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Hungry Eyes: Reflections on hosting and decoration

'There is nothing really beautiful save what is of no possible use. Everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and man's needs are low and disgusting, like his own poor, wretched nature. The most useful place in a house is the water-closet.'¹

Théophile Gautier *Mademoiselle de Maupin* 1835

The decorative is a celebration of uselessness. Plush cushions, cut flowers in a vase, the decorated Christmas tree, the candles on the dinner table are unnecessary from a utilitarian point of view – pure frippery. And yet, this ancillary aspect of the decorative, its deliberate supplementary status in relation to the 'main event', elevates its inherent uselessness to a tool of **some** power. The decorative's function is to make something look attractive and by doing so makes it the centre of attention. **Furthermore, its very uselessness gives the decorative and decoration its aesthetic value and thus links it directly to concepts of art and the artistic.** (I would suggest either loosing this sentence or expanding on it a bit more – I think more needs to be said to explain what concepts of art and artistic in particular - -given visual art element of the journal)

The decorative and its intrinsic uselessness plays a crucial role when considering the culinary event of the dinner party and its surrounding rituals. For my part, I have always loved the thrill and the theatre of the dinner party and the ways in which the small details, the purely ornamental, turn food and its consumption into an event. The dinner and the dishes to be served always seemed to start off as fiction, as a story to be told in a culinary manner and over the years, I have increasingly realised that my interest in cooking and serving food is inspired by my work as an academic teaching and researching literary texts. The textual web woven by narrative structure and its complex links to historical and cultural contexts has been at the centre of my interest when reading and has simultaneously become the guiding factor when planning and hosting a dinner party.

A few years ago, we opened up our dining room to the public as a small pop-up restaurant 'The Whalley Range Dining Room'. The room could seat up to twelve diners who, on arrival, were welcomed in the front living room for a pre-dinner cocktail. Following the aperitif guests were invited to enter the candle lit dining room where a table was laid with china, glass, cutlery, linen napkins and decorated with flowers. Guests received the menu beforehand so they could make a choice between a vegetarian and a meat main course, other than the main course everybody ate the same dishes. A sample menu is as follows:

¹ Théophile Gautier, *Complete Works*, trans. F. C. Sumichrast (New York: Bigelow Smith, 1910), p. 80

Pop up dinner party

British Summer

In

The Whalley Range Dining Room

Cocktail

Pimm's or elderflower and lemon Martini

Starter

Salad of Pearl Barley, broad beans, peas and mint

Main Course

Lamb with mint potatoes, lemon thyme celeriac, red wine gravy and red currant and port jelly

Vegetarian Main

Caramelised Onion and English Goats cheese risotto with seasonal salad leaves on the side

Dessert

Red and Green English Summer pudding with seasonal berries, and vanilla and clotted cream ice cream

Cheese Board

A selection of British cheeses with homemade savoury

biscuits

Coffee and chocolates

The pop up restaurant opened up the front two reception rooms of our house, a Grade II listed mid-Victorian villa. Having had to completely renovate the house between 2004-5 we felt that the somewhat forgotten building should be re-introduced to the city. By opening up the private space of our living and dining room the historical architecture and decorative features could be re-introduced to the public sphere. In addition, cooking and hosting have been interests of mine for a long time, to the extent that even my academic research and publications focused increasingly on the cultural meaning of food and eating.²As such, the pop ups were a practical

² Eat my Words: Poetry as Transgression, in Mueller-Zettelmann, Eva (ed), *Theory into Practice: New Approaches to Poetry*, Rodopi (2005)

means to explore the interstices between the private and the domestic as well as the realm of 'work' and the ways in which they could inform and respond to each other.

For each dining event, the menu came together as part of a theme (Italian spring/autumn; Scandinavian Christmas; French/German Border; British summer). In developing the theme, presentation and decoration were given as much thought as the food itself. In fact, I realised that the decorative element became an intrinsic part of how I hoped the dishes could be tasted and appreciated. The narrative and aesthetic framework of the dinner became increasingly important, the ways in which the sensual experience of the event would refer to aspects of sight, sound, taste and smell and thus create a communicative environment in which guests could experience themselves as a group brought together by the event. The wording of the menu, for example, refers to a narrative of 'Britishness' that aimed to bring to the fore what is often thought of as 'essentially' British (Pimms, summer pudding, the combination of pea and mint). The careful wording of the menu initiated consideration of the relationship between nationality and food, childhood memories and possible alternative versions of culinary Britishness with the food itself often fading into the background, taking on a purely decorative role. The shift in focus from the individual dishes served to the associated references brought to bear by the specific language of the menu and accompanying 'summer' décor was the most striking revelation during the pop-up events: the boundaries between the essential and the decorative became blurred. The smell of the flowers, the colour of the china, the texture of the napkin, and the text on the menu all became part of what was tasted, ingested and digested. The enjoyment of the food was dialectically linked to its 'linguistic' presentation as well as the table and room decoration. It was thus in its 'connective tissue' where the event gained its specific meaning as a cultural experience and the meal itself transformed into a communicative text. In Diane McGee's words: 'In the relationship of food to dining can be found the basis or the essence of culture, just as in the transformation of speech to text, literature emerges.'³

['Food and crime: What's eating the crime novel?', *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol.14.2: Crime Narratives: Crossing Cultures and Disciplines, eds Maurizio Ascari & Heather Worthington \(2010\)](#)

['Rhyming Hunger: Poetry, Love and Cannibalism,' in *The Canarian Review of English Studies \(Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingeleses\)*, Vol. 60, Special Issue: \(Re\)Defining Contemporary British Poetry \(April 2010\)](#)

['Foreign Recipes: Mothers, Daughters and Food in *Like Water For Chocolate* and *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, *Crossroads. A Journal of English Studies* \(Vol. 1, Spring 2014\).](#)

['Feeding the Vampire: The Ravenous Hunger of the *fin de siècle*' in, Mary Addyman et.al, *Food, Drink and the Written Word 1820-1954*, London: Routledge, 2016](#)

³ Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-century Women Writer*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p 6.

When hosting the pop-up dinners, I realised that the relationship between ‘main event’ (food) and the decorative had a tendency to re-write itself constantly and by doing so each event invented its own narrative and produced its own readings of the particular meal and its environment. Such an interweaving of narrative, experience and memory brings me back to literature and in particular, to Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*.⁴ (insert date and publications details in footnote) In the novel the dinner party is used as a narrative trope. For Mrs Ramsay, the central female protagonist, the dinner party is a creative event that brings her houseguests together as a group. The *Boeuf on Daube* she serves— a deceptively simple dish – nevertheless becomes profoundly meaningful for the narrative and its characters in the ways in which it will affect the lives and relationships of the men and women assembled around the table. However, it is the imaginative rather than the nutritional aspect of food and eating that is at the centre of Woolf’s fictional dinner party. Food and eating as a biological necessity fade into the background with the effect that the decorative and sensuous aspects take centre stage rendering the meal meaningful as a culinary event. Furthermore, it is the add-ons, the things on and around the dinner table that transform food as a biological necessity (nature) into something cultural and inspirational (art), as Mrs Ramsay’s reflections on the table decorations insinuate:

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. What had she done with it, Mrs Ramsay wondered, for Rose’s arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (in some picture) among the leopard skins and the torches lolloping red and gold ...⁵

Mrs Ramsay translates the mundanity of edible goods into cultural anecdotes and the visual quality of her musings function as a link to the other major female character in the novel, the painter Lily Briscoe. The arrangement of the fruit initiates a chain of associations in the host’s mind and thus carry domestic, traditionally feminine labour, into the cultural public sphere of art and transform food into a culturally staged(?)meal. In short, Mrs Ramsay’s appreciation of the table decoration underlines that ‘the choice, preparation and presentation of food signify a good deal more than merely the available or customary diet of a people.’⁶ The decorative and presentational aspect of food, its non-essential and often extraneous accessories can thus be understood as transforming the process of eating into a meaningful cultural event. Paradoxically, it is therefore in the ancillary and non-nutritional nature

⁴ [Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. Oxford: OUP, 2008](#)

⁵ *ibid.* p.79

⁶ Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-century Women Writer*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p 11/12.

of the decorative, where food derives its value and pertinence as a creative act and social activity. The success of a dinner party as a cultural event resides in its ability to make the guests gathered around the table forget about the necessity of food. As the anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues: 'food and eating afford us a remarkable arena in which to watch how the human species invests a basic activity with social meaning – indeed, with so much meaning that the activity itself can almost be lost sight of.'⁷

⁷ Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions Into Eating, Culture, and the Past*. Boston: Bacon Press, 1996, p. 7