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A Rigorous Diet: Food in Luisa Passerini's *Autoritratto di gruppo*

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Current critical studies have demonstrated that food, as the object of social constraints and personal desires, plays a central role in the creation and maintenance of gender categories. While across time and geography there are major differences in the relationship between women and food, it is also possible to identify continuities. As Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli and Lucia Re note in *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia*, one continuity is that the relationship between food and women has represented “relations of power to be maintained and reinforced or changed.”¹ The complex relationship between women, power and food is present, as Hélène Cixous claims, in “the first fable of our first book.” Eve’s action inaugurated a history not only of control over women and food, but also of consumption as a means used by women to express desire and transgress authority. From the story of Eve through the tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the apple has been a concrete example of the gendered nature of authority and expression.² While food, power and expression are central concerns of Luisa Passerini’s autobiography, *Autoritratto di gruppo*, there is no apple. Instead, there is an onion. The onion presents the reader with an entirely different set of associations from the apple. The onion is a pungent vegetable whose preparation requires tears. It is also a poor vegetable both in terms of price and nutritional value. While at the center of its thick white flesh an apple has a core, at the center of its thin, uneven layers an onion is empty. The narrator’s description focuses on the many layers of an onion, relating them to female subjectivity: “a slow shedding of skins, like an onion—back, back, you almost can’t capture it with the eye—one woman inside another, one woman through another.”³ Since Luisa’s⁴ autobiography will be an attempt to slowly describe the multiple layers of her identity, the image of the onion is apt for two reasons. First, the onion introduces the central metaphors of food and diet that run through *Autoritratto*.

Second, the concentric layers of the onion reference the impossibility of a linear narration of the self as a single, coherent entity.

Any autobiography involves the selection and organization of past events to create a narrative which explains the narrator's subjectivity. This organization is particularly intricate in Passerini's *Autoritratto*. The odd numbered chapters are a collage of excerpts from past interviews with Passerini and the diary she kept during her psychoanalysis. The even numbered chapters are selections from her interviews with participants of the revolutionary political movements of 1968 interspersed with her commentary. The fragmented and hybrid organization of the text favors the creation of interpretive links between individual and collective stories over the delineation of chronological fact, thereby interweaving a personal autobiography with that of an entire generation. As Derek Duncan demonstrates in his critical essay "Corporeal Histories: The Autobiographical Bodies of Luisa Passerini," corporeality is a fundamental component of Luisa's narrative for the body is "an autobiographical text in its own right."⁵ The complex process of selection and organization which orders Luisa's written narrative mirrors her attempt to logically order her body through the imposition of strict dietary regimes.

Because Luisa follows two diets, her relationship with food is intricate. Yet, the food she consumes can be divided into two opposing groups. Chocolate, meat, truffles and wine contrast onions, couscous and pumpkin. The former group is composed of foods that represent tradition; therefore Luisa labels them her Piedmontese diet in reference to her home region. She fondly remembers that as a student when she and her roommates had money they would cook "for an entire afternoon, a colossal *fritto misto* for example, with all the ingredients tradition demanded" (43). In this way, she associates the Piedmontese diet with wealth, abundance and sociality.

The latter group of foods belongs to the Steiner diet. The Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner believed that all elements necessary for mental and physical health are already present in the body. Therefore, the purpose of his diet is to activate the natural resources of the body. For example, Steiner eliminated alcohol from his diet because it "produces physically and in an external way [...] just what man should develop physically within himself." Since "alcohol imitates and copies the activity of the ego [...] man replaces his inner self with [...] a substitute" and he becomes its slave.⁶ The goal of Steiner's diet is to increase internal energy

and warmth by having the body work hard to digest food independently of outside aid. Since meat contains plant material digested by an animal, it reduces the activity of human digestion and thus is also excluded from Steiner's diet. According to Steiner's philosophy plants are the inverted image of the human body; the roots are the head, the stalk is the torso and the leaves are the feet. While Luisa originally turned to Steiner's diet as a cure for chronic gastritis, the link between human and vegetable bodies, and nutrition and spirituality is a possible source for the connection between food and subjectivity in *Autoritratto*.

Although there is an overabundance of food in *Autoritratto*, there is very little digestion.⁷ The unresolved problems of the past that reappear through Luisa's psychoanalysis and her research on 1968 are expressed through indigestion. Derek Duncan refers to the conflict between ingestion and indigestion when he states: "ingestion represents an aperture onto the world and the past, while distance and regret is often signaled through stomach cramps and a return to solitary mastication" (379). While on a general level indigestion demonstrates an inability to reconcile the past and the present, it is frequently a sign of more complex unresolved psychic issues. For Luisa the attempt to digest the collective legacy of 1968 and her personal past occurs within the context of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis is a process whereby the repressed past is recuperated and assimilated into the present. In *Autoritratto di gruppo* the success of this assimilation is likened to digestion. When Luisa visits a doctor to complain about her gastritis he tells her that it will not be resolved until she has concluded her psychoanalysis. To understand the doctor's comment it is necessary to consider Luisa's later statement that her psychoanalyst compels her to "bring everything back to myself, insisting that I dissolve the external into internal. It's the ana-lysis, the lysis" (105). Psychoanalysis involves the transformation of the external into the internal, just as eating does. By morphologically breaking apart analysis Luisa demonstrates that the word contains a reference to the enzymatic process of digestion. Since psychoanalysis is a long, difficult process, digestion is lethargic. In a description of her generation's confrontation with its revolutionary legacy Luisa reveals a static, stunted attempt at digestion which parallels her personal psychoanalytic confrontation with the past: "The reconstruction of memory was difficult and tortuous. It required remaining as if in quarantine for years, mulling things over inside oneself, apparently immobile" (122). Psychoanalysis represents a

limbo where the past comes to the surface, but is not yet fully accepted. This indeterminacy is shown on an objective level in Luisa's diet which continues to waver between traditional and Steiner foods: "I continue not to know what to eat, not to be able to choose between the two nutritional systems" (48). Until this process of mediation between present and past is completed and the quarantine is over, the stomach issues remain unresolved.

The complexities of indigestion are apparent in Luisa's descriptions of her relationships with men. Romantic and sexual distress becomes a somatic refusal of food. For example, during the 1960s Luisa was in a long-term, non-monogamous relationship. After a summer apart, Luisa and her lover were to meet in Paris. He was accompanied by another one of his lovers, Luisa's female friend. While awaiting the couple Luisa falls ill and suffers "fever as jealousy." Her friend and her lover bring Luisa her favorite foods, but she cannot stomach them: "they brought me food they knew I liked, like paella. I couldn't swallow it with that fever" (45). Despite denying her jealousy, Luisa cannot ignore it. Eventually, she expresses her unhappiness "silently" through food.

The psychic complexity of indigestion is also evidenced by a sexual relationship in the narrative present. After a dinner with her married lover, X, Luisa suffers "violent [convulsions,] vomit that fails to expel the gluey brown rice [eaten at] lunch." Luisa locates a rejection of her lover in this violent refusal of food: "I [felt] the need to expel both this food and this man from inside me" (47). Yet, after she vomits, she wants her lover to come to her bedside and cure her. Derek Duncan notes that this double desire manifests a "contradictory impulse both to expel and incorporate the other" (379). The effects of free-love on her present relationships are one of the most complicated knots that Luisa must undo in psychoanalysis. Both of the non-monogamous relationships described in her autobiography end with Luisa unable to digest food. In this way Luisa incorporates her refusal of 1968's tradition of free-love.

Communalism was another integral element of 1968's revolutionary politics and frequently involved food. In an interview with Passerini, Laura Derossi describes restaurants as the backdrop for the social aspect of the movement: "When we went out to eat, at a minimum there were ten of us [...] There were places we went and we made friends with the waiters, with the owner, and we ate there, we hung out there" (89). Politics and socialization often occurred as much in *trattorias*, bars and restaurants as in the university. In contrast to this tradition, the Steiner

diet's conception of the body as self-sufficient and its focus on eating as the production of energy necessary to sustain the body tend to strip eating of its social value. Furthermore, the Steiner diet disallows wine and coffee, two ingredients central to the political discussions of 1968. In fact, Luisa's dietary restrictions were so strict that they "reduced to a minimum the opportunities for socializing and sorely tried those relationships that survived" (122). Luisa's diet thus seems to negate not only sociality in general, but also sociality as a specific correlate of revolutionary politics and instead privileges an isolated self-absorption.

While Luisa's dietary asceticism negates some elements of her political past, it extends others. Her strict diet denotes a contradictory response to the heritage of 1968 since it is both a "rejection of its roots and subterranean lengthening of those roots" (65). Although the diet appears to be an attempt to purify herself of certain memories, her extremism in applying it can be read as a continuation of the cultural extremism of 1968. In her historical work *Storie di donne e femministe* Passerini links the body to politics: "politics could also be found in this: in the movement of bodies and in the movement of meanings attributed to their gestures and actions" (Duncan 372). The rigor which Luisa dedicates to her diet seems to be another example of how the political is manifested through the body. The division of food into acceptable and unacceptable groups, the "rigorous attention to not combining the wrong foods" (122) can be seen as a re-elaboration of an extreme politics which was not only intransigent in its ideology, but also, despite its rhetoric, hierarchical.

As the importance of indigestion rather than ingestion in Luisa's narration demonstrates, her diet is based primarily on a principle of exclusion over inclusion. Luisa is more concerned with purifying her body of harmful elements than incorporating helpful ones. The mechanism of exclusion is particularly clear with respect to Luisa's mother. The role of the mother in feminine identity is another contradictory legacy of 1968 because the revolutionary movement "legitimated in its extensions that which it denied internally, like female physicality and maternity" (99). The result is that much of Luisa's autobiography is centered on a reconsideration of her mother.

Food plays a role in the construction of gender roles from the beginning of Passerini's life: "In the courtyard, my great-grandmother, still waiting for the husband who had disappeared, spent days cooking huge pots of conserves, of marmalade, of *mostarda*, which was a grape-based

compote, inimitable" (6). In "Luisa Passerini's Autoritratto di gruppo: Personalizing Theory," Graziella Parati notes that in Luisa's autobiography "women are destined to personify the survival of the family structure [...] while men are allowed to expand the space of their 'ego.'" Female immobility, which will be renounced by Luisa, is explicitly connected to food. This connection between women and food is reiterated in Luisa's understanding of the return to femininity as objective: the realm of food, clothes, jewelry" (48). Luisa locates food as a choice, as one of the many accessories that women use to define their identities. Just as Luisa's grey clothes reject the bright colors and jewelry of her grandmother, her strict diet rejects the giant pots of sweet jam. However, the conscious decision not to eat foods which she associates with tradition is only one way Luisa distances herself from the maternal through food.

Luisa's rejection of her lover X becomes physical through vomiting; similarly, her rejection of the maternal becomes corporal. Her rejection is physical insofar as it is "not so much a conscious act of subjectivity as an obscure impulsive reflex, almost a spontaneous withdrawal, an unmediated repulsion, out of nausea, disgust, aversion" (33). Insofar as Luisa's rejection of the maternal is instinctively physical, it is a form of abjection. Luisa's convulsions and vomiting mirror Kristeva's description of abjection as "the spasms and vomiting that protect me."⁹ The theme of maternal abjection extends beyond a refusal of food. Luisa's painful abortion, which signifies her rejection of the role of motherhood and coincided with the death of the most important maternal figure in her life, her grandmother, is also a form of abjection. Yet, the abortion, which occurred on a kitchen table, can be linked to food. The foetus constitutes the liminal stage of human life in which one is neither alive nor dead, neither in the world nor out of the world. Similarly, food in the mouth and in the stomach is still "other;" it is in the body, but not yet part of it. Vomiting and abortion both reject from the body objects which straddle the boundary of the self. Through the description of an onion, Luisa associates her body with a plurality of female identities. She clarifies this characterization later on in her autobiography when she states: "I have various strata within me. I, the other, and the void, there are at least three of us" (117). Through the abortion of her foetus, through the vomiting of maternal foods, Luisa references and refuses these multiple layers of identity.

While the figure of the mother is undoubtedly tied to the problem of food in *Autoritratto* it is also linked to the genre of autobiography.

Telling the stories of 1968 is a way for Luisa to confront her relationship with her mother. According to Julia Kristeva, the mother and her body represent a non-verbal stage of life. The sounds that link a newborn to its mother are those of the body: the heart beat, the laugh, the nursery rhyme. In this way, the connection between mother and child is founded in the non-verbal. Kristeva further claims that the act of speaking is a way for the child to differentiate him or herself from the body and the subjectivity of the mother. Therefore, every speech act refuses and at the same time references the mother and her body. For women this double movement is multiplied since not only their language, but also their female bodies involuntarily recall the mother. Speaking and storytelling, like eating for Luisa, are processes that paradoxically remember and refuse the mother. Eating and speaking are further associated through the mouth. As Susanne Skubal notes in *Word of Mouth: Food and Fiction after Freud*: "the double domain of the oral lies in its being the site of both human ingestion and utterance."¹⁰ Luisa explicitly references this link between eating and discourse when she describes her inability to decide between two diets as "going back and forth between two languages until you can no longer speak either one" (47). In this context the choice of food is a corporal means of expression. Luisa speaks not only through textual narration, but also through bodily narration.

Luisa refuses her past, yet tries to accept it; similarly, she refuses her mother and her lovers, yet desires them. These contradictory movements between refusal and incorporation are transposed onto the level of narration. The relationship between organization of written narrative and organization of bodily narrative is described by Luisa in the following observation: "Our purpose is not a historical reconstruction but rather a mulling over and internalizing of some memories that remain too external to ourselves, too objective" (133). The use of the word "digestion" points to how the process of coming to terms with the past which autobiographical narrative enables is mirrored in the incorporation of food into the body. Yet, as I have demonstrated, Luisa's digestion frequently is thwarted and transformed into indigestion.

At the end of her longest discussion on her diets Luisa states: "At the beginning of the eighties I had understood that the journey of life is circular, not linear. And I had to begin my return" (122). For Luisa this return occurs through the writing of her autobiography. In re-examining the past she must work through that which has remained un-digested by her subjectivity, the products of psychic indigestion.

New writing is shown as excrement: "Handwriting: little black legs on a white page, like traces of excrement" (8), and recuperated research fragments are "[aborted] essays" (162). While digestion and indigestion might seem to be contradictory processes, for Luisa each is an element of self-narration. In the end, Luisa comes full-circle by recuperating that which she has expelled and aborted over time as the material of her autobiography. This circular return brings us back to the image of the onion. Whereas Eve's apple had uniform, opaque flesh, Luisa's onion has multiple, translucent layers. Similarly, *Autoritratto* is not a linear depiction of a cohesive self, but the constant re-cuperation and re-elaboration of discourses of the self created across time. Like the layers of the onion, the fragmented, non-linear chapters of the autobiography demonstrate how past and present discourses not only run concentrically around each other, but also may be seen and read through each other. To arrive at the center of the apple is to arrive at a core; to arrive at the center of the onion is to find an empty void. A search for subjectivity that seeks to constantly pull back the layers of identity to reveal one woman hidden beneath another, or which attempts to pull away and negate layers of the past, such as that of the mother or the legacy of 1968, would ultimately arrive at a void. Instead, Luisa's autobiography looks across the layers in an attempt to see one woman "through another." Thus, Luisa ultimately determines that identity is not constructed through the peeling of the onion, an unraveling of layers as she once thought, but through the addition of layers, of revised discourses that build on and incorporate the past.

Notes

1. Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina and Lucia Re, eds. *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia. Prospettive interdisciplinari*. Bologna: CLUEB, 2005. 8.

2. Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran take Cixous' idea of "scenes of the apple" as a starting point in their introduction to *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Women's Writing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

3. Passerini, Luisa. *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy, 1968*. Trans. Lisa Erdberg. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1996. 3.

4. The name Passerini will refer to the author of *Autoritratto* while Luisa will refer to the character/narrator.

5. Duncan, Derek. "Corporeal Histories: The Autobiographical Bodies of Luisa Passerini." *The Modern Language Review* 93.2 (April 1998): 372.

6. Steiner, Rudolf. *Problems of Nutrition*. Bell's Pond: The Anthroposophic Press, 1969. <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/Nutrit_index.html>

7. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche establishes a link between intellect and digestion: "A strong and successful man digests his experiences (his actions, including his evil actions) as he digests his meals, even when he has to swallow down some hard mouthfuls. If he is "unable to finish with" an experience, this kind of indigestion is just as much a physiological matter as the other one—and in many cases, in fact, only one of the consequences of that other one." *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Ian Johnson. <<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/genealogy3.htm>>

8. Parati, Graziata. "Luisa Passerini's Autoritratto di gruppo. Personalizing Theory." *Public History / Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 132

9. Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. 2.

10. Skubal, Susanne. *Word of Mouth: Food and Fiction after Freud*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 6.