers and nightshade berries arranged on burdock leaves, weighed down by a horse chestnut. These "pretend meals" are "half wreath, half lunch," (80) in other words, part nourishment (albeit spurious, for even the horse chestnuts are inedible), associated with life, and part mourning, associated with death. Mansfield's spurious dinner, inedible for the children, but real nourishment to other creatures which polish off even the crockery, already served to blur categories in a modernist narrative strategy of shifts and slides. Atwood intensifies the collision and subsequent blurring. The "lunch" (life-giving) is poison (death-dealing): the berries, " red as valentine candies, " (79) are "deadly," the juice "poisonous," and drinking one drop turns you into a "zombie," a creature both dead and alive. Destabilising agents of liminality between life and death, illusion and reality, the flower meals are eventually "eaten" by the "dissolved dead people" (79, 80 respectively) in the stream flowing out of the cemetery. This is a world in which a grape drink does not taste like grapes " but like something you might use to kill insects " (152), in which a porcupine run over by a car feeds a raven picking at

its guts, which are " pink and scrambled like eggs " (152), and a maggoty dead raven in turn " smells like rot, like rust, and, more strangely, like some sort of food " that Elaine has eaten once but can't remember (154).

Consolidating the destabilising incongruities that generate ambivalence, Atwood sets nutritious food at the negative pole of her axis, while she foregrounds the attraction of poison. the nourishing porridge that Elaine's mother cooks for her breakfast is "like boiling mud" (126), and after her lunch of soup and cheese and crackers, Elaine feels as if her stomach is "full of earth" (146). In the first case, her stomach contracts, and she finds it hard to swallow. In the second case, the ingestion metaphor is extended to the processes of digestion and elimination: she vomits and examines the ruins of her still recognizable lunch. In both cases, food is alien, an undesirable invasion of the body, rather than a symbol of nourishment and life. Simultaneously, antithetically parallel to the deadly nightshade berries which evoke the double desire of sugar and flesh, we encounter the red jars of chokecherry jelly that Elaine's mother makes. Paratactic juxtaposition creates equivalence: they *look* " poisonous "; they *are* " beautiful " (155). Conforming to the strategy of inversion and ambivalence producing the uneasy overlapping of food with both *eros* and *thanatos* one can cite one of Elaine's dreams, in which Cordelia (through the rhetoric of denial) is associated with a chokecherry tree whose anodine berries turn into or prove to be deadly nightshade. The emphatic use of plosive alliteration - the " brilliantly " red berries are " filled with blood, like the bodies of blackflies " which " burst " (155) - reinforces what Rooke has identified in Munro's fiction as the " drift toward death " (Rooke 44). Food, violence, and (self)destruction conflate in visions Elaine constructs of eating the deadly nightshade berries, drinking the Javex out of the skull and crossbones bottle, or jumping off the bridge and " smashing down there like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin. " (166) The simile comparing the protagonist to a shattered vegetable is synthetically parallel to the extended metaphor associating the vulnerable Elaine with a sardine being eaten, its bones crumbling between your teeth

(168). Atwood uses cacology effectively to call attention to the original value of the stock metaphor " to have backbone ", and thus concretises the little girl's state of mutilation.

In a society awash with " thick, jolting, poisonous coffee" (18) and the sticky "surfeit and glut" of imported chocolates and fancy cookies(159), metaphors skilfully combining the concrete and the abstract, such as the conceit " sugar-coated self-indulgence "159), connote sickness, sin, and disgust, and a state of confusion between diners and dinners.

Like the rotting raven that smells like food, women in *Cat's Eye* belong to the same network of decay: they are repulsively unpalatable yet ultimately consumable. They are " white as an uncooked chicken, " " fat and saccharine, " or " flabby as pork fat; " they have " blanc-mange coloured skin " and faces like " jelly, " " a dinner roll, " an unbaked biscuit, " or " moldy eggs " (7, 82, 166, 340, 426). The culinary imagery is undeniably fraught with sociopolitical implications, and does single out certain powerless groups that are fed on. Yet beyond this primary level, it suggests a broader system of power based on predation. A Promethean society that collects, pickles, and displays ox eyeballs in jars (37) displays in an equivalent manner a human brain in a bottle, looking significantly like " a giant flabby gray walnut" (181).

Indubitably, cannibalism, a hyperbolic form of ingestion in which humans are both subjects and objects of consumption, underpins the narrative. There are apologues and parables establishing allegorical similitudes with creatures such as female praying mantises, which eat the males (99). The underlying truth or moral rises to the surface when the young Elaine chews her fingers, "leaving welts of exposed, oozing flesh" (120), gnaws her hair, bites off pieces of her lips, and peels her feet like mushrooms. In a sequence enumerating in an apparently chaotic manner that reveals itself to be proleptic the different flavours of her blood, which tastes of orange Popsickles, chewing gum, licorice, gnawed hair, and ice, Atwood establishes a disturbing equivalence between the body and food. In a subtle inversion of the praying mantis

analogy, which already subversively displaces truisms concerning patriarchal society, the writer suggests that Elaine is the agent of her own cannibalisation, but that the true predators tormenting and feeding on her are other females.

Cat's Eye functions in the manner of the apologue belonging to oral literature: it resonates symbolically and serves to amplify the ideas of its politically engaged author. One is struck by the child narrator's observation that there are no young men in teaching or elsewhere, because "the war has eaten them," (81) the very matter-of-factness of the remark serving to generate an oppositional readerly stance. Just as Elaine and her family eat a creature that "resembles a trussed, headless baby" (140), so, too, do societies and their governments devour their own young. On a microcosmic scale, the story of the coming of age of a woman artist stages, in an effective *mise-en-scène*, a larger social macrocosm condoning the disposable nature of its environment, or of one social category for the convenience of another. Readers, even those who have not read *Surfacing* and do not benefit by the intratextual network, are invited to make connections with the semi-scatalogical manner in which North American society has poisoned the Great Lakes, turning them into " the world's largest sewer " (350): Lake Ontario is "slate-grey and brimming with venoms. Even the rain from it is carcinogenic" (19). In similar discursive instances in which explicit verbal irony is substituted for the more implicit mode of structural irony, the narrator denounces the transformation of British Columbia - too beautiful to be real, like a postcard or film backdrop - into a " land of stumps " (46), significantly just out of sight of the picture windows.

The language of ingestion, among other structural processes, is the vehicle the author has selected as her topic, in the original Aristotelian meaning of the term, to transmit her argument. Her topic fundamentally corresponds to *pathos*, the kind of oratory that Aristotle identified in *The Rhetoric* as that which moves the public. It is all the more effective as it blends with the topic of *logos*, in its double acceptation. I have indirectly foregrounded the first plane which consists in illustration by *exemplum*, as well as the co-existing plane of logical links generating conclusions containing plausibility, among

which we can identify the link between antecedent and consequent, the individual and the group, or the whole and its parts. Atwood aims to negotiate (and largely succeeds) a complex ideological relationship with her audience which includes establishing a certain truth value that the receptor is hard put to contest.

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