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Author: Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

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Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

University of Silesia, Katowice

Provide, Provide: Food in the American South

A problem relating to the provision of food underlies the early colonial history of the English in North America. In Virginia the supply of victuals constituted a crucial aspect of the rivalry between the native Americans and the whites. European failure in that field resulted in instances of settlers abandoning their communities in order to live with the Indians as well as in those of burning native cornfields. Both phenomena led to a toughening up of imperial policy.

Colonial agriculture was driven by double motives. On the one hand, the imperial interest required that the colonies produce costly exotic “staples like hemp, sugar, indigo, silk, and wine, which would not grow in the British Isles and for which British gold had to be sent abroad.”¹ On the other hand, there were the exigencies of everyday life to consider. The familiar charge that the native peoples did not deserve to own their land because their primitive economy failed to produce enough turned out bitterly false in Virginia. Not only did the Indians outperform the whites; they occasionally provided the colonists with food. The growing frustration caused conflicts with the natives, including occasions of destroying their fields even though the English themselves were starving. Peter Hulme comments on that: “to burn cornfields when you are starving, rather than stealing the corn, is to court the charge of psychosis.”²

¹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 263.

² Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 167.

In the late eighteenth century the agricultural character of Southern economy created the illusion of the section feeding the whole country. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century statistics demonstrated clearly that the production of “cereals, fruits, garden vegetables and esculent roots”³ in the free states exceeded that of the slave states. Hinton Rowan Helper, abolitionist and staunch racist, quotes in *The Impending Crisis* (1857) a fellow North Carolinian:

By every consideration of self-preservation, we are called to make better efforts to expel the Northern grocer from the State with his butter [...] It is a reproach on us as farmers, and no little deduction from our wealth, that we suffer the population of our towns and villages to supply themselves with butter from another Orange County in New York.⁴

This component of Southern mythology, by and large, disappeared in the wake of the Civil War. Still, food retained an elevated position in Dixie, distinctly different from that elsewhere in the United States.

In the early twentieth-century representation of food tended to overlap with the socioeconomic and geographical divisions of the *ante-bellum* South. The landed class argued for the good life afforded by the benevolent climate and a life of ease. In 1930 the *I'll Take My Stand* symposium, the chief expression of these sentiments, contrasted the Northern and Southern lifestyles: “The amenities of life also suffer under the curse of a strictly-business or industrial civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love.”⁵ The Agrarians stressed the provision of abundant nourishment as an index of a refined, leisurely culture, their favourite comparison being of Dixie with Mediterranean Europe.

The Piedmont as well as the poor white culture of the lowcountry, on the other hand, disseminated the image of outdoor life, with hunting, fishing, and plentiful consumption. It is in this tradition that Thomas Wolfe's work belongs. As Thomas C. Moser points out, both in his life and in his books Wolfe was a man of excess (*The American Novel* 147), therefore it may be misleading to take too much of his work for an expression of regional sensibility. Yet I am going to look at his representation of food as characteristic of the above-mentioned strand of Southern literature, partly because

³ *Ante-bellum. Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper*, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), p. 181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵ *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, ed. Louis Rubin (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. xxv.

of his exuberance. Describing the eating habits of the Gant family in *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe says they fed “hugely,”⁶ “stupendously...,”⁷ the “father ate ravenously and without caution, immoderately.”⁸ “He got choked on a bone each time he had fish, bought more than he could eat. [...] He had a Dutch love of abundance: again and again he described the great stored barns, the groaning plenty of the Pennsylvanians.”⁹

On the whole, the imagery of food in Wolfe operates along three lines: 1) it signals the protagonist’s craving for the exotic, 2) it underscores the sensuality of the South, 3) it indicates social background. Elaborating on Eugene Gant’s childhood literary fascinations, Wolfe writes: “He read a dozen of Scott, and liked best of all Quentin Durward, because the descriptions of food were as bountiful and appetising as any he had ever read.”¹⁰ Exoticism, which impels his father to travel to Louisiana and allow himself to become overwhelmed with its tropical profusion,¹¹ makes itself felt to young Eugene through locally available foreign cuisine.

She sent him to the little Jewish grocery down the street for the sour relishes she liked so well: tabled in mid-morning they ate sour pickles, heavy slabs of ripe tomatoes, coated with thick mayonnaise, amber percolated coffee, fig-newtons and lady fingers, hot pungent fudge pebbled with walnuts and coated fragrantly with butter, sandwiches of tender bacon and cucumber, iced belchy drinks¹².

Immediately preceding this fragment is a description of the lush sensuality of the South, both drawing on closely related vocabulary.

Lastly, food figures as index of breeding. A minor character in the novel, who has left his home town and gone up in the world, on return is involved in the following scene in a sandwich bar:

“A couple of slices of buttered toast, if you please, not too brown,” said Spaugh delicately to the counterman.

“A mess of hog chitlings and sorghum, you mean, you bastard. You were brought up on salt pork and cornbread.”¹³

Class distinction implied in the conversation is related to a resentment occasioned by a local betraying his region for career’s sake. Diet becomes

⁶ Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

a measure of sectional identity and the scene on which to air social views. Thus the exchange quoted points to the figuration of food in the South while articulating differences between the South and other regions.

In the 1976 novel *The Great Santini* Pat Conroy employs food in a broad sentimental project of rehashing the Southern outdoors myth, with a benevolent black in the background, and, generally, overtones of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Toomer, the black boy, owns a dozen beehives, and a pack of twenty-six dogs. He teaches Ben, the white protagonist, to eat raw oysters, introducing him into the lore of the land. They eat sea turtle eggs, talk about removing honey from the hives, plan to gig flounder, until Ben comes to believe that

[T]he secret of this marsh haunted land resided in the quivering flesh of oysters, the rich-flavoured meat of crabs, the limp of the flower boy, the eggs of the great turtles that navigated toward their birthing sands through waters bright with the moon.¹⁴

The wealth of South Carolina nature in this novel offers ample nourishment, translating itself into friendship and, subsequently, into qualified sectional patriotism.

A similar paradigm operates in Conroy's *Beach Music*. However, this time the bounty of nature enables the protagonist to turn food into a career by becoming a writer for a gourmet magazine. He admits that cooking, and teaching cooking to his daughter, is his brand of escapism. Instructing her to regard every form of life as edible, he tries to prepare her for every contingency. Besides, there are two uses of food in this novel that figure prominently in the lives of the girl's mother and grandfather.

In the former case, the profound identity problem of a girl growing up in a South Carolina immigrant Jewish family is aggravated by her parents serving ethnic food at her birthday party to her schoolfriends. Culinary failure indexes unsuccessful assimilation which terminates in suicide. By contrast, the grandfather's story assigns food a function in his surviving the ordeal of the concentration camp. Degraded, he daydreams of great composers playing their works with him. The concerts are enhanced by food.

Before we play, I go to the great restaurants of Europe and I order the finest meals cooked by the finest chefs. I eat escargots glistening with butter and flecks of garlic and parsley, order roast duck with crisp brown skin and pods of fat just beneath the wing bones, eat baguettes dipped in olive oil, and creme brulees with burnt crusts of brown sugar followed

¹⁴ Pat Conroy, *The Great Santini* (London: Black Swan, 1996), p. 123.

by layers of sweet cream that make the mouth pucker with pleasure [...] Because I live in my head I survive by concentrating on the great silos of beauty I have stored up.¹⁵

The beauty on which he draws involves chiefly music but, behind it, the whole refined culture he inherited as a scion of a prominent Warsaw family.

The last text in this survey, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, offers a profoundly original vision of the South, food receiving a similarly unique role. The novel's portrayal of North Carolina in the early 1860's is Darwinian, and it often links food with scenes of biological struggle and death. The following excerpt presents the deserter protagonist attacked by insects.

The sun climbed the sky and turned hot, and all the insect world seemed to find Inman's bodily fluids fascinating. Striped mosquitoes hummed around his ears and bit his back through his shirt. Ticks dropped from trailside brush and attached themselves to him at hairline and pant waist and grew fat. Gnats sought out the water in his eyes. A horsefly followed him for a while, troubling his neck. It was a big black glob of buzzing matter the size of the end joint to his thumb, and he longed to kill it but could not, no matter how he jerked and beat at himself as it landed to bite out gouts of flesh and blood.¹⁶

Further on, we read of a meat-eating bog-plant. Terrified by the forest, and the war, Inman reflects: "You could hold the tip of a finger to what stood for its mouth and it would snap at you. These flatwoods seemed only a step away from learning the trick on a grander scale."¹⁷ Still later, he shoots a marauding Federal soldier and sees a hen peck at the brain through the cracked skull. The next day he prepares himself a breakfast from the brains of the hog, previously stolen by the killed soldier, and an egg from the hen that had been feeding on the raider.¹⁸

Inman professes the belief in not killing an animal unless he means to eat its flesh. Yet when he comes across a motherless bear cub, he shoots it because it would soon fall prey to stronger predators.

He ate sitting at cliff top. He had not eaten bear of such youth before, and though the meat was less black and greasy than that of older bear, it still tasted nevertheless like sin. He tried to name which of the deadly seven might apply, and, when he failed he decided to append an eighth, regret.¹⁹

¹⁵ Pat Conroy, *Beach Music* (London: Black Swan, 1997), p. 648.

¹⁶ Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1998), p. 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

The last important perspective on food in this novel relates to tea. Although it is the mid-nineteenth century, one character in the book has only recently first tasted it.

[S]he admired it so much that she gave Stobrod a handful of it tied in a square of cloth as he went on a coon hunt. The next time she saw him weeks later she had asked how he liked it. Stobrod had said it was no better than fair and that he didn't find it preferable to any other kind of greens. Ruby came to find out that he had cooked it up with a strip of fatback and eaten it like cresses.²⁰

The fragment can be analyzed as a wry comment on the culture of the country in which so much strife had taken place over tea trade. It can also indicate how far eating culture in the South and North differed.

For a conclusion of this analysis of Frazier's novel, and of the present survey, I have selected the catfish episode. As two starving men spot a huge catfish heading upstream, they block its passage, one of them jumps in the water and wrestles with the fish, flings it onto the shore where the other shoots it. They eat a portion of the meat and leave the remainder to crows that accompany them throughout their journey. The passage underlines not only pervasive Darwinism; it also shows that, like land and race, food in the South is mythic. Frazier transcends the two major traditions in the representation of nourishment in Southern literature. Yet in his novel, too, food looms larger than life.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 301.