

# Eating with Barthes: The Comfort of Touching the Real

Sophie Eager

‘no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as  
much flavor as possible.’<sup>1</sup>

Roland Barthes, *Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France*

What does it mean, for Barthes, to write with flavour? How close can reading words bring us to the experience of eating food? In this article, I consider textual encounters with food and eating in Barthes’ work as a means of becoming aware of the body as we read, and as demonstrating a particular lightness of contact with sensual experience. I suggest that, for Barthes, awareness of the body is also a way of finding comfort, but only in fleeting moments, and in a way that makes no assumptions about its effects on the reader. Further, while comfort would seem contrary to the polemical tone of Barthes’ earlier writing that uses food,<sup>2</sup> it is less surprising when considered in the light of his return to unmediated forms of experience in ‘naturalness’, as he describes in the figure of the spiral in *The Preparation of the Novel*.<sup>3</sup> Barthes’ use of food in his work is therefore comparable, in my reading, to that of contemporary food writers who use food as a way of engaging their readers’ corporeal interest, and encouraging them to experience the text through the body. This comparison nonetheless serves to draw out the specificity of Barthes’ mode of engaging with food, which, much like the rest of his writing, is hard to pin down. As the epigraph suggests, Barthes uses reference to sensual experience in his writing as a way sidestepping the ‘will-to-possess’ [*vouloir-saisir*] inherent in non-neutral forms of writing.

By using his writing to make us attend to the body – as something outside language – Barthes blurs the distinction between theorization and experience, and demonstrates an idea without describing it directly. This indirectness entails that Barthes’ writing on food can offer the reader a particular kind of comfort by bringing the body into the text, and encouraging

us to experience the pleasure of reading in these fragmented moments of contact with a Barthesian notion of the real. I use the terms ‘comfort’ and ‘the real’ in order to draw out underlying trends in Barthes’ writing and render them more explicit. I understand the real through Barthes’ tangential use of it across his work – as implying a temporary escape from ideology, combined with a presence to the experience of the body – and comfort through its Latin root *confortare*; to give strength or support.<sup>4</sup>

Discussion of the use of food in Barthes’ writing appears only briefly in the broader criticism of his work. In *Leftovers: Eating, Drinking and Rethinking with Case Studies from Post-war French Fiction* (2019), Ruth Cruickshank refers to Barthes as ‘one of the post-war French thinkers most readily associated with food’, and gives detailed analysis of how Barthes reveals the myths harboured in our signifying practices relating to food.<sup>5</sup> After careful reference to the different foodstuffs mentioned in *Mythologies* and *Empire of Signs*, Cruickshank also points to the way Barthes’ later references to food involve ‘embracing symbolic uncertainty, allusive potential and interpretative plurality’.<sup>6</sup> While *Leftovers* offers an excellent overview of Barthes’ use of food, then, it does not follow through on its practical implications, and remains at a distance from the process of eating, to which I aim to come closer in the present article.

Knut Stene-Johansen has also written briefly on the importance of food in Barthes’ work, highlighting Barthes’ interest in the ritual and rhythm of meals.<sup>7</sup> Following Barthes’ call for an ‘encyclopaedia of food’ in *How to Live Together*, Stene-Johansen draws on his own literary examples to support his claims about the prominence of food in literature as a way of exploring ‘both ethical and aesthetical relationships’.<sup>8</sup> In a 2002 article, Ariane Pfenninger considers the parallels between writing and food in Barthes’ work, and the place of pleasure in both practices, but again, like Cruickshank and Stene-Johansen, she does not consider how writing about food brings us closer to the experience of eating it.<sup>9</sup> For these critics, Barthes uses reference to food as a means to an end, and this attitude is repeated throughout studies of Barthes that acknowledge his interest in food. In *La Révolte intime* (2009), the publication resulting from her seminars on Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Julia Kristeva shows how Barthes’ use of food in his theory is an established structure of his style, and an important feature of this early text. In her analysis of ‘Wine and Milk’, she notes how Barthes uses the familiar sensual experience of drinking wine to capture his reader’s attention, but describes how it serves primarily as

an introductory step before a *retournement* that reveals the ideological element at work behind their enjoyment of the drink.<sup>10</sup>

In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1999), Kristin Ross also discusses Barthes' use of food in his work, but only in order to aid her analysis of the rapid modernisation and Americanisation of France in the second half of the twentieth century, where she describes how Barthes uses food to express his distaste for these rapid changes in French culture at the time. Although Barthes' use of these foods in his explication of myth reveals a fondness for sensual detail, Ross notes that, 'in the end, they made him a bit queasy',<sup>11</sup> and she quotes Barthes' use of the word 'nausea' to describe his distaste for the stereotypical.<sup>12</sup>

Jean-Pierre Richard has also commented on Barthes' use of the culinary in his writing, but again in a way that engages only superficially with the qualities of foodstuffs, presenting them as continuous with other forms of sensory experience that do not engage the physical body, particularly the mouth, in the same way. In *Roland Barthes, dernier paysage* (2006), in a manner true to Barthes' own mode of criticism, Richard picks up on recurrent conceptual figures in Barthes' texts that engage our sensory awareness. These include the mixed weave of iridescent fabric, the shock of the metal ball bouncing off the wall of a games table, as well as the changing texture of mayonnaise as the water and oil emulsify.<sup>13</sup> However, it seems strange to me that Richard does not pick up more on the recurrence of food in Barthes' writing. In his analysis of Stendhal, Flaubert, Fromentin and the Goncourt brothers in *Littérature et sensation* of 1956,<sup>14</sup> Richard wrote about how there is a lot of eating in Flaubert's writing.<sup>15</sup> While Richard acknowledges Barthes' sensitivity towards 'all things culinary', he also states that Barthes is less interested in food than other writers, and could have gone further in his use of it: 'R.B. made a more limited use of taste attributes, at least in literature'.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Philippe Roger has pointed out the importance of the desire produced by a bowl of figs in one of the earliest texts Barthes wrote. In a re-imagining of Plato's *Crito* which Barthes wrote as a student, Alcibiades convinces Socrates to escape by 'letting the sun play on a plate of ripe figs'.<sup>17</sup> Roger quotes Barthes on how this sensual experience was more effective than the other disciples' attempts to convince Socrates through reason as it produced desire and therefore appealed the body instead the mind: 'Alcibiades' figs tip the balance of Socrates' decision by a sensual appeal [...] potent enough to counterbalance the philosopher's will to obey the Law'.<sup>18</sup>

Fleeting moments of intense sensual experience therefore serve as a way to ground our experience in bodily awareness and our sense of contact with the world and other people.

In a wider academic context, Barthes' 1961 article 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' features in the anthropological reader, *Food and Culture*, edited by Caroline Counihan and Penny van Esterik,<sup>19</sup> and is regularly cited alongside work by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas.<sup>20</sup> However, a comprehensive discussion of his use of food in his writing that follows through on the practical implications of eating and engaging with food has yet to be written.

This is a significant gap in studies of Barthes' work, especially given his own awareness of the power of this sensuality to engage the reader in the text. In his analysis of Phillippe Sollers, he proposes an injunction for making writing readable by relating it to the senses: 'the sensual is always readable. If you want to be read, write sensually'.<sup>21</sup> In Barthes' earlier work, such as the *Mythologies*, this corporeal engagement enabled through 'writing sensually' introduces ideological critique, as is argued by the critics discussed above. However, his later work also suggests the possibility of direct contact with the world through the body; what he calls the return to 'naturalness'.<sup>22</sup> In Barthes' texts of the 1970s, this 'naturalness' is possible in a momentary release from the need to make sense, and provides a way of stepping outside the restrictive paradigm of meaning he describes in *The Neutral*. Throughout his career, he suggests the possibility of direct pleasure in sensual descriptions that bear no ideological baggage, such as he finds in haiku.<sup>23</sup> In order to argue for the prominence of these moments of direct pleasure through food, which are more concerned with the individual's immediate existential state than with ideology, I invoke my own definition of 'the real' in relation to Barthes' work, building upon discussions of the term from throughout his writing, and from secondary criticism. It must be noted that what I am defining as Barthes' notion of the real is only accessible in ephemeral moments; in 'The Reality Effect' he describes it as 'only fragmentary, erratic, confined to "details"'.<sup>24</sup> It manifests, in Claude Coste's terms, as a willing stupidity to believe in unmediated access to experience,<sup>25</sup> and for Nikolaj Lübecker's as 'a momentary realization' which 'is immanent and can be realized instantaneously'.<sup>26</sup> As we will see, Barthes' way of describing eating together involves a sense of fleeting contact with texture and taste rather than eating as consumption and subsumption of the foodstuff. As I discuss in the main body

of the article, eating together in Barthes is a particularly intimate form of tactful contact that involves the sensory organs of the mouth and face; what Barthes calls in *The Pleasure of the Text* the 'human muzzle'.<sup>27</sup>

This argument is an extension of Barthes' own justification of the presence of food in his work. As stated above, Barthes usually presents food as a gateway to a theoretical idea – most notably in the *Mythologies*, where we encounter reblochon, margarine, milk, and steak and chips, as a way of understanding how ideology is concealed in second order signifying systems.<sup>28</sup> I explore this use of foods as a means to an end, building on the claims of existing critical writing on Barthes' use of food outlined above, in the first section of the article. However, in the subsequent sections, I then enact my own version of the 'spiral' to which Barthes himself refers to consider how writing about food can also be a means of making contact and feeling a sense of connection to others. Reflecting on food leads us to reflect on proximity or distance from others who do or do not share our tastes, and of expressing a sense of belonging or exclusion. Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of how food preparation structures society in the first three volumes of his *Mythologiques* provides a way of conceptualising this inclusion/exclusion.<sup>29</sup> His writing suggests that different ways of preparing food – raw or cooked, boiled, roasted or smoked, as well as the different technology used in each of these processes – creates a differential system that allows for the categorisation of different social groups, and for him to point out the similarities and differences between them. Barthes too is interested, especially in his earlier work, in who is excluded from practices of food. Like Lévi-Strauss, he considers different ways of cooking in his analysis of the steak in 'Steak and Chips', and how this distinguishes different socioeconomic groups from each other.<sup>30</sup> However, in Barthes' writing, even if we are financially or socially excluded from a food stuff, his sensual description of it still engages the reader's body and invites them to recognise the experience. Barthes' writing on food is therefore more immersive than Lévi-Strauss', and in his later work he seems to be appealing to a more naïve interaction with food that brings the reader comfort in pleasurable sensual descriptions, and implies the possibility of sharing this comfort with others.

Barthes' continued concern for pleasure and the presence of the body in writing therefore suggests that there is more to his interest in food than as a metric for understanding language and meaning, and I ultimately conclude that his focus on the experience of food supersedes the interest in ideology in

his earlier work. Firstly, though, I consider how Barthes uses food as a way of describing writing and painting, and therefore as a means rather than an end in itself. In the second section, I nuance this claim by considering how food, for Barthes, is a way of suggesting ‘mouth touch’, and of bringing the reader into fleeting contact with the real, as I define it in relation to Barthes’ work. Finally, I consider how this contact can constitute a kind of comfort, and the way Barthes’ writing keeps this contact light and mobile.

### Writing with Flavour, but Not Swallowing

In Barthes’ 1970 text, *Empire of Signs*, food appears throughout in the form of sukiyaki, tempura, cut cucumbers, sticky rice and miso soup. Here, the lightness entailed in Barthes’ non-consumption of the food serves the ideological role of representing his ideal version of writing and reading, where the writer and reader can move freely between the different fragments of text or meal. For example, Barthes sees an illustration of his favourite structuring device for texts, the fragment, at work in the composition of a Japanese meal, where the eater can move freely between different foodstuffs at their own will and is not forced to follow a particular order of consumption. It is the fragmentary nature of the meal that prevents any one foodstuff from dominating, allowing the eater to assemble its different elements as they please, ‘taking up here a pinch of vegetables, there of rice, and over there of condiment, here a sip of soup, according to a free alternation, in the manner of a (specifically Japanese) graphic artist’.<sup>31</sup> This ‘taking up’ [*puisant ici*] serves as a metaphor for a way Barthes’ text might be read, the reader moving lightly between its fragments in the order they choose.<sup>32</sup> As object of composition, food therefore also serves as a metaphor for the text and language in Barthes’ work, whether in the juicy steak served to Louis XVIII’s preference as an analogy for literary semiology,<sup>33</sup> or in the head rush and subsequent slump induced by champagne as an analogy for languages that gain significance after their first hearing.<sup>34</sup> Yet, for all his description of observing and handling the different elements in the opening pages of *Empire of Signs*, Barthes gives no mention of swallowing the foods before him. Japanese food is more notable for possessing the particular properties that Barthes admires: clarity and divisibility. On a different reading, the actions of the eater in the first few

fragments are therefore rather like those of a picky child, poking at the different dishes on the plate with the chopsticks but refusing to consume them.<sup>35</sup> While Barthes does talk of how the bubbling broth of the sukiyaki needs replenishing,<sup>36</sup> the actual ingestion of its contents is left unspoken.

The parallel between food and writing presented in *Empire*, or writing and food as painting, appears again in Barthes' later work in his discussion of Bernard Réquichot. The texture of paint on Réquichot's canvas is compared to that of melting and burning cheese when preparing raclette. The wheel of cheese is exposed to a heated element, causing its surface to bubble and swell, before it is scraped atop a plate, and the process is begun again. Barthes describes with relish the changing texture of the cheese's surface when exposed to the heat: 'it bubbles, it bulges, it sizzles thickly; the knife gently scrapes this liquid blister, this liquid supplement, from its form; it falls, like a white cowpat; it hardens, it yellows on the plate; with the knife, the amputated area is smoothed out; and the process then begins again'.<sup>37</sup> This passage is also strikingly similar to the final words of *The Pleasure of the Text*, revealing how both texts foreground the experience of the body in writing and reading. There again, a list of verbs connoting texture and contact are introduced by the indefinite pronoun: 'it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes'.<sup>38</sup> In *The Pleasure of the Text*, these verbs convey the grain of the voice – 'the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat' – and therefore make us aware of the body that produces the text.<sup>39</sup> While the accumulation of sticky adjectives in the *Mythologies* is nauseating, the excess of verbs in this passage instead suggests vibrations passing through the body, an effect heightened by the use of velar consonants which engage the tongue and soft palette.<sup>40</sup> When Barthes talks about the 'grain of the throat', then, this grain is produced in the language of the text itself, recreating the corporeal experience of the grain through vibrations in the throat. Using the example of cinema in this passage, Barthes describes how this bodily involvement brings the voice of the actor, embodied in the breath, the roughness of the voice, the flesh of the lips, the whole 'human muzzle', into his ear, producing a contact between bodies

While writing about food is a way of writing about language, then, the sensuality of Barthes' writing reminds us of the presence of the body in the text, and contact that can be made through the sensory organs of the mouth and throat. If Barthes focusses on the mouth as the site of communication, however, rather than of chewing and swallowing, it would seem that his

primary use of food and sensuality is as an exploration of the functioning of writing and signification. In the case of himself consuming unpleasant food, for example his description of eating rancid couscous in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes does not dwell for long on the feeling of the mouthful.<sup>41</sup> While he describes picking politely at the food, the experience of the *ranci* is most of all a way of introducing Fourier's ideas on society and values. We see therefore that Barthes uses flavour as a way of presenting ideology, tainted by both desire and disgust. While in *Empire* and 'Réquichot' he uses food to talk about writing, this use cannot be extended to every instance of food in his work. However, it does always serve as a way of bringing the body into the reading process. This entails that the presence of food serves a further purpose; it allows us to make contact with the real through the body, which I will explore more detail in the next section.

This not swallowing would be less striking were it not for Barthes' love for the writing of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, expressed in his preface to the 1973 French edition of *The Physiology of Taste*. Brillat-Savarin himself is not a writer who could be accused of restraint, and he reflects at length about the importance of swallowing in the process of consumption. In *The Physiology*, he describes a man eating a peach, who, while initially pleased by its odour and the sensation of freshness and acidity, only experiences the full joy of its taste once he has swallowed the mouthful:

it is not until the instant of swallowing, when the mouthful passes under his nasal channel, that the full aroma is revealed to him; and this completes the sensation which a peach can cause. Finally, it is not until it has been swallowed that the man, considering what he has just experienced, will say to himself, 'Now there is something really delicious!'<sup>42</sup>

It is significant here too in the comparison to Barthes, given the reference to the 'human muzzle' above, that the mouth is site of both pleasure and language, but in the case of swallowing the peach, the bodily experience comes first. Part of the significance of Barthes' use of food in his writing is the way it privileges the experience of the body as something outside language, and this example from Brillat-Savarin confirms the same order of priority. The sensations of the mouth and throat as organs of touch and taste therefore come before their role as organs of expression and judgement, a temporal ordering



that mimics the engagement of the body in the *Mythologies*, where sensation comes before ideological critique.

The comparison to Brillat-Savarin nonetheless foregrounds the particular style of Barthes' use of food in his writing, where, for all the sensuality his writing deploys to engage the reader's body, his interest is more in the touch of food than its consumption. In 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', Barthes fixates on the category in American food of the crisp or crispy – 'everything that crunches, crackles, grates, sparkles, from potato chips to certain brands of beer'<sup>43</sup> – which prioritizes 'mouthfeel' over the French dichotomy, based on flavour, between sweet and savoury.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the steak in *Mythologies* is represented more through texture – juicy, or moist under its charred crust – than through its taste or odour.<sup>45</sup> Instead of swallowing, Barthes' use of food therefore engages the reader's interest through the texture each food suggests. The first fragments of *Empire*, even if they make no mention of swallowing, offer loving descriptions of the texture of different Japanese foodstuffs: the simultaneous stickiness and detachability of the rice (like snowflakes that can deconglomerate) and the oxymoron of the soup's 'clear density',<sup>46</sup> using food in his writing to activate his readers' bodies and make us aware of momentary access to the real as enabled through the senses.

The contrast to Flaubert that arises from Jean-Pierre Richard's work is helpful to provide a point of comparison to prove Barthes' restraint. In relation to *Empire*, I described how the food in Barthes' writing goes unswallowed, instead being consumed with the eyes, and therefore never taken inside the body. The same cannot be said of consumption in Flaubert, where food is consumed with relish: consider in *Madame Bovary* the old Duke de Laverdière at the dinner table at the Vaubyessard ball with drops of gravy falling from his lips; Emma Bovary stuffing arsenic into her mouth in Monsieur Homais' cellar in order to end her own life; or the same Monsieur Homais and l'Abbé Bournisien tucking into cheese and brioche as they sit across from each other over Emma's casket.<sup>47</sup> We see that Flaubert's writing, too, treads the line between desire and disgust, using his characters' consumption of food as a way of confirming their carnal nature and the bovine qualities suggested by the surname of his eponymous heroine. It is striking when comparing Barthes' use of food to these examples that Flaubert's characters can swallow, and that food represents something more material than the fragments of the text or the bodily gestures of writing. While he seems

genuinely excited and stimulated by the food's physical properties, Barthes never describes engaging in its actual consumption. We never catch Barthes in the act of swallowing, even though he both professes and demonstrates an acute interest for food and representations of it throughout his writing career.<sup>48</sup>

What emerges in Barthes' writing, then, is a different kind of encounter with food that focuses more on the modality of touch-as-flavour, rather than of smell and taste as described by Brillat-Savarin. It would be too invasive for Barthes' writing, like Brillat-Savarin's does, to enter inside the body of the reader like the *bolus* of the masticated peach. Rather than penetrate the reader's body, his descriptions of food instead remind us of the way we can access the real through corporeal experience. This notion of the real as suggested in Barthes' writing, which I aim to bring into clearer focus here, is tenuous and momentary, and his use of food to suggest the possibility of immediate contact with it is potentially problematic. At points Barthes claims that writing about sensual experience cannot put us in touch with the real. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, he states that there is a gap between writing and disgust, as 'when written, shit does not have an odour': the Marquis de Sade can fill his descriptions with excrement and 'we receive not the slightest whiff, only the abstract sign of something unpleasant'.<sup>49</sup> In Barthes' discussion of the decadent, debauched scenes in Sade, even the descriptions that would most involve the reader's body in representations of corporeal experience are a 'fact of language' that is opposed to the real. Language, as abstracted signs, is instead presented as a way of creating distance from the real: 'Language has this property of denying, ignoring, dissociating reality [...]. "Reality" and the book are *cut apart*: they are not linked by any obligation'.<sup>50</sup>

Yet examples abound in Barthes' own writing of descriptions that contradict the claim that writing has no smell or taste. In an earlier version of the 1954 text, *Michelet*, from 1951, Barthes describes how, for Michelet, bodies from the past are brought back to life, and this 'resuscitation' in turn activates the reader's body by asking them to make 'some kind of physical judgement' of the historical figures Michelet describes; what Barthes calls 'these character-substances'.<sup>51</sup> This judgement is made according to feeling rather than moral evaluation, and is therefore an encounter between bodies past and present that brings us uncomfortably close to the nauseating corporality of Michelet's 'portraits':

This is how bodies are resurrected, when, from the depths of history, they can still disgust and engage the historian – and his reader – in an intimate repulsion, of a vegetative or existential order [...]. One is always an accomplice to Michelet's portraits, as one is poetically to the objects whose underlying substance is revealed to us.<sup>52</sup>

The capacity for disgust brings us uncomfortably close to the characters Michelet describes, who are presented through their material composition, often in terms of substances that are flaccid, soft and fatty. Further on in this passage, Napoleon is described as achieving the sickening density of tallow or lard, and Barthes quotes Michelet directly in describing Philippe V's wife as 'stuffed with butter, with parmesan'.<sup>53</sup> Barthes' own writing therefore suggests that the 'abstract signs' of language can produce both revulsion and appetite. At these moments in Barthes' writing, language, while it operates on the modality of vision and hearing, can nonetheless relate closely to touch and flavour.

In *Carnal Thoughts*, Vivian Sobchack describes this capacity of language to suggest touch and flavour through the synaesthesia experienced when reading a recipe book, where we undergo the experience 'of *tasting* the recipe as we *read* it'.<sup>54</sup> She points out that, even if we engage in reading through our visual system, given the embodied nature of reading, this input is inherently connected to the other processes occurring in the body as we read: 'My eyes read and comprehend the recipe cognitively, but they are not abstracted from my body, which can – albeit in a transformed and somewhat confused act of gustatory sense-making – taste the meal'.<sup>55</sup> Later in the text Sobchack confirms this idea by her move away from sensual descriptions as metaphors into something more real that 'touches' us in the way I described above:

Once we understand that vision is informed by and informs our other senses in a dynamic structure that is not necessarily or always sensually hierarchical, it is no longer metaphorical to say that we 'touch' a film or that we are 'touched' by it [...]. We could say that it is only in afterthought that our sensual descriptions of movies seem metaphorical.<sup>56</sup>

Reading about food as ‘visualising’ in Barthes’ work is therefore also a way of attending to our other sensory modalities, allowing us to experience the flavour of writing even if the food itself is never swallowed.

### **Back to Nature: Corporeal Contact with the Real**

In this next section, I want to consider in more detail the argument I alluded to in the previous section; that reading about food in Barthes’ work can constitute a kind of contact with ‘the real’. As a means to understand how Barthes uses the body in his writing to suggest the possibility of forms of contact that precede ideology, I first consider the evolutionary backstory of our senses of touch and taste. In his discussion of the development of the different senses in humans and other vertebrates, André Leroi-Gourhan refers to the importance of the face, in particular the lips, nose and mouth, which are the fundamental organs of the sense of touch. The sensitivity of this area of the muzzle is, in many animals, heightened by appendages like feelers or whiskers that further increase its receptiveness to contact, and which remind us of our evolutionary inheritance in relation to this part of the body:

Tactile organs are very densely concentrated in the anterior facial zone and somewhat less so at the extremity of the forelimb; they are more sparsely scattered over the rest of the body. The lips are the seat of the subtlest sensitivity to temperatures, vibrations, and contact; their sensory equipment is often reinforced by palps, for example, as in fish, or by long stiff whiskers as in felines and rodents.<sup>57</sup>

Lips, as the ‘seat of sensitivity’, are therefore of great importance for the sense of touch; a fact that might be forgotten more easily with humans, for whom it is assumed that touch is experienced primarily through the hands.<sup>58</sup> In the first book of *Gesture and Speech, Technics and Language*, Leroi-Gourhan describes at length how our evolution into bipedal – rather than quadrupedal – organisms, and our consequent distancing from the ground, freed up the hands for other motor activities, and increased the expressivity that is possible through the face. Nonetheless, his discussion of this development reminds us that the face and hands developed from the quadrupedal animal’s muzzle and

forelimbs. As Georges Bataille writes in *Mouth*, in animals, which begin with a muzzle and end with a tail, the mouth functions as the prow (the part that sticks out in front and confronts other animals in its path): 'it is the most living part, in other words, the most terrifying for neighbouring animals'.<sup>59</sup> As we saw above, Barthes is interested in the sense of touch produced by the grain of the voice, which itself is a product of the 'human muzzle'. This reminder of the body's evolutionary past calls to mind the incredible sensitivity of the muzzle-mouth, which, as the front of the animal, is the first part of the body to confront the world and other beings in it. Added to this is the sense that the animal mouth also performs many of the functions that were later outsourced to the human hand; it is the animal's way of holding and grasping, and therefore demonstrates the same capacity for grabbing and possessing that can be performed by human hands. The muzzle, as a concentration of hand and mouth, is therefore the ultimate organ of touch. The kind of contact that is made in the mouth is an even more intimate kind than that made by the hand, as it brings the object into the liminal space between the inside and outside of the body.

Furthermore, Leroi-Gourhan confirms the argument I am making through Barthes that awareness of the body comes before the use of language. Leroi-Gourhan describes how lip and mouth touching is less connected to figurative representations than touch through the hands or other parts of the body, which is more often used to analyse the way an object is extended in space; what he calls the 'analytic nature of tactile perception'.<sup>60</sup> While the body's touch relates to comfort and our insertion in space, and the hand's touch relates closely to the level of physiology, 'labial touch' is linked more to nutrition and affective bonding. In particular, he describes how, in gastronomy, our sense of smell is separate from sight and hearing as we cannot emit taste and smell in the same way as we can language. While, in theory, these experiences can be represented through language, in gastronomy this symbolisation requires 'too much substitution'.<sup>61</sup> Unlike the other arts, which are defined by the possibility of figurative representation, gastronomy escapes this possibility: 'it never reaches the symbolic level'.<sup>62</sup> Leroi-Gourhan therefore defines gastronomy, involving taste, smell, and awareness of the food's consistency, as 'this aesthetic-without-a-language'.<sup>63</sup> The touch of the lips and mouth specifically, combined with the power of our sense of smell, is accorded a specific status as producing experiences outside language. Writing about food, for Barthes, is another way of producing the momentary *punctum* of

writing that makes contact with the body.<sup>64</sup> What a focus on the 'human muzzle' as a way of engaging with food adds to the notion of *punctum* described in *Camera Lucida* is the intimacy of the sense of lip and mouth touch described by Leroi-Gourhan. The touch of the mouth and lips implied through Barthes' use of food in his work therefore suggests the possibility of a kind of contact with the body both outside of and enabled by language. This labial, lingual, laryngeal touch represents a way of establishing contact with the real through the mouth and throat, using both food and language.

Therefore, even if Barthes' writing about food does not include the act of swallowing in as much detail as Brillat-Savarin, is it undeniable that his descriptions of food evoke physical sensations in the body. In her analysis of the 1950s myths, Ross claims that the shift in Barthes' writing of the 1960s from analysing these everyday objects to his championing of Robbe-Grillet represents 'a retreat from the pleasures of greasy French fries as much as from the messiness of the real'.<sup>65</sup> While it is true that Barthes' turn to structuralism and textuality at the very end of the 1950s does render his writing more scientific and less sensual, Ross points out that his interest in material things nonetheless continues:

But even under the regime of rigour, the old pleasures (the 'loved' books by Balzac, the sensuous material feel of things) creep back; from all the pages of New Novelist prose Barthes read in the early 1960s, what seems to stay with him, almost nostalgically, are the objects, the eyeglasses, erasers, coffeemakers, prefab sandwiches, cigarettes [...] Objects cleansed of all human significance, of course, but objects in fact not so different from the objects that fill the pages of *Mythologies*.<sup>66</sup>

These 'objects cleansed of all human significance' suggest the possibility of an innocent encounter with the very same objects that Barthes revealed as harbouring naturalised cultural myths in his earlier work. This continued interest in material objects suggests an underlying tendency in Barthes' writing to look for ways to make contact with these objects, and to reflect on the objects' textures and the pleasure to which they can give rise.

Later in his career, particularly in the last texts he wrote, he comes to rely on this immediate form of engagement as a means of describing and creating affect, both for himself and for his readers. In *The Preparation of the Novel*, he uses the structure of the spiral, one to which he often makes recourse in his later work, to justify a return to simplicity. Using a well-known example

from Zen Buddhism about being present in our experience of the world, he describes how the subject undergoes different phases of understanding in order to achieve enlightenment. Having performed a secondary ‘stage of interpretation’ on an initially naive understanding of the object, a third stage of understanding restores this naivety in the form of the natural, as demonstrated through the encounter with the real instantiated through haiku:

a Zen parable says, initially: the mountains are mountains; second stage (let’s call it the initiation): the mountains aren’t mountains anymore; third stage: the mountains are mountains again → It spirals back → It could be said: first moment: that of Stupidity (we all have our share of it), moment of arrogant, anti-intellectualist tautology, *a spade’s a spade*, etc.: second moment: that of interpretation; third moment: that of naturalness, of *Wu-shi*, of haiku.<sup>67</sup>

In this discussion, the spiral explains the simplicity of the haiku as pure notation to which no further explication can be added, but I argue that a similar kind of ‘spiralling back’ can be justified in the case of experiencing food. If in Barthes’ early work he is critical of this ‘natural’ attitude towards phenomena in the world, this passage shows that there is scope to interpret his use of food throughout his writing in the same way we experience a haiku: as a point of direct access to the reality of our shared world.

Moreover, for Barthes, food as an experience of the real involves a corporeal knowledge that goes beyond differences of personal preference. Even if we find different sections of *The Physiology* stimulating based on the kind of food Brillat-Savarin is discussing, we can still be aware of our bodies reacting to the representation provided. Barthes describes his experience of this moment of realisation in *The Pleasure of the Text* when reading a passage from Stendhal. In this case, it is not the foods described in particular – including milk, cheese made from Chantilly cream, jam from Bar-le-Duc, and strawberries in sugar – that bring him pleasure, given that he does not like milk or sweet dishes. He therefore realises that there is something else going on when an author writes about food where its very materiality is irrefutable. There is an excitement for Barthes in reading about a *salade d’oranges au rhum* in a text from 1791, just like one could find in a restaurant today, because it confirms the ‘stubbornness’ of objects in their ‘being there’.<sup>68</sup> This specific form of representation of things in the novel echoes his earlier essay, ‘The

Reality Effect' (1968), and his description of extraneous, insignificant descriptive details in the novel as 'a kind of narrative *luxury*' that cannot be recuperated by structural analysis.<sup>69</sup> In this text, Barthes explores the possibility of disrupting the tripartite structure of signifier, signified and referent by removing the signified entirely. This disruption would enable the kind of contact with the real I have claimed is enabled through Barthes' writing about food, where writing sets up 'the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier'.<sup>70</sup> I also think it is not too bold to claim that most readers will find rum and oranges more affectively stimulating as represented in a text than the detail of the barometer in 'The Reality Effect' given the multimodal nature of our experience of food, which in turn produces a richer affective reaction when we come across it in textual form.

An interest in this stubbornness of the 'being there' of objects, which enables a momentary encounter with the real, is explored again in *The Preparation of the Novel*, where, as we have already seen, the final turn of the spiral makes possible a return to 'naturalness'. Here, Barthes proposes a way of categorising different representations through 'a differential in referential resonance depending on the words used', by which different descriptions will stimulate the reader to different degrees.<sup>71</sup> While in this passage he is nominally talking about the importance of seasons and the weather to the mood of a haiku, he also gives the specific example of the stimulation of food in novels as being high up in his differential. The intriguing example he offers to corroborate the power of food when represented in a text is the scene from Ian Fleming's 1959 novel *Goldfinger*, where the protagonist, Bond, dines on crab and pink champagne.<sup>72</sup> In her footnote to this passage, Kate Briggs includes Barthes' oral addition to his prepared notes, which confirms the impact this passage from Fleming's text had upon him: 'The vividness of that short menu is still very sharp in my mind'.<sup>73</sup> There is something pleasing and intimate for the reader of Barthes, whether they frequently consume pink champagne or not, at Barthes' sense of wonder at this specific representation. Moreover, as the passage quoted above from *The Pleasure of the Text* shows, the 'being there' of the food can still resonate with a reader who has never experienced the foods being described.

While Barthes' pleasant response to this menu from *Goldfinger*, and his surprise when encountering an orange and rum salad in a text, do not on first viewing amount to a sense of comfort, they are nonetheless classifiable as scenes that involve corporeal knowledge. Even when represented in the text,



these foods have the material reality of the ‘being there’ he describes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. In the final section, then, I want to consider how this sense of being confronted with the ‘real’ of the body through food constitutes an offer to share the experience described in the text, and therefore of feeling a sense of solidarity and connection with other readers of the same scene.

### Moments of Comfort

Comfort might seem like a strange word to choose given the lightness and evasiveness with which Barthes’ writing engages the body through food and flavour. However, if we understand it through Barthes’ notion of the real – as fleeting and fragmentary – then these moments of comfort emerge only temporarily when confronted with specific details in the text that touch the reader like the *punctum* of the photograph. Equally, the apparent gentleness of comfort should be contrasted to the Latin root of the word, *confortare*, to give strength. Comfort is therefore another form of the ‘strong states’ through which Barthes describes his notion of the neutral, and is passionate rather than indifferent.<sup>74</sup> While in *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes seems dismissive of the kind of comfort offered to the reader by the *text of pleasure*, highlighting the strength of feeling involved in *comfort* (my stress on the second syllable) presents this response to the text in more active terms, and these ephemeral moments of contact with the real are therefore different in quality from the ‘*comfortable* practice of reading’.<sup>75</sup> Comfort, too, can be radical, especially in a literary climate where the default mode of criticism is often one of suspicion and restlessness.<sup>76</sup>

Barthes uses food in his writing to make us aware of the body, and I have argued that this awareness suggests the possibility of making direct but fleeting contact with the real. A further, consequent claim from this argument, based on the understanding of comfort detailed above, is that this awareness of the body, as generated through writing about food, is also a potential source of momentary solidarity for the reader. In this final section, I call upon contemporary Anglo-American food writing as offering shared comfort as an alternative way to understand the suggestion of ephemeral moments that are potentially free from the negative ideology of myth, which puts us in contact with bodily experience. Popular food writing, like that of the twentieth-

century American writer M. F. K. Fisher, invites us to commune around it, sharing meals, memories, or recipes, and therefore reactivating an original mode of being together through food and reminding us of our affective bonds.<sup>77</sup> The proliferation of food writing in the form of memoirs in recent years testifies to the impact and ongoing popularity of this genre of text, and proves how central food can be to an understanding of one's own body and its desires. Writing that is unapologetically sentimental,<sup>78</sup> is not reliant on systematic theoretical underpinning, and largely produced by women – by contemporary food writers like Rachel Roddy, Nigella Lawson, Ruby Tandoh, Ella Risbridger and Nigel Slater – captures the joy involved in the experience of food, and the drive to share this joy with others.<sup>79</sup> Equally, food memoirs that are more overtly political, like Michael W. Twitty's *The Cooking Gene*, present the experience of food as one that unifies rather than divides, and use writing about it as a way of bringing people together and reminding them of shared heritage.<sup>80</sup> Reading these authors alongside Barthes serves as a way of reminding us of the things we share, even if this reminder also involves a sense of separation and distance for the fact that food is not always innocent.

I claim that these texts offer comfort, then, but not in a wholly straightforward way, as it is still up to the reader to be receptive to this offer and take it up on their own terms, for which the form of the cookery book or food memoir is particularly apt. Ella Risbridger, whose 2019 food memoir *Midnight Chicken* recounts her recovery through food from a suicide attempt at age 21, describes writing and cooking recipes in terms that echo Fisher's in the oft-cited introduction to her autobiography, *The Gastronomical Me*; as asking for and conveying love, and fulfilling the desire for comfort.<sup>81</sup> Risbridger describes in her introduction her desire to convey, through her writing, the love she felt she needed while waiting to receive medical attention:

The recipes in this book have all been made and written with love. Proper love: you-are-not-alone, and let's-find-comfort-together-in-this-enormous-pan-of-paella sort of love. Practical, no-nonsense, honest love – that nevertheless makes time to hold your hand, and ask how you are, and listen to the answer. That is what I wanted in that waiting room.<sup>82</sup>

She describes how, in conveying this love, reading about cooking can provide *kummerspeck*, 'grief-bacon' or 'comfort eating'. Her writing is therefore offered

as a 'grief-bacon book' that can provide comfort reading in the same way the foods she describes offer comfort eating. Moreover, the form of these authors' writing about food, which is often divided into 'bite-size' fragments and interspersed with recipes, is structurally similar to the fragmented form of Barthes' own texts, encouraging the reader to engage in them non-chronologically and to 're-write' each fragment for themselves in their recreation of the recipe or re-appropriation of the experiences of food described. In turn, recipes are composed intertextually; fragments or ideas from one are dispersed among many others, and it is difficult to locate a point of origin for these fragments. We saw above how Barthes uses the verb 'puiser', translated as to dip into or pick at, to describe the light, non-possessive way of engaging with food and writing he prefers,<sup>83</sup> and this verb is also suitable for the way the reader engages in these forms of food writing. Therefore, while these texts are no doubt prone to reinforce the middle-class and culturally specific stereotypes around food that can alienate as well as include, their status as texts also gives them an open-endedness that accords well with Barthes' notion of literature. They provide a further elaboration of how writing can offer comfort to the reader while still maintaining their interpretative freedom, and demonstrate Barthes' point in relation to Sollers that sensuality is a particularly effective way of engaging the reader.

What comparison to these other forms of food writing remind us of, however, is the importance of the rhetorical strategies that Barthes employs to ensure that the comfort writing about food can provide remains light and mobile, and makes no particular claim upon the reader. Unlike 'prescriptive' forms of comfort reading, like that offered by Alain de Botton and other writers associated with his *School of Life*, the comfort Barthes' texts offer is ambiguous and inconclusive.<sup>84</sup> The evasive style of Barthes' writing means it indirectly suggests the possibility of the reader being comforted by it, and therefore leaves open their freedom of interpretation. Alongside this evasiveness, however, Barthes' writing about food suggests a way of engaging with the real through experiences of the body that can potentially produce strong feelings in the reader. Given the parallels that can be drawn to other food writers' use of food in their work, I have presented this strong feeling in response to reading Barthes as providing fleeting forms of comfort: giving us strength and supporting us, even if we did not know we needed it.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill & Wang: 1983), p. 478.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly in the *Mythologies* (1957) and 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' (1961).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> My invocation of comfort as a lens through which to consider the reading experience has also been much informed by Jürgen Pieters' recent publication, *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Pieters describes the 'interlocking histories' (p. 13) of literature and consolation, presenting a historically grounded argument for the power of literature to console. He also invokes Donald D. Winnicott's notion of the transitional object, which the infant uses to sooth themselves in the absence of their caregiver, as an analogy for the way some books can sooth the reader in moments of grief or pain.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Cruickshank, *Leftovers: Eating, Drinking and Re-thinking with Case Studies from Post-war French Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Cruickshank, *Leftovers*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Knut Stene-Johansen, 'Nourriture/Food', in *Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual, and the Community*, ed. by Knut Stene-Johansen, Christian Refsum and Johan Schimanski (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), pp. 255-66.

<sup>8</sup> Stene-Johansen, 'Nourriture/Food', p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Pfenninger, 'A Table avec Roland Barthes', *Romance Notes*, 42.2 (2009): 243-50.

<sup>10</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolte intime: Pouvoirs et limites de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> As cited in François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, vol. 1 (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, *Roland Barthes, dernier paysage* (Paris: Verdier, 2006), pp. 10, 25-26, 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> A text Barthes reviewed for *Esprit* in November 1955: 'sa critique pose l'œuvre comme la prolifération d'une imagination corporelle, le produit d'une dialectique menée entre les objets, leur hauteur et leur substance, et le propre corps de l'écrivain'. Roland Barthes, 'Du Nouveau en critique', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. I, p. 622. Further references to the *Œuvres complètes* will be given in the form of *OC*, followed by the volume and page numbers.

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, *Littérature et sensation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1956), p. 131; translation mine.

<sup>16</sup> Richard, *Roland Barthes*, p. 43; translation mine.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Roger, 'Barthes' Frenchness' in *Interdisciplinary Barthes*, ed. by Diana Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Roger, 'Barthes' Frenchness', p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Counihan and Penny van Esterik, eds, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> For example, in Jane Dusselier, 'Understandings of Food as Culture', *Environmental History*, 14.2 (2009): 331-38.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sollers Writer*, trans. by Philip Thody (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 81. Briggs chooses to preserve the form of the original French word 'naturalité' in her translation; I understand this term as comparable to the more familiar 'naturalness'.

<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that Barthes' interest in food as a way of making contact with the real is closely related to how he experiences Japanese culture. For more on Barthes and *japonisme*, see Lucy O'Meara, 'Japonisme and the Minimal Existence of the Cours', in *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 118-62.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Claude Coste, *Le Bêtise de Barthes* (Paris: Hourvari, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Nikolaj Lübecker, *Community, Myth and Recognition in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.129.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, in *OCI*, pp. 695, 705, 729, 730.

<sup>29</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit; De miel aux cendres; L'Origine des manières de tables* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1964, 1967 and 1968).

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Steak and Chips'm in *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991), p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> By invoking eating as a metaphor for reading and writing, Barthes is also building on a tradition that goes back at least as far as Seneca of comparing consuming language to consuming food. However, as I argue in this article, Barthes is more interested in touch than consumption, and his metaphorical use of food is therefore

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distinct in its superficiality, in the sense that it engages with surfaces and textures rather than internal processes and sensations.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, 'L'Aventure sémiologique', in *OC IV*, p. 525: 'On dit que le roi Louis XVIII, fin gourmet, se faisait cuire par son cuisinier plusieurs côtelettes empilées les uns sur les autres, dont il ne mangeait que la plus basse, qui avait ainsi reçu le jus filtré des autres. De la même façon, je voudrais que le moment présent de mon aventure sémiologique reçoive le suc des premiers et que le filtre soit, comme dans le cas des côtelettes royales, tissé de la matière même qui doit être filtrée [...] et que par conséquent on retrouve dans mon travail présent les pulsions qui ont animé tout le passé de cette aventure.'

<sup>34</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Lecture de Brillat-Savarin', in *OC IV*, p. 808: 'Certains langages sont comme le champagne: ils développent une signification postérieure à leur première écoute [...].'

<sup>35</sup> When discussing the movement of chopsticks, he uses the verb *chipoter*, to peck, or to eat very little, to describe the process of consumption; an action for which poking would be a less elegant but not inaccurate description.

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, *Empire*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Réquichot and his Body', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) p. 214; translation modified.

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 66.

<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that Richard Miller's translation, unlike Richard Howard's translation of the Réquichot text, preserves these sounds from the original French: 'ça granule, ça grésille, ça caresse, ça râpe, ça coupe: ça jouit'. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1970), p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste: Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, ed. and trans. by M. F. K. Fisher (New York: Vintage Classics, 2009), p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, p. 26. Note again here that the English translation does not preserve the velar consonants of the original French: 'tout ce qui crisse, craque, grince, pétille, des chips à telle marque de bière'. Roland Barthes, 'Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine', in *OC I*, p. 1110.

<sup>44</sup> 'Mouthfeel' is a term borrowed professional food tasting, where it is used to describe in detail the sensation of the foodstuff in the mouth, as distinct from a

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description of its taste. For example, in chocolate tasting, it is used to describe the creaminess or dryness of the chocolate, as well as the particular way it melts on the tongue.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Steak and Chips', p. 63: 'flat, edged with yellow, like the sole of a shoe, in cheap restaurants; thick and juicy in the bistros which specialize in it; cubic, with the core all moist throughout beneath a light charred crust, in haute cuisine'.

<sup>46</sup> Barthes, *Empire*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>47</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 44, 280, 297.

<sup>48</sup> There is therefore an argument for Barthes' prudishness concerning the body and food, which it is beyond the scope of this article to properly consider. While in his texts on Réquichot and Brillat-Savarin, Barthes shows some awareness of the inside of the body and the processes of digestion, his overall focus is more on the visual and buccal experiences of food than on the other end of its consumption. Barthes' resistance to the gut and excrement is made more striking when comparing his work to current interest on these aspects of bodily experience in contemporary French Studies. Key proponents of this emerging area of research include Manon Mathias, 'Recycling Excrement in Flaubert and Zola', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 54.2 (2018): 224-243; and Annabel Kim, 'The Excremental Poetics of Daniel Pennac's *Journal d'un corps*', *French Studies*, 73.3 (2019): 416-33 and 'Dans l'béton, dans la merde: Anne Garréta's Intractable Materiality', *Fixxion*, 21 (2020): 121-30.

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p. 137.

<sup>51</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Michelet, l'histoire et la mort', in *OCI*, p. 118; translation mine.

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, 'Michelet, l'histoire et la mort', p. 118; translation mine.

<sup>53</sup> Barthes, 'Michelet, l'histoire et la mort', p. 118; translation mine.

<sup>54</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 70; emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 70.

<sup>56</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. by Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA and London: October Press, 1993), p. 297.

<sup>58</sup> On this point, Darian Leader has written on the combined functioning of the mouth and hand in *Hands: What We Do with Them – And Why* (London: Penguin, 2017). He focusses on the example of new-born babies and their 'certain innate reflexes' (p. 16), particularly around sucking and feeding, that affirm the fundamental connection between these two organs of touch. Leader also notes the

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interchangeability between taste and touch in earlier use in English, for example, in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'with Eve's act described at one moment as 'tasting' and at another as 'touching' (p. 17). While the mouth is initially the main site of touch and exploration, growing reliance on vision as the primary modality during the infant's development entails that tasks are 'being progressively delegated to the hands' (p. 19).

<sup>59</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Mouth', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 296.

<sup>61</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 292.

<sup>62</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 292.

<sup>63</sup> Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 293.

<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), pp. 26-27: 'this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me [...] A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.

<sup>65</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, p. 183.

<sup>66</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, pp. 183-84.

<sup>67</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 81.

<sup>68</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 45-46; emphasis in original.

<sup>69</sup> Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', p. 141.

<sup>70</sup> Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', p. 147; emphasis in original.

<sup>71</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 34.

<sup>72</sup> The passage from *Goldfinger* reads as follows: 'With ceremony, a wide silver dish of crabs, big ones, their shells and claws broken, was placed in the middle of the table. A silver sauceboat brimming with melted butter and a long rack of toast was put beside each of their plates. The tankards of champagne frothed pink. [...] The meat of the stone crabs was the tenderest, sweetest shellfish he had ever tasted. It was perfectly set off by the dry toast and slightly burnt taste of the melted butter. The champagne seemed to have the faintest scent of strawberries. It was ice cold. After each helping of crab, the champagne cleansed the palate for the next. They ate steadily and with absorption and hardly exchanged a word until the dish was finished'. Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), pp. 28-29.

<sup>73</sup> Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 415.

<sup>74</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc, trans. by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 7: 'The Neutral – my Neutral – can refer to



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intense, strong, unprecedented states. “To outplay the paradigm” is an ardent, burning activity.’

<sup>75</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> As David Russell puts it, ‘After such criticism, what forgiveness? [...] what of the tact that provides the conditions for trust: the relation of collaborative hope that makes new demands on the world?’. David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2019), p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> I choose Fisher as an example here given the proximity of her writing to Barthes’: she provided a 1949 translation of Brillat-Savarin’s *La Physiologie du gout*, to which she also added her own substantial editions. This is the translation of the text from which I quote earlier in the article.

<sup>78</sup> The sentimentality of this mode of writing means it perpetuates the same sense of ‘naturalness’ as Barthes’ writing, but without recourse to his rhetorical strategies. The ‘spiral’ Barthes describes in his return to naturalness, which I discuss in the second section of the article, is not present in these other texts, but they nonetheless demonstrate the connection between naturalness and comfort. Sentimentality invites the reader to share in the text’s affect, and writing about food in particular taps into questions of memory, selfhood, and affective relationships with others.

<sup>79</sup> For example: Nigella Lawson, *Cook, Eat, Repeat: Ingredients, Recipes and Stories* (London: Random House, 2020); Ruby Tandoh, *Eat Up: Food, Appetite, and Eating What You Want* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2018); Ella Risbridger, *Midnight Chicken, & Other Recipes Worth Living For* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Nigel Slater, *Toast: The Story of a Boy’s Hunger* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> Michael W. Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American History in the Old South* (New York: Amistad, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> M. F. K. Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me* (London: The Folio Society, 2017), p. xix: ‘like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it... and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied... and it is all one.’

<sup>82</sup> Risbridger, *Midnight Chicken*, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup> Barthes, *Empire*, p. 24; ‘Plaisir aux classiques’, in *OC I*, p. 63.

<sup>84</sup> I am thinking, specifically, of Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life: Not a Novel* (London: Picador, 1997); Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013); and Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel*

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*Cure: An A-Z of Literary Remedies* (London: Canongate Books: 2013), which, superficially at least, offer a similar argument to my own about art and literature offering the reader comfort. However, the comfort they offer is more cloying: in the case of *The Novel Cure*, the reader is told what books to consume, and in all three books there is none of the rhetorical complexity we find in Barthes. Jürgen Pieters makes a similar argument about the limitations of these texts when describing the comfort of reading in *Literature and Consolation*; see, for example, p. 12-13.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Eager was awarded her PhD from King's College London in August 2021. Her thesis considered how Barthes' 'loving distance' can be used as a way to understand being together with others, and with the other represented in the text, as explored in and through Barthes's work. More broadly, she is interested in questions of social connection, having worked within the UK Government's Tackling Loneliness Team, and she is now pursuing further study in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London.

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