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The Emperor's Plate: Marketing Leftovers in Nineteenth-Century Paris

The stuff of imperial banquets and the fare of the lower classes are extreme concepts not usually considered together. And yet they come together in a practice through which food circulated wildly across socioeconomic, cultural and imaginary borders over the course of the long nineteenth century.¹ It was not impossible during this period for beggars to eat like the emperor – or the king or the President of the Republic or the Rothschilds, depending on the year and the milieu – because they might be consuming the very scraps cleared from such privileged tables.²

The practice of clearing leftovers from the grand tables of palaces, ministries, embassies and fine restaurants and reselling them to the less privileged as *regrat* or *rogatons* (the most common umbrella terms), *bijoux* and *arlequins* (slang subterms) was common in the nineteenth century and had a special place – a quite literal space – in the market. In the renovated space of the Baltard-redesigned Halles in central Paris, the triage and recomposition of leftovers was done behind the scenes, below ground.³ In subterranean passages removed from the light of day the remains could be prepared for marketing to the public in a painstakingly refurbished state: the almost intact morsels salvaged for resale at premium second-hand prices, the gristly half-

¹ I use Eric Hobsbawm's widely accepted term to refer to the period stretching from 1789-1914, from the French Revolution to the beginning of World War I.

² See, for example, Alfred Suzanne, 'Les Coulisses de la Cuisine: les arlequins,' *L'Art culinaire* (Paris: 1892: Dixième Année), p. 47; Madeleine Ferrières, *Nourritures canailles* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 356; Emile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: Folio, 2002 [1873]), pp. 341-53.

Subsequent references to works cited in the Notes will be given in the text; all translations from the French throughout this essay are mine.

³ Also relegated to subterranean space were such activities as force-feeding pigeons to prepare them to look their plump best upon death, cutting up animal carcasses, plucking chickens, colouring butter – what we might call 'food grooming'.

devoured bits re-plated and artfully sauced, recomposed in more or less attractive collages priced accordingly. From here they would be sent up to the pavilion stalls devoted to this specific kind of commerce.⁴

The alimentary history of the underfed is only now being resurrected, piecemeal, thanks to a handful of contemporary historians and their sources in chronicles and novels of the period, many of which are little read or even forgotten (and generally out of print) today. We know a fair amount about the rise of haute cuisine in post-revolutionary France, but the poor left few recipes, and their fare was of little interest to most period chroniclers of gastronomy and fine restauration.⁵ It is precisely this gap – of interest, of knowledge, of discourse and, of course, most concretely, of substance – that separated high tables and low (or no) tables, but that also, paradoxically, was responsible for connecting them and for putting into socioeconomic circulation a vast array of objects of consumption.

In what follows I will look beyond the already richly preserved corpus of gastronomy as it was codified in nineteenth-century Paris, to the other extreme, the commerce in leftovers, and more specifically, one subgenre: the plate of recomposed table scraps, *l'arlequin*. However, by way of introduction to this trafficking, I must emphasize, if only in passing, how radical were the dichotomies that enabled it. To at least evoke the profound disparities of the Paris food scene, let us consider a small but representative series of polarities. In the first of three examples, we have, on the one hand, Grimod de la Reynière's *Almanach des gourmands* with its *recherché* counsel –

⁴ The *arlequins* were sold in Pavilion XII, in the area dedicated to *viandes cuites* or 'cooked meats', which were the most coveted component of plated leftovers, present in greater or lesser degree according to availability and price. They were also dispatched to the regional markets of Paris. The presence of harlequins in the markets (Les Halles and local ones) predated the Baltard Halles, but the ways, means and legislation of their sale is poorly documented.

⁵ See Eugène Briffault's chapter 'Des Gens qui ne dînent pas' in *Paris à table* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2003 [1846]), pp. 50-58 for a rare exception.

expanded and reinvented each time in the eight editions of the almanac – on where the most discriminating palates might find the highest quality of everything gourmand, from extravagant ingredients, to exquisite restaurant meals, to fine crystal, porcelain and linens; on the other, Pierre Hamp’s account of the protest of one outraged beggar, who meets a restaurant kitchen handout of ‘ham fat between two rags of gnawed bread’ with the cry: ‘This is what I get? [...] you don’t have anything better? You who get to choose your food are lucky. I have to swallow whatever I find, or starve to death.’⁶ Or again: let us juxtapose the recipe for ‘Le Potage Camerani’ (invented on the occasion of an early nineteenth-century dinner for ten eminent gourmets at the elegant Café Anglais), with its stipulation that the chicken liver base be derived from forty fattened chickens killed by electrocution rather than bleeding or strangulation, and the protocol for a rather different preparation of soup, common to multiple soup kitchens catering to the indigent, this one dependent on a stock sourced from the greasy residue of dish washing skimmed by the kitchen labourers [*les plongeurs*] when they were done with their day’s work.⁷ And finally, a third apposition: the harmonies of a sumptuous repast prepared with lavish, calculated attention such as Marcel Rouff evokes it (‘imagine the intellectual effort, the intuitive genius that will harmonize the products of the earth, the sky and the sea’), or the gentle accords of a well-conducted menu such as Auguste Escoffier conceives it (‘to choose [...] dishes with

⁶ Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière, *L’Almanach des gourmands: servant de guide dans les moyens de faire excellente chère* (Paris: 2012 [1803-1812]) passim.; Pierre Hamp, *Mes Métiers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929), p. 143. If our sources are to be believed, such a complaint is extremely rare. In any case the reporting of it is exceptional. Far more common are patronizing accounts of the gratitude of the poor for anything at all, along with comments on their lack of discrimination. J. Barbaret, for example, speaks of occasional charitable handouts from harlequin sellers to the truly destitute and starving: ‘This composite clump of food was not well presented, but those to whom it was offered didn’t look too closely. There was an entire elegy in the silent gratitude they addressed to the gifters. The gift may not have been marketable; in any case [...] hunger makes stench imperceptible’ (*La Bohème du travail* (Paris: Hetzel, 1889), pp. 369-370).

⁷ Eugène Chavette, *Restaurateurs et restaurés* (Paris: A. Le Chevalier, 1867), pp. 9-10; Barbaret, p. 365.

discernment, to group them harmoniously and to create, with scattered notes, a sort of delectable orchestration’) – contrasted with what Madeleine Ferrières names the ‘cacophony of colours and smells’, or the dissonances of pot luck borne, in Jacques Castelnau’s description, by a ladle emerging ‘like a lottery ticket’ from a pot of melded remains, with its arbitrary haul of anything ranging from ‘a half-devoured chicken thigh [to] a few humble lentils’.⁸

This last example precisely encapsulates the dynamic of the passage from wealth to poverty, privilege to indigence, choice to imposition, aesthetic intention to random consumption that characterizes the particular practice I want to explore in detail in these pages. *L’arlequin* is the alimentary idiom in French for a patchwork of reassembled table scraps generally assumed to be visually reminiscent of the costume of its namesake, the buffoon figure in the *Commedia dell’arte*; on the gustatory, olfactory and tactile levels as well, such food scraps would have been analogous to the garishly mismatched costume fabric of the *Commedia* character. To retain the theatrical and design resonances of the term, and also its later literary and painterly connotations, I will hold to a literal translation, ‘the harlequin’.

I’ll begin by describing the practice in the dominant discourse of its contemporary historians, journalists and novelists, most often followed by our own contemporaries as well, which represents a perspective I call *degradational* in that it focuses on the ignoble and disgusting nature of the already deteriorating, eventually decomposing second-hand food, and on the Parisian *regrattier*’s business of selling it down the socio-economic chain in increasingly degraded form to a progressively impoverished clientele. A spate of solicitous bourgeois commentators ranging from the late eighteenth century to our time, no doubt priding themselves

⁸ Marcel Rouff, *La Vie et la passion de Dodin-Bouffant, gourmet* (Paris: Editions Sillage, 2010 [1924]) pp. 8-9; Auguste Escoffier, Avant-propos, *Le Livre des menus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1912), pp. 5-6; Ferrières, p. 358; p. 360; Jacques Castelnau, *Les Petits métiers de Paris* (Paris: Astéria, 1952), p. 49.

on their expansive sympathy and pity, have complacently and derogatorily represented the dregs of fine repasts passed down to the dregs of the social order. This discourse typically takes the high voice of overflowing outrage and disgust. In the last part of the essay I will move on to suggest an alternative approach, however, this one constructed upon minor traces also available in period narratives as well as latter-day ones, and which I call *aspirational*; this discourse tends more to espouse a subjectivity that is not the author's own, and to represent the practice of eating other people's discarded food as an act that is metaphysically as well as physically motivated; this means approaching hunger in its affective and imaginary regimes rather than only as a somatic imperative. Broadening the concept of hunger and of taste allows us also to thicken our understanding of food in its diversified states, categories and functions, cultural as well as natural, adulterated as well as pure, and to think about eating as an act of potential revolt that puts into question accepted social, political and aesthetic definitions of taste and disgust.

Trickle-down Eating

The phenomenon of used food pre-existed the alimentary application of the term *l'arlequin*; Maxime du Camp explains, in 1870, that *arlequins* used to be called *rogatons*, 'but slang has prevailed'.⁹ In his late eighteenth-century *Tableau de Paris*, under the entry 'Hideous Dishes' [*Mets hideux*], Louis Sébastien Mercier describes the antecedent to what would become a somewhat better regulated trade in recycled food at Les Halles in mid-nineteenth century:

At the bend of the street, in a narrow little stall, what is it I see on these chipped, cracked plates? What are these leftovers that already bear the mark of mold? These remains,

⁹ Maxime du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions, et sa vie jusqu'en 1870*, ed. by G. Rondeau (Paris: Moncod, 1993 [1870]), p. 165.

rejected by the valets, after touching the mouth of a bishop who thought better of it and switched to another bit, were disdained by the scullions [...] who sold them to the *regrattiers*, who left them exposed to the air [...]. In the evening, an indigent soul [...] descends from his attic to buy these disgusting remains on which the servants have drooled.¹⁰

Though Mercier's early version of the trade in dinner remains describes the shadiest of food recyclings, concealed in dark alleyways, marginalized in space and time, the cycle announces the very same trickle-down pattern that would remain in place throughout the new century. And as we shall see, the practices he describes, though they become illegal, do not completely vanish during the nineteenth century.

In the memoir of his early days as pastry and then restaurant chef apprentice (in the late 1880s-early 1890s), Hamp recounts the triage that took place in the kitchens after the diners left:

From the residues of the cleared plates, the *maîtres d'* put aside for the harlequin sellers whatever scraps kept a little substance, held on to a semblance of slice or piece. These went to a plate of cold meat for the stalls of Les Halles or cheap restaurants. Whatever was runny or pulpy was given to the beggars to feast on [...]. After this, the cadaverous remains of sauces and dishwashing, the vomit of drunken diners, the burnt and rotten bits fell into the barrels of [the dishwasher] who watched in jubilation as the viscous level on which he made his small fortune rose [...]. He sold this to pig farmers [...]. The food cycle, which began with the vegetable garden, the herd and the flock, ended in the dung heap and the pigsty. (pp. 142-43)

¹⁰ Louis Sébastien Mercier, 'Mets hideux', *Tableau de Paris*, ed. by Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994 [1789], 3 vols.), vol. 1, p. 1183.

Other commentators recount similar kitchen operations that culminate in the sale of just such grease and slops and debris to soup vendors and harlequin sellers rather than pig farmers. Castelneau calls harlequin sellers ‘the fiercest competitors of dogs, cats, and pigs: they literally take bread from [animal] jaws’ (p. 48).

The visual and literary iconography of harlequins in the nineteenth century in fact consistently has consumers vying with beasts for their sustenance. Tales are legion of dishwashers turning a profit by selling off to pig farmers on the sly the dinner vestiges meant for charitable handouts. According to A. Coffignon, the harlequin stands were first providers for ‘the good souls that pamper little dogs’; human consumers are listed as secondary clientele.¹¹ Du Camp specifies that after the choice scraps are snapped up by humans, ‘there remains a fair amount of detritus that is difficult to classify’; these dregs lie around waiting for the well-to-do women who cross Paris to buy ‘succulent mash’ for their ‘coddled dogs’ or other pets from their favourite harlequin stalls at Les Halles (p. 165). Paintings and photographs of harlequin merchants typically feature a dog crouching beneath the display table, at once naturalist detail and ideological commentary. Written accounts frequently expose a thin conceit on the part of buyer and seller alike that the food is being purchased for a pet at home, though it would be good enough for human consumption, as in the following exchange reported by P.-L. Imbert:

--I would like a ragoût for my dog.

¹¹ A. Coffignon, *L’Estomac de Paris* (Paris: À la librairie illustrée, ca. 1887), pp. 181-82.

--I have exactly what you need: a delicious dish, from the kitchens of M. the Count of the Sylvain Flute. I had some for breakfast, and I'm still licking my fingers. [...] It's a shame that the dog will be eating it...this is food worthy of a Christian.¹²

The Omnibus

Eugène Sue's potboiler novel *Les Mystères de Paris* takes off from a scene in a tavern in which the ex-convict protagonist, Le Chourineur, orders a harlequin and urges his companion to do the same. The dual descriptions of the dish, one from the character's voracious point of view and the other from the novelist's patronizing one, are worth comparing.

What a dish! God Almighty! What a dish! It's like an omnibus. There's something for all tastes, for those who eat meat and those who don't, for those who like sugar and those who like spice...Chicken drumsticks, biscuit pieces, fish tails, rib bones, pâté crusts, fried bits, cheese, vegetables, woodcock head, salad. Go on, eat, eat up, la Goualeuse...this is refined food.

Sue, in good editorial form, adds a note to explain the dish, which he evidently deemed too exotic to pass without clarification for his 1842 bourgeois reader: 'A harlequin is a collection of meat, fish, and all kinds of leftovers coming from the cleared tables of the servants of upper class homes. We are ashamed of these details, but they contribute to the ensemble of such menus.'¹³ It is not clear whether his shame is to be attributed to commiseration with the plight of his fellow humans at the bottom of the social hierarchy condemned to consume the relics of the higher orders, or to a potential offense his details might deliver to the taste and sensibility of his

¹² P.-L. Imbert, *Les Trappeurs parisiens au XIXe siècle* (Paris: André Sagnier, 1878), pp. 117-19.

¹³ Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* (Paris: Editions Hallier, 1977 [1842]), p. 25.

bourgeois readers, but it is precisely the carefully crafted ambiguity of his phrasing that begins to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the discourse I call ‘degradational’.

Almost all commentators emphasize the ‘omnibus’ nature of the harlequin and call attention, explicitly or implicitly, to its disgusting nature. Chavette includes the harlequin in his wide-ranging book on restauration in Paris, penultimate in a series of chapters that descends from fine dining to charity hand-outs. He introduces the harlequin by its sinister appearance – ‘These strange plates, mysterious amalgams of scraps so diverse that they have been named *harlequins*’ – and goes on to detail procedure and composition: ‘Restaurant leftovers are sold and carefully picked over for the best scraps, resold as ‘jewels’ [*bijoux*]. The harlequin is composed of the leftovers of such leftovers! Fish heads, rib bones, bits of lamb leg, pastry crumbs, all this, pell-mell, soaked in twenty different sauces, already four to five days old, waiting for customers in a certain corner of the central Halles’ (pp. 109-10).

Imbert describes the completely fortuitous and therefore motley nature of the harlequin and indeed of the whole phenomenon, from consumer to consumed to surface of consumption:

On plates of all shapes and every dimension we find displayed foods destined for consumers of all classes and even all species: men, dogs, or cats. We see objects whose nature is difficult to determine: bones to which not even the slightest bit of meat adheres; fowl hardly eaten; bits of pastry and of fish mixed in with fragments of roast beef and of salad. Everything is there, even – too often, alas, for the needy! – that which should not be there! (pp 114-15)

It is as if commentators were rivalling for the most revolting descriptions possible. Coffignon describes ‘pâté crusts, vegetable scraps, half gnawed legs of lamb, chicken carcasses, fish, a little of everything’ (p. 181).

Certainly part of what disturbs about the harlequin is its mixed character, the combining of separate parts that lose identity; but the scandal it provokes is not due only to its jumbled form in spatial display, but also to its combined presentation in time. Paté and meat bones and pastry heaped together on a plate speak not only to the eradication of separate elements, but to the erasure of course sequencing as well. Du Camp is clear about the violation of temporal structure in his rendition of ‘this nameless pile, where hors-d’oeuvres are mixed with roasts, and vegetables, with desserts’ (p. 165). The rituals of dining are dependent on sequencing and time, and these formalities are disrupted by the harlequin. In a dramatic example of temporal disordering projected onto the consumer as well, Coffignon paints a portrait of ‘Grandma Olden Days’ [*la mère Jadis*], who haunts the harlequin stalls by predilection, and injects into every utterance the time marker ‘in the olden days’. Roaming the streets of Paris as an old woman, she persistently inserts into the present a past where she was ostensibly one of the beauties of Paris. Working now as an ambulant merchant, she and her words are overtaken by former times of luxurious ease. Choosing her meals from the harlequin display, she recalls and repeats more privileged days of dining on each of the recycled dishes in an original incarnation. Her conversation is a harlequin in time, fragments of different temporal layers juxtaposed, promiscuously cohabiting the same moment (pp. 182-83).

Suzanne attempts to put some order into the disorderly phenomenon, distinguishing between different classes of harlequins destined for different classes of eaters (‘choice’ harlequins and ‘cheap’ harlequins). The most expensive portions are also the most highly assorted [*richement assorties*] – no doubt because they are the most highly sorted as well – and the nature of their individual elements is more succulent and more elegant [*recherchée*]. Suzanne offers examples of the finest assortments, going for ten to twelve sous: ‘[1] a chicken thigh, a

lobster claw, a filet of sole, a dried-up bit of pâté, some pistachio pudding; [2] half a truffled trotter, a slice of galantine, a breaded cutlet, a fish head, a chocolate éclair; [3] some sauerkraut, crayfish in red wine sauce, sautéed rabbit, veal head cheese, a venison filet, some bits of apple charlotte' (p. 46).

Zola describes the hybrid composition of a lower-end plate: 'Starting at 9 a.m. the plates are displayed in the stalls, prettily made up, dressed and decorated; for three to five sous: scraps of meat, game filets, fish heads or tails, vegetables, charcuterie, even dessert; cakes barely nibbled and sweets almost whole' (p. 342). His signalling of the artisanal element of the harlequin merchant's work (which requires not merely dishing out, but dressing, decorating, applying cosmetic touches) announces a common motif.

The Seller as Artist

Like Zola and others, Suzanne comments on the artistry necessary to a harlequin seller intent on making her composite wares appetizing to the eyes of those customers who choose to eat remnants of other people's fancy (if used) food instead of buying less extravagant raw ingredients, for much the same price, to be freshly prepared. After the early morning collection by intermediaries (or by harlequin merchants themselves) who contract with various ministries, embassies, fine restaurants and *hôtels particuliers* to pick up pails of leftovers from their kitchens, after the delivery of these dinner remains to the underground sorting areas of Les Halles where they are poured and scraped into large vats, the work but also the craft of the harlequin sellers begins. The labour of sorting through the vats [*les mannes*] filled with mixed ruins of miscellaneous dinners is only the start. She or he must also, most crucially, 'garnish the plates with tact and discernment. [...] It is no easy matter for the "jeweller" [*la bijoutière*] to

dress up her merchandise, add the final touches, divide it among the many plates she has to fill, and arrange all this in such a fashion that it will tempt the eye and the desire of her clients' (p. 46). The harlequin seller is an artisan as well as a merchant. Commentators consistently use verbs such as *habiller*, 'to dress'; *parer*, 'to dress up, deck out, embellish'; *rhabiller*, 'to rehabilitate or dress up'; and *maquiller*, 'to make up, apply cosmetics' to describe the work of *bricolage*, 'cobbling' or 'tinkering', that is the essence of the trade. As Ferrières has suggested, to sell used food is not only to engage in commerce, but also in transformative work; it is to refurbish, to renew, to beautify, to stimulate appetite, to make new things out of old things [*regratter, c'est aussi rendre plus beau, plus appétissant, faire du neuf avec du vieux*] (p. 351). Rhetoric writes the harlequin seller as a tailor, a shoemaker, a dresser, a wardrobe mistress, a make-up artist and at times a brothel madam trading in recomposed bodies of food that must be overdressed because they are already overcirculated, overcombined, overmixed, overaged: literally promiscuous objects of desire proffered for public consumption.

In contrast, Suzanne relates, a labourer with many children could feed his entire family economically with another line of goods from the same stall, which also vends, but at a much lower price than the more extravagant mosaics, various ragoûts and stews whose defining meat has disappeared: lamb stew reduced to its potatoes; veal with carrots whose carrots predominate; beef with cabbage condensed to cabbage. Available as well are various stews or soups whose ingredients are so merged as to be almost indistinguishable (p. 46).

Suzanne is not alone among period chroniclers who describe soup sold either by harlequin merchants or by merchants specialized as soup sellers. Soup is the epitome of the harlequin concept: it is the product of ingredients scraped from the bottom of the barrel and the top of the sink, recombined into what is often a rendering into oblivion of the constituent parts.

Barbarett describes the soup made by harlequin dealers with what is left after the assembling of harlequin plates:

With the grease skimmed off dirty dishwater allowed to cool and congeal into a crust, supplemented by water, the merchants set bouillon cooking, to which they add the remains of mashed potatoes, beans, other vegetables, and any crusts of bread they've picked up. [...] These wares might even be vaguely appetizing for anyone who has not witnessed the manipulations they have sustained. In any case, the consumers of such food are not demanding. [...] They are usually vagabonds, whose palates have been desensitized by alcohol. (pp. 366-68)

Though Barbaret dismisses the need to cater to the taste of consumers, it is clear elsewhere that the fabrication of soup as well as of plated harlequins is financially commensurate with a work of beautification and ornamentation, not to say disguise. Maxime du Camp and others report on the very specialized tradesman called the 'bouillon bead-maker' (literally, 'the worker who makes eyes in bouillon' [*l'employé aux yeux de bouillon*]). His task was to create the illusion of depth and richness of texture in a very thin bouillon made from such raw materials as we have seen, or, to quote du Camp, from an even more watery base: 'soup drawn from the fountain, and coloured with a bit of burnt onion' (p. 169). Castelnau elucidates the work of this inimitable labourer who must simulate the onctuous depths of complex broth on the dull surface of simple coloured water: 'This precious assistant [...] takes in his mouth a spoonful of fish oil and blows it out with force while squeezing his lips tightly together. He thereby spreads a kind of mist on the pot. Through the action of this bountiful dew, droplets [*les yeux*] form and transform the flat brownish surface into a lustrous constellation' (p. 51).

The Afterlife of the Harlequin

The harlequin, as plate or as soup, is one stage in a cycle of recycling. While the practice was more or less regulated and policed in the marketplace by the Second Empire, there were multiple opportunities after the market stalls for reaching outside the law and raising the practice to greater heights of insalubrity, as there were numerous outlets for leftovers prior to or on the sidelines of the market. Jean-Paul Aron has remarked that ‘[the harlequin] is only the prologue. [...] The industry of rotting takes as its tenet that nothing be lost. [...] From vestige to refuse, from refuse to decomposition, the transitions are imperceptible’.¹⁴ To follow the cycle after its ‘prologue’, to witness some episodes of what may be considered to be the afterlife of the harlequin, we can turn to some period accounts.¹⁵

Chavette relates the multi-episodic epilogue to the story of foods condemned by the authorities at Les Halles: ‘The authorities [...] order the withdrawal from sale of [food refuse] before it is entirely rotted. But have no fear, these condemned remains are not yet lost. They disappear to outlying areas, far from the purview of the inspectors, to stock the pots of the miserable hovels where poverty feeds’ (p. 110). Alternatively, there are the *houillers*, who are traffickers in spoiled food (poultry, game, etc.): food so far gone as to have been rejected by the lowliest of restaurants at the market, and so normally destined for the refuse dump. Instead it is purchased for next to nothing by a *houiller*, who takes it to the outskirts of Paris. There, ‘posing as a peasant, he approaches you in the street or under a doorway, with an air of secrecy, to

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Aron, *Le Mangeur du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013 [1973]), pp. 274-75.

¹⁵ Aron’s narrative, while useful, is composed of largely unattributed bits of first-hand accounts, lifted from the earlier texts and juxtaposed on his page, like an in-print imitation of the alimentary composite that is his subject. Ferrières’s scrupulously annotated and incisive chapter ‘L’Arlequin’ in her *Nourritures canailles* (pp. 343-62) is a better starting point.

propose cheap game. His merchandise is carefully wrapped “so as not to attract the attention of the police”, says the ostensible poacher. The low price convinces you, he passes you the package...and you carry the plague home with you’ (p. 111). There is a third scenario offered by Chavette in this survey of deteriorating remains: ‘A few years ago, the health services of Les Halles ordered that spoiled fish be carted off to the garbage dumps of [the suburb of] La Villette. One day they arrested some people who for years had been coming after the dump carts left, to refish the fish and resell it on the outskirts of Paris. No comment is needed’ (pp. 112-13).

If Chavette makes no further comment, other writers furnish details on the practice of ‘making up fish’ [*maquiller le poisson*] by infusing blood in the gills of fish no longer fresh. Lobster, crayfish and other molluscs that deteriorate quickly in warm weather were not subject to the same kind of ‘freshening up’; instead, the spoiled parts would be simply detached. Any holes or gaping spaces made by the amputations would be ‘stuffed with chervil, parsley, or aromatic herbs to mask the ammonia smell given off’.¹⁶

Coffignon leaves pages that elaborate on the specialized work of oyster resellers, vendors of oysters gone bad and palmed off cheaply by sellers unwilling or unable to sell them to their clients. The resellers, known as ‘undertakers’ [*des croque-morts*], stock thousands of spoiled oysters in large wooden tubs in large open sheds commonly referred to as ‘infirmaries’ [*l’infirmierie*]. Here they are set to soak in salt water sometimes dosed with algae. The oyster, dying but not yet dead, has sufficient reflexes remaining to open upon contact with the salt water, to ‘drink’, and when replete, to close – and to give the illusion of vitality and edibility. ‘It will soon die of indigestion,’ reports Coffignon, ‘but [for a critical limited period] appears fresh to the

¹⁶ Monique Sclaresky, *Paris si étrange* (Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, 2005), p. 39.

eye, sounds full and feels heavy' (pp. 219-21). It is no wonder, then, that the consumption of oysters in the nineteenth century begins to be 'democratized', to use Coffignon's term (p. 217).

Hamp's memories of his restaurant apprenticeship include several accounts of the eating habits of those living even below the level of harlequin patrons. The 'moth-eaten' beggars he refers to as *les miteux* come by for handouts the kitchen staff prepares for distribution at appointed hours: 'The *maîtres-d'* had to clean the cleared plates carefully, scraping off fat parings and sauce dribbles to soften and flavour the dry crusts destined for the teeth of the starving. These damned souls wait[ed] for their disgusting ration each morning, at the very time when the waiters were laying the white tablecloths, setting the crystal and the silver' (p. 143). Hamp further describes a food cycle linking the pinnacle of haute cuisine inexorably to the dung heap, each stage of which is socioeconomically determined and strictly hierarchized:

The food served in fine restaurants was passed on from wealthy guests to the clients of stalls that sold bits and pieces, and then on to the wretched of the streets, then on to the institutionalized poor, and finally to the pigs put out to pasture and to fertilize the land. Everyone sought to profit from this traffic where the smallest crumb of bread and the most disgusting drool of sauce had commercial value. (p. 144)

Nature may be but thinly veiled by culture, but culture – economic and political forces – regulates how nature is both determined and determinative.

Nothing Is Lost

If the harlequin finds its place in an institutionalized (re)cycling of food whose downward path mimics the social ladder, it also is informed by a broad economic mandate of thrift and reuse. Time and again we are reminded by various dictums and declarations in the accounts of food

circulation that nothing is to be wasted. As corollary, everything must be done to assure that nothing is discarded, including reconditioning, cosmetic enhancement, savvy marketing and fraud. Though insalubrity and dishonesty were easier to implement away from the surveillance of authorities in the marketplace, commerce at Les Halles was no exception to the rule of salvage and recirculation, and one has the sense that many vendors did whatever they could get away with. ‘Nothing is lost in Paris,’ Coffignon reminds us, ‘at Les Halles less than anywhere else’ (p. 151). Butter that fell on the floor would be used for frying (p. 181). Cooking utensils and grills were fashioned from old umbrella ribs by a small tradesman on the edge of Les Halles (Coffignon, p. 260). Discarded butt-ends of smoked cigars were gathered for recycling by another specialized tradesman [*le ramasseur de bouts de cigares*].¹⁷ Du Camp offers the summary judgment that ‘all is used in this immense city of Paris, and there is no object too deteriorated, too disdainful, too paltry, to be put to use by some intelligent person.’ As illustration, he goes on to narrate the cycle of bread, starting with the used bread sellers (literally, ‘crust and crumb sellers’ [*les marchands de mie et de croute*]) at Les Halles. But the story flashes back, for the source of the recycled bread can be traced to school canteens where the boarded children freely waste their bread, throwing it, kicking it ‘like pebbles or clumps of dirt’ in the schoolyards. These clods of bread, ‘covered with dust, stained with ink, damp from puddles, hardened behind trash heaps’, are gathered and sold to used bread dealers, who sort the bread. The bits ‘still presentable’ are dried in the oven and grated, to be used for making croutons or thickening soup. The crusts and crumbs deemed ‘too defective’ are pulverized in a mortar and used for breading chops. The ‘true debris’ is ‘blackened over a fire, ground into a dark powder, mixed with honey sprayed with a few drops of spirits of mint’, and sold as toothpaste (p. 165).

¹⁷ See Jean Paillet’s tableau in *Paris qui crie: petits métiers*, ed. by Henri Beraldi, illus. by Pierre Vidal (Paris: Les Amis des livres, 1890), pp. 111-12.

Castelnau gives a similar account of the bread recycling industry, adding that the used bread seller's employees charged with bread triage work morning to night in vast sheds, working in teams before 'mountains of bread' to sort the scraps into those still fit for humans and those consigned to feed rabbits (pp. 49-50).

Zola describes the handling of butter in the cellar of Les Halles. Butter for the poor was composed, like cheap wine, of an amalgam of sources, some turning or already rancid. Once kneaded into a single mass by bare arms buried up to the elbows, the blend would be visually enhanced by the addition of a colourant [*le raucourt*] derived from the annatto tree. If that were not available, carrots or marigolds would do the trick (pp. 330-31). Butter was not the only food artificially coloured. Various kinds of fowl and cuts of pork were 'freshened up'; in fact there was a specialized tradesman called 'the painter of turkey feet' [*le peintre de pieds de dindons*] whose job was to apply a glaze on these appendages so that they would 'appear fresh and red even many days after death' (Castelnau, 46-47). Other sorts of fowl were prepared for sale by various other cosmetic enhancing techniques. Pigeons were force-fed by blowing grain, mouth-to-mouth, then infused with salt water, and killed in their digestive afterglow to present a white and delicate flesh to the consumer (Zola, pp. 392-93). Ducks and chickens were artificially plumped for market by blocking their cloaca with paper and then forcing air into their trachea (Sclaresky, p. 38).

The line separating thrift and enterprise from unsanitary practices and fraud is sinuous, whether within or without the zone of surveillance. Hamp recounts, from his days as a pastry apprentice in the upscale Pâtisserie Laborde, that the owner 'trained us to avoid wasting even a single crumb. We used everything down to the last drop' (p. 62). So it may not be a great surprise that the syrup used for glazing *babas au rhum* was drawn from the 'scum [... of] sugary

residues, scrapings of cake icing, meringue left over in the bottom of bowls [...] all dumped into five-litre cans. [...] When the containers began to overflow due to fermentation, their content was spewed out into a copper pan and cooked to clarification' (p. 62). He also relates the owner's purchase of some very well-priced vanilla beans from a passing sailor ostensibly returning from the Antilles. Upon use, however, it was clear that the vanilla was secondhand: '[these were] old beans soaked in oil to plump them up again and give them lustre, and chemically reinfused with vanilla scent' (pp. 62-63).

Castelnau gives as an example of the increasingly prevalent 'art of reusing leftovers' [*l'art d'accommoder les restes*] – an art that was gradually becoming a bourgeois value, and not just a popular necessity – the 'zester woman' [*la zesteuse*]:

As soon as she spots a piece of orange or lemon rind, she grabs it greedily. During oyster season she is found prowling around restaurants and bars. [...] Her eyes light up when she sees a basket of shellfish. The waiters end up recognizing her, and if she is attractive, they save the precious peels for her. When she returns home, she grates them [...]. As her business grows, she takes on helpers [...]. She expands her expeditions from Paris, to France, and then abroad. And the fine powder, sometimes yellow as gold, sometimes copper red, is transformed into lemon extract, orange syrup, and Dutch curaçao. (pp 51-52)

Echoing the period chroniclers, Castelnau repeats the refrain: 'nothing is lost' [*on ne perd rien*], clearly using the present example to speak not only to avoiding loss, but also, to the potential gains of economy, frugality and entrepreneurial skill (p. 50).

The Harlequin Eaters

The harlequin finds its place within this general climate of detritus, recirculation and thrift, but also stands out against it as distinctive. It finds its difference in the variegated form we have seen. As I earlier indicated in passing, nineteenth-century commentators, echoed by their successors, tend to assume a direct analogy between Harlequin, that stock figure of the *Commedia dell'arte* immediately recognizable by its stitched-together aspect, and the similarly composed plate of leftovers that came to borrow its name. The naming and the analogy, however, beg to be further considered in terms of their connotations as much as their denotations.

First a brief review of common assumptions about the theatrical harlequin and its avatars. Du Camp expounds: ‘Today we call [recycled food scraps] *harlequins*. Just as Bergamasque’s costume is made of bits and pieces, [used food sellers’] merchandise is composed of all sorts of goods. They gather the leftovers from sumptuous tables’ (p. 165). More succinctly, Chavette explains that the fragments are ‘so diverse that they were given the name of *harlequins*’ (p. 109). Castelnau depicts even as he disparages the harlequin seller as ‘the lowliest of cooks, not even worthy of the name, the person who puts together on a single plate the most assorted dishes; such cuisine resembles the coat of the legendary clown, whence [the plate acquires] the name of that character’ (p. 48). Philippe Mellot proposes that ‘the remains of meat, fish, or even pastries coming from the cleared tables of great houses are *harlequins*, which no doubt took their name from Harlequin, that comical character whose mottled costume was made of stitched-together patches of green, yellow, red, and blue’.¹⁸

¹⁸ Philippe Mellot, *La Vie secrète des Halles de Paris* (Paris: Omnibus, 2010), p. 43.

While the alimentary-vestimentary analogy is apt, I want to argue that it is overdetermined. If the cuisine resembles the pieced-together costume of the legendary character, so too do the clothes of the individual consumers, so too, the physical appearance of each one, and so too, their collective physiognomy. Here is one harlequin client described by Imbert:

[His clothes are] frayed, wrinkled, crumpled [...] the buttons are missing in essential places, leaving unjustifiable gaps. Above a shirt collar which on one side disappears under a tie and on the other cascades down limply like a wet dishrag, emerges a round, beardless, florid face, whose eyes, looking in two different directions – the right one downward, the left upward – take on the strangest expression. A few strands of very long hair, meant to hide his premature baldness, float down his back in the most amusing way. His jacket is powdered with dandruff on the shoulders and with lint elsewhere. His pants are not clean; imbedded in the fabric is dog hair. (p. 116)

Here is the portrait of another client, ‘old Muflard, an aged skinflint who gads about in worn-out, flabby shoes that have lost their shape, and whose clothes, patched together everywhere, recall those of Trichka, the character created by the well-known Russian fabulist Jean Krylov. Trichka chewed off his sleeve cuffs to fill in the holes at his elbows, then his coattails to extend his sleeves’ (Imbert, p. 119).¹⁹ A cunning consumer, Muflard (whose name evokes snouts, boors and boorishness) makes the rounds of the harlequin stalls, sampling everything and buying nothing. Imbert, in good physiognomist fashion, marvels at the extent of human gullibility: ‘How could the merchants not understand from his costume, from his appearance, and from his way of

¹⁹ Imbert is referring to Ivan Andrievitch Krylov (1769-1844). The fable, ‘Trishka’s Coat’, or ‘Trishka’s Caftan’, uses the poor peasant’s actions as a lesson to be learned about acting rashly in the moment and not thinking through the long term consequences (false thrift, one might say). Trishka actually cut off his various clothing parts; the verb Imbert uses (*rogner*, ‘to chew’ or ‘to gnaw’ in English) solders the link between sartorial and alimentary harlequinry.

eating that this man knows all about harlequins!’ (p. 122). In both of Imbert’s examples, harlequin habits of eating are mediated by harlequin modes of dress which in turn convey a generalized character disorder: a foolishness or petty madness.

More globally, Suzanne comments on the motley horde queuing up for the harlequin stands: ‘It is a curious and interesting spectacle to watch the wretched crowd of paupers pressing up around the stalls, minutely inspecting three or four rows of lined-up plates, and making their choice among the unspeakable assortments of dinner debris’ (pp 46-47). He presents two mirror images of harlequin alignments, the plates of assorted debris that are the object of the customers’ gaze, and the customers themselves, society’s sundry castoffs, comical spectacle for the authorial and lectoral gaze.

Here is Castelneau describing the customers thronging for the ‘unimaginable’ [*invraisemblable*] harlequin *ragoût* that he has just luridly detailed, and which, more concisely, consists of buckets of food slops and discarded sauces dumped into a pot and heated up together: ‘The banquet prepared, the parade of guests begins. They present all that is most pitiable in the human comedy: haggard, emaciated faces, waxen complexions, hunched backs, frail limbs clad in rags, eyes either lit up by revolt or extinguished by resignation’ (pp. 48-49). The garbage stew and the human stew are presented as parallel constructs, analogous scenes of mixing, each fit for the other.

And so we begin to see a pattern of determinism characterizing the linked representations of harlequin foods and their consumers. If for Brillat-Savarin it was the case that ‘you are what you eat,’ the case in hand seems rather to be that you eat what you are.²⁰ Following a fearful

²⁰ ‘*Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es*’, Aphorism IV in Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *La Physiologie du goût* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982 [1825]), p. 19.

symmetry, the wretched of the earth are fed the wretched remains of the table. As if accomplishing a destiny, the ‘moth-eaten’ tautologically eat pre-nibbled shreds. The rhetoric and tone of such commentaries make clear that the rags and tatters that cover the harlequin eaters, like the variegated scraps they put in their mouths, are never simply fabric and food, but are always also implicit bearers of greater meaning. Jeremy MacClancey and Helen Macbeth’s claims for the double nature of food, ‘both “nature” and “culture” [...] substance and symbol’ could easily be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to clothing.²¹ Similarly, the link between clothing tatters and food scraps is not merely circumstantial, not only economic, but also, fundamentally, condemnatory. In the guise of compassion and commiseration we find sanctimony and a presumption of due justice: you eat what you deserve and you deserve what you eat. In a deterministic universe, people who wear mismatched, handed-down clothes swallow oddly combined, handed-down foods. This, I suggest, is because there is something suspect, something potentially disruptive, about those who present a composite exterior, just as there is about those who take in a mottled meal. If to bourgeois eyes, as Ferrières has observed, ‘the harlequin [meal] exhibits aesthetic disorder’, the consumer cannot be told from the consumed (p. 360). The harlequin plate may evoke Harlequin, but the connection is mediated by the ragtag pauper fool who resembles and assembles both in his or her essentially unbalanced and unbalancing personage.

Patched trousers, asymmetrical collars, clashing colours, dandruff, dog hairs, lint, physical impairments and motley crowds; all are comical, in the commentary of our narrators: unsettling in that what is torn, gnawed, ripped, spotted, patched, sprinkled, stained threatens to

²¹ Jeremy MacClancey and Helen Macbeth, ‘Introduction: How to do Anthropologies of Food’, *Researching Food Habits: Methods and Problems*, ed. by H. Macbeth and J. MacClancey (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), pp. 5-6.

destabilize and transgress order and harmony. Negative connotations of the composite can be traced back as far as the bible, reports Michel Pastoureau: Leviticus prohibits practices of mixing.²² Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the prostitute, the buffoon, the criminal, the disorderly and the mad were consigned to clothes that were striped, streaked, patchworked, gaudily coloured, spotted or otherwise variegated to signal ‘the idea of trouble, of disorder, of noise and of impurity’. Such fabrics are visually different, but conceptually or socially alike: ‘they translate various degrees of [...] transgression’ (p. 47). And modern occidental culture is still permeated by the medieval scandal of variegation, contends Pastoureau, as by the belief that the solid and the monochromatic are godly while the mottled is diabolical (pp. 13, 40, 99).

In these narratives of Parisian street life, then, the harlequin eaters become harlequins as well, metonymically assimilated to the food they consume, and metaphorically identified with the lineage of Harlequin, the jester, the jongleur, the buffoon, the clown, the servant fool. Each individual case arguably presents itself, too, as a microcosm of the crowd, motley, derisible, socially marginalized, yet basic to the structure of social hierarchy, unstable and potentially destabilizing, and therefore menacing. In both the anecdotes and the rhetoric adopted by most of their chroniclers, as we have witnessed, harlequin eaters provoke a range of reactions including commiseration, benevolence, pity, sanctimony, ridicule, self-righteousness, defensiveness and Schadenfreude. Aspiration, inspiration and admiration are less common responses to the consumers repeatedly represented as bottom feeders and cynically described by one author as ‘those who make a living by dying of hunger’ [*ceux dont la profession est de mourir de faim*], but they do exist, and it is time to attend to them (Castelnuau, p. 48).

²² Michel Pastoureau, *L’Etoffe du diable: une histoire des rayures et des tissus rayés* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 11.

Savour the Harlequins

Du Camp makes clear that there are harlequin consumers who are not simply social victims; some have other options, and patronize the harlequin sellers by election:

Many poor labourers working at Les Halles prefer this odd way of eating to the more substantial but too costly food that they can find in cabarets and cheap restaurants [*les gargotes*]. For two or three sous, they can eat. What is strange is that the vendors have a regular clientele, which they attribute only to the art of the kitchens whose debris they source. A number of well-to-do but miserly people also secretly come to shop there, without ever admitting it; they can be recognized immediately by their anxious and furtive manner; they are mocked, but, since they are paying, never to their face. (p. 165)

Coffignon closes his review of the characteristically revolting components of harlequin plates with the comment that ‘there is no lack of avid eyes to survey the display’ (p. 181).

Some of these cases are ambiguous; one might assume the draw of the harlequin to be either one of last resort – of money over matter – or of brute hunger. But we approach a different range of accounts where the motivation is more explicitly positive. Portraying a particular patron of the harlequin stalls, Coffignon specifies: ‘It is not by need that she visits the harlequin sellers of Les Halles; it is by taste’ (p. 183). And Imbert explains: ‘The harlequin merchant’s clientele is considerable, for many poor people are happy to feed on the same bits as the rich, at a very low price’ (p. 116). Such hints of a different kind of motivation for eating other people’s food, one that does not depend on physical need, begin to suggest that we look at other kinds of appetite.

There is another side to the story of this ‘industry of putrefaction’, as Jean-Paul Aron calls it, that needs to be heard (p. 275). It is true that hunger and penury and their exploitation played a fair part in the buying and reselling of prepared food. Who would not, after all, have

preferred to be part of the first seating, welcomed among the fortunate diners who had the right of first refusal of the sumptuous excesses of the table? But it is exactly this hunger, understood now in a metaphysical sense, which begins to explain that there were reasons for eating the remains of other people's meals that accompanied and sometimes even transcended brute need.

The allure of socioeconomically exotic cuisine in the nineteenth-century imagination responded not only to bodily appetite but also to a hunger for the storied possibilities it opened: its mystique depended upon what Rebecca Spang, in her discussion of restaurants, has called 'the suspicion that somebody else was having a better dinner, a more titillating dalliance, a more exotic bottle of wine'.²³ Taking suspicion here not in its most common sense having to do with a 'conjecture of evil' but in a secondary sense related to the 'imagination of something (not necessarily evil) as possible or likely' (OED), I propose that the term is implicitly related to its etymological sense (from the Latin *susplicere*) of 'looking up from below' or 'looking upward': looking on with connotations of admiration and esteem and awe. Just this kind of suspicion abetted not only the institutionalization of restaurants in the nineteenth century, but also the derivative institution of selling food down the socioeconomic chain in increasingly deteriorating form. What I propose in place of the degradational discourse we have been following is a reading of harlequin ways of eating that is open to imagination and dreaming. This other way of reading will tease out an aspirational discourse that borrows what we might call an upwardly suspicious voice, along with an upwardly mobile eye. I'll take an extended example from Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris*.

Reading Zola against many of the historical sources – and also against a certain Zola himself – reveals the tonier side of leftovers: the site of fantasy and imagination, they provide, at

²³ Rebecca Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), p. 234.

their best, a royal path to reverie and illusion, a garden of hope and desire, a refuge and an escape. They nourish the spirit more significantly than the body, democratizing the palate as they open the mind's window to imperial palaces. Such is the calculated spiel of the vendors as they market their handed-down fare to the people like a ladder extended from a higher sphere. The appeal of such goods caters to a brand of suspicion that has ties both to desire and gullibility: a kind of pauper's *bovarysme*, to use Jules de Gaultier's word, that opens the space of dreaming in an impoverished world.²⁴

My prime reference here is to one of Zola's less admirable protagonists, Mlle Saget, whom I want not to romanticize, not to rehabilitate, but to complicate, perhaps even along with Zola. This 'old bird' – she is a kind of magpie [*une vieille pie-grièche*] – lives on gossip, and, more concretely, on castoff scraps gifted her by the marketplace vendors, supplemented by leftovers she buys from the stalls of harlequin sellers – more by avarice and craftiness than by financial necessity (p. 343). Let's zoom in on Mlle Saget as she lurks before her preferred harlequin merchant, 'who claimed to sell leftovers exclusively from the Tuileries'. So taken is the miserly woman with the myth of the emperor's old food that one day, Zola recounts, 'the saleswoman had talked her into buying a scrap of leg of lamb, claiming it came straight from the plate of the emperor. This slice of lamb, eaten with pride, still appeased the old woman's vanity' (p. 342). Another day, undeterred by a nauseating rancid smell, she buys a plate of cold fried fish and accepts the merchant's lure to return on the morrow: 'Come back tomorrow [...]. I'll put aside something nice for you. There's a big dinner at the Tuileries tonight' (p. 343). Mlle Saget is a little too settled and a tad too bitter to seek her prince, her Rodolphe who might bear her off to

²⁴ Gaultier coined the term in 1892 to refer to a state of dissatisfaction, like a latter-day quixotism, in which the subject, prone toward escapist fantasy, ignores everyday reality and instead imagines being a hero or heroine in a romance (*Le Bovarysme: la psychologie dans l'oeuvre de Flaubert* (Paris: Editions du Sandre, 2007 [1892])).

a Swiss lakeside chalet or to a domed city in a forest of lemon trees crowned by stork nests – or even to a ball at the Tuileries, but she, like Emma Bovary, savours symbol before substance when she ogles repurposed table scraps and devours the debris on her plate.

As Jules de Gaultier must have realized when shifting emphasis from psychology to philosophy in his second essay on *le bovarysme*, written ten years after the first, the condition to which Emma lent her name is less personal and pathological than perceptual – metaphysical, even, and hermeneutic.²⁵ Just so Mlle Saget's upward eating, the emblem of a larger ascending perspective, introduced with her character as a gaze set above and beyond: 'The gable window opened, a little old lady leaned out, looking at the sky, then Les Halles, in the distance' (p. 53). This suspicious eater is the personification of a certain Zolian hermeneutics – open, mobile, capricious – which admittedly is not the one that springs first to the mind of readers of the often didactic *Rougon-Macquart* series of novels, but one with which he is certainly flirting well before modernist writers like Colette and Proust and Nabokov moved metamorphic writing centre stage. Transcending the individual perspective of Mlle Saget is the narrative voice given to long descriptions of Les Halles backlit by a seductive rhetoric of flickering, flashing, vacillation, lustre, gleam, shimmering, iridescence, opalescence, phosphorescence, and concretized by metaphors of crystal, mother of pearl, watered silk and the rainbow plumage quickening doves' throats. In another register the metaphors extend to visual juxtapositions such as patchwork, stripes, streaks, collages, stains, clashing colours and patterns; and then further, to pan-esthetic metaphors of the heteroclitic and the carnivalesque: 'hubbub'; 'chatterings'; 'din'; 'confusion'; 'jumble of merchandise'; 'cacophony of wafting smells'. The visual and conceptual

²⁵ Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme: essai sur le pouvoir d'imaginer* (Paris: PUF, 206 [1902]).

crown of the stunningly unstable carnivalesque is the plate of mismatched leftovers, *l'arlequin*. This cobbled plate is curiously never identified by its common name in *Le Ventre de Paris* (though Zola uses the term freely in other novels); however, only several pages after the extended scene at the used food seller's stall, the unspoken alimentary harlequin is echoed and finally named in a description of the pulsing hub of Les Halles [*le carreau des Halles*], scene of a jumble of animation and vegetation, the entirety of which is framed by 'two kiosks so patched with green, yellow, red, and blue theater posters that they appeared to be dressed in a harlequin costume' (p. 350).

As countervailing force to the 'upward-looking suspicion' I have tried to draw out in *Le Ventre* from motifs of yearning and desire, associated with an aesthetics of iridescence and mobility, connected in turn to a hermeneutics of openness and indetermination, there is in this novel, to be sure, the more familiar Zolian plot, in the thickest sense of the word, or what we might call 'downward-looking suspicion', of the detective novel variety. It gives rise to thematic designs of spying, hiding and seeking; policing, discipline, knowledge, domination and repression, which play out through a familiar naturalist aesthetics of order, fixity and closure, and are congruent with a hermeneutic approach of determinism and control.²⁶

The disordering figure of the *arlequin* – which, I suggest, we begin to consider with Zola's harlequin eaters – dances everywhere on the edges of the nineteenth-century landscape. In *Le Ventre de Paris*, the harlequin introduces a play of lambent lights and colours within otherwise sombre subterranean scenarios of fixed meanings and reductive readings. In the case of Zola, the harlequin is the quixotic knight he sends into the fray to give battle to his own darkest didactic tendencies, to break the clutch of this night and shatter it into day.

²⁶ For an overview of a (negatively valued) suspicious hermeneutics, see Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', *Poetics Today* 32:2 (Summer 2011) pp. 215-34.

Epilogue

Zola is a prologue. From the fumes of his harlequin pots and the scars of his harlequin plates a figure rises to represent the scum but also to transvalue it, intermittently challenging, undermining and transfiguring his dominant voice. But Zola is only the prologue.

Harlequin food, deemed unnatural by the dominant bourgeois culture Zola inhabited, was naturalized by this same culture as the people's base sustenance. In retrospect we might borrow David Gissen's architectural term *subnature* to reclassify it, referring here to a kind of anti-nature: the marginalized 'other, stranger form of nature' – mud, dust, debris, urban waste – disparaged as primitive and vile by social canons.²⁷

But canons are always susceptible to inversion.²⁸ The *Commedia dell'arte* figure – hugely popular in seventeenth and eighteenth-century France as a lowly trickster and clown – began to be appropriated as rebel and hero in the nineteenth century, by Romantic and then Symbolist writers, and had a similar trajectory in painting. The alimentary harlequin, like its theatrical namesake, underwent an evolution and a revalorization at the hand of certain writers and artists. By the turn of the twentieth century, it was no longer a mere emblem of disgust or at best, of ambivalence (as in Zola), but also a figure of inspiration, agitation and revolt. It served the writers and artists who represented it and often identified with it iconoclastically as a force of provocation and contestation, and, I contend, became a founding figure of modernism. But here begins another chapter.

²⁷ David Gissen, *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), p.21; pp. 21-26.

²⁸ As Pastoureau maintains, 'any social code is capable of being inverted; any code, to function well, is in fact obliged to be inverted, so that whatever constituted a handicap or a lack at the beginning ends up becoming a benefit' (Pastoureau, p. 10).