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John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure*: An Aesthetics of Textual Surprise[1]

MAIK GOTH

1. Introduction: A Taste of Surprise

"This is not a conventional cookbook":[2] such a statement at the beginning of a novel surely takes the reader by surprise. John Lanchester's 1996 debut *The Debt to Pleasure*,[3] in which he marries the cookbook to the literary confession, is, indeed, full of textual surprises. Purportedly written by the erudite and immoral Tarquin Winot, the sophisticated culinary guide through the four seasons develops into a murder manual that turns its unwitting readers into accomplices of more than one murder. While the revelation of Tarquin Winot's murderous insanity surely makes for the most important single surprise, many other surprises depend on stylistic and rhetorical strategies, and on intricate interrelations between literary and sensory perceptions. After giving a taste of the textual surprises Lanchester's novel has in store, this paper will show how Winot uses surprises to activate reader participation. Subsequently, the element of surprise in the murder plot will be discussed. This will be supplemented by an analysis of stylistic surprises which involve the reader in a subtle literary game. In a final step, it will be argued that the dynamics of the unexpected depends on the aestheticism that informs the novel.

The Debt to Pleasure is arranged in four chapters corresponding to the four seasons, starting with the winter menu and ending with various autumnal recipes.[4] These chapters are preceded by a theoretical essay ("Preface, Acknowledgement and a Note on Structure," 1-5), which highlights the seemingly authentic nature of the cookbook as well as the narcissist sophistication of its fictional *mâitre*, Tarquin

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Winot. Whereas the former is borne out by the accuracy of the ensuing menus and recipes, the latter comes to the fore in innumerable digressions: he lectures on the cultural history of the peach, the manifold variations of stew, and the philosophical implications of cheese. Thus, the novel turns from a simple cross-breed of two genres into a surprising array of what Winot calls "gastro-historico-psycho-autobiographico-anthropico-philosophic lucubrations" (224).[5] At the same time, the reader is acquainted with Tarquin Winot's life and personal relations. Among the latter are his parents, a businessman and an actress; his brother Bartholomew, a famous modern artist; Etienne, a French exchange student tutoring the brothers in his native tongue; Mitthaug, the Norwegian family cook; and Mary-Theresa, their Irish maid; additionally, we are introduced to Jean-Luc and Pierre, Winot's Provençal neighbours, who have a penchant for shooting birds; Mrs Willoughby, an Englishwoman with an affinity towards French cuisine and life; and, most importantly, to Laura Tavistock, who becomes his collaborator, and Hugh, her Welsh husband. Except for the Provençal twins, everybody on this list is dead by the end of the novel. Tarquin Winot figures as an unreliable narrator who brings the fine art of murder to perfection. Since he dictates and edits his text as he follows Laura and Hugh Tavistock on their honeymoon from Portsmouth to Provence, the book additionally turns out to be a "masked travelogue," complete with explanations of travel routes and sights.[6] Tarquin's account of the journey thus makes up what Genette defines as the "first narrative" of the novel, in which the reflections, menus, and flashbacks are embedded.[7]

Lanchester's breaking down of the boundaries between fictional and non-fictional traditions does, indeed, smack of the postmodernist craze to create distinctly 'novel' species of narrative fiction.[8] But Tarquin Winot, his fictional narrator, does not only take advantage of the plenitude of text types to indulge in a constant play with the reader.[9] He also generates friction between the various levels of his narrative. This sense of playing for surprises already surfaces in Winot's foreword, in which he expounds the various aspects of his work. After

explaining the structure of his cookbook, Tarquin Winot enumerates everything a "menu can embody":

> […] [The menu] can be a way of knowledge, a path, an inspiration, a Tao, an ordering, a shaping, a manifestation, a talisman, an injunction, a memory, a fantasy, a consolation, an allusion, an illusion, an evasion, an assertion, a seduction, a prayer, a summoning, an incantation murmured under the breath as the torchlights sink lower and the forest looms taller and the wolves howl louder and the fire prepares for its submission to the encroaching dark.
>
> I'm not sure that this would be *my* choice for a honeymoon hotel. The gulls outside my window are louder than motorcycles.
>
> Tarquin Winot
> *Hotel Splendide, Portsmouth*
>
> (4-5)

In this passage, Winot poses as an aesthete who shows off his love of and devotion to food. He first dazzles the reader with an almost infinite asyndetic enumeration in which he celebrates culinary matters as the acme of human culture and sophistication. When claiming that the menu is also an invocation designed to ward off the impending danger of the oncoming darkness, the catalogue loses its staccato-like quality; here, the slow-moving polysyndetic enumeration in the subclause complements the sombre mood of the chronographia. By this time, the narrator has sufficiently taken his readers in with his erudition and novelistic talent, so that he can deal his textual surprise and startle the reader out of his poetic ruminations with a reference to the actual setting of the narrative. As the eerie twilight mood is disrupted by the reality of the honeymoon hotel, the mellifluous syntax is suddenly replaced by cynical statements. This unexpected clashing of styles creates a surprise that draws attention to the pronounced difference between two levels of narration, the disembodied 'ivory tower philosophising' on the one hand, and travelogue deixis on the other. This change of 'sound' is made manifest by the birds' noise, an impression that is further emphasised by a simile whose noisy vehicle, strikingly placed at the end, gives a cacophonous ring to the short paragraph.

At the very end of the passage under scrutiny, Lanchester has Winot sign his preface and add the name of his place of abode, the Hotel Splendide in Portsmouth. But this 'actuality,' seemingly authenticated by Winot's adding name and address, is mere bogus, since he has previously pointed out that he has "falsified one or two proper names and place names" (3); and, as we learn much later, even his own name is a fraud: in commemoration of the villain in Shakespeare's *The Rape of the Lucrece*, he changed his Christian name from Rodney to Tarquin, so that his name fits his nature (193). As a result, what looks like the intrusion of the actual world turns out to be a fiction once the reader closes the hermeneutic circle. The display of strategies, at once narrative, and meta-literary, prepares the reader to be on the lookout for ever new surprises in *The Debt to Pleasure*.[10]

2. Surprise and Reader Address

The most immediately striking examples of surprise are the instances of reader address which enable Winot to subvert the traditional rapport between the reader and the writer of a cookbook. Usually, the author of the cookbook dons the robe of the trustworthy and reliable teacher and instructor, while the reader assumes the role of a novice who must observe and put into practice his master's every word. Tarquin gives a teasing example of such mastery in his recipe of Irish stew:

> […] Layer the ingredients as follows: layer hard potatoes; layer onions; layer lamb; layer soft potatoes; layer onions; layer lamb; repeat as necessary and finish with a thick layer of all remaining potatoes. Sprinkle each layer with salt and herbs. You will, of course, not be able to do that if you have been following this recipe without reading it through in advance. Let that be a lesson to you. Add cold water down the interstices of meat and vegetable […]. (24)

What a surprise for the reading home cook: Winot has led his clueless readers by the nose by temporarily de*laying* the important infor-

mation that each *layer* must be spiced separately before the next one is prepared. The didactic surprise that results from this deceptive strategy is given further emphasis by the abrupt change from standard cookbook instructions to sharp-tongued reader address. Thus, surprises are incidents whose success in temporarily outwitting the reader rests firmly on premeditation and strategic placement. Since Winot's face-to-face rebuke harks back to an earlier passage in which he ridiculed his English Provençal neighbour Mrs Willoughby for reading cookbooks like novels (2),[11] we suddenly realise that he has induced us to make a similar mistake when reading the novel as a cookbook. This kind of interactive reprimand, which also betrays Winot's blasé attitude towards his readership, of course smacks of many of the narrative manoeuvres in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. As in the direct reader address in *Shandy*, picking on the reader presupposes his active presence. In consequence, the surprise is based on the dichotomy existing between the realm of the fictional cookbook and the reality of the reader who knows that he is reading fiction. Such dynamics result in a duality of readerly roles: Winot plays with the (fictional) involvement of the implied home cook, while Lanchester makes sport of the intellectual presence of his readership.

Reader address is never static, or of one kind. It can take the covered form of an unwarranted lexicon abbreviation, when Winot refers to the Romantic idea of genius, and adds a "q. v." (45). Since this is short for Latin *quod vide*, this formula is a veiled command that orders the reader to actively go through the book to find out what Winot has to say about genius (especially his own). But this is not the only time one has to be on the *qui vive*, for later in the novel Winot gives his readers an essay question after quoting Keats's dictum that "A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory" by simply adding the familiar imperative "Discuss" (111). This kind of interactive language game is given a further Shandyistic turn when Winot goes to seek the poisonous mushrooms with which he eventually kills Laura and Hugh Tavistock. After describing his entrance into the wood, he addresses the reader directly: "Please imagine here a passage which evokes the

comparative experiences of mushroom hunting all over Europe, with many new metaphors and interesting facts" (215). Winot transfers the act of imagination to the reader, enumerating all the ingredients necessary to make the result sound like any of Winot's own rhetorical flourishes. Thus, this exhortation is not exclusively designed to poke fun at the methodology informing the more stylistically challenging cookbooks;[12] more importantly, it turns out to have a self-reflexive, meta-literary dimension that raises the reader's awareness of Winot's own stylistic whims through sudden recognition. The surprising instances of reader address, which mark the novel as a specimen of metafiction,[13] stir the reader out of his (self-imposed) tranquillity, and raise his level of attention so that he perceives and experiences more clearly Winot's more subtle surprises.

3. Surprise, Murder, and Experience

Sudden address is one strategy to involve the reader in the dynamics of surprise; hints insinuating that there lurks a different truth beneath the surface of the autobiographical cookbook are another. This is especially so since the novel presents both a thriller plot and a murder mystery.[14] The former is chiefly connected to the travelogue, for Winot does not undertake his journey to the Provence in late summer without a reason. When closing the account of his experiences on the cross-channel ferry from Portsmouth to St-Malo (34-35) he describes his own physical appearance, pointing out that he wears dark glasses and a new deerstalker. This is already rather conspicuous; but when he claims that he wants "to take a stretch around the promenade and inhale deep draughts of sea air through the slight tickle of my false moustache" (35), it becomes apparent that he is wearing a disguise to follow a young couple on their honeymoon. In the course of this pursuit, he changes cars and wigs to conceal his identity, and follows the instructions given in his copy of the *Mossad Manual of Surveillance Techniques*. The reader is thus made witness to Winot's adroit observa-

tion, a circumstance that is further stressed by an unexpected use of pronouns when he refers to the newly-weds as "[o]ur young couple" (103). In this instance we are suddenly made aware of Winot's conscious turning us into accomplices of his designs, which eventually culminate in a culinary murder. The success of this plot depends on a surprise meeting on the market of Apt, a planned recognition scene that works even for us, because the newly-weds turn out to be none other than Laura Tavistock and her husband Hugh.[15] The thriller plot now merges with the murder mystery, which in turn joins the cookbook, as Tarquin Winot prepares an omelette containing poisonous mushrooms (the notorious *Amanita phalloides*), which he offers to his victims right before our eyes: "'Melt the butter over high heat and wait for the foam to subside. Keep the pan hot, and add the filling when the centre is beginning to coagulate. Eat, eat'" (220-21). This outline, albeit sketchy, gives good evidence for Durham's verdict that the ultimate success of the novel lies in its "conflat[ing] the cookbook and the murder mystery," especially in establishing an aesthetics that "turn[s] murder […] into a culinary art."[16]

The discovery that Winot is a serial murderer (who is also about to ambush his next prey) is surely the most significant single surprise in *The Debt to Pleasure*. It is, however, also the most difficult to localise. For it depends on the individual reader when he starts making sense of the clues dropped in the novel, and when his suspicion becomes certainty. In consequence, Tarquin Winot invites his readers to a literary game of hide-and-seek that sets them the task to decipher the hints placed in the narrative. When he draws an analogy between precognition and art, emphasising "the accumulating effect of hints, glimpses and the gradual accretion of that sense of foreboding which also goes by the name 'meaning'" (92), he makes explicit the overall design of the novel and offers a key to unlock its chief mystery. The main surprise in the murder plot thus does not come as an unexpected explosion; as seen above, Tarquin Winot's hints are miniature surprises that reveal only a little of the truth behind the semblance at a time—until the attentive reader has accumulated enough material to

solve the mystery himself. To the novelist, creating a puzzle and asking his readership to piece it together, is a risky business, as the all-too-astute reader might make his deductions at a fairly early stage of the novel (and find that it is not much of a surprise at all).[17]

In order to show how different kinds of surprise inform the murder plot I will deal with the fate of one single victim, Mitthaug, the Norwegian family cook, who supposedly died an accidental death when being run over by a District Line train at Parsons Green station. The two very different surprises he falls victim to make him a case in point, since they shed light on Winot's devotion to food, and murder. The first of these is recounted in a section on "Vegetables and Saladings," which is part of the summer menu, in a digression instigated by general reflections on the tomato. After explaining the etymology of the term "from the Nahautl *tomatl*" (133), and its uncanny resemblance to the human hearts which members of this ancient culture "saw ripped out at the daily human sacrifice" (133), he criticises the generally bad and flavourless quality of the tomato before illustrating the pleasures a ripe specimen can evoke:

> I will never forget the expression on Mitthaug's face the first time (during an ordinary roadside picnic luncheon on a family expedition to Agen one August) he ate a fully ripe tomato—the expression of surprise and near-sensual shock was, even to my child's eyes, undisguisedly sexual. (133)

Mitthaug's surprise in this short narrative passage is one of unexpected, intense taste. The full impact of his experiencing true flavour is represented by the hendiadys "surprise and near-sensual shock," because the latter term expresses the physical intensity of the surprise. The incident characterises surprise as an unprecedented sensation that turns innocence into experience. The sexual delight it triggers is so overwhelming that Mitthaug cannot help but reveal it through his facial expression. The mimic incident, in turn, also surprises young Tarquin. Although he partakes of Mitthaug's emotions only visually, i.e. at one remove from the 'real thing,' he nevertheless perceives the surprise together with the Norwegian cook. The passage thus offers

an explanation as to why Winot is so fully devoted to culinary matters: he associates surprise with the revelatory nature of sensory, especially culinary, experience.[18] In the wider context in which Winot embeds his recollection, Mitthaug's pleasurable experience is contaminated by the vivid depiction of violence and human sacrifice which immediately precedes it, and which turns the red vegetable into the throbbing heart of a human victim. This thematic overlapping associates Mitthaug's sensual experience with the surprise of his own death.

As with so many other of his victims, Tarquin leaves his readers in the dark as to the real circumstances of Mitthaug's death for quite a while. Although his passing on is referred to every now and then, Winot sidesteps crucial information,[19] until—at last—the secret is out. The cook's death occurred when Tarquin was still a child: "It seems that Mitthaug simply stepped forward and lost his footing at precisely the wrong moment, just as the train was hurtling into the station" (165). The passage raises suspicion, because the verb "seems" impairs the probability of an accident. The reader's misgivings are further stirred by the adverb "precisely" and the temporal sub-clause "just as." Thus, Winot gives a rather striking hint at the exactitude of timing, which counter-runs the notion of chance. However, the inquest held to clarify the exact circumstances of Mitthaug's death ends with an open verdict, and the general feeling that the Norwegian might have committed suicide. As usual, Winot places the relevant and revelatory pieces of information in inconspicuous syntactical units, such as sub-clauses, or parentheses.[20] Here, he resorts to the latter:

> […] (The coroner rejected out of hand the 'evidence' of a plainly hysterical woman who claimed to have seen me administering a well-timed shove to Mitthaug's back just as the train arrived on the platform.) […] (166)

Although the narrator does his best to impair the witness's credibility, the reference to "a well-timed shove" connects surprisingly with the account above. Yet, it takes Winot another forty pages to relate the whole truth of Mitthaug's death. The revealing statement is made

when Tarquin tells Laura about the events leading to hapless Etienne's death. According to him, the French exchange student died after being stung by a bee; for some unknown reason the syringe did not contain the life-saving antidote he needed, but useless liquid. Tarquin is then addressed by his collaborator:

> "Were you close to any of the servants?"
>
> As she spoke I momentarily saw Mitthaug's face as he lay on the rails before the onrushing train. He was looking up at me with an expression of surprise so pure that it would in another context have been comic. (200)

The recollection of Mitthaug's death, which is thematically linked to the bee sting incident, is the deadly counterpart of the culinary surprise discussed above. This time, the surprise lies in Mitthaug's realisation of young Tarquin's criminal energy and of his own impending death. Thus, Mitthaug's facial expression shows a sudden recognition that contradicts his pre-conceived image of the young boy's innocence.

Like the tomato episode, the event establishes a brief bond between culprit and victim; they are connected by a momentary look. This visual contact communicates the experience from Mitthaug to Tarquin, so that they perceive or experience this moment together. If one bears this in mind, Tarquin's reference to the purity of Mitthaug's facial expression emphasises the cook's sheer astonishment resulting from a mutually experienced moment of truth: the veil of appearances, the façade of fake humanity, is lifted to allow a momentary glimpse of the real. In the context of such mutual revelation, Laura Tavistock's initial question acquires an unexpected ambivalence, so that the term "close" can be used in both a physical and a psychological sense: physical, because Tarquin had to be physically close to push Mitthaug in front of the train; and psychological, because their eyes connect to share a surprising revelation. As recounted in a previous passage, this momentary glimpse also sheds light on the realities of last things, for it teaches Mitthaug and Winot to disbelieve "in the reality of life after death" (93).[21] To Winot, the event thus brings about

an awareness of the "pressing presentness and thisness of life" (93) and an awakening of his sensualist persuasion. The two surprises Mitthaug experiences explain why Winot has acquired a taste for inflicting surprises on others, both the pleasant and unpleasant surprises of taste and death.

4. Surprise and the Stylistics of Sense

As we have seen in Mitthaug's experience with the ripe tomato, instances of surprise can be connected to the senses. One could in fact argue that Lanchester deliberately appeals to his readers' sensory experience to establish a discourse between the text and different kinds of perception (e.g. taste, sound, or vision). In the following section, I will therefore analyse the repertoire of stylistic surprises to show how this cross-sensual discourse is effected.

A critical survey of Tarquin Winot's stylistic repertoire best starts with a brief analysis of his—and many a metafictionist's—favourite: the catalogue. The following example is taken from the Kerneval episode, where Tarquin Winot stops for a grilled lemon sole in a local hotel. As he minutely observes the clouds passing by, he remembers how his mother used to point out cloud shapes at him: "Look, a horse. Look, an antelope. A cantaloupe. A *loup garou*. A *loup de mer*. A *sale voyeur*. A *hypocrite lecteur*" (100). What starts as an inconspicuous list of cloud shapes changes into a surprising cascade of seemingly unrelated items, from horse to antelope to melon to were-wolf to wolf-fish to dirty voyeur and to hypocritical reader; this discontinuity is further emphasised by the sudden shift from recounted narrative to the narrator's own free association. A closer look at the passage, of course, reveals that the individual terms are predominantly connected via sound, with "-aloup" linking the first set of terms, and "mer/-eur" (an imperfect rhyme) yoking together the second. The *loup de mer* is of central importance, here; since it has phonetic similarities with both sounds, it establishes a link between the terms preceding and succeed-

ing it. The last two items in the catalogue—*sale voyeur* and *hypocrite lecteur*—are arguably the most significant and surprising, since they are entirely unrelated to the forms of clouds. As they comment on Tarquin Winot's character and on the role of the reader, they reflect the overall dynamics of the novel discussed in previous sections of this article. The 'dirty voyeur,' for example, can apply to the first-person narrator, who is currently spying on the newly-weds. As he, however, turns his readers into witnesses of his crimes, the epithet also possibly refers to them. This is even more so with the term "*hypocrite lecteur*," which can be interpreted as a veiled accusation of the reader who witnesses (and maybe morally condemns) Winot's heinous crimes but watches him go about his business pleasurably. The catalogue thus seems to end with a covert reader address, but it also contains an intertextual surprise, because the phrase is taken from "Au lecteur," the introductory poem to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal.* The poem, which deals with the sinfulness of the human being and the pervasiveness of *ennui*, ends with an emphatic address to the reader, famously quoted by Eliot at the end of the first section of *The Waste Land*: "Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat [i.e. *ennui*], /—Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!" (ll. 39-40).[22] In these lines, Baudelaire marks the reader as his kin, who suffers from the same sinfulness and boredom as the poet. The final segment in the catalogue therefore renders the connection between author and reader more profound, and points to Winot's affinity to French poetry and the concepts of aestheticism.

The stylistic surprises evoked by onomatopoeia, neologism, and pun also play with the sound and meaning of words, a circumstance that can be accounted for by the partly oral narrative mode of the novel. A telling example of onomatopoeia occurs when Winot converses with Laura and comments on his brother's sculpturing work:

> "I suppose he was usually too busy to cook."
>
> "Tink tink tink tink tink tink tonk tonk tonk. His chisel was never far from hand." (110)

The unwarranted breaking of conversational decorum reduces the act of artistic creation to a cacophonous profanity, especially since the iterative act of chiselling is represented through extended repetition. Hence, the textual surprise briefly reveals Tarquin's attitude to his brother and his art, although his derision of Bartholomew's artistic efforts is mitigated by an immediate return to conversational conventions.

His neologisms serve a similarly humorous function. Coinages such as "tequilathon" (124), a word that combines tequila and marathon, and "our Gallic frenemy" (143), a paradox that combines friend and enemy, are portmonteau terms that telescope two meanings in one word. As self-conscious narrator, Winot is well aware of his linguistic inventions, as the following passage shows, which—in passing—also calls into question the notion of character: "For instance, 'Mary-Theresa' and 'Mitthaug' are close approximations rather than mean and mere identicalities. (Does that word exist? It does now)" (3).

However, new terms can also signify more than meets the eye. Tarquin's reminiscing that Etienne, the French exchange student, "was quick to see a streak of genius in me and encouraged me a lot in my quiddity, in my me-ness" (199), contains a double-bottomed language game. At first glance, "me-ness" is synonymous with egotism, created by joining a personal pronoun with a standard suffix. If, however, one takes into consideration that the same passage blends into an account of Etienne's death caused by Winot's murderous designs, the statement takes on a second meaning: since it is directly linked to the murder plot, it renders Winot's real nature ambivalent. This interpretation also has its effect on the term "me-ness," which thus shows a revealing homophonous resemblance to 'mean-ness.' Lanchester brings about a surprising, silent revelation by yoking together two different figures of speech in one single term.

Surprises of this sort are quite subtle. In consequence, Winot uses puns that are not merely designed to raise a smile, since they can also strike a more serious note. When discussing the cultural relevance of death for Brittany,[23] he draws the analogy between the "skeleton

figure of the Breton *Ankou*" and "the image of death in Mexico (figure of colour, of a comparable pre-Christian harshness and of carnival—*carne vale*, farewell to flesh […])" (93). Although these anthropological reflections evoke a sense of morbidity, they still appear to be of a detached, or abstract kind. However, they become uncannily concrete when he returns to his narrative: "I hoisted the car on to a scraggly grass verge and walked the last few hundred yards towards the *enclos paroissial* of Kerneval" (93). Tarquin Winot deals another punch line, here, by introducing a town whose name is homophonous with the term carnival. This linguistic manoeuvre makes death a garish and concrete presence in this episode of the narrative, especially in conjunction with the architectural "church-statue-ossuary combination" of the *enclos*. The surprising pun in this passage is therefore not only showcasing creative wit; more importantly, it draws attention to Winot's deadly designs and foreshadows the Tavistocks' joint death.

A book obsessed with food does, of course, also feature play on words such as "taste" and "digest." Yet the following instance shows that trite examples can still be re-contextualised to cause surprise. Here, Winot comments on some newly received information about the honeymooners: "I digested the information with the help of a fruity young calvados" (117). As already purported, using the term "digest" to describe a mental process is no novelty. The surprise in this passage lies in the liquid presence of the *digestif*, whose fruity *bouquet* helps blend and conflate intellectual and gastric acts, a method that almost turns the passage into a zeugma and additionally helps bring to life what is usually taken to be a dead metaphor.

Winot's playing meaningful games with the sound and significance of words thus activates the reader's sensory awareness. His use of synaesthesia, however, opens up a more profound interdependency between the sensory and the literary.[24] When Winot rails against the poor quality of sauces, ketchups, and yeast extracts, he points out that they are "often loud in colour and comparably unsubtle in taste" (107). Attributing sound to colour is, of course, a standard example of synaesthesia that can be found in any glossary of rhetorical terms; but

what makes the passage rather startling is the link between the visual and the tasty (or rather, untasty) by means of analogy. The yoking together of colour and taste brings about a double transference of sensual experience, which is especially significant because it can be interpreted as the perfect (and perfectly horrible) match between culinary form and content. Such multi-layered items of synaesthesia can also take the form of a self-reflexive hotel critique, as in the following passage: "The room's bad oil paintings synaesthetically mimicked the slight rankness of the stale coffee, served in those pretentiously unpretentious big French bowls" (121-22). By explicitly conflating the look of a painting with the smell of bad coffee, Winot judges the merits of art and food at a time. He thus does not merely establish a parallel between these two realms; since synaesthesia always works both ways, it renders distinctions between any artwork and any item of food unclear.

Therefore, it stands to reason that culinary experiences can be communicated to the addressee of the novel by a literary representation of food that takes into account some of its defining sensory aspects, such as taste, smell, touch, or vision. The author's synaesthetic reference to the "tangy physicality and pleasure" of garlic (176), for instance, makes food tangible, and thus increases its 'experienceability.' If one takes this kind of 'synaesthetic mimicry' one step further, one could claim that it actually informs the descriptions of meals and food in the entire work. Hence, I would like to redefine the term synaesthesia, which derives from Greek "συναισθάνομαι" and translates into 'perceiving together,' for the present purpose, and to make it also applicable to those descriptions that try to involve the narratee's senses. The etymological quibble is not too far fetched, since in Ancient Greek the *deponens medium* can mean 'to perceive something together with someone' when used with a dative object ("τινί"). This precept turns the rhetorical phenomenon into a narrative metaphor that makes narrator and reader experience sensory perception, the fiction of taste, together via their joint acts of imagination. When Tarquin Winot thus observes that, in the winter menu, "[t]he tastebuds should be titillated,

flirted with, provoked" (13), the remark has a strong sensual, even sexual undertone that is analogous to the reader's experiencing the novel and its cuisine in the manifold descriptions of food and cooking.

Many of the surprises that make words palatable are intended to raise strange sensations about otherwise familiar tastes. Take, for instance, Tarquin Winot's explications in "*A Luncheon on the Theme of Curry*" (104), which contains a catalogue of different spices; one of them is the "evocatively Middle Eastern coriander (its Greek etymology, from *koris*, commemorating the fact that it smells identical to the humble bedbug)" (106). What starts as an inconspicuous passage celebrating the exotic origin of a well-known spice ends with a rather unpleasant textual surprise that, in turn, brings about a change in the reader's appreciation of coriander. Linguistic ruminations thus pave the way to the evocation of insect and odour, which the reader's imagination then processes into a new taste experience. It should, however, be noted that Winot does send us up the garden path, here. True, the weed and the unripe seeds of coriander emit the rather nasty smell in question; the ripe seeds, however, have a sweet and spicy aroma and a sweet and mild taste, before acquiring a somewhat biting flavour. Taste surprises can thus be tainted by the unreliable narrator's penchant for deception.

This kind of complexity increases when Winot interlaces the rhetoric of taste with that of sound to create a serial surprise. One such instance occurs halfway through the novel, where Tarquin Winot recounts one of his meetings with Laura Tavistock in a high-class Indian restaurant:

> I chose an agreeably crisp battered aubergine, a well-judged dab of cucumber *raita*, a poppadum.
>
> "When I was a kid I used to be scared of Indian restaurants because I thought you had to eat puppydogs," confided my companion.
>
> "I have only ever eaten dog once, in the course of an experimental and unrepeated visit to Macao. One had won rather spectacularly at roulette and wanted to commemorate the event with a meal to remember. One celebrated afterwards with a bottle of Krug and a puppy casserole. Not a success, overall—somehow both stringy and fatty […]."

> "I couldn't eat dog. I'd throw up."
> "*J'aime les sensations fortes*." (108)

The surprise here stems from the unexpected connection between the terms poppadum,[25] puppydogs, and puppy casserole. The link between the first two terms is that of linguistic association; the joint meal in the Indian restaurant evokes Laura's childhood memory of mistaking "poppadum" for "puppydog." Laura's innocent reinterpretation of the term poppadum is thus in character with her girlish concern for sweet young animals.[26]

Tarquin Winot, on the other hand, takes his companion's remembrance of things past literally, replying with the sophistication of the experienced sensualist. His immediate retort, "I have only eaten dog once," thus strikes his collaborator and his readers unawares and stands in marked contrast to Laura's innocence. But this is not the only disturbing moment in his reminiscences, for he does not refrain from providing an (un)pleasantly detailed account of his culinary adventure, the puppy casserole (served in Macao, thus triggering cultural stereotypes). Such food violates Western-European norms, a sense of immorality Winot increases through description. Whereas "stringy" describes the texture (and taste) of meat full of long thin pieces that are difficult to eat, "fatty" is applicable to taste, texture, look, and smell, which also conjures up the collocation 'puppy fat,' a double-bottomed joke that stresses his taste for especially young vegetables and meat.[27] Winot thus recreates the physicality of the dish through the use of synaesthetic terms. With this in mind, Laura's retort that eating dog would turn her stomach takes, as it were, the words right out of our mouths. Her open rebuke also induces Winot to comment explicitly on the attitude that informs his predilections; the French phrase "*les sensations fortes*" thus emphasises his need for strong physical sensations, which results in the desire for tasty surprises and meals to remember.

5. The Aesthetics of Textual Surprise

"*J'aime les sensations fortes*" (108): Tarquin Winot's quest for strange sensations bears an indisputable resemblance to the credo of *fin de siècle* decadence, a movement that developed out of aestheticism in the 1890s.[28] As a self-styled "scholar-artist" (140), he thus takes sides against realism, an artistic mode represented by his much-loathed, but highly successful brother Bartholomew,[29] and advocates the superiority of art over life.[30] His decadence sallies forth from his supercilious stance and honey-tongued writing style, and the myriads of exotic terms and French phrases; it is traceable in his weakness for post-Augustan Rome (note his comparing BBQ to the burning of Rome, as well as his imitating the murder of Claudius by using the same mushrooms for the newly-weds); it informs his refined taste and artistic approach to cooking; and it induces him to violate moral norms.[31] When he thus comments on dishes that logically combine two different tastes, purporting that "to the committed explorer of the senses, the first experience of any of them will have an impact comparable with an astronomer's discovery of a new planet" (77),[32] he chooses the aesthetic precepts postulated by Walter Pater in the conclusion to his seminal study on Renaissance art and poetry.[33] Pater famously advocates the supremacy of experience caused by strange or novel sensations. The sensual surprises evoked by, among others, "strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours"[34] stir the senses and break the aesthete's *ennui*, a sense of boredom Tarquin frequently experiences himself,[35] to cause a momentary, "quickened sense of life."[36] Since such worldly views are instigated by a heightened awareness of life's short span and the uncertainty of the hereafter, the only means to feel keenly, poignantly alive is to experience "as many [of these] pulsations as possible."[37] As these sensations can only be triggered by surprises that cause hitherto unknown experiences, the committed sensualist is on a constant quest for new sensual, but also artistic surprises.

Winot's own standards are, of course, decadent transmutations and subversions of Walter Pater's aestheticist manifesto.[38] His set of principles about beauty and art is so depraved that he deliberately exposes his senses to new experiences in order to try out their boundaries.[39] Such finding explains his experiencing "the thrilling sense of taint" (157) through the smelliness of eating offal, so that odour is the synaesthetic manifestation of an immoral act. He even goes so far as to conceive of murder as the chief object of aesthetic assessment, since he bewails the "loathsomely predictable murders, all of them motivated by either love (hate, jealousy) or money" (141).[40] The sheer number of new possibilities suggested by this decadent programme is inscribed into his surname: since it is homophonous with "why not?" his name is a rhetorical question that shrugs off moral inhibitions as irrelevant.[41] Winot's worldview, or, if one prefers, his vision, is expressed by the style and techniques he employs. The decadent aestheticism that underlies the novel is thus transformed into a multi-layered synaesthetic discourse that appeals to the reader's intellect and senses.[42] Winot conceives literature as a space of joint experience, which blends the literary with the culinary with the visual with the auditory to enhance the surprising "pulsations"[43] that help experience "the pressing presentness and thisness of life" (93). Hence, Winot resorts to the aesthetics of textual surprises to tickle his readers' senses and to settle his debt to pleasure.

The success of Winot's ephemeral aesthetic programme depends on the reader's active participation, because he is assigned a privileged role in Winot's artistic project: that of the collaborator. As collaborator, the reader is turned into the accomplice of the narrator's murderous designs, experiences sensual perception through extended synaesthesia, and becomes witness to his life-as-art project. The last of these three roles is of crucial importance to Winot, as he once confesses to his future victim Laura Tavistock: "The biographer, the anecdotalist here features as a collaborator, an essential (*the* essential) component in the transmission of the artwork to posterity, to its audience" (73). In the situational context of the discussion, he slyly asks Laura to col-

laborate; in the wider context, however, he wants his readers to be the witnesses to his life and works. As one can gather from the double murder in the final part of the novel, however, Winot's concept of collaboration has a sting in its tail. While he carries out the murder, he explains to the reader the minutiae of how the mushrooms' poison works, triumphantly concluding that "the body is forced *to collaborate* in the continuing process of poisoning itself" (223; emphasis added). The use of the verb "to collaborate" in this context is hardly coincidental, for Laura and her husband unwittingly *collaborate* with Winot in that they are made the subjects of another piece of murderous art, and will soon breathe their last.

The analysis advanced here becomes all the more plausible if one takes into account Winot's theory of murder, which he explicates in detail when relating the particulars of his brother's death to the Tavistocks as he is about to poison them (220-29). After purporting that the murderer and the artist are the culturally most significant figures of the twentieth century, he leaves no doubt as to who is entitled to play the leading role:

> The murderer, though, is better adapted to the reality and to the aesthetics of the modern world because instead of leaving a presence behind him—the achieved work, whether in the form of a painting or a book or a daubed signature—he leaves behind him something just as final and just as achieved: an absence. Where somebody used to be, now nobody is. (225)

Winot's critique of traditional art praises the artistic supremacy of murder, since it effects the annihilation of *both* the work of art (the murder) *and* its subject (the victim): hence, art and life blend to create an emptiness out of something that had existed.[44] Murder therefore inverses the traditional creative process which gives shape to something that was not. In turn, Winot's life-long art project turns full circle when killing Laura Tavistock and her husband: by annihilating the *sine qua non* of his eternal fame, the collaborator, he also annihilates himself. This interpretation can be brought to bear on the reader's tripartite role of collaborator: as an accomplice and witness he might

have been morally poisoned by Tarquin Winot's book, just as Dorian Gray was poisoned by the yellow book he received from Lord Wotton in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[45] But Winot develops the *fin de siècle* topos of the poisonous book one step further: as he gives the full recipe of the poisonous omelette, he invites the implied home cook to prepare the meal on his own, which he then can either consume himself or serve to others.[46] With this in mind, the concept of the poisonous book loses its metaphorical status. But this finding is also relevant for the discussion of extended synaesthesia, for the detailed descriptions of the omelette as well as of the poisoning process involve the narratee's senses just as much as previous culinary descriptions have done. As synaesthetic collaborator who experiences food through the medium of language, the (implied) reader therefore 'literally' eats of the same noxious meal served to the Tavistocks, disappears with the "murdered couple" (232) at the end of the book—and dies to become an absence.[47] This unexpected turn of events is the ultimate 'surprise' of Winot's cross-sensual discourse. Thus, John Lanchester's *The Debt to Pleasure* is a banquet for the reader's multiple senses in which the author does more than create a jilted sensualist and warm up decadent ideas spiced up with postmodern principles: he takes the analogy between consuming food and reading literature to a more advanced level, and attempts to establish an inextricable interdependency between reading and feasting.[48]

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

NOTES

[1]This is the expanded version of a paper presented at the conference of the *Connotations* society at Dortmund and Bochum, 24-28 July 2005. I would like to express my gratitude to both Burkhard Niederhoff and Christiane Bimberg for organising the event. I also wish to thank the participants of the conference, whose remarks on the paper were insightful and encouraging. Thanks are also due to Burkhard Niederhoff, Murat Kayi, Stefan Erlei, and the anonymous *Connotations* reviewer for their generous advice and criticism. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2]John Lanchester, *The Debt to Pleasure* (London: Picador, 1996) 1. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

[3]Since then, Lanchester has published two further novels, namely *Mr Phillips* (2000), the odyssey of a laid-off accountant in the London of the 1990s, and *Fragrant Harbour* (2002), a novel dealing with the fates of four people living in Hong Kong over the past seventy years.

[4]Winot explains the structure of his cookbook at the very beginning of the novel: "I have decided that, wherever possible, the primary vehicle for the transmission of my culinary reflections will be the menu. These menus shall be arranged seasonally. It seems to me that the menu lies close to the heart of the human impulse to order, to beauty, to pattern" (4).

[5]Winot states that the ultimate model for his literary project is Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarine's nineteenth-century "culino-philosophico-autobiographical" work *La Physiologie du Goût* (2).

[6]See Winot's extensive and self-reflexive comment on the structure of his work: "About the architecture of this book. Its organization is based on the times and places of its composition. In the late middle of summer I decided to take a short holiday and travel southwards through France, which is, as the reader will learn, my spiritual (and, for a portion of the year, actual) homeland. I resolved that I would jot down my thoughts on the subject of food as I went, taking my cue from the places and events around me as well as from my own memories, dreams, reflections, the whole simmering together, synergistically exchanging savours and essences like some ideal *daube*" (3-4).

[7]For the concept of "récit premier" see Genette 48. Cf. Durham 71-72 for similar comments.

[8]In the only article about *The Debt to Pleasure* to date, Carolyn A. Durham discusses its position in the literary trends of the 1990s.

[9]See Durham's repertoire of text types: "[…] the biography, the autobiography, the guidebook, the travelogue, the restaurant review, the historical commentary, the cultural ethnography, the aesthetic manifesto, the philosophical treatise, the personal confession, the mystery, the stand-up comedy routine, the judicial inquest, the lexicon, the reference book, the how-to manual, and, as the French say, *j'en passe*" (72). As Durham notes, Winot's erudite diction has by now taken her in to such an extent that she starts imitating his exuberant and learned catalogues as well as adding the occasional French phrase (Durham 80n3).

[10]Remarks that aim at disillusioning the reader are also used to elaborate on the more complex entrapments of narration, as this metaliterary passage shows: "As it happens, the little Breton town of Kerneval in which I was lunching (in which, if you are prepared to succumb for a moment to the always fashionable illusion of the historic present, I am lunching, though in fact I am dictating these words in a Lorient hotel room […])" (102).

[11]Winot loathes Mrs. Willoughby, since he perceives her as the opposite of everything he cherishes: "Mrs Willoughby was, in fact, a walking anthology of bad

taste, a serial offender against the higher orders of art and discrimination" (126). Durham quite rightly points out that she is "his feared double as much as his antithesis" (75).

[12]On the chatty style characteristic of cookbooks see Durham 75-76.

[13]See Imhof 245-67 for a thorough discussion of reader participation in metafiction.

[14]It should, however, be taken into consideration that Lanchester deliberately violates one of the whodunit's prime directives by turning a serial killer into the narrator of his novel. For it is *the* golden rule of detective fiction that the culprit should not be one of what Ulrich Suerbaum calls "Funktionspersonen," namely characters who fulfil the function of detective, first-person narrator, policeman, or physician, and who are therefore exempt from suspicion (Suerbaum 24). The classic exception to this rule is, of course, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

[15]Winot gleefully stages the encounter as a 'cliff hanger' at the end of the section on aïoli: "[…] the other occupants of the market [were] unreal to me, everything in the world a masquerade except me and her and my purposes, as I rose up before her and crisply announced: 'But my dears—how too, too unlikely!'" (186).

[16]Durham 77.

[17]The analysis of surprises advanced in this section so far recalls Winot's outline of a projected novel (210-12), in which everything is constantly shifting—characters, themes, places—while the style remains consistent. At one point, the readers will wonder whether they are reading a narrative at all, since "the essential mechanisms of propulsion, surprise, development would seem largely to be forgotten" (212). If applied to the novel in process, this outline would suggest that Winot's surprises on the plot level are more subtle and less explosive than traditional ones. Cf. Mars-Jones's critique of Winot's *mise en abyme*.

[18]At a different stage of the novel, Tarquin Winot emphasises the supremacy of food in a nice rhetorical question: "In terms of our inner lives, our *real* lives, what effect, after all, is had by the result of the battle of Waterloo compared with the question of whether or not to put Tabasco sauce on one's oysters?" (195).

[19]The narrative strategy Lanchester employs is thus reminiscent of Gérard Genette's concept of paralipsis. In a paralipsis, "the narrative does not skip over a moment of time, as in an ellipsis, but it *sidesteps* a given element"; the paralipsis is only later completed through an analepsis that solves the puzzle (Genette 52).

[20]Mars-Jones criticises this method as a "manipulative mannerism that becomes transparent" (24).

[21]The passage in question runs as follows: "[…] has anyone anywhere in the history of the world ever genuinely believed in the reality of life after death? When Mitthaug fell in front of his train at Parsons Green station, was he telling himself that there would be more where this came from? One suspects not" (93).

[22]"Reader, you know this monster delicate, / —Double-faced reader,—kinsman,—brother mine!" Text and translation are taken from Richardson's edition of Baudelaire's poetry.

[23]"Death, then, gives Brittany its cultural distinctiveness" (92).

[24]Synaesthesia (Greek "perceiving together") is a rhetorical device that describes "one kind of sensation in terms of another" (Abrams 315). In psychology, it signifies the experience of one sense (say, sound) through another (say, colour). Among others, Winot's extended discussion of the smell of spring, "that smell which is more a texture than an odour" (36-37), has a strong synaesthetic quality.

[25]Poppadum is a usually hot Indian bread cracker served as a starter.

[26]The phonetic resemblance between the two words causes an incident of paranomasia, or, to be more precise, a naïve asteïsmus, "a reply to earlier words used in a different sense" (Cuddon 757).

[27]Winot's predilection surfaces occasionally. After giving his recipe of Irish stew in the winter menu, for instance, Winot presents a learned catalogue of various kinds of stew; among others, he makes mention of the "*navarin* of young lamb and baby vegetables, with its sly rustic allusion to infanticide" (26).

[28]For an introduction to these developments see Johnson 47-49.

[29]Bartholomew, who is conceived as Tarquin's direct opposite and nemesis, is frequently ridiculed by his brother for his assumed realism (101, 158).

[30]See also Winot's remarks on the "aesthetic period" of his university days, when, inspired by Huysman, he served a black menu in a black room (100-02; cf. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*, ch. 2).—Winot's set of tenets smacks of the ideas informing Oscar Wilde's dialogue *The Decay of Lying*, which could be used as a foil against which to read the novel. Vivian's view that "Life is Art's best, Art's only pupil" seems to be especially important in this context (*Complete Works* 983).

[31]He makes his dislike of moral art explicit when downgrading an ornamented altar in Kerneval church as a "hideous modern piece of sanctimonious-didactic embroidery" (96).

[32]Winot's remark suggests Brillat-Savarin's aphorism IX in his *Physiologie du Goût*: "La découverte d'un mets nouveau fait plus pour le bonheur du genre humain que la découverte d'une étoile" (Brillat-Savarin 1: 15; "The discovery of a new dish brings more happiness to humanity than the discovery of a star").

[33]Pater 233-38.

[34]Pater 237.

[35]"[…] in the course of a lifetime's engagement with any one of them [i.e. the arts] one goes through periods of boredom, *ennui*, *anomie*, *déjà vu*, it's-all-been-doneness" (77). Quite notably so, Winot culturally differentiates (English) boredom from (French) *ennui* ("Styles of self-satisfaction vary from country to country, just as to be bored is not the same thing as to suffer from *ennui*"; 43). See also Baudelaire's "Au lecteur," where the poet characterises *ennui* as the disease from which modern man is suffering (see also n22 above).

[36]Pater 238.

[37]Pater 238.

[38]Isobel Murray draws attention to the general misunderstanding of Pater's precepts, citing Oscar Wilde as the most important exponent of such miscarried aestheticism (*Dorian Gray* ix); see *Dorian Gray* 22 and 130-31 for Wilde's permutations of Pater's ideas, and Johnson 72-83 for an extended discussion of the two writers.

[39]Winot's decadent programme therefore recalls Brillat-Savarin's dictum that "les limites du plaisir ne sont encore ni connues ni posées" (Brillat-Savarin 2: 29; "the limits to pleasure are as yet neither known nor fixed"), which Winot ranks as his favourite (2). In a more literary context, however, Winot's search for new sensations also reads like a perverted version of Rimbaud's advocating "un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement* de *tous les sens*" for the poet who wants to become a seer (Rimbaud 251; "a long, vast and systematic *derangement* of *all senses*").

[40]The view that murder can be appreciated in artistic terms once moral judgement is suspended was first voiced in Thomas De Quincey's three-part satire "On Murder, Considered As One of the Fine Arts," where the anonymous narrator maintains that murder "may also be treated *æsthetically* […]—that is, in relation to good taste" (De Quincey 50).

[41]His name tallies well with Johnson's observation that "aestheticism diverges from a puritan ethic of rigid 'thou shalt nots'" (Johnson 22).

[42]The notion of extended synaesthesia is reminiscent of Rimbaud's postulating a new poetic language in his "Seer-Letters": "Cette langue sera de l'âme pour l'âme, résumant tout, parfums, sons, couleurs, de la pensée accrochant la pensée et tirant" ["This language will go from soul to soul, including all, scents, sounds, colours, the thought that clings to another thought, and draws it on."] (Rimbaud 252). As synaesthesia is frequently used in nineteenth-century French literature (see, e.g., Baudelaire's "Correspondences," Rimbaud's "Voyelles," and Huysmans's *À Rebours*, ch. 5), it could be regarded as a crucial feature of French aestheticism. By resorting to this stylistic device, Winot shows his indebtedness to the traditions that exerted a formative, if misleading influence on the English decadence. For a comprehensive account of French influences on the English decadence see Lindner.

[43]The term is Pater's (*Renaissance* 238).

[44]The ideas articulated in the passage under discussion (on 220-29) are further developments of an earlier theory of "the aesthetics of absence, of omission," where Winot claims that the true artist is to be judged by "what he doesn't do" (69). That his views take a deadly turn is hinted at when Winot notes that his art is an "affair of farewells and absences" (95).

[45]Wilde, *Dorian Gray* 125-26 and 146-47.

[46]This supposition is underscored by the surprising cookbook rapport embedded in the conversation with the Tavistocks. The commands in the recipe are therefore also addressed to the reader.

[47]This view is corroborated by the closing lines of the novel: "I turned and walked back up to the house. By the time I got there the murdered couple had gone around the corner onto the main road, leaving behind them a slow cloud of settling dust" (232).—Durham also argues for the "death of the *reader*" by the hand of Tarquin Winot, who "metaphorically kills both us, his implied readers, and our diegetic representative within the text" (79).

[48]The phrase also features in Kalaga's article "Food for Thought: A Textual Feast," where the analogy between reading and feasting is discussed (somewhat inconclusively, one should add) in the literary theories of Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, and Paul Ricoeur.—See Barakoska's article on Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* for a recent discussion of the analogy between consuming food and consuming literature.

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