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Recently, such critics as Alain Buisine and Charles Bernheimer have underlined the importance of the theme of food in Huysmans' works, Bernheimer in his notions of the fetish and Buisine in what he sees as the assimilation of terrestrial and spiritual food, of all things theological and the gastronomic, in huysmansian texts. Indeed, food problems are everywhere in Huysmans, and while there is undoubtedly an element of exaggeration in his never-ending culinary complaints, his stomach troubles were real enough according to his correspondence, which reveals that he was himself a life-long martyr to dyspepsia. (He died of mouth cancer, a cruel bit of irony.) He was also, like most of his protagonists, a confirmed bachelor, holding the idea of marriage in abhorrence. Hence, in his novel *En Ménage*, the character Cyprien describes in culinary terms the boredom and monotony of married life: "...le gigot au suif et les haricots à l'eau tiède du lundi; le veau et le plâtreux fromage blanc de tous les mardis, les carottes à la sauce rousse, l'oseille du jeudi qui rendait malade..." (354). For my purposes, therefore, what most interests me in Huysmans is what I see as the convergence of culinary and carnal disgust—a disgust related to the author's vilification of nature. Indeed, many of his texts comment upon the ancient "nature versus intellect" dichotomy in which women, bodily functions, and food are associated with nature, while men are associated with the intellect. By examining two huysmansian novels, I hope to bring to light the paradoxically postmodern reworkings of this dichotomy in order to gain new insights into the relationships of food and women in his works.

In the context of the lamentable alimentary disaster that constitutes one of the most persistent themes of Huysmans, the worst culinary misadventures are undoubtedly reserved for the unhappy Monsieur Folantin (which rhymes with Sartre's nauseated Roquentin), the dyspepsic anti-hero of *À vau l'eau* (1882), an existentialist chronical of the material and digestive troubles of bachelorhood. Lacking the financial means to pay for Paris' finest restaurants, unwilling to take a wife or to hire a cook, and (most tragically of all in my mind) unwilling to *learn* to cook even the simplest of dishes himself, this bored, middle-aged civil servant is condemned to wander from one sad "gargote" to the next in search of the perfect meal. Folantin's vision of the world as a self-proclaimed "raté" is utterly fatalistic while at the same time completely culinary. His descriptions of food, emblematic of his bleak philosophical outlook, are bitter yet poetic, ironic yet resigned. Here, the restaurant scene that opens the novel is full of pessimism and irony, yet the author's use of adjectives of color renders the scene poetic, as a simple Roquefort cheese becomes soap-like white lace marbled with indigo: "Et...Folantin, assis devant une table encombrée d'assiettes où se figeaient...des bouteilles vides dont le cul estampillait d'un cachet bleu la nappe, fit la moue, ne doutant pas qu'il allait manger un désolant fromage; son attente ne fut nullement déçue; le garçon apporta une sorte de dentelle blanche marbrée d'indigo, évidemment découpée dans un pain de savon de Marseille" (381).

Such poetic culinary metaphors are accompanied by the more familiar comparisons of meat and shoe leather or the more strange references to the bitter taste of lamp oil: "...il ne fallait point réclamer d'autre pitance, les viandes étant ratatinées comme des semelles de bottes et tous les plats dégageant l'âcre goût des huiles à lampes" (401). Other descriptions display an almost hallucinatory disgust emblematic of Folantin's chronic indigestion and warped outlook: "...la compagnie était répulsive et la saleté stupéfiante; la carne fétidait, les verres avaient les ronds de bouches encore marqués, les couteaux étaient dépolis et gras et les couverts conservaient dans leurs filets le jaune des oeufs mangés" (399). Whether expressed in poetic or more

direct terms, the most bitter disenchantment seems so natural here that the opening sentence of the last chapter, quite repugnant in any other context, takes on an almost lyrical value: "Un soir qu'il chipotait des oeufs qui sentaient la vesse..." (440).

Hence, while other protagonists, from the author's later decadent and Catholic periods, manage to revolve their lives around higher concerns such as art and religion, Huysmans' naturalist hero Folantin, although definitely possessing artistic tastes and yearnings, is destined to a lower existence because of his relative poverty. However, Folantin does share with other huysmansian heroes a deep-seated aversion for both physical love and food as exemplified in this picturesque comparison of prostitutes and restaurants, of women's flesh and second-rate meats:

> ...il s'adressait aux affûts des corridors, aux malheureuses dont le gros ventre bombe au ras du trottoir; il plongeait dans les couloirs, tâchant de distinguer la figure perdue dans l'ombre; et la grossièreté de l'en-luminure, l'horreur de l'âge, l'ignomie de la toilette et l'abjection de la chambre ne l'arrêtaient point. Ainsi que dans ces gargotes où son bel appétit lui faisait dévorer de basses viandes, sa faim charnelle lui permettait d'accepter les refus de l'amour. (389)

And later in life, able to pay more to meet his carnal needs, he still describes his adventures in culinary terms, as "dînettes": "Il avait dû se contenter encore de banales dînettes, mais comme il payait davantage, il était expédié dans des salles plus propres et dans des linges plus blancs" (390).

Unable to tolerate any human presence in his home, Folantin remains an inveterate bachelor, considering the only advantage of marriage as possible relief from the endless duties of food preparation. In a moment of weakness, therefore, after a series of bad meals, he imagines marital bliss in gastronomic terms: "...nous mangerions de la viande le matin seulement et, de même que la plupart des petits ménages, nous nous contenterions au dîner d'une assiettée de soupe. Qu'est-ce que toutes ces privations à côté de l'existence organisée, de la soirée passée entre son enfant et sa femme, de la nourriture peu abondante mais vraiment saine..." (394-95). At one point, he does briefly hire a housekeeper, but she is a bad cook (of course!) and he fires her in a comical scene where, in order to make her feel better he offers her his remaining vinegar, salt, and lamp oil. Again, in this passage, we see an intense aversion to both food and women, as she is described in the same sentence as a bad cook and as overly familiar. Any notion of even friendship with a woman is repugnant: "...elle cuisinait mal et sa familiarité dépassait les bornes du possible" (392-93). Later in life, as his erotic desires subside and he enjoys relations with fewer and fewer women, food becomes a sexual fetish, a replacement for a love object. Perhaps the clearest food-as-fetish scene occurs when a colleague is convinced by Folantin's joyous, faraway look that he is in love: "Avouez qu'elle vous attend...elle est blonde ou brune?" (432). Little does he know that Folantin is not in love at all, he is merely ecstatic after finding a restaurant that delivers! Thus amorous feelings are confused with potential culinary satisfaction.

Perhaps the most striking fusion of gastronomic and carnal disgust occurs in the novel's final scene when Folantin is picked up by a prostitute (potential venereal disease) in a restaurant (potential food poisoning). This double threat of food and women is rendered visually when the prostitute enters, placing her fetishistic feminine accessories, her gloves and little hat, next to Folantin's drinking glass: "Elle s'assit, et posa sa voilette et ses gants près de son verre" (442). The themes of danger and fear are again underlined when Folantin expresses the woman's presence as an invasion, employing military metaphors while describing himself as a coward who throws down his arms in order to avoid conflict with the adversary. When she propositions him directly, he states, "Mon Dieu!...Mademoiselle...et, comme un poltron, qui jette ses armes, pour ne pas engager une lutte avec son adversaire, M. Folantin avoua sa con-

tinence, son peu de besoins, son désir de tranquillité charnelle" (443). Hence, his strategy of avoidance, coupled with the obvious phallic connotations of the surrendered arm, imply that Folantin would prefer to admit to impotence rather than sleep with a woman. Asked if he will take her home, he continues to skirt the issue, stating in an amusing bit of ironic understatement that one does not bring women into his house, since that is against the rules of his apartment building. "Je ne puis, finit-il par répondre, on n'amène pas de femmes dans ma maison" (444). Finally agreeing to accompany her to her place of residence, he is predictably nauseated by their brief sexual encounter, quoting the German pessimist philosopher Schopenhauer on his way home: "la vie de l'homme oscille comme un pendule entre la douleur et l'ennui" (447). This philosophical meditation about a sexual experience is typical of the cerebral huysmansian protagonist who, ill at ease in physical encounters, tends to rethink them in more familiar, intellectual terms.

In contrast to Folantin, Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' decadent masterpiece *A rebours* (1884), is an independantly wealthy esthete who, bored and disgusted with the materialism of modern Paris, decides to withdraw to an isolated country house, which he turns into his private shrine to art. His moving into his new home corresponds to his discovery that he has become impotent and his conscious decision to abandon all contact with women. He further emphasizes this rupture when he decorates his new bedroom as a monk's cell and, in the novel's most dramatic convergence of feminine and culinary concerns, throws a funeral banquet in honor of his lost virility. In keeping with the theme of death, the meal is accompanied by a musical ensemble playing funeral marches, and all food, drink, china, costumes, servants, and decor are black, with the exception of the green flames in the candelabras: "On avait mangé dans des assiettes bordées de noir, des soupes à la tortue, des pains de seigle russe, des olives mûres de Turquie, du caviar...des boudins fumés de Francfort, des gibiers aux sauces couleur de jus de réglisse et de cirage, des coulis de truffes, des crèmes ambrées au chocolat, des poudings..." (94). What is most striking about the banquet (beside the fact that he manages to find so many black-colored foods) is its total privileging of aesthetic concerns (how things look) over functional, practical considerations (like providing well-balanced nutrition). The banquet thus celebrates not only Des Esseintes' dead virility, but also, in a larger sense, a triumph of art over nature. As with Folantin, food is largely repugnant for Des Esseintes, since it is part of raw nature. However, through the creative powers of the male artist/aesthete, it can be transformed into an object of beauty and thus be made "palatable." Through art, therefore, Des Esseintes hopes his indigestion can be, if not conquered, at least somewhat alleviated.

In a number of other aesthetic and quasi-culinary experiments, he attempts to assert art's control over nature in interesting and strange ways. His dining room, an architectual *mise-en-abyme* of one room contained within another, is a hermetically-sealed replica of a ship's cabin, complete with a vaulted, beamed ceiling, control panels, air and water-circulation systems, and portholes through which one views fish swimming by in a giant aquarium, giving one the impression of traveling at sea. Here, in keeping with the strict demands of his ever-turning stomach, he is served simple meals at exactly the same time every day, the menu varying only four times a year, with the change of the season. I would like to suggest that Des Esseintes' various artistic experiments are examples of Jean Baudrillard's postmodern notion of "simulacra." In this "age of simulation," Baudrillard writes, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (254). Hence, "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (254). Viewed in this light, Des Esseintes' dining room, for instance, is a simulacrum in that it is a

"fake" ship's cabin as well as a "fake" dining room. For him, however, it is more "real" (and more beautiful, I might add) than any "real" dining room could ever be. Indeed, he manages to substitute this sign of the real (the fake) for any and all notions of a "real" dining room. Des Esseintes himself explains this process of substitution, this creation of simulacra, in terms that sound very similar to Baudrillard's. After explaining how he replicates the sea in his bathwater, he states: "Le tout est de savoir s'y prendre, de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s'abstraire suffisamment pour amener l'hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même" (107). (Hence, I am drawing the parallel between Baudrillard's "substituting signs of the real for the real itself" and Des Esseintes' "substituting the dream of reality for reality itself"). His creation of simulacra thus continues in his abortive London journey. Having fully steeped himself in the "English" atmosphere of Austin's Bar, and having convinced himself that the customers and workers in the pub are all characters out of Dickens, he settles down to enjoy his best meal in years. For a brief hour or two his intestinal agonies are completely forgotten as his image of London, *le signifiant*, completely replaces the "real" trip to London, *le signifié*. Clearly, the "fake" has become more real to him than any "real" trip to London could ever be. The distinction between "true" and "false," "real" and " imaginary" is blurred: "A quoi bon bouger, quand on peut voyager si magnifiquement sur une chaise? N'était-il pas à Londres dont les senteurs, dont l'atmosphère, dont les habitants, dont les pâtures, dont les ustensiles, l'environnaient?" (254).

Des Esseintes continues his creation of simulacra in other quasi-culinary experiments. His "orgue à bouche" or mouth organ, a material representation of Baudelaire's notion of "synesthésies," is an ensemble of miniature barrels, each containing its own silver faucet and filled with its own type of liqueur. The faucets may be turned on all at once or individually so that one may sample the different liqueurs in an endless variety of combinations. Each liqueur corresponds to a different musical instrument, so that one may "play" the mouth organ and create a symphony of tastes. Aesthetic concerns again take priority here over the functional considerations of providing actual nourishment. Like a perfume or poem, other elements alien to biological life, the mouth organ drunkens the senses without providing any actual nutritional value. And again, it exists in an artistic environment that is a postmodern world of dreams, hallucinations, and shadows rather than a world of the real. The postmodern absence of distinction between originality and reproduction, between the real and the imaginary, is again apparent. Indeed, it would be difficult to find or even imagine the "real," or "original" mouth organ that Des Esseintes has "replicated."

These various artistic experiments, though interesting, do not succeed in quelling Des Esseintes' neurosis nor his chronic indigestion. Eventually, unable to keep any food down and given to spells of uncontrollable vomiting, his doctor prescribes a treatment of enemas. He is delighted with this new form of nourishment, the crowning achievement of his artistic existence, for it appeals to his love of the artificial and is, as he states, the last deviation that one can commit. Indeed, with the enemas, food is not really food anymore, but a simulation of food, a medicinal liquid, a chemically-based, artificial mixture that contains none of the materiality of real nourishment. Taken anally (à rebours), furthermore, it appeals to his taste for the perverse and his vampire-like love of doing things backward, like sleeping during the day and remaining awake through the night. He simulates the process of ordering in a restaurant, unfolding the doctor's prescription for the enemas like a menu, and even writes out recipes and meal plans in his new role as a "faux gourmet" (344). So delighted is he about discovering the enema, that he dreams about what it would be like to deliver a definitive blow to nature and, as Baudrillard puts it, completely substitute this sign of the real (the enema) for the real itself (real food), in other words, to continue feeding

himself this way indefinitely once his health is regained: "Ce serait délicieux, se disait-il, si l'on pouvait, une fois en pleine santé, continuer ce simple régime" (345).

In his preoccupation with artifice and his desire to create a sort of artistic playground in which the real and imaginary are confused, Des Esseintes' artistic experiments are thus quite postmodern. However, the postmodernist project, closely aligned with femininst thought, generally looks to subvert strategies that keep women silent. Des Esseintes' desire (with the banquet) to celebrate women's exclusion from his aesthetic environment, suggests that in some important ways, he is very much at odds with the postmodernist agenda. His desire to exclude women echoes, to some extent, Huysmans' own artistic project. In the 1903 preface to *A rebours*, the author expressed his desire to subvert the constructs of Zola's naturalist novel—a goal that depended upon, among other things, the exclusion of women: "...le désir ...m'appréhendait de briser les limites du roman...[de] supprimer l'intrigue traditionnelle, voire même la passion, la femme..."(71). For both Huysmans and his fictional character, a major irony becomes apparent: despite considerable effort to abandon women altogether, Des Esseintes inadvertently brings "woman" into his house in the form of two feminine icons—the Gustave Moreau pictures of Salome, his favorite paintings (Antosh 139). The same irony is then applicable to Huysmans in that he seeks to write a book in which woman plays no part, yet he offers her up, it could be argued, as the book's central image. From a Freudian perspective, Huysmans' fictional character displays, like Folantin, typical symptoms of fetishism, a perversion found primarily in men, in which, genital discharge being impossible under normal conditions, the fetish takes the place of the normal love object (Eidelberg 146). In the case of Des Esseintes, I would like to suggest that the fetish is the image of Salome—a love object which he substitutes for "real" women when he discovers he is impotent.

Like the banquet, dining room and mouth organ then, the Salome paintings represent an effort to tame nature through the aesthetics of simulation—woman's flesh is replaced by art. Although it is clear that Des Esseintes is aroused by the paintings, that he has an erotic fixation for this icon of perversity, he obviously thinks that these hours spent fantasizing before the works are just play-acting. But as Laura Mulvey writes in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,": "...the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified" (368). Ruth Antosh has astutely pointed out the paintings' role in Des Esseintes' downfall. They, along with his collection of exotic plants, provoke a terrifying nightmare, which leads to a worsening of his neurosis and his ultimate death. His frightening dream of the evil flower-woman, the allegorical figure of Syphilis, reveals "that Des Esseintes' sexual impotence is rooted in fear of women, whom he associates with danger and disease" (139). Thus, his gaze, which he believed to control Salome, only provokes the surfacing of his deepest fears. For Huysmans' biographer Robert Baldick, much of the same fear of women applies to Huysmans himself: "Huysmans' misogyny, in fact, was no superficial affectation; it was rooted—deeply rooted—in fear" (68).

In conclusion, we have seen how, in *A vau l'eau*, food is used as a metaphor for the author's pessimistic, schopenhauerian philosophy, while at the same time serving the naturalistic aesthetics of Zola—aesthetics that seek to give artistic credence to the lower, unappealing aspects of life. Peppered with his own brand of dark humor, however, Huysmans creates a strikingly despairing novel in which his fear of nature, be it in the form of food or women, cannot be overcome. With *A rebours*, as Huysmans succeeds in breaking away from Zola's naturalist aesthetic, I have attempted to suggest that food operates in a more sophisticated, postmodern artistic system—a system that points forward to twentieth-century notions of simulation. Indeed, can some of the roots of postmodernism be traced to baudelairian and huysmanian notions of

substituting artifice for nature?[1] Whatever the answer to this question, which is too complex to delve into here, Des Esseintes' artistic agenda attempts to control his environment by turning everything around him into art. However, as we have seen with the Salome paintings, this agenda ultimately fails, for his beloved "art" becomes a mere sexual fetish as the simulated femme fatale ends up devouring him. Des Esseintes' plight is in fact similar to that of John the Baptist's, whose severed head (for Freud, decapitation represents symbolic castration), is offered up on a platter, like food. A highly innovative text from an artistic standpoint, then, *A rebours* constitutes, from a feminist point of view, a rather conventional effort to control women by turning them into art. While an interesting book in concept and form, its persistent misogynistic subtext means that rather than envisioning and empowering a new, postmodern world order, it ends up conveying many of the fears inherent in the old modernist system.[2]

Finally, for all of his interest in art as an important art critic and aesthete, perhaps Huysmans shared with his fictional protagonist an important misunderstanding about the nature of art—that is, he seems to underestimate art's ability to affect the viewer by returning the gaze. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan writes of the way visual experience is never fully organized by a centralized ego; there is always an excess of vision beyond what the subject can master in sight. Clearly, the Salome paintings unfold in exactly this area of insufficient control (42-122). Huysmans and Des Esseintes perhaps fail to understand that instead of passively obeying the subject's sovereign gaze, art objects tend to slip out beyond it and usurp the visual field, taking on an almost portrait-of-Dorian-Grey-like life of their own.

Notes

[1] Brian Banks underlines Huysmans' affinity for Baudelaire versus Zola. He writes, "Certainly, it was Baudelaire's poetry and poetical prose that touched Huysmans more than any work of the Realists; his favorite Zola work was the atypical *La faute de L'abbé Mouret*" (89).

[2] This is perhaps what Huysmans' recent biographer Brian Banks meant when, perceiving this paradox in the work of a misogynist who is nonetheless an artistic insurgent, describes him as an "anarchist traditionalist" or an "anarchist of the right" (207-208). Surely a similar paradox could be studied in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, notably in his novel *L'Eve Future*, which breaks fresh ground as an early experiment in science fiction, but ends up a rather conventional effort to control woman by making her into a disposable robot.

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