Albertine’s Futuristic Gastronomy

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Abstract

To eat or not to eat the world is a question that opposes on the one hand, what Leo Bersani calls the « masochism of art », a selfless, disinterested attitude which he sees embodied by the narrator’s restraint of his desire to devour the world, and on the other, Albertine’s sadistic creation/destruction of an imaginary foodscape, the famous sculpted ice landscape, offering astonishing resemblances with the imagined gastronomic creations of the Futurist movement. This article suggests that this movement, whose Manifest in 1909 coincided with the year the writing of the Recherche suddenly takes off, can be construed as an accelerator of what is there from the outset in the first published volume: the novel’s pendulum movement, its intermittences du cœur.

According to Roland Barthes’s famous mayonnaise metaphor, A la recherche du temps perdu, as we know and read it since the publication of its first volume in 1913, started to « take » (prendre) like a mayonnaise in September 1909:

Tous les écrits de Proust qui précèdent la Recherche ont un aspect fragmenté, court: de petites nouvelles, des articles, des bouts de textes. On a l’impression que les ingrédients sont là (comme on dit en cuisine), mais que l’opération qui va les transformer n’a pas encore eu lieu: ce n’est pas « vraiment ça ». Et puis tout d’un coup (septembre 1909), « ça prend »: la mayonnaise se lie et n’a plus dès lors qu’à s’augmenter peu à peu.

Barthes 2000, 56–57

While the mayonnaise metaphor itself has « taken », it is worth noting that in the same article, Barthes uses an entirely different register of metaphors, modern metaphors of speed, in order to stress the urgency felt by Proust « au moment où la Recherche démarre », and underline the increased velocity with which Proust, « qui a toujours écrit, comme il dit, ‘au galop’ », was now writing, « lancé à fond de train dans la grande œuvre à laquelle il va désormais tout sacrifier » (ibid.).

It is also in 1909 that the first Futurist Manifesto was published. Most critics have clearly established Proust’s fascination for what the Futurists represented, a new, bracing, fast, exciting way of life, the energy of which was palpable in the year 1913, when Proust published his first volume. But they typically focus on modern ways of transportation or communication, not on the way Futurism
is intricately and surreptitiously infused into the very organism that is the novel (to borrow Barthes’s terminology), and this not only in the late parts of the work, La Prisonnière, where what I describe as Albertine’s Futuristic ice-cream landscape is situated, but from its very beginning. All the elements are in place, since « Combray », for the pendulum of extremes to swing between two opposite visions to life and art: the narrator’s conservative petite madeleine and Albertine’s Futurist constructive/destructive approach.

In their 1997 article « Beauty’s Light », Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit attribute to Proust’s young narrator, in search of his vocation, what they consider to be the very quality of the artist: a form of masochistic renunciation to devour, consume, assimilate the world (Bersani and Dutoit 1997). To illustrate this, they quote the well-known buttercup description in Combray’s « Côté de Guermantes ». Even though buttercups – boutons d’or – contain no butter in French, they provide, according to this reading, a lesson to the young would-be artist in his long and difficult apprenticeship, the lesson being that art is what you cannot eat, its beauty residing in its uselessness:

> Ils étaient fort nombreux à cet endroit qu’ils avaient choisi pour leurs jeux sur l’herbe, isolés, par couples, par troupes, jaunes comme un jaune d’œuf, brillants d’autant plus, me semblait-il, que ne pouvant dériver vers aucune velléité de dégustation le plaisir que leur vue me causait, je l’accumulais dans leur surface dorée, jusqu’à ce qu’il devînt assez puissant pour produire de l’inutile beauté.

R² 1, 165–166

« Inutile beauté », useless beauty, is also what Mme Verdurin strives to offer her guests when she creates her « chemin de table » (table runner) at la Raspelière (in Sodome et Gomorrhe, II), a miniature version of the rented property’s « chemin » (a word loaded with significance ever since Combray as it evokes the cheminement of the artist). For the would-be artist that is Mme Verdurin, and despite her name indicating a base adherence to the imitation of nature, this is no mere transposition of nature. Mme Verdurin is Aristotelian in her creation as she privileges sight over gustatory experience.¹ As an astute socialite, she also knows the symbolic power of the art of the table. Interspersing flowers and food, the inedible and edible bounties of the old aristocratic domain, she brings « distinction » to her table by orienting the eye of the eater from the

¹ In De Anima, Aristotle establishes a long-lasting opposition in the senses between sight (which implies distance, objectivity and allows for the contemplation of truth) and the base and subjective senses of taste and smell, which do not distinguish man from animal.