

# From Sapore to Sapere: The Gustatory Perception of Elsewhere in Calvino's 'Under the Jaguar Sun'

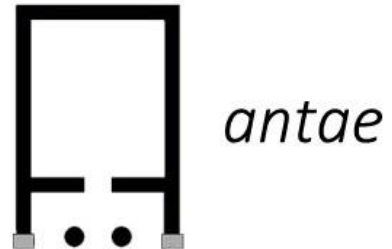
Satarupa Sinha Roy

*antae*, Vol. 3, No. 1. (Apr., 2016), 77-86

---

## Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:



- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

---

*antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing is also accepted.*

## From Sapore to Sapere: The Gustatory Perception of Elsewhere in Calvino's 'Under the Jaguar Sun'

Satarupa Sinha Roy

*University of Calcutta*

‘[K]nowledge cannot come to those who have neither tasted nor smelled. Speaking is not sapience, the first tongue needs the second.’<sup>1</sup>

The relationship of taste with knowledge goes far back in time. Tasting the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge—described by Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* as ‘precious of all Trees/ In Paradise, of operation blest/ To Sapience’—led to the Fall of Man, culminating in the eviction of Adam and Eve from Paradise.<sup>2</sup> The epistemic component of taste is further emphasised by Milton in *Samson Agonistes*, when the blinded Samson proclaims (to Harapha): ‘The way to know were not to see but taste’.<sup>3</sup> Food (together with the empirical sentience of taste) occupies a position of particular significance in literature. From Chaucer and Rabelais to Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, from the English Romantics to the Russian Realists, from the magic realism of Isabel Allende (*Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*) to the anthropological cogitations of Piero Camporesi (*The Magic Harvest: Food, Folklore and Society*), from the provocative food fable of Günter Grass (*The Flounder*) to the redemptive art of Isak Dinesen (‘Babette’s Feast’), the metaphoricity of food has amplified and enriched phenomenally over centuries. In contemporary literary discourse, gastrocriticism—brilliantly interdisciplinary as it is—has come to occupy a crucial place.<sup>4</sup> Its pride of position may, alternatively, be attributed to the centrality of food and dining in human society and its intimate (and often, complex) relationship with human experiences and values. But how does one *read* food in literature? What *should* one make of taste divorced from the materiality of immediate consumption of the food/meal one merely reads about in literature but cannot savour? In what ways do food taboos (literary representations of cannibalism, for instance) both inform and invert the textual grammar of the subject and the object?<sup>5</sup> Gastrocriticism draws upon a wide range of disciplines vis-a-vis history, anthropology, semiotics and the social sciences in its consideration of questions such as these. The meaning potential of food, so to speak, is infinite. As described by Gaye Poole, food is ‘a polysemous

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, Book 9, *Paradise Lost* ed. by Scott Elledge, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Norton, 1975), lns. 795-97.

<sup>3</sup> John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), ln. 1091.

<sup>4</sup> The term “gastrocriticism” was coined by Ronald Tobin in his 1990 book, *Tarte à la crème: Comedy and Gastronomy in Molière's Theatre*.

<sup>5</sup> This paper focuses on a single food taboo, i.e. cannibalism, given its relevance in the text at issue.

signifier that articulates in concrete terms what is very often internal, vague, abstract'.<sup>6</sup> Poole's insight is particularly useful in the current context as it shines a light on the rather dimly-lit (if not plainly obscure) interstices of what might be summed up as the beguiling matrix of our 'inner' lives. We are defined by what and how we eat; as Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin had put it in his 1825 treatise, *The Physiology of Taste*: 'Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are'.<sup>7</sup> Food and identity are, for that matter, inextricably linked to each other, with the former functioning as both a mirror (on which the consuming individual's identity is reflected) and a conduit (through which the consuming/devouring self gains sapience about itself and others).

A careful survey of the critical literature on the subjects of food and eating would point not just towards a diverse, multifaceted corpus but also underscore the continually evolving nature of literary gastronomy itself. While works such as Emily Gowers' *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (1997) and Nathaniel McDonald's *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (2008) critically appraise food symbolism with reference to Roman and biblical literatures respectively, Gian-Paolo Biasin's *The Flavors of Modernity* (1993) critically engages with representations of food in modern European novels.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Joan Fitzpatrick's *Food in Shakespeare* (2007) and Gail Houston's *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (1994) are telling examples of intensive critical inquiries on the subject of food together with its complex representative nature and discursive sociological entailments. In her influential essay, 'Deciphering a Meal' (1972), Mary Douglas subjects the phenomenon of meal to a rigorous syntagmatic analysis arguing that the sociological analysis of particular culinary performances must always be carried out in connection with other related phenomena.

In a similar vein,<sup>9</sup> this paper, in its search for intercontextual meanings (in Calvino's story), hopes to reach beyond the reductive regime of binary oppositions such as, Self/Other, inside/outside, home/abroad, *heimlich/unheimlich*, native/exotic, religious/secular, savage/civilized, and so on, so as to provoke analytic questions in relation to the semiotic function(s) of food. However, it is important to state at the very outset that by placing "gustatory perception" at its heart, this paper makes emphatic the centrality of "taste" in gaining sapience about the objective world.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the importance of sensory perception in

---

<sup>6</sup> Gaye Poole, 'Reel Meals: Food and Public Dining, Food and Sex, Food and Revenge', in *Viands, Wines and Spirits Nourishment and (In)Digestion in the Culture of Literacy: Essays in Cultural Practice*, ed. by Wojciech Kalaga & Tadeusz Rachwał (Katowice: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), pp. 9-29, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> This is an oft-quoted aphorism by Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) and is listed as item IV in a list entitled, 'Aphorisms of the Professor', intended as an eternal foundation for the science of gastronomy in *The Physiology of Taste*. For more on this, see Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Although Biasin's book specifically focuses on the Italian novel, it does include occasional references to the broader category of European novels.

<sup>9</sup> Although expressly concerned with the semiotic implications of food, this paper (unlike Douglas' essay) is not given to any systematic analysis of ritual in the context of Calvino's story.

<sup>10</sup> This refers directly to the title of the current paper.

understanding the external world is often dangerously diluted in favour of language or speech acts. Our species, *Homo sapiens* (wise man), as Michel Serres in his remarkable treatise on the five senses reminds us, essentially points towards a ‘savouring’ organism—its wisdom being only a function of its ability to savour or taste.<sup>11</sup> Knowledge, then, derives fundamentally from taste—*sapere* from *sapore*—although the speaking tongue, wonderfully voluble and articulate, is more readily associated with intellect than its savouring twin.<sup>12</sup> Speaking against the imperium of language, Michel Serres in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* underscores the substantiality of the body in our consciousness of ourselves as “subjects”, the empirical receptors of all external phenomena. The sensate body is foundational to experience; it is the site where our “five senses” both originate and converge and where the chaotic world of random “objects” is called into order. The increased (and ever-increasing) emphasis on language, as Serres argues, is instrumental in suppressing the natural body and its perception of the external world. Although this paper is not expressly concerned with projecting the artificiality of language per se, it does (in alignment with Serres’s philosophy of perception) seek to demonstrate the centrality of sensate experience in meaning making. Consequently, the aim of this paper can be said as aiming to arrive at a more informed understanding of the silent eloquence of the savouring, perceiving tongue. Calvino’s ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’ was originally published (in Italian) as ‘Sapore Sapere’ (‘To Taste, To Know’) in the June 1982 edition of the *FMR*. As the original title suggests,<sup>13</sup> it explores the complex language of (the sense of) taste underscoring the centrality of gustatory experience in the production of knowledge. What it discerns through the protagonists’ scrupulous tasting/testing of food—the exotic cuisine of Mexico, in this instance—is the understanding of food not merely as a substance nourishing the body, but also as an agent restoring it.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the semiotic richness of the culinary sign, this paper also examines the ways in which ‘taste’ impacts and influences the conceptualisation of ‘elsewhere’ in the context of Calvino’s story. For the journeying couple in ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’ it is the sense of taste that occasions knowledge or, more precisely, wisdom—the type of human wisdom that enables its possessor to visualise himself as organically continuous and coterminous with the world. That the unnamed narrator and his companion Olivia are tourists in Mexico—not explorers or travelers, but *tourists*—warrants special attention. Their leisured bearing and overtly touristic itinerary make

---

<sup>11</sup> See Serres, *The Five Senses*.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes likewise pointed out that the French words *savoir* (knowledge) and *savour* (savour) originate from a common Latin root. See Roland Barthes, *Leçon*, trans. by Richard Howard (Paris: Seuil, 1978), in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> The title was later changed to ‘Sotto il sole giaguaro’ at the request of the author.

<sup>14</sup> In the context of Calvino’s story, this has a special relevance. Given the fact that the narrator and his companion Olivia are tourists in Mexico, they dine mostly in restaurants. The understanding of food as a restorative agent is further enhanced when one considers the etymological root of the word ‘restaurant’ which is derived from the French ‘restaurant’, originally ‘food that restores’. For more, see:

<[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=restaurant](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=restaurant)> [accessed 6 February 2016].

In ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’, the restorative function of food becomes palpable in that it nourishes the protagonists intellectually—its function as a nutrient being only secondary—thereby facilitating and heightening sapience.

them immediately recognisable as such. Yet, as Calvino makes it clear from the very beginning, they are no ordinary tourists, their fascination for the exotic *Other*<sup>15</sup> being palpably analytic and deeply introspective inasmuch as it sets them apart from the 'crowd of noisy groups, loud in sound and color'.<sup>16</sup> Unlike this oddly philistine congregation whose touristic pursuits are, in all likelihood, impelled by an anticipation of cheap ecstasy promised by the pseudo-place of abroad, the narrator's (and Olivia's) quest seems to share tonal affinities with the quest romance.<sup>17</sup> This becomes even more apparent when one takes into account the complex structure of their relationship and the implicit motive behind their tour of Mexico. As they journey *in* and *through* multiple temporal, spatial and cultural formations, they gradually seem to move away from the refined but restrictive modern sensibility towards a more primal order in which body and memory—ceasing to be discreet entities—mingle resolutely and inextricably in the process of mastication. The culinary sign, therefore, presides over their passage from the terrifying void of alienation to the fertile grounds of sagacity and sapience. Likewise, the restoration of sexual harmony between the couple—not in the proverbial *heimlich* domain of 'home' but in the *unheimlich* territory of 'abroad', and facilitated by the tasting of exotic food—invests the 'elsewhere' of abroad with a rare sense of belonging. Interestingly, the relation between the (German) words *heimlich* meaning familiar, homely, etc., and *unheimlich* meaning unfamiliar, strange, uncanny, etc., is deeply ambiguous. They both *do* and *do not* seem to suggest the same conventional relationship that exists between two unequivocally antithetical terms. As Freud writes, '*Heimlich* [thus] becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny ("das *Unheimliche*," "the unhomely") is in some way a species of the familiar ("das *Heimliche*," "the homely")'.<sup>18</sup> In Calvino's story, the familiar lacks vitality and is intellectually barren. This is particularly evident in the disaffected protagonists' lack of spontaneity (towards each other) and their rather odd manner of communicating (mostly) through an elaborate matrix of flavours; in the ritually explored realms, as in the exotic locales regularly flooded by tourists and finally, in the sterile insights proffered by the inchoate experiences of modernity, divorced from sapidity and perceptiveness. On the other hand, 'elsewhere' (embedded in the time/place/culture which is not one's own)—that often merges with the 'here' and 'now' in 'Under the Jaguar Sun', depending on the intensity of the narrator's cognizance—holds out a promise of rare intellection as evident from the narrator's ethereal experience of the *Other* at Palenque:

'I went down, I climbed back up to the light of the jaguar sun—into the sea of the green sap of the leaves. The world spun, I plunged down, my throat cut by the knife of the king-priest, down the

---

<sup>15</sup> The term '*Other*' (with a capital "O"), an element in the binary opposition *Self/Other*, refers in the current context to an identity that is largely constructed and projected onto the perceived individual/group by the perceiving Self. On the contrary, the word 'other' (with a lower-case "o") refers simply to another individual or group.

<sup>16</sup> See Italo, Calvino, 'Under the Jaguar Sun', in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 3-29, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> In the words of Northrop Frye (1970): 'Translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the wasteland. Fertility means food and drink, bread and wine, body and blood, the union of male and female.' See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1970), p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> Sigmund, Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 134.

high steps onto the forest of tourists ... The solar energy coursed along dense networks of blood and chlorophyll; I was living and dying in all fibers of what is chewed and digested, and in all the fibers that absorb the sun, consuming and digesting.’<sup>19</sup>

The dissolution of the boundary between introspective knowledge (about the self) and objective knowledge (about the world) is fully realised when he (the narrator) imagines himself as the sacrificed victim whose resurgence as vegetation sounds off the universal cycle of destruction and rebirth. Such a prospect points towards Michel Serres’s (1982) ideation of knowledge that is ‘always linked to an observer, an observer submerged in a system or in its proximity. And this observer is structured exactly like what he observes’.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, it is to such an observer alone that ‘elsewhere’ ceases to be the *unheimlich* realm of the outside, taking on more intimate shades of the familiar or *heimlich*. In other words, by recalling the past man has *always already* known but forgotten, the wondrous prospect of understanding what had passed into oblivion is revived yet again leading to the reification of ‘elsewhere’ as an epistemic category. For instance, the narrator—just like Palomar of *Mr Palomar*, who experiences the cheese shop as an encyclopedia and a dictionary—considers the exotic cuisine of Mexico from a rather commodious perspective:

‘[T]he true journey, as the introjections of an “outside” different from our normal one, implies a complete change of nutrition, a digesting of the visited country—its fauna and flora and its culture (not only the different culinary practices and condiments but the different implements used to grind the flour or stir the pot)—making it pass between the lips and esophagus. This is the only kind of travel that has a meaning nowadays...’<sup>21</sup>

As evident from the above excerpt, the metaphor of travel is woven ostensibly and inextricably into the symbolism of food and foodways (‘digesting of the visited country’); to know the ‘outside’—the quintessential ‘elsewhere’—one must *taste* it, in all its paraphernalia of flavours. *Sapere* comes through *sapere*. Indeed, the Italian edition of *Under the Jaguar Sun* opens with an excerpt from the (Italian) linguist Niccolò Tommaseo’s (1802-74) *Dizionario dei sinonimi* where he defines ‘tasting’ as the exercising of the sense of taste which is followed by a more nuanced appreciation of flavour(s). While ‘tasting’, to begin with, does not generally involve any deliberate reflection, the experience of taste intensifies progressively with the subsequent appreciation of flavours. Tommaseo links the Italian verb *sapere* (to know) with the Latin root *sapio* (to taste; to discern) suggesting that ‘taste’ may be appropriately considered as a combination of the immediate sensory perception and the reflective appreciation/discernment of

---

<sup>19</sup> ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’, pp. 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> See Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, trans. by Josue Harari and David Bell (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 83.

In Calvino’s *Mr Palomar*, Palomar’s fascination with the belly of the gecko is manifestly evocative of the kind of ‘observer’ Serres speaks of. The sight of a gnat slowly dissolving inside the reptile’s gullet sends Palomar into a deep reverie: ‘Perhaps at this moment a god of the nether world situated in the center of the earth with his eye that can pierce granite is watching us from below, following the cycle of living and dying, the lacerated victims dissolving in the bellies of their devourers, until they, in their turn, are swallowed by another belly’. Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Under the Jaguar Sun’, p. 12.

the ingested substance. It is this dual competence of 'taste' which receives much attention in Calvino's story—the subtle nuances of which can be distilled from the narrator's ceremonious appreciation of a dish comprising meatballs. The dish in question—*gorditas pellizcadas con manteca* (translated as “plump girls pinched with butter”)—is particularly evocative. The immediate “taste” of the meatballs (subsuming, in the narrator's imagination, the fragrance of Olivia) is followed by and assimilated into the subsequent recognition of the name's erotic suggestiveness. The narrator's 'voluptuous mastication' of the meatballs is a prominent dramatisation of the intimate contact between bodies (i.e., between the narrator and the meatballs; also, between the narrator and Olivia who is symbolically ingested by the narrator) facilitating the most intimate knowledge of the other achieved through the merging of bodies.<sup>22</sup> This occurs exactly at two levels: the merging of food (an object external and therefore foreign to the body) with the body of the one consuming it, and the sexual communion between the narrator and Olivia in the vital intimacy of which the subject-object dichotomy stands resolutely annulled. Thus, besides taking on the crucial significance of a socio-cultural/-historical artifact (much in the same way as it does in *Mr Palomar*), food in Calvino's story transmutes into 'a desirable erotic body'.<sup>23</sup> It is this latter association of food with eros that this paper shall now turn its attention to. The significance of such an association—hardly fortuitous—cannot be overstated, for food/meal, in 'Under the Jaguar Sun', represents that rapturous site of 'complicity' between the protagonists (i.e., the narrator and Olivia) which also marks the threshold of the purportedly unknown “elsewhere”. In this respect, the culinary sign functions as a rather potent device through which the mysterious hinterlands of the primordial memory,<sup>24</sup> as well as the essence of the subjective individual self, are negotiated and enlivened.<sup>25</sup>

The association of food with eros is vividly articulated when in *Mr Palomar*, the eponymous protagonist reflects upon a cassoulet, 'from a mountain of goose-fat a female figure surfaces, smears white over her rosy skin, and he already imagines himself making his way towards her

---

<sup>22</sup> 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> In his *Food for Thought*, Louis Marin writes: 'What is edible is always to a certain extent a little bit of all three of the following: a desirable erotic body awaiting consummation, an economically appropriated possession, and a linguistic sign exchanged within a system of communication'. Louis Marin, *Food for Thought*, trans. by Mette Hjort, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 125.

Apart from the emphasis on food/meal as a complex system of communication (through flavours), this paper examines at length the erotic implications of food as a culinary sign and the ways in which it becomes instrumental in the formulation of 'elsewhere' as an alternative place of belonging.

<sup>24</sup> What is being implied here through the generic expression, “primordial memory”—the consciousness of which is smothered by the tumultuous experiences of modernity—is also evoked in Section 2 (entitled, “Meiosis”) of Calvino's *Priscilla*, which is characterised by the narrator's awareness of his and Priscilla's “past” as unicellular organisms and who is acutely aware of the “continuous renewal of protein molecules” inside himself and Priscilla. Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. by Martin McLaughlin et.al. (New York, NY: Harcourt, 2002), p. 225.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing and interesting aspect of the relationship between the anonymous narrator and Olivia is their intricate communion which is expressed (by the narrator) in the following words: 'Our subjective, individual selves, I was thinking, find their amplification and completion only in the unity of the couple'. 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 10.

through those thick avalanches, embracing her, sinking with her'.<sup>26</sup> In 'Under the Jaguar Sun', on the other hand, the narrator's erotic fantasy of being savoured (highlighting, in the process, the sense of taste) by Olivia is the precursor of cognition (knowledge about the self): 'It was the sensation of her teeth in my flesh that I was imagining, and I could feel her tongue lift me, against the roof of her mouth, enfold me in saliva, then thrust me under the tips of the canine'.<sup>27</sup> The narrator's awareness of Olivia (and also Olivia's of him) is, so to speak, heightened by such gustatory delectation and the finer nuances of their elemental affinity—in their most rarified state—can find expression only through a complex rhetoric of taste. As the relationship between the narrator and Olivia comes to be 'established exclusively through food' so much so that the image of a meal appears to be the most palpable and worldly equivalent of their communion, the culinary sign takes on the significance of the intermediary through which the unknown, the unfamiliar, the "elsewhere" as opposed to "here", the past as opposed to the present, the forgotten as opposed to the aggrandized, may be (imaginatively) revived.<sup>28</sup> Thus, neither the narrator's nor Palomar's erotic fantasies are matters of appetite, but seem to issue from a deeper and a more profound desire to *know*, to revive the obscure memory of the 'deep atavistic bond' that exists between individuals and the food(s) they consume.<sup>29</sup>

The special significance of food in the context at issue can be further illustrated with the help of an example from *Mr Palomar*, where the protagonist visits a Paris charcuterie. Stacked on the marble counters of the store, hanging from festive Christmas wreaths and encased in tall august jars, is an oneiric world of abundance which sends Palomar reeling down the tunnel of time. Vestiges of Spain's Moorish past slumber quietly between slices of game pâté and galantines of pheasant evoke elaborate Renaissance costumes. As the comprehensiveness of his cogitation goes on to confirm, Palomar's orientation to the present can no longer be taken to be stable. The art of reflective recall as he (and also Olivia) demonstrates, embodies a unifying principle: it envisions human history (and the universe, by extension) as an essentially isochronous order in which the "here" of the immediate present is integrated seamlessly with the "there" of another (also of the *Other's*) time. Olivia's fascination with cannibalism is attended to by an intense awareness of this cyclicity: "Perhaps the death of time concerns only us [...]. We who tear one another apart, pretending not to know it, pretending not to taste flavors anymore."<sup>30</sup> The elaborate cuisine of the nuns with its bold and fiery flavours, honouring a 'specific' flavour—that of the Aztec ritual meal comprising human flesh—links disparate temporal, spatial and cultural orders. It is that enchanted conduit through which the ancient civilisation of the Aztecs, with its emphasis on the cyclicity of nature, comes forth as a particularly striking metonymy of the world (subsuming the eternal cycle of death and rebirth).<sup>31</sup> Drawing our attention to the

---

<sup>26</sup> *Mr Palomar*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Mr Palomar*, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> The Aztecs believed that the gods became weak and vulnerable every fifty-two years and that they needed to be propitiated through sacrifice. Human sacrifice was common in many Mesoamerican civilisations and the Aztecs



fundamentally integrative principle underlying microhistories, Gian-Paolo Biasin, in his essay 'Italo Calvino in Mexico: Food and Lovers, Tourists and Cannibals', locates the Aztecs and the modern tourists—'with the same status and the same rights, in two phases'—within the latitudinous category of human civilisation.<sup>32</sup> While in the first phase the individual was subservient to the species (individual victims were sacrificed by Aztec priests for the greater good of the community/humankind), the order stood veritably altered in the second phase (followed by the advent of Christianity) in which the individual was nourished/fed through the Eucharist by God (Christ) himself.<sup>33</sup> Yet, despite the reversal of the cosmic order and in spite of it, the Aztecs and the modern tourists ('we who tear one another apart') remain ideologically united through a common metaphor of "feeding" and "nourishment".<sup>34</sup>

Calvino's story seems to answer the questions, "what does one imagine knowledge to be?" and then, "how does sapidity both facilitate as well intensify sapience?" For it is not with the eye that one sees Calvino's Mexico—the seat of the Aztec and the Mayan civilizations, bearing witness to the melting and mixing of cultures—but with the discerning relish of the tongue. Just like the royal palace in 'A King Listens', which is 'all whorls, lobes: [it is] a great ear', Calvino's Oaxaca/Mexico spreads out like an expansive gustatory apparatus yielding the most intimate knowledge only to those willing to savour its fecund fields.<sup>35</sup> It is evidently from the immediacy of the modern moment that the couple—in the course of their 'gustatory exploration'—journey to other times and places: the "elsewhere" being revealed in its lavish complexity of flavours by the savouring tongue(s). And so it becomes possible for Olivia to vicariously participate in the Aztec ritual meal, to experience the complex and elusive flavours of the terrible yet venerable food dissolving in the belly of the devourer. As Palomar consonantly cogitates, if the earth were transparent, everything would appear as 'an inferno of grinding and ingesting'.<sup>36</sup> Understandably, the tangibility of "elsewhere" (as the quintessential outside) cannot be satisfactorily established in such a world as imagined by both Palomar and Olivia. On the contrary, Calvino evokes the ancient symbolism of the Ouroboros—depicting a serpent devouring its own tail—in order to perpetuate the dissolution of boundaries that render the *Other*—"elsewhere" being its spatial (as well as temporal) variant—strange and indecipherable. Besides symbolising the eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth, the conjuration of the Ouroboros (with its underlying allusion to a cosmic cannibalism) supplies a universal logic to the

---

practised it to ensure the 'return' of their gods—rejuvenated and nourished by the sacrificial offering—which, in turn, ensured the continuity of their world order.

<sup>32</sup> See Gian-Paolo Biasin, 'Italo Calvino in Mexico', *PLMA*, 8(1), (1993), 72-88, p. 85. My emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> 'The first phase included humankind', writes Biasin, 'synecdochically and metaphorically, in a discourse on the cosmos in which the cycle (the species) was more important than linearity (the individual) and the individual sacrifice served to preserve the species by concretizing the metaphor of "feeding" the gods. In contrast, the second phase, with the coming of Christianity, effects a complete reversal: linearity prevails over the cycle, the individual is valorized to the utmost vis-à-vis the species, and it is God himself, Christ, who through the Eucharist, ("Take and eat: this is my body") concretizes an opposite metaphor and "nourishes," and hence, saves the individual'. (85).

<sup>34</sup> 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 22. My emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Italo Calvino, 'A King Listens', in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, pp. 33-64, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Mr Palomar*, p. 54.

couple's quest of knowledge (through flavours). Identifying with the cosmic serpent, the narrator and his companion integrate within themselves the respective identities of the devourer and the devoured (also that of the sacrificer and the victim) 'in the universal cannibalism that leaves its imprint on every amorous relationship and erases the lines between our bodies and *sopa de frijoles, huachinango a la vera cruzana* and *enchiladas*'.<sup>37</sup> The second tongue of sapience—thus awakened through the gustatory perception of elsewhere—slumbers no more.

### List of Works Cited

- Allende, Isabel, *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* (New York, NY: Harper Flamingo, 1998)
- Barthes, Roland, *Leçon*, trans. by Richard Howard (Paris: Seuil, 1978), in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982)
- Biasin, Gian-Paolo, 'Italo Calvino in Mexico: Food and Lovers, Tourists and Cannibals', *PLMA*, 8(1), (1993), 72-88
- , *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993)
- Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme, *The Physiology of Taste* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986)
- Camporesi, Piero, *The Magic Harvest: Food, Folklore and Society*, trans. by Joan Krakover Hall (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993)
- Calvino, Italo, 'A King Listens', in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 33-64
- , *Mr Palomar*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1999)
- , *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. by Martin McLaughlin et.al. (New York, NY: Harcourt, 2002)
- , 'Under the Jaguar Sun', in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 3-29
- Dinesen, Isak, *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1988)
- Douglas, Mary, 'Deciphering a Meal', *Daedalus* 101(1), (1972), pp. 61-81
- Fitzpatrick, Joan, *Food and Shakespeare*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)
- Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003)
- Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1970)

---

<sup>37</sup> 'Under the Jaguar Sun', p. 29.

Gowers, Emily, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Grass, Günter, *The Flounder*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Vintage, 1997)

Houston, Gail Turley, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1994)

Marin, Louis, *Food for Thought*, trans. by Mette Hjort (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989)

McDonald, Nathaniel, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Open University Press, 2008)

Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Scott Elledge, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Norton, 1975)

——, *Samson Agonistes and Shorter Poems*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950)

Poole, Gaye, 'Reel Meals: Food and Public Dining, Food and Sex, Food and Revenge', in *Viands, Wines and Spirits—Nourishment and (In)Digestion in the Culture of Literacy: Essays in Cultural Practice*, ed. by Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Rachwał, (Katowice: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2003), pp. 9-29

Serres, Michel, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, trans. by Josue Harari and David Bell, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982)

——, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008)