

Sexual Politics of Milk

Barbara Formis

Abstract: *In this paper, I set out on a feminist philosophical investigation of the Ancient Greek approach to food and its contemporary avatars. Focusing on milk, the aim of the investigation is to unsettle and overcome the classical dualisms and cultural stereotypes that frame European thinking about food. Using a methodology inspired by somaesthetics, two qualities of eating food and drinking milk immediately emerge: non-visual embodiment and performativity. The first section of the paper develops the idea of non-visual embodiment through an analysis of food as animating energy rather than inert matter. In the second part of the paper, called “Milk as a performative and sexual metaphor for knowledge,” the analysis is orientated towards breast-feeding as a dual relation between two vulnerable beings. The sexual and political aspects of breast-feeding are examined via Aristotle’s and Plato’s writings as well as Socrates’ idea of knowledge as maieutics. The third and final section of the paper, entitled “The self, virility and cannibalism,” focuses on the links between meat-eating and masculine power. This link is anchored to ancient cannibalistic figures and mythological stories that identify meat-eating with ritual sacrifices. The phallogocentric aspect of meat-eating has recently been analysed by Derrida through his idea of “eating well” which addresses the question of the indiscernability of activity and passivity in the process of eating.*

Keywords: *feminism, performativity, knowledge, breast-feeding, cannibalism*

Food for thought. A philosophical investigation that takes “food for thought,” food as thought, can be characterized by its drive to reach a plane of immanence that disrupts some of the most persistent dualisms of the western philosophical tradition: contemplation versus action, theory versus practice, facts versus values, mind versus body, art versus life. To take “food for thought” is to go back to the reality of bodily impressions and needs. Coming back to the philosophical analysis of the basic activity of alimentation allows us to build a philosophy of necessity, an ethics of needs and a materialistic aesthetics. To begin with we can define the experience of eating as non-visual embodiment. This definition allows us to grasp the continuity between art and life in that eating involves a complex ritual of gestures and behaviours that discloses the aesthetic qualities of everyday activity.

One aliment that enjoys a special place in the continuities between everyday life, art and thinking is milk. Within the interweaving of eating and thinking, milk is the primary food of the newborn, the element that nourishes and quenches thirst before any other type of food assimilated by the body. Milk is a symbol of pleasure and ecstasy yet, precisely because of its primary function, it has remained unmarked as both a political and performative tool.

Eating as somaesthetics

Pragmatist aesthetics in general, and somaesthetics in particular, are methods for empowering body consciousness by means of the disruption of classical dualisms (body and mind, image and object, facts and values, theory and practice...). If such an empowering disruption is possible, one may ask if it could be obtained by food. When we think about food something strange can happen. Food easily appears before our eyes, it materializes itself as an image. We immediately visualize a plate of risotto, or an ice-cream, or a slice of bread – often depending on our physical state, and whether we are hungry or not. In contrast to other kinds of object, food appears with much more organic and tasty details. If I say the word “pen,” “window” or “statue,” those words do not call up an entire experience of smell and vivid colour, as the word “bread” or “chocolate” might. As the perceptual impression of food arises from our imagination and memory it reveals a series of experiences of cooking and eating that carry with them a complex revivification of the senses.

The reason for this difference is that food is an *animated* element. We can think of it as an object, which of course it is, but – as a memorable series of Dutch Paintings and Still Life paintings have expressed magnificently – food is not only an inert materiality, it is a vibrant and lively element that exceeds the constraints of materiality. One could claim that food is for somaesthetics what the body in general is for pragmatist aesthetics and phenomenology: a pivotal point that articulates a series of entangled relationships between living beings. Food exemplifies the body by exposing the vital energy of materiality.

This is particularly true of the experience of eating rather than the activity of cooking. Even if the culinary experience of preparing food is evidently interdependent with the act of eating, it is possible to separate these two practices in a simple manner: if cooking deals with the appropriation, the arrangement and the transformation of food, eating deals with the actual experience of the relationship with it, and such an experience is only possible if food as an object is destroyed in order to become an *aliment*. Cooking relates to food as matter, eating relates to food as energy.

Another way to understand this difference is through a comparison with the art world: cooking is like creating a work of art, eating is like experiencing that same work. As a matter of fact, the process of art creation shares several steps with the preparation of a dish. We must first think about the project or recipe, then procure the ingredients (whether real or ideal). We must dispose of an adequate amount of time and possess the necessary equipment; but above all, we must pay attention to what we are doing. Gastronomy, like art in general and literature in particular, is a meticulous practice that requires devotion and patience. The ability to invent is thus related to knowledge: a recipe is an existing path you may decide to follow as a simple act of prudence, though sometimes one might want to take a risk and follow a new route, venturing onto unknown roads to conceive new formulas. In cooking, as in the exercise of producing art, one can invent new recipes or reheat previously prepared dishes.

By way of consequence, if experiencing a work of art is like eating and cooking is like creating that work of art, then the cook is to the guest as the author is to the spectator: the instigator of an experience, a magician who sometimes surprises and other times turns out disappointing. Between the two actors of these trans-actions, there is a test, a dialogue and an address: no work of art without spectator, no meal without eater. The spectator and the guest are not passive subjects, receptacles who consume and swallow everything without blinking: they taste, feel and judge. Thus the spectator like the eater is the real actor of her experience; she chooses her speed, her manner of apprehension and may even suddenly put an end to her aesthetic experience. The

refusal is a real rejection because the destiny of an unfinished novel, for example, or a half left plate is sad: it leads to forgetfulness, waste, dust on the top of a shelf or maceration in a trashcan. Sometimes the remains of the work or the meal may have a less tragic fate, for example recycling: the painting is given away or sold and the meal reheated the next day in a microwave oven.

This comparison reveals a major point for pragmatist aesthetics in general and somaesthetics in particular: like a meal a work of art is not a mere object but rather the site of an experience. Its materiality evolves as a form of energy and as a living practice because a work of art is a sort of an *aliment*: it allows us to nourish our experience and it shapes our knowledge. As aliment, the work of art is very easily assimilated, almost without effort; it is an experience far more instructive than that of learning theory. Aesthetic experience is above all sensuous: we understand without knowing, we know without understanding.

Eating is certainly a way of providing physical sustainment to the body: we need a certain amount of calories, carbohydrates, proteins and vitamins in order to move, act and simply live. Food is then the first and most fundamental element of our life, the primary *power* that our body needs on both a biological level and a cultural and ideological one. But unfortunately this type of power appears to be far too rudimentary to be considered legitimate from a theoretical perspective. It's precisely because of its primacy that food is often forgotten, underestimated and unnoticed as a field of knowledge. Its materiality does not seem to be valuable enough within the field of philosophy as an academic discipline.

Indeed it is strange that we have been able to reason endlessly concerning the relationship between body and mind, dictate laws, establish hierarchies and cite examples in favour of one or the other theory, without ever trying to explain the structures contained in the very idea of food. Undeniably, if there were a direct link between body and mind, between a physical practice and theoretical knowledge, that link would lie in the activity of eating. Food is the primary link between physical matter and spiritual energy. The term "food" would then not only define edible material, but also the entirely impalpable element that is needed for living and thinking.

With regard to the principle of identity, one could talk about the relationship between the self and food in the terms of the chicken and egg paradox. Does my body come *before* or *after* food? If eating is the condition *sine qua non* for the existence of a body and the body thus comes after food, how, on the other hand, could there be food without a body ingesting and absorbing this food, or without a body searching for it? This paradox is also reflected in the relationship between the act of "eating" and the act of "thinking." Which of the two actions comes first? Do we need to eat in order to think or the inverse? If we suppose that eating comes first, then the first immediate objection would be that eating also requires a very basic and elementary form of thought. This type of thought is identifiable with *life* as an unreflective awareness of the self. And also, how would one then consider the case in which the act of thinking is directed towards the act of eating, as in cooking for example? If we need to eat in order to think, we often need thinking in order to eat.

Eating would then appear not only as an aesthetic experience, subject to the rules of judgement and appreciation, but more profoundly as the unreflective experience at the origin of any other type of experience. The experience of eating would testify to the possibility of constructing a background to life, the *condition sine qua non* for thinking, perceiving and judging. Eating is a way to go back to the real. Philosophy has always preferred to extract the subject from the concrete *continuum* of life, in order to familiarize us with abstractions, flights of fancy and theoretical investigations. In contrast to the dualist tradition, the real investigation, the one that sows the threads of our existence, happens often unmarked under our eyes, or hidden in our stomachs.

Milk as a performative and sexual metaphor for knowledge

The reality of food brings us back to the unreflective experience of eating, and more specifically to the very first encounter with food: *breastfeeding*. Within the interwoven relation of eating and thinking, milk has a very special place. Milk is the primary food, the element that nourishes and quenches thirst before any other type of food can be assimilated by the body. Milk is a symbol of pleasure and ecstasy. In its maternal substance, milk is simply miraculous: it comes already sterilized, at the perfect temperature, it is ingested through the process of sucking and consists of carbohydrates, lactose, water, minerals, vitamins, proteins and lipids. In addition, during feeding, the composition of milk magically varies: lighter and sweet in the beginning, it will be more bold towards the end. Its transformation is the exact mirror image of the traditional meal: breastfeeding starts with dessert. For its part, colostrum (the adaptation milk produced by the breasts the first two days after birth), brings in all the food the child needs in just a few grams: a concentrate of proteins, immunoglobulin, enzymes and hormones. This type of soft and sliding food is comparable to that of the astronauts: sucked and squeezed out of a food bag cum tube it turns into a puree through the process of salivation. Like an astronaut, the newborn must adapt to a hostile environment.

Milk incarnates the potentiality of a nutritional facility that would not be synonymous with naivety and ignorance, but rather the key to a clairvoyant and absolute knowledge. Milk is the symbol of the fountain of life, of the uninterrupted flow of wisdom. To ingest science as the newborn swallows milk, with the same deep reflective consciousness and apparent lack of physical effort, would be the dream of any poet, philosopher or writer. To produce words with the same ease as a mother produces milk would be sheer delight for an author. Words would flow like a stream of milk without constraint; sentences would arise from the breast milk of knowledge, a kind of universal nutriment of thought. Milk is a metaphor for the world as described by Esperanto, a language without ties that dissolves in the mouth; this language would be entirely soluble.

Paul Claudel speaks of the solubility of words in the following terms:

Et si la parole est une nourriture, c'est ainsi que divers aliments nous ont été donnés. Car il en est que l'homme fabrique lui-même, comme le pain, de crus et d'autres qu'il faut cuire; il en est que l'on broie et mâche, d'autres où la langue seule fait son œuvre; et d'autres, comme le lait, qui fondent d'eux-mêmes dans la bouche comme le beurre et le sucre. Et moi, pressé par le bruit intérieur, je voulais proposer au monde un mot soluble et délectable, afin de repâître comme un profond estomac la mémoire et l'intelligence comme une bouche bordée de lèvres avec ses dents¹.

In this passage Claudel subverts the order of the mother tongue. If words were like food, some needing to be cooked and others to be ingested raw, we would grind and chew some of them, but others like milk, as well as butter and sugar, simply dissolve in the mouth. The writer's desire is to find a "delectable and soluble word" in order to nourish memory and intelligence as if they were a stomach. Claudel grasps the idea of milk as a metaphor for a sublime language that appears like a flowing river, a natural human capacity. If communications are swallowed, the formal aspect of words disappears and the meaning becomes absolute, no mediation is possible. Would

¹ Paul Claudel, *La Ville*, 1901, vol. I, Paris : Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, *Théâtre*, 1956, p. 434. "And if speech is food, then this is how various aliments have been given to us. For there are some that are manmade such as bread, some that are raw, and some that must be cooked; some that are chewed, others where the tongue alone does its work, and others, like milk, that dissolve in the mouth like butter or sugar. And I, pressured from within by noise, I would like to propose to the world a delectable and soluble word, so as to feed memory and intelligence like a vast stomach with a mouth lined with lips and teeth." (My translation).

this be a mystical experience? Perhaps. An erotic experience? Certainly. For this soluble food of milk or butter or sugar, this first food that melts in the mouth without effort, is an ecstasy of the lips and body, like a kiss. Milk is considered *pure* because of its whiteness without spots or shades, without thickness. Milk is innocence. It is considered virgin since it is the foundation of life, when all is extremely fragile and one drop is vital. There at the very dawn of life, milk is salvation.

In within a certain form of patriarchy, milk is a mother and milk is woman: the identification between milk and motherhood is founded in breastfeeding as a corporeal act and as a symbolic value. Milk is a mother also because milk is “the mother” of any other type of food, it is a sort of proto-food, the one that we experience before any other; milk is a mother because a mother nourishes her new born baby through the milk produced by her breasts; and milk is a mother because a mother is supposed to provide food and nourish her child throughout growth. The second identification, between milk and womanhood, is less evident but nonetheless persistent and strong: milk is a woman insofar as it contains feminine qualities such as purity, whiteness and virginity; milk is a woman because it is delicate and soft.

From a philosophical point of view, milk has a privileged position. Rousseau sees it as the *natural* element par excellence, which relates to its assimilation to womanhood insofar as women are considered to be closer to nature than men. From a metaphysical perspective, milk is indeed unique, since it relieves both hunger and thirst and is placed beyond all categories. Moreover, milk acts like the supportive substratum of different types of aliments, it is a foundation for establishing the multiple categories of edible matter. It is the white and untouchable background on which are drawn all the other colours; the primitive smell from which various scents are formed; the flavour that precedes any flavourings; the stuff before any texture; the liquid that runs before viscosity. Milk is the archetype of any type of food. It is this element without qualities which alone allows the determination of all possible forms of food. In Kantian terms, milk would be a transcendental form of food, the *a priori* schema of any diet; in less Kantian terms it is the mysterious element that originates and determines the differences and hierarchies arising in the entire food cosmology.

Yet such a privileged position is far from absolute and unanimous. If a dairy diet is often recommended for health reasons, this is in large part due to the fact that the dairy industry has managed to make a marginal and poorly considered food a key pillar of modern diet. Presented as essential to the health of the skeletal system, thanks to collusion between nutritionists and the dairy industry, the dairy diet hides a less glorious reality. Portrayed as a miraculous food by some, milk becomes a diabolical drink for others and is accused of contributing to the development of cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. If we go back in time the opponents of a purist vision of milk multiply; amongst them the Ancient Greeks for whom milk is a barbaric, unclean and disgusting element. Aristotle tells us that the Persians considered milk as an immaculate element (and by saying this he implies that milk is appreciated by Barbarians). He also recalls that Empedocles describes it as “whitish pus.”²

So the Greeks are not milk drinkers. For them, before being a drink, milk is a soothing liquid, an emollient for massage and a medical product used for its laxative proprieties. The Greeks dug an unbridgeable gap between their habits and those of other (supposedly inferior) populations, reserving for themselves the consumption of wine, olives and bread, leaving to others all the impure substances like beer, animal fats and milk, as well as the incapacity to bake

2 Aristotle, in *Generation of Animals*, 777 a 7.

bread.³ For Aristotle, milk is “soft;”⁴ for Plato it is “tender.”⁵ Milk is for uncultivated and weak peoples. Although Zeus was fed goat milk when he was born, the Ancient Greeks consider milk as a dirty substance. The simple fact that it is a natural element originating from the body of an animal is *per se* the sign of its impurity and its obscenity. Within the culture of Classical Greece purity is synonymous with culture and manhood, and consequently the opposite of nature and animality.

In a passage in *The Republic*, where Plato explains the fundamental characteristics of human virtue and specifically the tasks related to the guardians,⁶ he regulates breastfeeding for the guardians’ wives. If the new mothers do not have enough milk they will procure other women’s milk. They must breastfeed infants with measure, and childminders will be made responsible for any tiresome labour and night duties. Plato asserts that a well-designed city-state has to make motherhood easier by diminishing the time and energy dedicated to breastfeeding and childcare.⁷ The Republic can function, according to Plato, only when the child is not recognised by her parents, and especially her mother. Because education is a duty of the City, the affective relationship between a mother and her newborn has to be diminished, and sometimes even eradicated. One effective method is to limit the time dedicated by a mother to breastfeeding her child. By doing so the people of the Republic will be freed from familiar ties and the idea of individual possession.

Aristotle, in a very different context, defines milk as an element that is fundamentally related to sexual procreation. In *History of Animals* he associates milk with another white fluid bodily product: sperm.⁸ In *Book III*, Aristotle begins his analyses with the study of blood, the liquid element that is “the most universal and the most indispensable”⁹ in animals. “Blood in a healthy condition is naturally sweet to taste”¹⁰ is one of the first ‘gastronomic’ qualities that Aristotle mentions in his description, before describing its colours and varieties, for example, that “the blood in the female is thicker and blacker than in the male; and [...] of all female animals the female in man is the most richly supplied with blood, and of all animals the menstuous discharges are the most copious in woman.”¹¹ Womanhood is thus characterized, according to Aristotle, not only by a great quantity of blood but also by a great dispersion of this very important liquid. Then, after a brief passage on marrow, Aristotle dedicates a longer passage to milk by associating it again with sperm.

What do milk and sperm have in common for Aristotle besides their similar colour and texture? Firstly, they are made by the same substance, which is blood, and it is on the basis of the definition of blood that they can be classified. Secondly, and maybe more importantly, they belong to the same cycle of life. Aristotle explains that if all other liquids are “nearly always congenital in animals, milk and sperm come at a later time.”¹² If Aristotle does not go into details

3 See Janick Auberger, *Manger en Grèce classique La Nourriture, ses plaisirs et ses contraintes*, Presses Universitaires de Laval, ch. 4, p. 218 and sq., 2010.

4 Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 516 a.

5 Plato, *Timaeus*, 81c.

6 Plato, *The Republic*, V, 460 a.

7 *Ibid.*, V 461 b-c.

8 Aristotle *History of Animals*, III, 523 b, 15 ; in *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol. I, Princeton, Bolligen Series LXXI, 2 : Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 826.

9 Aristotle, *ibid.* 520 b, 19, p. 826.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.* 521 a, 20, p. 827.

12 *Ibid.*, 521 b, 15, p. 828.

about what “later time” actually means, it is easy to deduce that both milk and sperm appear during adulthood and are directly related to sexual reproduction and the procreation of the species.

Sperm plays an important role in Ancient Greek concepts of education, and it would be interesting to explore how this role had an input on the symbolic value of milk. It is common to find the idea of sperm as a metaphor of knowledge, transposed from one body to another via the sexual encounters that were the basis for male education. From this perspective the sexual activity between the master (an adult male called the *erastes*) and the student (a younger male usually in his teens called the *eromenos*) is symbolized by the adult’s pleasure and the transmission of a liquid from the master’s body into the student’s body. The Greeks called this phenomenon *paiderastia*, based on the root *pais* which literally means “young beardless boy.” The term is often clumsily translated as “pederasty” and associated with homosexuality or worse with abuse of minors. Contrary to this vulgar opinion, the Greek practice of pederasty was a collectively acknowledged erotic relationship that symbolized social hierarchy. The practice was so pervasive that it became the principal cultural model for free relationships between citizens. Within the homo-social culture of Classical Greek, sperm is the perfect incarnation of knowledge.

So how in such a context could the association between milk and sperm be instructive? It is by going back to Aristotle’s master, Plato, and then to Plato’s master, Socrates, that we can understand the deep critical potential of the association between milk and sperm in the Greek philosophical context.¹³ Socrates’ definition of philosophical investigation is maieutics; that is to say, the art of the midwife. It is in his *Symposium* that Plato portrays Socrates giving a speech about love; to be more precise, Socrates, the man who knows nothing, cannot properly speak and pronounces his speech as a ventriloquist by recalling somebody else’s speech. The person who speaks through Socrates’ mouth (and under Plato’s quill) is a woman, her name is Diotima. There, in the midst of male speech, in the ardour of pederasty, where homosexual love is the source of knowledge, Socrates introduces a female voice: sacrilege. It was strictly forbidden for women to attend banquets. Women could participate in a symposium as dancers or musicians, and they could also have to submit to sexual intercourse, but they were not allowed to eat, drink or speak.

Who was Diotima, exactly? A prophetess and priestess of Mantinea, a description which unites three characteristics each of which would have excluded her from participating in that symposium: being a woman, a religious figure and a foreigner. Other sources say that she was a famous courtesan. Potentially excluded from the symposium in three different ways, she is present via Socrates’ lips. But why a woman and not a man? This seemingly innocuous question is nevertheless essential, as pointed out by David Halperin in a very important study.¹⁴ As Halperin shows, Diotima has the advantage of not being personally involved in practices of pederasty and so her teaching is neutral. Diotima has a woman’s body and replaces a male conception of knowledge as possession with a female conception of knowledge as reproduction; or, to put it another way, she replaces the idea of love as desire of the other with the idea of love as desire for a child. In this passage, Plato advances a completely novel image of a “male pregnancy” which is actually very consistent with the Socratic method, defined as “the art of giving birth to rhetoric.”

¹³ See Francis Wolff, *Socrate*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, coll. « Philosophies », 2010 (1st ed. 1985) and Sarah Kofman, *Socrate(s)*, Paris : Galilée, coll. « La philosophie en effet », 1989.

¹⁴ David Halperin, “Why is Diotima a Woman?” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and other essays on Greek Love*, 113–151, 190–211. New York: Routledge, 1990.

In Socrates' language, men also fall pregnant, suffer the pains of childbirth, feed their young.¹⁵ This new definition of sexual desire as fully oriented to procreation illuminates the issues related to the vital need to feed.

If Diotima teaches Socrates an ethic of "correct pederasty" (*to orthoson paiderastein*) it is because only a female body can give rise to the universality of desire as procreation. In classical Greek culture female desire is related to the shape of the body, the physiological economy, and to personal needs rather than desires of the mind. The body is identified with its generative function, since in classical Greece women were not considered as having an active role in procreation, being the mere venue of the male germ. In classical Greece, sexual practices were a mirror of society, they did not belong to the private sphere but to the social sphere. Sexual practices generally reflected the social relation between a dominant subject (exclusively male) and a dominated body (young boys, women, slaves). In this context, no reciprocal relationship (nor desire) was possible, but only sexual acts performed by one person on another person. From this perspective, penetration and ejaculation, where no reciprocity is admissible, are symbols of the social hierarchy.

That is why in this context, desire is not mutual but only unilateral: the master loves the young boy, but the latter cannot reciprocate, being only the receptacle of the master's desire and knowledge. Many decorations on vases illustrate paederastic encounters where the young beloved has a passive and neutral expression on his face, showing neither pleasure nor satisfaction, but rather a sort of sufferance. Socrates disrupts the social hierarchy of paederastic education by inflaming desire in the young. His erotic appeal provokes an inversion of the social order, which brought him criticism and eventually condemnation to death. The relation between this new erotic method and philosophical knowledge has been widely studied, but what remains to be explored are the consequences for feminist theory.

A very specific entrance point for this enquiry goes back to the symbolical relation between sperm and milk. If sperm is the element that is emblematic of knowledge (going from one body to another body), this is because in traditional Greek culture knowledge is a material entity that passes from one receptacle to another, a sort of an object that could be ceded and purchased; this is why, for example, the Sophists asked for money for their teaching. In this framework knowledge is a merchandise. Socrates' critique of this equation, and consequently Plato's, was particularly virulent: knowledge is not an object of possession, but rather a quality of human beings that can be awakened by philosophical enquiry. From a Socratic standpoint, sperm is not a matter conveyed from one body to another body, as if the body of the receiver were a simple receptacle, but rather an energy that arouses and develops the body of the receiver (the young boy), who is the real author of his own desire and knowledge. Sperm is not a material object, but an energy; something that is unique but universally shared, something that cannot be purchased because it is already possessed.

Through this redefinition of knowledge (and sperm), Socrates empowers the dominated subject, which is the young boy. Yet, we could add that the dominated subject also included the category of woman, and her capacity to give birth, which is the operative symbol of Socratic philosophy. Furthermore, the association of sperm with energy allows us to understand its transformation into the nourishing liquid of breast milk. Already, in the practices of pederasty, fellatio was associated with breastfeeding insofar as the master was nourishing the young through

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 117: "Diotima introduces and develops the unprecedented imagery of male pregnancy, insisting on it despite what might seem to be the wild incongruousness of procreative metaphors in a paederastic context. In Diotima's formulation, men become pregnant (*kyein*), suffer birth pangs (*ôdis*), bear (*gennan*) and bring forth (*tiktein*) offspring, and nourish their young (*trephein*). Indeed, the authentic aim of erotic desire, according to Diotima, is procreation (3206e)."

their mouths.¹⁶ But another aspect is that milk corresponds to sperm in so far as milk emerges at the birth of the child, which, according to maieutics, is the initial object of desire. Sperm is present immediately before conception, milk arises immediately after birth: these two products of the body are both necessary steps in the maieutic process of desire and maintenance of the child, where the child is knowledge. Milk and sperm are both nourishing liquids, they provide spiritual nutriment to the body and act as symbols of society and education.

The self, virility and cannibalism

If milk is the flow of knowledge and the fountain of life, its identification with sperm and the consequent transformation of its meaning entails a sexual politics with potentially feminist overtones. The classical Greek model of pederasty is characterized by unilateral desire. Maieutics is a procedure that disrupts that model and as such it provides a political counterpoint for women's emancipation. Of course, one can only speak hypothetically about a feminist theory within Socrates' philosophy, but if there are some sparkling fragments of such a theory, they would be found in a supposedly hidden link between alimentation and education, with such a link passing through sexuality. Given that education in Classical Greece was deeply entangled with sexual practice and social domination, the redefinition of sexual practice through maieutics necessarily redefines education. Knowledge is consequently seen not as a sexual act which implies domination and possession of somebody else's body, but rather as childbirth. The act of delivery is the Socratic metaphor for education.

A feminist reading of this moment in Socrates' thinking is profoundly related to the project of somaesthetics in so far as somaesthetics is rooted in the indissoluble relation of thought and action, body and mind, pleasure and knowledge. In a similar way to maieutics, somaesthetics also deals with the interaction between bodies, the energetic qualities of matter and engages in a critique of any limitation of the human body to the status of an object.

This novel understanding of sexual practice and knowledge in Socrates has profound implications for both the forms of life that are related to food in general, and for the feminist theory of food in particular. The identification of milk (as the feminine element) and sperm (as the masculine element) contrasts with their evaluation in Greek society. If sperm is highly considered because of its relation to knowledge, then milk, as we have seen above, is denigrated because it is considered dirty and weak. One explanation for this devaluation of milk would be the low consideration of women in Greek society, wherein womanhood strangely assembles all those characteristics that are considered as faults in men: weakness, emotionality, lack of will, irascibility, dishonesty, weirdness. Femininity is the default, the negative side, of virility.

But there is certainly a second and more profound reason that is due to the connection between milk drinking and cannibalism. Already in Homer, milk is mentioned as being appreciated by Orientals¹⁷ and the Cyclops are portrayed as beings who eat human flesh and drink milk excessively as if it were wine, in order to wallow about drunk and bellowing, in the midst of the sheep. According to the Greeks, not only is milk repulsive because it originates in the mammary glands, but it is also associated with cannibals and big meat eaters. To drink milk means to accomplish a double act of cannibalism: firstly, because we ingest an animal liquid; secondly, because populations that drink milk are themselves considered to be cannibals. Herodotus in his *Histories* speaks of the Scythians saying that "their drink is milk"¹⁸ and notes

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷ *Odyssey*, IV, 89

¹⁸ I, 216.

that to improve the process of milk production they used to introduce bone tubes into the sexual parts of the mares and blow into them believing that “air inflates the veins of the animals and push[es] milk down into the breasts.”¹⁹ In the imagery of the Greeks eating meat and drinking milk were related as activities that were synonymous with primitive and uncivil behaviour: barbarians are carnivorous and “galactophageous” which literally means “those who are fed on milk.” Homer mentions them only once, and he describes them as a people of horsemen and armed pastoralists transporting arrows on large carriages.

This is the key difference with the Greeks who were sedentary people and farmers. The Barbarians did not possess the art of agriculture; they were nomadic shepherds who had to rely on a carnivorous diet. The shepherd who does not sow and depends on whatever his current environment provides loses his identity and is subject to natural events. The specificity of the civilized diet is based on agricultural products, the baking of bread and the cultivation of wine. Consequently milk does not form part of such a culture. For the Greeks eating meat is related to the cookery of sacrifice.²⁰ Since eating meat is already a sort of cannibalism, men had to ritualize the act of cooking and make offerings to the Gods in order to avoid their anger. Thus, perhaps it is precisely because eating meat was so strongly criticized, that milk in general and breastfeeding in particular, were so massively denigrated in Greek culture. As psychoanalysis also teaches us, breastfeeding is a vivid metaphor for cannibalism, and the nursing mother can be portrayed as a devouring mouth.

We have identified two major causes that could explain the Greeks’ deprecation of milk: firstly, its connection to womanhood (a gender that is classified as physically and morally inferior), and secondly, its association with cannibalism and barbarism. Yet there is most probably a third cause that can be highlighted: the devaluation of passivity in contrast to activity and its consequent implication in the construction of the idea of the subject. More specifically, this factor in the Greek deprecation of milk lies in the devaluation of sucking and drinking, and the inverse enhancement of biting and eating. The difference between these two modes of ingestion is related to the emergence of teeth. Sucking is the first and primal mode of feeding, and it is only with the appearance of the first teeth (often called “baby teeth” or also “milk teeth”) that biting becomes conceivable. Teething is not a simple phenomenon: it corresponds to a period of suffering that determines an anatomically fit state for food diversification. Dentition is an empowering step that allows the individual to switch from simple suction to real biting. The newborn can only ingest food by drinking or, later on, by swallowing puree, but with the growth of the first incisors, she can begin to chew, bite and lacerate matter with her teeth. At the other end of the life cycle, the loss of teeth can be experienced as a return to suction and a symbol of regression. For newborns it is during the same period of acquiring the capacity to bite that they affirm their identities and begin to construct themselves as subjects.

We can identify here a gender difference between the activities of sucking and biting that can be criticized, as we will see later. Teething thus seems to symbolize the passage from a passive state to an active state. On the one hand, if sucking is an act of submission and dependence, by swallowing without chewing the subject acts like an object, as if she were a receptacle. On the other hand, in biting and chewing, the subject seems more emancipated and alive, because these acts imply a voluntary movement, they involve a decision, a commitment to take full ownership of the food. And if we wanted to gender these acts, we would associate sucking with womanhood and biting with manhood. If suction evokes innocence – a stage of full confidence

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris : NRF Gallimard, 1979.

– chewing evidences a state of mistrust and conflictuality with regard to food and its origin. It is not surprising that in some animals teeth are not only used to chew but to inject poison. During the process of sucking the subject acts like a plant, she absorbs the liquid and enjoys in an almost motionless state the energy received by ingestion. Sucking is a vegetable modality of living. Conversely, during the process of mastication, the subject is fully an animal, he is animated by an inner force, he dominates the surrounding world by modifying it, transforming and destroying in order to absorb it. If suction swallows sensually without destroying food, biting sets up a mediated relationship to the world. Hegel would say that such a mediated relationship is the necessary condition for the emergence of a true consciousness. The voracious animal bite would be synonymous with a realized subjectivity.

Here again in Greek culture we encounter, not surprisingly, some familiar dualisms: on one hand, biting is related to the fact of eating meat, manhood and subjectivity; on the other hand, sucking is related to milk drinking (and particularly breastfeeding), womanhood and passivity. A sexual politics of milk would thus begin by following somaesthetic's guidance for overcoming these dualisms.

Some traces of just such a project can be originally found in feminist theory. *Sexual Politics* is, of course, the title of one of the first books of the second wave of feminism written by Kate Millet in 1969 and reedited three times since.²¹ In this controversial book Millet analyses the political impact of the role played by patriarchy and sexism in literature (i.e. in Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence). During the third wave of feminism, Carol J. Adams wrote *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* where the author demonstrates the profound ideological connection between a carnivorous diet and male domination in society and invokes veganism as a form of feminism and political activism.²² Furthermore, apart from feminist theory, we can also find traces of a philosophical inquiry into food as a pivotal field of social and political conflict in Derrida's theory of *differance*, and more specifically in an interview called 'Eating Well', or the Calculation of the Subject with Jean-Luc Nancy published in 1991.²³ In this text Derrida explains that Heidegger's idea of "*Dasein* is not unrelated to what I am calling here a "sacrificial structure." For Derrida this "sacrificial structure" is related to what he calls "phallogocentric structure."

One day I hope to demonstrate that this *schema* implies carnivorous virility. I would want to explain *camo-phallogocentrism*, even if this comes down to a sort of tautology or rather hetero-tautology as an *a priori* synthesis, which you could translate as "speculative idealism" "becoming-subject of substance," "absolute knowledge" passing through the "speculative Good Friday:" it suffices to take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, whether it's a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other. (...) Authority and autonomy (for even if autonomy is subject to the law, this subjugation is freedom) are, through this schema, attributed to the man (*homo* and *vir*) rather than to the woman, and to the woman rather than to the animal. (...) The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh.²⁴

21 Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969; London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd., 1971; London: Virago, 1977; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

22 Bloomsbury Academic, 1990, new édition 2010.

23 Jacques Derrida, " 'Eating Well', or the Calculation of the Subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida' in E. Cadava, P. Connor and J.-L. Nancy (eds) *Who Comes After the Subject?* New York and London, chap. 8, p. 96 and sq., Routledge, 1991.

24 *Ibid.*

The “idealizing interiorization of the phallus” passes through the body (“the mouth,” “the tongue,” “the lips” or “the breast of the other”), and this passage is a sacrifice comparable to the one that the Greeks organize in the ritual banquets for eating meat. Virility is profoundly linked to a carnivorous diet and to sacrifice, and this *schema* is the proper structure for subjectivity. Later, in the interview, Derrida suggests that vegetarianism is not the answer insofar as the vegetarian also has to be subjected to the sacrifice, which in this context is entirely linked to the “self.” Sacrifice is identified with “need, desire, authorization, the justification of putting to death, putting to death as denegation of murder,” and within this scheme the vegetarian also accepts denegation as sacrifice. A better solution, according to Derrida is that “eating well” should become a collective practice:

The infinitely metonymical question on the subject of ‘one must eat well’ must be nourishing not only for me, for a ‘self’ which, given its limits, would thus eat badly, it must be *shared*, as you might put it, and not only in language. (...) This evokes a law of need *or* desire, *orexis*, hunger, and thirst (...) respect for the other at the very moment when, in experience (...), one must begin to identify with the other, who is to be assimilated, interiorized, understood ideally (...), speak to him in words that also pass through the mouth, the ear, and sight, and respect the law that is at once a voice and a court.²⁵

What if this shared experience evoked by Derrida – driven by desire and appetite (the Greek *orexis*), this experience in which the subject (“self”) vanishes – was the primary experience of food which is breastfeeding? Such a hypothesis – which is fully driven by somaesthetics – would imply two fundamental changes: firstly, the rehabilitation of the supposedly negative and passive state of suction and secondly the establishment of a schema of subjectivity no longer grounded in virility, but in womanhood in general, and motherhood in particular.

In terms of actual bodily and somaesthetical experience breastfeeding indicates a direction, at least, for the first change. During suction, the subject is not entirely passive. Its mode of existence cannot be reduced to simply vegetating. During breastfeeding, the child is mobilizing such a large amount of energy that (s)he can get tired and fall asleep during suckling, exhausted before even being satiated. Suction is a powerful movement, the baby sucks without stopping, without slowing down the pace, pauses are very rare and brief. By suckling the baby actively causes the ejection of milk through her vigorous aspiration. It has been found that, in some cases, the amount of calories ingested by infants may be less than the amount of calories burned during the exercise of suckling, with a resulting lack of weight gain for newborns.

Breastfeeding is indeed an “activity” in the full sense of the term, accomplished by a phenomenon of extreme concentration that allows a deep sense of pleasure in the baby. Far from the image that we have of vegetable existence as that of a passive and helpless object, breastfeeding may even be said to attain an alternative ideal of a vegetative life as a way of fully absorbing the surrounding world. To breastfeed is to engage in a form of life beyond the active-passive dichotomy, a form of life characterized by outgoing activity and ingoing absorption, by fragility and voracity. Furthermore, if breastfeeding causes pleasure in the newborn, it is the same for the nursing woman. Hormonal changes due to the production of milk affects the mental and sensory status of the mother, prolactin changes her sleep cycles, and the mother spends more time in deep sleep, high levels of oxytocin lead to soft drowsiness, a quiet euphoria, a kind of calming the body. It is said that breastfeeding mother should “eat for two,” chemically, it is true in fact that high levels of prolactin enhance cell multiplication of the gastrointestinal tract (the

²⁵ *Ibid.*

stomach and the intestines), their surface of absorption increases, the liver also becomes more efficient. This means that the digested nutrients are more abundant and faster.

This dance for two between the mother and the child contradicts the conventional idea that suckling is a passive state. This hormonal transaction provides a feeling of hunger and mutual euphoria. The body and the sensations are processed by a continuous dialogue between two persons as dependent on one another and whose common material is milk. A sexual politics of milk could well lead to a different theory of the subject in which the subject is not identifiable with the “self” but rather with a shared experience. Can the subject be defined as a human relationship where passivity and activity no longer in opposition are reunited in a more complex form of life?

Notes

Bibliography

Adams, Carol J., *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic, 1990, new edition 2010.

Aristotle. *Generation of Animals & History of Animals*, III, 523 b, 15; in *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol. I, Princeton, Bolligen Series LXXI, 2 : Princeton University Press, 1984.

Auberger, Janick. *Manger en Grèce classique La Nourriture, ses plaisirs et ses contraintes*, Presses Universitaires de Laval, ch. 4, p. 218 and sq., 2010.

Derrida, Jacques. “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida” in E. Cadava, P. Connor and J.-L. Nancy (eds) *Who Comes After the Subject?* New York and London, chap. 8, p. 96 and sq., Routledge, 1991.

Detienne, Marcel and Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris : NRF Gallimard, 1979.

Halperin, David. “Why is Diotima a Woman?” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and other essays on Greek Love*, 113–151, 190–211. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969; London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd., 1971; London: Virago, 1977; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Plato. *Timaeus*. Zeyl, D. J. (trans.), Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000

Plato. *The Republic*. Griffith, Tom (trans.), G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, 2000.

Contact Information:

Barbara Formis

E-mail: barbara.formis@univ-paris1.fr