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Lust for Leaves

The eating of paper, plant material, and wood, medically catalogued as *xylophagia* from the Greek words for wood and for devouring, is generally identified as one among many forms of *pica*, the broad medical term for a condition alternately referred to as “pathology,” “perversion,” “eating disorder,” and “fetish,” and defined as an appetite for things deemed inedible or judged to have no significant nutritive value. How, I will ask here, might these classifications begin to shift and be revalued when the disorder in question occurs in the leaves of a book?

Balzac and then later, Colette, his lifelong voracious reader, shared a fascination with the ingestion of paper, a hunger that they generously bequeathed to their characters. While not all the paper I’ll discuss is inscribed or imprinted, every sheet implies the potential to bear writing if only by dint of its textual virtuality. How might this connection to text modify not only the name of the condition but also its ramifications and significance?

In the first part of what follows I will discuss the medical literature on *pica* with its diagnostic emphasis on the craving for substances deemed to have “insignificant nutritive values” and on the “false or defective appetites” of the patients so diagnosed. I’ll then go on to reconsider the meaning of “significant/insignificant nutritive value” in the context of writing and writers, for whom paper may have alimentary properties of symbolic if not biological nature.

Specifically: I will look at Colette and Balzac as ingesters (in their own right and that of their characters) of paper and its writerly kin (pencils, erasers, blotters,

etc.), tobacco and other plant material, as well as of words, and will come to focus on Balzac's seminal novel, *Lost Illusions*, which criss-crosses, through the intersecting paths of its characters, a craving for paper, for tobacco leaves, and for words that are concretized as plant matter masticated and chewed into folio writing surface. I will ask how Balzac's paper eaters, like Colette's heirs to these (most notably, in *Claudine at School*) might help us to understand, otherwise, a predilection for unusual forms of sustenance. I will, in other words, be juxtaposing terms borrowed from rhetorical discourses (symbolism, metaphor, etc.) with the more traditional terms borrowed from medical discourses of pathology in order to understand a certain variety of *pica*, the condition named for the magpie's "indiscriminate" eating, as a rather more discriminating choice of sustenance and a very real source of nourishment.

The larger field of *pica* deserves a lot more attention than I can devote to it here, but a few remarks are essential. First, a word on its history. The condition was already noted, as a pathology, by the Greeks and the Romans, and has been very present in medical literature since the mid-sixteenth century. Medical literature from the eighteenth century on refers to the practice alternately as "eating disorder," "fetish," "depravity," and "perversion." There is a constant slippage in the literature from physical to moral diagnosis, such that William Cullen defines it in 1769 among the "false or defective appetites: "dysorexiae" (Cullen, pp. 162-64); the *Encyclopédie* of 1765 links it to "extreme disgust for good food and violent appetite for absurd things" (*Encyclopédie de Diderot*, "Pica")—clear value judgments here—and Pierre-Guillaume Fréjacques, in his 1803 medical thesis, defines *pica* in terms of "depraved tastes," "extreme appetite," and "irresistible desire." Similarly, the

Dictionnaire Encyclopédique des science médicales of 1874-89 defines pica as both a “perversion of appetite” and a “craving for completely unsuitable or repugnant substances.” The individual phrasing varies but these early experts all clearly resort to a vocabulary of moral judgment and a rhetoric of impropriety. Before turning to more recent diagnostics, a few words more on Fréjacques’s early nineteenth-century medical thesis on the subject. I find in the doctor’s remarks on symptomology two general tendencies that are worth noting. The first is an emphasis on the role of excess in every mode: appetite, quantity, and urgency: in short, on the force of desire as a pathogen, one might say; and the second, an insistence on unruliness as a factor. Pica, states Dr. Fréjacques, attacks women much more frequently than men, and not just any women: those subject to irregular menstruation or unruly imagination. Much more rarely, men can be affected: the sole example he gives is “negroes in America.” We begin to suspect that the diagnosis of eating disorder may be partly related to what disrupts the social order.

Second, a word about more recent sources on pica. The latest account of pica in the *DSM 5*, hot off the presses in 2013, appears more enlightened from both psychological and anthropological standpoints. It more progressively grants that the diagnosis must be supported by “the eating of nonnutritive, nonfood substances... [that are] *developmentally inappropriate* [a minimum age of 2 years is suggested to exclude developmentally normal mouthing of objects by infants]”; it notes further that in order to qualify as pica, the behavior “*not [be] part of a culturally supported or socially normative practice*” (*DSM*; my italics). Yet it opens more questions than it answers for less literal-minded, more literary-minded readers. For what, we might

ask, is the meaning of “nutritive value” in the context of a community of writers and readers engaged in writing and reading, to give an example close to my concerns, and how is it quantifiable? How can we set the bar at age 2, with the suspicion that not only infants but perhaps also their adult heirs apprehend the world orally? And what is the cultural or social group at play in the determination of normative oral practices? My intent is not to be facetious, but to orient my reading of alimentary modes clearly in the symbolic and the rhetorical rather than the biological and the pathological. As the editors of the collection *Consuming the Inedible* suggest, “Food is both nature and culture, substance and symbol, life sustaining in both biochemical and cognitive mode” (MacClancy, Henry and Macbeth, p. 3) In even stronger terms, food historian Madeleine Ferrières reminds us that “the eater is nourished as much by symbols as by substances” (Ferrières, 353).

My readings of Colette and of Brigitte Mahuzier, the critic who first brought pica in Colette to my attention, resonate with such symbolic feedings. I am reminded that Colette’s Claudine and her school friends as well as the Colette narrator of the short story “La Cire verte” all snack gluttonously on paper (blank pages, printed sheets, blotters) and devour pencils, bars of sealing wax, erasers, and other such paraphernalia of writing and reading. This Colettian regime characterizes one kind of pica that, one might argue, stands out in radical ways from the rest of that vast span of eating behaviors focused on ostensibly inedible substances nonetheless available for consumption, and enticingly so, to the interested few that choose them. Their medical classifications range from geophagia, the ingestion of dirt or clay, to lectophagia, grass, to coprophagia, feces—and I pass over a good many others here

to come to rest on xylophagia, which is the accepted term for the eating of wood or paper. In place of xylophagia I suggest instead a neologism, graphophagia, which is on the one hand more comprehensive in its potential inclusion of other writing implements, and on the other hand, more specialized in its emphasis on the function of paper that is our object here: its service as writing surface, inscribed or virtual.

Elsewhere I've discussed the place of Colette's paper eaters in a larger economy of materialization and dematerialization of writing, both in Colette's text and in its relation to Balzac (Beizer, forthcoming). Here I'll need to bracket the substance of that work; however, I want first to insist on the literary food chain that links the two writers in order to work more closely with the Balzacian graphophagic imaginary upon which Colette fed. For in addition to vicariously ingesting the stuff of writing (its surfaces, its tools), Colette devoured its spirit, epitomized by the writer who was for her "*the* novelist" [le romancier unique]: the prime mover of letters (Colette "La Cire verte" 393).

Balzac was Colette's master, her father-in-writing, "my cradle, my forest, my voyage" (Colette "Cire" 393). To this I would add, continuing in the same topographic register, that he was not only her forest but her pasture, her meadow, her feeding ground: "I have drunk, eaten, known all [of Balzac]," she writes. "And I begin afresh" (Colette, "Balzac," p. 218). As Derrida reflected in another context, "To love without wanting to devour must surely be anorexic"; and Colette was surely not that. The catalogue of her voraciousness—"my reader's gluttony," she calls it—gives detailed evidence of her passion for Balzac: her consumption of every mania that he penned, along with the characters and plots and dialogues that rendered them, all of

which she brings up prodigiously from memory (Colette, "Balzac," p. 218). She also delivers the material supports of his narratives: the twenty volumes of her Houssiaux edition, complete with "unindented pages," and "typographic cliffs" [the long narrow columns of text](Colette, "Balzac," p. 218). We have then an appropriately perverse version—a graphophagic case—of those classic alimentary examples of the *mise en abyme* or infinite mirroring effect: the bewigged gentleman in the Quaker Oats logo on the product box proffering a box with a smaller replica of the Quaker Oats box and logo, ad infinitum, we imagine, or the Droste Cocoa logo with the two stereotypically Dutch children holding a box with that same logo, or the Vache qui rit cow with her (or his) Vache qui rit earrings emblazoned with ear-ringed laughing cow replicas... In the present case, for which we must fabricate our own images, and readjust our thinking from the material to the spiritual, Colette the paper eater feeds on Balzac's pages, in turn replete with other paper eaters.

I turn now to a few of these pages as they appear in his novel *Lost Illusions*. I'll be following three passages of which only one explicitly features graphophagia, but will try to show how they're braided together. Let us look first at the well-known seduction scene at the end of the novel in which the convict Vautrin appears out of nowhere on the road out of Angoulême, now disguised in the priestly garb of Carlos Herrera. Magnificently literalizing a *deus ex machina* intervention, the false man of God descends from his carriage just in time to arrest the suicide of Lucien de Rubempré. As he slows his pace to allow the breathtaking young stranger he glimpses over his shoulder to overtake him, Vautrin, nonchalantly puffing a cigar, offers Lucien at once a ride and a selection from his cigar case. Susan Sontag and

Richard Ellman spilled a fair amount of ink in a heated discussion over whether this cigar, proffered three times and accepted only the third, is euphemism for a seduction, emblem for a seduction, or simply a cigar (Sontag&Ellman). To call the question of whether a cigar is a cigar, however, even a euphemistic or an emblematic one, is to block our peripheral reading vision, to produce a smoke screen that blinds us to what lies next to and around the cigar and its smokers in the text. This is the question we must ask, for sometimes, too, a seduction is a seduction, but not simply a seduction in the form of a cigar. Indeed, seductions, like cigars, have a tendency to be inconstant, ephemeral, non-identical, and to open different vistas.

Just so the priest's courting of his new favorite. Even as he plies him with cigars, weaning him from death to life, Vautrin woos Lucien with installments of a story—and here we come to the second strand of my braid. Playing Scheherazade to Lucien's Sultan in a twist of the traditional plot—here it is the Sultan's suicide rather than his lover's murder that must be forestalled—Vautrin feeds Lucien the strange alluring tale of a beautiful impoverished goldsmith's son who is rescued by the baron de Goertz, minister to Charles XII, on his way to Stockholm. In his new station as secretary and favorite to the baron, the young man is brought from rags to riches, performing a fairy tale thwarted only by his compulsion to bite the paper that feeds him. Here in excerpt is Balzac's account of the youth's folly:

Overwhelmed by his work. ... the young secretary spent his nights writing; and like all hard workers, he formed a bad habit, he began to chew paper.

...Our pretty young man began with blank paper, but he got used to it and moved on to written pages that he found more tasty. *They didn't smoke yet as*

we do today. Finally the little secretary, moving from taste to taste, came to munch on parchments and to eat them. (Balzac, *Lost Illusions* p. 692; my translation here and below, my italics)

This habit might seem harmless enough. But when it comes to light that an international peace treaty has disappeared at the mouth of the baron's secretary, he is condemned to death. Narrowly escaping his sentence, the little secretary is installed in a new position in far-off Courland, thanks only to his protector's unalienable devotion. But, as is not uncommon in the realm of fetishism, the compulsive paper eater still cannot control his appetite, and gets himself in trouble once again: "Our little paper eater notices that he is chewing a receipt of the duke's for a considerable sum of money" (*IP* p. 694). In a watershed moment, the little pica prince realizes he cannot have his paper and eat it too. Seized with terror when he realizes he has gobbled all but half of the duke's signature, he seeks asylum with the comely duchess, who not only grants it but later, widowed, marries him.

Regaling Lucien with the promise-laden saga of this earlier pretty lad who was delivered from deprivation to depravity, Vautrin links the two stories, the one recounted and the one about to be written, by a rhetoric relying heavily on simile and analogy: "The baron of Goertz sees intelligence in this young man, as I see poetry on your brow; he takes him in his carriage as I am about to take you in mine..." (*IP*, p. 692); and also on a series of repetitions that are interwoven through both stories, and end up twinning them. Most blatantly, there are the verbs "munch" and "chew" that migrate outward from Vautrin's spinning of the paper-eater's tale to Balzac's presentation of Vautrin the smoking storyteller, introduced in this way:

“Listen to me, said the priest, chewing on his cigar ...” (*IP*, p. 692). Explaining the young paper eater’s irrepressibly polymorphous taste in paper (from blank to writing-covered to parchment) he equates it parenthetically with his own excesses: “they didn’t smoke then as we do now” (*IP*, p. 692).

By way of this double story he promises Lucien all that the baron grants his protégé: duchesses, riches, protection, and the oral mania of his choice. I use this word “mania” advisedly, following Balzac (*IP*, p. 693), whose descriptions of the little secretary are increasingly pathological as the narrative advances. Listen to the lead-in to his account of the young man’s second near-fatal feast:

If you think that this comely man, condemned to death for eating the treaty, mends his *depraved taste*, you don’t understand *the empire vice holds* in man; even the death penalty doesn’t stop him when what is at stake is pleasure he has fashioned for himself! What is the source of *this power of vice*? Is it a force that is peculiar to him, or does it come from human weakness? Are there *tastes that touch the limits of madness*? I cannot stop myself from laughing at those moralists who want to fight such illnesses with fine phrases! (*IP*, p. 693; my italics)

Ventriloquizing Vautrin, Balzac situates graphophagia in the contiguous zones of artificial paradises, pathology, and evil. The initially mild language that introduced the young man’s excesses as “starting a [bad] habit” has become quite a bit more virulent: he speaks of “the empire of vice,” “the power of vice,” “illnesses,” “depraved tastes,” “tastes that touch the limits of madness,” and “pleasure” [jouissance], the latter adding a third, sexual zone onto the map. But let me be clear

about what I am claiming here. To link compulsive paper munching to cigar chewing to sexual pleasure is not simply to subsume paper eating to a euphemistic or emblematic cigar, but rather, to suggest the perversity of all pleasure.

In his reflections on Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*, Roland Barthes defines perversion as "the exercise of a desire without a purpose" Like bodies that make love without making babies, mouths propelled to eat by desire rather than need are obeying an appetite for luxury and excess rather than a natural appetite. Human desire in general, says Barthes, is always a luxury, always a supplement, and the desire to eat—appetite without hunger, in other words, the "desired food" ["nourriture désirée] celebrated by Brillat-Savarin—is "an unconditional loss, a sort of ethnographic ceremony by which man celebrates his power, his liberty to burn up his energy 'for nothing.'" (Barthes p. 286; my translation). In the course of this discussion that opposes alimentary need and alimentary desire, Barthes makes a strong proposition. If Brillat-Savarin were writing today, he says, "He would not have failed to count among the perversions this taste for food that he defended and illustrated" (Barthes, p. 286). By extension, could we not suggest that anything one ingests or imbibes with pleasure or voracity is potentially a symptom of pica? Is Balzac not developing by insinuation, in *Lost Illusions*, a theory of oral pleasure and taboo?

In counterpoint, however, to the heady ingestion of tobacco and paper—twinned excesses we might call the consumption of foliage and folios—we encounter, in the form of David Séchard, Lucien's spiritual brother and legal brother-in-law, a third and more tempered oral adventure. This is the third strand

of my braid. Reduced to indigence together with his wife Eve, Lucien's sister, by the extravagances of Lucien, the printer David dreams of inventing a more efficient means of making paper that will bypass the need to decompose cotton and linen rags to their constituent plant material by going directly to the vegetal source.

The passage I bring to your attention represents a Eureka moment, when David chances on a long-sought solution to the problem of breaking down plant fibers to make paper.

Prey to the anxiety caused by penury, David was distractedly chewing a nettle stalk. ...As he walked the streets...he found in his teeth a pulpy mass, he took it in his hand, spread it out and saw a paste superior to all the compounds he'd previously obtained; for the main problem with the pulp obtained from plants is a lack of binder (*IP*, p. 603).

Now, David's discovery of a laboratory in his mouth is less about consumption of paper or leaves than about production: as it wraps into one the processes of ingestion, digestion and egestion, it blends leaves and paper in a transformation of one to the other where the body and its secretions become silent crafters. If in Barthes's terms, Balzac's paper cravers and cigar smokers are perverse in their exercise of "a desire without purpose," this nettle chewing, on the contrary, marks David as a maker of things: here is Homo Faber. Brillat-Savarin read by Barthes would I think have traced David's distracted mouthings not to luxury but to natural appetite, a means to buy bread, an activity satisfying need rather than desire.

Now, Brillat's *Physiology of Taste*, first published in 1825, was reissued by the editor Charpentier in 1839 in an edition that bound it with Balzac's new *Treatise on*

Modern Stimulants (Traité des excitants modernes) in an effort to legitimize both. Balzac was at this time also planning the third and last book of *Lost Illusions*, *Sufferings of the Inventer* (1847), source of my anecdotes and citations.

If the *Treatise of Modern Stimulants* has a debt to Brillat, it goes one step further in its study of excess, as Balzac makes scoffingly clear. There are in Balzac's treatise sections on sugar, tea, eau-de-vie, and coffee, along with a deep unnamed undercurrent of sex, hiding in the name of women or the euphemism "the genesisist drive" [le génésique]—all of which the *Physiology of Taste* had included—but also, a long section on tobacco, which it had not. "It is inadmissible," Balzac says, "that Brillat-Savarin, after having taken as title *Physiology of Taste* and after having so well demonstrated the role played in pleasure by the nasal cavity and palate, could have forgotten the chapter on tobacco" (Balzac, *Treatise*, p. 321).

In this way the *Treatise* reveals on one hand its origins in an intended *Tobaccology*, and on the other, Balzac's strong opinions and deep ambivalence about tobacco. If tobacco is a latecomer among stimulants, it soars above them: "It triumphs over all the others." (*Treatise*, p. 320). Once a neophyte persists in smoking, not only do the initial irritating effects (vertigo, nausea) disappear but in fact, "the smoker enters a paradise" (*Treatise*, p. 321)

However, there are subsidiary effects that do not disappear and only worsen with use. In this treatise obsessed with the conservation and healthy circulation of what it names "les muqueuses," a term that in context refers not only to the mucous membranes but to all bodily secretions, especially the viscous ones, tobacco has the deleterious side effect of desiccation. "This excessive pleasure, at what price is it

acquired? ...The smoker has suppressed salivation" (*Traité*, p. 323). Paradise exacts its price, and—here is the guilt-laden part of the bargain—abusers who believe they are only harming themselves in drying up their mucosa are in fact not only delusional, but also, irresponsible: "They adulterate the race and bastardize the generation, which leads to the ruin of the country" (*Traité*, p. 308). Alternatively, Balzac explains, in an odd elaboration of the perils of desiccation, the toll of criminality on the offender's self is, like that of tobacco, a shutdown of the mucous system. He recounts the story of a theft on board a prerevolutionary frigate. When the crew fails to ferret out the culprit, an officer steps in. He asks each sailor to spit into a spoonful of flour put in the palm of each, and to make a ball of the mixture ("to make a small ball of flour by mixing it with saliva" [*Traité*, p. 324]). One man only cannot accomplish the task, because he has no saliva to bind the flour. (Let us recall that a "lack of binder" was the phrase Balzac used to explain why David couldn't get fibers to gel into pulp for paper before chancing on his digestive chemistry.) The empty-handed sailor is the thief (*Traité*, p. 324). By the logic of the text he is assumed impotent as well.

A man addicted neither to tobacco nor to crime, however, would presumably enjoy a healthy system that works like David's, and enables his successful invention: "Mucosity... discharges its excess through the taste organs...and...so constitutes the gastric juices, these cunning chemists, the despair of our laboratories" (*Traité*, p. 324). Had David been a smoker, we might infer, France would no doubt still be making paper from rags, and David would not have sired three children, for "the smoker interferes with his circulation by suppressing its discharge..." (*Traité*, p. 325).

I move towards a conclusion, first, on the level of story. Reading *Lost Illusions* with the *Treatise on Modern Stimulants*: David is to Lucien as the ox to the eagle, chewing his cud while Lucien soars in a haze of smoke analogous to the paper addict's stupor. David is the fecundating father and Lucien, the rebel angel; David underwrites while Lucien inspires; David supports the matter of the book and of social stability, and Lucien, its ether and its dream. Following the sexual paradigm imposed on these two axes, David is allied with heteronormativity and Lucien, perversion or subversion of these mores. All this I paraphrase from Balzac. I would add, though, that Balzac's loyalties are not evident. There is no good, no evil brother; no chosen or rejected son, but a split temptation. Balzac, after all, condemns tobacco but sings its raptures. Disgust is often lined with desire. And if David often recalls Hephaestus, the artificer as builder, and Lucien, Pandora, the artificer as beautiful destroyer, in Richard Sennett's terms, it is hard to tell with any certainty who is making, who unmaking the world of Balzac's book, and even which of these alternatives is prime for Balzac. David is the spitting image of Balzac, both physically and by virtue of his paper milling, but Lucien is the one who gets another book. In the tersest of formulations: Lucien is the writing on David's page.

And so we come back, in the end, to metaphor, and with it, the second, more open-ended part of my conclusion. Here, you shall see, I have only speculation and questions to offer. Metaphor: eagles and oxen and an appetite for writing that is beyond hunger because needless, as superfluous to everyday life as addiction and intoxication and dream. Such craving turns hunger on its head, perverts it, expropriates its object, makes it improper. So spoke the eighteenth and nineteenth

century medical men of their earth swallowers, their grass cravers and paper eaters. So spoke Balzac, more lovingly, more cunningly, of his paper-intoxicated little secretary. And Colette, what of Colette, feeding, metaphorically, on Balzac's pages?

Pica has moved us from material examples of perverse eating to metaphors of perverse eating that are simultaneously metaphors of perverse reading (excessive, obsessive, uncontrollable...). Is the metaphor of voracious reading a variety of pica? Is metaphor a kind of pica? Is pica a metaphor? What do we talk about when we talk about pica? *Pica*, a false appetite, an excessive appetite, a defective desire... a craving for absurd things or inappropriate substances: a displacement of good taste, of appropriate taste, of the proper, toward the disgusting, the inappropriate, the improper.

Discussions of metaphor in cognitive linguistics often begin with the slippage between the concrete and the abstract, the proper and the improper. If metaphor, as Maggie Kilgour has defined it, is "the trope by which opposites—guest and host, body and mind, food and words—meet" (Kilgour, p. 13), then pica, categorized as an eating *disorder*, may signal an interruption of the conceivable reconciliation of food and words, body and mind, matter and spirit, and perhaps also a disturbance of the trope—metaphor—that drives such a potential meeting of opposites. If pica is characterized by the ingestion of "repugnant substances," it may be that what makes these substances repugnant to those of us who do not crave them is their very substantiality: paper, wood, dirt, feces—all materials that throw in our face (if not our mouth) the fact that what we all take in whenever we eat is always, at base, matter that may or may not then be intellectualized, symbolized, aestheticized,

imagined *otherwise* (Ferguson, pp. 16-17). Is pica then a kind of disconnect in the rhetorical system, an aporia, a cultural hole? If food as material artifact needs to be recast in an intellectual mold in order to gain cultural currency, as Ferguson has maintained, and the individual appetite regulated, socialized, then pica is a kind of breakdown or disordering of the system. Pica-esque representations or metaphors of pica in literature such as we have seen in Balzac and Colette might then be perceived as working toward re-metaphorizing matter in at least these limited contexts, even while marking the culturally disordering effect of eating disorders.

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