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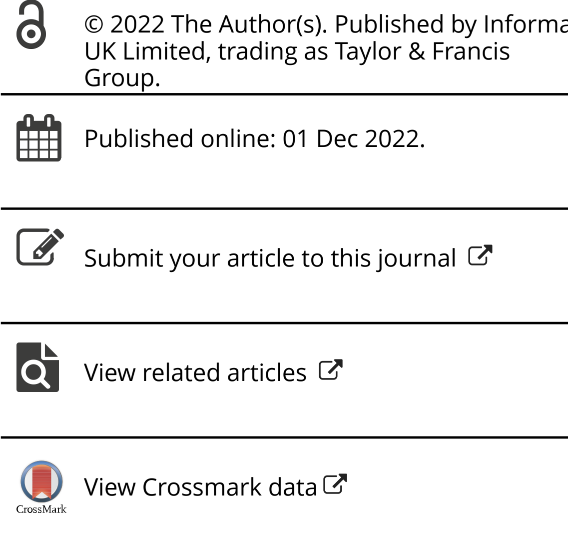

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Chocolate and the French novel: modernity, language, nature

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ABSTRACT

This article brings ecocritical and historical approaches together with literary analysis to provide the first in-depth analysis of chocolate in French novels. It argues that chocolate is a uniquely hybrid, indeterminate substance in both literal and figurative terms and it enables writers to ask questions about human nature and our status as civilized, textual beings. Examining examples from a range of writers—Stendhal, Huysmans, Verne and Nothomb—I show how chocolate highlights our paradoxical understanding of ourselves as both imbricated within nature through our material status and yet separated from it through our culture and especially through language and writing. Chocolate thus provides a fruitful tool for writers to think about textuality, modernity, and our relationship with nature.

RÉSUMÉ

Première analyse approfondie du chocolat dans les romans français, cet article met en relation les approches éco-critique, historique et littéraire. Il s'agit de montrer que le chocolat est une substance exclusivement hybride et indéterminée au sens propre et figuré et qu'il permet ainsi aux écrivains de poser des questions sur la nature humaine et notre statut en tant qu'êtres civilisés et surtout textuels. En examinant des exemples tirés d'une variété d'écrivains – Stendhal, Huysmans, Verne and Nothomb – je démontre que le chocolat met en lumière notre compréhension paradoxale de nous-mêmes, à la fois imbriqués dans la nature par notre constitution matérielle et en même temps séparés d'elle du fait de notre culture, mais surtout par le langage et l'écriture. Le chocolat fournit donc aux écrivains un outil précieux pour réfléchir à la textualité, à la modernité et à notre rapport à la nature.

Chocolate has attracted attention from food historians and economic historians, and to some extent in the history of medicine, but far less within literature. This article considers the unique potential provided by chocolate for writers in thinking about modernity; textuality; and our relationship with nature. The reason chocolate offers such potential, I argue, is that it is a hybrid substance both in its physical makeup and its categorization. On a literal level chocolate is mixed, containing cocoa solids, cocoa butter, sugar, and often other ingredients. On a classificatory level, it is viewed as food but is also taken as

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a drink and it has been understood as a stimulant and even a form of medicine. Its moral status is ambiguous, at times viewed as exotic and even threatening but also promoted as a food for children. This disruption of categorizations when it comes to chocolate makes it a compelling site for investigating the instability and ambivalence of eating and language. At the same time, chocolate is situated both within nature (deriving from the cacao tree) and human culture (requiring intense manipulation for its production). This in-betweenness along with its varying texture makes it a productive locus for the manifestation of fears regarding our status as human beings within the natural world.

Chocolate's indeterminate status came to the fore in the nineteenth century with the industrialization of its production alongside a growing promotion of its health benefits. Although chocolate frequently appears in nineteenth-century French novels, there has been no in-depth analysis of its meaning or significance in French writing. I focus here on three authors whose work engages with chocolate in relation to its hybridity and instability: Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884) and *En route* (1895), and Verne's *L'Ile à hélice* (1895). I then consider the legacy of these nineteenth-century textual engagements with chocolate in the work of contemporary author Amélie Nothomb, whose novels are in close dialogue with the nineteenth-century novel (Humphreys 2021) and obsessively return to food in relation to language and human-other relations.

Chocolate has been imbued with a range of meanings throughout history. It has long been gendered as feminine (Robertson 2010) and has emerged in its current form through the racialized exploitation of people who cultivate sugar and cocoa (Hackenesch 2017). There is also an important ecological dimension to its production and commodification (Deckard 2017). Studies of chocolate in English, Caribbean and Spanish literature have shown how these writings expose the abuse and violence in the history of chocolate production (Keyser 2017; Gamboa 2006). Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, for example, points to a 'literature of cacao' which bears 'a certain labor of blood in its pages, a certain bitter aftertaste of death' (Amado 1965, vi). This article focuses instead on the conflicted perception of chocolate in nineteenth-century France both as a health food and a potentially dangerous substance. I argue that French novels of this period engage with chocolate as a unique way of exploring instability and indeterminacy in relation to our human identity and our capacities as thinking, writing subjects. To situate this discussion, I will first provide an overview of chocolate consumption in France.

Chocolate was first brought over to France from Spain in the mid seventeenth century and the word 'chocolat' first appeared in a French dictionary in 1680 (Gordon 2009). At this point chocolate was expensive and difficult to prepare, and its consumption was limited to the affluent classes (Girard 1984). Maria-Theresa, Louis XIV's wife, was particularly fond of chocolate and had her own chocolate cook, and the substance became popular amongst the nobility during Louis's reign. As we see from prints of chocolate-making in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the production of chocolate did not change significantly in the eighteenth century, and in France it remained limited to the upper class (Clarence-Smith 2016). Chocolate was mainly taken as a hot beverage mixed with water or milk and added flavourings.

A number of technological developments led to changes in the production of chocolate in the nineteenth century and these influenced its composition, taste, and consumption. In 1828, for example, Dutch chemist Van Houten developed a new process to

separate cocoa powder from cocoa butter. This was an essential step in accelerating the trend towards solid chocolate and a process that ultimately made the mechanization of chocolate bars possible. The second half of the nineteenth century was the period in which chocolate shifted from being taken in liquid form to a solid food, and from an expensive luxury to a widely available snack. By this point, France had become the world's largest consumer of chocolate after Spain (Gordon 2009).

The nineteenth century is considered as a period in which chocolate's reputation as a form of medicine was overshadowed by its categorization as food (Coe and Coe 2009). Although chocolate became widely consumed as a snack, however, there was also a continued belief in its health benefits in France well into the second half of the century. In 1864, for example, physician Auguste Debay noted in *Les influences du chocolat sur l'économie humaine* (1864) that chocolate is a complete food which is highly beneficial for digestive irritation. In 1866, chocolate was still included in the French pharmacopeia and was recognized as a form of medicine (Burnby 1984). In line with other drinks which arrived in European nations in the early modern period (such as coffee and tea), chocolate was initially viewed with a suspicion which doctors and scientists worked hard to allay. The number of publications promoting these substances exploded in the nineteenth century such as Alfred Franklin *Le Café, le Thé et le Chocolat* (1893). Chocolate was uniquely placed, however, both in its positioning in between liquid and solid ('le chocolat est-il un aliment ou une boisson?' is the title for one of the sections in Franklin's book) and its role within health maintenance. Whilst coffee was known as an aphrodisiac and a form of fuel (especially for brain work), chocolate's health benefits were considered to surpass those of tea and coffee. It was widely viewed as a nutrient-dense substance and was also considered to be restorative and strengthening. Psychiatrist Alexandre Cullerre, for instance, notes that it is 'un aliment analeptique' (Cullerre 1887, 176) and J. B. A. Chevallier affirms in *Hygiène alimentaire: Mémoire sur le chocolat* (1871) that chocolate is a complete food, unlike tea or coffee. French commercial chocolate posters in this period commonly depicted mothers and children eating chocolate as a wholesome food (Swisher 2009; Wilson and Jeffrey Hurst 2012).

Chocolate was particularly recommended for nervous and frail individuals. Dr Ernst Monin, for instance, singles chocolate out in *L'Hygiène de l'Estomac* as beneficial for the nervous system and digestion (Monin 1888, 311, 312). Eugène Pelletier in *Thé et le chocolat dans l'alimentation publique* and Brillat-Savarin in his *Physiologie du goût* (1825) note that chocolate is suitable for the weak and convalescent and especially those who undertake labours of the mind (Pelletier 1861, 109–110; Brillat-Savarin 2009, 119). These views are located within new understandings of modern life in which the interconnected ailments of nervous fatigue and poor digestion were regarded as key 'modern' conditions. Cullerre refers to 'la névrose', for instance, as 'la maladie du siècle' caused by changes in human existence which had made the nineteenth century 'le siècle du mouvement accéléré' (Cullerre 1887, 9, 11), and he later notes that 'en même temps que le siècle des névroses, notre siècle est aussi celui des mauvais estomacs' (178–179). Chocolate was therefore viewed as a restorative for maladies considered to be caused by modern life.

Yet at the same time, the continued belief in chocolate's health benefits at the precise moment that it was emerging as a food commodity undermines any straightforward understanding of modernity as a rupture with previous ways of being. As outlined by Sarah Pennell and Rachel Rich, 'foods at the intersection of medicine and nourishment are

a clear example of the continuities in thinking which link pre-modern and modern western medical knowledge' (Pennell and Rich 2016). Substances like chocolate disrupt our usual chronologies, or rather, they challenge our understanding of what 'pre-modern' and 'modern' might mean. Many influential definitions of modernity are predicated on Western models that refer to rifts between earlier (more primitive) and later (more civilized) forms of living (Brinton 1963; Berman 1983). Scholars have challenged this static understanding of modernity, instead positing 'multiple modernities' rooted in specific cultural moments (Eisenstadt and Riedel 2002). Such later analyses, however, continue to view nature, society, and language as separate entities. In my examination of chocolate in literature, I will consider how this substance can destabilize such categories.

Many novelists of the nineteenth century satirized the health approach to chocolate. In George Sand's *Valentine* (1832), the heroine's grandmother suffers from indigestion and fever after drinking chocolate and in *Madame Bovary* (1857), the emblem of bourgeois idiocy, Homais, sells 'chocolats de santé' and refers to his supposedly enlightened status through his adherence to 'le grand mouvement des chocolats' (Flaubert 1986, 136, 420). Health chocolates were highly popular in the second half of the century as a means of providing medicine in palatable form. In Flaubert's later, unfinished novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1870), chocolate is dismissed as 'un amas de substances indigestes' (Flaubert 1999, 47). Chocolate's health benefits are therefore mocked or given short shrift by these writers. In the only article I have found on chocolate in French literature of this period, negative perceptions of chocolate are further noted in relation to social inequality. Jean-Claude Bologne observes that in the work of writers such as Flaubert and Musset, chocolate is the breakfast drink of the idle rich (Bologne 1996). Indeed, the first Madame Bovary's chocolate-drinking is a sign of her laziness, and Sand's novels mention chocolate only in relation to the middle and upper classes. We might say the same of Zola: the privileged Grégoire family in *Germinal* (1880) for instance eat steaming bowls of chocolate whilst the workers starve outside in the cold. In these works, chocolate is a symbol of indulgence and indolence.

Chocolate has also been associated with sexuality, especially during the nineteenth century as part of a European perception of chocolate as a symbol of the erotic and feminine (Moore 2005). The only reference to chocolate in Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* (1869), for example, is the aroma of chocolate emanating from bowls on the gaming tables in Mlle Vatnaz's harem, and in *Madame Bovary*, Emma's wedding cake features 'une escarpolette de chocolat' (Flaubert 1986, 88). Echoing Fragonard's late eighteenth-century painting *L'Escarpolette* (an evocation of eroticism), the chocolate swing on the wedding cake hints at Emma's repressed desire. Parallels between chocolate and sexuality in relation to women are further drawn in Zola's *Nana* (1880), in which the heroine is said to devour chocolate pralines in the same way as she devours men.

However, there are other literary engagements with chocolate which exploit the composite potential outlined in this article's opening pages. More sustained references to chocolate are found, for instance, in Stendhal's writing. Little has been written on food in this writer's oeuvre, perhaps since, as Geneviéve Sicotte has suggested, Stendhal focuses on the introspective individual, with the result that dining scenes are rare in his novels (Sicotte 1999, 87). Barthes also singles out Stendhal as a writer who includes little detail regarding the characters' eating habits (Barthes 1971, 129). It is therefore all the

more significant that there are references to chocolate in Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, his second major novel, and I will argue that Stendhal uses these to reflect on the process of writing.

When the main character in *Chartreuse*, Fabrice, is in prison, Clélia advises him to abstain from eating until she manages to send him some chocolate, as she believes that there is a plot to poison him. The portrayal of chocolate here is in line with contemporary health manuals: it is chosen by Clélia as a way of delivering nutrition and energy in a small, portable, format (Lombard 1855, 94). Stendhal is also reversing a trope here concerning poison hidden in chocolate to disguise the taste. Chocolate appears, for instance, in Voltaire's *Candide* (1758) as a method of delivering poison, and the theme reappeared in 1805 with the story of the attempted poisoning of Napoleon by a former mistress using a chocolate drink (Wilson and Jeffrey Hurst 2012). This connection with poison had traditionally been one of the main sources of unease surrounding chocolate.

Anxieties regarding chocolate's purity intensified in the nineteenth century due to fears around falsification (Terrio 2000). Physician Leándre-Moïse Lombard refers in *Cuisinier et le médecin*, for example, to the fraudulent practice involving the addition of starch to chocolate (Lombard 1855, 165). This is part of a wider concern surrounding the adulteration of food in this period as it started to be produced on a larger scale and links between original ingredients and the final product were becoming harder to trace (Kraft 2016). However, there was a heightened concern about chocolate:

> Parmi les produits qui sont employés dans l'alimentation, il en est un, *le chocolat*, qui mérite à tous les égards de tirer non seulement l'attention de l'administration mais celle du consommateur, car ce produit, [. . .] est, dans une foule de cas, le sujet de fraudes qu'il serait temps de réprimer, non seulement dans l'intérêt du commerce en général mais encore dans l'intérêt de la santé publique. (Chevallier 1853).

These fears surrounding chocolate are illustrated in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* for example when the protagonists suspect their grocer of adulterating the chocolate he sells. Chocolate companies responded to consumer nervousness about adulteration through adverts and packaging which presented their chocolates as pure and clean (Wilson and Jeffrey Hurst 2012).

The concerns about adulteration in relation to chocolate are compounded by its indeterminacy (physical, classificatory, and moral). There is a particular sense of ambiguity when it comes to chocolate since, as Sydney Mintz outlines, unlike some substances (such as sugar or cocaine), chocolate cannot be refined into a 'chemically pure (and therefore unmistakably standardized) product' (Mintz 1996, 10). Its flavour and aroma are said to depend on more than 500 substances (Albright 1997). Chocolate has also held equivocal status in terms of its classification: is it a food, a drink, or a form of medicine? The question of whether it could be classified as a food for example was key to religious debates about fasting (Forrest and Najjaj 2007). Finally, there have been moral uncertainties when it comes to chocolate, with a long connection between chocolate and immorality due to its heretical use in pre-Columbian Aztec rituals (Cabezon, Barriga, and Grivetti 2009). Historian Susan Terrio notes that under the Ancien Régime, 'faire le chocolat' meant being naïve or gullible, and 'être chocolat' meant to be deceived (Terrio 2000, 238). Chocolate has therefore long been associated with deception in French. Indeed, when

it first arrived in France in the seventeenth century, chocolate was associated with excitement and passion but also danger, in a conflicted reaction of attraction and fear (Jones 2013).

In contrast with these anxieties surrounding chocolate, in Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* chocolate is a way of staying alive: 'Ne buvez que de cette eau, vivez avec du chocolat', '*Le poison*! Prendre garde à l'eau, au vin, à tout; vivre de chocolat' (Stendhal 2003, 427, 428, original emphasis). Chocolate's status in *Chartreuse* as a source of health is further highlighted through its association with bread, that most essential of French foods —'à l'aide de cette corde je vous ferai passer du pain et du chocolat' (425)—and water: 'prenez dans votre poche du chocolat et une bouteille d'eau que je vais vous donner' (559). In Stendhal's novel, chocolate is an essential and life-giving substance. This understanding of chocolate is anticipated in Stendhal's earlier novel *Le Rouge et le noir* (1831) where Julien's friend cannot get up after drinking wine laced with laudanum whereas Julien, 'craignant quelque plaisanterie de ce genre, avait soupé avec du chocolat apporté de Paris' (Stendhal 2000, 518). Chocolate preserves health.

Stendhal's allusions to chocolate can in this sense be compared with its role in the works of the marquis de Sade. In Sade's texts, chocolate functions as an emblem of food's dual nature, both fortifying and potentially poisonous (Barthes 1971, 24). Whereas eating and digesting, however, function in the service of sex and vice in Sade, in Stendhal's novel, chocolate forms part of the author's reflections on the act of writing. Chocolate is delivered to Fabrice in prison alongside writing materials—'il retira d'abord une provision de chocolat, et ensuite, à son inexprimable satisfaction, un rouleau de papier et un crayon' (426–7)—and later, chocolate is transformed into text as Fabrice's prison journal is written 'avec une encre de prison, formée de vin, de chocolat et de suie' (501). In *Chartreuse*, chocolate initially equals health, safety, and purity in contrast with the other foods which are threatening, potentially contaminated and deadly. But by becoming Fabrice's 'ink', chocolate turns into something else (writing material rather than food), and it is combined with other things (wine and soot). What was pure and safe becomes unstable and hybrid, and what was once organic matter (food) becomes part of culture (writing).

By presenting chocolate as text, Stendhal highlights the essential, life-giving nature of writing, but at the same time his choice of chocolate hints at the ambiguity, indirectness, and what we might call the impurity of text, given that chocolate is a mixture of ingredients, and that this mixed status is highlighted through the chocolate ink. Stendhal thus plays with what Terrio has referred to as chocolate's 'semiotic virtuosity' (Stendhal 2000, 63). Terrio makes this point in relation to chocolate's susceptibility to cultural and social elaboration, but this capacity to take on multiple meanings also makes chocolate a potent means of writing about writing. Its impurity is ultimately reconfigured in *Chartreuse* as a positive quality in that it is chocolate and text's versatility that is foregrounded.

We might be led to believe that there is no metatextual dimension to Stendhal's chocoliterary references since, for most of the characters in this novel, the written word is a practical means of communication rather than an aesthetic act. However, as Ann Jefferson argues, the urgent and impromptu quality of Fabrice's writing in prison 'relates it to the improvisatory nature of the writing of the novel itself' (Jefferson 2003, 74, 76). Peter Brooks similarly draws parallels between Fabrice and Clélia's exchanges and Stendhal's own developing style (Brooks 1978, 183), and in this sense many have

observed the importance of prison in Fabrice's development into a mature young man and the importance of writing as part of his metamorphosis (Brombert 1975, 67–92; Russell 1982). What has not been noted, however, is the role of chocolate in this process. Brooks omits the reference to chocolate completely, for example, simply referring to 'du charbon écrasé délayé dans du vin' (Brooks 1978, 185). Chocolate, however, as hybrid substance, is liberating in this novel as it enables Fabrice to communicate and to develop as an individual.

In thinking about these questions of purity and hybridity, chocolate provides a useful tool for thinking about modernity. Bruno Latour argues in his anthropological study of modern society that the 'modern constitution' has always been understood as a process engaged in acts of 'purification', that is, the process of demarcating the world into binaries of nature and culture, human and nonhuman (Latour 1993, 6, 10). As a result, modernity is understood in terms of a break or 'rupture' (10) from a premodern past in which phenomena were mixed, blurred, confused. In some ways, chocolate fits in with this narrative since its arrival in seventeenth-century Europe led to fascination and excitement but also some uncertainty, as attempts were made to convert this unpredictable, confusing substance into a fashionable product of civilization that could be managed and tamed by a range of utensils and social protocol (Perkins 2009). In the case of Stendhal's *Chartreuse*, chocolate is also in some ways tamed or harnessed in that it is pressed into portable blocks and used for human communication.

Latour, however, makes an important second point in defining modernity. For Latour, the word 'modern' designates not only the act of purification but also a concomitant but separate process of 'translation' which 'creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture' (Latour 1993, 10). Unlike earlier theorizations of modernity (alluded to above), Latour's hypothesis is that purification has made translation possible: 'the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes—such is the paradox of the moderns' (12). This point is made by Latour in relation to systems of thought (such as the climate change debate), but his understanding of modernity is also helpful in thinking about a foodstuff such as chocolate and its conflicted reception in European history. Despite efforts to tame chocolate (the 'purification' stage), it has always retained a sense of mystery and indeterminacy, and for this reason it can ultimately lead to new combinations ('translation'). This is the second stage in *Chartreuse*, as the chocolate becomes part of a new, hybrid substance (the ink).

This way of thinking about chocolate resonates with some of Barthes' analyses of food and language. As Ruth Cruickshank has noted, later references to food in Barthes' writings 'embrac[e] symbolic uncertainty, allusive potential and interpretive plurality' (Cruickshank 2019, 43). Barthes affirms in his analysis of Brillat-Savarin for example that 'l'énoncé gastronomique [. . .] présente dans toute son ambigüité le pouvoir du langage: le signe appelle les délices de son référent dans l'instant même où il en trace l'absence [. . .]. Le langage suscite et exclut' (Barthes 1975, 32). Barthes' emphasis here on food's ability to bring out the indeterminacy of language can be applied to Stendhal's textual engagement with chocolate. Although Sophie Eager has argued that 'there is more to [Barthes'] interest in food than as a metric for understanding language and meaning', she also notes that 'reading about food in Barthes' work can constitute a kind of contact with 'the real'' (Eager 2021, 27, 34), and in Barthes' writing, 'the real' is the opposite of a clearly defined,

stable object. When Fabrice uses the chocolate ink in *Chartreuse*, he is not only physically but also mentally liberated, producing writings that are free from limits ('une lettre infinie' 427, '[les] griffonnages infinis' 501).

One writer who takes further the alignment between chocolate and impurity, and its ability to undo the separation between nature, society, and language, is Huysmans in his most famous novel, *À Rebours*. When the novel's protagonist, des Esseintes, stops feeding himself through enemas, he is served 'un sirop de punch à la poudre de viande dont le vague arome de cacao plaisait à sa réelle bouche' (Huysmans 1983, 304). This concoction seems to be wholesome as it has a beneficial effect on des Esseintes's poor digestive health: soon afterwards, 'l'estomac se décida à fonctionner' (334), enabling him to digest ordinary food again. But the substance which reminds des Esseintes of this cocoa taste is a hybrid of liquid and solid (syrup and powder) and it is based on deception (tricking his palate into accepting food). Moreover, the reference to the 'réelle bouche' is there to remind us of Des Esseintes' recent ingestion of sustenance through his other 'mouth', the anus, and thus an implicit link is made here between the cocoa-flavoured substance and bodily waste.

The use of chocolate as part of an 'excremental vision' has been analysed by Hamida Bosmajian in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) in which Willy Wonka 'shares the excremental exuberance of the primitive trickster who creates life out of filth' (Bosmajian 1985, 45). The chocolate-as-excrement analogy can thus be used to emphasize deception in relation to the base and squalid. Indeed, chocolate next appears in Huysmans' *À Rebours* in the context of moral duplicity. Having focused on the decaying nature of the aristocracy mired in 'l'ordure', des Esseintes extends this description to the lowering standards of the clergy which is contaminated by commercial interests including the production of chocolate, a matter that is presented as a form of falsification:

> Les monastères s'étaient métamorphosés en des usines d'apothicaires et de liquoristes. Ils vendaient des recettes ou fabriquaient eux-mêmes: l'ordre de Cîteaux, du chocolat, de la trappistine, de la semouline et de l'alcoolature d'arnica; [. . .]. Le négoce avait envahi les cloîtres où, en guise d'antiphonaires, les grands livres de commerce posaient sur des lutrins. De même qu'une lèpre, l'avidité du siècle ravageait l'église, [. . .] transformait les supérieurs en des confiseurs et des médicastres, les frères lais et les convers, en de vulgaires emballeurs et de bas potards. (342).

In addition to acting as something else ('en guise de'), there is an emphasis here on things actually transforming into something else, as in Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme*. This time, however, a lexicon of illness and contagion dominates ('envahi', 'lèpre', 'ravageait') to indicate moral baseness. The monasteries are diseased and dubious and the production of chocolate appears as part of this deceit, as the material realm imposes itself on the spiritual. In *À Rebours*, therefore, chocolate emerges in the context of fraudulence and both literal and figurative impurity.

Chocolate re-surfaces in Huysmans' later work, *En route*. Less well known and even less closely tied with the parameters of the novel than *À Rebours, En route* continues to probe the entanglement between the material and the spiritual through the digestive system. The protagonist Durtal undertakes a retreat in a monastery for his spiritual health, which is deeply linked with his physical and specifically digestive wellbeing. Before going, Durtal is apprehensive about his body's ability to cope with the monastic regime and he packs 'des

paquets de chocolat, pour essayer de tromper, s'il était besoin, les angoisses de l'estomac à jeun' (Huysmans 1996, 274). Once again chocolate is a means of deceiving his stomach. However, chocolate later emerges in *En route* in relation to wellbeing. The Trappist monastery's 'fabrique de chocolat' is presented as a lifeline here ('c'est elle qui nous sauve' 502) and Durtal eats chocolate in the context of solitude and reflection in the face of his impending confession: 'Durtal emporta sa tablette dans le jardin. Réfléchissons, se dit-il, en la grignotant' (339). Durtal's discovery of his own selfhood takes place in *En route* largely through re-working his relationship with his stomach (Duffy 2018), and this process is set off by this chocolate-eating moment. Huysmans' representation of chocolate therefore oscillates between corruption and health, and between nature (the garden), society (the chocolate business) and language—Durtal rejects Biblical knowledge in favour of reading himself.

In addition to the historical context of food adulteration, there is also a theoretical point here to do with the ambivalence of language. *À Rebours* is famously concerned with the relationship between artifice and the real, and although it has long been assumed that Huysmans' writing is a celebration of artifice, recent critics have challenged this reading (Patrick 2000). Not only is des Esseintes in *À Rebours* unable to escape from the real world (material, organic, social), but the novel also shows why accepting this fact is essential. *En route* takes this even further, with the text itself (split into two halves) embodying an uneasy combination of the real and the artificial, the material and the spiritual.

The links between chocolate, indeterminacy and writing are further explored by Jules Verne. Chocolate is twice mentioned in Verne's oeuvre, both times in connection with textuality. In 'Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse' (1890), the narrator writes of an America featuring pastry newspapers written in chocolate ink which are read and then eaten (Verne 1989, 3). This concept receives more sustained development in *L'Ile à hélice* which portrays a floating island of millionaires travelling across the Atlantic. On this island, some of the newspapers are again made of pastry printed with chocolate ink. After reading them, people eat them for breakfast. The aim of these publications, according to the narrator, is to 'distraire un instant, en s'adressant à l'esprit . . . et même à l'estomac' (Verne 2005, 150). Critic Christian Chelebourg has suggested that 'il s'agit de dénoncer une forme d'écriture *alimentaire*, qui distrait mais ne nourrit pas l'esprit' (Chelebourg 1999, 191, original emphasis). Indeed, the narrator notes that these are '[des] feuilles cercleuses, soiristes et boulevardières, consacrées aux mondanités courantes', that is, a form of ephemeral, temporary distraction.

Tim Unwin on the other hand has shown that Verne's novels can themselves be read as undigested material, as Verne brings together a mass of readings and pours them out through his writing, thus challenging 'the belief that the text should come to us in digestible and coherent form' (Unwin 2004, 125). If, as Chelebourg suggests, the newspapers are too easily digested, then Verne's texts, in contrast, aim to take their time to travel through the reader's system, requiring the reader to think as they digest the material. More detail is provided on these 'feuilles':

> Les unes sont astringentes, les autres légèrement purgatives, et le corps s'en accommode fort bien. Le quatuor trouve cette invention aussi agréable que pratique. «Voilà des lectures d'une digestion facile! Observe judicieusement Yvernès. – Et d'une littérature nourrissante! Répond

> Pinchinat. Pâtisserie et littérature mêlées, cela s'accorde parfaitement avec la musique hygiénique!» (150)

Verne takes up the medical emphasis on chocolate's digestibility here and mimics hygienist discourse as the chocolate newspapers provide their consumers with specific physiological benefits. But chocolate's renowned digestibility also makes it an ideal means of posing questions about the digestion of text. In Verne's textual re-working of medical views of chocolate, the journalistic material provides a form of refreshment for the reader, preparing them for the reading of weightier material, such as novels. It is curious that, as in the case of Stendhal, chocolate literally becomes text here since it is used as a form of ink. It is therefore not a drink, yet it is not a solid chocolate bar either, once again becoming something else (text) and inhabiting in-between states.

Moreover, the 'musique hygiénique' mentioned here refers to the speakers' own role on the island. They are musicians, recruited to play music to improve the wealthy inhabitants' wellbeing, especially those suffering from '[la] névrose' (134). The comparison between the chocolate newspapers' health benefits and those of the characters' musical output therefore brings attention to the fact that they themselves are also mere entertainment or a distraction. There are two points to note here, therefore, in relation to the chocolate newspapers: firstly, the links between text and health, and secondly an emphasis on artistic self-reflexivity.

To focus on the first point, the travelling millionaire island in *L'Ile à hélice* is a symbol of healthy living in the context of American capitalist society and technological mastery. Illness, poverty, and adversity have been eradicated on this island devoted to health, cleanliness, and leisured wellbeing. For example, the islanders use an artificially produced 'eau hygiénique' (80) free from impurities, they eat enormous vegetables created through 'l'électroculture' (100) and enjoy a comfortable life 'à l'abri de toutes les influences microbiennes' (105). However, as the novel goes on, this antiseptic paradise is undermined: first it is invaded by a pack of wild animals, then it is attacked by indigenous people from nearby islands, and finally it falls apart through internal factions and errors which lead to famine. These events thus bring the inhabitants back into contact with the wild, the untamed, and finally the most frightening thing of all, their own weaknesses and physical fragility.

The idea that the technologically advanced paradise will be undone by biology, notably our reliance on food, is hinted at throughout the text. There are numerous references to the tyranny of the stomach, for example one cellist's stomach 'est aussi impérieux que son propriétaire' (54) and at another point, referring to the musical quartet's hunger, the narrator observes that 'l'estomac réclame son dû quotidien' (123). The narrator suggests that the island's creators are trying to go beyond their human status: 'en créant ce domaine artificiel, [. . .] le génie humain n'a-t-il pas dépassé les limites assignées à l'homme par le Créateur? . . . ' (167). The novel therefore raises questions about our status as (physical) human beings. The island's collapse reminds the inhabitants of their positioning within the animal, natural order, and it is ultimately self-inflicted, which brings us to the issue of self-reflexivity.

It seems relevant to note here that there are references throughout Verne's novel to humans eating each other, to cannibalism, and the first time is in the context of chocolate eating. Following the news that 'Standard-Island' has been invaded by wild animals, the musicians discuss the mystery of how the animals appeared on the island:

> Ma foi, répond Pinchinat, en grignotant son journal chocolaté qu'il trempe dans le bol fumant, ma foi, je donne ma langue aux chiens et même aux fauves … Quoi qu'il en soit, mangeons, monsieur Dorémus, en attendant d'être mangés …
>
> – Qui sait? … réplique Sébastien Zorn. Et que ce soit par des lions, des tigres ou par des cannibales …
>
> – J'aimerais mieux les cannibales! Répond Son Altesse. Chacun son goût, n'est-ce pas? (445)

Eating takes place on several levels here and is repeatedly linked with language. Pinchinat eats the chocolate newspaper whilst referring to the act of giving his tongue to animals, an expression which means acknowledging one's inability to find a solution, and therefore the failure of human reason. He is also eating whilst discussing the possibility of being eaten by other beings (human and non-human). Finally, there is the issue of taste which plays on the double meaning of this term. The passage therefore switches between literal and figurative eating and points to the multivalency of language when it comes to eating.

To cannibalize something is often used as a metaphor when discussing the appropriation of salvageable parts from one thing for use in another. Yet cannibalism can also be used in a textual context. Bertrand Marquer has written about a 'style cannibale' for example in the context of Flaubert's extensive readings (Marquer 2017, 238). Verne's writing can also be seen in this light, since he was not only an avid reader but was renowned for taking whole sections from other texts and including them in his own (Unwin 2005, 162). It therefore seems relevant that cannibalism emerges in relation to chocolate eating in *L'Ile à hélice*, as this was a key feature of Verne's writing method and his understanding of himself as a writer. Verne's chocolate newspapers are thus situated within a nexus of concepts involving both our bodily natures and human creativity or 'le génie humain' (167).

I want to suggest that chocolate's role as a tool for thinking about modernity therefore extends in Verne's work into a form of ecophobia, in the sense of a denial of our material origins as a species, and a fear of the unpredictability of nature. Some have discussed ecophobia as a form of 'contempt' towards nature (Deyo 2019, 442). I use the term instead in the sense of ambivalence: a fascination and even desire tinged with fear and anxiety. In some ways this ambivalence is more dangerous as it can lead to the fetishization of nature. We see this in the case of chocolate as it is an object of unique mystique (Wilson and Jeffrey Hurst 2012, 11) and yet efforts are made to neutralize or tame its power through the addition of sugar or milk and its formation into set forms. Verne's writing and its engagement with chocolate reflects anxieties both about his position as a writer and the position of humans in relation to nature. In common with Stendhal and Huysmans, Verne draws attention to the contemporary medical approach to chocolate as a beneficial substance, but he also finds in chocolate a rich resource in thinking about humans as civilized beings and the ambiguous line between humans and other animals.

Research on ecophobia has stressed the importance of its evolutionary roots in the development and even survival of humans, but one upshot of this work is the implications for our understanding of human culture—and especially language—in our relationship with nature. According to Brian Deyo, 'language and culture symbolically—and from an evolutionary perspective, necessarily—insulate humans from the threat of primordial realities'. (Deyo 2019, 446). Therefore, language is understood as something that upholds

ecophobia and keeps us separate from nature. However, language can also be a means of probing and challenging anthropocentric views. Rather than conceptualizing language as a monolithic, neutral tool that keeps nature (and our own bodily status) at bay, language can be a way of exploring the ambivalence and potential sense of contamination in the act of eating, and no more so than in the case of chocolate, which is mysterious, captivating, and indeterminate.

Many of the nineteenth-century attitudes towards chocolate identified in this article have re-emerged in recent decades. A preoccupation with chocolate's purity for example is back in the context of 'real' (unprocessed) food rather than substances full of additives, as evidenced in percentages of cocoa content which are now a prominent part of chocolate packaging. There is also a renewed curiosity in chocolate's health benefits: its therapeutic use is once more being touted (Laine 2008; Pech 2010) and a 'science of chocolate' has been established in which researchers examine the evidence to support health claims about chocolate. The power of chocolate in improving gastrointestinal health for instance has again been highlighted by biomedical research (Hayek 2013). Whilst these trends suggest that chocolate continues to incite interest as a hybrid of food and medicine, what of its significance as source of reflection on our position as writing subjects?

To answer this question, I turn to the work of Amélie Nothomb. A Belgian author raised in Japan, Nothomb holds a unique position in relation to the French literary tradition. She has identified as a specifically Belgian author, and although she did not live in Belgium until she was seventeen, the country holds particular significance both in her coming to writing and her relationship with food (Nodot-Kaufman 2007). Nothomb also, however, positions herself within the tradition of French literature, with references to French classics throughout her work and a strong engagement in her writing with nineteenth-century French authors, especially Huysmans (Humphreys 2021). Her writing provides a helpful insight into the continuing importance of chocolate in thinking about modernity, textuality, and our relationship with nature given that her novels not only focus on these questions, but they also return compulsively to the question of eating. Whilst Nothomb's interest in food has been studied in relation to eating disorders (Damlé 2014) there is also something specific to say about the pleasure of eating in her work, specifically chocolate.

In *Métaphysique des tubes*, two-year-old Amélie, living in Japan, enters the interconnected realms of perception, memory, and communication through her experience of eating chocolate: 'Ce fut alors que je naquis [. . .] par la grâce du chocolat blanc' (Nothomb 2000, 30). This chocolate is notably Belgian (29), but the import of this seems to be the fact that Belgian chocolate is of notably good quality rather than a separate texture or taste, as stated in *Biographie de la faim*: 'je venais de Belgique, [. . .], le chocolat y était meilleur qu'ailleurs' (111). Initially an object of fear and disgust but also desire, chocolate becomes for the child Amélie in *Métaphysique* a means of accessing sensual, oral, and intellectual pleasures. This has two repercussions. Firstly, it is this knowledge of pleasure's existence which enables Amélie to become fully human. Having started life as 'une plante' (22) and then 'une bête enragée' (36), she now accedes to full personhood. In this text, chocolate is therefore a means of reflecting on the boundaries between humans and non-human beings. Here, however, it indicates a demarcation between these different states, and a progressive evolution from one to another.

Secondly, and interlinked with this point, chocolate leads to the discovery of Amélie's identity as a person capable of language, as 'il' (God) becomes 'moi' (30) and God speaks

through her own self. This link between literary selfhood and deity recurs throughout Nothomb's writing, in an implicit challenge to Barthes' anti-intentionalism and his famed essay on the death of 'l'Auteur-Dieu' (Barthes 1968). In *Robert des noms propres* (2012), for example, a character called 'Amélie Nothomb' is killed. However, as Anna Kemp points out, unlike Barthes' vision, 'Nothomb's aesthetic suggests that multiple readers would only pollute and corrupt the ideal form'. (Kemp 2012, 67). In contrast with these images of corruption and pollution (so central to understandings of chocolate), the chocolate which awakens the young 'Amélie' from her mutism in *Métaphysique des tubes* is white, a colour associated with purity.

Nothomb's emphasis on deity both in relation to chocolate eating and her position as an author makes sense in relation to her approach to textality. As Katie Jones highlights, the parallel between the consumption of food and the consumption of ideas is central to Nothomb's understanding of the reading process and to her understanding of writing, conceptualized in her work as a physical process involving bodily organs (Jones 2007, 185). Jones analyses Nothomb's relationship with food through the prism of disgust (especially in relation to gender), and it is important to note that, whereas the gendering of chocolate as female occurs in nineteenth-century texts in relation to sexuality, Northomb's novels play with this dimension by highlighting her accession to God-like status through her writing and an implicit move from the masculine to the feminine, a process that happens through eating chocolate.

The nexus of ideas in Nothomb's work surrounding writing, chocolate, and deity can also, however, be understood in the context of ecophobia if we accept that 'ecophobia is all about power' (Deyo 2019, 479). As noted by Dyo quoting Descartes, by understanding humans as individuals 'gifted by God with the divine faculty of reason', we can 'render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature' (Deyo 2019, 451). Nothomb's divine white chocolate highlights this human exceptionalism and separation from nature since it is a form of chocolate so far removed from the original cocoa that some argue it cannot be categorized as chocolate (white chocolate contains cocoa butter but no cocoa solids). Moreover, eating this white chocolate is explicitly connected in Nothomb's text with univocality. Whereas Barthes affirms that 'l'ecriture est destruction de toute voix, de toute origine', the experience of eating chocolate in *Métaphysique des tubes* and Amélie's consequent accession to language leads to the pronouncements of 'une voix' and a single (pure) meaning: 'Vive moi ! [. . .] Sans moi, ce chocolat est un bloc de rien. Mais on le met dans ma bouche et il devient le plaisir. Il a besoin de moi' (26). Meaning emerges not through the act of reading but through the birth of the authorial voice.

Chocolate, or rather the experience of eating chocolate, is conceived in similarly theological terms in Nothomb's *Biographie de la faim*: 'Dieu, [. . .] c'est la rencontre entre le chocolat at un palais capable de l'apprécier' affirms the narrator Amélie (Nothomb 2004, 33). The emphasis is on a single source of truth, the authorial 'palais' that can truly taste chocolate and thereby enable meaning to be created. The chocolate that Amélie eats here is once again far removed from the original ingredient of cocoa, being heavily laden with sugar. In Nothomb's writing, the potential multiplicity of meanings is opposed by an emphasis on the writer's authority, and this is emphasized through her engagement with chocolate, an 'aliment théologal' (Nothomb 2004, 32) in Nothomb's work.

The way we think and write about chocolate therefore matters because of what it reveals about our understanding of ourselves as both imbricated within nature through

our material makeup and yet separated from it through our culture and especially through language and writing. Fear regarding our bodily vulnerability is what we see in relation to chocolate in Huysmans and to an even greater extent in Verne, triggered by anxiety concerning the permeability of the human subject. Nothomb uses chocolate in her writing to engage with these nineteenth-century debates and to put forward her own understanding of authorship as an all-consuming act of meaning-creation and (specifically human) authority. Yet instability and ambiguity can also be reconfigured as a form of freedom, as there is a more liberating sense of hybridity when it comes to eating and language in Stendhal's chocolate ink, in Durtal's solitary chocolate reverie, and in Verne's own reflections on choco-textuality and the digestion of ideas.

In nineteenth-century France, chocolate occupied a space in between health and contamination, and between purity and sexual immorality. It was also indeterminate in a physical sense: the term 'chocolat' in writings of this period refers to drinking chocolate but also solid bars or medicinal pastilles, and it is inherently mixed, consisting of multiple varying ingredients. Like all human-made foods, chocolate is a blend of the human and non-human, but it is uniquely placed in between the exotic and the civilized, the comforting or healthful and the dangerous. If Nothomb is an emblem of modern and even postmodern French writing (Ferreira-Meyers 2008), then her interaction with chocolate shows that this substance continues to provide inspiration in thinking about our identity as modern human beings.

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