

LOCAL AND GLOBAL FOOD ITEMS IN VICTORIAN GOTHIC FICTION

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In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf notes: 'It is a curious fact that novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten. It is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever'.¹

The question of the presence of food in literature revolves around the significance which a food item may have in the narrative. Roland Barthes' discussion of the 'the reality effect' and his definition of the superfluous as 'insignificant notations' well fits into the argument of food items and literature.² Barthes points out that if real life is made of insignificant details which fiction tends to eliminate, one way of reinstating the reality effect is to give space and visibility to such insignificant details. By pausing on food items not only do we 'defy a convention', but we also bring back reality into fiction and discover that human beings' ordinary necessity of eating is a precious source for dealing with conformity and diversity, manners and habits. As Terry Eagleton underlines, 'food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation'.³

Food is a protean category which both transforms and is transformed by the body; it is never genuine nor authentic, but always the result of continuous natural and cultural processes. The act of eating and issues such as hunger, thirst, appetite, taste, diet, cooking and consumption, the effect of food from intake to digestion to excretion all mark the transformative paradigm of each and every body. Indeed, one of the most common, universal and inevitable alterations the body undergoes is due to the act of eating. But what exactly do humans eat? Can eating and eating habits provide a way to classify living beings? Does eating natural or manufactured food mark differences among humans and between human and non-human eaters? What makes for a diet? What is taste?

Gothic literature is the place of transformation and transgression of the body. When associated with food, the monstrous body is often characterised either as a devouring being (over-eating and drinking), or starving, and because of that, denied a positive social connotation and left on the margin of the public sphere.⁴ By deploying a pattern of excessive and transgressive appetite, gothic literature questions what is edible and what is not, and often classifies monstrous characters on the basis of what and how ‘food things’ are brought to the mouth. One of the features of most vampire literature is, of course, the ingestion of blood. Yet Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* – the most famous of the vampire stories – tells us more than just the vampire’s diet and his threatening eating ‘habits’.

At the beginning of the novel, the young solicitor Jonathan Harker travelling to Eastern Europe in order to meet Count Dracula comes across the ethnic features of a foreign country. While he complains about the delay of trains in the East, he is definitely pleased with the food he is given at the inns he stops at. ‘I had for dinner, or rather supper, a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty. (*Mem.*, get recipe for Mina.) I asked the waiter, and he said it was called ‘paprika hendl,’ and that, as it was a national dish, I should be able to get it anywhere along the Carpathians’.⁵ Three paragraphs into the novel Jonathan is already sitting at the table and eating. Not only does the narrative pause on the act of eating but it also tells us how the character relates to the different eating habits of the foreign country he is visiting and how the new food literally affects his taste buds. When he falls asleep and has ‘all sorts of queer dreams’, in a rather prosaic form Jonathan explains the possible reason for his sleeplessness:

There was a dog howling all night under my window, which may have had something to do with it; or it may have been the paprika, for I had to drink up all the water in my carafe, and was still thirsty. Towards morning I slept and was wakened by the continuous knocking at my door, so I guess I must have been sleeping soundly then. Despite the side effects, I had for breakfast more paprika, and a sort of porridge of maize flour which they said was ‘mamaliga’, and egg-plant stuffed with forcemeat, a very excellent dish, which they call ‘impletata’. (*Mem.*, get recipe for this also.) (28).

Jonathan associates the ‘queer dreams’ of the night with his eating of paprika, yet despite the side effects, the Englishman does not hesitate to have ‘more’ spiced food and even enjoys it. The

gustatory complex and contradictory effect of this item is pointed out by Timothy Morton in his book *The Poetics of Spice*, a study of the literal and cultural significance of spice in English Romantic literature, which underlines how spice ‘participates in discourses of spectrality, sacred presences, liminality, wealth, exoticism, commerce and imperialism’.⁶ I believe that the same range of discourses also emerges in Stoker’s Victorian text, the spices within the Englishman’s mouth engaging with a literal and metaphoric meaning of ‘liminality’, the perception of otherness by means of taste.

From the very beginning of Stoker’s novel, Jonathan not only appreciates what he eats but also plans to have the foreign food replicated when he goes back to England, which may be interpreted either as a genuine way to have his alimentary pleasure renewed at home or a sort of colonialist attitude which tends to incorporate both material and cultural traits. In any case, among the many unusual things the foreigner detects, the ethnic food always tastes ‘good’, so much so that Jonathan constantly makes sure the cooking instructions are accurately written down, a preoccupation which assures Jonathan that Mina, his wife-to-be, will make the dish at home. If this tells us of gender roles, I argue that Jonathan’s recipe writing reveals more than an indisputable sexual discourse, the issue at stake being also the character’s obsessive relationship with his accurate writings.⁷ Whether or not his transcription is exact, Jonathan’s recipe writing represents more than just a list of ingredients and procedures, for the English written version he produces marks the first attempt to transform the unfamiliar otherness (here food) into the familiar. The effort Jonathan puts in his recipe writing shows how in Stoker’s *Dracula* reporting what goes in the mouth and what affects taste is as important as any other documentation.

Once Jonathan reaches the castle, he is welcomed by Count Dracula who invites him to a generous dinner consisting of an ‘excellent roast chicken [...] some cheese and a salad and a bottle of old Tokay’ (42). It is clear that Jonathan is no vegetarian and enjoys eating meat instead. After just two chapters into the novel, the character has tasted a variety of meats, ranging from chicken, to forcemeat to a so-called ‘robber steak’ of which we are given accurate details on cooking and

serving.⁸ Jonathan's preference of cooked meat is clearly a way to alienate himself from bloody food. The issue at stake (no pun intended) here is that carnivore Jonathan does not feed on bloody red meat, which is normally associated with masculinity, and is therefore very much in contrast with Dracula who instead feeds on pure blood.⁹ Carnivores' cooking habits raise a number of questions as to why humans consume their food in certain ways. Eighty years before *Dracula*, vegetarian Percy Shelley had explained that the human beings' cooking of their meat was an expedient for 'screening from [their] disgust the horror of the shambles'.¹⁰

Jonathan's eating of meat is often accompanied by wine drinking. Before the Tokay offered by Dracula, the Englishman travelling abroad well remembers the taste of Golden Mediasch, a wine that gives 'a queer sting on the tongue, which is, however, not disagreeable' (31). The 'sting' produced by the spices in the wine is a close up on Jonathan's taste buds, stimulated by that 'queer' sensation which is 'not disagreeable', a litotes showing that Jonathan's pleasant gustatory feeling is admitted but without too much enthusiasm, a hesitation in expressing his sensations which emerges in other moments of the character's experience in Transylvania.

Although warmly invited to eat, Jonathan's first disconcerting moment is when he realizes that the count does not share the food he offers. The phrase Dracula pronounces after serving food to his guest, 'I have dined already, and I do not sup' (42), sounds revealing and enigmatic at the same time. During all the meals Jonathan consumes at the castle, Dracula is either away or never eats with him. Although the guest considers the host's absence at the table 'strange', nevertheless, he is quickly restored and greedily seduced by the service and the food his host offers him. 'The Count himself came forward and took off the cover of a dish and I fell to at once to an excellent roast chicken' (42).¹¹ Franco Moretti's convincing Marxist interpretation of the novel focuses on this detail to underline that if there is no one who serves food, Dracula evidently lacks servants, a feature that makes the count an anomalous aristocrat.¹²

However, despite the large amount of narrative devoted to eating and drinking, in *Dracula* we are never told of any English food item the characters consume.¹³ One wonders if Stoker was

influenced and inhibited by Mrs Beeton's statement in her *Household Management* (1861): 'It has been asserted, that English cookery is, nationally speaking, far from being the best in the world. More than this, we have been frequently told by brilliant foreign writers, half philosophers, half chefs, that we are the worst cooks on the face of the earth'.¹⁴

By contrast, local and global food items are present in Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*, published in 1897, the same year of *Dracula*.¹⁵ Despite the title, the novel does not deal with a bloodsucker vampire, but uses the tropes of vampire narratives, being the story of Harriet, a young woman who causes the death of the people she loves by unwillingly 'sucking' out their breath. By displacing the vampire bite from sucking blood to sucking breath, the narrative maintains the focus on the mouth, and the bodily cavity becomes the locus of excessive eating. *The Blood of the Vampire* opens in the dining room of a hotel in a Belgian resort, where a number of English holidaymakers are enjoying their 'magic hour of dining'. Here Harriet is immediately singled out for her unusual and disconcerting features: she eats with avidity and enjoyment, and devours her food in such a manner that 'it makes people sick'. The young woman's eating manners even outdo the other noticeable guest at the hotel, the 'very coarse feeder' Baroness Gobelli, the only character who approves of Harriet's voracious appetite, and who, like her, always wants 'more'. The gluttony of these two women enacts such an insatiable intake of food which makes them condemnable from the outset of the novel.

However, the remarkable trait of the novel is not only the two women's voracious appetite, but the wide range of food and drink items displayed along the narrative. If only after the first chapter the characters consume soup, potage au crouton, tête de veau aux champignons, cheese, lemonade and beer, by the end of the novel they will have ingested a very rich menu: cakes, gateaux, bread, butter, crevettes, pistoletes, prawns, shrimps, chocolates, caramels, sweetmeat, candies, bonbons fruit, fried steak, onions, lettuce, egg, bacon, roast beef, caviar, cod's roe, cutlet, milk, liqueurs, coffee, whiskey, sucre de pomme, Champagne and cordial. It is worth noting not only the quantity of narrative devoted to specific food and drink items, but also that a large part of

the terms are in French, a literary choice that certainly would have pleased the readers of Mrs Beeton's recipe book which included a glossary of the French vocabulary used in English modern cookery, a marker, as the author underlined, of the English people's great 'indebted[ness] to the gastronomic propensities of our French neighbours'.¹⁶

Food in gothic literature well suits the purpose of exploring codified limits and transgressions. The ingestion of various items, whether food or drinks, the quality and the quantity of the items ingested, and the ways the acts of eating and drinking are performed are not simply details but fulfill instead a thematic, structural and hermeneutic function: what happens at the mouth is strictly connected with what we call the 'other'.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Vintage, 2001, o.v. 1929), p. 7.

² Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, o.v. 1968).

³ Terry Eagleton, 'Edible écriture', *TLE*, 27 October, 1997.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984, o.v. 1968)

⁵ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Boston and New York: Bedford/ St Martin's Press, 2002), p. 27. All further parenthetical references will be to this edition.

⁶ Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice. Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 9.

⁷ 'There are many odd things to put down, and, lest who reads them fancy that I dined too well before I left Bistritz, let me put down my dinner exactly' (31). Troy Boone, "'He is English and therefore adventurous": Politics, Decadence and *Dracula*', *Studies in the Novel* 25 (1993), 76-91 (p.76).

⁸ 'bits of bacon, onion, and beef, seasoned with red pepper, and strung on sticks, and roasted over the fire, in the simple style of the London cat's meat!' (p. 31). Cat's meat was cheap meat sold to families as pet food. Often horsemeat, it was unfit for human consumption and sometimes even too rotten for pets.

⁹ J. e. d. Stavick, 'Love at First Beet: Vegetarian Critical Theory Meets *Dracula*', *Victorian Newsletter*, 89 (Spring 1996), p. 25.

¹⁰ Percy Shelley, *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (London, 1813). In 1874, Charles Lamb responded to Shelley's condemnation of meat-eaters with his *Dissertation Upon Roast Pig* (1874).

¹¹ Food containers raise a number of questions: what function do food containers play in the communication system of food? What is the difference between the container used to assemble and transport food (serving bowls, tureens, bottles, milk jugs, salt and pepper shakers), and the one used to consume it (plates, cups)? What is the significance of pottery made in the shape of the food it is meant to contain? (for example: fish plates for fishes). When the object reproduces food (fruit, game), does that tell us anything about the relationship between consumer and food? does it tell us of the difference, in Mrs Beeton's terms, between eating and 'dining', the so-called 'privilege of civilization'?

¹² See Franco Moretti, 'The Dialectics of Fear,' *New Left Review*, I/136, (November-December 1982), p. 68.

¹³ One exception is Yorkshire dialect speaker Mr Swales referring to 'cured herrin's' and 'belly-timber'.

¹⁴ Isabella Beeton, *Household Management. Treatise of Domestic Economy* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006, p. 994, o. v. 1861), p. 48. If Stoker might have felt 'intimidated' to include any English food items in his novel, he certainly followed Mrs Beeton's narrative structure, both books being an assemblage of many and different literary genres.

¹⁵ Florence Marryat, *The Blood of the Vampire* (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2009).

¹⁶ Beeton, *Household Management*, p. 44.