

tion of 'doing cooking', rather than providing illustrations for an authoritative interpretation of domestic practice.

Further reading: Gullestad 1984; Highmore 2000b, 2002; Margulies 1996; Martin 1979.

ONE DAY FINALLY, when I was twenty, I got my own small apartment, apart from school barracks, that included a rudimentary but sufficient facility in which to prepare my meals. I discovered myself invested with the care of preparing my own food, delighted with being able to escape from the noise and crowds of college cafeterias and from the shuttling back and forth to face preordained menus. But how was I to proceed? I did not know how to do anything. It was not a question of waiting for or asking advice from the women in the family because that would have implied returning to the maternal hearth and agreeing to slip back into that discarded feminine model. The solution seemed obvious: just like everything else, these sorts of things could be learned in books. All I had to do was find in a bookstore a source of information that was 'simple', 'quick', 'modern', and 'inexpensive', according to my then naive vocabulary. And in order to secure the means to do so (at least, so I thought), I undertook the close study of a paperback cookbook devoid of both illustrations and 'feminine' flourishes. To my mind, this absence endowed the book with eminent practical value and sure efficiency.

From the groping experience of my initial gestures, my trials and errors, there remains this one surprise: I thought that I had never learned or observed anything, having obstinately wanted to escape from the contagion of a young girl's education and because I had always preferred my room, my books, and my silent games to the kitchen where my mother busied herself. Yet, my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells, and colors. I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings, and the dull thud of the kneading hand. A recipe or an inductive word sufficed to arouse a strange anamnesis whereby ancient knowledge and primitive experiences were reactivated in fragments of which I was the heiress and guardian without wanting to be. I had to admit that I too had been provided with a woman's knowledge and that it had crept into me, slipping past my mind's surveillance. It was something that came to me from my body and that integrated me into the great corps of women of my lineage, incorporating me into their anonymous ranks.

I discovered bit by bit not the pleasure of eating good meals (I am seldom drawn to solitary delights), but that of manipulating raw material, of organizing, combining, modifying, and inventing. I learned the tranquil joy of anticipated hospitality, when one prepares a meal to share with friends in the same way in which one composes a party tune or draws: with moving hands, careful fingers, the whole body inhabited with the rhythm of working, and the mind awakening, freed from its own ponderousness, flitting from idea to memory, finally seizing on a certain chain of thought, and then modulating this tattered writing once again. Thus, surreptitiously and without suspecting it, I had been invested with the secret, tenacious pleasure of *doing-cooking*.

When this became clear in my mind, it was already too late; the enemy was on the

inside. I
myself in
'pleasur
gestures
between
the same
which th
gestures

The
of life, v
women
to retain
practicin
whose n
way, tha
knows t
gestures
househo
the body

Perh
through
living in
history,
on Mot
writing
debt and
who can
your eye
my great
to death
servitud
in the k
the poet
letters
preserv
are tran
yet tena
basic ge
texts, b
ion, and
of being

[. . .]

Culinar
necessa
for ther
lent fee

inside. It then became necessary to try to explain its nature, meaning, and manner to myself in the hopes of understanding why that particular pleasure seems so close to the 'pleasure of the text', why I twine such tight kinship ties between the writing of gestures and that of words, and if one is free to establish, as I do, a kind of reciprocity between their respective productions. Why seek to satisfy, with one as with the other, the same central need to *spend* [*dépenser*], to dedicate a part of one's lifetime to that of which the trace must be erased? Why be so avid and concerned about inscribing in gestures and words the same fidelity to the women of my lineage?

There have been women ceaselessly doomed to both housework and the creation of life, women excluded from public life and the communication of knowledge, and women educated at the time of my grandmothers' generation, of whom I would like to retain a living and true memory. Following in their footsteps, I have dreamed of practicing an impoverished writing, that of a *public writer* who has no claim to words, whose name is erased. Such writing targets its own destruction and repeats, in its own way, that humble service to others for whom these non-illustrious women (no one knows their names, strength, or courage anymore) represented for generations basic gestures always strung together and necessitated by the interminable repetition of household tasks performed in the succession of meals and days, with attention given to the body of others.

Perhaps that is exactly what I am seeking in my culinary joys: the reconstruction, through gestures, tastes, and combinations, of a *silent legend* as if, by dint of merely living in it with my hands and body, I would succeed in restoring the alchemy of such a history, in meriting its secret of language, as if, from this stubborn stomping around on Mother Earth, the truth of the word would come back to me one day. Or rather, a writing of words, reborn, that would finally achieve the expression of its wonderful debt and the impossible task of being able to return its favor. Women bereft of writing who came before me, you who passed on to me the shape of your hands or the color of your eyes, you whose wish anticipated my birth, you who carried me, and fed me like my great-grandmother blinded with age who would await my birth before succumbing to death, you whose names I mumbled in my childhood dreams, you whose beliefs and servitudes I have not preserved, I would like the slow remembrance of your gestures in the kitchen to prompt me with words that will remain faithful to you; I would like the poetry of words to translate that of gestures; I would like a writing of words and letters to correspond to your writing of recipes and tastes. As long as one of us preserves your nourishing knowledge, as long as the recipes of your tender patience are transmitted from hand to hand and from generation to generation, a fragmentary yet tenacious memory of your life itself will live on. The sophisticated ritualization of basic gestures has thus become more dear to me than the persistence of words and texts, because body techniques seem better protected from the superficiality of fashion, and also, a more profound and heavier material faithfulness is at play there, a way of being-in-the-world and making it one's home.

[. . .]

Culinary practices situate themselves at the most rudimentary level, at the most necessary and the most unrespected level. Traditionally in France, the responsibility for them falls almost exclusively on women and these tasks are the object of ambivalent feelings: the value of French cuisine is enhanced when compared to that of

neighboring countries; the importance of diet in raising children and care for the family is emphasized in the media; the responsibility and role of the housewife as primary buyer and supplier for the household are stressed. At the same time, people judge this work to be repetitive and monotonous, devoid of intelligence and imagination; people exclude it from the field of knowledge by neglecting dietary education in school programs. Yet, except for residents from certain communities (convents, hospitals, prisons), almost all women are responsible for cooking, either for their own needs or in order to feed family members or their occasional guests.

In each case, *doing-cooking* is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons. This women's work has them proliferate into 'gesture trees' (Rilke), into Shiva goddesses with a hundred arms who are both clever and thrifty: the rapid and jerky back and forth movement of the whisk whipping egg whites, hands that slowly knead pastry dough with a symmetrical movement, a sort of restrained tenderness. A woman's worry: 'Will the cake be moist enough?'; a woman's observation: 'These tomatoes are not very juicy, I'll have to add some water while they cook.' A transmission of knowledge: 'My mother (or aunt or grandmother) always told me to add a drop of vinegar to grilled pork ribs.' A series of techniques [*tours de main*] that one must observe before being able to imitate them: 'To loosen a crêpe, you give the pan a sharp rap, like this.' These are multifaceted activities that people consider very simple or even a little stupid, except in the rare cases where they are carried out with a certain degree of excellence, with extreme refinement – but then it becomes the business of *great chefs*, who, of course, are men.

Yet, from the moment one becomes interested in the process of culinary production, one notices that it requires a multiple memory: a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies, in order, for example, to identify the exact moment when the custard has begun to coat the back of a spoon and thus must be taken off the stove to prevent it from separating. It also calls for a programming mind: one must astutely calculate both preparation and cooking time, insert the various sequences of actions among one another, and set up the order of dishes in order to attain the desired temperature at the right moment; there is, after all, no point in the apple fritters being just right when the guests have barely started on the *hors d'oeuvres*. Sensory perception intervenes as well: more so than the theoretical cooking time indicated in the recipe, it is the smell coming from the oven that lets one know if the cooking is coming along and whether it might help to turn up the temperature. The creative ingenuity of cleverness also finds its place in culinary production: how can one make the most out of leftovers in a way that makes everyone believe that it is a completely new dish? Each meal demands the invention of an alternative ministrategy when one ingredient or the appropriate utensil is lacking. And when friends make a sudden, unexpected appearance right at dinnertime, one must improvise without a score and exercise one's combinatory capacities. Thus, entering into the vocation of cooking and manipulating ordinary things make one use intelligence, a subtle intelligence full of nuances and strokes of genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself, in short, *a very ordinary intelligence*.

These days, when the job one has or seeks in vain is often no longer what provides

social identity, when for the bitter wear and that rare joy of producing knowing the joys of a those who will consume work is alleged to be montage of things to planning, organizing, and tidying up. It has Rabelais's heroes, all lists of mounds of food Balzac's creatures,³ the concierges.⁴

Listen to these simple people, whose populate city morning

You see, this sou but you shouldn morning. Well, wood-burning s added two leeks together, and w before serving i made a fricassee. She browns an makes up a nice

I will admit it myself children in the Comt behavior; I was less v to me adorned with out of its literary dre itself once again in (except to be paid productivity (men h always experienced balancing in a subtle it finally collapses).

Notes

- 1 On Rabelais, Noë
- 2 'This narrative, b lists of mounds of there is a naive a mother and she p

social identity, when for so many people nothing remains at the end of the day except for the bitter wear and tear of so many dull hours, the preparation of a meal furnishes that rare joy of producing something oneself, of fashioning a fragment of reality, of knowing the joys of a demiurgic miniaturization, all the while securing the gratitude of those who will consume it by way of pleasant and innocent seductions. This culinary work is alleged to be devoid of mystery and grandeur, but it unfurls in a complex montage of things to be done according to a predetermined chronological sequence: planning, organizing, and shopping; preparing and serving; clearing, putting away, and tidying up. It haunts the memories of novelists, from the fabulous excesses of Rabelais's heroes, all busy eating, digesting, and relieving themselves,¹ to the 'long lists of mounds of food' of Jules Verne,² passing through the 'bourgeois cuisine' of Balzac's creatures,³ the recipes of Zola, and the tasty simmering dishes of Simenon's concierges.⁴

Listen to these men's voices describing women's cooking, like Pierre Bonte's simple people, whose hearty accents [on an early morning radio talk show] used to populate city mornings with good savages:

You see, this soup, made with beans, is what we call, of course, a bean soup, but you shouldn't think there are only beans in it. My wife made it this morning. Well, she got up at seven o'clock, her pot of water was on the wood-burning stove – she put her beans on to soak last night – then she added two leeks chopped very fine and some nice potatoes; she put all that together, and when it started boiling, she put her salt pork in. An hour before serving it to us, after three and a half to four hours of cooking, she made a fricassee for it. A fricassee is made in a pan with bacon drippings. She browns an onion in it, and when the onion is nice and golden, she makes up a nice flour roux and then puts it all in the soup.⁵

I will admit it myself: I still dream about the rice croquettes and the fritters that nice children in the Comtesse de Ségur's books used to eat for dinner as a reward for good behavior; I was less well behaved than them and these unknown dishes, which seemed to me adorned with exotic flavors, were never served at our family table. But, taken out of its literary dressing and stripped of its fleeting ennoblement, culinary work finds itself once again in dreary reality. This women's work, without schedule or salary (except to be paid off through service to others), work without added value or productivity (men have more important things to calculate), work whose success is always experienced for a limited duration (the way a soufflé just out of the oven, balancing in a subtle equilibrium, in this glorious peak, is already wavering well before it finally collapses). Yes, women's work is slow and interminable.

Notes

- 1 On Rabelais, Noëlle Châtelet, *Le Corps à corps culinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 55–92.
- 2 'This narrative, but also all the others, and this one with no exception, are interlarded with long lists of mounds of food, as in Dickens, Rabelais, Cervantes . . . For Verne, as for those writers, there is a naive and simple fantasy of feeling full, the horror of emptiness . . . nature is the mother and she provides food. She is full everywhere, as Leibniz said, and she cannot be hungry.'