

Master Listeners, Master Savorers: A Response to Monique Truong's Lecture

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Monique Truong's two narrators—Binh, a Vietnamese cook who works for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in *The Book of Salt*, and Linda, who has lexical-gustatory synesthesia (which means she experiences certain tastes when she hears or speaks words), in *Bitter in the Mouth*—foreground an intriguing relationship between food and words.

She [Toklas] believes that it is possible to be humane even when one is behaving brutally. This, I know, is her motto in other endeavors as well. I am fine when I have a knife in my hand, when it is the blade that delivers the *coup de grâce*. One of my favorite French phrases, I must admit. . . . It is a perverse way of hiding something right in the open, very French in its contempt and cruelty for those who are not. (*The Book of Salt* 69, italics in original)

And GertrudeStein's French is, believe me, common. It is a shoe falling down a stairwell. The rhythm is all wrong. The closer it gets, the louder and more discordant it sounds. Her broad American accent, though, pleases her to no end. She considers it a necessary ornamentation, like one of the imposing mosaic brooches that she is so fond of wearing. (*The Book of Salt* 33)

Binh's sharp and delicate insights into culinary arts are often directed to reflecting on French language and its culture as well as his American madam's wonderfully awkward French. In the case of Linda, this Vietnam-born girl, because of her condition, tastes highly industrialized American processed foods, which can be read as a metaphor for the mainstream U.S. culture that she had to assimilate:

When my teacher asked, "Linda, where did the English first settle in North Carolina?" the question would come to me as "Lindamint, where did the Englishmaraschinocherry firstPepto-Bismol settlemustard in Northcheddarcheese Carolinacannedpeas?" (*Bitter in the Mouth* 21, italics in original)

Dinah Fried, author of *Fictitious Dishes*, notes, "[r]eading and eating are natural companions, and they've got a lot in common. Reading is consumption. Eating is consumption. . . . They can energize you or put you to sleep. Heavy books and heavy meals both require a period of intense digestion." The common English phrase "devouring books," which Ms. Truong uses to describe

her childhood reading experiences (“Our First Steps” 22), sums up Fried’s point. In literature, food intake often creates a rich metaphor for reading stories and ingesting new ideas. Here is a great example from a novel set near Ritsumeikan University—Yukio Mishima’s *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*:

We drank delicate Japanese tea and ate a sort of dry Western cake that I had never tasted before. The more tense I became, the more the crumbs dropped from the cake onto my shiny, black-serge trousers. (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* 27)

The narrator, a novice monk with a speech impediment—stuttering—visits the Golden Temple for the first time and experiences a gap between the real, not-so-impressive appearance of the temple and the Platonic beauty of the temple he had imagined in his mind. This scene depicts the narrator failing to properly eat the “foreign” sweetmeat at the Golden Temple, and it also epitomizes a serious issue faced by him—the difficulty of finding the right words to connect his inner ideals to the real world, or in his own words, a “key to the door that separates my inner world from the world outside” (*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* 5).

Linda, the narrator of *Bitter in the Mouth*, is extremely sensitive to words. Whenever she hears or speaks a word, a taste hits her tongue. The word “Linda,” for instance, brings the flavor of mint into her mouth. Sometimes, in order to paralyze this “secret sense” and to stay focused, she chooses to smoke. Other times, she just expresses her hunger for a word and its flavor:

I sometimes would crave a word. I would go to bed thinking about it, and in my dreams someone would say it. The next morning that word would be the first one in my head. I would go through my day hoping to hear it. For me there was, and still is, an appreciable distinction between hearing the word said and saying it for myself, though both would produce the same incomings. It was the difference between being served a good meal and having to cook one for myself. (*Bitter in the Mouth* 102)

The above quotation is fascinating because it suggests her preference for listening to words over speaking them. Linda is undoubtedly a tricky but great narrator: she relates her family saga and secrets, spicing them up with Kelly’s letters and historical episodes of Virginia Dare and the Wright Brothers. However, it appears that she has decided to be a listener—a very keen, careful one. For her, being a good listener seems to be an essential virtue. She accusatorily remembers the early days of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend Leo: “For a soon-to-be psychiatrist, he wasn’t a very good listener” (*Bitter in the Mouth* 173). Unlike French for Binh in *The Book of Salt*, English is not depicted as a barrier for Linda, but she continues to take in new words—academic ones at Yale and “legalese” at Columbia and a Manhattan law firm:

The law gave me an entirely new vocabulary, a language that non-lawyers derisively referred to as “legalese.” Unlike the basic building blocks—the day-to-day words—that got me from the subway to the office and back, the words of my legal vocabulary, more often than not, triggered flavors. . . that I had chosen for myself, derived from foods that were never contained within the boxes and the cans of DeAnne’s kitchen. (*Bitter in the Mouth* 193)

Deleuze and Guattari famously theorized that a mouth, tongue, and teeth form the territory of food in a primitive sense, and thus uttering words (that is, choosing language over food) would equal an act of fasting. Along with Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” Melville’s “Bartleby” (another character from a Manhattan law firm) can be a good example. In fact, reading these two characters as metaphorical writers is not uncommon among critics and book lovers.

Feeling hungry but never fasting, Linda narrates what she has heard, what she has read, and what she has tasted in her own way. In the lecture, Ms. Truong observed that Lafcadio Hearn is a master listener, who would ask his Japanese wife Setsuko to tell him ghost stories repeatedly until he was fully convinced that he had truly heard them. I would say that Binh and Linda are also master listeners, who cannot help but taste the stories presented to them, even if the words of those stories would taste salty or bitter. Ms. Truong’s master listeners know how to savor them on their refined tongues.

I will close my comments by asking Ms. Truong a question:

It seems that historical figures, such as Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Dare, and Lafcadio Hearn, fascinate you a lot. What kind of role do they play in your writings? Is borrowing characters from reality a way of reading history?

Bibliography

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