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# RHYMING HUNGER: POETRY, LOVE AND CANNIBALISM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper wants to explore how poetic texts often draw on the body in a very self-aware manner, and by doing so accomplish what could be called a self-referential corporeality. By looking at a selection of love poems by Carol Ann Duffy (mainly from the volume *Rapture*, 2005) and at two poem sequences from Michael Symmons Roberts collection *Corpus* (2004), I want to investigate the relationship between the poetic and corporeal acts of internalisation and externalisation. I will be particularly interested in the link between love and the concept of consumption by reading the latter in its specific relationship to eating and the process of digestion. By drawing on the theoretical work of Freud, Derrida and Kristeva, I want to suggest that the poetic processing of words shows some significant and illuminating connections to the processing of food and by doing so allows us to look at poetic imaginations of love and the body in new ways.

KEY WORDS: Self-referential corporeality, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Symmons Roberts.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende explorar cómo los textos poéticos a menudo se aproximan al cuerpo de manera muy consciente, y al hacerlo llevan a cabo lo que se podría denominar una corporalidad autorreferencial. Mediante el análisis de una selección de poemas de amor de Carol Ann Duffy (principalmente de su colección *Rapture* de 2005) y de dos secuencias de poemas de la colección de Michael Symmons Roberts, *Corpus* (2004), me propongo investigar la relación entre actos poéticos y corpóreos de interiorización y exteriorización. Me centraré principalmente en la relación entre el amor y el concepto de consumo mediante la lectura de éste en su relación específica con el comer y con el proceso digestivo. A la luz de los postulados teóricos de Freud, Derrida y Kristeva, quiero sugerir que el procesamiento poético de las palabras muestra conexiones significativas y esclarecedoras con el procesamiento de la comida y que, al hacerlo, nos permite nuevas perspectivas hacia las imaginaciones poéticas del amor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: corporalidad autorreferencial, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Symmons Roberts.



“Digestion is a kind of fleshy poetry, for metaphor begins in the body’s transubstantiations of itself, while food is the thesaurus of all moods and sensations.” (Ellmann, *Hunger* 112).

Art thou the thing I wanted?  
Begone —my Tooth has grown—  
Supply the minor Palate  
That has not starved so long—  
I tell thee wile I waited  
The mystery of Food  
Increased till I abjured it  
And dine without like God (Dickenson 560)

## EATING LOVE

When in Maurice Sendak’s bestselling children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are* little Max, after behaving particularly mischievously, is called “wild thing” by his mother, he retorts in childish anger: “I’ll eat you up” (Sendak 5). His mother sends him to bed without dinner and, suddenly, his room transforms into a magical and poetical forest and his journey into the land where the wild things are begins. “We’ll eat you up —we love you so” (Sendak 27), threaten the monsters when Max prepares to sail back home to his room where he is greeted by the delicious smell of dinner, which is still hot! Although not a poetic text as such, Sendak’s tale of love, anger, and monstrous cannibalism is written in short, rhythmic sentences which teem with metaphors and images. Max’s childhood home and the carnivalesque realm of the wild things, feelings of love and furious anger, are melted into a dream-like, in-between state where monsters and mothers resemble each other uncannily.

Desire, food and the monstrous are also major constituents of another poetic tale aimed at children: Christina Rossetti’s infamous long poem “Goblin Market,” composed by the poet in 1859. In this tale of love, temptation, rage and sacrifice, food and eating not only represent the connection (and, at the same time, the blurring of lines) between the monstrosity of the goblins and the childish innocence of Laura and Lizzie, they also provide the matrix from which emanate imaginations of love, desire, abjection and corporeality, in short: imaginations of ourselves/our selves. In “Goblin Market” the act of eating is developed as a polysemic trope that signifies temptation, the threat of death, rape and transgression on the one hand, and (sexual) love, transubstantiation, sacrifice, resurrection and salvation of the other. When Laura succumbs to the Goblins’ fruit she

...sucked their fruit globes fair or red:  
Sweeter than honey from the rock,  
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,  
Clearer than water flowed that juice;  
She never tasted such before,  
How should it cloy with length of use?

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more  
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,  
She sucked until her lips were sore; (Rossetti 8)

However rather than satisfaction, this first taste of the forbidden fruit leaves Laura in the painful realm of never-ending desire and it is only Lizzie's act of self-sacrifice that will lead her back into 'normality'. Lizzie comes back from the Goblins, covered in their juices and offers herself to her sister:

She cried "Laura," up the garden,  
"Did you miss me?  
Come and kiss me.  
Never mind my bruises,  
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me:  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men." (Rossetti 17)

Eating is both, transgression and salvation, it simultaneously threatens death and promises life. Operating as a major signifying trope of the poem, it swamps the text with meaning and, at the same time, strangely drains it of it, since eating always refers to something else and is never meaningful as simply the intake of food.<sup>1</sup> As a metaphor and trope in narrative and poetic texts, I would like to argue the act of eating imbues a sense of ambiguity into textual proceedings and their readings and, as an effect, creates an atmosphere of ambivalence where pleasure dissolves into anxiety and *vice versa*. Max's angry retort to his mother—"I'll eat you up"—signifies his fury about dependence and is, at the same time a declaration of love for her (even if tinged with desperation), and echoed later on in the text by the wild things: "We'll eat you up, we'll love you so!" In the following, I want to explore some contemporary poetic texts that imagine and, at times, struggle with, love as an act of devouring and being devoured. By looking at a selection of love poems by Carol Ann Duffy (from the volume *Rapture*, 2005) and at two poem sequences on embodiment from Michael Symmons Robert's collection *Corpus* (2004), I want to investigate the relationship between the poetic and corporeal acts of internalisation and externalisation. I will be particularly interested in the link between love and the concept of consumption by reading the latter in its specific relationship to eating and the process of digestion. By drawing on the theoretical work of Freud, Derrida and Kristeva, I want to suggest that the poetic processing of words shows some

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<sup>1</sup> Food as a metaphor in "Goblin Market" and other examples of poetry is discussed in more detail in my essay, "Eat My Words: Poetry as Transgression."



significant and illuminating connections to the processing of food and by doing so opens up new perspectives on poetic imaginations of love and bodies in love.

### RAPTURE: CONSUMING LOVE/CONSUMED BY LOVE

Carol Ann Duffy's collection of love poems *Rapture* documents and dissects the course of a love affair, from its euphoric beginnings to the bitter end when the "garden's sudden scent's an open grave" and the speaker has to endure "the death of love" (Duffy 62). The various poems in the volume are thematically and emotionally held together by a desperate attempt to understand and make sense of the experience of love and, at the same time, come across as a delirious celebration of the very fact that falling in love, being in love and being "over" love is forever nonsensical and out of one's control. The title "Rapture" already reverberates with the ambiguities and complexities that will be addressed in the various poems which themselves form a book-length love poem. Etymologically the term "rapture" resonates with a wide range of meanings which link together: the transport of believers to heaven at the second coming of Christ; to be delightedly enthusiastic; the act of seizing and carrying prey; a state of passion, paroxysm, fit; rape sexual violation, ravishing; the act of conveying a person from one place to another; the action or an act of carrying off a woman by force, abduction, to name just the most relevant here. Adding to the etymological jigsaw, there is also a connection between ravenous and ravish when both refer to an act of violence and a taking of things by force.<sup>2</sup> In its various meanings, from the original to more current ones, ravenous suggests a link between predatory, violent and ferocious behavior and feelings of hunger and (gluttonous) appetite.<sup>3</sup> As a title for a collection of love poetry, the meanings of rapture configure the spectrum of love as a semantic, as well as an emotional space where feelings of delighted enthusiasm reside next to the terrors of sexual violence and predatory hunger. In her groundbreaking study on hunger and metaphors of eating in general Maud Ellmann props up this link between amorous desire and the threat of being devoured by pointing out the "traces of infantile cannibalism" that "resurface in our language," especially in the language of love: "the object of desire, for example, is commonly described as "appetizing," "dishy," "sweet," or even "good enough to eat" (Ellmann 40). "*All eating is force-feeding*," and it is through the wound of feeding that the other is instated at the very center of the

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary refers, amongst others to the following meanings: Ravish: "To plunder, rob, steal from (a place, building, race or class of people, etc.); to devastate, lay waste to (a country)." Ravenous: "Given to plundering, or taking things by force; extremely rapacious." <<http://www.oed.com/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Originally: (of an animal) given to seizing other animals as prey; predatory; ferocious. Later: (of an animal or person; also of the appetite, hunger, etc.) voracious, gluttonous. Also *fig.* and in extended use. <<http://www.oed.com/>>.



self” (Ellmann 36), argues Ellmann further on, which suggests that any discourse of/on food and eating as well as any of/on the self will always be at the mercy of something other, something alien and uncanny. Furthermore, one could argue here that discourses of food and eating are inhabited by the uncanny and its tendency to disturb a straightforward differentiation between inside and outside. As Nicholas Royle puts it so poignantly when discussing the uncanny:

But it [the uncanny] is not ‘out there’, in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality... its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the word ‘itself’. It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* foreign body, ...It would appear to be indissociably bound up with a sense of repetition or ‘coming back’ —the return of the repressed, the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat (Royle 2).

There is a range of poems in *Rapture* that bring to mind such uncanny processes of transformation and the sense that the self is forcefully invaded by something that is, initially, exterior and alien to it. The first poem in the collection, ‘You’ sets the scene for the drama that will unfold over the following pages:

YOU

Uninvited, the thought of you stayed too late in my head.  
so I went to bed, dreaming you hard, hard, woke with your name,  
like tears, soft, salt, on my lips, the sound of its bright syllables  
like a charm, like a spell.

Falling in love  
is glamorous hell: the crouched, parched heart  
like a tiger, ready to kill; a flame’s fierce licks under the skin.  
into my life, larger than life, you strolled in.

I hid in my ordinary days, in the long grass of routine,  
in my camouflage rooms. You sprawled in my gaze,  
staring back from anyone’s face, from the shape of a cloud,  
from the pining, earth-struck moon which gapes at me

as I open the bedroom door. The curtains stir. There you are  
on the bed, like gift, like a touchable dream. (Duffy 1)

The poem is divided into three quatrains and a final couplet and thus directly reminiscent of the sonnet form which itself is, of course, inextricably linked with the theme and discourse of love. Furthermore, the sonnet can also be described as a rather protean form, a poetic “shapeshifter,” that has created its own generic identity via the transformative processes of voracious mimicry (inclusion) and an often determined desire for innovative originality (exclusion). Thematically “You”



reiterates this gesture by developing the poem in images that connote a threat of invasion (“uninvited”; “stayed... in my head”; “Into my life, larger than life, beautiful, you strolled in”), transformation (“dreaming you hard, hard woke with your name,/like tears, soft, salt on my lips,”; “staring back from anyone’s face...”) and a desire to possess/devour the other: “the crouched, parched heart/like a tiger ready to kill;” “There you are/ on the bed, like a gift, like a touchable dream.”). By articulating feelings of love and desire in the poetic format of the sonnet, a normative genre that has shaped and structured the discourse of love by simultaneously defining and breaking the conventions of the ways in which these emotions can be expressed and discussed, the poem sets the scene for an atmosphere of ambiguity and contradiction. The “glamorous hell” of being in love is evoked via the tensions between the desire of being devoured and annihilated by the lover and, at the same time, the very fear of becoming the prey of “a tiger ready to kill.” Being invaded by the other and thus becoming the other promises excitement, but stepping out of “the long grass of routine” and leaving “the camouflage room” exposes the self to the danger of being ravished by a predatory other. The poem is called “You” but what it actually articulates are desires and fears of the persona about being cannibalistically devoured by the lover. If one is eaten up by the other, one becomes one with the other but it also designates the other as a site of mourning of and for the self.

Love as “glamorous hell” is something we have been rehearsing since infancy according to psychoanalytic theories and their critical imaginations of ego development and subject formation. In the works of Sigmund Freud and Melanie cannibalism is employed as a central trope when they refer to anxieties of the infant. Freud, and even more so Klein, incorporate the image and act of cannibalism as fundamental explanatory models when it comes to the representation of fears of and love for the maternal figure and its corporeal imaginations. As Ellman summarises Klein’s theory of ingestion so eloquently:

She argues that the infant devours all the objects of his outer world in order to install them in his world of fantasy. Since the mouth is where he has imbibed his mother’s milk, it is mainly through this orifice that he partakes of his imaginary banquet. But his whole body, with all its senses and functions, participates in his incorporation of the cosmos: he drinks it with his eyes, eats it with his ears, and sucks it through his very fingertips. (Ellmann 40)

Cannibalising the (m)other via processes of incorporation and introjection is regarded in Kleinian theory as fundamental to any notion of identity as produced by a separation between inside and outside. However, cannibalistic hunger does not end here. Devouring whatever is perceived as outside, and by doing so, creating the sense of interiority (the idea of an inner self), triggers off a dynamics of “self-consuming” action with the ingested objects themselves now eating away at the inner self. Theorised and discussed in the various psychoanalytic models of melancholia and mourning, especially the ones by Freud, Klein and Kristeva, this volatile relationship between creation and destruction is the closest we come to a sense of identity. Karl Abraham and Maria Torok problematised this intricate cannibalistic



core by proposing the term 'encryptment' when describing the process of transforming exterior objects into internal space.<sup>4</sup> Incorporation for Torok is foremost a spectral act, its haunting quality underlined by her use of the term 'phantom' when explaining the extent to which the process has to be understood in relation to the death instinct:

While incorporation, which behaves like a post-hypnotic suggestion, may recede before appropriate forms of classical analysis, the phantom remains beyond the reach of the tools of classical analysis. The phantom will vanish only when its radically heterogeneous nature with respect to the subject is recognized, a subject to whom it at no time has any direct reference. In no way can the subject relate to the phantom as his or her own repressed experience, not even as an experience within incorporation. *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.* (Torok et al. 53-4)

Whereas the term incorporation at first reading suggests a seamless amalgamating of outside into inside, Torok and Abraham's notion of the phantom as remaining radically foreign to the ego sees at the core of the self something that cannot be digested and, furthermore, devours cannibalistically the host that *invited* it in the first place. This notion of incorporation as a double act of cannibalism —first savagely ingesting the outside which, when incorporated, devours what is conceived of as inside seems to me what underlies, or more precisely, haunts the notion of love in Duffy's *Rapture*.

Love, as it is articulated and problematised, in various poems in this volume always seems to be already inhabited by its failure, a theme which is also present when the poetic texts address the complicated issue of expressing emotions in poetry. Much of the history of poetry as a genre is inextricably interlinked with the desire to put into words how love and disappointed love feels. This, in turn, is often tinged with the frustration that goes along with this process, since there always seems to exist an incongruence between words and feelings. In the poem 'Text', for example, the very medium that transmits emotions between the two lovers (the text-function on a mobile phone) also distorts the message:

The codes we send  
Arrive with a broken cord.

I try to picture your hands,  
Their image is blurred.

Nothing my thumbs press  
Will ever be heard (Duffy 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Encryptment is discussed in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's works *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* and *The Shell and the Kernel*.





The poem is organised in seven couplets which mirrors the communication (or, should that be the impossibility of communication?) between the couple. The “significant words” of the third couplet lose their certainty of meaning when they are “re-read” again and again with the effect that they become distorted audibly (“broken chord”), visibly (“I try to picture your hands/ their image is blurred”) and finally unable to be communicated (“Nothing my thumbs press/ will ever be heard.”) It is as if the text, in its double meaning as a feature of mobile phone communication and as the poetic text itself, feeds on and eats up the very meaning it is presumed to produce and transmit. Furthermore, the poem already hints at the disaster of love which, by continuously rehearsing the anxiety-ridden relationship between infant and mother figure, is imagined as feeling that simultaneously props up and threatens the sense of being *oneself*.<sup>5</sup> When discussing Melanie Klein’s account of the mother-child dyad in early infancy Jacqueline Rose, for example, refers to the conflict between the desire for closeness and the threat of annihilation that underlie this relationship: “Against the idyll of early fusion with the mother, Klein offers proximity as something which devours.” (Rose 139-40). Maud Ellmann re-formulates the contradictions underlying the development of a sense of self in a more general way when pointing out: “The ego is established as excluding what is not itself, and by devouring whatever it is striving to become. But this means that the ego can sustain its perilous existence only through the ceaseless purgation of itself” (Ellmann 40). Furthermore, eating and language are, in her opinion, both acts that construct identity in and with the other:

It is through the act of eating that the ego establishes its own domain, distinguishing its inside from its outside. But it is also in this act that the frontiers of subjectivity are most precarious. Food, like language, is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful that one speaks—or chews. From the beginning one eats for the other, from the other, with the other: and for this reason eating comes to represent the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food the prototype of every object of exchange. (Ellmann 53).

The poems in Duffy’s *Rapture*, it seems to me, refract the relationship between the lovers through feelings of a painful *jouissance* in which togetherness and the desire to become one is poetically enacted as a celebration and, at the same time, as a tragedy of loss. In “Name” the lover is consumed erotically and linguistically, his/her identity (name) deconstructed into sounds: “Its consonants/brushing my mouth/like a kiss,” “.../rhyming, rhyming/ rhyming with everything.” (Duffy 3). Whereas the poems at the beginning of the volume often just give a taste of the trauma that defines the experience of love (such as, “Hour” and “Haworth”), the aptly names “Absence” introduces a change of tone by putting the emphasis more

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<sup>5</sup> This article cannot elaborate in greater detail on psychoanalytic accounts of the relationship between infants and the maternal figure, but Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis in particular regard any feelings of love and desire as directly rooted in this dyad.

clearly on fragmentation and the feeling of being lost. The poem is, similar to “Text,” written in two-liners, however now, rather than giving both lines equal length, the first line is always longer than the second one. In addition, the rhythm is staccato-like and repetitive, producing a language that sticks in the throat like a bone. Every two-liner (I do not think one can refer to them as couplets) evolves as one particular image or metaphor and rather than creating a whole (becoming one), the poem is “in bits”:

Then the birds stitching the dawn with their song  
have patterned your name.

Then the green bowl of the garden filling with light  
is your gaze.

Then a sudden scatter of summer rain  
is your tongue.

Then a butterfly paused on a trembling leaf  
is your breath. (Duffy 10-11)

Everything becomes the lover but, at the same time, the lover disappears consumed by the desire of the persona to ex-corporate her/him. In addition, the harder the poem attempts to capture its object of desire in metaphors and metonymies, the more elusive it becomes. Only if something is absent is it in need of re-presentation, thus rather than the poem lamenting the absence of the lover, it *requires* it so it can express desire. The lover is consumed by and, simultaneously, given existence by the poetic discourse of love poetry.

There are many more examples in *Rapture* which can be read in relation to the complex issue of consuming love as they have been discussed in the previous paragraphs,<sup>6</sup> but for now I would like to move on to Michael Symmons Roberts’ poem sequences in *Corpus* in order to shift the focus on religious and spiritual love and they way in which they address and are articulated by the alimentary.

### *CORPUS:* EATING BODIES

*Corpus*, Michael Symmons Roberts’ fourth collection of poetry received the 2004 Whitbread Poetry Award and is, as its title suggests, above all concerned with the body and embodiment. Symmons Roberts has been referred to as a religious poet in a secular age, and the poems gathered in *Corpus* are to a great extent

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<sup>6</sup> Further examples are: “Rapture,” “Elegy,” “Betrothal,” “Love,” “Give,” “Finding the Words,” “Syntax,” “The Love Poem.”



informed by themes that invoke faith and spiritual love. There is, however, a further subject that connects the different poems in this volume: food and eating. Paradoxically, at first sight, it could be argued that the poetic texts are held together by the same issues that separate them from each other: on the one hand we encounter bodies that eat, drink, feast and are in need of sustenance, on the other the spiritual body reigns supreme, in particular in the Christian myth of Christ's risen body. But, 'corpus' also has a specific meaning in relation to writing when it refers to a collection of texts. In that respect the title of Symmons Roberts' volume displays an additional self-referential quality since every thematic pointing towards bodies will automatically include the textual corpus in which these themes are formulated. Hence, instead of being confronted with stable and fixed bodies, it is the idea of the body in flux, in pieces and under construction that dominates the poetic framework of this collection. Many of the poems in *Corpus* utilize images of food and eating when elaborating their poetic subject, but it is especially two sequences of poems, entitled "Food for Risen Bodies" and "Carnivorous," that explore the culinary in a more explicit manner.

The subject matter of "Food for Risen Bodies" is developed in six parts and, as indicated by the title, can be read as a direct reference to the Christian narrative of Christ's resurrection from the dead. However, Christ or Jesus is never present via his name. Some of the poems refer to a male persona, but any kind of body we might imagine is always the product of textual constructions, never the result of a direct naming. What kind of bodies can be inhabited, the different poems seem to ask, and by doing so introduce a multifarious corporeality which questions the idea that there is such a thing as "a body." The different bodies that are explored in the poems are distinguished by food and eating: when they eat, what kind of food they eat, and so on. In "Food for Risen Bodies-1" there is no named persona and no indication of gender, subjectivity is invoked only by terms such as "those," "who" and "them":

A rare dish is right for those who  
Have lain bandaged in a tomb for weeks:

quince and quail to demonstrate  
that fruit and birds still grow on trees,

eels to show that fish still needle streams.  
Rarer still, some blind white crabs,

not bleached but blank, from such  
a depth of ocean that the sun would drown

if it approached them. Two-thirds  
of the earth is sea; and two thirds of that sea

—away from currents, coasts and reefs—  
is lifeless, colourless, pure white (Symmons Roberts 3)



It is only the cultural knowledge of the Christian narrative that allows us to read the poem as Christ's resurrection, thus rather than the poem being 'about' religion, the latter emerges as its subject and literally haunts the poetic structure like the eerie image of the body that has "lain bandaged in a tomb for weeks." Representing the undead body as a body that eats reinforces the moment of the spectral and spectacular even further, since it places the body in an in-between state, neither dead nor alive. This is further emphasised by the image of the "blind white crabs,/ not bleached but blank," itself reminiscent of the corpse in its white bandages. Eating the crabs (the word is phonetically haunted by "corpse") is equivalent to partaking of the dead body which thus introduces a kind of self-cannibalisation, another way of reading the idea of the self-sacrifice and the part it plays in the Christian narrative. Crudely speaking, the act of Holy Communion is nothing else but an act of cannibalism, its abjection only transformed into the sacred by the context of religion. Furthermore, by turning "quail," "eel" and "crabs" into the rare dish that will be enjoyed by the risen bodies (in plural!), life transforms into death and then into food, the latter serving as sustenance for the newly alive body that is still tainted by death. The poem struggles to contain the different transformations that are running through it and which open it up in many different directions: life and death reverberate and flow into each other; food and eating create bodies that live and die; the materiality of the earth is "lifeless, colourless, pure weight" like the future of the body in its decaying state as a corpse. What is consumed by the risen body also consumes corporeality itself and, furthermore, the very textuality of the poem. It seems, paradoxically, that the poem comes into being by a process of self-digestion.

"Food for Risen Bodies-II" introduces a temporality divided into a past and present and a persona furnished with a masculine pronoun:

On that final night, his meal was formal:  
 lamb with bitter leaves of endive, chervil,  
 bread with olive oil and jars of wine.

Now on Tiberias' shores he grills  
 A carp and catfish breakfast on a charcoal fire.  
 This is not hunger, this is resurrection:

he eats because he can, and wants to  
 taste the scales, the moist flakes of the sea,  
 to rub the salt into his wounds. (Symmons Roberts 11)

Structurally as consistent as the first part of the sequence, the poem develops its theme over three stanzas, each made up of three lines. The concept of trinity is one of the most fundamental elements of Christianity, the divine is unified but also divided into Godfather, Son and Holy Spirit. Thematically, the poem can be situated in Christian mythology, evoking the last supper as the formal meal on "that final night." The lamb, one of the most enduring icons of the Christian faith, refers to Jesus' sacrifice, its abhorrent circumstances emphasised by the image of the



“bitter leaves” that accompany his final meal. The formal meal and the foreboding atmosphere it creates is then contrasted with the breakfast of grilled carp and catfish at the shore of the sea of Galilee where Jesus walked on water and healed crowds. The first meal of a new day is full of new beginnings as much as the term “final night” of the previous stanza resonates with endings and death. The line “This is not hunger, this is resurrection” mirrors in its parallel structure similarity and dualism at the same time: dinner and breakfast are both meals, but they mean something completely different and thus force the reader to reflect on the very binarity that is invoked structurally as well as thematically. This is not just a juxtaposition of light and dark: the chiaroscuro of the charcoal fire that provides the means for a meal that offers hope and new beginnings is also eerily foreboding of a future Church that will burn its adversaries on stakes, thus privileging dogma rather than democracy. The promise of the new dawn can never completely wash away the taste of bitterness of that final meal. The last stanza also resonates with ambiguity when the delicate food is transformed into torment that rubs “the salt into his wounds.” The stigmata, the wounds that never heal, signify the body of Christ as one in constant transgression: it is indicative of a corporeality that at the moment of its emergence vanishes into spirituality, but also remains as a painful reminder inscribed and rubbed in the orifices and thresholds of the body.

The next part of the sequence leaves out a concrete persona and has a more narrative than lyrical feel to it. “Generations back, a hoard of peaches,/ apricots and plums was laid down/ for the day of resurrection;...” (Symmons Roberts 14). By utilizing the storing of food as an image in which the past can ripen into future (“Each is now a dark, sweet/ twist of gum, as sharp as scent”), the poem is haunted by a messianism that invokes the moment of waiting as never ending (“In the sheds, each fruit still lies/ cocooned, in careful shrouds of vine-leaves,/ tissue moss”). Although cocoons will develop into something different, this process will leave something behind, transformation is always tinged by death (“shrouds”), the line seems to imply. The final two lines of the poem, “Mosquitoes cloud,/ as if they sense a storm” take up again this ambiguity and the violent image of the storm evoking images from the Old Testament as well as indicating the possibility of something radically new.

The final three parts of “Food for Risen Bodies” replay many of the themes discussed above: in part four the mouth is seen in its multifarious references to the erotic, language and eating:

The men they silenced  
 —now heads of tables—  
 slit their stitched lips free  
 as if to kiss and bless  
 the dinner knives.  
 They whisper grace  
 through open wounds. (Symmons Roberts 43)

By likening the mouth, which is already doubled as the orifice that ingests food and expels language, to an open wound, all three —eating, language and



wound— are directly inscribed into a body defined by the proximity between pain and *jouissance*. Bodies are foremost oscillating bodies, the scarcity of words defining the materiality of the poem's body is transformed into diversity and ambiguity of meaning. The structure of the poem is held together by, and simultaneously strains against, the polarities that construct its framework: silence in the first line grates against whispering "grace / through open wounds" at the end of the poem, the constrained "stitched lips" are set free by a violent gesture. The dinner knives and their function in the act of eating are also present as weapons, which puts further emphasis on the ambiguity of eating as an act always on a knife's edge, as something that holds our bodies to ransom in those precarious moments when the mouth is always on the verge of turning into a wound.

The image of the mouth as an open wound not only refers back to the body of Christ and the stigmata as enunciative of the Christian message, it also signifies the polysemia of the mouth and the way it links language and food, both to be purchased by acts of loss, both deeply steeped into the processes of the oral.

Whereas part five again refers to a singular, masculine figure who "gaunt and stubbled/ by the shrinkage of his skin" turns down the food to go "straight for the cigarettes" (Symmons Roberts 48), the final poem, also the longest, presents a group of diners after they finished their food. Again, there is a feeling of some new beginnings when

No longer ravenous, they smoke  
and sip. Some carry tables out

to get a feel for the sun on skin again.  
More words are coming back,

So there's a lot of naming.  
Old ones still hold good —*oak*,

*Brook, crab, sycamore*—but more  
are needed now. They mull

potential titles for these new  
white bees, as sharp as stars

against the ivories of cherry  
or magnolia... (Symmons Roberts 61)

Organised in rhythmically regular two-line stanzas, the final part of the sequence seems to refer back to what happened before, in terms of themes as well as from the point of view of temporal structure. We are in present tense now, an effect of the pasts and futures emanating out of the previous parts. But, past and future are also left behind since it is necessary to learn a new language, defined by a new grammar and syntax. Whereas food has been swallowed, words now come tumbling out like bees: "Word gets round// the bees were new creations/ made in hon-



our of a poet,/so they wait for him to choose” (Symmons Roberts 61). The bees and the mentioning of the poet refer back to the epigraph of the poem *Abeja blanca zumbas —ebria de miel— en mi alma*, a line from a poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda’s poetry played an important part in the resistance against the dictatorship of General Pinochet, notorious for the brutal torture of its adversaries, many of them poets and artists. In Neruda’s poem the bee functions as a signifier for the tension between absence and presence, the bee is memorised in a humming that resonates through the body and is thus always reminiscent of absence by the very need to re-present it. Symmons Roberts’ poem links itself with Neruda’s text via the moment of memory as corporeal: “Although these bodies were not//theirs before, there are resemblances/ and flesh retains a memory//even beyond death, so every/lover’s touch, each blow or cut//is rendered into echo on the hand,/the lips, the neck. Some fall silent//while their own phenomenology/ is mapped across them” (Symmons Roberts 61–62). Bodies, rather than as stable entities, are here imagined as sensory networks, interwoven in and with time and thus without beginning and end. This experience of corporeality means “No pain,//but a record nonetheless, a history/ of love and war in blank tattoos” (Symmons Roberts 62).

Food and eating as part of this sequence of poems not only introject the body into time and spatial structures, they also process the body, or produce a body-in-process, when food is ingested. Corporeality, rather than presented as existing in the solidity of a body, is here imagined as always “in the coming,” but as never really arriving at a final state of being. The religious, in particular Christian, meaning of the poems is more than evident, but there is also something that strains against such a narrow framework of interpretation, something that eats itself into the poetic texts. When food and eating are utilized in poetic texts as they are here, they often seem to work in a performative manner, meaning that in the same manner as eating is productive of the ways we experience corporeality, it is also productive of, and as, the ways in which we consume it via readings. Food and its ingestion roots bodies in materiality but also dissolves them because of its effect on the relationship between inside and outside. “Food for Risen Bodies” as a body of poetic texts inhabits *Corpus* as fragments; the sequence is executed chronologically by numbering it from one to six, but is also constantly interrupted in its chronology when it is interspersed rather randomly throughout the volume. We ingest the different parts and compare their tastes as our bodies as readers are rising when partaking of this diet of poetry. The sequence plays dualisms against each other: materiality against spirituality; life against death; hungry against satiated; beginnings against endings; the religious against the secular only to find the one always already steeped in its other, eating away at the (poetical) body under construction. The body of Christ in its religious symbolism becomes this self-consuming body under construction by offering itself for consumption in order to create the body of Christianity. Faith and monstrosity are linked in a foundational manner as Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death*, and maybe their link becomes particularly evident in cannibalism at, and as, the heart of spirituality.

*Corpus* contains another sequence of poems, “Carnivorous,” consisting of five parts. In contrast to “Food for Risen Bodies” all five poetic texts show the same



structure of seven lines divided into two stanzas of two and five lines. Again, the only obvious chronology that orders the sequence is provided by the numbering, the poems themselves seem to be placed randomly throughout the volume. Meaning literally the feeding on flesh, the poetic sequence “Carnivorous” composes a poetic narrative of feasting, feeding, and fasting:

The cook said: “*Let there be a feast  
For those who hungered all their lives.*”  
So the skinny ones stripped the sow,  
And found stretched out inside her  
—like her soul, like her self— a lamb,  
with its head in the place of her heart  
with its hind legs tucked to leap. (Symmons Roberts 13)

Moving into the interior like a spiral, the poem explores layer after layer, but even when apparently reaching what is traditionally regarded as our innermost sanctum—the soul, the self—there is more to come. The soul/self is represented as a lamb, its head substituting the heart of the sow, thus connecting the two animals in a grotesque manner. This is flesh feasting on flesh that is its own but also part of something other. The poem is performed by a process that refers mimetically to the act of eating itself and the way it comes into being as a constant transformation of self into other and vice versa. The second part further develops this carnivalesque scene in which nothing is what it seems:

The cook said: “*This lamb is for  
Those who gave their lives for others.*”  
  
So the martyrs took the lamb.  
It tasted rich, steeped in essence  
of anchovy. They picked it clean  
and found within, a goose, its pink  
beak in the lamb’s mouth like a tongue. (Symmons Roberts 21)

Transgression and transformation take centre stage here when the lamb is turned into a symbol; but even its symbolic value cannot be sustained, since it is already devoured by something else: a goose, itself again intertwined with the other animal when its beak acts metaphorically as the lamb’s tongue. Performative of the process of eating, the poem enacts constructions of a self that is never self-sufficient so to speak, it is always already engaged with something other, precisely at the moment when the idea of the self seems to emerge. Although a religious and spiritual reading seems to offer itself as the essence of the poem (the lamb as the symbol of Christ and his sacrifice), there is always more to come. It thus provides a cogent commentary on symbolism itself, as something that is always in need of a reference point that will take it “outside itself” by planting another at its centre. Self-alienation, the poem seems to suggest, is the closest we get to self-knowledge. The following part offers the goose to those who are alienated and exiled from their homes:





“They turned it upside-down/ to pluck the soft meat from its breast/and found a salmon coiled inside,/ sealed in a crust of salt” (Symmons Roberts 24). The carnival of meaning turns increasingly topsy-turvy, what was upside goes down, sow turns into lamb which turns into poultry which turns into fish: the more the poem develops chronologically forward, the more it regresses from an evolutionary point of view. The salty crust concealing the salmon is turned into the “*salt of tears*” and offered by the cook to “those who knew that taste too well” and they

unwound the salmon’s curl  
and stripped the lukewarm flesh.  
Stuck in the throat they found  
A shell-less snail, fattened on milk. (Symmons Roberts 31)

The enigmatic figure of the cook—to what extent is s/he in control of what goes into the food and what it is transformed to?— matches food to eaters, but the taste of what will be eaten is already known to those who will partake of it. Taste is presented here as something that is anticipated mnemonically when it intertwines past with the future. The invitation by the cook “*Come and eat*” (Symmons Roberts 31), as well as the parable-like narrative structure of the sequence, is again reminiscent of a Christ figure and brings to mind the many examples in the New Testament of Jesus feeding the hungry and needy. On the other hand, precisely because of its underlying meaning as a parable, there is always a need to translate and transform it into something other, and similar to the food stuffed with more food, its essence can only ever lie in continuous deferral. In the final part, the table seems finally cleared:

*“Has anyone here never hungered,  
Never run, never lost, never cried?”*

The cook held the snail on a fork.  
No-one replied, so he swallowed it.  
Later, rumours spread that one man  
Slipped away, out into the driving rain,  
Leaving a clean plate in his place. (Symmons Roberts 38)

Whereas each previous poem in the sequence opens with the words “The cook said,” in this final part the first two lines have swallowed the cook only to spit him out at the beginning of the second stanza. Ingested by the poem, the persona of the cook, the one who seemed to be in discursive control of the poem and the food, then swallows the shell-less snail and disappears. Only rumours linger —is the cook the man who got away? The slipping and sliding prevails and leaves us only with a clean plate in place of something else. Is the clean plate to be understood as a substitute for the one who ate its contents? Is the plate clean because no food was ever served on it? Or has whatever was on the plate now replaced the diner, has what was outside been transformed into interiority and otherness shifted into the self, forming its eccentric core? The poem folds finally into itself, feeding



on its own stuffing and emptiness, the latter never being nothing, but always in place of something else/other.

Michael Symmons Roberts' poetry sequences "Food for Risen Bodies" and "Carnivorous" are not so much poems *about* food and eating, they are rather *performed* by the processes of ingestion and digestion. If they are to be read in relation to religion and Christianity, then, I would suggest, they are meaningful above all as an absorption of the specific link between the carnal and spiritual that is constitutive of the figure of Jesus. Julia Kristeva describes the sublimated body of Christ as

The vanishing point of all fantasies and thus a universal object of faith, everyone is allowed to aspire to Christic sublimation and by the same token know that his sins can be remitted. "Your sins will be forgiven," Jesus keeps telling them, thus accomplishing, in the future this time, a final raising into spirituality of a nevertheless inexorable carnal reminder. (Kristeva 120)

However, as I suggested before, religion and Christianity are not the ultimate *sine qua non* of these poems, by situating them in the realm of eating and cooking the poematic experience that emerges and that can be understood as their very condition, is the effect poetic language and the culinary have on each other. In "Che cos' è la poesia?" Derrida remarks that we should "call a poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion." Poetry, and in particular poetry that engages specifically with food and its ingestion, I would suggest, is at its heart self-consuming, which is an image as strange as the lamb's head that is placed as the sow's heart in "Carnivorous."

## EATING POETRY

When asking "Che cos' è la poesia?" Jacques Derrida rather than providing a definition, offers a culinary feast when he refers to the "poematic experience" (Derrida 231) as something that, rather than affording its august celebration as a unified whole and a coherent form, feeds and infects us with love. The poetic, Derrida suggests, "would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other and under dictation, by heart" (Derrida 227). Rather than utilizing a discourse of separation which regards poetry as something that needs to be sectioned off in order to be recognised as such, for Derrida it is its very disappearance as something that "is" when he regards it as something that 'does'. He defines the experience of poetry in the following way: "I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart" (Derrida 231). And, furthermore, instead of making it contingent on separation, what he calls learning by heart is inscribed in a continuous processing of identity, "the *I* is only at the coming of this desire" (Derrida 237). Rather than distancing itself, the poem wants to be consumed: "Eat, drink, swallow my letter, carry it, transport it in you" (Derrida 229) and then, rather than being kept intact, it wants to be transformed by the digestive juices of the poematic. The essence of poetry, to put it oxymoronically, is transgression and transformation, the



poem “does not hold still within names, nor even within words” (Derrida 229), it is “a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion” (Derrida 235). Instead of defining its generic identity as the ability to keep its orifices closed off to the world, Derrida revels in a feast of digestion and a lack of boundaries when he wants to “set fire to the library of poetics. The unicity of the poem depends on this condition. You must celebrate, you have to commemorate amnesia, savagery” (Derrida 253). Indicated in the performative nature of ‘Che cos’ è la poesia?’, poetry is here reflected on as a living, intermingling, eating and digesting body that is constantly in the process of ‘doing’ rather than secluded off in a state of ‘being’. By paying attention to the process of eating and the ways in which it consumes and is productive of literal as well as of textual bodies, Max’s childish declaration “I’ll eat you up” rather than the angry retort of a little boy suddenly transforms into a poetic statement of love. Or as Maud Ellmann puts it: “Digestion is a kind of fleshy poetry, for metaphor begins in the body’s transubstantiations of itself, while food is the thesaurus of all moods and sensations” (Ellmann 112).

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