

The Pleasure of Food, and the Spiritual: *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Babette's Feast*

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Summary

This article explores the significance of the enjoyment of food in relation to spirituality, as (re)presented in two texts – Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007) and the cinematic version of Karen Blixen's novel *Babette's Feast* (1987). It is argued that the pleasure derived from food occupies a crucial position in both texts, firstly in its own "hedonistic" right, but secondly also as far as it functions allegorically (*Babette's Feast*), or temporally (*Eat, Pray, Love*) regarding the (re)presentation of spiritually significant experience. That is, the enjoyment of food is (re)presented as a means of repeating (and perhaps anticipating) spiritually meaningful culinary experience (*Babette's Feast*). In *Eat, Pray, Love*, the spiritual awakening of the protagonist, in the "dark night of her soul", is succeeded by a kind of "carnival", followed by something resembling the Lent of the Christian tradition. Hence, her journey through space and time takes her from sensuous (though celibate) pleasure in food (Eat) to spiritual sacrifice (Pray) and eventually romantic love (Love). The narrative logic of this sequence, it is argued, consists in sensuous, culinary enjoyment preparing her for the meaning of sacrifice through spiritual commitment. These two phases of her journey, or existential quest, become intertwined (their complex interlacement being constituted by a kind of interpenetration of pleasure and sacrifice through commitment).

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op die betekenis van die genot van kos in verhouding tot spiritualiteit, soos dit verteenwoordig word in twee tekste – Elizabeth Gilbert se *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007) en die rolprentweergawe van Karen Blixen se roman *Babette's Feast* (1987). Daar word aangevoer dat die genot wat uit kos verkry word 'n deurslaggewende posisie in beide tekste verteenwoordig: Eerstens in sy eie "hedonistiese" reg, maar tweedens ook in soverre dit funksioneer as allegories (*Babette's Feast*), of tydelik (*Eat, Pray, Love*), en verteenwoordig dit 'n spiritueel beduidende ervaring. Dit wil sê, die genot wat kos bied, word verteenwoordig as 'n middel tot herhaling (en ook dalk afwagting) van 'n spiritueel betekenisvolle kulinêre ervaring (*Babette's Feast*). In *Eat, Pray, Love*, word die spirituele ontwaking van die protagonis, in die "donker nag van haar siel" ("dark night of her soul"), gevolg deur 'n tipe "karnaval", wat op sy beurt, gevolg word deur iets wat die Christelike "vas" kan voorstel. Vandaar haar reis deur ruimte en tyd, wat haar neem van sensuele (dog

selibate) genot in kos (Eat), tot spirituele opoffering (Pray) en uiteindelik tot romantiese liefde (Love). Daar word aangevoer dat die narratiewe logika van hierdie volgorde bestaan uit sensuele, kulinêre genot wat haar voorberei vir die betekenis van opoffering deur spirituele verbintenis. Hierdie twee fases van haar reis, of eksistensiële soektog, word verweef (hul komplekse samevlegting word gevorm deur 'n deurdringing van genot en opoffering deur verbintenis).

Eat, Pray, Love: Contra Plato, Temporally

In Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007), an autobiographical novel, the narrator-protagonist, who must be carefully distinguished from the author, Elizabeth Gilbert – who is more appropriately to be thought of as a historically or temporally changing “author-function”, not simply coinciding with the historically existing individual bearing the author's name (Foucault 1972: 221-222) – takes her readers on a literary journey from suffering to redemption. The suffering involves her realisation, six years into her marriage, that she does not want to be married, and the subsequent, gradual dissolution of her marriage, finally ending in a protracted, increasingly (from her husband's side) acrimonious and for her financially crippling divorce (Gilbert 2007: 10-36).¹ But help comes unexpectedly – being a published author, she is approached by her publisher with a commission to write an account of her international travelling experiences in the course of a year, with ample sponsorship for the extended trip.

It is unnecessary, here, to go into all the details of Liz – as she is known – going through the travails of a painful divorce, or everything that led up to being told by a “medicine man” in Indonesia that she would lose all her money, only to get it all back again (*EPL* 28). Nor is it essential to relate all the details of her passionate, but “impossible” love affair, in the course of getting divorced and afterwards, with a young man called David, with whom she finally cuts ties when she is already in Rome, Italy, on the first of her three-legged world trip. To be sure, all these details comprise the motivating “existential” context within which Liz decides to embark for Italy, first, for a four-month visit, followed by a similar time in India, and concluding her year's working holiday (or more accurately, perhaps, convalescence) with four months in Indonesia.

The main focus of this article will be on her sojourn in Italy, given the importance of food in Italian culture, and Liz's increasing discovery of the joys that different Italian cuisine affords her. However, the links between her discovery of the pleasures provided by food, on the one hand, and her “spiritual” pursuit of selfless sacrifice, in India, and receptivity to romantic love, in Indonesia, will also be touched on, in their relation to pleasure as a

1. Subsequent references to *Eat, Pray, Love* (Gilbert 2007) will be indicated by *EPL* followed by the page number(s).

kind of preparation for the latter two “stages” of her journey, which may be seen as one of self-discovery.

Liz’s visit to Rome is initially prompted by her desire to learn Italian (pp. 24, 44-48), which she has, for some time, regarded as a beautiful language, whose beauty, moreover, justifies its study without recourse to anything pragmatic or useful. One may detect here the implied connection between beauty and pleasure, reminiscent of Plato’s account, in the *Symposium* (1965), of the connection between pleasure and beauty in the context of the pursuit of love. According to Plato (1965: 92-95), the lover’s quest for the (Form of the) Beautiful, which surpasses all merely beautiful “things”, culminates in the “direct” apprehension of Beauty. But before this can happen, the lover first has to discover the Beautiful contemplatively in an “indirect” manner at “lower” worldly levels: initially in the physical beauty of one beloved person, followed by its apprehension in the beautiful bodies of many beloveds. Such a person becomes a lover of all physical beauty. Subsequent to this, the stage is reached when it dawns on the lover that beauty of soul exceeds physical beauty in value and desirability.

This is followed by the discovery of the superior beauty of moral actions and of institutions, and eventually of the beauty belonging to sciences or disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy. In this way the lover, who (according to Diotima, as related by Socrates via Apollodorus (Plato 1965: 79-95)) gradually realises that beauty is common to all these different things, is led to the unique discipline that has (absolute) beauty as such as its object, instead of a mere derivation of it, in an admixture with other attributes. At the culminating stage of the dedicated lover’s “ascent”, such a person eventually becomes privy to a revelation of “absolute”, “eternal”, Beauty “itself” (1965: 93-94). One might say that this discovery is only possible in the event of “sacrificing” the desire (and accompanying pleasure) of worldly things, from individuals to the sciences – a pattern that is detectable, in modified form, in Gilbert’s account of the progression from pleasure to spiritual sacrifice and dedication, and eventually to love.

Whereas, in the *Symposium*, pleasure and beauty are implicitly connected, through the desirable beauty of a beautiful body, and subsequently that of all beautiful bodies (before passing on to more elevated things, like beauty of soul, etc.), Gilbert’s account of pleasure is largely restricted to the enjoyment of food – in the country of a beautiful language, thus bringing beauty into the equation, too, as Plato does – which does not mean that she is oblivious of the pleasure afforded by “beautiful bodies”, most obviously through sex. She does contemplate the beauty of Italian men, and the pleasures of sex (*EPL* 67-71), in a city that is described by a friend as having SEX as “its word” (*EPL* 108), that is, as its *raison d’être*.

Significantly, however, while Plato valorises beauty more, proportionally to its level of elevation above the mundane realm of material bodies – the Form of Beauty, elevated above all particular, embodied things in an impossible realm, outside space and time, being the most valorised – Gilbert

consciously positions her choice against that of Plato. She pointedly mentions him by name:

“[N]o town can live peacefully, whatever its laws,” Plato wrote, “when its citizens ... do nothing but feast and drink and tire themselves out in the cares of love.”

But is it such a bad thing to live like this for just a little while? Just for a few months of one’s life, is it so awful to travel through time with no greater ambition than to find the next lovely meal? Or to learn how to speak a language for no higher purpose than that it pleases your ear to hear it? Or to nap in a garden, in a patch of sunlight, in the middle of the day, right next to your favorite fountain? And then do it again the next day?

(EPL 119)

It is strikingly noticeable that the enjoyable things she mentions are all explicitly situated within mundane time and space, which is diametrically opposed to the supra-mundane realm where Plato situates the highest goal worth striving for. The woman who instructs Socrates in the ways of love and beauty, Diotima (i.e. Plato) states, after her description of the different, successive levels traversed by the lover in his or her upward journey:

The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvellous indeed, the final goal, Socrates, of all his previous efforts. This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change.

(Plato 1965: 93-94)

Here, it is noticeable how earthly time and space, or anything corporeal, sensible or sensuous, is removed from Plato’s conception of beauty, in contrast with the domain of sensible and sensuous enjoyment that Gilbert valorises. Even the fact that she advocates such enjoyment as something temporary, and not “forever”, has something about it that emphasises the temporal and earthly in contrast with the illusory attempt to escape from it into eternity: “Of course, one can’t live like this forever. Real life and wars and traumas and mortality will interfere eventually” (EPL 119).

Plato's valorisation of (the supposed experience of) supreme, supra-mundane beauty is phrased, ironically, in terms of the sense of sight – something that is easy to deconstruct: the very thing he argues against – sight as instance of sensory perception – is deemed necessary for promoting the interests of intelligibility (grasping the eternal and “perfect” nature of the supra-sensible form of beauty (Olivier 2009)). Gilbert has no such lofty ambitions. In Nietzschean fashion (given her valorisation of the earthly as opposed to the other-worldly (Nietzsche 1984)), she is more than happy with what the mundane has to offer, and significantly, her preferred senses do not put sight first (she does recognise the beauty of Italian men, however, as pointed out earlier). They are gustatory (taste) and auditory (hearing), although sometimes her description of different dishes does include their visual appearance as a kind of counterpart to their taste. Consider the following representative excerpts, for instance:

So Sofie and I have come to Pizzeria da Michele [in Naples], and these pies we have just ordered ... are making us lose our minds. I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with this pizza, almost an affair They have only two varieties of pizza here – regular and extra cheese. None of this new age California olives-and-sun-dried-tomato wannabe pizza twaddle. The dough, it takes me half my meal to figure out, tastes more like Indian nan than like any pizza dough I ever tried. It's soft and chewy and yielding, but incredibly thin. How was I to have known there could be a crust in this world that was thin and doughy? Holy of holies! Thin, doughy, strong, gummy, yummy, chewy, salty pizza paradise. On top, there is a sweet tomato sauce that foams up all bubbly and creamy when it melts the fresh buffalo mozzarella, and the one sprig of basil in the middle of the whole deal somehow infuses the entire pizza with herbal radiance

(EPL 83-84)

Strikingly, Gilbert's diction here hints at an allegorical thread between this “heavenly” food and what is spiritually valorised, namely a hallowed space, or the thought of paradise as the place where nothing is lacking, and everything exists in abundance. I shall explore the connection with allegory later. Here's another example:

The food is definitely better here [in Bologna] than in Rome, or maybe they just use more butter. Even the gelato in Bologna is better (and I feel somewhat disloyal saying that, but it's true). The mushrooms here are like big thick sexy tongues, and the prosciutto drapes over pizzas like a fine lace veil draping over a fancy lady's hat. And of course there is the Bolognese sauce, which laughs disdainfully at any other idea of a ragù.

(EPL 103)

This time the analogy is sexual, as a kind of reminder, one presumes, that the pleasure afforded by sex – which Liz has put on hold in Italy (EPL 67-

71) – is still out there, somewhere, to be appropriated at the right time. But all the many and varied allusions to, and descriptions of tantalising Italian food aside, Chapter 36 – the last one on Italy, before those on India – certainly marks the high point in Gilbert’s account of Liz’s celebration, and enjoyment of food. Here she visits Sicily, and despite the comparative urban ugliness and conspicuous signs of poverty there, she discovers that it harbours the zenith of Italian culinary delights:

I tell her that I don’t need to see the menu but could she just bring me the best food possible because this is my first night in Sicily. She rubs her hands together in pleasure and yells something in Sicilian dialect to her even-more-elderly mother in the kitchen, and within the space of twenty minutes I am busily eating the hands-down most amazing meal I’ve eaten yet in all of Italy. It’s pasta, but a shape of pasta I’ve never before seen – big, fresh, sheets of pasta folded ravioli-like into the shape ... of the pope’s hat, stuffed with a hot, aromatic puree of crustaceans and octopus and squid, served tossed like a hot salad with fresh cockles and strips of julienned vegetables, all swimming in an olivey, oceany broth. Followed by the rabbit, stewed in thyme.

(EPL 118)

But nowhere does Gilbert connect, and contrast, Liz’s devotion to the enjoyment afforded by food – which she treats as a species of (the pleasure concerning) beauty, so conspicuously pursued in many ways by Italians – as persuasively with Plato’s displacement of the enjoyment of beauty to an impossible, supra-sensible domain as here, where she enlists Barzini’s masterful 1964 apologia, *The Italians*, to make her point:

Because the world is so corrupted, misspoken, unstable, exaggerated and unfair, one should trust only what one can experience with one’s own senses, and this makes the senses stronger in Italy than anywhere in Europe. This is why, Barzini says, Italians will tolerate hideously incompetent generals, presidents, tyrants, professors, bureaucrats, journalists and captains of industry, but will never tolerate incompetent “opera singers, conductors, ballerinas, courtesans, actors, film directors, cooks, tailors ...”. In a world of disorder and disaster and fraud, sometimes only beauty can be trusted. Only artistic excellence is incorruptible. Pleasure cannot be bargained down. And sometimes the meal is the only currency that is real.

(EPL 120)

Kaja Silverman (2000), in her philosophical recuperation of the visible world of the senses, aimed precisely against Plato’s centuries-old, and still influential, devaluation of this world in favour of the supra-mundane world of thought, provides a philosophical vindication of Liz’s quest in *Eat, Pray, Love*, by means of a fitting evocation of the phenomenal beauties afforded by the senses, which she conceives of as giving “signification” (and one may add: significance) to the beauty of the sensible, “phenomenal” world:

It is not by responding to the formal parameters of another being at the level of our own objectivity that we communicate with it; were we ever to succeed in synchronizing ourselves in this way with another creature or thing, the result would be a monologue, not a dialogue. We communicate with the world only when we enable its forms to signify – only when we provide the meaning they lack. I say “lack” because phenomenal forms are not simply meaningless signs; they are also signs in search of significance. But it is in fact through an abundance rather than a deficit that phenomenal forms address us. They are “pregnant” with a beauty to which only a very special kind of human signification can give birth. And only by becoming “ourselves” can we provide that signification.

(Silverman 2000: 143)

Liz’s attempt to “become herself” starts with her abandonment to the culinary enjoyment of food in Italy, but makes way, eventually, for what might appear to be a complete turnabout, namely a devotional journey to, and sojourn in, an Indian Ashram belonging to a Guru whom she previously “discovered” through her lover, David, in New York. Keeping in mind, however, what was pointed out earlier about the way in which Carnival (as the unrestrained indulgence in the sensuous pleasure of especially food and drink) precedes, and also justifies, Lent (as the devotional sacrifice of some of the sources of worldly pleasure) in the traditional Christian calendar, this is no mere, abrupt “turnabout”. It marks a stage in Liz’s quest of self-discovery that is essentially linked to her Italian splurge (which saw her gain quite a few kilograms in weight). As I shall point out later, it also represents a complex understanding, on Liz’s part, of “doing together” practices that have usually been kept apart as binary opposites – a complexity which is further enhanced by the third stage of her journey, in Indonesia, where she discovers that she is receptive, once more, to romantic love (*EPL* 225-346).

The stark contrast between Liz’s Italian experience, and what she would find at the Ashram in India, is captured well in the following excerpt:

They want you to come here strong because Ashram life is rigorous. Not just physically, with days that begin at 3:00 AM and end at 9:00 PM, but also psychologically. You’re going to be spending hours and hours a day in silent meditation and contemplation, with little distraction or relief from the apparatus of your own mind. You will be living in close quarters with strangers, in rural India. There are bugs and snakes and rodents. The weather can be extreme – sometimes torrents of rain for weeks on end, sometimes 100 degrees in the shade before breakfast. Things can get deeply real around here, very fast.

My guru always says that only one thing will happen when you come to the Ashram – that you will discover who you really are.

(*EPL* 135)

And this is what happens – Liz discovers who she really is, but not before she loses herself, that is, her “self”. Without her own, personal Carnival in

Italy to strengthen her in mind and body, it is doubtful whether her spiritual quest in India would, or could, have yielded any fruit. The culmination of her spiritual quest came unexpectedly one day when she had an unannounced mystical experience of “union” with the divine, which was somehow devoid of ego or self, and of desire in the sense of “ego-wants”, and somehow propelled her into a feeling of being in a void permeated with peace and wisdom and love, a non-place which, ironically, started fading back through layers of illusion to ordinary life as soon as she consciously wanted to stay “there” forever (*EPL* 208-211).

This spiritual “experience” – if one may call it that – is a far cry from the indulgence in gastronomic delights that Liz sought, and found, in Italy, and in a strange manner it is complexly interwoven with it. Nor is it the same thing as Plato’s invocation of an encounter with absolute, eternal, beauty – as one is inclined to think at first, with a sense of disappointment, that Gilbert has been unable to embrace the mundane “completely”. I shall return to this.

Babette’s Feast: Contra Augustine, Allegorically

In *Babette’s Feast* a comparable connection is established between the sensuous pleasure afforded by food and drink, on the one hand, and the anticipation of spiritual fulfilment and reconciliation, on the other, where the first functions as a (quasi-)allegorical representation of the latter. One might wonder how the enjoyment of food in the form of a sumptuous meal, could adumbrate spiritual fulfilment (*jouissance*), especially in the context of a community of religious devotion, predicated on the belief that sensuous pleasure of all varieties is anathema to the object of their devotion. The solution to this conundrum is charmingly presented in Gabriel Axel’s film, *Babette’s Feast* (1987), based on the story by Isak Dinesen, alias Karen Blixen. Here I shall concentrate on the film version to be able to highlight the relevance of the visual aspect of the eponymous “feast”, understood precisely as a foreshadowing of putative spiritual pleasures, as well as a facilitation, via mutual enjoyment, of fraternal love.

Babette’s Feast tells the story of Babette Hersant (Stéphane Audran), a woman who seeks refuge from the post- and counter-revolutionary persecution in France of 1871, who is recommended as housekeeper to two ageing, piously devout sisters, Philippa (Bodil Kjer) and Martine (Birgitte Federspiel) by the former suitor of Philippa, the singer Achille Papin. The two spinster sisters live on the chilly and desolate west coast of Jutland, shepherding the remaining members of a narrow and disciplined Christian sect founded by their deceased father, a pastor.

Although courted in their youth – Philippa by among others the baritone Papin, and Martine, apart from prospective husbands in the local com-

munity, by a young, but dissolute Swedish cavalry officer, Lorens – neither ever married, partly because of the suitors faltering, and partly because of their father's discouragement. The two sisters take Babette in as cook and housekeeper, and for fourteen years her graceful, if modest, presence works its magic on the sisters and their flock, softening the edges of their austere way of life somewhat.

Back in Paris a friend of Babette has renewed a lottery ticket for her through the years, and one day she receives the news that she has won 10 000 francs, an amount that would enable her to return to her native country. Surprisingly, she decides instead to spend her entire winnings on the ingredients for a sumptuous meal (to be prepared by herself) for the little community on the occasion of the deceased pastor's centenary birthday celebration, in gratitude for providing her with a safe haven when she needed it.

Babette returns to France for a few days to select and arrange for the dispatch of the food, drink and condiments required for the intended meal, and the sight of this cornucopia, when it arrives, is enough to make any observer's mouth water. The members of the near-ascetic congregation, having never witnessed anything as exotic before, become suspicious, however, that what is about to be inflicted on them is gratuitous and sinful sensuous enjoyment, if not (God forbid) the concoctions of witchcraft. The narrative culminates in the meal – the eponymous feast, properly so called – but not before the villagers, guided by the presiding sisters, decide to accept Babette's meal, without, however, taking any delight or pleasure in it, nor even as much as commenting on the food and drink.

The extended dinner, which invites an allegorical reading, constitutes the space of a significant transformation on the part of the members of the conservative little community, their resistance to it notwithstanding. That such a metamorphosis is imminent, is already adumbrated by Babette's careful and judicious preparations, which, almost as much as the subsequent meal itself, are a sensuous delight to imagine or behold – in the film, mainly in visual, chromatic terms, but because of the nature of food and of cooking, approximating synaesthetic proportions. Willy-nilly, with the unexpected culinary guidance of none other than Martine's erstwhile suitor, Lorens, who is by now a famous general and member of the royal court (and visiting his aunt, a member of the congregation), the villagers learn of the qualities and the names of the various dishes and wines, and despite their own intentions to the contrary, they gradually fall under the spell of the epicurean delights prepared for them.

Here the variety of colours, highlighted by the cinematography, not only contrasts conspicuously with the predominantly drab grey, white, brown and black of the preceding footage, but reverberates with intimations of life and vigour. Their initial resistance melting away before the bewitchment of their senses by the subtle aromas and gustatory pleasures they are indulging, their customary disposition towards one another is also transmuted – old animos-

sities dissolve and former affections are rekindled among them. In short: the religiously strict congregation learns that grace, so fervently desired in the hereafter, is a mundane state of affairs which draws on memories of similar events in the past, but also prefigures and temporally informs any other-worldly expectations they may entertain.

The feast functions, in fact, as an allegory of the heavenly pleasures they earnestly pray for. Before paying attention to the way this is accomplished, however, a brief excursion is necessary, to be able to place the villagers' self-deprivation (of earthly, sensuous enjoyment) in historical and conceptual perspective.

For this purpose, one need not look any further than the thought of the early medieval, Platonistic Christian philosopher, Augustine of Hippo. It is not difficult to see a consonance between the Jutlanders' abstemiousness and those advocated by Augustine, specifically in his *Confessions* of 401 CE. Consider the attitude towards, and evaluation of, the enjoyment of food and drink in the following passages:

This hast Thou taught me, that I should set myself to take food as physic. But while I am passing from the discomfort of emptiness to the content of replenishing, in the very passage the snare of concupiscence besets me. For that passing, is pleasure, nor is there any other way to pass thither, whither we needs must pass. And health being the cause of eating and drinking, there joineth itself as an attendant a dangerous pleasure, which mostly endeavours to go before it, so that I may for her sake do what I say I do, or wish to do, for health's sake. Nor have each the same measure; for what is enough for health, is too little for pleasure. And oft it is uncertain, whether it be the necessary care of the body which is yet asking for sustenance, or whether a voluptuous deceivableness of greediness is proffering its services Placed then amid these temptations, I strive daily against concupiscence in eating and drinking. For it is not of such nature that I can settle on cutting it off once for all, and never touching it afterward, as I could of concubinage. The bridle of the throat then is to be held attempered between slackness and stiffness.

(Augustine 1957: 148-149)

The strict religious discipline which regulates the Jutlanders' lives evidently owes Augustine (and his like-minded successors) a debt. The same self-deprecating suspicion that anything pleasurable which goes beyond the mere requirements of life-sustaining nourishment is clearly evident in Augustine's allusion to the "dangerous pleasure" of eating and drinking, and his derogating reference to "concupiscence in eating and drinking". These are temptations that detract from the purifying discipline of spiritual devotion, and distract the soul in the face of the rewards that beckon in heaven beyond the mundane, shot through with tantalising but demonic diversions. This being the case, how could a sumptuous, exotic culinary feast possibly function as allegorical prefiguration of the presumably

spiritual realm which is the object of the Jutlanders' desire? The answer to this question depends crucially on the nature of allegory.

Gadamer (1982: 65) reminds one that, until the late 18th century, allegory and symbol figured as synonyms – not surprisingly, given that the meaning of both depends on something outside of themselves. That is, in both cases the supra-sensible is made accessible through substitution. While allegory was initially used as rhetorical figure in oratory and conversation, symbol was not restricted to these spheres. The two concepts were nevertheless both used in a religious context (Gadamer 1982: 66), but interestingly the metaphysical aspect, so characteristic of symbol, appears to have been absent from allegory. This prepared the way for what Gadamer sees as the modern tendency, to valorise the symbol at the expense of allegory. The symbol, with its metaphysical connection of visual phenomenon and invisible meaning, increasingly attained the status of mysterious sign, where opposites coincide – a veritable *coincidentia oppositorum* in which the metaphysically elevated converged with the mundane. Symbols were therefore not arbitrary, as allegory was, but united imperceptible reality with perceivable phenomena (Gadamer 1982: 66-67). In Gadamer's words:

The symbol is the coincidence of the sensible and the non-sensible, allegory the meaningful relation of the sensible to the non-sensible The symbol, as what can be interpreted inexhaustibly, because it is indefinite, is opposed to allegory, understood as standing in a more exact relation to meaning and exhausted by it, as art is opposed to non-art.

(Gadamer 1982: 67)

These considerations already entail an abundance of material for interpreting *Babette's Feast* as a narrative that employs allegory to suggest a fairly "precise" correspondence between the spiritually nourishing pleasures of the supra-sensible and the sensuous enjoyments of the sensible domain of culinary feasting. It is in the work of Paul de Man, however, that indications may be found to the effect that this narrative lends itself to allegorical interpretation. Essentially, it concerns the temporal character of allegory, as opposed to the spatial status of the symbol. (As will be seen, this opens the way for the interpretation of *Eat, Pray, Love*, as well, not directly in allegorical terms, but in a way opened up by allegory's inalienable temporal nature.) De Man (1985: 207) observes that, as far as the symbol is concerned, the image and that which is represented by it (the "substance") coincide, because they do not differ in terms of their "being"; they only differ regarding their "extension", in as far as the one is part, and the other whole, under the same set of categories – thus, the Christian cross is a self-transcending symbol that points to something which surpasses time, and which manifests itself in the cross only contingently. Because such coinciding suggests simultaneity, de Man continues, it has to be a spatial

relationship, in contrast with allegory, where “time is the originary constitutive category” (p. 207).

The paradoxical simultaneity of identity and difference (of symbolic sign and what is signified) in the case of symbolic representation would therefore presumably make of symbol a figure ill-suited for representing events that inescapably occur in time, such as eating and drinking in a convivial atmosphere, for which allegory, on the other hand, would seem to be ideally suited. In fact, according to de Man (1985: 206-209), allegory always goes hand in hand with an authentically temporal destination (and destiny). “[I]t remains necessary”, he says, “if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term [that is, “repeating differently”]) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of the previous sign to be pure anteriority”.

Significantly, de Man (1985: 208) further intimates that, while symbol may be understood as a “defensive strategy” in thrall to the illusion, that time’s burden may be overcome through identification of the self with the supra-temporal, allegory allows no such “self-mystification”. On the contrary, allegorical representation is accompanied by the painful awareness that the self cannot coincide with the object of its representation, and therefore embraces its own temporality and finitude.

The pertinence of these reflections on Paul de Man’s part for the two texts under consideration here cannot be exaggerated. In both – more conspicuously so in *Babette’s Feast* than in *Eat, Pray, Love* – the modes of representation constitute the means of overcoming the sense of guilt inculcated by the other-worldly desire detectable on the part of Augustine in the above excerpt. In light of the manner in which food and drink are literarily and visually construed in the texts in question, they are no longer regarded as temptations, the enjoyment of which must of necessity lead to self-mortifying guilt and repentance.

If this Augustinian attitude is still perceptible in Babette’s Jutlander hostesses and their tiny flock prior to the commencement of the delectable dinner she has prepared for them – confronted by tables set with the finest linens, crystal goblets, and china, specially bought by Babette for the occasion (and visually highlighted by the cinematography), one could hardly blame them – the viewer witnesses its gradual amelioration, on their part, in the course of their eating and drinking. And no wonder: the menu, which is augmented with several rare wines, such as “Clos de Vougeot”, together with various spirits and champagnes, includes such gourmet dishes as “Potage à la Tortue” (turtle soup); “Blini Demidoff au Caviar” (buckwheat cakes with caviar and sour cream); “Caille en Sarcophage avec Sauce Perigourdine” (quail in puff pastry shell with foie gras and truffle sauce); “La Salad”, with Belgian endive and walnuts in a vinaigrette; and “Les

Fromages”, presenting Blue Cheese, grapes, figs, pineapple and papaya. The *pièce de résistance* dessert is “savarin au Rhum avec des Figues et Fruit Glacée” (rum sponge cake with figs and glacéed fruits).

As mentioned earlier, Lorens (Martine’s erstwhile suitor), who is well versed in the enjoyments of the world, provides running commentary on the commendable qualities of the various dishes and wines, in addition to which he observes that it is reminiscent of food and drink that he relished, years earlier, at a famous Paris restaurant called Café Anglais. According to him, the chef at this reputable eatery was justly renowned for her exceptional culinary talents. (The chef in question, of course, was none other than Babette, who shares her secret with the two sisters after the meal.) It is pertinent to the allegorical character of the meal, which functions as a catalyst for the temporal displacement of the sensuous enjoyment of the different items on the menu, that Lorens’s gastronomical eulogy culminates in a reflection, on his part, concerning the conciliatory consequences, at a spiritual level, of consuming such fine fare. And indeed, in the course of the meal, understood as representation in allegorical terms, the transformation witnessed in the demeanour of the members of the small community, while not coinciding with the spiritual pleasures it alludes to, readily lends itself to being interpreted as temporally recalling (and also prefiguring) enjoyment in a different register.

The allegorical sign, according to de Man, always refers to a sign that precedes it, and the most likely candidate here seems to be what is recounted in the New Testament story about Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding, where the guests reportedly remarked on the unusual practice of keeping the best wine for last, instead of serving it first. Then there is the “last supper” described in the Gospels, which similarly constitutes an anterior sign for allegorical interpretation. The guests around the table themselves refer to other meals preceding the one in question. In a nutshell: Babette’s feast repeats the wedding feast described in the Gospels, as well as Jesus’ last supper, as well as such meals alluded to by the villagers around the table. The elevating and conciliatory properties of earthly culinary delights correspond to those of a hallowed past (and by implication also of a devoutly anticipated hereafter, modelled, not on a timeless “spatial” relation, but precisely on events in the temporal realm). Needless to stress, this is diametrically opposed to the value that Augustine places on food and drink.

Complexifying *Eat, Pray, Love*

Returning to Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* through the lens of the temporal status of allegory (briefly touched upon earlier regarding the pizza “paradise” she discovers in Naples), what is most striking is the protagonist,

Liz's insistence that – contrary to Plato's expressed desire for the supra-temporal in the guise of absolute beauty as the only worthy object of love – what she wants is to *experience* both the pleasures of this world and those of self-sacrificing devotion to the divine. I emphasise the word “experience” deliberately, because there is never any hint on her part that she hopes to, or believes that she can, surpass the temporal domain of the mundane into some supra-temporal or eternal sphere. And this spatio-temporal world is the context within which allegory, together with concepts associated with its temporal commitments, functions to illuminate both the plight and the joys of time-bound humans. In Liz's words:

All these desires seemed to be at odds with one another. Especially the Italy/India conflict. What was more important? The part of me that wanted to eat veal in Venice? Or the part of me that wanted to be waking up long before dawn in the austerity of an Ashram to begin a long day of meditation and prayer? The great Sufi poet and philosopher Rumi once advised his students to write down the three things they most wanted in life. If any item on the list clashes with any other item, Rumi warned, you are destined for unhappiness. Better to live a life of single-pointed focus, he taught. But what about the benefits of living harmoniously amid extremes? What if you could somehow create an expansive enough life that you could synchronize seemingly incongruous opposites into a worldview that excludes nothing? My truth was exactly what I'd said to the medicine man in Bali – I wanted to experience both. I wanted worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence – the dual glories of a human life. I wanted what the Greeks called *kalos kai agathos*, the singular balance of the good and the beautiful.

(EPL 30)

Clearly, Liz has no illusions of actually transcending the constraints of the mundane – if she wants “divine transcendence”, she wants it in the here and now of a mortal life. And this is precisely where the suggestiveness of allegory for *Eat, Pray, Love* comes from. As a mode of representation that, unlike symbol, gains its validity from temporal signification, instead of “spatial” (quasi-)transcendence of the temporal, allegory – or, as is the case here, an affinity for allegorical signification – connects narrated events with the mundane, spatio-temporal domain of finitude and mortality. This allows a kind of enjoyment that is no less valuable than Plato's vaunted apprehension of absolute beauty in a mystical “vision” of supra-temporal being. To be sure, as remarked earlier, the narrative of *Eat, Pray, Love* is not, strictly speaking, allegorical – one would be hard put to find an appropriate sign that precedes and informs it in the allegorical sense. But the fact that allegory's sphere of validity is the domain of time and mortality, is a sure indication that, in Gilbert's novel, the quest, on Liz's part, for combining “opposites”, refuses transcendence in the Platonic (and Augustinian/Christian) sense of somehow attaining other-worldly bliss, precisely to be able to attain a certain kind of (paradoxical) transcendence within the

spatio-temporal realm. While, for Plato, the kalogathon signifies the formal, supra-temporal union of the beautiful and the good, what Liz desires is more complex, distinctively their axiologically equivalent, yet distinct, co-existence in a mortal's life, namely her own.

How should one understand the possibility of actualising this paradoxical togetherness? It appears to me that the means to do so are found in the work of Joan Copjec on Claude Lefort's argument concerning the notion of "immortality" in the modern era. Lefort connects a "sense of posterity" with immortality (Copjec 2002: 20-21). With the fading of the ancient and medieval belief in eternity (in the specific sense of timelessness), he argues, a new sense of "immortality" becomes possible, in so far as the intimidating prospect of replacing time with eternity no longer tempts human beings. Copjec puts it as follows:

The modern notion of immortality benefits from the collapse of our belief in an eternal realm. Where formerly every deed (and the active life, in general) was thought to fail insofar as it was unable to elevate itself out of time, into eternity, in modernity the deed was reconceived as affording one the possibility of transcending historical time within time. This is what is new: this idea that the act could raise itself out of impotence, or out of the immanence of its historical conditions, without raising itself out of time The valorization of the act helped to forge, Lefort argues, a new link between immortality and "a sense of posterity"

(Copjec 2002: 20)

It should be added that this connection of immortality with posterity in Lefort's argument is mediated through the concept of "singularity", in the sense that someone who may be said to attain such "immortality" in human society does so by clearing a "place" for her- or himself – "a place which cannot be taken, which is invulnerable, because it is the place of someone ... who, by accepting all that is most singular in his life, refuses to submit to the coordinates of space and time and who ... for us ... is not dead" (Lefort quoted in Copjec 2002: 23).

This argument in favour of a distinctly modern notion of "immortality" as singularity resonates well with Liz's quest in *Eat, Pray, Love*. As in the case of the modern human being who, through her or his singular deeds or actions, carves for themselves a unique, irreplaceable niche in history, in this way achieving "immortality" of the modern variety, Liz – far from aspiring to some kind of timelessness or eternity through spiritual devotion (if not pleasure) – wants (to use Copjec's words) to explore "the possibility of transcending historical time within time". And she wants to accomplish this by bringing "worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence" – which were traditionally thought to be mutually exclusive, as one may gather from Augustine (quoted above) – together, somehow.

Complicating the already paradoxical matter of "transcendence of time within time", Liz adds the twist of thinking, and doing, these two counter-

vailing things together. In so doing, I believe, she moves from what Lefort understands as the modern (transcending time within time), to a recognisably poststructuralist position, which is characterised by a dual logic of both/and – as, for instance, in Foucault's (1972) brilliant demonstration of discourse being simultaneously subject to the universal (structures that repeat themselves through history) and the particular (or contingent manifestations of these structures in historically specific ways). In short, Liz wants to indulge in the joys of the culinary (Italy) without thereby denying herself the spiritual gratification of devotion to, and ultimately experiencing divinity (India) – something that requires selfless sacrifice and self-denial.

Recall that I dwelt briefly, earlier, on Liz's mystical experience in the Indian Ashram (*EPL* 208-211), with the promise to return to its significance. This is to be found in something that is captured well by what Copjec (above), referring to the "modern" notion of immortality, calls "the possibility of transcending historical time within time". Consider the following description, of what was really "indescribable", by Gilbert:

It wasn't hallucinogenic, what I was feeling. It was the most basic of events. It was heaven, yes. It was the deepest love I'd ever experienced, beyond anything I could have previously imagined, but it wasn't euphoric. It wasn't exciting. There wasn't enough ego or passion left in me to create euphoria and excitement. It was just obvious. Like when you've been looking at an optical illusion for a long time, straining your eyes to decode the trick, and suddenly your cognizance shifts and there – now you can clearly see it! – the two vases are actually two faces. And once you've seen through the optical illusion, you can never not see it again ... I wondered, "Why have I been chasing happiness my whole life when bliss was here the entire time?"

(*EPL* 209-210)

Liz has not entered, like Plato's lover of beauty, the realm of eternity or timelessness, and left time behind completely. Instead, what has happened to her has happened from within time, and is experienced as something that has somehow always been right there, beside her, to which she might have learned to attune herself as to a figure hidden in an optical illusion, up to a certain point, until one cracks the code of its apprehension. The final words of the chapter confirm this (*EPL* 211): "You may return here once you have fully come to understand that you are always here". Here we have a both/and figure of discourse, which is very different from the dichotomous conception of the earthly as opposed to the absolute, or divine, realm that governed Platonic and (Augustinian) Christian medieval thought.

I want to conclude this article with an even more accurate verbal evocation of the position in which Gilbert's Liz, and everyone like her, who wants both "worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence" to find themselves – individuals who relish good food and wine, but also feel the "spiritual" tug towards the incomprehensible "other" (Horkheimer's "ganz Andere"), and

find it difficult to accept the injunction, to choose between them. For such people, Gilbert has this to tell: one day at the Ashram Liz, who could not, while in Italy, figure out what her distinctive “word” was – when a friend told her that Rome’s word was “SEX” – was reading a book about yoga, and discovered there a description of “ancient spiritual seekers”:

A Sanskrit word appeared in the paragraph: ANTEVASIN. It means “one who lives at the border”. In ancient times this was a literal description. It indicated a person who had left the bustling center of worldly life to go live at the edge of the forest where the spiritual masters dwelled. The antevasin was not one of the villagers anymore But neither was he yet a transcendent The antevasin was an in-between. He was a border-dweller. He lived in sight of both worlds, but he looked toward the unknown. And he was a scholar.

When I read this description of an antevasin, I got so excited I gave a little bark of recognition. That’s my word, baby! In the modern age, of course, that image of an unexplored forest would have to be figurative, and the border would have to be figurative, too. But you can still live there In the figurative sense, this is a border that is always moving – as you advance forward in your studies and realizations, that mysterious forest of the unknown always stays a few feet ahead of you, so you have to travel light in order to keep following it. You have to stay mobile, movable, supple. Slippery, even I’m just a slippery antevasin – betwixt and between – a student on the ever-shifting border near the wonderful, scary forest of the new.

(EPL 214-215)

This evocative excerpt captures, succinctly, a way in which literary (and cinematic) art can deal with the ever-present dilemma, inherited from our metaphysical past, of being confronted with an axiological choice between the mundane (food, sex) and the supra-mundane (“eternal” fulfilment), whether the latter is understood in religious or metaphysical terms. It places Gilbert’s text under the sign of the poststructuralist rejection of axiologically loaded binary oppositions, in the place of which such oppositions are deconstructed (Derrida) – shown to have no foundation – or genealogically unmasked as being the result of contingent historical decisions that have been elevated to the status of necessity (Foucault). In this way, opposites are “thought together”, negotiated in a manner that allows each a co-existence, albeit an uneasy, “slippery” one. Similarly, Gilbert’s Liz rejects such either/or choices, and opts for both the pleasurable experience of food *and* the fulfilling experience of the divine, within the temporal domain.

Conclusion

Hence, to conclude, from the discussion above, it is evident that both Axel’s *Babette’s Feast* and Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* employ cinematic and literary strategies, respectively, where time, or the temporal register, is decisive for

coming to terms with the implications of the enjoyment of mundane pleasures, such as eating delectable, palatable food, for one's spiritual well-being and fulfilment, or more generally, for a meaningful existence. In the former, it is allegory that enables the viewer to grasp the possibility of significant culinary enjoyment on the part of an otherwise excessively spiritually oriented group of people. In the latter, although allegory alerts one to the crucial function of time in the protagonist's quest for the dual fulfilments of earthly enjoyment and the approximation of "spiritual" fulfilment in relation to the "divine", it is the paradox of "modern immortality" that furnishes the clue to understanding Liz's intertwinement of these two ostensibly irreconcilable experiences by way of what one might label an "intermediation" between the two domains.

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