

Disgusting, Delicious, Divine:
A Conceptual Architecture of Eating in Western Culture

by

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For my family,
On a bien mangé

MENU

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PREFACE

*Eating is a primal mark and act of life that
evokes the cosmos as a great cosmic banquet.*
(Mendez-Montoya 2012: 1)

Every time we return to California this happens: when no one is looking, I breathe deep and let the hills enter me. Velvety, dry and coarse and endless with spots of scrub brush and then miles of farms and vineyards where the big sky must crush the grapes in the places it presses down on the land. The smell of cattle. The baked leafiness of cypress carried on vibrating atoms in the hot summer air.

I was born here and although I live on the other side of the country, I feel a connection with these hills in the same way I feel linked to my dead grandfather, an inexplicable yet undeniable connection with no memories attached, a blood connection. I am meeting my maker, eating my maker, because in a way, it was these hills that made me.

California was always an eating pilgrimage towards my origins. There was the land, ripe with apricots, sweet tomatoes, and plums from my grandmother's patio that I would gobble for a taste of the soil I was born on. And then there was my Armenian ancestry, laid out in platters of mezze – string cheese with black nigella seeds strung so finely it formed little nests; pyramids of stuffed grape leaves, *yolanchi*; *bastirma*, a cured, spiced meat; pickled okra, olives, lamb, *lamejun*. Unable to speak, read or write the language, I tried to eat my way back into Armenianness. I was repulsed by the vinegary acidity of the grape leaves, but I learned to appreciate it, hoping each

time I swallowed I might close the gap between my American self and a people that lived two oceans away on the other side of Turkey.

Food and eating are central to my personhood, and by no means do I claim this fact as unique to my own experience of being. Yet when I was confronted with the ominous task of choosing a topic for my undergraduate thesis, it only made sense to do one thing: as I often do, I took solace in food. What began as an exploration of contemporary developments in French cuisine quickly metamorphosed into a study of the act of eating itself. Because we eat so frequently and under such varied circumstances, we seldom realize just how often we experience eating as a medium that structures our very being, from constructing identity to communing with the world around us. Sometimes, eating is banal and utilitarian; other times, it is a profound, even religious act. The pages that follow contain an investigation of *why* and *how* we understand eating the way we do – what does it mean, to eat?

INTRODUCTION

...la cuisine, ce lieu mystérieux, odorant et chaud, où il ferait si bon de se retrouver, ce lieu magique du feu, ce lieu de métamorphose, ce lieu volé aux dieux où l'on façonne tant de matières malléables, d'où naissent tant de douceurs sublimes, n'est-elle pas simplement le ventre même de la maison à l'image du ventre maternel ? On comprend mieux désormais la fascination mêlée d'un certain dégoût qu'elle provoque en nous et aussi l'obsession de nettoyage purificateur qu'elle appelle. Rester le moins longtemps dans la cuisine, lui faire subir quotidiennement le supplice de l'eau de Javel, c'est se prémunir des souillures naturelles qu'elle suggère dans sa relation fondamentale avec les toilettes. (Châtelet 1977: 36)¹

Western culture has a schizophrenic relationship with food – we cannot decide whether it delights or disgusts us, whether it is sacred or abject, magical or biological, so we treat it as all of these and more.² The average person's day is punctuated by innumerable and, more often than not, unmemorable encounters with food. Given that this series of food encounters is repeated daily throughout an entire life, the majority of us seldom notice that each one of us harbors a variety of wildly conflicting attitudes towards food, and thus an entirely schizophrenic understanding of the act of eating. The furthest most of us delve into this realization is generally the moment of

¹ "...the kitchen, that mysterious place, hot and full of aromas where it's wonderful to find oneself, that magical place of flame, the place of metamorphosis, the place stolen from the gods where we forge so many malleable substances, where so many sublime delicacies are born – is it not simply the belly of the house in the image of the maternal belly? We come to better understand this once we feel our fascination mingle with a certain disgust that the kitchen provokes in us, and also the urge to cleanse that it inspires. To remain for even the shortest stretch of time in the kitchen, rendering it ritually supplicant to disinfectant, is to protect oneself from the natural stains that it suggests in its fundamental relation to the toilet."

² Schizophrenic is here understood as "with the implication of mutually contradictory or inconsistent elements." (OED)

conflict between appetite and disgust while in the toilet of a restaurant, but we quickly move on without asking why this is so.

Or, if we are like Noëlle Châtelet, we do notice these conflicting attitudes, and, intrigued, we endeavor to be stenographers of this experience, transposing it into prose, dissecting it, examining it from the vantage point of our own experience and from that of others in the hopes of reaching a conclusion about how we understand the act of eating.

My project falls somewhere near that of Châtelet's – I too am investigating how we understand the act of eating – though my approach is somewhat different, and my focus more narrow. I specifically examine the individual's experience of the act of eating: *how* do we conceptualize the function this act fulfills in our singular being, in our own subjectivity? And furthermore, *why* do we conceptualize eating in this way – that is, schizophrenically? I address the *how* by demonstrating the abundance of conflicting sentiments present in our discussions of food and eating. The *why* I treat through recourse to the philosophical underpinnings of western thought, demonstrating how these ideas actually structure our discussion of and attitude towards food and embodied subjectivity – how we understand ourselves as eating subjects. In short, this is an attempt at a conceptual architecture of the act of eating in western culture.

Susan Bordo lends validity to this approach in her investigation of how the philosophical ideas that undergird our understanding of our own subjectivity inform our day-to-day perceptions of ourselves as embodied, eating subjects. Bordo contends that anorexia, an eating disorder that consists in feeling disgust towards one's own

embodiment, is a culture-induced epidemic, produced by popular western philosophical disdain for our corporeality:

Susan Bordo argues that the Cartesian estrangement from the body is misconceived if we think of it only as a conceptual puzzle about whether we can really know the “external world.” She regards anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders as the psychopathological crystallization of culture, a process she explains partly in terms of the effects of Cartesian philosophy on popular culture. (Like Platonic philosophy, Cartesian philosophy is committed to the logic of identity and to the prioritization of the mind, or soul, over the body.)... The starvation of the body is motivated by the dream to be “without a body,” to achieve “absolute purity, hyperintellectuality and transcendence of the flesh.” Self-denial is taken to confer a sense of nonbodily purity deeply reminiscent of Plato. (Curtin 1992: 7)

Unlike Châtelet, Deane Curtin, and Susan Bordo, whose works synthesize their arguments from a wide range of sources – everything from research on eating disorders to trends in Parisian apartment layouts – my project is primarily one of literary analysis. I have chosen to focus solely on providing detailed analysis of representations of eating in literature, and I have made this choice for the following reason: literary works that address food and the act of eating serve as prolonged meditations on those phenomena, a rich synthesis where personal and popular understandings of eating and food have space to express themselves with full nuance, and where the candid imagination is free to indulge its wildest notions. Put simply, if I want to investigate the product of a western mind thinking *really* hard about food and eating, what better place to look than literary works that treat these aspects of human experience in great detail?

I have specifically chosen to work with a corpus of contemporary French literature that comprises the works of three authors – five novels and one memoir –

written over two decades spanning 1992 to 2012: Joy Sorman's novel *Comme une bête* (2012), Amélie Nothomb's novel *L'hygiène de l'assassin* (1992) and memoir *Biographie de la faim* (2004), and Muriel Barbery's novels *Une gourmandise* (2000) and *L'élégance du hérisson* (2004). Why French literature? In truth, my choice of French literature stems from the somewhat utilitarian fact that I am a French Studies major with an interest in writing about food. Why work with multiple texts by the same author? In the case of Nothomb and Barbery, working with two texts by the same author allows me to develop an especially extensive account of one individual's schizophrenic relationship with eating – the multiplicity of often-conflicting ways one individual conceptualizes that act. If we considered only one work per author, we would miss a great deal. For instance, we see a significant discrepancy in the way eating is conceptualized between Barbery's two novels: in *L'élégance du hérisson*, eating is treated primarily as a symbolic act, a gesture of self-narration in which the physical dimension of eating – the actual interaction of food with the subject's body – is of negligible value; yet in Barbery's novel *Une gourmandise*, the discussion of eating focuses much more on the interaction between food and body where eating is an act of physical communion with the subject's edible world.

Because my goal is to expose the presence of patterns across works, my analysis requires me to frequently shift attention between fragments of different texts in my corpus. In the following paragraphs, I provide basic summaries of those selected works in the hopes that providing this context will relieve the reader of any confusion caused by this jumping between texts.

Muriel Barbery's work *Une gourmandise* recounts the death of an ailing food critic, Pierre Arthens, also known as the king of French gastronomy. The narrative consists of a number of reflections on the life of the unbelievably solipsistic Arthens – from his own perspective, and from the perspective of others in his life: his wife, his estranged children, the maid, a homeless man outside his building, the cat, and the prehistoric fertility statue he keeps in his office to name a few. However, the majority of the novel's action is structured by Arthens's quest to call to mind a distinct eating experience, one that slinks just below the reaches of his memory. The narrative unfolds as Arthens makes progress towards his goal in a series of reflections on definitive eating experiences in his lifetime, culminating in the final realization: the flavor for which Arthens has so fervently racked his memory is none other than the banal mushy-sweetness of supermarket pastries, *chouquettes*. Arthens makes peace with this fact and then expires.

L'élégance du hérisson, Barbery's second novel, consists mainly of existential reflection based in food and eating. This narrative is fed by the voices of two women: Renée and Paloma. Renée is the concierge of an apartment building for the Parisian elite. An autodidact and closet intellectual, she lives in seclusion with her cat, her Japanese tea set, her secret library and weekly visits from her only friend, the building's Portuguese maid, Manuela. Paloma is the twelve-year-old daughter of a high-ranking Socialist Party minister, and a tenant in the building where Renée is concierge. Something of a savant, Paloma keeps to herself; she and Renée share a disdain for the superficiality of the building's other tenants. The two women spend their time contemplating whether life has a meaning, a line of inquiry that often leads

them to despair, save for the promising interjections of food and art. Paloma and Renée meet upon the arrival of a mysterious new tenant, Kakuro Ozu, a middle-aged Japanese man whose love of food, art and literature proves an intriguing and cultured presence into which neither woman can resist inquiring. The three become fast friends, and their interaction proves uplifting for all: there might, indeed, be a meaning to life. However, just as she is falling for Ozu, Renée is fatally struck by a dry cleaning van, leaving Paloma and Kakuro to contemplate life once more, thankfully this time in positive and constructive terms.

L'hygiène de l'assassin by Amélie Nothomb is the tale of Prétéxtat Tach, a morbidly obese octogenarian and the most celebrated francophone writer of his time. Tach's impending death has recently been announced to the public. The novel begins with a series of interviews given to journalists that clamor to chronicle the novelist's final days. In these interviews, Tach details his repulsive existence: a diet – a *hygiène* – consisting entirely of fatty and abject substances, and a routine devoted wholly to the fulfillment of basic animal functions except the sexual urge. Tach is finally brought face-to-face with a female journalist, Nina. Tach hates women; he is the proponent of an absurd misogyny. Nina has arrived with a very specific agenda: she seeks to prove that Tach's last novel is an entirely autobiographical work, a sort of confession. The novel in question is a story about a fear of the bodily conditions of human adulthood that drives its protagonist to both murder his cousin (also his lover) when she first enters puberty, and to incinerate his family home. Nina's suspicions are correct, and Tach confesses that, with his cousin dead, he forsook all aspirations to eternal youth and mired himself in disgusting corporeality, adopting the atrocious

diet and habits he maintains to this day. The novel concludes with Nina strangling Tach at his own request, just as Tach strangled his cousin in his childhood. In a strange injection of the supernatural into the text, Nina becomes Tach's 'avatar' once she has taken his life.

Nothomb's memoir *Biographie de la faim* recounts the author's life through a series of definitive eating experiences. Claiming that 'I am hunger' ('la faim, c'est moi'), Nothomb describes a life driven and defined on the one hand by the ravenous desire to consume – places, people, cultures, languages and foods – and on the other, afflicted by anorexia that estranges her from her body. Nothomb's use of eating as an autobiographical medium provides valuable insight into how eating structures and informs our personhood.

Comme une bête by Joy Sorman follows a young man, Pim, through a butcher's academy and into a successful career as an artisan butcher. Initially interested in the profession for the financial stability it offers, Pim's interest grows into a deeply existential obsession with meat. Through detailed biological motifs and extensive research into the butchery and meat-packing trades provided by Sorman, Pim revels in the idea of eating as both an act of material reconstitution and an intersubjective encounter where one physically incorporates an 'other' – an animal, a person even. Eating is cast as both a form of communion with and identity transfer between the eater and the eaten. The novel concludes when Pim achieves what he views as the teleological end of butchery as an art form: the return to a state of nature in which Pim hunts cattle on foot in the hills of Normandy, dressing them in the field as he relishes the *rapprochement* between human and beast, eater and eaten.

To call up eating in a literary text is necessarily to remind a reader that a human being is a physical thing – corporeal, embodied, material. In each of these works, eating proves a site of profound reflection on embodied subjectivity, and on our relationship to materiality – we question our relation to the body, to the physical world around us, we ask what happens when we eat and how this affects our personhood. What emerges from close examination of the works in this corpus is an undeniable pattern of conflicted (schizophrenic) attitudes towards materiality and the human subject’s status as a material entity.

On the one hand, an established tradition of contempt for the material world in western philosophy and Christian theology has instilled an aspiration to *transcend* the material. Traditionally, western philosophy has conceived of the human subject as a hierarchized mind-body dualism, where mind is valued more than body:

Western philosophy has by and large had a strong element of corporeal contempt. That is, aspects of what it means to be embodied have not been placed at a high value but have instead been set against a valuing of the self as mental and spiritual. As a consequence, activities that involve the body have been largely neglected in the Western philosophical tradition. (Kuehn 2001: 6)

Defining the subject as a dualism creates categories of absolute difference – mind/body, material/immaterial, self/other, nature/culture – where identities are not fluid but fixed. Furthermore, locating the subject in the immateriality of a mind or ‘mental substance’ posits the subject as an *atemporal* entity, existing without relation to time and thus unaffected by the body’s decay. This introduces a notion of identity that is not only fixed, but atemporal – an *essence*, also known to western philosophers as a substance: “Substances make knowledge possible because explanations terminate

in them; they are the explanation for other things, while requiring no explanation themselves.” (Curtin 1992: 6) We thus conceive of ourselves as transcendent subjects aspiring away from our corporeality to locate ourselves in the immaterial dimension of an intellect or soul. The notion of transcendence marks our attitudes towards eating by affecting disgust towards that act and its associated processes. Where a dualistic model of subjectivity is invoked, eating is portrayed as a lowly biological necessity, and the body as a prison for the subject, a disgusting machine that is terrifying in its otherness from the self. The physical interaction of food and body is not valued here – conceptualized this way, the real value of eating is in the immaterial, symbolic dimension of how food choice is rationalized by the subject: ‘I eat X therefore I am Y.’

On the contrary, these texts simultaneously reveal an entirely different conceptualization of eating based in an opposing view of materiality: that of materialist philosophy, also known as philosophies of material immanence. Here, we find the ideas of modern science at play, namely the notion of the subject as a wholly material entity instead of a hierarchized mind-body dualism:

When we eat, we are literally “intimate” with food by physically bringing it near the body, lips, and mouth. The ingested substance breaks the conventional boundaries of inside and outside, oneself and alterity, and infiltrates the body with a variety of scents, textures, flavors, and substances, until the ingested food is incorporated into the body through a complex metabolizing process that transforms – transfigures – its initial consistency into calories, vitamins, proteins, and so forth. (Mendez-Montoya 2012: 1)

The framework of material immanence precipitates an embracing of corporeality, and a literal understanding of the phrase ‘you are what you eat’: “The classification of

something as food means it is understood as something made to become part of who we are.” (Curtin 1992: 9) In this conceptualization of eating, notions of fixed identity and essence are somewhat destabilized as eating interactions with the material world become sites where the subject is reconstituted and thus redefined by its exchange with the material world around it.

Finally, and with surprising consistency, we see an attempt at syncretism from our authors as these two completely opposite attitudes towards materiality converge in certain representations of eating. The frameworks of transcendence and material immanence are combined such that transcendence is relocated *to* materiality, what philosopher Patrice Haynes describes as immanent transcendence. Here, matter itself is mystified in varying degrees: “I maintain that the task of advancing a non-reductive materialism is implicitly concerned with rethinking transcendence and materiality in ways that reject their traditional opposition. Matter may then be conceived as that which possesses its own powers of becoming, of self-transcending – powers we may even consider divine.” (Haynes 2014: 3) To understand eating as an act of immanent transcendence brings about the following patterns in descriptions of eating. First, fixed identities or essences are said to inhere in the matter of food itself, and matter is endowed with a certain vitality and creative agency that makes eating a vaguely intersubjective act, a participatory relationship between eating subject and edible world where essence is transferred from eaten to eater. And second, matter and material interactions are mystified to an extreme degree and endowed with qualities of divine transcendence – God in a bite of chocolate, divinity in the moment pastry meets palate.

As mentioned previously, my argument consists in pointing out the patterns that emerge in the ways the authors of my corpus discuss food, and how these patterns can be explained by certain foundational convictions and trends in western philosophy. Chapter I discusses the presence of western philosophical notions of transcendence in our authors' depictions of eating. The focus of this chapter is twofold. In the first section, I examine attitudes of disgust towards the eating body that advance a notion of the subject as transcendent, an immaterial intellect or soul trapped in a disgusting machine-prison-body that it must somehow transcend. In the second section, I discuss portrayals of eating as a transcendent act. Here, materiality is viewed as an inferior dimension of the universe – dumb and inert, there to be manipulated by the superior immateriality of intellect. Eating thus provides an opportunity for transcendence: it is a base physical necessity that we transform into a symbolic act of self-definition in order to create meaning and transcend the arbitrariness of our material world.

Chapter II exposes an attempt at adopting frameworks of material immanence in our authors' discussions of eating, namely the materialist framework of biology. Here, I discuss more literal interpretations of the concept 'you are what you eat', where the subject is conceptualized as a wholly material entity in flux, engaging in eating interactions with an edible world. I observe that our authors advance a notion of eating as ontology, as an act that primarily and fundamentally structures our being – instead of using eating to transcend our world, eating is how we most intimately interact with it, because eating blurs the boundary between eater and eaten: "food is really the "not-yet me." Food exists in a relation to the self that is of ontological

potentiality: the other that may become the self. Eating is the greatest example of the ontological continuum between the self and its environment” (Kuehn 2001: 121) I then explore the implications of this notion of the subject as material flux – a wholly material entity constantly reconstituted by entering into eating relationships with the world around it.

Chapter III is a reflection on our authors’ simultaneous expression of philosophies of transcendence and material immanence in their representations of eating. This chapter highlights our authors’ attempts to combine these two frameworks, resulting in the conceptualization of eating as an act of immanent transcendence. Chapter III begins by reflecting on how immanent transcendence is already present in our authors’ attempts at employing philosophies of material immanence in their representations of eating. I then move to address more overt instances of immanent transcendence in our authors’ representations of eating. In these instances, matter itself is overtly mystified such that it is endowed with divine qualities.

CHAPTER I:

The Dualistic Subject: Embodiment, Disgust, Symbolic Eating and Transcendence

*Machine, automatisme, cerveau dominé,
voilà qui nous ramène à la sombre
réalité d'un corps déchaîné, occupé,
préoccupé par son propre rendement,
comme séparé de nous qui mangeons.
(Châtelet 1977: 43)³*

In the introduction to her philosophical work *Immanent Transcendence:*

Reconfiguring Materialism in Continental Philosophy, Patrice Haynes observes that

From Plato onwards, the Western imaginary has typically figured immanence pejoratively in terms of the limits of matter, the body, sensibility, being, worldliness, etc. This devaluation of material immanence is thoroughly consolidated, according to Nietzschean lines of critique, by the theistic notion of *divine transcendence* used to express God's radical otherness from the world. The transcendent God of theism, so the argument runs, invites a 'rhetoric of ascent', which promotes the aspiration to disengage from material finitude, deemed lowly and base, in order to reach up towards spiritual union with the divine, deemed eminent and superior (Haynes 2014: 1)

Indeed, the writings of Plato and his later interpreters, the Platonists, have profoundly shaped attitudes towards materiality in the Western imaginary. Plato contends that the material world is subordinate to an immaterial world of forms, wherein truth – the true nature of things – inheres. As long as we are mired in a physical dimension, Plato writes in the *Phaedo*, our immaterial dimension of the intellect, also referenced as the soul, is hindered from comprehending the 'true' or the 'real' nature of things:

³ "Machine, automaton, dominated brain – we cannot escape this somber reality of a body that is beyond our control, occupied, preoccupied with the task of its own output, as if separate from we who eat."

[Socrates:] Then would [knowledge of what and how things actually are] be achieved most purely by the man who approached each object with his intellect alone as far as possible, neither adducing sight in his thinking, nor dragging in any other sense to accompany his reasoning; rather, using his intellect alone by itself and unsullied, he would undertake the hunt for each of the things that are, each alone by itself and unsullied; he would be separated as far as possible from his eyes and ears, and virtually from his whole body, on the ground that it confuses the soul, and doesn't allow it to gain truth and wisdom when in partnership with it: isn't it this man, Simmias, who will attain that which is, if anyone will? ... Well now, it really has been shown us that if we're ever going to know anything purely, we must be rid of [the body], and must view the objects themselves with the soul by itself
(Plato: 65e 6 - 66a 7; 66d 5 - 66e 2)

Plato's Socrates establishes a hierarchy between mind and body in this way, asserting that the 'real' is located not in materiality, but in an immaterial dimension – that the philosopher's work is to free the mind from the erroneous signals of the body and grasp the immaterial world of forms with the intellect alone: “[Socrates:] Then is it clear that, first, in such matters as these the philosopher differs from other men in releasing his soul, as far as possible, from its communion with the body?” (*Ibid*: 64e 8-65a 2)

This means that “the true self is defined in terms of the soul, which can remain identical through time, autonomous, and “independent” of the decay and dissolution of the body.” (Curtin 1992: 6) In his conceptualization of the subject as a hierarchized duality, Plato claims that the soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal, implying that to free the soul from the body through contemplation is an act of divine transcendence:

[Socrates:] ‘Now look at it this way too: when soul and body are present in the same thing, nature ordains that one shall serve and be ruled, whereas the other shall rule and be master’

...
 [Cebes:] ‘Obviously, Socrates, the soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal.’
 (Plato: 79e 8 - 80a 5; 80a 7-9)

Adopted and reinterpreted by Platonist thinkers, namely Plotinus, and eventually by Christian thinkers such as Saint Augustine, this conception of the human subject as a hierarchized soul-body dualism has fostered what Glenn Kuehn refers to as ‘corporeal contempt’ in western attitudes towards materiality and embodiment, which encourage disregard for corporeality and materiality, and aspiration towards the immaterial and divine:

for Plotinus, man is essentially an intellect ... Plotinus’ corporeal contempt comes from his realization that not only is he a finite “being” and therefore is distanced from The One, but he is “being” in a body, which is a messy, unpredictable, distracting encasement.
 (Kuehn 2001: 24)

...
 Yet, because of Plotinus and Augustine, we have the legacy of desiring to overcome the body in the extreme. We view it as dirty, disgusting, messy, disorganized, and the source of overwhelming temptations. (*Ibid*, 31)

In this chapter, we will investigate how, as products and stakeholders of that Western imaginary so heavily influenced by this legacy of corporeal contempt, the authors of our corpus uphold this tradition of casting materiality in pejorative terms in representations of the eating body.

The first two sections of this chapter examine representations of the eating body that cast materiality as a somehow inferior dimension of the subject, implicitly locating the ‘real’ subject in the immaterial dimension of an intellect or soul. The first

section focuses on representations of eating that respond to those aspects of corporeality that provoke disgust and even fear, namely excrement, the bowels, and scenarios where the body is perceived to have a certain degree of autonomy separate from the subject's will. Here, the body is portrayed as a disgusting and terrifying machine-prison that we inhabit but that is never quite a part of us, remaining a material 'other' that we are quick to differentiate ourselves from.

In the second section, we move from attitudes of disgust and horror where corporeality is concerned, to indifference towards embodiment, exploring our authors' treatment of the eating body as 'just a body'. Here, the material world – corporeality included – is portrayed as that dumb and inert aspect of our being that we manipulate in order to translate our immaterial will into material terms. In this context, food choice and food ritual become purely symbolic acts of meaning creation. Eating here is a vehicle for constructing personal narratives that allow us to transcend the meaningless chaos of pure materiality.

Finally, the third section discusses how eating-inspired portrayals of corporeality as both a disgusting machine-prison and as 'dumb matter' reflect a Western intellectual tradition of conceptualizing the subject as a mind-body (immaterial-material) dualism. As in Plato, this tendency to conceptualize the subject as a dualism locates the 'real' subject in an immaterial mind or soul, and thus urges transcendence of the material world. This section demonstrates how eating, as the site where base material need and intellectual projects of self-narration intersect, is portrayed by our authors as a means of transcending materiality via a project of meaning creation.

i. Prisoners in the Machine: disgusting corporeality as machine-prison-other

Plotinus writes: “[Plato] says that the soul is enchained and entombed by the body” (Plotinus in Kuehn 2001: 26). As in the Christian and Platonist traditions, where the body is portrayed as a sort of earthly prison for the soul, the literary works in question are consistent in their representation of the body as a fearsome, lowly and constraining material component of the subject, a sort of imprisoning ‘other’ possessing quasi-autonomy over the subject’s interactions with the material world. In such constructions of the body, the subject is formulated simultaneously as subject *of* and subject *to* its body. The body is thus understood as a materiality that is at once the subject’s own, and yet separate from the subject.

Food and its associated processes – ingestion, (in)digestion, expulsion – are central to establishing this distanced relationship of disgust and (fascinated) fear between the subject and its body. Noëlle Châtelet writes in *Le corps à corps culinaire*:

Ainsi nos chocolats et meringues de cinq heures sont-ils voués à s’acheminer de la « machine bouche » à la « machine anus », en dépit du mangeur conscient, qui aura vite fait, précisément, d’escamoter les étapes intermédiaires du flux nutritif « linéaire » (machine-estomac, machine-intestin), se retrouvant, du coup, devant ce raccourci surprenant : manger, c’est faire se connecter au-delà de connections intermédiaires, la bouche et l’anus. (Châtelet 1977: 40)⁴

⁴ “In this way our five o’clock chocolates and meringues are fated to make their way from the ‘mouth-machine’ to the ‘anus-machine’ in spite of the conscious eater who, precisely in order to conceal the intermediary steps of the ‘linear’ digestive process (stomach-machine, intestinal-machine), suddenly finds himself enacting this surprising ellipsis: beyond those intermediary connections, to eat is simply to connect the mouth and the anus.”

To posit the body as a machine in this sense, defined by the input, transformation and output of matter, a machine that opens and closes, chews, churns and expels, is somewhat disturbing and arguably ‘dehumanizing’. Such a portrayal affirms and reinforces a barrier between the subject and its body, portraying the body as an autonomous machine within whose opaque processes and functioning we are trapped and held hostage. Châtelet confirms the disturbing qualities of this conceptualization of the eating body:

La description que F. Guattari et G. Deleuze font de la machinerie organique est sans doute la plus objective, la plus sereine mais aussi la plus effrayante qui soit... De vraies machines qui tournent, roulent, grincent, broient, produisent enfin des choses objectives extériorisables – machines productrices de flux partiels mais connectés entre eux (flux de merde, flux de lait, flux d’air, flux sonores) (*Ibid*, 40)⁵

I read Châtelet’s reference to the machine-body as ‘objective’ to mean two things: first, that it is literally an ‘objectifying’ vision of the body, a way of thinking about corporeality that casts the body as a physical object separate from the subject; and second, that Châtelet sees something like a self-evident truth in this vision of the body, as though she expected it to naturally occur to everyone.

While I by no means endorse belief in the notion of objective truth, Châtelet’s suggestion that the machine-body is a universally acknowledged attitude towards eating corporeality is amply supported in the literature of Joy Sorman, Amélie Nothomb and Muriel Barbery, who all take up this negative line of representation of the body as a fearsome, disgusting, and yet intriguing machine-prison-other. Their

⁵ “Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuzes’s description of ‘organic machinery’ is by far the most objective, the most serene, but also the most frightening possible... Real machines that turn, churn, grate, grind and finally produce objective, exterior things – machines productive of flows that are partial and yet connected (the flows of excrement, milk, air, sound...)”

works are most visibly linked by the collective charge of repulsion they levy against the digestive process. For Muriel Barbery's protagonist Renée, humanity's most evident commonality is every human body's capacity to produce material repugnance:

Il faut se représenter que lorsqu'elle descend chez moi à quatorze heures, le mardi de chez les Arthens, le jeudi de chez les de Broglie, Manuela a peaufiné au Coton-Tige des chiottes dorées à la feuille qui, en dépit de cela, sont aussi malpropres et puantes que tous les gogues du monde parce que s'il est bien une chose que les riches partagent à leur corps défendant avec les pauvres, ce sont des intestins nauséabonds qui finissent toujours par se débarrasser quelque part de ce qui les empuantit. (Barbery, 2002: 27)⁶

In one long sentence with few instances of punctuation, Barbery's Renée takes a certain sadistic delight in holding the reader as a literal captive audience to an evocative tirade about excrement. The body is here portrayed clearly as an ominous, quasi-autonomous machine performing functions shrouded in a mystique that is at once thrilling and terrifying. It is not 'les riches' nor 'les pauvres' nor 'eux' together who produce the shit in question, rather it is 'des intestins nauséabonds', a machine part performing a function whose separation from the whole of the subject, and even from the body as a whole, only renders the idea of the body as an autonomous machine more forceful.

Barbery implies that every human, rich and poor, is subject *to* and resident within a shit-producing machine called the body. Thus the body in its material

⁶ "One must picture Manuela, who by the time she descends to my loge—Tuesdays from the Arthens, and Thursdays from the de Broglies—has just painstakingly polished the gilt shitters which, despite all that, are no less messy or noxious than all of the other restrooms in the world because if there's one thing that the the rich share with the poor, it's nauseating intestines that always finish with the partial discharge of their stinking contents."

finitude and necessary processes of nourishment becomes a sort of prison for the subject, a reading echoed in Barbery's choice to voice the odium of embodiment in one long, uncomfortable sentence. The structure of Barbery's passage mimics her vision of the body as a disgusting, material prison for the subject: the passage imprisons her audience in a sustained meditation on shit that only becomes more unpleasant, and whose progression the reader can do nothing to control, becoming trapped in the passage just as Barbery's subject is trapped in the machine-body.

Amélie Nothomb's *Prétextat Tach* forces this same conception of the body as disgusting machine-prison on the reader. A morbidly-obese 83-year-old writer whom Nothomb references as *l'obèse* ('the fat man') more often than by his own name, Tach's entire existence consists of servicing the human body and immersing himself in its functions. His daily routine is defined by the mechanical rhythm of the openings and closings of the body – expulsion, intake, digestion:

Le matin, je me réveille vers 8 heures. Tout d'abord, je vais aux waters vider ma vessie et mes intestins. Désirez-vous des détails... Tant mieux, parce que c'est une étape certes indispensable dans le processus digestif, mais absolument dégueulasse, vous pouvez m'en croire... Ensuite je me dirige vers la cuisine et je prépare le petit déjeuner.
(Nothomb 1992: 34)⁷

In this way, Tach reduces all of human life to mere materiality, in which he only finds cause for disgust.

Yet the conceptualization of the body as a disgusting machine-prison is nowhere more detailed than in Joy Sorman's *Comme une bête*, a novel about a young

⁷ "Each morning I wake at around eight. First, I go to the bathroom to empty my bladder and intestines. Would you like to hear the details?... All the better; it's really a necessary step in the digestive process, but absolutely disgusting, you can take my word for it... Next, I make for the kitchen to prepare breakfast."

man training to be a butcher. A tour of an industrial slaughterhouse brings Sorman's protagonist, Pim, in contact with pure physicality: the cadavers of slaughtered animals. Over the course of Pim's tour, he witnesses the opening up of the body, the overflowing of the barriers – both physical and perceptual – that separate the disgusting from the tolerable, and the terrifying reduction of the whole physical subject to mere machine parts: « L'odeur est forte et indéfinissable, un mélange de sueur et de graisse rance, d'ammoniaque et de soies de porc carbonisées, de bile et de caoutchouc. » (Sorman 2012: 42-43)⁸

To Pim's horror, these bodies lose their wholeness and become interchangeable parts of the slaughterhouse's giant machine, their odors mixing with the sterile rubber and ammonia of the factory to form an almost indivisible odor. The true horror of the slaughterhouse is its failure to reduce the body to mere atomic particles. It presents the body as something non-unique, a mass-produced biological assemblage that can be systematically 'découpé' into parts. Yet those parts remain terrifying in their unavoidable reference to the unique physical whole to which they once belonged, and which has since been coolly dismantled and inducted by the factory's mechanical body, its blades, belts, hooks, sanitizers, and men in « un attirail chirurgical qui les transforme en silhouettes anonymes et techniques, qui les font disparaître sous des couches de caoutchouc stérile. » (*Ibid*, 42)⁹

In this environment, humans and beasts alike become cold, machine-like physicality, stripped of their individuality, of the 'wholeness' of the individual

⁸ "The odor is strong and indescribable, a mix of sweat and rancid grease, ammonia and charred pork rinds, bile and rubber."

⁹ "...a surgical ensemble that renders the students anonymous and scientific silhouettes, that makes them disappear beneath layers of sterile rubber."

subject, and thus stripped of the uniqueness and autonomy that would otherwise grant them the status of ‘subject’. Instead they are objectified; they become machines and machine parts – here a haunch suspended from a hook, there a « main ankylosée toujours prolongée d’une lame. » (*Ibid*, 27)¹⁰

In this moment, Sorman’s vision of embodiment is that of a terrifying and inescapable physicality: « les ouvriers récurrent avec obsession leurs bottes alimentaires, passées sans relâche à la brosse rotative qui débarrasse le caoutchouc blanc des croûtes de bile et de merde, le sang et l’eau s’écoulent sans fin dans la même rigole » (*Ibid*, 43).¹¹ Pim himself tries to escape it: he faints, but his effort is futile, as he merely sinks further into physicality:

Au milieu des innombrables corps, Pim cette fois tourne de l’œil, c’en est trop. C’est d’abord l’œil qui tourne à l’intérieur de son orbite, aspiré à l’arrière globe oculaire, cent quatre-vingts degrés sur lui-même...ca y est Pim tourne de l’œil, c’est l’œil qui tourne en premier puis emporte tout son corps en orbite autour des carcasses, il vole, il glisse, il fond, il se dissout tendrement, aussi tendre qu’un rognon blanc.
(*Ibid*, 48)¹²

Pim’s body seizes control of him: the eye rolls first, the body follows. Sorman deploys an increasingly medical rhetoric of terms like ‘globe oculaire’ and precise measurements (180 degrees) to signal a removal from the emotive-abstract and a move towards the scientific-precise, mechanical and purely physical. In attempting to escape the terror of sheer physicality, Pim’s own body takes control and ironically,

¹⁰ “...a stiff hand joined always to a blade, extended by it.”

¹¹ “...obsessively, the workers run their boots under a rotating brush that relieves the white rubber of the recurring crust of shit and bile; blood and water flow endlessly into the same channel.”

¹² “In the midst of so many bodies, Pim faints – it’s too much. First it’s the eye that rolls to the interior of its orbit, sliding back on itself in the ocular glob, one hundred and eighty degrees...that is how it happens: it’s the eye that rolls first, pulling his whole body with it as it orbits the carcasses – he flies, he glides, he melts, he tenderly dissolves, as tender as a Rocky Mountain oyster.”

Pim himself is reduced to meat, for a moment lifeless and resembling of the animal matter being processed around him.

We might find some significance in Sorman's decision to describe Pim as 'un rognon blanc' – a bull's testicle. Considered by some a delicacy, the testicle is here more impactful as a symbol that locates Pim's being in a physical organ: it threatens to reduce Pim to a generative organ, as if to void material life of all capacity to carry greater meaning beyond the somewhat machine-like function of reproduction.

Taking control, Pim's body becomes a prison in this moment, a reading reinforced by Sorman's account of blood escaping from a lifeless body, which she describes in the terms of a liberation: « c'est plutôt la violence avec laquelle [le sang] s'échappe de la plaie, c'est sa force, son impatience, c'est la vie qui se libère, vous saute à la gueule et vous éclabousse. » (*Ibid*, 60)¹³ Life is thus held captive within corporeality.

The majority of the circumstances that provoke representation of the eating body as an 'other' – a terrifying and disgusting machine-prison inhabited by the subject – the majority of these circumstances are instances of the *productive opening* of the body that fixate on the moment when food in its various forms exits the physical subject. Fixation on output constructs the body as a machine-prison in which the subject is trapped, and over which the subject has little control. In other words, this conceptualization of the body is instructed not by an inquiry *into* the body's internal processes, but rather by an external observation of the body as productive:

L'idée que tout ce que nous absorbons (air-aliment-eau-sperme) nous traverse entièrement pour ressortir plus

¹³ "...the blood flees from the gash with a forceful, impatient violence. It is life being liberated, it springs from your throat and spatters everywhere."

loin transformé (gaz-excrément-urine-bébé) ne cesse de nous surprendre et la surprise s'accroît encore du fait que la matière ne se contente pas de se métamorphoser en une autre matière repérable, mais aussi en énergie, en intelligence ou en bêtise, bref en une série de gestes sociaux et affectifs que nous accomplissons en oubliant (ou en feignant d'oublier) que les spaghetti et le vin rosé de la veille y sont pour quelque chose. (Châtelet 1977: 39)¹⁴

In the next section, we will continue to examine how eating observed and analyzed from an external perspective prompts a certain conceptualization of materiality as base and of the subject as a mind-body dualism. The next section will explore discussions of *food choice*. In these instances, eating is conceptualized as a site of transcendence, a site where biological necessity and a project of meaning creation intersect to invest food and food ritual with symbolic value.

ii. The Body as 'Just a Body'

Quite often, the authors of our corpus understand eating as a simply symbolic act of self-definition. In these instances, the material food's interaction with the subject's physicality – indeed the entire material dimension of eating – is of negligible value in constructing the subject when compared with the way the subject *intellectualizes* eating. In other words, the immaterial, symbolic value that the consumption of a particular food in a particular way carries for the subject takes

¹⁴ That everything we absorb (air–sustenance–water–sperm) entirely traverses us to come out later transformed (gas–excrement–urine–baby) never ceases to amaze us and the astonishment increases when we consider the fact that matter not only metamorphoses in another reconstituted matter, but also in energy, intelligence or stupidity, in short in a series of social and affective gestures which we perform forgetting (or pretending to forget) that the spaghetti and the rosé eaten the night before serve a function.

precedence as that which truly affects the subject, and eating becomes an act of self-definition more than one of physical reconstitution.

Here, the subject is conceptualized as an arbitrary material entity in an arbitrary material world. This formulation of the human condition has much consonance with existentialist lines of thought – that the human subject is thrown arbitrarily into the world, a world devoid of any *a priori*'s, and thus of any fixed identities or predetermined meaning. The subject's existence as a physicality precedes its essence, which is entirely self-determined. This approach to physicality belongs to what Haynes and other thinkers term a reductive theory of matter, "which sees matter as passive, inert and mechanistic... a mere reflection of the subject's determinations characteristic of idealist and humanist philosophies." (Haynes 2014: 3-4) In this relationship, the body is just a body and the subject is that body's agent, free to create meaning and context in whatever way it chooses.

In *L'élégance du hérisson*, food choice is emphasized as a major site of meaning creation. It is an act of autobiographical narration, a language employed by individuals to assert a desired personal identity to themselves and to others. To many of Barbery's characters, most of whom are victims of crippling insecurity, the act of self-narration (asserting that 'this is who I am' in some way) is of vital importance. Paloma, the twelve-year-old savant and daughter of a high-ranking Socialist government minister, writes the following of her insecure family members: « Quand ma mère offre des macarons de chez Ladurée à Mme de Broglie, elle se raconte à elle-même l'histoire de sa vie et ne fait que grignoter sa propre saveur ; quand papa

boit son café et lit son journal, il se contemple dans une glace tendance méthode Coué » (Barbery 2006: 154).¹⁵

Paloma's family members feed themselves their own myths to both maintain their self-esteem, and to sustain the momentum of the narrative that they write themselves into in order to make sense of the world and their place in it. In this regard, the novel and its characters understand food consumption to be at once a quotidian and yet deeply symbolic act of autobiographical narration:

Mais chaque matin, même s'il y a eu une séance nocturne et qu'il n'a dormi que deux heures, il se lève à six heures et il lit son journal en buvant son café bien fort. C'est comme ça que papa se bâtit chaque jour. Je dis « se bâtit » parce que je pense que c'est à chaque fois une nouvelle construction, comme si tout avait été réduit en cendres pendant la nuit et qu'il fallait repartir de zéro... Pour papa, le journal et le café sont les baguettes magiques qui le transforment en homme d'importance. (*Ibid*, 95-96)¹⁶

Paloma's father exploits his physical need as a site of meaning creation where he 'constructs' his identity as an important man of state by symbolically ingesting that beverage which he feels reflects this desired identity. He thus feeds himself his own personal mythos. The universality and ubiquity of food are stressed in the above passage: at base, eating is a primary condition of our existence as physical beings, a necessary activity that punctuates our everyday and accumulates meaning and significance the more we exploit it as a medium of self-narration.

¹⁵ "When my mother offers Ladurée macaroons to Madame de Broglie, she is narrating the story of her life to herself, nibbling at its savor. When papa drinks his coffee and reads his paper he contemplates himself in a mirror as if according to Coué's method, lost in a ritual of autosuggestion."

¹⁶ "But each morning, even if there was a night session and he hasn't slept but two hours, he gets up at six and reads his newspaper, drinking his strong coffee. This is how papa builds himself each day. I say he 'builds himself' because to me it seems that each day brings a new construction, as if all was reduced to ashes during the night and he has to start again from zero... For papa, newspaper and coffee are the magic sticks that transform him into a man of importance."

Here, the physical interaction of food with the body does nothing to transform the subject – it only transforms the body. As with Plato’s dualistic subject, wherever the body is understood as ‘just a body’ the ‘real’ subject is conceptualized as residing in a higher, immaterial dimension, here invoked as the dimension of the intellect. This means that the transformation of the subject is not catalyzed by a two party, participatory interaction with the material world, but through a solo act of self-definition. As Probyn observes, “eating and food are ways in which we perform identities and produce realities.” (Probyn 2000: 21) This act of self-definition takes place in the immaterial dimension of the intellect, where the subject places symbolic value on the food it chooses to consume, and the manner in which it consumes that food.

iii. Mind-Body Dualism and Transcendence

Barbery, Sorman and Nothomb build their literary works around discussions of food and eating, and in those works we find two versions of corporeality that cast materiality as somehow inferior. These two portrayals of the eating body are conceptualized through recourse to the same technique of casting the subject’s materiality as a sort of ‘otherness’ – either through the isolation of physicality to its own, semi-autonomous, repulsive, and ominously pulsating realm, or the subtle reduction of the body to dumb materiality, a lifeless puppet that is manipulated and endowed with meaning by a superior intellect.

When invoking the body as machine-prison-other, these authors consistently portray individual body parts and organs as what I have called ‘machine parts’: Barbery’s stinking intestines, the rhythm of Nothomb’s digestive system, and Sorman’s butcher’s eyes that roll and cry of their own accord: « Absence de sentiment, aucune trace de tremblement, mais de l’eau qui coule d’un robinet mal fermé, une fuite sur le réseau, une fontaine mécanique. » (Sorman 2012: 17)¹⁷ When invoking the body as ‘just a body’, emphasis is placed on the *intellectualization* of eating – Paloma’s father taking coffee to reaffirm his desired identity, or her mother narrating her life’s story through the choice of Ladurée macaroons.

This discourse on the materiality of the subject inherent in works composed around food and eating has inspired a vision of the subject as *embodied*. In other words, our three authors conceptualize a subject that is *in* a body, and thus in a relation to the body. The body is an other, an inferior, material dimension of the subject that is nonetheless perceived and portrayed as somehow separate and to a certain extent, non-human (the concept of machine – explicit or implied – is directly opposed to that of humanity, most explicitly in Sorman).

How, then, do these authors conceptualize the subject in these instances where physicality is invoked as either dumb matter or a machine-body-prison-container for that subject, and rejected on grounds of disgust and suggested inhumanness? If not the body itself, then *where* does what seems for these authors to be a suggested notion of the ‘real’ subject reside? We find a response to this question emerge in the form of an implied soul- or mind-body dichotomy, the notion that the subject is comprised of

¹⁷ “An utter lack of sentiment, no trace of trembling, rather, water that flows from a poorly shut faucet, a mechanical fountain.”

both an immaterial and subordinate material dimension. Barbery's *L'élégance du hérisson* exhibits the most definitive separation of the food-centered subject into immateriality – 'soul/mind' – and materiality – the body, as Paloma claims: « [L]es haricots verts et la vitamine C, même s'ils nourrissent la bête, ne sauvent pas la vie et ne sustentent pas l'âme » (Barbery 2006: 89).¹⁸ As in Plato's *Phaedo* and in the work of Plotinus cited by Kuehn, to call up the soul ('l'âme') as the cohabiting 'other' in the machine-body is to declare a non-corporeal, *transcendent* dimension of the subject to which the 'real' subject belongs, and thus establish the subject as a vertical hierarchy such as that described by Haynes at the beginning of this chapter. This vertical hierarchy of being demands that the subject transcend its materiality to locate itself in immateriality, conceptualized as a mind or soul.

Sorman and Nothomb, however, are more reticent about establishing such a definitive hierarchy, though by no means do they avoid the idea altogether. Instead, they play in the ambiguous space of *la tête*, 'the head'. Sorman's narrator muses: « Les hommes sont des têtes tandis que les animaux sont des corps », though we are never granted full departure from embodiment, humanity remaining 'les têtes', a word that, as in English, implies both the bodiless mind ('l'esprit') and the embodied mind, synonymous with the brain, the head (Sorman 2012: 47).¹⁹ Yet even this separation of head from body understands the subject as dichotomous and hierarchized, again calling for transcendence – that the 'real' human subject is located in the intellectual capacity of the head, and is therefore more than just an animal body.

¹⁸ "...even if they nourish the beast, green beans and vitamin C won't save your life, and they certainly can't sustain your soul."

¹⁹ "Humans are heads, whereas animals are bodies"

Nothomb also displays this ambiguous complicity with the mind-body dichotomy as a model of human subjectivity in her memoir *Biographie de la faim*. Recounting the agony of recovering from a period of severe anorexia in her adolescence, during which she tried to starve herself to death, Nothomb writes of a war between her mind and her body:

Malgré les hurlements de ma tête, mon corps se leva, alla dans la cuisine et mangea. Il mangea dans les larmes, car ma tête souffrait trop de ce qu'il faisait. Il mangea tous les jours. Comme il ne digérerait plus rien, les douleurs physiques s'ajoutèrent aux douleurs mentales : la nourriture était l'étranger, le mal. Le mot « diable » signifie : « ce qui sépare ». Manger était le diable qui séparait mon corps de ma tête. (Nothomb 2004: 221)²⁰

The passage forcefully reiterates the concept of the body as a machine-prison, holding Nothomb's mind captive while, seizing control like the body of Pim in the slaughterhouse, it continues its rhythm of eating and (attempted) digestion. Nothomb's body here answers to material necessity before mental mandate. But again, in Nothomb's choice of 'tête' as the noun representing the mind, there is this reluctance to concede the mind as somehow separate from the body, that is, as a non-organ organ.

Inherent in this reluctance to totally separate mind from body is the tragic ambiguity of the human condition so profoundly articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: that humanity is at once unfettered by the endless

²⁰ "Despite the screams of my head, my body would rise, go to the kitchen, and eat. It ate in tears as my head suffered greatly from what my body did. It ate every day. Because I was no longer able to digest anything, the physical torment was added to my existing mental grief: food was foreign, evil. The word 'devil' signifies "that which separates". Eating was the devil that separated my body from my head."

possibility of the intellect and its soaring ambitions, but bounded by the limitations of its material finitude:

Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence [of being towards nothingness] which the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby produced into his destiny. “Rational animal,” “thinking reed,” he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it. He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things...As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance.
(Beauvoir, 1948: 7)

Barbery and Nothomb’s characters are painfully aware of this ambiguity as they grapple with what one might term the essential question of both authors’ works, a question most succinctly posed by Barbery’s character Paloma from an armchair in the concierge Renée’s apartment; Paloma asks Renée: « Vous croyez que la vie a un sens ? » (Barbery 2006: 293)²¹

Renée and Paloma share a naturalist conception of the human being as an animal with no specific end other than the survivalist doctrine of evolution:

« Personne ne semble conscient du fait que, puisque *nous sommes* des animaux soumis au froid déterminisme des choses physiques, tout ce qui précède est caduc. »

²¹ “Do you think that life has a meaning?” or alternatively “Do you think there’s a sense to life?”

(*Ibid*, 59)²² Into this model of humanity, Renée inserts a nod to the existentialist principle *l'existence précède l'essence* ('existence precedes essence').

Throughout the novel, the two women pursue this line of existential inquiry into whether life does or can have a meaning, and time and again, they look to food for answers:

Le rituel du thé, cette reconduction précise des mêmes gestes et de la même dégustation, cette accession à des sensations simples, authentiques et raffinés, cette licence donnée à chacun, à peu de frais, de devenir un aristocrate du goût parce que le thé est la boisson des riches, comme elle est celle des pauvres, le rituel du thé, donc, a cette vertu extraordinaire d'introduire dans l'absurdité de nos vies une brèche d'harmonie sereine. Oui, l'univers conspire à la vacuité, les âmes perdues pleurent la beauté, l'insignifiance nous encercle. Alors, buvons une tasse de thé. (*Ibid*, 94)²³

In food ritual, specifically in that of tea, Paloma and Renée find solace and meaning, where the harsh and empty givens of nature – e.g. the physical need for food – are transformed into something of value. Barbery uses food ritual as an example of the transcendent project of sublimation, which allows humanity to transcend the harsher aspects of our material world. The theme of sublimation is a constant presence in Barbery's work, and the verb 'sublimier' is employed frequently to describe the goal of Renée's concept of 'Art', humanity's cultural project of transcendence: « Ces jours-là, vous avez désespérément besoin d'Art. Vous aspirez ardemment à renouer avec votre illusion spirituelle, vous souhaitez passionnément que quelque chose vous

²² "No one seems aware of the fact that, because *we are* animals submitted to the cold determinism of physical things, all *a priori*'s are obsolete."

²³ "The tea ceremony, that precise renewal of the same gestures and the same degustation; that accession to simple, authentic and refined sensations; that license granted each person, at a minimal fee, to become an aristocrat of taste because tea is the drink of the rich as well as the poor. The tea ceremony, then, has this extraordinary virtue of introducing a breach of serene harmony into the absurdity of our lives. Yes, the universe conspires to vacuity, lost souls mourn beauty, insignificance surrounds us. So let us drink a cup of tea."

sauve des destins biologiques pour que toute poésie et toute grandeur ne soient pas évincées de ce monde. Alors, vous buvez une tasse de thé » (*Ibid*, 102).²⁴

In this way, food is categorized as Art, and food consumption practice is simultaneously a metaphor for and performance of Barbery's human condition because it sublimates a physically necessary action. The animal necessity of nourishment is transformed into a *transcendent* act of autobiographical narration that accumulates meaning the more it is ritualized or intellectualized. Food without Art – food treated as pure material sustenance – is empty for Barbery's characters. Instead, what makes us truly human is our undertaking of transcendent projects of self-narration and meaning creation through which we rise above the arbitrariness of our material finitude.

In Nothomb, food choice resurfaces as the site of a transcendent project of meaning creation by which Prétexat Tach narrates himself into being. Tach does not share the transcendent optimism of Barbery's characters; he fails to embrace Beauvoir's existential ambiguity, and thus rejects the possibility of transcendence through intellectualization of material phenomena, choosing instead to wallow in a purely physicalist view of humanity that is equal parts tragic and base.

Tach falls into a pseudo-nihilism that disparages all faith in the concept of a creative human 'life of the mind'. He goes so far as to claim the intellectual exercise of writing as a mechanical, bodily process instead of an uplifting intellectual endeavor, stating that writing is the product of a form of orgasm produced by the temporary autonomy of the hand:

²⁴ “On days like these, you are desperately in need of Art. You ardently aspire to revive your illusions of spirituality; you passionately hope something will save you from your biological destiny in order that the world might not be divested of all poetry and all grandeur. So, you drink a cup of tea.”

La main, c'est pour jouir. C'est atrocement important.
Si un écrivain ne jouit pas, alors il doit s'arrêter à
l'instant... la jouissance la plus spécifique se situe dans
la main qui écrit. C'est une chose difficile à expliquer :
quand elle crée ce qu'elle a besoin de créer, la main
tressaille de plaisir, elle devient un organe
génial. (Nothomb 1992: 85, 87-88)²⁵

It is not Tach who writes, but the hand, whose autonomous physicality is emphasized, and whose 'génie' resides solely in that physicality ('elle devient un organe génial'). Such a perspective denies the human mind any capacity for transcendence and instead mires that mind in an autonomous, mechanical body to which even the mind's most brilliant works are attributed.

Tach is irreparably disgusted by the physical phenomenon of human adulthood, so much so that his adolescent incarnation resolves to remain pre-pubescent for as long as he possibly can. To execute this plan, the young Tach designs and implements a regimen of personal care – a *hygiène* – which involves a specific diet, described here by his interviewer, Nina:

à l'époque, le mot recouvrait tous les domaines de la
santé mentale et physique : l'hygiène était une
idéologie... Vous mangez le strict minimum. Certains
aliments sont interdits et d'autres conseillés, en vertu de
principes qui me semblent relever de la plus haute
fantaisie : vous interdisez les mets jugés
trop « adultes », tels que le canard à l'orange, la bisque
de homard et les nourritures de couleur noire. En
revanche, vous recommandez les champignons non pas
vénéneux mais réputés impropres à la consommation,
tels que les vesses-de-loup, dont vous vous gavez en
saison (Nothomb 1992: 136-37)²⁶

²⁵ “The hand is there to masturbate with – it's atrociously important. If a writer doesn't get off, he should stop his work immediately... the most specific pleasure situates itself in the hand that writes. It's difficult to explain: when the hand creates that which it needs to create, it quivers with pleasure, it becomes an organ of genius.”

²⁶ “...at the time, the word referenced all domains of mental and physical health: hygiene was an ideology... You ate the strict minimum. Certain foods were forbidden and others recommended by virtue of criteria that, to me, seem to stem from the most far-fetched of fantasies: you forbid plates

Barbery's notion of food choice alimentering a personal myth is present here, as we learn that the reasoning behind Tach's choices is a high-flying 'fantaisie.' Living in an elite environment, the adolescent Tach rejects what, at the time, most considered the height of culinary art, dishes such as lobster bisque and duck à l'orange. He foregoes such fare, which he judges to be too adult, in favor of marginalized natural foods. However, Tach is unable to ward off puberty forever, and neither is Léopoldine, his younger cousin with whom he has an incestuous relationship, and whom he has sustained on the same mythos for the entirety of their childhood.

Tach and Léopoldine have made a death pact: in the event that one of them should show signs of puberty, the other is responsible for their death. Léopoldine is the unlucky first, and Tach strangles her. Her absence triggers a diet-based metamorphosis in Tach, through which he attains the physical and mental state that he is to maintain for the rest of his life:

Croyez-moi, c'eût été sordide, car ce qui a suivi ce 13 août n'a été, jusqu'à aujourd'hui, qu'une déchéance immonde et grotesque. Dès le 14 août, l'enfant maigre et sobre que j'étais est devenu un goinfre épouvantable. Était-ce le vide laissé par la mort de Léopoldine ? J'avais continuellement faim de nourritures infâmes – ce goût m'est resté. En six mois, j'avais triplé de poids, j'étais devenu pubère et horrible, j'avais perdu tous mes cheveux, j'avais tout perdu. Je vous parlais de l'imagerie conventionnelle de ma famille : cette imagerie voulait que, suite à la mort d'un être cher, les proches jeûnassent et maigrissent. Ainsi, tous les gens du château jeûnaient et maigrissaient, tandis que, seul de ma scandaleuse espèce, je m'empiffrais et j'enflais à vue d'œil. Je me souviens, non sans hilarité, de ces repas contrastés : mes

judged too 'adult' such as duck à l'orange or lobster bisque, and you avoided any food that was blackish in color. On the contrary, you insisted on mushrooms that were nonpoisonous but still reputed to be improper for human consumption, such as puffballs, which you gorged yourself on when they were in season."

grands-parents, mon oncle et ma tante salissaient à peine leurs assiettes et, consternés, me regardaient vider les plats et bouffer comme un malpropre. (*Ibid*, 194)²⁷

There are multiple ways to read Tach's transformation. For instance, one might argue that the onset of Tach's hunger is a supernatural intervention, a manifestation of the forces of fate and justice enacting retribution in the universe of the novel, which punish Tach with piggishness and impose on him a dietary regime that forces an outward representation of his character's essence: nauseating, disgusting.

However, I am partial to another interpretation of the events described by Tach. This reading poses Tach's gravitation towards disgusting foods as an expression of his own bad faith and repressed self-loathing in the wake of his murderous act. In this case, obesity represents a new *hygiène*, one that is meant to exacerbate the aspects of human physical adulthood that are so loathsome to Tach such that instead of transcending his material condition (what the rest of humanity might identify as good faith), Tach forces himself to wallow in its least savory elements (a nihilistic bad faith). He – and not the forces of fate or justice – realizes his self-appointed title of *malpropre*, a scumbag, a swine.

Tach has reduced his being to the realm of the corporeal, and in doing so, he becomes a prime example of nihilistic bad faith. The nature of this bad faith is nicely

²⁷ “Believe me, it was sordid to watch: everything that followed that 13th of August, all the way to today, was vile and grotesque degeneration. After the 14th of August, the thin and somber child I was became an appalling glutton. Was it the emptiness left by the death of Léopoldine? I had a perpetual craving for repugnant foods – this preference has remained with me. In six months, I had gained three times my weight; I had become horrible and pubescent – I had lost my hair, I had lost everything. I’ll tell you about the conventional expectations of my family: in their minds, after the death of a loved one those closest should fast and their bodies diminish; yet I stuffed myself, swelling in plain view. I remember, not without a degree of hilarity, the wildly divergent atmosphere of those meals: my grandparents, my uncle and my aunt hardly sullied their plates and, appalled, watched me empty entire platters and gobble like a pig.”

summed up in his response to a journalist, who is perplexed at the heart's absence from the inventory of figurative body parts that Tach lists as necessary for a writer:

[journaliste] -À titre de sensibilité, d'affectivité, d'émotivité, voyons !
[Tach] -Tout ça dans un bête cœur plein de cholestérol ! (*Ibid*, 90)²⁸

Where others see the potential for transcendence of materiality in the human condition, Tach sees only rot and revulsion. For Tach, the heart is a mere organ destroyed by food intake, while for the rest of humanity it is infused with transcendent meaning, a symbol and epicenter of human emotion, more than 'just an organ smothered in cholesterol'. Indeed, the 'heartlessness' of Tach is anticipated by the narrator's commentary at the beginning of the novel: « il avait envoyé paître les recommandations des diététiciens et se nourrissait abominablement... Mais il buvait très modérément et pratiquait la chasteté depuis des temps immémoriaux : les médecins ne trouvaient pas d'autre explication au bon fonctionnement de son cœur étouffé par la graisse. » (*Ibid*, 8)²⁹ Food's incorporation into his physicality smothers the heart of Tach in a way that reads figuratively as well as literally.

A comparison with Barbery anchors the conversation for us: eating in this novel is never a site of transcendence the way it is in *L'élégance du hérisson*; instead, in Tach's hands food serves to produce the opposite effect – it grounds us, pulls us down to a sub-animal level. Tach wields eating as evidence of the pitiless law of entropy, the inevitability of decay that drives Tach to embrace a nihilistic doctrine. For this reason, Tach wallows in disgusting and destructive forms of nourishment:

²⁸ “[journaliste]: In the name of sensibility, affectivity, emotion, come on!”

“[Tach]: All that in a stupid heart full of cholesterol!”

²⁹ “He totally disregarded the recommendations of his dieticians and fed himself abominably... But he drank quite moderately, and had practiced chastity since time immemorial; the doctors were at a loss for how a heart so smothered in lard could function so well.”

le soir, je mange assez léger. Je me contente de choses froides, telles que des rillettes, du gras figé, du lard cru, l'huile d'une boîte de sardines... Avec ça, je bois un bouillon très gras que je prépare à l'avance : je fais bouillir pendant des heures des couennes, des pieds de porc, des croupions de poulet, des os à moelle avec une carotte. J'ajoute une louche de saindoux, j'enlève la carotte et je laisse refroidir durant vingt quatre heures. En effet, j'aime boire ce bouillon quand il est froid, quand la graisse s'est durcie et forme un couvercle qui rend les lèvres luisantes. (*Ibid*, 41)³⁰

If food is the site of transcendent Art in Barbery, it is artless in Nothomb. Tach eats the leftovers, the unwanted and unintended bits – intestines simmered in lard, pig's feet and pork rinds, chicken butts. He delights in wearing this mask of nihilistic repugnance, and his goal is to make journalists vomit: « Tach exploitait à fond les ressources peu connues de l'écoeurement. Le gras lui servait de napalm, l'alexandra d'arme chimique. Ce soir-là, il se frotta les mains comme un stratège heureux. » (*Ibid*, 43)³¹

Yet the disgust, the *hygiène* of repugnance, the delight in repelling others – it really is all just a mask, one that deceives inwardly as well as outward. The greatest irony in the universe of Nothomb's novel: though he decries the bad faith of humanity for the entirety of the novel, no one is a greater victim of bad faith than Prétéxat Tach. He is caught up in his own nihilistic lie, for nihilism still qualifies as a form of self-narration, a sort of personal myth. In this regard, food choice reveals Tach to be pursuing a project of meaning creation like all of those that he scoffs at:

³⁰ « ...most nights I eat light. I settle for cold foods, like rillettes, congealed fat, lard in the raw, the oil from a tin of sardines... With that, I drink a very fatty bouillon that I prepare in advance: I boil pork rinds, pig's feet, chicken butts and marrow bones for an hour with a carrot. I add a ladleful of lard, remove the carrot and I let it cool for another twenty-four hours. Actually, I like to drink this bouillon cold, when the fat has hardened to form a cover that makes the lips glisten.»

³¹ «Tach made full use of the arsenal of nausea. Fat was his napalm, an alexandra his chemical weapon. That night he rubs his palms together with glee, a scheming strategist.»

Prétextat Tach, lui, préférait les alexandra. Il buvait peu mais quand il voulait s'imbiber un rien, c'était toujours à l'alexandra. Il tenait à se les préparer lui-même, car il ne faisait pas confiance aux proportions des autres. Cet obèse intransigent avait coutume de répéter, jouissant de hargne, un adage de son cru : « On mesure la mauvaise foi d'un individu à sa manière de doser un alexandra. » Si l'on appliquait cet axiome à Tach lui-même, on était acculé à conclure qu'il était l'incarnation de la bonne foi. Une seule gorgée de son alexandra eût suffi à mettre knock-out le lauréat d'un concours d'absorption de jaunes d'œufs crus ou de lait concentré sucré. (*Ibid*, 23)³²

Tach delights in making his drinks exceedingly sweet and exceedingly rich. An alexandra is cognac, liqueur de cacao, and cream; one might expect such a character to drink something more disgusting, and while Tach's recipe is far from appetizing, there is something *disarming* about his choice of a sweet, almost feminine drink as his signature cocktail. Nothomb's narrator seems to mock Tach's idea of bad faith, labeling his system of judgment via the alexandra an 'axiom' when such a method clearly makes very little sense – it is Tach whose beliefs are foolish, and not those whom he judges.

Indeed, buried beneath the larded, nihilist exterior of Prétextat Tach is a will to live a life, and to create meaning within it. Breaking down at the novel's end, Tach begs Nina, his final journalist interviewer: « Aidez-moi à donner un sens à cette histoire, et n'ayez pas la mauvaise foi de me dire que nous n'avons pas besoin de sens : nous en avons besoin plus que de n'importe quoi. Rendez-vous compte ! »

³² “Prétextat Tach himself preferred to drink alexandras. He drank little, but when he wanted to imbibe a little something, it was always an alexandra. He insisted on preparing them himself, as he did not trust the proportions used by others. This intransigent fatman had the habit of repeating, with joyful belligerence, an adage of his own creation: “One measures the bad faith of an individual by how he mixes an alexandra.” If one were to apply this axiom to Tach, they'd be forced to conclude that he was the incarnation of good faith. A single sip of his alexandra would administer a sufficient KO to the laureate of a contest for absorbing raw egg yolks or sweetened condensed milk.”

(*Ibid*, 198)³³ He contradicts himself entirely and begs for meaning in life – the author begs for his own life to be set in a narrative. He begs to transcend the arbitrariness of material finitude.

³³ “Help me give a meaning to this story, and don’t have the bad faith to tell me that we aren’t in need of meaning: we need it more than anything else, don’t you realize!”

CHAPTER II:

The Subject as Material Flux: an Edible World

In the previous chapter, we explored how the authors of our corpus use the act of eating to advance of a notion of the subject as dualistic, divided along the lines of material and immaterial elements from which a mind/body dualism emerges. The dualistic subject is almost always a transcendent subject, aspiring away from its material condition of embodiment to site itself entirely in immateriality – the mind, the soul, the intellect, or a project of meaning or identity creation where materiality is perceived to offer no *a priori* meaning or identity of its own.

Locating the subject outside of embodiment (e.g. in an immaterial intellect, mind or soul) only allows eating to function as an exercise in self-definition for the subject, a lens through which to perceive the world and situate oneself in it, but nothing more. In other words, the subject conceived as a mind-body dualism restricts eating to a practice imposed upon or engaged in by the subject, one expressive practice among many others through which the subject reinforces notions of identity, and seeks to transcend the alleged purposelessness of its material environment.

Put simply, eating for the dualistic subject is understood as a *purely symbolic* act. For the dualistic subject, eating only constructs identity insofar as the mind – that immaterial dimension of the subject – *intellectualizes* the act of eating. Food ritual, like Renée's tea ceremony or Prétéxtat Tach's regime of fatty foods, exemplifies the intellectualization of eating: it is the symbolic value placed on the food and the way it is eaten, and not the actual food or the physical act of eating itself, that confirms an

identity desired by the subject. Physical food itself only transforms the material dimensions of the dualistic subject – it passes through the machine body and emerges as unpleasant excrement, a reminder that the ‘real’ subject resides in an immaterial dimension. Materiality possesses no real agency for the dualistic subject; the material world is dumb and inert, it exists to be intellectualized, interpreted, manipulated and given meaning through ritual and practice. Eating in this context is merely an expressionist act that seeks to express in material terms that which originates in the intellectual.

As was demonstrated in the first chapter, discussion of the more disgusting and unnerving aspects of corporeality cause us to reject our materiality and aspire to situate ourselves in what we see as a superior, immaterial realm. This explains why the dualistic subject is conjured around descriptions of excrement, meat processing, and machine-bodies that seem to ‘take control’. In distancing ourselves from our corporeality the body becomes nothing but an inferior ‘other’ with which we share our existence and on which we depend in order to interact with the material world and fulfill material needs. Perceived in this way, my materiality is never quite ‘me’; instead, the body is something that the dualistic subject observes from the *outside*: food goes in, excrement comes out; Paloma’s father drinks coffee to transform himself into ‘a man of importance’, but the interaction of his body with the matter that comprises the coffee is purely symbolic and only transforms his body – what transforms *him* is the act of identity construction that takes place outside the body in his mind, where the ‘real him’ is located.

If consideration of the disgusting aspects of corporeality causes us to reject materiality, what happens when our authors discuss the *desirable* aspects of corporeality? When our authors approach eating from the perspective of hunger, desire, and sensual pleasure, materiality is embraced and the body ceases to be an inferior ‘other’, understood instead as ‘me’. Instead of observing the body from the outside, our authors prompt us to be the body, to *be inside* the eating subject: in the mouth, on the tongue, down the esophagus, and in the gut where digestion and incorporation of food take place.

In this chapter we will shift our focus from our authors’ portrayal of a dualistic material-immaterial model of the subject to explore the presence of a subject located entirely *inside* materiality. Where the dualistic subject’s universe is hierarchized, divided into the inferior realm of the material, and the superior realm of the immaterial, the material subject inhabits a wholly material, non-hierarchically structured universe. Here, matter is all there is: the subject is a body composed solely of matter in a state of flux, constantly reconstituting itself through interaction and exchange with the material world around it. Drawing on biological understanding of how the material subject is constituted through physical interaction with its world – namely through the act of digestion and incorporation of matter into one’s own being – our authors here introduce eating as a way of being and becoming, an *ontology*.³⁴

Eating as ontology stands in stark contrast to the dualistic subject’s purely symbolic view of eating; eating in this case is the very condition of being. To be is to

³⁴ Ontology is understood throughout this project in the non-philosophical sense as “a theory or conception relating to the nature of being” (OED). When I refer to ‘eating as ontology’, I am referring to a conception of being (existence) where an abstract understanding of eating fundamentally structures existence. In other words, existence is modeled on and structured by the act of eating.

eat; to eat is to be constantly *becoming* – transformed by eating one’s world. In so many words, the material subject literalizes the concept that ‘you are what you eat’ – through eating (especially digestion) it incorporates the world around it and thus reconstitutes itself. Here, the subject is not constituted by its own intellectualization of its interactions with the material world, but by its material (physical) interaction and exchange with the world. The subject for whom eating is ontology is a subject in flux, constantly transformed by physical engagement with its world.

In the first section of this chapter, I will provide a theoretical basis for the consideration of eating as ontology. We will examine numerous thinkers’ responses to the question *what is eating?* as we seek to define the idea of eating as ontology in greater depth. The second section begins a discussion of how eating as ontology is actually present in our authors’ texts. Here we address depictions of the eating subject that treat hunger as a vital drive that conditions being by urging physical contact and exchange with the material subject’s world. The third section examines portrayals of taste as the actual site of the physical interaction between subject and world that hunger urges. Finally, the fourth section studies representations of digestion that advance the notion of *becoming* through eating the world, and the implications of conceptualizing subjectivity in this way.

i. Understanding Eating as Ontology: theoretical frameworks

How do we understand eating – what does eating consist in, and how can it be understood more specifically as a way of being? As was established at the outset of

this inquiry, to think subjectivity with and through food is to inherently implicate corporeality as a core aspect of being: the eating subject is necessarily an embodied subject. Eating as ontology therefore implies corporeality as a foundational condition of being – the world is comprised of bodies in a state of constant contact and exchange, a state of flux. Glenn Kuehn succinctly articulates this notion of eating as ontology when he discusses “a sense of the self as bodily interactive in an environment. First, our physical involvement with our edible environment offers stomach-oriented philosophical perspectives that demonstrate how philosophy begins in the concrete and specific and not in the transcendental and general.” (Kuehn 2001: 2) Eating as ontology does not treat eating as a symbolic practice, but as a material exchange between subject and world where subject and world are conceived as bodies in flux: they mix, eat and are eaten.

“The world is there to be eaten,” writes David Goldstein in reference to the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who examines eating as a way of being in his philosophical ethics (Goldstein 2010: 36). For our authors, the subject for whom eating is ontology eats its world, *digests* it and becomes it. To reiterate a point made in the last chapter, Châtelet notes that the dualistic subject’s experience of eating is governed by a knowledge of the body perceived from the outside, one that neglects « les étapes intermédiaires du flux nutritif « linéaire » (machine-estomac, machine-intestin), se retrouvant, du coup, devant ce raccourci surprenant : manger, c’est faire se connecter au-delà de connections intermédiaires, la bouche et l’anus. »

(Châtelet 1977: 40)³⁵ Instead of the abridged understanding of eating as connecting mouth and anus previously described by Châtelet, here the internal process of digestion takes precedence as the medium and model that structures eating as ontology.

The digestive act of incorporation ignored by the dualistic subject now becomes a highly literal contact with and absorption of the world into the subject: “We are transformed by food because it is that part of the world which travels through us. It is not just filtered by us, like air, but it literally traverses our bodies from one end to the other. This is a transformative experience which has meaning from the visceral to the ethereal.” (Kuehn 2001: 66-67) Kuehn coins the term ‘stomach-oriented philosophy’ as a way of referencing the conceptualization of subjectivity along the lines of a physical exchange with one’s world, namely through the digestive act of incorporation: “Thus, philosophical stomach-orientation comes directly from a depiction of the self as an embodied, interactive, organism-in-an-environment.” (*Ibid*, 137) Elspeth Probyn elaborates on Kuehn’s notion of the subject as bodily interactive in its environment by explaining *how* the subject is constituted through exchange with its environment. She describes the subject in terms of assemblage theory.³⁶

Moving away from much of the literature that sees in
eating a confirmation of identity, I propose that in
eating we lose ourselves in a wild morphing ... what

³⁵ “...intermediary steps of the ‘linear’ digestive process (stomach-machine, intestinal-machine), suddenly finds himself enacting this surprising ellipsis: beyond those intermediary connections, to eat is simply to connect the mouth and the anus.”

³⁶ “Assemblage theory is an approach to systems analysis that emphasizes fluidity, exchangeability, and multiple functionalities. Assemblages appear to be functioning as a whole, but are actually coherent bits of a system whose components can be “yanked” out of one system, “plugged” into another, and still work.” (University of Texas at Austin 2010)

Foucault calls ‘that obscure desire...to become other than oneself’...Against arguments that see in eating a confirmation of a predetermined identity, the point is to focus on the different forms of alimentary assemblages. It is here that we see glimpses of the types of intermingling of bodies that suggest other ways of inhabiting the world. (Probyn 2000: 8)

The subject is conceptualized as flux, something that is perpetually morphing, reconstituted by its incessant exchange with the other bodies in its environment.

Variants of this notion of the subject as material assemblage and flux have circulated since antiquity when, drawing on the idea of the atom advanced by Leucippus of Abdera and his pupil Democritus, Epicurus and his disciples hypothesized that “all the forms that we observe are temporary: the building blocks from which they are composed will sooner or later be redistributed.” (Greenblatt 2011: 175) We see this kind of materialism surface as a valid and popular ontological framework in the late 18th century, when thinkers like Diderot give voice to wild ideas of a material world in a state of constant transformation, as in this passage from Diderot’s *D’Alembert’s Dream*:

There is but one great individual, and that is the whole. In this whole, as in any machine or animal, there is a part which you may call such and such, but when you apply the term individual to this part of a whole you are employing as false a concept as though you applied the term individual to this part of a bird’s wing or to a single feather of that wing. You poor philosophers, and you talk about essences! Drop your idea of essences. Consider the general mass, or if your imagination is too limited to take it all in, consider your own origin and your final state... Alive, I act and react as a mass... dead I act and react as separate molecules... Don’t I die then? Well, not in that sense, neither I nor anything else.... To be born, to live and to die is merely to change forms. (Tancock trans. 1966: 181-82)

Rather than a subjectivity organized by the vertical hierarchy of materiality (base) and immateriality (idealized), these thinkers propose the subject as existing within a horizontally organized, wholly material universe. Diderot's passage represents a materialist philosophy of *immanence*, immanence defined broadly by Haynes as "that which remains within certain limits or bounds." (Haynes 2014: 1) Materialist philosophies of immanence such as those of Diderot and Gilles Deleuze "assert that immanence is all there is; there is no beyond 'out there', no exteriority, no divine otherness viewed as separate, independent and superior in relation to mundane immanence." (*Ibid*, 4). When Diderot speaks of 'the whole' or the 'general mass' he is giving voice to a materialist philosophy of immanence, the idea that there is nothing outside of the material world.

Philosophies of material immanence from thinkers like Diderot and Deleuze, and as we shall see, like those advanced by our authors' concept of eating as ontology, are classified by Haynes as a particular form of materialism that is "more attitudinal than doctrinal, and refers more generally to any theorizing dedicated to avowing embodiment, flesh, nature, sensibility, desires, affects, material processes and so forth." (*Ibid*, 4) Operating in this way, philosophies of material immanence undermine traditional ideas of the subject and subjectivity structured around dichotomy and hierarchy, and replace them with the notion of a horizontal continuum of being and becoming:

Deleuze's non-reductive materialism confounds those classic dichotomies beloved of the western philosophical tradition, where the opposition between mind (positively valued) and matter (negatively valued) underwrites the opposing of the organic to the inorganic, spirit to the corporeal, the agential to the

mechanistic, form to formlessness, and subject to object. (*Ibid*, 56)

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate that the fictional works examined in this project extend eating as ontology far beyond the literal understanding of eating as a physical exchange of molecular components. What emerges is something strikingly similar to the concept of Holy Communion: eating is an interaction where I absorb the qualities of that which I ingest, whether it be a hamburger, a piece of writing, or the Eucharist.

Eating is understood as becoming in this sense – it is an activity that makes fluid the boundary between the subject and its environment, meaning that the eating subject is in a state of constant *becoming*. Probyn’s work gives voice to this notion of eating as becoming:

Through the optic of food and eating, I want to investigate how as individuals we inhabit the present: how we eat into cultures, eat into identities, indeed eat into ourselves...I seek to use the materiality of eating, sex and bodies in order to draw out alternative ways of thinking about an ethics of existence, ways of living informed by...the rawness of a visceral engagement with the world. (Probyn 2000: 2-3)

It is this visceral engagement with the world that forms the basis for eating as ontology, and for understanding the subject as material flux and constant becoming.

ii. Ontological hunger

How is eating as ontology present in the literature examined by this project?

All of our authors employ characterizations of an ontological hunger to advance a notion of eating as a way of being. At its most basic, hunger is conceptualized by the

dualistic subject of the machine-body as a base physical need. However, when eating is conceptualized as ontology, hunger is invoked by all as the force that drives the subject to mix with its environment. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas alleges that “at the root of need there is not a lack of being but, on the contrary, a plenitude of being” (Goldstein 2010: 36). Levinas refers to hunger not simply as a fact of embodiment but as an ontological force, a desire much like Carl Jung’s concept of libido that both conditions and drives the subject’s behavior.³⁷

Echoing Levinas, Amélie Nothomb gives a concise and potent account of how hunger structures being: « L’homme se construit à partir de ce qu’il a connu au cours des premiers mois de sa vie : s’il n’a pas éprouvé la faim, il sera l’un de ces étranges élus, ou de ces étranges damnés, qui n’édifieront pas leur existence autour du manqué. » (Nothomb 2004: 24).³⁸ Nothomb explains that hunger is not simply a bodily need, but an existential lack at the core of one’s being that denies a dichotomous model of the subject as divided into the physical and the intellectual: « Existe-t-il une faim du ventre qui ne soit l’indice d’une faim généralisée? Par faim, j’entends ce manque effroyable de l’être entier, ce vide tenaillant, cette aspiration non

³⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* characterizes libido as synonymous with ‘life instinct’ and gives the following definition:

Libido, concept originated by Sigmund Freud to signify the instinctual physiological or psychic energy associated with sexual urges and, in his later writings, with all constructive human activity. In the latter sense of eros, or life instinct, libido was opposed by thanatos, the death instinct and source of destructive urges; the interaction of the two produced all the variations of human activity. Freud considered psychiatric symptoms the result of misdirection or inadequate discharge of libido. Carl Jung used the term in a more expansive sense, encompassing all life processes in all species. Later theories of motivation have substituted for libido such related terms as drive and tension. (Britannica 2014)

³⁸ “Man begins to construct himself based on what he came to know in the first months of his life: if he never felt hunger, he will be one of those strange elects, or perhaps one of those strange condemned, whose existence is not built around lack.”

tant à l'utopique plénitude qu'à la simple réalité: là où il n'y a rien, j'implore qu'il y ait quelque chose. » (*Ibid*, 23)³⁹

Nothomb's hunger as lack precipitates a vital urge to *fill*, an urge to which Sorman's characters are also party when she describes a group of laughing teenagers as « outrés par le vide de la nuit. » (Sorman 2012: 35).⁴⁰ This eating as filling is not a purely symbolic interaction with the material as in the case of the dualistic subject. Rather, hunger understood in this sense is a literal desire to *incorporate* the object of one's hunger and thus to expand or reconstitute one's being.

Hunger understood in this context is both a perpetual state of being and a positive force of vitality whose goal is to grow and transform the subject. It is apprehended as the urge to reach outwards into the world with the intent of exchange, an understanding of hunger that reinforces the notion of being as the interaction of bodies in a state of constant flux and becoming:

Levinas seems first to be suggesting that hunger is not a need at all, or not exclusively so. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a desire, a conduit for embracing the world with one's "joyous appetite for things"... Secondly, rather than try to ignore hunger and eating as merely physical phenomena, Levinas uses them to articulate just what it means to be part of the world, to feel oneself in being. (Goldstein, 2010: 36)

Levinas' characterization of hunger as vitality is forcefully present in Amélie

Nothomb's memoir *Biographie de la faim*. To be, she claims, is to be hungry: « La faim, c'est moi. Le rêve des physiciens est de parvenir à expliquer l'univers à partir

³⁹ "Is there such a thing as a hunger of the stomach that is not also a general hunger? By hunger, I mean that frightful lack of one's entire being, that gnawing emptiness, that aspiration not so much to utopian plenty as to this simple reality: where there is nothing, I implore that it might be filled by something."

⁴⁰ "...outraged by the emptiness of the night."

d'une seule loi. Il paraît que c'est très difficile. À supposer que je sois un univers, je tiens en cette force unique : la faim. » (Nothomb 2004: 22).⁴¹ The potent image of the individual as a universe governed by the force of hunger and its laws directly establishes eating as a way of being, the fundamental condition that structures being within the universe of the novel. Furthermore, the characterization of the subject as a universe reveals a conceptualization of the subject as an assemblage in perpetual motion whose component parts are consistently reorganized by a single force, that of hunger. This notion of how hunger structures being calls to mind Probyn's claim that "[f]ood/body/eating assemblages reveal the ways in which identity has become elementary, and that its composite elements are always in movement." (Probyn 2000: 32)

Barbery also conceives of hunger as vitality through her protagonist Renée, who is not truly 'alive' until she feels hunger:

À qui ne connaît pas l'appétit, la première morsure de la faim est à la fois une souffrance et une illumination. J'étais une enfant apathique et quasiment infirme, le dos voûté jusqu'à ressembler à une bosse, et qui ne se maintenait dans l'existence que de la méconnaissance qu'il pût exister une autre voie. L'absence de goût chez moi confinait au néant ; rien ne me parlait, rien ne m'éveillait (Barbery 2006: 40-41)⁴²

Without hunger, Barbery's Renée is lifeless and isolated from the world around her.

Vitality is here characterized not simply as being biologically alive, but as having the desire to pursue, to interact, to become – cliché as it sounds, to be truly alive is to be

⁴¹ "Hunger – I *am* hunger. The physicist's dream is to explain the universe with a single law. That seems very difficult. If I were myself a universe, I would be governed by this one force, by this law only: hunger."

⁴² "For those who do not know appetite, hunger's first bite is at once an anguish and an illumination. I was an apathetic child, infirm in appearance with a stooped back that almost resembled a hump, and who only continued to exist that way out of ignorance of the fact that there might be another way to live. My absence of appetite confined me to nothingness; nothing spoke to me, nothing awoke me"

hungry. Barbery and Nothomb employ a vocabulary of awakening when discussing hunger: « Comment ne pas en conclure d’abord que ces gens avaient eu faim, ensuite que cela les avait éveillés? » (Nothomb 2004: 13-14)⁴³ Hunger spurs the subject to life by urging interaction with the world; it eats the subject, it literally *bites* (‘la première *morsure* de la faim...’).

Thus hunger eats the subject, which in turn becomes the hungry subject compelled to eat the world around it: « Puisque ma faim ne pouvait être apaisée dans le jeu d’interactions sociales que ma condition rendait inconcevables...elle le serait dans les livres...L’enfant débile est devenue une âme affamée. » (*Ibid*, 42-43)⁴⁴ Charged with hunger, Renée reaches *outwards* into the world around her to enrich her being. She reaches out to interact with other human beings (unsuccessfully), and then with literature. By describing her interactions with the world in the language of hunger, Barbery’s Renée shares Levinas’s philosophy that ‘the world is there to be eaten’.

Ontological hunger is the desire to ingest and digest the world, but what exactly happens when subject eats world? To answer this question, it will be necessary to examine how our authors depict the act of ingesting, and then digesting the world in the next two sections.

⁴³ “How could one not immediately conclude that these people had experienced hunger, and that that hunger awakened them?”

⁴⁴ “As my hunger could not be appeased by participation in the social game, which my condition rendered inconceivable, it would instead be satisfied...by books...the feeble child became a famished soul.”

iii. Tasting the World: the intimacy and sensuality of eating, taste as an epistemological phenomenon

An anecdote from Jon Reiner's memoir *The Man Who Couldn't Eat* will serve us as a transition from our discussion of hunger to an examination of the subject's more explicitly physical encounter with food: the sensual experience of taste.

Reiner's memoir recounts how being medically unable to eat profoundly impacted his life. In the aftermath of a severe intestinal rupture, Reiner was placed on a stomach pump that fed him via a tube running directly from the small machine to his stomach, with the result that he was prohibited from tasting his food.

Reiner was overtaken by what he describes in an interview as "an existential hunger" where food invaded every corner of his consciousness: "I can't stop thinking about food, I'm remembering food I ate twenty years ago like I had it that afternoon, and I'm online looking up restaurants that I've gone to, and looking up recipes for dishes that I've made." (Radiolab 2012) After a month of watching his family eat dinner each night, Reiner began to experience bizarre, evocative daydreams: "Maybe the most vivid side effect of total food deprivation is that everything conjures food, and I rarely see it coming. Sometimes when I look at Finny's basted kid legs stepping out of the shower, I half expect him to morph into a pluckable chicken bobbing around the room." (Reiner 2011: 116)

Unable to eat his world, he felt himself defined by an emptiness of being. His description of his taste-less self evokes the same image of a living corpse found in Nothomb's anorexic self-portrait⁴⁵ and, to a lesser extent, in Barbery's description of

⁴⁵ (Nothomb 2004: 211) : « Après deux mois de douleur, le miracle eut enfin lieu : la faim disparut...J'avais tué mon corps...Juliette devint maigre et moi squelettique...à dire vrai, je n'éprouvais plus rien. » / "After two months of suffering, the miracle was finally staged: my hunger

Renée before she experiences hunger: “The person mirrored on the TV border is stunning: haunted eyes and a narrow head like a railroad apartment, a cadaverous figure punctured in the middle by a bloody hole.” (Reiner 2011: 118) Reiner’s condition worsened as confinement to the stomach pump inflicted unforeseeable emotional hardships; his wife took time off from their marriage and he began having suicidal thoughts.

Reiner had never anticipated the extent to which eating and being are interconnected. His experience functions as a nuanced aesthetics of eating, allowing us a window into the complexity of how we conceptualize eating at various intervals of our engagement with food. For example, Reiner describes reaching a breaking point one night when a neighbor baked a chocolate Bundt cake for his family:

I breathe deeper, I smell it all: Mount Gay or the jivey Captain Morgan that you always see splashed on subway ads, it makes no difference; flour, butter, sugar, the pair of borrowed eggs. Crumbs sprinkle my forehead. I’m arching to jump in the center hole and bury myself in the cake. Smell isn’t enough. I touch the cake with clumsy fingers, running them through brown chunks that crumble impossibly...I plunge my hands into the mound, and then Susan walks into the kitchen.”
(*Ibid*, 127)

In his quest to simulate taste by combining his other senses, Reiner demonstrates that the act of eating is underwritten by much more than a desire to satisfy biological needs. Indeed, Reiner has titled his memoir *The Man Who Couldn’t Eat*, and in so doing he sets forth an implicit definition of what it means to eat. Reiner’s condition does not prevent him from receiving nutrients, but it does prevent him from having the intimate physical encounter with food afforded by *tasting*. His title thus implies

disappeared...I had killed my body...Juliette had become thin, and I skeletal...truthfully, I didn’t feel anything anymore.”

that eating is really tasting, and what Reiner misses most about taste is the sense of *connection* with the object of his hunger: “I plunge my hands into the cake in order to get some sense of connection with the food” (Radiolab 2012).

Taste is the site of the subject’s intimate and profound connection with the edible world:

Taste is the most physically intimate of the five senses. Taste cannot be experienced without taking a bit of the world and putting it into one’s body. Like the sense of touch, taste involves a direct physical contact with the object, and like the sense of smell, taste involves something entering the body. But unlike these sensations, the objects we taste are incorporated into the body. The objects we taste are assimilated, processed, and transformed through the body. (Kuehn 2001: 116)

Taste then becomes an epistemological capacity of eating as ontology: hunger is the desire for contact with a piece of the world, and taste is the revelation that occurs on contact with the object of hunger. Reiner describes the Bundt cake as if it contained a world in itself that, if he were allowed to eat with his mouth, could be accessed most thoroughly with the tongue. He understands the cake as a universe whose components range from the banal to the unexpected: flour, butter, sugar, and even subway advertisements. In the same way, Barbery’s food critic Pierre Arthens describes the taste of bread as a microcosm, the world in a piece of bread:

Si le pain se « suffit à lui-même », c’est parce qu’il est multiple, non pas en ses sortes particulières mais en son essence même car le pain est riche, le pain est plusieurs, le pain est microcosme. En lui s’incorpore une assourdissante diversité, comme un univers en miniature, qui dévoile ses ramifications tout au long de la dégustation. (Barbery 2000: 91)⁴⁶

⁴⁶ “If bread truly suffices ‘in and of itself’ it is because bread is a multiplicity, not just in the sense that it’s made of component parts but even its essence is multiple because bread is rich, bread is many,

Just as the Captain Morgan in Reiner's Bundt cake connected Reiner to a whole world of rum brands and subway advertisements, Arthens's experience with this edible microcosm of bread reveals taste as a connection with another part of the world:

Les fissures de l'enveloppe sont autant d'infiltrations champêtres : on dirait un labour, on se prend à songer au paysan, dans l'air du soir ; au clocher du village, sept heures viennent de sonner ; il essuie son front au revers de sa veste ; fin du labour. À l'intersection de la croûte et de la mie, en revanche, c'est un moulin qui prend forme sous notre regard intérieur ; la poussière de blé vole autour de la meule, l'air est infesté de poudre volatile ; et de nouveau changement de tableau, parce que le palais vient d'épouser la mousse alvéolée libérée de son carcan et que le travail des mâchoires peut commencer. (*Ibid*, 91)⁴⁷

Arthens's reflection on the taste of bread fills three whole pages. Acknowledging eating as a process of gradual decomposition, he walks us through each step of his encounter with the bread as it is transformed in his mouth from bread to something else. This exhaustive account of taste unfolds like a dream or a Surrealist film where the reader is bombarded with waves of evocative imagery that is constantly morphing to form new tableaux, a descriptive technique that mimics the metamorphosis of forms that occurs during digestion.

The crust first transports us to the middle of an idealized pastoral scene where we encounter the bread's origins, the peasant farmer who presumably harvested the

bread is a microcosm. In it, an astounding diversity is incorporated, like a miniature universe that divulges new parts of itself throughout the degustation."

⁴⁷ "The fissures in the crust are so many infiltrations of the rustic: one imagines a plough and begins to think of the peasant in the evening air; seven o'clock sounds from the village bell tower; he wipes the sweat from his brow on his jacket sleeve; a day's work done. At the intersection of the crust and the spongy inside, on the contrary, a windmill takes shape before our interior gaze; wheat dust flies around the millstone, the air is infested with volatile powder; and the scene changes again, because the palate has just wed the alveolate mousse, liberated from its straightjacket so that the jaw can begin its work."

wheat. As Arthens breaks through the crust, a windmill emerges and wheat dust coats everything. And then the scene takes a turn for the intimately physical as Arthens's palate finally makes contact with the 'mie', the spongy inside.

As Arthens prepares to actually digest the bread, rustic imagery gives way to an evocative vocabulary of anatomy and physical contact: the bread is now a physical body, it is characterized as 'alveolate', a living tissue that 'marries' itself to Arthens's palate as it is broken down. Barbery's bread becomes an embodied 'other' with which Arthens interacts. It is a body alive in his mouth: « la tendresse de la substance interne qui se love dans les joues avec une docilité câline, que c'en est presque déconcertant. » (*Ibid*, 91)⁴⁸ The bread is another living subject with which he enters into a relationship, to the extent that this bread is given a sort of personality, its 'affectionate docility'.

Amélie Nothomb describes a similarly intersubjective experience with pineapple:

La nuit, je me relevais pour aller dans la cuisine me battre contre des ananas : j'avais remarqué que l'excès de ce fruit me faisait saigner les gencives et j'avais besoin de ce combat au corps à corps... Si les premiers sangs n'étaient pas encore versés, j'en dépeçais un autre : arrivait le moment excitant où je voyais la chair jaune inondée de mon hémoglobine. Cette vision m'affolait de plaisir. Je mangeais le rouge au cœur de l'or. Le goût de mon sang dans l'ananas me terrifiait de volupté. (Nothomb 2004: 207-08)⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "...the softness of the interior substance that curls up in one's cheeks with an affectionate docility that is almost disconcerting."

⁴⁹ "At night, I would wake to do battle with pineapples in the kitchen: I had noticed that eating enough of the fruit made my gums bleed, and I was desperate for this combat of body against body... If the first blood was still not spilled, I'd cut up another: then would come the moment of excitement when I saw the yellow flesh bathed in my hemoglobin. This vision made me mad with pleasure. I was eating red at the heart of gold. The taste of my blood in the pineapple terrified me with delight."

The pineapple is another body with which Nothomb does battle. Her pleasure, which she describes as a disturbing bliss, comes from the physical union between herself and the pineapple: she stains the flesh of the pineapple with her blood and their bodies merge into the beautifully ambiguous image of 'red at the heart of gold'.

Where eating is discussed as ontology, taste is the site of the subject's physical intercourse with the world. It is where the boundary between subject and world is erased as bodies coalesce in the process of ingestion and then digestion. This intimate physical interaction has an undeniably sexual quality – bodily boundaries are penetrated, tissues make contact – but we are mistaken if we read this as a simple comparison of the act of eating and that of sex. Rather, eating as ontology dissolves *all* boundaries that articulate the subject: eating is sex, sex is eating; they are understood as indistinguishable acts of merging with the object of one's desire.

We see this play itself out in a certain scene from Abdellatif Kéchiche's film *La graine et le mulet*. A girl named Rym eats fish couscous in the apartment of her mother's lover, Slimane, in front of his sons Majid and Riadh. The scene is filled with uncomfortable yet riveting sexual tension: the seemingly incestuous and pedophilic bond between Rym and Slimane; the flirtatious glances exchanged by Riadh and Rym as she eats with her hands; her delight in eating, the grunts of pleasure, with the full knowledge that she is being watched. The camera pans to close-ups of her face, her fingers in her mouth, her eyes closed, the expression of bliss on her face and grains of couscous that fall from her mouth or stick to her lips.

It is sexual in a grotesque way, though one cannot deny something exciting about it, intimate as sex and eating merge into the same act. Later in the film,

agonizingly long close-ups of Rym's naked, somewhat ample stomach as she belly dances seductively in Slimane's restaurant achieve the same effect. Fixated on her bare, undulating stomach and gyrating hips, the viewer feels something between fascinated disgust and sexual excitement. The scenes remind their viewers that eating and sex are simply forms of physical intercourse with one's world – we desire to merge with that which we eat just as ardently as we desire to share a body with our lovers, if only even momentarily through a kiss.

Our authors treat eating and sex as indistinguishable phenomena, for example, Arthens's encounter with a pastry demonstrates how eating and sex become the same act:

l'ineffable de cette sensation-là, de l'effleurement puis du broyage de la pâte humide dans une bouche devenue orgasmique... La chouquette adhérait aux muqueuses les plus intimes de mon palais, sa mollesse sensuelle épousait mes joues, son élasticité indécente la compactait immédiatement en une pâte homogène et onctueuse que la douceur du sucre rehaussait d'une pointe de perfection (Barbery 2000: 164-65)⁵⁰

What Arthens describes is an orgy of tissues, organic textures and bodily substances – mucus, humidity, indecent elasticity, sensual softness and an orgasmic mouth. The dough is again said to 'marry' the inside of Arthens's cheeks as their bodies merge. This same fluidity between eating and sex also presents itself in Sorman's text as Pim's obsession with meat grows into an ambiguously sexual infatuation:

À nouveau des idées folles lui traversent la boîte crânienne, le cerveau échauffé par la bidoche, il se glisserait bien nu dans une bête encore tiède, se mettre

⁵⁰ "...the ineffability of that sensation, of the light touch and then the grinding of humid doughy paste in a mouth on the verge of orgasm...the chouquette adhered to the most intimate mucuses of my palate, its sensual softness married it to my cheeks, its indecent elasticity immediately compressed it to a creamy and homogenous paste that the sweetness of sugar raised to a point of perfection..."

dans la peau d'un autre, vis ma vie, se blottir contre ses entrailles puis refermer l'animal avec une grosse aiguille et du fil de pêche, pour conserver la chaleur à l'intérieur, pour l'échange thermique...c'est que Pim habite à l'intérieur d'un animal, ils s'indifférencient et se mêlent (Sorman 2012: 137)⁵¹

Many parallels can be drawn between these passages and Reiner's cake incident, namely the desire to experience the object of hunger through intimate physical contact. Interestingly, when this desire is experienced in the extreme, it is cast as a symptom of madness. Reiner feels like a lunatic when he fondles the cake in hope of some connection with it. Likewise, Sorman's narrator suggests that Pim is ashamed of his 'mad' desire to perform his transformation into that meat which he consumes by literally wearing the beast's carcass. However, this behavior is simply the logical extension of the desire for physical connection experienced by subjects for whom eating is ontology.

In passages like these, eating dissolves the boundary between subject and world and the subject exists in a state of flux. The subject for whom eating is ontology is a subject that exists as material immanence: it overflows, morphs, and mixes through distinctly physical contact and exchange with its environment. Reiner dives hands-first into a Bundt cake to connect with it; Amélie Nothomb's blood mixes with the flesh of a pineapple and their bodies unite; a mouthful of bread plunges Pierre Arthens into a profound communion with the countryside and with the 'body' of the bread itself. As Noëlle Châtelet writes: "to eat is to be connected."

⁵¹ "Wild thoughts begin to stir inside his skull again, his brain stimulated by the meat, in the nude he might slide into a carcass that's still warm, put himself in the skin of an other, *live my life*, nestle against the entrails and then close the animal up with a big needle and fishing line, to conserve heat inside, for thermal exchange...that's how Pim would live inside an animal: the two cast off their differences and blend together"

(Probyn 2000: 31) But *what* exactly does the eating subject connect to? In the next section, I will address depictions of transformation through digestion in order to answer this question.

iv. Eating Others: digestion and the implications of eating as ontology

Thus far, we have identified two components of eating as a way of being: hunger as the vital drive that urges intercourse with one's environment, and taste as the site of 'knowing' the world through physical contact with one's environment. We finally arrive at the core aspect of eating as ontology: *incorporation* or the aspect of transformation through digestion – becoming that which one eats.

Our authors interpret the clichéd refrain 'you are what you eat' very literally in this context. For instance, Amélie Nothomb's *Prétextat Tach* explains the process of digestion as a process of being physically transformed by that which one consumes:

Je pensais que tout le monde lisait comme moi : moi, je lis comme je mange : ça ne signifie pas seulement que j'en ai besoin, ça signifie surtout que ça entre dans mes composantes et que ça les modifie. On n'est pas le même selon qu'on a mangé du boudin ou du caviar ; on n'est pas le même non plus selon qu'on vient de lire du Kant (Dieu m'en préserve) ou du Queneau.
(Nothomb 1992, 66)⁵²

⁵² "I thought that everyone read like me: me, I read the way I eat: that doesn't just mean that I have an essential need to read, but rather that which I read enters into my very composition and modifies it. You're not the same once you've eaten black pudding or caviar; and you aren't the same after you've read Kant (God help us all) or Queneau."

Tach describes eating as the act of literally incorporating the object of consumption such that a tangible transformation of the subject is produced ('ça entre dans mes composantes et que ça les modifie').

Similarly, Joy Sorman's narrator describes eating calf's brains as actually becoming the calf:

Et dans la cervelle du veau il y a toute sa vie, sa jeune et courte vie, comme dans une boîte noire, ses persistances rétinienne, ses peurs et des couleurs, les saisons, le goût d'un pré et d'une mère. Nous mangeons une matière imprimée, encodée et on ne me fera pas croire que c'est anodin, plus personne ne mange de cervelle, demandez-vous pourquoi. Ce n'est pas une histoire de mode, c'est qu'on a fini par se rendre compte des effets à force, qu'il y avait des transferts irréversibles. Manger de la cervelle de veau c'est devenir veau, retrouver la saveur du lait par exemple... *nos chairs se mélangent, je le sens bien quand j'avale mon steak, ça tremble à l'intérieur, puis ça se dissout doucement. C'est la bête sauvage qui entre en moi, j'ai l'enzyme qui digère l'élastine* (Sorman 2012: 117)⁵³

The simplicity of the idea here is quite potent: in eating calf's brains, one becomes the calf. The matter is imprinted ('encodée, imprimée') with experience, which is transferred in the process of incorporation. It is not the subject's act of intellectualizing this material exchange that forms identity here, but the material interaction itself that (re)constitutes the subject. According to Sorman's narrator, the beast enters into one's body as a live 'other' that trembles as it is swallowed, and then it is incorporated, digested.

⁵³ "The calf's brain contains its entire life, its young and short life, like a black box, its persistence of vision, its fears and the colors, the seasons, the taste of a pasture and of a mother. We eat an imprinted substance, encoded, and I won't believe it's insignificant – no one eats brains anymore, ask yourself why. It has nothing to do with what's in vogue, it's that we finally recognized the effects, that there were irreversible transfers. To eat calf's brains is to become the calf, to rediscover the savor of milk example...our tissues mingle, I feel it when I swallow my steak, it trembles as it goes down, then it subsides gently. It's the wild beast entering me, I have the enzyme that digests elastin."

Of great interest is Sorman's explicit citation of the biology of incorporation: she mentions the protein elastin, a protein found in connective and organ tissues that allows tissues to resume their shape after being stretched.⁵⁴ In order to digest meat, one needs an enzyme that can break down elastin, which Sorman's narrator celebrates having. Sorman is approaching the process of digestion like Diderot and the Epicureans – from a molecular level. She is claiming that the subject becomes the calf by decomposing its brain matter and incorporating that matter into the body of the subject.

The fluidity and instability of identity implied in this conceptualization of the eating subject is reinforced by Sorman's unique narrative device, a multiplicity of seamlessly joined voices whose origins remain unclear. In the above passage as in Sorman's novel, what appears to be the primary, omniscient narrator occupies plain text while the less frequent first-person narrator that often addresses itself to Pim is in italics. A third historical narrator not included in this passage punctuates the text with wholesale typography and layout changes, delivering short exegeses on certain developments in the history of human meat consumption.

However, Sorman's vision of incorporation differs from other materialist understandings of that phenomenon in one crucial aspect. If we examine the implications of this passage, we find that Sorman's attempt to combine a scientific understanding of digestion with the idea of identity and identity transfer lands her in

⁵⁴ Elastin is the major component of elastic fibers, which are slender bundles of proteins that provide strength and flexibility to connective tissue (tissue that supports the body's joints and organs). Elastic fibers are found in the intricate lattice that forms in the spaces between cells (the extracellular matrix), where they give structural support to organs and tissues such as the heart, skin, lungs, ligaments, and blood vessels. (National Institute of Health 2012)

the realm of fixed identity, essentialism and mystified matter. For the calf's brain to be decomposed into molecular components and *still* transfer 'calfness' to the eating subject, the matter itself must possess some sort of essence or fixed identity. This is what Sorman means when she writes that 'irreversible transfers' occurred from eating calf brains; the matter, she claims, is 'imprinted' or 'encoded', it is the vehicle for an essence. At the very heart of this concept of the material subject in flux where identity is allegedly fluid and the subject is lost in a wild morphing, we find the notions of fixed identity and essence at work. Indeed, in order to become something else through eating, that something else must retain its definitive qualities after being incorporated, and hence an essence must somehow inhere in it.

Specific as it seems, this conception of materiality as it relates to eating – where matter is endowed with an essence – is shared by all of our authors. For instance, Barbery's Pierre Arthens describes the savage essence of fish:

Il y a dans la chair du poisson grillé, du plus humble des maquereaux au plus raffiné des saumons, quelque chose qui échappe à la culture. C'est ainsi que les hommes, apprenant à cuire leur poisson, durent éprouver pour la première fois leur humanité, dans cette matière dont le feu révélait conjointement la pureté et la sauvagerie essentielles. (Barbery 2000: 46-47)⁵⁵

The material interaction of fire and flesh reveals the simultaneously 'pure' and 'savage' essence of the fish. By adding that this quality 'escapes culture', Arthens claims it as universal, a true essence experienced by all.

⁵⁵ "In the skin of grilled fish, from the most humble of mackerels to the most refined of salmons, there is something that escapes culture. In this way, men, in learning to cook their fish, must feel their humanity for the first time, in this matter in which the flame simultaneously reveals essential purity and savagery."

Amélie Nothomb guards a jar of water from her family's summer home in Kent Clifffes, New York as a material portal to that place and the memories it holds for her:

Ma sœur, finaude, me montra un flacon qu'elle conservait dans son sac.

– C'est de l'eau de Kent Clifffes.

Mes yeux s'écarquillèrent devant un tel trésor. Kent Clifffes était le lieu où Juliette et moi avions connu nos plus belles nuits. De l'eau de Kent Clifffes, c'était de la décantation de magie. Cet élixir ne nous quitterait pas. (Nothomb 2004: 169)⁵⁶

The water of Kent Clifffes contains the place, is somehow marked by it. It is 'magical', not simply water but an 'elixir that would never leave us', matter that marks and is marked – creative matter.

Indeed, when the subject is conceptualized as wholly material, its identity, its drives, *everything* is contained within matter. As Haynes attests in her survey of philosophers of material immanence, the framework of material immanence – the idea that there is nothing beyond matter – ultimately brings matter to life: “As a result, immanence no longer signifies limitedness and confinement but a site of movement, excess and creative transformations” (Haynes 2014: 4-5) In Sorman's calf's brains, Barbery's fish, and Nothomb's water we find essence and transformative power. As suggested in passing in the previous section, eating as ontology understands eating as an almost intersubjective encounter where both parties – the eater and the eaten – have the capacity to act on one another: the eater takes in,

⁵⁶ “My sister, ever-wily, showed me a flask that she had kept in her bag.

‘It's some water, from Kent Clifffes.’

My eyes were wide open in awe of such a treasure. Kent Clifffes was where Juliette and I had known our finest nights. The water of Kent Clifffes was distilled magic. That elixir would never leave us.”

breaks down and incorporates; the eaten transforms the eater by transferring its essence.

Eating as ontology's concept of the transfer of essence is not restricted to interactions with 'traditional' food items (e.g. bread, meat, beverages). For instance, languages and cultures are portrayed as edible essences in both Nothomb and Barbery:

Moi, je ne parlais qu'une langue: le franponais. Ceux qui y voyaient deux langues distinctes péchaient par superficialité, ils s'arrêtaient à des détails tels que le vocabulaire ou la syntaxe. Ces brouilles n'auraient pas dû leur cacher non seulement des points communs objectifs comme la latinité des consonances ou la précision de la grammaire mais surtout cette parenté métaphysique qui les unissait par le haut: le délectable. Comment ne pas avoir faim du franponais? Ces mots aux syllabes bien détachés les unes des autres, aux sonorités nettes, c'étaient des sushis, des bouchées pralinées, des tablettes de chocolat dont chaque carré verbal se découpait facilement, c'était des gâteaux pour le thé de cérémonie, dont les emballages individuels permettaient le bonheur du déshabillage et la différenciation des saveurs. Je n'avais pas faim de l'anglais, cette langue trop cuite, purée de chuintements, chewing-gum mâché qu'on se passait de bouche en bouche. (Nothomb 2004: 47)⁵⁷

Language becomes food, and this language-food is endowed with an essence: French and Japanese are crisp and neat, reminiscent of chocolate bars, sushi and teacakes; English is 'overcooked' and chewed up. Language for Nothomb seems to serve as a

⁵⁷ I spoke one language, and one language only: 'le franponais'. Anyone who claimed that French and Japanese were two different languages was guilty of superficiality and couldn't see beyond the minutiae of vocabulary and syntax. Fixation on these trifles not only hid their aspects in common, like the Latinity of their sounds or the precision of their grammar, but – most important of all – this ignorance obscured the metaphysical kinship that united the two languages on a higher plane: their deliciousness. How could one not be hungry after 'franponais'? Those words neatly divided into syllables by the distinctness of each sound; they were sushis, praline bouchées, bars of chocolate where each verbal tab is broken off with ease, cakes for the tea ceremony whose individual wrappers bestowed the additional pleasure of undressing. English didn't make me hungry; that language was too cooked, a puree of hisses, chewed chewing gum that was passed from mouth to mouth.

type of physical communion with cultures as she interprets it not on the basis of its grammatical structure, but on the basis of what one might term its ‘mouth feel’, its physical aesthetic as it is experienced by the speaker. To return to Kuehn’s concept of the eating subject as ‘bodily interactive in an environment’, here even language becomes a kind of body that enters into a physical interaction with the subject.

Barbery also advances a notion of edible cultural essences. In a passage comparing French and Japanese cuisine, Paloma explains how cuisine can convey the qualities or characteristics of a culture:

Si vous voulez mon avis, la cuisine française, c’est une pitié. Autant de génie, de moyens, de ressources pour un résultat si lourd... Et des sauces et des farces et des pâtisseries à s’en faire péter la panse ! C’est d’un mauvais goût... Et quand ce n’est pas lourd, c’est chichiteux au possible : on meurt de faim avec trois radis stylisés et deux coquilles Saint-Jacques en gelée d’algues, dans des assiettes faussement zen... Le sabayon, c’est l’emblème de la cuisine française : un truc qui se veut léger et qui étouffe le premier chrétien venu... Et je ne brode même pas sur la décoration de la salle et de la table... ils font dans le style hôpital... L’épure, la simplicité, ce n’est pas ça... Mais dans les mangas, les personnages ont l’air de manger autrement. Ça a l’air simple, raffiné, mesuré, délicieux. On mange comme on regarde un beau tableau, ou comme on chante dans une belle chorale... la cuisine japonaise, ça a l’air... eh bien, ni jeune ni vieux. Éternel et divin. (Barbery 2006: 97-98)⁵⁸

⁵⁸ “If you want my opinion, French cuisine is pathetic. So much genius, so many means and resources wasted on such a heavy result... And the sauces, the stuffings, and the pastries *ad nauseum*! It’s all in bad taste... And when it isn’t heavy it’s faddish and frilly to an extreme: if all you eat is a poser, Zen-style plate of three stylized radishes and two scallops in an algae gelatin, you’ll die of hunger... But Sabayon is the emblem of French cuisine: a thing that pretends to be light and then smothers the first wretch to put it in their mouth... And I won’t even begin with the décor of the venue and the table settings... they’re ‘hospital-chic’... refinement, simplicity – that’s not how it’s done... But in Mangas, the characters seem to have a way of eating differently. It’s a simple, refined air – measured, delicious. They eat the way one would observe a beautiful painting or blend with a beautiful choir... Japanese cuisine, it seems, well, neither young nor old. Eternal and divine.”

Paloma discusses French haute cuisine and its accompanying consumptive practices as reflective of a vain and aristocratic occidental tradition. French haute cuisine is crafted by pretentious vanity to feed vain mouths – it pretends to be that which it is not: pure Art instead of food-Art, light when it is actually heavy. French cuisine is in this way essentialized as fraudulent, vain and exorbitant, contrasted with the simple and elegant essence of Japanese food culture.

This might explain why Barbery’s treatment of Japanese culture throughout the novel comes off as uncomfortably orientalist, reducing most qualities of Japanese practices, objects and individuals to ‘simplicity’ and ‘elegance’. Testimony to Barbery’s essentialization of Japanese culture is her abundant use of the word ‘simplicité’ as a favorite descriptor for and of the Japanese character Kakuro Ozu (a total of six cringe-worthy deployments of the word, the most direct three of which are cited below):

« j[‘avais] proposé une tasse de thé [à Kakuro] qu’il avait accepté avec simplicité. » (*Ibid*, 157)⁵⁹

« Je suis très fier de ma cuisine, dit M. Ozu avec simplicité » (*Ibid*, 229)⁶⁰

« *S’il vous plaît, acceptez ces présents avec simplicité.* –Kakuro » (*Ibid*, 326)⁶¹

Additionally, Barbery’s stance seems to reject any notion of cultural relativism as her characters make what seem like objective claims about cultures.

This is reinforced by Renée’s interpretation of a Japanese film:

Mais il est surtout question de quelque chose qui nous échappe, à nous autres Occidentaux, et que seule la culture japonaise éclaire... Le camélia sur la mousse du temple, le violet des monts de Kyoto, une tasse de

⁵⁹ “I invited Kakuro to tea, which he accepted with simplicity.”

⁶⁰ “‘I am very proud of my kitchen’, said Monsieur Ozu with simplicity”

⁶¹ “*Please accept these presents with simplicity.* –Kakuro”

porcelaine bleue, cette éclosion de la beauté pure au cœur des passions éphémères, n'est-ce pas ce à quoi nous aspirons nous tous ? Et ce que nous autres, Civilisations de l'Ouest, ne savons atteindre ? La contemplation de l'éternité dans le mouvement même de la vie. (*Ibid*, 104-05)⁶²

By ascribing a universal goal to human life, Barbery's Renée creates an objective standard for all of human culture, regardless of origin or circumstance. Cultures are thus judged objectively and hierarchized by her characters according to how effectively they attain this clichéd goal of 'contemplating eternity in the ephemeral'.

This rejection of cultural relativism is evident in Barbery's treatment of cultural foods: consuming bad culture makes the eater physically ill. Speaking through the Portuguese maid Manuela in a passage that once again juxtaposes occidental food practice with that of the Japanese, Barbery goes so far as to suggest that there is a tangible consequence for consuming the edible material product born of 'bad culture' alongside its ideological fruit: « Peut-être nous sommes malades, à force de trop. » (*Ibid*, 172)⁶³ The unhealthy (meant literally) vanity of French haute cuisine takes its toll on Pierre Arthens, the renown French food critic of *Une gourmandise* who surfaces in *L'élégance du hérisson* as a tenant in Renée's building and dies of a heart attack:

quand je dis « c'est un vrai méchant », je veux dire que c'est un homme qui a tellement renié tout ce qu'il peut y avoir de bon en lui qu'on dirait un cadavre alors qu'il est encore vivant... Pierre Arthens, c'est sûr que c'était un vrai méchant. On dit que c'était le pape de la critique

⁶² "But most of all, it's something that escapes us Westerners, and that only Japanese culture illuminates... The camellia on the temple moss, the violet in the mountains of Kyoto, a cup of blue porcelain, this blooming of pure beauty at the heart of ephemeral passions – is it not what we all aspire to? And that us others, the Civilizations of the West, know not how to attain? The contemplation of eternity in the very transience of life."

⁶³ "Maybe we are sick from excess."

gastronomie et le champion dans le monde de la cuisine française. Alors, ça, ça ne m'étonne pas. Si vous voulez mon avis, la cuisine française, c'est une pitié... (*Ibid*, 96-97)⁶⁴

Paloma's description of Arthens links his malady of character directly to his literal consumption of 'bad culture' in the form of pretentious French haute cuisine. It is thus no surprise that Pierre Arthens dies prematurely, and that his death marks a major turning point in the novel's action: Kakuro Ozu purchases Arthens's apartment, meets Renée, and invites her to dine on Japanese food. Barbery replaces a character representing the institution of French haute cuisine with a culinary cultural other, a character who represents 'good culture'. Kakuro brings the much more modest, and yet vastly more elegant practice of Japanese cuisine to Renée, cooking homestyle Japanese food for her in his own kitchen.

In conceptualizing an edible world in which 'you are what you eat', it makes sense that our authors should essentialize cultures. Muriel Barbery reduces meat and fish to the following essential qualities: « La viande est virile, puissante, le poisson est étrange et cruel. » (Barbery 2000: 47)⁶⁵ And Joy Sorman claims that beef transfers its strength to the eater when the *maître de transformation* (translated literally as the 'master of transformation') at the butcher's school resolves to take Pim's meek physique into his own hands:

On lui ferait bien bouffer du steak en intensif à ce gars-là, on lui donnerait le cœur de la viande pour que le rouge afflue sous la peau trop pâle, pour que le bœuf lui

⁶⁴ "...when I say 'he's a real villain' I'm talking about a man who has so disowned everything capable of good in himself that we could call him a cadaver while he's still alive...Pierre Arthens was a real villain. Some called him 'the Pope of gastronomy' and he was hailed as a champion in the world of French cuisine. But that doesn't surprise me one bit. If you want my opinion, French cuisine is pathetic..."

⁶⁵ "Meat is virile and powerful; fish is alien and cruel."

transmette sa force, on lui ferait avaler bien saignant,
bleu même, le sang solide, compact et dense de la
barbaque, pour que le flot artériel pulse plus fort, on lui
servirait une bavette frites avec un quart de côtes, il fait
soif hein Pim, tiens, donne ton verre, ça va te
reconstituer tout ça. (Sorman 2012: 22)⁶⁶

Thus eating becomes the site of a transfer of vitality, and though it confounds the notion of fluid identity, the transfer of essences as well. By this same logic, our authors conceptualize culture, literature, and language as edible phenomena. Eating as ontology envisions a world in which *everything* is edible. It demands that we redefine our notion of food and of eating to re-envision ourselves as material composites in a vaguely intersubjective relationship of material exchange with and incorporation of the material world around us.

We will conclude this chapter by examining this vaguely intersubjective relationship with one's food and its implications for eating portrayed as ontology. As we have seen, eating as ontology casts items like meat and bread in an ambiguous space between subject and object. They constitute a pseudo-subject insofar as they can *act on* the eater by transferring an essence, and are portrayed as vaguely 'alive' in one's mouth and body. And they constitute an object in the sense that we use the term 'objectify' to refer to the way that certain individuals are often treated: that they are deprived of agency and essentialized, they are that which is desired and devoured by the subject, but possess no agency within the interaction – the human looks at a cow and sees a steak, a block of cheese or a jug of milk before an individual organism

⁶⁶ “They would gorge the lad on steak, give him the heart of the meat so that red would flow under his too-pale skin, so that the steer would transmit its force to him; they would make him eat it bloody rare, raw even, the blood in the muscles, compact, dense and congealed to strengthen the flow in his arteries; they would serve him flank steak frites with a carafe of red wine – it makes you thirsty, doesn't it, Pim – here, give me your glass, all this will reconstitute you.”

with unique experience and decision-making capacities of its own. Our authors problematize eating as ontology along these very lines by invoking the idea of devouring a *human* other: what happens when the object of our hunger falls squarely in the category of ‘subject’?

Though no actual cannibalism occurs in any of the texts in our corpus, this scenario *is* explored in the context of sexual partners and gender relations. In the work of each author we find a male character with a special relationship to food, who also displays misogynistic tendencies. In Sorman’s *Comme une bête*, Pim’s ability to interact with women is limited to an interaction between butcher and meat, subject and object, agent and acted upon:

Pim passe sa main partout où il peut, identifie à haute voix le jarret, la côte première et le filet mignon – les mots la font rire et puis moins quand il passe à la tranche grasse et au cuisseau. » (Sorman 2012: 37)⁶⁷

...
« À nouveau Pim a débité la fille en planche anatomique tandis qu’il la caressait et ce n’était plus si drôle. Elle l’a traité de profiteur, il n’a rien répondu, ni protesté ni acquiescé, sa main palpitant toujours avec délicatesse la chair (*Ibid*, 61)⁶⁸

Pim confounds eating with sex such that this unfortunate girl becomes an *object* of hunger – a slab of meat instead of a partner.

Barbery’s Pierre Arthens is exceptionally receptive to a similar idea proposed by a young colleague: « [pour leurs maris, la cuisine de nos grand-mères était] au fond et surtout, d’une sensualité torride, par où nous comprenons que lorsque nous

⁶⁷ “Pim runs his hand over her body; out loud he identifies the shank, the short loin and the filet mignon – his words make her laugh, and then less so when he moves to the haunch and the round.”

⁶⁸ “Again, Pim cut the girl up in an anatomy chart while he caressed her though it wasn’t so funny anymore. She accused him of exploiting her – he responded with nothing, neither protested nor acquiesced, his hand still delicately kneading the flesh”

parlons de « chair », ce n'est pas un hasard si cela évoque conjointement les plaisirs de la bouche et ceux de l'amour » (Barbery 2000: 39)⁶⁹ In the same way that the encounter of lovemaking is described here as a primarily 'one-way' encounter between eater and eaten, meat and carnivore, Arthens reveals that the women in his life are nothing more than objects. Earlier in the novel, he claims his wife as the most beautiful of his decorative possessions: « J'aime ma femme, comme j'ai toujours aimé les beaux objets de ma vie. C'est ainsi. En propriétaire, j'ai vécu, en propriétaire je mourrai » (*Ibid*, 19).⁷⁰

Finally, Amélie Nothomb's Prêtextat Tach refuses to recognize women as worthy of life. He spits unfounded hatred and a death wish for women everywhere from his wheelchair in Nothomb's *L'hygiène de l'assassin*: « elles imaginent qu'on a besoin d'elles. La vérité, c'est que dès l'instant où elles sont devenues femmes, dès l'instant où elles ont quitté l'enfance, elles doivent mourir. Si les hommes étaient des gentlemen, ils les tueraient le jour de leurs premières règles. » (Nothomb 1992: 159).⁷¹ Tach's ridiculous misogyny stems from an unsuccessful attempt to control his female cousin – to keep her as a sexual object in the image of his desire and prevent her from reaching puberty.

As close readers of patterns, we must ask ourselves why this misogynist figure recurs in these works. One might conclude that the recurrence of this character is indicative of a stance that sees women objectified as mere consumables by male

⁶⁹ “[for their husbands, our grandmothers’ cooking was,] at bottom and overall, of a torrid sensuality, by which we understand that when we speak of ‘flesh’, it is no accident if it simultaneously evokes the pleasures of food and of sex.”

⁷⁰ I love my wife, as I have always loved the beautiful objects in my life. That's how it is: a proprietor I've lived, and a proprietor I'll die.”

⁷¹ “...they imagine that we actually need them. The truth is that from the instant they become women, from the instant they are finished with childhood, they must die. If men were truly gentlemen, they would kill them the day of their first periods.”

culture – as meat. Sorman writes in reference to Lady Gaga’s meat dress at the MTV music awards:

Parce que les femmes savent que nous sommes en viande, elles le savent mieux que personne. Les femmes et Pim le boucher, qui a encadré aux côtés de ses vaches une photo de Lady Gaga en chair. Des posters de femmes nues dans les cabines de routiers, une chanteuse couverte de steaks au-dessus de la caisse. (Sorman 2012: 118)⁷²

Eating as ontology may transform the world into a vivid food-scape ripe for the taking, but as our three female authors make clear in their works, it also betrays predatory instincts and cruel tendencies. That which we desire we cannot help but objectify and essentialize as hunger projects the image of our own desire onto the other we hunger for. Eating interactions thus take on a quasi-cannibalistic or predatory dimension where distinctions between sex and food are non-existent, as are distinctions between intersubjective and subject-object interactions.

⁷² “Because women know that we are made of meat. They know it better than anyone. Women and Pim the butcher, who framed a picture of Lady Gaga wearing meat and put it next to his cows. Pin-ups of nude women in the cabins of truck drivers; a pop star covered in steaks beneath the counter.”

CHAPTER III.

Reflection: Mystified Matter and Immanent Transcendence: the supernatural, material divinity, and return to the 'cru'

Though it may seem an oversimplification in light of the detailed analysis provided in the last two chapters, I wish to step back and again consider the following general framework for the argument advanced by this project. When we conceptualize the act of eating in a contemporary context, we draw on two principal traditions of thinking subjectivity in Western thought: the dualistic, transcendent subject of Platonist philosophy and the Christian tradition, and the immanent material subject of materialism and modern science. Though we may identify neither as Christians, nor Platonists, nor biologists, these ideas continue to inform dominant ways of thinking with the result that they contribute significantly to the way we conceptualize our being in the world.

As an inherently bodily act, eating demands that we consider an undeniable aspect of our being: our materiality. However, the omnipresent intellectual traditions of immanence and transcendence described in previous chapters, with their divergent conceptualizations of materiality, produce a sort of schizophrenia in our own attitudes towards matter and corporeality. Materiality is thus that which we sometimes degrade and at other times embrace – when the body repulses us, we turn to doctrines of transcendence and like Plato, we seek to locate our 'real' selves in an immaterial dimension; when the body and physical interaction with our world brings us pleasure,

we embrace scientific doctrines of material immanence, and are content to locate ourselves within the material alone.

However, in our discussions of eating – especially when we consider that act in detail, say, by making it the central topic of a work of literature – we occasionally reconcile this seemingly irreconcilable mixture of positive and negative attitudes towards materiality. We do this by inserting the transcendent *into* the immanent; strange as it seems, we insert the immaterial dimension of an intellect, essence, creative agency, or even divinity into matter itself. We thus engage a philosophical framework that Haynes terms immanent transcendence, that which:

effectively de-materializes a dimension of the material world in order to ground it...far from being abandoned, the idea of transcendence retains its potency for [new materialist philosophers] precisely because it is recovered to immanence as that which can help articulate matter's creative agency and the irreducible singularity of embodied subjects and things.
(Haynes 2014: 12)

Under these conditions, matter is re-imagined in 'non-reductive' terms by John Milbank as ““that which can itself occasion subjectivity and meaning, because it is the site for the emergence of a spontaneous and unpredictable energy.”” (Haynes 2014: 2)

The portrayals of taste and digestion examined in the third and fourth sections of Chapter II provide excellent examples of the kind of immanent transcendence Haynes finds in thinkers who claim to be wholly materialist. The purpose of Chapter II is to demonstrate that like the philosophers scrutinized by Haynes, our authors attempt a claim of radically material subjectivity in contrast to the dualistic subject conjured elsewhere. However, like Haynes' philosophers, our authors cannot help but fall back into transcendence:

as Regina Scwhartz recognizes, ‘Even those who claim to be radical materialists rediscover transcendence in new guises’. From the postmodern notion of transgression to the phenomenological notion of the irreducibility of the other to the aesthetic notion of excess, transcendence prevails even in the most emphatic materialist thought. In this book, I have suggested that the idea of immanent transcendence enables Deleuze, Irigaray and Adorno to articulate a non-reductive materialism whereby matter is always more than just matter. Importantly, for these three thinkers, transcendence does not designate exteriority or discontinuity but a movement of becoming and excess inherent in matter. (Haynes 2014: 151)

In the passages depicting Arthens’ bread, Nothomb’s pineapple, Sorman’s calf brains, and especially in passages regarding inter-human eating interactions, matter becomes conceptualized ambiguously as something between subject and object. It is endowed on the one hand with vitality and transformative agency and thus ‘subjectivized’; on the other hand our authors afford matter a unique essence that gives material entities the status of irreducible singularity or ‘otherness’, which makes a distinction between eating subject and eaten object possible on the basis of fixed *identity* that objectifies – the subject has the power to transform and become, the object remains fixed in an identity.

In this way, immanent transcendence in our treatment of eating can also be understood as the *fusion* of two different understandings of our relationship to food outlined by Deane Curtin: an *objectified* relation and a *participatory* relation.

Our confusing modern relations to food, I believe, can best be understood by reference to the distinction between two ways of understanding relations: as *participatory* or *objectified*. The substance project for personhood, which stresses autonomy and independence, must understand our relations to food as *objectified*; food is understood as “other”. Obviously,

even substances have to stop to eat, as Plato noted unhappily, but because of the dual nature of substances as mind and body, food is understood merely as fuel that recharges the body while leaving the mind untouched. ... [on the other hand,] I understand a “participatory relation” to be a defining relation. An agent is understood not in terms of essential, internal, and immutable qualities, but gradually *becomes* a person through relational openness to others. We are defined by our relations to the food we eat. To account for our openness to food requires a relational understanding of self. We are what we eat. (Curtin 1992: 11)

By adopting ‘you are what you eat’ as a framework for their approach to eating, our authors’ depictions of eating often simultaneously suggest participatory and objectified relations to food, and thus posit eating as a quasi-transcendental act. Through biological frameworks and motifs of molecular material reconstitution, they conjure selfhood as a material assemblage in flux according to a framework of pure material immanence. Yet in claiming eating as the site of a transfer of essence between entities, they also uphold a notion of fixed identity that casts eating as a transcendent act of becoming wholly ‘other’, where total ‘otherness’ is located in a dimension of essences that inhere in or are transferred between matter.

Our authors leave the significant detail of what happens at the exact moment of identity transfer ambiguous: we never know whether Sorman, Barbery and Nothomb conceive of matter as *containing* an essence within its material, or as the conduit for an immaterial essence, in which case identity would once again be located outside of the material in a strange immaterial dimension of essences independent from that of the intellect.

In this chapter I want to suggest that beyond its appearance in their flawed attempts at philosophizing food in terms of material immanence, our authors realize the concept of immanent transcendence to an even more significant degree by clearly *mystifying* matter in certain depictions of eating. Haynes writes: “As I see it, quasi-transcendental conditions, which explain the self-grounding of the immanent whole, are obtained by abstracting some dimension of the material world in such a way that this dimension is etherealized, indeed ‘transcendentalized’, and the material world more generally is mystified.” (Haynes 2014: 154-55)

What is invoked is the *transcendental*, that aspect of materiality that grants access to a mystical or divine dimension. In this case, our authors describe the possibility of divine transcendence contained within material immanence. This is most evident in our authors’ recurring claims of access to the divine through the material interaction of eating.

i. Relocating Divinity to Matter

The concept of transcendence within material immanence reaches its extreme when divinity is invoked as a material interaction. It is no mistake that Mary Roach describes the experience of reaching *into the guts of a live cow* as an encounter with divinity on multiple occasions:

“He handed me a protective plastic veterinary sleeve that extended to my shoulder, and directed me to position myself to the side of the opening...DePeters took some photos of me with my right arm in [fistulated cow number] 101.5. The cow appears unmoved. I look like I’ve seen God. I was in all the way to my armpit

and still could not reach the bottom of the rumen. I could feel strong, steady squeezes and movements, almost more industrial than biological.”
(Roach 2013: 169)

“[Roach:] I’m literally up to my shoulder inside this cow...it’s powerful in there...it’s a very muscular organ, mixing and squeezing and contracting, it’s groping you back. And it’s hot, it’s steamy, it’s physical, it’s very, yeah. The cow’s bored, and I’ve got this look on my face like I’ve seen God or something...
[Host:] and Mary’s spent lots of time in morgues and the like...
[Roach:] the expression I was wearing I’ve never had occasion to use.” (Radiolab 2012)

Nor is it a coincidence that Jon Reiner invokes heaven when he recounts the moment he plunges his hands into the cake: “I was in heaven!” (*Ibid*) While it’s tempting to pass these claims off as popular expressions of amazement, I contend that these researchers were actually experiencing physical contact as a quasi-religious encounter with the material world, a claim corroborated by our authors’ accounts of finding divine transcendence in material interaction.

Divinity perceived as the contact between bodies is treated by all of our authors. Pim’s physical contact with bovines in their living and dead states, for example, grants him supernatural access to human history and elevates him to divine status: « Pim a vu ce que voit la vache, Pim est peut-être un ange qui parle aux vaches normandes, un saint qui bénit la viande, un mage de la découpe, ou un illuminé du bocage. Il visite les alvéoles du temps, il se souvient avoir dessinée une vache sur les parois d’une caverne avec le sang de l’animal sacrifié » (Sorman 2012: 102).⁷³ In this

⁷³ “Pim saw exactly what the cow saw; Pim is perhaps an angel that speaks to Normand cattle, a saint that blesses meat, a sorcerer of dressing carcasses, or a visionary of the countryside. He has visited the honeycomb of time, he remembers having etched a cow on the walls of a cave with the blood of the sacrificed animal.”

passage, Pim experiences the processes of food and eating in a way that is profoundly religious: he is granted access to the cow's consciousness, he communes supernaturally with the past, he is an angel, a saint and a sorcerer.

Nothomb's memoir reflects this idea of divinity contained within material interactions more explicitly: « Ne suffit-il pas d'avoir en bouche du très bon chocolat non seulement pour croire en Dieu, mais aussi pour se sentir en sa présence? Dieu, ce n'est pas le chocolat, c'est la rencontre entre le chocolat et un palais capable de l'apprécier. Dieu, c'était moi en état de plaisir ou de potentialité de plaisir: c'était donc moi tout le temps. » (Nothomb 2004: 40)⁷⁴ She finds God in the *rencontre*, the contact of chocolate and palate. The notion of immanent transcendence is voiced in Nothomb's statement that she *is* God all of the time, that divinity resides not outside in some wholly separate realm, but within – divinity resides *in* matter, activated by material contact and exchange.

Nothomb later characterizes hunger – the vital desire for contact and connectedness – and the impulse to fill, as a manifestation of divinity: « il y avait du Dieu en ce qui avait toujours soif de la fontaine, cette attente virulente mille fois comblée, exaucée jusqu'à l'extase intarissable et cependant jamais désaltérée, miracle du désir culminant dans la culminante jouissance. » (*Ibid*, 64)⁷⁵ Here, the notion of ontological hunger discussed in Chapter II is characterized as explicitly divine, and eating becomes a theological experience where God is returned to the immanent plane

⁷⁴ “Does it not suffice to have good chocolate in one's mouth not only to make one believe in God, but to feel oneself in His presence? God is not the chocolate itself – it is the meeting of the chocolate and a palate capable of appreciating it. God is me in a state of pleasure, or of potential pleasure: God was me all the time, then.”

⁷⁵ “There was God in the part of me that always thirsted at the fountain, that virulent expectation gratified a thousand times over, fulfilled to the point of infinite ecstasy and yet never quenched; the miracle of desire culminating in the highest of pleasures.”

of materiality as hunger and desire, the vital force that drives the world. The notion of divine transcendence produced in the interaction of material entities is again expressed by Barbery's Arthens: « Dans l'union quasi mystique de ma langue avec ces chouquettes de supermarché, à la pâte industrielle et au sucre devenu mélasse, j'ai atteint Dieu. » (Barbery 2000: 165)⁷⁶

These moments where divinity is discovered within the material represent the height of the mystification of matter that Haynes sees in modern continental philosophies of material immanence: "I maintain that the task of advancing a non-reductive materialism is implicitly concerned with rethinking transcendence and materiality in ways that reject their traditional opposition. Matter may then be conceived as that which possesses its own powers of becoming, of self-transcending – powers we may even consider divine." (Haynes 2014: 3)

Beyond finding God in the material interaction of eating, Barbery also characterizes eating as a religious experience of immanent transcendence through allusion to Biblical stories and Christian religious ritual. For instance, Barbery affords the cherry plum – and fruit more generally – a transformative, mystical quality of its own by invoking the story of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil:

Le test de la mirabelle frappe par sa désarmante évidence. Il tire sa force d'une constatation universelle : mordant dans le fruit, l'homme comprend enfin. Que comprend-il ? Tout. Il comprend la lente maturation d'une espèce humaine vouée à la survie puis advenant un beau soir à l'intuition du plaisir, la vanité de tous les appétits factices qui détournent de l'aspiration première aux vertus des choses simples et sublimes, l'inutilité des discours, la lente et terrible dégradation des mondes à laquelle nul n'échappera et,

⁷⁶ "In the quasi-mystical union of my tongue with the industrial dough and melted sugar of the supermarket chouquettes, I attained God."

en dépit de cela, la merveilleuse volupté des sens
 lorsqu'ils conspirent à apprendre aux hommes le plaisir
 et la terrifiante beauté de l'Art. (Barbery 2006: 53)⁷⁷

The pleasure of food in the above passage is cast as the very catalyst for humanity's transcendent aspiration to the sublime, and is thus invested with a mystical transformative power. Barbery seems to be stating that food is where we, as a species, first conceived the idea of escaping the toils of the material world through the transcendent project of Art.

Of particular interest for my argument is the perspective from which Barbery re-writes the Biblical story of the fall of man. Besides replacing the apple with a cherry plum, she absents God from the scenario and suggests a Darwinian naturalism as the governing power in God's place ('la lente maturation d'une espèce humaine vouée à la survie'). Knowledge of good and evil becomes knowledge of self-serving sensual pleasure. To recall Chapter II's discussion of taste as an epistemological capacity of the eating subject, eating is here the quasi-mystical site of a revelation: the notion of the transcendent phenomena of Art and beauty arises out of sensual pleasure, the material interaction of the subject with its edible environment. Barbery thus combines the outlook of modern science's materialism with the transcendent motifs of the Bible, an explicit demonstration of how discussions of eating prompt us

⁷⁷ The cherry plum test amazes with its disarming clarity. Its power lies in a universal observation: the moment man bites into fruit, he understands. What does he understand? Everything. He understands how the human species, given only to survival, slowly matured and arrived one fine evening at an intuition of pleasure, the vanity of all the artificial appetites that divert one from one's initial aspiration toward the virtues of simple and sublime things, the pointlessness of discourse, the slow and terrible degradation of worlds from which no one can escape and, in spite of this, the wonderful sweetness of the senses when they conspire to teach mankind pleasure and the terrifying beauty of Art.

to reconcile the western philosophical frameworks of transcendence and material immanence.

In *Une gourmandise*, Barbery also calls on the concept of Holy Communion as a framework for discussing the act of eating:

Ce n'est plus pain, ni mie, ni gâteau que nous mastiquons alors, c'est un semblant de nous-mêmes, de ce que doit être le goût de nos tissus intimes, que nous pétrissons ainsi de nos bouches expérimentées où la salive et la levure se mêlent en une fraternité ambiguë... Autour de la table, nous ruminions tous consciencieusement et en silence. Il est tout de même de bien curieuses communions... Loin des rites et des fastes des messes instituées, en deçà de l'acte religieux de rompre le pain et d'en rendre grâce au Ciel, nous nous unissons pourtant en une communion sacrée qui nous faisait atteindre, sans que nous le sachions, une vérité supérieure, décisive entre toutes... C'est ce qui fait [le pain], sans l'ombre d'un doute, l'instrument privilégié par où nous dérivons en nous-mêmes à la recherche de nous-mêmes. (Barbery 2000: 92)⁷⁸

The Truth to which Arthens refers in this stunning passage is the truth of our materiality, discovered orally through bread's semblance to our own skin and organ tissues. Again, eating becomes the site of a divine revelation, this time through communion with our materiality. It is not the body of Christ that we chew, but our own bodies, thus recovering the transcendent act of connecting with Christ to the immanent plane of connection with our own material bodies. Yet this act retains its mystical religiosity as the distinctly physical act of mastication gives way to an otherworldly experience of ourselves from outside of ourselves. As we eat ourselves,

⁷⁸ "It is no longer bread, nor dough, nor cake that we chew but a semblance of ourselves, of what must be the taste of our intimate tissues that we knead in our practiced mouths where saliva and yeast mingle in an ambiguous union... Around the table we are lost in silent rumination. This is a strange type of communion... Far from the rites and fasts of Mass, we fall short of the religious act of breaking bread and giving thanks to Heaven; instead we join in a sacred communion through which we attain, without even knowing it, a superior Truth, decisive among all... That is doubtless what makes bread the privileged instrument by which we discover ourselves."

we discover our materiality anew. It is thus *us*, the human eater, who is made sacred in lieu of God – *we* become the immanently transcendent object of religious contemplation.

ii. The Return and the ‘Cru’

For our authors, eating is an act of immanent transcendence where the material immanence of biology and transcendent notions of divinity, mind, and identity are reconciled in a mystified contact with the material world. This way of thinking eating within a framework of immanent transcendence promotes the notion of a *return* – a return to the material where the eating subject rejects immaterial transcendence and instead looks to contact with materiality as a way to transcend immaterial transcendence itself. Haynes writes:

theorizing matter in contemporary continental philosophy often invokes some sort of transvaluation of transcendence. Jean Wahl suggests something like this when he remarks ‘Perhaps the greatest transcendence is that which consists in transcending transcendence, that is, of falling back into immanence.’ If materialism requires transcending transcendence this need not mean the elimination of transcendence altogether but rather, I claim, its recovery to matter itself (Haynes 2014: 1)

Just so, we witness our authors advocating that we revisit or return to the *cru*, the raw, as the apogee of eating. Modern science informs us that our origins are in the materiality of the Earth and not in the intention of an immaterial God. We thus replace our quest to recover our divine origins with a quest to recover our natural

origins, and the ‘raw’ or the ‘natural’ becomes the image of what we previously recognized as ‘divine intention’.

In a chapter titled *Le cru* in which he pays homage to sushi, Barbery’s Arthens directly acknowledges this way of thinking informed by immanent transcendence: « La perfection, c’est le retour. C’est pourquoi seules les civilisations décadentes en sont susceptibles : c’est au Japon, où le raffinement a atteint des sommets inégalés, au cœur d’une culture millénaire qui a apporté à l’humanité ses plus hautes contributions, que le retour au cru, réalisation dernière, a été possible » (Barbery 2000: 67)⁷⁹

Sorman’s Pim also reflects this logic of a ‘return’ in his justification for his choice of butcher as métier: « il laisse volontiers à d’autres les professions fantomatiques de la modernité – marketing ou communication –, et choisira un boulot salissant et concret. » (Sorman 2012: 17-18)⁸⁰ Here Pim opts for a line of work that is inherently physical. He offers a somewhat pejorative characterization of professions like marketing and communication, from which opportunities for physical interaction are absent, judging them to be ‘ghostly’ or ‘spectral’. He finds butchery to be ‘concrete’, affording him opportunities for contact and communion with the material world. Pim therefore transcends transcendence, finding humanity’s ultimate calling in the material.

⁷⁹ “Perfection is in the return – this is why perfection may only be achieved by decadent civilizations. It is in Japan – where refinement attained unequaled heights – at the heart of a thousand-year-old culture that brought humanity its most valued contributions, that the return to the raw, the last realization on the path to perfection, was possible.”

⁸⁰ “He left the spectral professions of modernity to others – marketing or communications –, instead he chose a dirty, concrete line of work.”

This idea of a return to the immanent, the material and thus the ‘natural’ as the ultimate act of transcendence even manifests itself in the narrative structure traced by each author. In *Comme une bête*, Pim’s character moves from the ‘civilized’ to the ‘natural’, a version of *cru*. Pim is first attracted to butchery as a profession for its aspects that reflect the transcendent ideals of removal from materiality: « Parce que la boucherie est lucrative, que le boucher ne travaille pas dehors sous le vent et la pluie » (*Ibid*, 18)⁸¹ By the end of the novel, Pim has completely reversed his position, fulfilling butchery’s potential as an art by reverting to its most natural and ‘liberated’ methods. He sets an entire cattle farm free to roam the wilds of Normandy, and pursues beasts on foot in order to slaughter and dress them in the fields:

Désormais, par la grâce de Pim, la Normandie est une jungle, une savane, une forêt sauvage et impitoyable, sans foi ni loi si ce n’est celle du plus fort. Pim déclare l’état de nature, abroge l’élevage, hommes et bêtes paumés au milieu d’étendues naturelles. Pim est maintenant le premier homme, cerné par les herbages, les arbres et les taillis, cerné par les animaux qui sont des milliards. (*Ibid*, 161-62)⁸²

Pim’s return to the ‘state of nature’, an explicit reference to Rousseau’s nostalgia for the absence of law and civilization, is a sort of *cru* for the genre of political philosophy. He aspires to a *rapprochement* of man and nature in which he is « le boucher descendu de l’arche de Noé, le boucher d’après le déluge » (*Ibid*, 162)⁸³ Sorman’s invocation of the myth of Noah signals a vision of a new beginning, a

⁸¹ “Because butchery is lucrative, because the butcher doesn’t toil outside in the wind and the rain.”

⁸² “Nevertheless, thanks to Pim Normandy is a jungle, a savannah, a savage and pitiless forest with neither faith nor law, save the law of the fittest. Pim declares a state of nature, repeals domestication, men and beasts lost in nature. Pim is now the first man, ringed by pastures, trees and the thickets, surrounded by thousands of animals.”

⁸³ “...the butcher descended from Noah’s ark, the butcher after the deluge.”

‘return to zero’ or ‘starting from square one’ characteristic of the tendency of immanent transcendence, which seeks a return to material origins.

Barbery sets her protagonist Pierre Arthens on a similar trajectory of ‘return’ in the narrative structure of *Une gourmandise*. The action of the novel is structured by the ailing food critic’s peregrination of his own memory in search of a particular memory of savor. Finally attained, the novel’s climax comes with an account of that memory, which does not constitute a three-star meal or some foreign delicacy, but the banal indulgence found in gobbling a plastic bag of supermarket pastries,

chouquettes:

Dieu, c’est-à-dire le plaisir brut, sans partage, celui qui part du noyau de nous-mêmes qui n’a égard qu’à notre propre jouissance, et y revient de même ; Dieu, c’est-à-dire cette région mystérieuse de notre intimité où nous sommes entièrement à nous-mêmes dans l’apothéose d’un désir authentique et d’un plaisir sans mélange. Tel l’ombilic qui se niche au plus profond de nos fantasmes et que seul notre moi profond inspire, la chouquette [de Leclerc] était l’assomption de ma force de vivre et d’exister. J’aurais pu, toute ma vie durant, écrire sur elle, et toute ma vie durant, j’ai écrit contre elle. Ce n’est qu’à l’heure de ma mort que je la retrouve finalement après tant d’années d’errance. Et il importe peu, en définitive, que Paul me la rapporte avant que je ne trépasse. La question ce n’est pas de manger, ce n’est pas de vivre, c’est de savoir pourquoi. Au nom du père, du fils, et de la chouquette, amen. Je me meurs. (Barbery 2000: 166)⁸⁴

⁸⁴ “God – that is, raw, unequivocal pleasure, the pleasure which stems from our innermost core, cares for nothing other than our own delight, and returns to it in like fashion; God – that is, that mysterious region in our most secret self with which we are completely in tune in the apotheosis of authentic desire and unadulterated pleasure. Like the umbilicus nestled in our deepest phantasms, which only our deepest self can inspire, chouquettes were the assumption of my life strength, of my power to exist. I could have written about chouquettes my whole life long; and my whole life long, I wrote against them. It is only in the instant of my death that I have found them again, after so many years of wandering. And it matters little, in the end, whether Paul brings them to me before I expire. The question is not one of eating, nor is it one of living; the question is knowing why. In the name of the father, the son, and the chouquette, amen. I die.”

The *chouquettes* are the ideal site of immanent transcendence, divine in their everydayness, alive and connective as their savor comes not from their sensual qualities alone, but from the entire battery of the circumstances under which they are consumed. Arthens transcends the transcendent through his return to this moment of quotidian savor: he returns temporally, through memory, and he returns to uncomplicated pleasures from a life of food snobbery. The pleasure afforded by the simplicity of the *chouquette* is here portrayed as ‘pure’ in some measure, and thus as an iteration of the ‘cru’ conjured by Arthens earlier in the novel: the pleasure of the *chouquette* is ‘sans mélange’, unadulterated by concerns of prestige and the like – French cuisine in its simplest state.

iii. The Ambiguously Supernatural

Besides the discovery of divinity in materiality, we find reconciliation of material immanence and transcendence at work in our authors in the form of an ambiguously supernatural dimension of certain novels. As we shall see, this ‘ambiguous supernatural’ extends beyond the subtle mystification of matter as endowed with an essence or force of vitality discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Rather, here ambiguously supernatural forces *intervene* in physical interactions in slightly more overt ways, endowing the material with mystical powers.

L’hygiène de l’assassin ends with a supernatural interjection: Nina becomes the avatar of Prétexat Tach, a vessel for him in some vague way. After strangling Tach to death at his request, Nothomb’s narrator describes Nina: « Et l’avatar

contempla ses mains avec admiration. » (*Ibid*, 221)⁸⁵ Nothomb's narrator is omniscient and provides only rare commentary, therefore the reader can take that narrator's word for objective truth within the universe of the novel. By labeling her 'the avatar', the narrator implies that Nina has undergone a real transformation: she now somehow embodies Tach, evidenced in her inheritance of his hands – those organs that write of their own accord, and that strangle with pleasure.

The reader must ask: what does this process of *becoming* Tach entail? Returning to Tach's claim that to truly read and to fully comprehend a work of literature is to *digest* it and incorporate it into oneself, one might argue that as a true reader of Tach, Nina has somehow ingested Tach himself – whether figuratively or literally: « si vous l'aviez lu comme il fallait le lire, avec vos tripes, pour autant que vous en ayez, vous auriez dégueulé. » (Nothomb 1992: 58)⁸⁶ The idea of 'reading with one's bowels' can be read as metaphorical; but it can also be extended to postulate reading as a physical act of digestion.

In light of this passage, we might speculate that the nature of the transformation one undergoes when one reads is left *intentionally* ambiguous by Nothomb in service of the dramatic metamorphosis suggested to take place at the end of the novel. The closest relatable phenomenon is the Eucharist; we could view the process described by Nothomb as a sort of warped transubstantiation where the written word of Tach stands in for the wafer and undergoes a metamorphosis, becoming a physically ingested substance that inheres in the reader.

⁸⁵ “And the avatar contemplated her hands with admiration.”

⁸⁶ “If you had read it as it is meant to be read – with your guts – if you had any, you would have vomited.”

In this case, Nothomb would be arguing for an interpretation of literature as food, and thus of a consequent communion with the author in the act of reading. Though perhaps far-fetched, we find some evidence for this line of reasoning (the author as a Christ-like figure) in Tach's repeated claims of sacrifice for the good of humanity ('je suis la messie de l'obésité'; 'je suis trop bon').

Indeed, the injection of the ambiguously supernatural into a text about food seems symptomatic of this synthesis of material immanence and transcendence, as we also find the supernatural invoked ambiguously and fleetingly in Sorman. In the wake of his visit to the slaughterhouse, Pim dreams that a pig carcass falls from its hook onto a worker:

Dans ce rêve Pim travaille à l'abattoir...Pim tend la main pour saluer mais le cochon qui tanguait juste au-dessus de son crâne se décroche, s'affale subitement et vient le heurter...À l'abattoir il est arrivé qu'un cochon se décroche et atterrisse sur un abatteur, s'écrase de tout son poids sur les épaules d'un ouvrier.
(Sorman 2012: 52)⁸⁷

This is the only interjection of the supernatural in the novel, a brief and unexplained flash of something mystical. It is important to note that neither Nothomb nor Sorman suggest the existence of another realm (e.g. otherworldliness), rather these instances are *supernatural* in the strictest sense, a sort of transcendence of natural laws that occurs within and is produced by materiality. Nina's connection with Tach and his texts, and Pim's connection with the atmosphere of the slaughterhouse find themselves mystified in this manner.

⁸⁷ "In this dream, Pim is a worker at the slaughterhouse...Pim raises his hand to wave, but the pig hanging just above his head suddenly comes unhooked and collapses onto him...As it so happens, at the slaughterhouse a pig came unhooked and fell on a worker, collapsed with all of its weight on the shoulders of a worker."

CONCLUSION

Everyone eats, and everyone must eat: eating, along with birth and death, has this unique status as a universal constant in the human condition. As an existential given, it is often the site of profound reflection on our very being. How we have come to conceptualize this act – how we understand ourselves as eating subjects – is therefore a site rich with clues about our culture in general.

In western culture, we conceptualize the act of eating in such divergent ways, to the extent that our attitude towards eating can be termed ‘schizophrenic’. As the works of Barbery, Nothomb and Sorman have demonstrated, sometimes eating is a profound act of physical and spiritual communion – with tradition, with other people, with a place, with divinity even – that makes the body feel like a sacred home; in other moments, it is an inconvenient biological necessity, an unsavory fact of embodiment that makes us want to distance ourselves from our corporeality. Undeniably, eating is a site where we examine our relationship to our own materiality.

Yet because of its constant presence in our lives, we seldom notice ourselves engaging in this schizophrenic conceptualization of eating, and more generally, of our embodied subjectivity. I contend that there is a distinct structure that undergirds our conflicted conceptualizations of the act of eating, a structure determined by western theories of materiality – philosophies of transcendence and material immanence. These theories of materiality exist as poles at opposite ends of a spectrum in the western imaginary. Though we often address and invoke them separately,

occasionally we try to make them meet in the middle, giving voice to immanent transcendence whereby we relocate subjectivity, and even divinity, to the realm of materiality. These conflicting philosophies of materiality structure our thought about eating to such an extent that they produce noticeable patterns, many of which are known to us as clichés: ‘feed mind, feed body’, ‘you are what you eat’, ‘I want to eat you’, ‘I found God in a bite of chocolate’.

We find the same perspectives of material immanence, transcendence, and immanent transcendence at work structuring discussions of eating in western non-Francophone literatures. For instance, the disgust for the eating subject, biological immanence, taste-able essence, and religious transcendence are all present in the way American writer Michael Paterniti describes eating the now illegal French delicacy of Ortolan, a small migratory bird. The dish is prepared by soaking the bird in Armagnac, roasting it and consuming it whole with a napkin draped over one’s head and face as a way of expressing shame for the somewhat savage act of eating this tiny creature whole:

Here’s what I taste: Yes, quidbits of meat and organs; the succulent, tiny strands of flesh between the ribs and tail. I put inside myself the last flowered bit of air and Armagnac in its lungs, the body of rainwater and berries. In there, too, is the ocean and Africa and the dip and plunge in a high wind. And the heart that bursts between my teeth.

It takes time. I’m forced to chew and chew again and again, for what seems like three days. And what happens after chewing for this long – as the mouth full of taste buds and glands does its work – is that I fall into a trance. I don’t taste anything anymore, cease to exist as anything but taste itself. (Paterniti, 2008)

It is also worth noting that, in relying on the works of Patrice Haynes, Elspeth Probyn, Glenn Kuehn, and Deane Curtin to provide theoretical frameworks for my analysis, I have drawn heavily on Anglophone – American and British – examinations of eating in my explanation of French representations of the same act. From this fact I conclude that there really is a distinctly western way of thinking about food and eating that spans national cultures.

And then there is what the universal language of biology tells us about the role eating plays in our being. In biological explanations of eating, we find our more poetic ideas about eating – like eating as ontology, the notion of an ‘edible world’, and the idea of becoming that which one eats – corroborated to a surprising degree. Consider the following: Dr. Michael Gershorn of Columbia University claims that “every neurotransmitter that exists in our brain, also exists in the gut without exception. The brain in the gut is simply the brain gone south” (Gershorn in Ouimet, 2002: R7). Nancy Rawson, director of basic research at AFB International, a firm that develops ‘palatability enhancers’ for pet foods, tells us that the skin of a catfish is covered in taste buds, “Catfish are basically swimming tongues” (Rawson in Roach, 2014: 33). And while it may seem obvious, Deane Curtin tells us that we do, in fact become that which we eat:

First, we are what we eat in a most literal, bodily way. Our bodies literally are food transformed into flesh, tendon, blood, and bone. Perhaps the most succinct way to express this is in terms of illness resulting from certain food practices. In the United States men who eat an average meat-based diet have a fifty percent chance of dying of a heart attack. The male American vegan (one who eats no dairy products, eggs, meat or fish) has a four percent risk of death from heart attack. American girls who eat an average amount of meat experience

early menstruation, which has been associated with high cancer rates. Chinese women who eat a vegetable- and grain-based diet start menstruating three to six years later than American women and rarely suffer these cancers. It is undeniable that our bodies are what we eat.” (Curtin 1992: 11)

These facts put the act of eating in perspective for us as a truly ontological act. The fact of a second brain in our gut might lead us to reconsider the notion that a part of our subjectivity resides in our materiality, in our digestive organs as well as in our heads. That a catfish uses taste as its primary medium of interaction with its world gives us reason to consider eating as an act that defines and structures our being in the world not simply in its necessity to sustaining our physicality, but as a medium through which we experience our own being, a way of being and of perceiving. And Curtin’s statistic would seem to reinforce the validity of the notion of eating as a *relational* interaction where that which one eats transforms the eater by transferring a certain degree of its own qualities to the body that absorbs it.

Yet perhaps most interesting is the ubiquity, in western cultural eating behaviors, of the impulse to treat eating as an act of immanent transcendence, a vaguely religious or mystified encounter where the material world is imbued with a degree of divinity or some unarticulated transcendent quality. Beyond the Eucharist, we see this impulse to ‘transcendentalize’ food present in every food movement that claims rawness, freshness, ‘simplicity’, or ‘naturalness’ as the pinnacle of culinary possibility. Post-transcendent obsessions with raw, ‘simple’, and ‘natural’, foods replace the transcendent culinary ideal of cultural phenomena like traditional French haute cuisine or molecular gastronomy, where food is transformed *from* its natural state to a complex fabrication: “this position insists on relocating transcendence ‘to

the plane of immanence' ...advocates of post-transcendence seek to re-vitalize immanent, material life." (Haynes 2014: 3)

In turn, 'rawness' and 'naturalness' become food religions of their own as they adopt a post-transcendent ideal of food in its 'natural state'. Raw juice bars, organic specialty food markets, gourmet salad chains, and natural beverages like coconut water and fermented kombucha gain traction as they market their 'naturalness' and simplicity as possessing special benefits that border on claims of superpowers. Evidence of their status as pseudo-religions that locate quasi-divine qualities within matter is the way we speak of these food movements: we use the language of religion.

Celebrities tout the diet's advantages: Uma Thurman and Woody Harrelson are among the famous raw-food converts. Although the practice is associated with veganism and new ageism, it also includes proponents of raw animal products. And it is not new: For centuries, raw-food diets have been a part of ascetic movements that have promoted the spiritual benefits of uncooked food. (Viestad, 2010)

People are 'converts' to these dietary movements, which peddle themselves as a way of life, a sort of moral code. We have invented and mainstreamed the term 'superfood' to market certain allegedly nutrient-rich raw foods, as though they contained divine grace and absolution for our cholesterol-clogged arteries. God in a mouthful of kale.

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A note on translations: all footnoted translations of Châtelet, Barbery, Nothomb and Sorman are my own.

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