

## **Eating and Writing : Jane Austen or the Anatomy of Ingestion**

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*Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine—good god how fine—It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy—all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry. I shall certainly breed.*

(Keats's Letter to Charles W. Dilke, 22 September 1819)

Austen certainly gave the Romantics something to 'breed' about when she reproduced another type of gastric narrative, a 'beatified' form of ventriloquy and procreation, around the moral, sexual and medical imperatives of the stomach. The rhetorics of the stomach and its expandable virtues voiced from within were there to remind her reader that a well or, better yet, ill-fed organism usually generates the necessary humours and disturbances to ensure a sense of entertainment and thus set the tone for a colourful story:

He dined with us on Friday, and I fear will not soon venture again, for the strength of our dinner was a boiled leg of mutton, underdone even for James, and Captain Foote has a particular dislike to underdone mutton; but he was so good-humoured and pleasant that I did not much mind his being starved (*To Cassandra*, 7-8 January 1807) (Jones, 78).

Even if the food lacked flavour, at least the pleasures surrounding the social politics of its ingestion were tasteful:

The Orange Wine will want our Care soon. — But in the meantime for Elegance & Ease & Luxury —; the Hattons' & Milles' dine here today—& I shall eat Ice & drink French wine, & be above Vulgar Economy. Luckily the pleasures of Friendship, of unreserved Conversation, of similarity of Taste & Opinions, will

make good amends for Orange Wine. — (*To Cassandra Austen*, 30 June-1 July 1808) (Jones, 92).

The failure to fulfill basic bodily needs was a chance to move organs around and play with body cavities, justifying Austen's sensible choice to relocate the stomach, whether empty, upset or 'starved', at the heart of another substance more easily absorbed. Conversations on the subject of not eating properly, in the end, would turn out to be, for Austen, one of the better sources of literary engagement, an excuse to rewrite tradition and therefore promote new modes of inspiration in terms of substance, laughter, tragicomedy or body language.

### **Insides Out: *Engastrimuthoi* and Classical Dietetics**

It is no mystery that Austen was, from an early age, exposed to the new anatomy of a changing world and the discoveries in the fields of medicine and contemporary science associated to it. Subject to the law of empiricism by virtue of association, she was nonetheless able to preserve some of her adolescent cravings for invention and fancy not 'to focus on scientific matters with any rigour to experience the impact of explanations that had penetrated her world' (Knox-Shaw, 17). A most notable example was Austen's reading, with her brother James, of Edward Jenner's *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Cow Pox* (1800):

Crucial to Jenner's explanation of why a cowpox vaccination was effective against smallpox was his belief that the more serious disease was a strain of the mild one, 'accidental circumstances' having worked 'new changes upon it'. He speculates further that diseases as apparently different as 'ulcerous throat', measles, and scarlet fever 'have all sprung from the same source, assuming some variety in their forms according to the nature of their new combinations' (Quoted in Knox-Shaw, 16).

If Austen was able to incorporate all these different elements in her writings, it is because her culture of the ordinary would always supplant revolutionary ideas, though they were never entirely ignored, to promote human instinct or irrational behaviour as the basis for any sound approach to fiction; in other words, to the 'generative role played by chance' (Knox-Shaw, 17). The key concept, of course, was 'variety' in a mind sensitive to inner mutations for anyone who cared enough to listen closely to what the body had to say in terms of social adaptation and 'nourishment': its complaints, discomforts or even abdominal prophecies.

My contention is that Austen's art of stomach-writing was not just the product of her time and the burden of potential illnesses weighing over it – (pre-)Romanticism

thus defined as the soon-to-be ‘age of hypochondria’<sup>1</sup> – but a return, in many ways, to classical medicine, its past regurgitations and ancient figures attentive to belly noises and dietary modes of discourse:

The medicine of these doctors practiced was based primarily on dietetics – that is, regulating the whole lifestyle. Drugs were used (those from Egypt had a great reputation), but surgery was very much a treatment of last resort. Swabbing with wine reduced sepsis in hernia operations. Recommendations for the treatment of fractures, dislocations, headwounds, and uterine prolapse sound very modern, but detailed knowledge of the internal organs and arrangement of the body was lacking. Comparisons with animals or everyday objects took the place of careful observation. The internal economy of a woman, for instance, was imagined as a tube, in which the womb wandered from its normal position, to which it might be attracted back by sweet, or repelled by foul, substances introduced into the vulva or the nose (Porter, 52).

Somewhat better informed, Keats, in his *Anatomical and Physiological Notebook* dated 1816 (the same year Austen’s *Persuasion* was published), was to indulge in this same curiosity for the ‘internal economy of a woman’ and her moving viscera as the symptom of a gap in terms of gender difference, here exposed to a harsher, more surgical reality:

The Aperture of the Male Pelvis is longest from before backwards that of the female from side to side in the upper Cavity. In the female outlet of the Pelvis the Tuberosities of the Ischii are farther distant than in the Male. The Viscera of the Abdomen in the Natural Position of the Body are no[t] placed in line with the Pelvis. A knife passed through the Body above the Pubis would touch the extremity of the Coccyx (Forman, 19).

In the context of ancient medicine, instead of a knife piercing through the body’s insides to test its material alignment as a step towards a more violent act of dissection, wine or smells would allow an organ to shift, more delicately, back to its initial position. To alleviate the patient and dispense him or her from the pain associated with another form of disorder in the ‘arrangement of the body’, the objective was to free the mind from any parasite that would cause any further agitation, in the hope that the female stomach, ‘weakened’ by a broken heart, writes Austen, and thus dependent on the aspirations of a tube would not choose to wander around once again:

Mrs Jennings, with a thoroughly good-humoured concern for its cause, admitted the excuse most readily, and Elinor, after seeing her safe off, returned to Marianne, whom she found attempting to rise from the bed, and whom she reached just in time to prevent her from falling on the floor, faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest and food; for it was many days since she had any

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<sup>1</sup> See George C. Grinnell, *The Age of Hypochondria: Interpreting Romantic Health and Illness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

appetite, and many nights since she had really slept; and now, when her mind was no longer supported by the fever of suspense, the consequence of all this was felt in an aching head, a weakened stomach, and a general nervous faintness. A glass of wine, which Elinor procured for her directly, made her more comfortable, and she was at last able to express some sense of her kindness, by saying, 'Poor Elinor! how unhappy I make you!' (Chapman: 1923, I, 184-185)

In that scene of distress, a partially satisfied stomach seems to restore the power of speech. Marianne, herself transubstantiated by a drop of wine, lets some of the flesh wounds dissolve and like open viscera (*viscus*, the flesh), is now in a natural position to let the words and feelings of discontent flow out of her. The lovesick Marianne, a modern *engastrimuthoi* in that she is kept alive by the myth or prospect of an oral formula that will help her untie the knot in her stomach, appears as if she were slowly regaining consciousness. Yet however scientifically lucid she becomes regarding her physicality, Marianne still has to take her orders from a whimsical organ. Capable to see past Elinor's state of being, she expresses pity for others as well as a natural ability for prediction, after having been altogether possessed by the gastric voices inside her head; the *daimôn*'s voices, according to the Greeks, speaking in the name of a trance-induced and essentially clinical vision:

La possession prophétique n'était d'ailleurs pas restreinte aux oracles officiels. Non seulement on croyait que des figures légendaires comme Cassandre, Bakis et la Sibylle avaient prophétisé dans un état de possession, mais Platon fait de fréquentes allusions à des prophètes inspirés comme à des types contemporains familiers. Notamment une espèce de médiumnité privée était exercée à l'époque classique par des personnes appelées d'abord *engastrimuthoi* 'parleurs du ventre', et plus tard 'pythons'. [...] Une allusion chez Plutarque semble impliquer que la voix du *daimôn* – sans doute une 'voix du ventre' rauque – se faisait entendre par leur bouche ; d'autre part un scholiaste de Platon s'exprime comme si la voix était simplement une monition intérieure. Cependant, les savants ont négligé un témoignage qui non seulement exclut le ventriloquisme mais qui suggère fortement la transe : un vieil ouvrage clinique hippocratique l'*Epidemiae*, compare la respiration bruyante d'un malade du cœur à celle 'des femmes appelées *engastrimuthoi*' (Dodds, 78-79).

To have any meaning or resonance at all, the ancient rhetorics of the stomach – a pre-text for a more heroic tragedy as Marianne's situation clearly illustrates – required not just the staging of the body but the dramatization of its internal chaos. This is the case of Laura's madness-speech in Austen's epistolary piece of *Juvenalia*, 'Love and Freindship' (1790), a woman whose whole system should be torn apart by sorrow and yet is obsessed by hunger and the urge to formulate out loud her random culinary apparitions:

Talk to me not of Phaetons' (said I, raving in frantic, incoherent manner) – Give me a violin –, I'll play to him and sooth him in his melancholy Hours – Beware ye

gentle Nymphs of Cupid's Thunderbolts, avoid the piercing Shafts of Jupiter – Look at that Grove of Firs – I see a Leg of Mutton – They told me Edward was not Dead; but they deceived me – they took him for a Cucumber' (Chapman: 1954, I, 100)

Feeding words to the emotionally scarred or substituting food for language in its most undigested form therefore leaves the mental *catharsis* in a state of frightful interruption: the organ, both the voice and the heart in the form of a stomach, here symbolically cut in half by the 'piercing Shafts of Jupiter' as Austen's *engastrimuthoi* is caught fantasizing about a dead 'Cucumber'.

### **Women with Guts: The Organs of Gestation**

If anatomically, the brain and the stomach are both defined around a common visceral constitution, in Austen, a healthy woman's cerebral activity, her capacity to maintain a conversation or, more generally, her intellectual focus, often seems to go numb when a plate of food is presented to her. Even for the most talkative characters (Miss Bates, Mrs. Jennings) who depend on words as a vital form of identity or distinction<sup>2</sup>, the rules of the stomach always seem to take over, proving speech to lack resistance when a spoon comes in the way of a big mouth: 'Supper was announced. The move began; and Miss Bates might be heard from that moment, without interruption, till her being seated at table and taking up her spoon (Chapman: 1923, IV, 328)'. Of course, in the case of Miss Bates, food is not just the centerpiece in a modest setting ('the drawing-room floor') where propriety and codes of conduct are dictated by domestic arrangements but the central Nerve keeping the whole social body alive, when its members make the conscious decision to have tea or share a meal together, beyond class and hierarchy:

The house belonged to people in business. Mrs and Miss Bates occupied the drawing-room floor; and there, in the very moderate sized apartment, which was everything to them, the visitors were most cordially and even gratefully welcomed; the quiet neat old lady, who with her knitting was seated in the warmest corner, wanting even to give up her place to Miss Woodhouse, and her more active, talking daughter, almost ready to overpower them with care and kindness, thanks for their visit, solicitude for their shoes, anxious enquiries after Mr Woodhouse's health, cheerful communications about her mother's, and

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<sup>2</sup> Austen's poetics of food is often defined by words spoken or unspoken : 'food [is] a symbol to suggest some quality about a person or situation that is all the more profound for not being spelled out. With some writers this a common practice but with Jane Austen so rare that when it does occur it can be quite astonishing in its power. At the same time, because we are not used to looking for this kind of almost poetic complexity in her work, it is easy to pass over, to read her only for her truth to nature and to miss some of the meaning that the text contains' (Lane, 141).

sweet-cake from the buffet – ‘Mrs Cole had just been there, just called in for ten minutes, and had been so good as to sit an hour with them, and *she* had taken a piece of cake and been so kind as to say she liked it very much; and therefore she hoped Miss Woodhouse and Miss Smith would do them the favour to eat a piece too (Chapman: 1923, IV, 155-156).

One piece of cake cast aside or ignored, as if questioning the standards of its maker, and the whole organic structure could very well collapse, all the more so since the combination of verbosity and repletion added to the male ghost of hypochondria – Mr. Woodhouse – meant any such character about to burst was already dependent upon a delicate condition or worse, a tightly-wound nervous system:

There was no recovering Miss Taylor – nor much likelihood of ceasing to pity her: but a few weeks brought some alleviation to Mr. Woodhouse. The compliments of his neighbours were over; he was no longer teased by being wished joy of so sorrowful an event; and the wedding-cake, which had been a great distress to him, was all eat up. His own stomach could bear nothing rich, and he could never believe other people to be different from himself. What was unwholesome to him, he regarded as unfit for anybody; and he had, therefore, earnestly tried to dissuade them from having any wedding-cake at all, and when that proved vain, as earnestly tried to prevent anybody’s eating it. He had been at the pains of consulting Mr Perry, the apothecary, on the subject. Mr Perry was an intelligent, gentlemanlike man, whose frequent visits were one of the comforts of Mr Woodhouse’s life; and, upon being applied to, he could not but acknowledge (though it seemed rather against the bias of inclination), that wedding-cake might certainly disagree with many – perhaps with most people, unless taken moderately. With such an opinion, in confirmation of his own, Mr Woodhouse hoped to influence every visitor of the new-married pair; but still the cake was eaten; and there was no rest for his benevolent nerves till it was all gone (Chapman: 1923, IV, 19).

Presents for the stomach, even the ‘small, trifling presents’, forced Austen’s protagonists to embark on a risky adventure, endangering both the essential balance of a fragile society as well as their own basic health. In the end, it all came down to what the body could ‘bear’ or refused to bear as a recurrent source of anxiety; and, if so, against the stomach’s descent, one had to be brave enough to speak up. In that respect, Austen’s narrative was giving voice to a community of repressed eaters, all convinced that eating against the stomach’s better judgment took quite a bit of guts, surely a viable metaphor for writing. Ingesting the food and emotions of others, whether as a moral duty or as a requirement in social functions but also oftentimes as a sign of gratitude for charitable offerings was, in itself, a crucial act of benevolence and extended civility:

To atone for this conduct therefore, Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked to her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could; and Mrs Jennings on her side treated them both with all possible kindness,

was solicitous on every occasion for their ease and enjoyment, and only disturbed that she could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn, nor extort a confession of their preferring salmon to cod, or boiled fowls to veal cutlets (Chapman: 1923, I, 160).

Bows to the stomach, confessions of taste – naturally, a question of sensibility – were all part of a deeper relationship to the body, into the entrails of Austen's prose, the locus of a woman's most intimate gestation; a feast which, as such, could take pride in having successfully incorporated the science of nutrition as a higher form of human empathy.

### **Medicine Lost in the Abdomen: A Story of Food and Nerves**

Empathy primarily for the ill, when choosing a proper meal, for Austen, along the lines of a prior medical diagnosis, was more often than not a cause for agony or unease, as illustrated by Mr. Woodhouse's 'benevolent nerves'. In Austen's private letters, the link between the subject of food and ill-health is striking and seems to come back regularly as if microbes and physical neuroses had infected every meal on the menu but also, by some bizarre use of *mimesis*, every guest around the dinner table:

Mr. Lyford was here yesterday; he came while we were at dinner, and partook of our elegant entertainment. I was not ashamed at asking him to sit down to table, for we had some pease-soup, a sparerib, and a pudding. He wants my mother to look yellow and to throw out a rash, but she will do neither (*To Cassandra*, 1-2 December 1798) (Jones, 16)

She is better this morning & I hope will soon physick away the worst part of it. — It has not confined her; she has got out every day that the weather has allowed her.— Poor Anna is also suffering from *her* cold which is worse today, but as she has no sore throat I hope it may spend itself by Tuesday. She had a delightful Evening with Miss Middletons—Syllabub, Tea, Coffee, Singing, Dancing, a Hot Supper, eleven o'clock, everything that can be imagined agreeable (*To Cassandra Austen*, 31 May 1811) (Jones, 129)

I am sorry to say that I could not eat a Mincepie at Mr Papillon's; I was rather head-achey that day, & could not venture on anything sweet except Jelly; but *that* was excellent. — There were no stewed pears, but Miss Benn had some almonds & raisins. — By the bye, she desired to be kindly remembered to you when I wrote last, & forgot it. — Betsy sends her Duty to you & hopes you are well, & her Love to Miss Caroline & hopes she has got rid of her Cough. It was such a pleasure to her to think her Oranges were so well timed, that I dare say she was rather glad to hear of the Cough (*To Cassandra Austen*, 29 January 1813) (Jones, 137).

The first example stands out. The yellow-coloured soup appears in the form of an edible mirror projected onto the mother's physiognomy, thus afflicted with a yellowish

complexion according to the doctor's orders. In this case, the body starts to reflect all the shades of food as if by some strangely bilious extension<sup>3</sup>. The medical reality of a stomach ache, certainly nerve-racking but not immune to laughter (*rire jaune*<sup>4</sup>) or ridicule, is therefore drawn to fit an organ in many ways adapted to human *bathos*<sup>5</sup>, in that it is often sinking to lower depths of compression (or repression) and therefore impossible to satisfy. In Austen's fiction, culinary relief is also synonymous with some form of disappointment, and sublime expectations in terms of gluttony or taste almost never met. Austen's own version of hell in the kitchen, as it were, from abdominal to abominable pain, pointing to a pathology, here topographical, located in the part of the abdomen where the characters' mock-dietetics are repeated within a specific place and at least three times a day:

Tea was made down stairs, biscuits and baked apples and wine before she came away: amazing luck in some of her throws: and she enquired a great deal about you, how you were amused, and who were your partners [...] There was a little disappointment – The baked apples and biscuits, excellent in their way, you know; but there was a delicate fricassee of sweetbread and some asparagus brought in at first, and good Mr Woodhouse, not thinking the asparagus quite boiled enough, sent it all out again. Now there is nothing grandmamma loves better than sweetbread and asparagus – so she was rather disappointed, but we agreed we would not speak of it to anybody, for fear of its getting round to dear Miss Woodhouse, who would be so very much concerned! (Chapman: 1923, IV, 329)

In the end, the choice of medicine in Austen, food and drinks, does not seem to be really working, despite the shifting voices and a geography of the stomach very artfully mapped out. Once again, reality meets fiction around the experience of the Hetling Pump Room in Bath, heir to the equally famous Roman Baths which Austen also visited for medical purposes with her uncle James Leigh-Perrot who, like Mr.

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<sup>3</sup> 'We are all in good health [&] I have certainly gained strength through the Winter & am not far from being well; & I think I understand my own case now so much better than I did, as to be able by care to keep off any serious return of illness. I am more & more convinced that *Bile* is at the bottom of all I have suffered, which makes it easy to know how to treat myself. You will be glad to hear thus much of me, I am sure, as I shall in return be very glad to hear that your health has been good lately'. Letter from Jane Austen to Alethea Bigg, 24 January 1817 (Jones, 199-200). 'Later eighteenth-century medicine treated bilious, digestive complaints with emetics and laxatives. In Austen's case, digestive problems were just a symptom of a far more serious condition'. See note to letter 88 (Jones, 276).

<sup>4</sup> « La forme première de l'humour, c'est sans doute l'ironie socratique, cette comédie d'ignorance et de maladresse qui cache au fond (selon Thomas d'Aquin) beaucoup d'orgueil, en tous cas beaucoup de ruse et souvent de narcissisme. C'est cette façon habillissime de se peindre sous un jour sévère ou dérisoire pour désarmer l'adversaire et l'amener dans son camp. Et souvent, sous couvert de dérision, pour se faire plaindre et panser. D'où la couleur jaune que je propose de lui attribuer. Comme dans l'expression 'rire jaune', en effet, il y a là faux détachement, alliage subtil d'un certain rire et d'un malaise certain, dissimulation plus ou moins réussie, sous le rire forcé, du désir de reconnaissance et du désarroi » (Noguez, 132).

<sup>5</sup> 'Many there are that can fall, but few can arrive at the felicity of falling gracefully. Much more, for a man who is amongst the lowest of the creation at the very bottom of the atmosphere, to descend beneath himself is not so easy a task unless he calls in art to his assistance. It is with the *bathos* as with small beer, which is indeed vapid and insipid if left at large and let abroad, but being by our rules confined and well stopped, nothing grows so frothy, pert and bouncing' (Pope, 12).



Allen, Catherine Moreland's guardian, in *Northanger Abbey*, suffered from acute fits of gout: 'a condition thought, in those days, to be caused by imbibing too frequently in port wine and brandy and the eating of red meat' (Old, 7). Austen soon expressed her skepticism about the curative qualities of the hot spring water, on her second visit to Bath in 1799 with her mother and her older brother Edward: 'Edward was [t]here to take the hot spring water for his health. It is recorded that Edward drank the spring water on the Sunday, swam in the Hot Bath on the Monday and went for electric shock treatment on the Tuesday' (Old, 10). This type of health regime would have made anyone quite nervous, if only just for the blatant disregard for the organism's capacity to regenerate fully from a sudden change of diet or thermal temperature. Austen's ability to celebrate such incoherence in the medical world or discourse is what makes her voice so distinctive. The desire to 'shock' (for want of a better word) her readership is less rooted in the stomach's failure to relish in the food that consistently surrounds the characters than in its growing expansion when relying on human hardships and illnesses as its primary substance. The simple act of eating turned into something so complicated always seemed to make sense for Austen whose organic display of humours and unhealthy expression of the body were all part of her appetite for fiction, itself whetted by a new range of flavours, some delightfully bittersweet. Food came with its multiple layers of awareness and comic relief, usually saving the best perversion for last. In a most unexpected *tour de force*, Austen almost made her essentially dysfunctional dietetics more appealing than a normal meal, reminding us that the nutritional cycle as a whole can have no real creative virtue unless it is a tad vicious.

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