'"Eat, Drink and be Merry!" Some Literary Representations of Food and Drink.'

Food and drink have always featured prominently in literature. This is not surprising in light of the fact that the first major narrative encountered by many people, the Bible, is replete with gastronomic references, ranging from the metaphor of God as the Bread of Life, to Christ turning water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, the killing of the fatted calf to celebrate the return of the prodigal son, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Last Supper, and so on. Food and drink are indissociable from the rituals of life. A wedding would not be complete without the wedding breakfast; a funeral in Ireland is traditionally preceded by a wake, at which generous amounts of food and drink are available, and concluded with a meal when the life of the deceased is celebrated. Because literature is a reflection of life, gastronomy logically features to a large extent in plays, poetry and fiction. This paper could not possibly cover all literary genres and so will concentrate on some 20th century fictional representations of food and drink with a view to giving readers a 'flavour' – if you will excuse a rather obvious *jeu de mots*! – of how they are presented in novels and short stories.

Marcel Proust (1871-1922) is one of the major figures of French literature and a writer who gave a whole new perspective to the '*petite madeleine*' - or small tea cake - that enabled memories of the past to be relived in the present. The taste and smell of the madeleine, described in such detail in the monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu*, transported Proust back in time and instilled in him what he described as 'this powerful joy' (Proust 2002, p.47). Involuntary memory, by its very nature, cannot be summoned at will. In order to operate effectively, it requires 'triggers' to set it in motion. One of these triggers for Proust was the 'madeleine'. Rather than trying to describe the process far less eloquently the novelist, I think it is wise to quote Proust's own account:

> And soon, mechanically, oppressed by the gloomy day and the prospect of a sad future, I carried to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had left soften a piece of madeleine. But at the very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with the cake-crumbs touched my palate, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening in me. A delicious pleasure had invaded me, isolated me, without my having any notion as to its cause. It had immediately made the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, acting in the same way that love acts, by filling me with a precious essence: or rather this essence was not in me, it was me (Proust, p.47).

Hard to imagine that afternoon tea could be such a significant event! Once the mixture of the tea and cake-crumbs comes in contact with his palate, Proust is relocated to another world, a world where the borders between past and present no longer hold sway, a world in which the artist has the impression of complete peace and where he can achieve heightened self-understanding. Further attempts to kick-start the process do not enjoy the same success. Another mouthful of the mixture of tea and cake leaves him unchanged, prompting the conclusion: 'It is clear that the truth I am seeking is not in the drink, but in me. The drink has awoken it in me, but does not know that truth, and cannot do more than repeat indefinitely, with less and less force, this same testimony which I do not know how to interpret and which I want at least to be able to ask of it again and find again, intact, available to me, soon, for a decisive clarification' (Proust, p.48).

Anxious to know what is responsible for such a transformation, he remembers that it was, in fact, the taste of the little piece of madeleine which evoked the experience he had one Sunday morning in the family holiday home of Combray. The sight of such madeleines had never had a similar impact, because he had not tasted them, and the image itself was not sufficient to ignite involuntary memory. 'But, when nothing subsists of an old past, after the death of people, after the destruction of things alone, frailer but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, smell and taste remain for a long time, like souls, remembering …'(Proust, p.49). Where the visual can at times be highly evocative, Proust notes that for him it was 'smell and taste' that provided the most intense reaction in relation to memory. When one considers that Proust was a sickly child, one who craved his mother's comforting presence to an unhealthy degree and who was acutely sensitive, the pleasure he derives from this reliving of the summers he and his family spent in Combray is somewhat curious. Unable to get to sleep until his mother came to give him a goodnight kiss, fretful at all times unless he knew that she was near him, might not such memories be better off forgotten rather than relived? Such an interpretation misses out on one vital point, however: that it is not the memories so much as the process that leads to his being filled with what he calls 'a precious essence' (47).

French culture is synonymous with gastronomic signifiers and so it is perhaps appropriate that one of the most famous passages in French and world literature should revolve around food. What makes Proust's achievement so singular is the manner in which he analyses what is quite a commonplace experience, the linking of food and drink to various situations and experiences from the past. For some, it might be a glass of wine, or a rasher, or a pint of

Guinness, or the smell emanating from a fish and chip shop, all of which are rich in possibilities for calling to mind previous events or feelings that have lain dormant in our consciousness. It is easy to relate to what the madeleine represents for the French writer, because we have all reacted similarly ourselves to comparable stimuli without having the same capacity to encapsulate the experience in such memorable terms.

I will now proceed to treat of some Irish literary representations of gastronomy. I will begin with James Joyce's (1882-1944) most famous short story, 'The Dead', which revolves around a party hosted by the aunts of the main protagonist, Gabriel Conroy. The Misses Morkan, as the ladies are known, put great store by presenting a good table to their guests: 'Though their life was modest, they believed in eating well; the best of everything: diamond-bone sirloins, three-shilling tea and the best of bottled stout.' (Joyce 1996, p.200). Social standing is a strong feature of this story, with characters acutely aware of how others perceive them in economic, intellectual and cultural terms. Gabriel Conroy is the main focal point of the narration and the story is seen mainly through his eyes. Self-absorbed and eager to assert his intellectual capacities at every opportunity, his aunts' dinner is an obvious opportunity for him to shine. He is given the task of carving the goose and giving the after-dinner speech, a confirmation of the esteem he enjoys with his aunts and the general group assembled on the night. His perplexed reaction to the attack on his lack of commitment to the Irish language by Miss Ivors, who accuses him of being a West Briton, is therefore quite understandable. Infuriated by her verbal assault, he ends up telling her: "O, to tell you the truth…, I'm sick of my own country" (Joyce, p.216).She clearly hit him in a vulnerable spot, as he is not given to outbursts like this. But in spite of his discomfort, he summons up the necessary enthusiasm to perform his carving duties. There is a very detailed description of the table, which is worth quoting, as it illustrates the level of attention Joyce pays to what the guests are given to eat:

> A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table, and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin, and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid

> rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks (Joyce, p.224).

The description goes on for a few more lines, but I think I have quoted a sufficient amount to underline the importance Joyce attached to the presentation and array of the victuals. It is noteworthy that the presentation and preparation are as important as the food itself. This is a display of refinement and taste: what else could account for the careful layout of the table, the somewhat exotic array of meat, fruit and vegetables. To a certain extent, we are what we eat, in that our choice of food reveals much about our economic status and tastes. The Morkan ladies are clearly middle-class, as are their guests, and they therefore strive to ensure that all who come to their house receive a positive impression of the meal they are served. Gabriel's discomfort after the altercation with Miss Ivors dissipates as he gets down to his first task: 'He felt quite at ease now, for he was an expert carver and liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table' (Joyce, p.225).

Perhaps his liking for the good things in life and his decision to write for an English newspaper show why Gabriel is sensitive to the accusation of being a West Briton. To a large extent, it is true. The Dublin middle classes at the beginning of the last century were in many ways closer to their English counterparts than they were to those living in the West of Ireland, for example. The adaption of the language and customs of the coloniser was a type of betrayal of their Irish heritage and identity. Hence, when he observes his wife Gretta being moved to tears on hearing the song *The Lass of Aughrim*, which reminds her of Michael Furey, to whom she had been attached as a young girl and who died at the age of seventeen, Gabriel is quite taken aback. Michael had been from Galway, on the very western seaboard which became synonymous with a certain notion of authentic Gaelic identity at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Certainly he and Gabriel seem scarcely to belong to the same race and yet the latter wonders if his wife would ever cry for him the way she did for this ghost from her past. Gabriel has a certain notion of Irishness, one that he links in his speech to what his aunts do every year at Christmas: "I feel more strongly with every passing year that our country has no tradition which does it so much honour as that of its hospitality." He goes on to explain how he is well-positioned to pronounce on such matters: "It is a tradition that is unique as far as my experience goes (and I have visited not a few places abroad) among the modern nations' (Joyce, p.231). Anxious to impress his audience by his travel and the knowledge he has of other cultures, Gabriel betrays a tendency

to look for models of excellence outside of his own country. Ireland may be renowned for its hospitality, but at the start of the last century very few would have been in the position to entertain in the lavish manner of the Misses Morkans.

In brief, what Joyce reveals in 'The Dead' is an appreciation of how culture and values are captured in the manner in which people entertain and feed their guests. His middle class Dublin world is quite different from what we encounter in the work of John McGahern (1934-2006), whose canvas was generally confined to the rural northwest midlands of Leitrim and Roscommon. But while they may treat of different classes and geographical locations, the emphasis on meals, weddings, wakes, funerals and trips to pubs in McGahern's fiction shows how he too realised that such rituals lay at the core of life in rural Ireland. But it is not merely in his fiction that McGahern treats of food and drink. The following description of a trip to Blake's in Enniskillen, taken from his collected prose, *Love of the World*, reveals the writer's penchant for gastronomy: 'The pint of Guinness you get in Blake's is as good as you can get anywhere. Michael draws a perfect shamrock in the cream of the stout with a flourish so neat and quick it cannot be followed. They have delicious sandwiches neatly cut into squares with generous measures of tea in the old aluminium teapots' (McGahern 2009, p.44). How often do we follow characters in his novels and short stories as they visit the local pub, or savour the tea and fresh ham sandwiches that are served to them while working on the hay, or when the death of a local person brings them to the home of the deceased, where they are supplied with copious amounts of food and drink.

McGahern's classic short story 'The Country Funeral', which describes the impact a trip to attend the last rites of their uncle Peter in the west of Ireland has on the brothers Fonsie, Philly and John Ryan, is an excellent example of how McGahern underlines the special role played by gastronomy in rural Ireland. As children, the Ryans were forced by their mother's rather precarious financial situation to travel to Peter's farm during the summer holidays. The invalided Fonsie had particularly bad memories of these stays: "The man (Peter) wasn't civilised. I always felt if he got a chance he'd have put me in a bag with a stone and thrown me in a bog hole." (McGahern 1992, pp. 381-2). Philly, who works on the oil rigs and wastes the good money he earns buying drinks in their local Dublin pub, has a different perception of their uncle. What's more, during the few days he spends at the funeral, he comes to appreciate the tact and neighbourliness of those living in the community where Peter lived.

For example, on their arrival the brothers notice how preparations have begun for the wake: 'In the kitchen Fonsie and Philly drank whiskey. Mrs Cullen said it was no trouble at all to make John a cup of tea and there were platefuls of cut sandwiches on the table' (McGahern 1992, p.383). The Cullens had taken it on themselves to buy some food and drink for the wake. Bill Cullen showed the brothers 'a bill for whiskey, beer, stout, bread, ham, tomatoes, butter, cheese, sherry, tea, milk, sugar' (McGahern, p.384). And yet they still need to travel to Henry's, the pub/grocery in the local town, to get more provisions for the expected guests. When they get there, Luke Henry, the proprietor, insists that they have a drink and discuss their deceased uncle. He refuses the money they offer for the bottles of whiskey, gin, stout, beer, sherry and the food they get off him, saying that they can settle up after the funeral, at which stage he will take back anything that has not been consumed.

What strikes one when reading through McGahern's account of the wake and funeral is the central role eating and drinking play in all the rituals. It is noticeable that the mourners do not eat or drink to excess. Rather, the food and drink are just an expression of welcome by the family and of solidarity by the friends and neighbours who come to view the corpse. Everything follows time-honoured traditions, expressions of sorrow being followed by anecdotes about the dead man's life, the qualities he encapsulated. Then there is the customary flurry of activity in the kitchen: 'Maggie Cullen made sandwiches with the ham and turkey and tomatoes and sliced loaves. Her daughter-in-law cut the sandwiches into small squares and passed them around on a large oval plate with blue flowers around the rim'. Those drinking beer often make use of the bottle in the following manner: 'Some who smoked had a curious, studious habit of dropping their cigarette butts carefully down the narrow necks of the bottles. … By morning, butts could be seen floating in the bottoms of bottles like trapped wasps' (McGahern, p.391). This simple description is a wonderful re-enactment of a common practice in rural Ireland. Talk at wakes was punctuated by food, drink, extinguishing cigarettes in the way described above. The reason why McGahern devoted so much time to immortalising such rituals was undoubtedly because he realised how, in an age of globalisation, they were so close to extinction. Hence the reference to Philly's 'healthy' breakfast on the morning of the funeral:

> After managing to get through most of a big fry – sausages, black pudding, bacon, scrambled eggs and three pots of black coffee – he was beginning to feel much better when Fonsie and John came in for their breakfast. (McGahern 1999, p.397)

In a similar fashion, we follow the three brothers as they stop over in various pubs on the journey back to Dublin after the funeral, something that would be extremely more hazardous today with the new laws on drink driving. By the time they end up back in Mulligan's of Poolbeg Street, they are well oiled and Philly has decided he will buy his uncle's farm from his mother and settle there after he has finished on the oil rigs. He views the area around Gloria Bog and people like the Cullens with huge affection now that he can appreciate the sort of support the landscape and population can offer in times of need.

With Proust, Joyce and McGahern, therefore, we can observe a tendency to conflate gastronomy with memory, social conventions and timeless rituals. Realising its importance in the lives of their characters, the writers endeavour to paint it in all its complexity so that their readers can appreciate the extent to which it moulds and encapsulates a society at a particular point in time. I trust that this short exposé will serve as an aperitif for many more in-depth analyses of the phenomenon in the future.

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