

Temples of the Spirit: The Function of Food in Melville and Bellow

*Roberto
Birindelli*

Università di Siena

*I*t is a well-investigated fact that in his works Melville made regular use of the full resources of language, including rhetoric and punning. Besides, his interest in the vernacular and cant language is amply documented and was the result of frequent contacts with the man in the street, coupled with his determination to rejuvenate the English lexicon with some “national blood”, the fresh usages developed among the American people¹. Unfortunately we do not have any direct statement that he wanted to do so, given his lack of self-confidence, both intellectual and personal, his evasive and enigmatic nature that made him look for ways to deal with things from an oblique and averted stance, always facing away from them, being extraordinarily wary of precise affirmation and looking for rhetorical masks behind which to hide himself. This, of course, adds to the game and makes our reading and critical analysis of his work particularly suggestive, a daring enterprise that promises ample reward.

In mid-century the national spirit was mounting in America and the literati - though still respectful of the models represented by Walter Scott for the historical romance and Charles Dickens for his unrivaled capacity to draw characters from all circles of life - were trying to rid themselves of British influence. This was particularly true in the literary New York that young Melville came to know around 1845 (“From my twenty-fifth year I date my life”) (Melville, *Lettere* 20) and in which his intellectual and artistic development took root. Having no formal training to rely on, he had to educate himself by extensive reading and contacts with the peo-

ple who really mattered, notably the all-powerful literary editors such as Lewis Gaylord Clark and the Duyckinck brothers, Evert and George.

Clark, who was religiously an Episcopalian and politically a follower of Daniel Webster, had revitalized the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, which he had bought in 1834 and was to edit until 1861. Irving, Longfellow, Hawthorne, all wrote for the magazine, as did a host of bon vivants who contributed regularly (though pseudonymously) to "The Editor's Table", a section giving ample space to anecdotal and gossipy news items which were the result of frequent repasts, with good eating, drinking and smoking, conceived as ways to distinguish themselves from the brutal world of commerce for which New York was notorious, and yet in sharp contrast with the civilized, morally-austere society of Boston. In particular, Clark disliked anything that smacked of Puritan restraint and Transcendentalism, which is to say anything that showed an interest in philosophical speculation or ideas of European extraction to the effect that plain life was relegated to the backstage. For this reason the *Knickerbocker* published a great deal about the sea and ship-life in an attempt to bolster American matter-of-fact masculinity as compared to romantic feminine speculativeness. The kind of literature the group approved of was called "Rabelaisian" and this word came to be used to label New York literature at large.

Evert Duyckinck too had read the German philosophers but was equally hostile to Emerson, to Nature and ideas, and equally devoted to the pleasures of the dining table and the smoking room. In addition, he had a library of 16,000 volumes from which Melville frequently borrowed books that he could not afford to purchase. The members of his circle wrote for a number of magazines, before all contributing to *The Literary World* that Duyckinck established and edited from 1847 onwards, attracting contributions from Southern writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and William Gilmore Simms.

There was no declared hostility between the two groups, but such as there was derived from Cornelius Mathews who was a friend of Duyckinck's and an enemy of Clark's. He had precise ideas as to the shape that American literature had to take, ideas that were summarized in his "Young America" manifesto, where he declared that American literature had to have "a lusty strength - the vigor of a manly and rough-nurtured prime [...] a certain grandeur of thought, a wild barbaric splendor and

[make] the wilderness to glow in the forge-light of high passions and thoughts” (Greene & McCabe 235)².

The fortunes of the two groups dwindled in the late 40’s and the New York intellectual panorama changed somewhat when in June 1850 the Harper brothers decided to show what kind of literary magazine America really wanted and launched their *New Monthly Magazine*. Under the editorship of Henry J. Raymond (1850-1856), the magazine printed many articles pirated from Britain, before developing an interest in contributions focused on American topics, mainly as a reaction to the editorial success of *Putnam’s*, established as a rival undertaking in 1853. The Boston ‘brahmins’ were not inert and promptly retaliated with the *Atlantic Monthly*, which began publication in 1857.

This rivalry is susceptible of throwing fresh light on Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”, which previous criticism has not dealt with in any meaningful way and offers significant insights into the work’s conception³. I would maintain that this short narrative was conceived by its author not so much as a satire of easy-going London life plotted against the frantic activity in the booming American industry, as represented through the exploitation of female workers in the second part of the diptych; it is quite possible to read it as an oblique, underground portrait of the New York “Rabelaisian” society that Melville had encountered and assiduously frequented just a few years earlier. In 1853, when he wrote the sketch, he was not simply trying to make a living with the easy money offered by the sleek magazine business, drawing upon materials that he had gathered in years prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick*. It rather makes sense to consider that his target was much more ambitious, as a closer scrutiny of the fifteen sketches produced in the years 1853-1856 might reveal. If it is true that his activity as a novelist had been dealt a severe blow, it is equally plausible that he should bear more than a grudge against the crass society that he deemed responsible for the rejection of *Pierre* (published in the late summer of 1852) - his most ambitious attempt at writing a transcendental novel of ideas, not just the adventure thriller or romance that the reading public, via the New York publishing houses and literary reviewers, expected from him. The *Literary World’s* reviewer had found the moral of the book, that virtue ought to be attempted only by the gods, to be a “loathsome suggestion”. *Pierre’s* meaning had appeared “muddy, foul and corrupt” (*Lit. World* 11, 21 Aug. 1852, 119)⁴. Therefore,

Melville's satire in "The Paradise of Bachelors" may well represent, as vaguely suggested by Fogle, an attack on mass production, the publishing business, and some theories of American democracy as exemplified by the Rabelaisian club life (Fogle 53-54).

It was only the blindness (or possibly an *ante-litteram* form of masochism) of the Harper's people that prevented them from reading this meaning in the combined sketch, or in its twin New York piece, "Bartleby", which Melville had published in *Putnam's* (November 1853), his very first attempt at this form of writing⁵. In it he had represented, from the point of view of a narrator who is a lawyer and declares himself an expert on "title-deeds"⁶, the dire lot of a fellow scribbler, the unlucky scrivener who subverts all societal hierarchies and chooses - or rather, "prefers not to" - to feed himself on ginger nuts and then, when all is vain and the alternative is to accept bribed food from his jailer, an aptly named Mr Cutlet, simply starves to death. After all, despite its universal value, is not the final *cri de coeur* that the helpless narrator utters ("Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!") (Melville, *Great Short Works* 74)⁷, a criticism of materialistic New York society, of American philanthropism as a way of hushing up a bad conscience?

If we extrapolate on it, there is little doubt that Melville intended "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (written in spring 1854 and published in *Harper's*, April 1855) to be read not as a travel sketch - in line with Irving's "London Antiques" and Lamb's "The Old Benchers of Inner Temple," as suggested by several critics (Bickley 88) - but as something else, a still undefined genre in which he experimented, half-way between the essay and the short story, in the vein of the so-called Socratic irony⁸. Quite appropriately the narrative opens with retrospective images - not dissimilar from those we can find in a typical travel sketch - that serve the purpose of introducing the reader to a secluded place, "in the stony heart of stunning London", which is repeatedly associated with icons that are intended to suggest Catholicism and decadence: as elsewhere in Melville, the place makes one think of a cloister, a monastery where the din of the city is not heard and one is encouraged "to give the whole care-worn world the slip" (*Great Short Works* 202)⁹. These, however, are not neutral statements: the narrator relies on connotation and alliteration to give us by contrast a poetical representation of what it means to live an active life, made up of daily confrontation with the problems of existence, of commu-

nal life, and the necessity for some pastoral retreat to recover one's strength. The description of the place is taken up again here and there, and the reader is invited to make an unusual, desecrating comparison when the cells of the passive and hedonistic Brethren of the Order of Celibacy are likened to those of a honey-comb or holes in any cheese.

The use of irony becomes more or less explicit when we are told by the narrator that the ennead of bachelors who sit in the dining hall of Temple Bar, that "Grand Parliament of the best Bachelors in universal London", is attended or rather "superintended by a surprising old field-marshal (I can not school myself to call him by the inglorious name of waiter), with snowy hair and napkin, and a head like Socrates" (207). Proper names, as always with Melville, are all-important: they are there to encourage the reader to make his own connections. It is therefore not coincidental that at one point we are reminded of Charles *Lamb*, and a bit earlier of Lord Verulam, aka Francis *Bacon*, with a cursory hint at *Boccaccio's* erotic tales when the gentlemen retire for the night; notice also that the narrator is invited by a (not so) mysterious R. F. C. - an acronym that stands for Robert Francis *Cooke* - and we have sufficient grounds to infer that the author is drawing liberally on the semantic field of eating, as I have shown by italicizing the relevant parts of the names. An inference that reminds us how in the opening remarks, when discussing the secularization of the Knights-Templars, the narrator had humorously observed that they were "reduced from carving out immortal fame in glorious battling for the Holy Land, to the carving of roast-mutton at a dinner-board" (203), their fate being not dissimilar to that of the Greek poet Anacreon who sang of the congenial ties between love and food and died, so the story goes, by choking on a grape seed.

The description of the dinner is extremely detailed and, in keeping with the historical references to the Knights-Templars, every dish is introduced by a military analogy: in marches the roast-beef, the "English generalissimo", having as aides-de-camp "a saddle of mutton, a fat turkey, a chicken-pie", while for avant-courier the nine gentlemen avail themselves of "nine silver flagons of humming ale". The table soon transforms itself into a veritable battle-ground:

This heavy ordnance having departed on the track of the light skirmishes, a picked brigade of game-fowl encamped upon the board, their camp fires lit by the ruddiest of decanters (207).

Such a pervasive use of food imagery by the first-person narrator unaccompanied as it is by a word of comment, of open rebuttal of a conduct of life that is oblivious to the serious issues that afflict the world, such as evil and pain, hunger and poverty, has been interpreted as a kind of prolepsis, a way of foregrounding the grim representation of life in the second part of the diptych:

the first-person narrator, [...] while posing as a rational, humane man, addressing readers similarly inclined, could become sufficiently disturbed by the action he related to reveal thoughts and behavior inconsistent with his chosen self-image; metaphors and symbols which served as vehicles for parabolic truth and had an organic, unifying function (Rowland 390)¹⁰.

Understandably enough, the narrator is confined to the role of an impotent *voyeur*, that of a person much too polite to disparage the dining habits of his guests. He therefore makes every effort to give an objective, documentary report of the event and duly restrains himself from chastising such wasteful communal rites. Melville, however, seems to invite the reader to fill the gap and substitute the silence of the narrator with the appropriate moral considerations, as one normally does when reading the Scriptures:

The tropological approach was the natural outcome of Melville's "transcendentalism," which saw an infinity of correspondences between the visible and invisible worlds; symbol and metaphor were his principal means for revealing the "fruit" beneath the "chaf" (Rowland 390).

As any experienced writer, Melville was well aware of the necessity to provide the reader with several levels of meaning that could foster interpretation based on subjective experience, culture, environment, in a way that defied written expression and made the task of the author who had to depend on language extremely venturesome. Whether he wanted us to marvel at his audacity in sympathizing with the Transcendentalists while dining and publishing with the Rabelaisians, we can only hazard as a guess and leave it unsubstantiated by any textual evidence.

Love and food, the erotic implication of good eating, oriental music and the renewal of the spirit through the flesh are skillfully exploited by Saul Bellow in his best-selling novel *Herzog* (1964), which though ostensibly aimed to represent the suffering intellectual Jew in modern city life, gives more than a wink to American tradition, particularly that associated with Transcendentalism and Romanticism at large. Though equally rejecting the romantic over-evaluation of the self and the modern, nihilistic vision of apocalyptic loss of the self, the main character, Moses Herzog, is typically involved in a sort of solipsistic re-consideration of latter-day harassing experiences, including his divorce, which stimulates a reexamination of his entire life. As an alternative, he tries to forget about the past, to turn over a new leaf, so to speak, and accept the facile solution offered by the newly-sprung affair with Ramona Donsell, the New York florist of Argentine descent with whom he has established an intimate acquaintance while teaching an evening course on “The Roots of Romanticism”.

Beside being an attractive, well-educated and high-minded woman, Ramona is an excellent cook, and - as we are promptly informed by the narrator - “she knew how to prepare shrimp Arnaud, which she served with Pouilly Fuissé” (Bellow 14). In chapter five, while musing on the failure of his recent attempt to find pastoral solace in the company of good friends who are spending their honeymoon on the sands of Martha's Vineyard, Moses is surprised by the ringing of his telephone: it is Ramona who, “with a voice that lifts so light from height to height with foreign charm” (150), invites her lover to dinner. He accepts, though reluctant, and offers to bring some wine, but she refuses categorically saying that she has some on ice. Why was she so firm about wine, the character wonders? Perhaps because “she believed in the aphrodisiac power of her own brand”, or maybe - he flatters himself - “because she wanted to surround him with luxuries” (154).

Ramona, however, is not a light-hearted, frivolous hedonist, as Moses reflects paraphrasing Kierkegaard: she has “passed through the hell of profligacy and attained the seriousness of pleasure” and, as a consequence, she “does not believe in any sin but the sin against the body, for her the true and only temple of the spirit” (150-1). With her it is possible to experience what Jean Wahl - the apostle of new metaphysics - has called the “transcendence downward”, or, as Herzog prefers to put it, “transcendence” (176), meaning that we as human beings must stop “flirting a

little with the transcendent” (189) and affirm the positive aspects of life as a way to keep at a distance the thought of death. While shaving and preparing himself for the evening out, Herzog elaborates on recollections of previous meetings and anticipates the pleasure of a good meal in excellent company:

He could look forward to a good dinner. Ramona knew how to cook, and how to set a table. There would be candles, linen napkins, flowers. [...] As for the menu, [...] she'd probably prepare vichyssoise, then shrimp Arnaud - New Orleans style. White asparagus. A cool dessert. Rum-flavored ice cream with raisins? Brie and cold-water biscuits. [...] Coffee. Brandy. And, all the time, Egyptian music on the phonograph in the adjoining room - Mohammad al Bakkar playing “Port Said” with zithers, drums, and tambourines (155-6).

What Herzog really gets does not fall short of his expectations, and yet we are given a hint of his uncertain feelings:

Herzog was hungry, and the dinner was delicious. [...] Tears of curious, mixed origin came into his eyes as he tasted the shrimp remoulade (187).

He may be thinking of a remark that Ramona once made: “You’re not a true, puritanical American. You have a talent for sensuality. Your mouth gives you away” (159). While looking forward to the foreign *Delicatessen* that lie in waiting for him, Herzog feels unable to repress a sense of guilt, as voiced by direct speech:

“I haven’t seen food like this for some time. Prosciutto and Persian melon. What’s this? Watercress salad. Good Christ!” (187).

After such a thought, we can easily perceive that a shadow is being cast on the listing of the items of the actual repast, with the expected musical complement:

After the shrimp Arnaud and salad, she offered cheese and cold-water biscuits, rum-flavored ice-cream, plums from Georgia, and early green grapes. Then brandy and coffee. In the next room Mohammad al Bakkar kept singing his winding, nasal, insinuating songs to the sounds of wire coathangers moved back and forth, and drums, tambourines and mandolins and bagpipes (187).

The problem is that Herzog's mind is constantly at work and he associates his sensorial perceptions with episodes in his past life, both private and public: the sound of oriental music makes him think of his Jewish grandfather who imported onions from Egypt, while the crustaceans remind him of his mother who came from the Baltic countries and was particularly fond of seafood. It is also possible that the repeated references to international *cuisine* represent an oblique criticism of the American meddling in international affairs, more specifically the military involvement in Vietnam, when we consider that the playing of drums, tambourines and bagpipes is popularly associated with the marching of soldiers.

Herzog, however, must learn to harmonize the contradictions that he perceives around himself. Body and soul, mind and heart, reason and emotion, his physical and spiritual needs have to be harnessed to produce the desired effect. In the true spirit of Emerson and Transcendentalism, what Herzog is after is the reconciliation of the two principles of self and society that regulate individual life and life in modern society. Like Emerson, he believes in self-reliance, in the spiritual freedom of the individual, and yet he is opposed to the kind of self-sufficiency and search for solitude that had alienated the romantic man from contemporary society. At the same time, while believing in the greater unity of mankind, he strongly deprecates bourgeois collectivism and social conformity that in his view are responsible for the "distortion of the divine image of man" (176), to promote the interests of an amorphous social body. What Herzog must do, if he wants to achieve equilibrium, is to steer clear of both extremes, to occupy a middle ground, neither affirm nor deny but always try the case first and keep the balance true. In the words of Emerson, to maintain equilibrium Herzog must display the skills of an equestrian walking on an oblique tightrope:

Nature delights to put us between extreme antagonisms, and our safety is in the skill with which we keep the diagonal line. Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy (Emerson VII, 20).

I have thus far argued that both in the case of Melville and Bellow what is foregrounded through the adoption of the extended metaphor of food and the participation in organized dinners is the danger - inherent in the abandonment of any interest in metaphysics and the ready acceptance of natural bliss - of affirming the primacy of material life as compared to spiritual life. There is, however, a final point that I want to make, which is intended to place the two texts under examination into a relationship of mutual relevance, as if they were parts of an identical discourse.

Both the narrator in "The Paradise of Bachelors" and the character in *Herzog* are invited to what we may consider ready-made dinners - in the latter case a bland attempt to contribute with a bottle of wine is expressly turned down by the organizer. The participant is therefore confined to a passive role: he can say yes or no and thus avail himself of what Kierkegaard termed a "transcendental possibility", but in no way is he offered a choice, an alternative that solely would transform his participation into an "authentic" experience. As it is, he can only have a glimpse of the "inauthentic" form of existence, a mere "togetherness" in existential parlance, which makes him feel a considerable amount of anxiety or alienation. The confrontation with the void or final death and descent into hell, represented by the trip to the paper-mill in the second part of the Melvillean diptych and Herzog's underground ride to Ramona's apartment, are the ways in which the two authors give shape to a common concept and reveal the authentic meaning of man's presence in the world, his inborn capacity to stand still in a void expecting an invitation that cannot be rebuffed.



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- 1 See, for example, by Babcock, both "The Language of Melville's Isolatoes" and "Melville's 'Moby Dictionary'".
- 2 The essay, otherwise shoddy and inaccurate (Melville's birthplace is given as Lansingburgh), can be used as a general profile on the author's cultural background and his British literary parent artists.
- 3 Almost invariably, the extant studies focus on the second part of the diptych, considered in its own account one of Melville's most remarkable tales. On the contrast between European leisure and American industrialism, see Thompson. Whereas Rowland, represents the narrator as attracted by men, repelled by women. More recently, Young (223) has drawn attention to the gestation symbolism and the Dantean imagery in the second part of the diptych, reaching the conclusion that "'Tartarus' is a curse on the enslavement of females to mills and factories". More simply put, according to this critic Melville is subscribing to the belief that special liability to insanity on the part of the females resided in their sexual organs.
- 4 Most likely Duyckinck was disturbed by two chapters, namely Bk. xvii, "Young America in Literature", and xviii, "Pierre as a Juvenile Author, Reconsidered", in which his critical position had been satirized. That the relationship with the Duyckincks had deteriorated is also shown by Melville's note dated February 14, 1852 (prior to the publication of *Pierre*), by which he cancelled his subscription to *The Literary World*.
- 5 Stein was the first to call attention to the eatable names of the three employees (Turkey, Nippers, i.e., lobster's claws, and Ginger Nut), and the ubiquitous references to food throughout the story. See also McCall (40-41), who, after affirming that in his books Melville "frequently sees the world in terms of 'appetite' - the Cook's marvelous comic sermon in *Moby-Dick* on 'voraciousness' (cfr. ch. 64, "Stubbs Supper", and ch. 65: "The Whale as a Dish") and Ishmael's cry, 'Oh, horrible vulturism of earth from which not the mightiest whale is free'" - reminds us that Chase had already noted "the large number of figures of speech having to do with the act of eating" (xiv). Finally, mention must be made of Miller's claim that the author showed a manic delight in writing of feasting, usually in an all-male society, to the extent that "in his fictions the orgies are oral Edens" (263), and thus pointing to a clear substitution of eating for sexuality.

- 6 Before becoming active in the literary market, Duyckinck had obtained a law degree from Columbia College and in his activity as unpaid agent for talented writers he similarly acted as a conveyancer and title hunter. Cfr. Wells.
- 7 Quite meaningfully, the closure is similar to that of “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”: “Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! And oh! Tartarus of Maids!” (222). The interjections are meant to express the inability of the narrator to respond effectively to injustices he has witnessed; powerlessly, he can only lament the dehumanizing situation in which both men and women are bound to live.
- 8 “So called after Socrates whose favourite device was to stimulate [i.e., simulate] ignorance in discussion, especially by asking a series of apparently innocuous questions in order to trap his interlocutor into error” (Cuddon 636).
- 9 Notice how Melville is resorting to his characteristic opening to express the *malaise*, the dissatisfaction with city life that afflicts his protagonists.
- 10 The dissatisfaction of the narrator becomes obvious only when we read the second part of the diptych, which in retrospect throws life at the Temple into high relief. On the narrator as the most important link between the two sections, see Weyler.



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