

Digesting the foreign. Food and Eating in the works of Tawada Yōko

Francesco Eugenio Barbieri

Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing the representation of food and eating in seminal works by Japanese author Tawada Yōko. The first part of this contribution will analyze the connection between food and metamorphosis, focusing especially on *Das Bad* and *Yōgisha no yakōressha*, works that belong to an earlier stage of the production of Tawada. The second part of this contribution will specifically inspect the representation and the metaphor of food in the works written in the aftermath of the 3.11 such as *Kentōshi*, *Fushi no shima* and the poem *Hamlet no see*.

Keyword: food, eating, metamorphosis, foreignness, Tawada Yōko, 3.11.

要旨: 本論文の目的は、日本の作家多和田葉子の代表的な作品における食物と食べることの表現を分析することである。第一部では、特に「Das Bad」および「容疑者の夜行列車」の中で、食べ物と変身の関係进行分析する。第二部では、「献灯使」、「不死の島」、「ハムレットの海」などのよく知られた作品を例に、3.11後に書かれた作品における食物の表現とメタファーを具体的に分析することである。

キーワード: 食べ物、食べる、多和田葉子、変身、3.11。

Japanese writer 多和田葉子 Tawada Yōko is today one of the most renowned examples of transcultural writer in the international literary scenario. Born in Tokyo in 1960, she obtained a degree in Russian literature from the prestigious Waseda University. After her degree, she left Japan and traveled through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway. In 1982 she arrived in Germany, where she still lives nowadays. At first she settled in Hamburg, a city where she remained until 2006, and then she relocated to Berlin. In these years she continued her studies with a MA and a PhD. Alongside her academic research, she started writing prose, poetry and theatrical pieces, first in Japanese and then, as she became progressively confident with the language, in German.

Critics agree that Tawada's migration experience is totally different from the case of a relocation that is motivated by financial or political purposes: she did not leave her home country in search for a better life or better economic conditions. On the contrary, her migration is somehow related to an intellectual dimension, the circulation of ideas, and a natural curiosity for different worlds and cultures. For this reason, her writing production in German (the language of her "host country") is radically different from what falls under the definition

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of “Gastarbeiterliteratur”, or “Literature of the Migration”. Tawada’s work, written in the two languages, is what we can define a literary case not only in her native country or in her adoptive one, but also on a more global scale of literary circulation. In one of his most recent publications, world literature scholar David Damrosch defines Tawada as a “contemporary global writer” (Damrosch 2020, 9). This is evidenced not only by a rising commercial success, but also by a steadily increasing number of studies, articles and books from Japanese, European and American scholars worldwide, which established what I would define a proper “Tawada-phenomenon” spreading among contemporary literary critics. Additionally, we could define her work as the result of a curiosity that is first of all intellectual and ethnological. It is a personal research that is located in a space that is not national anymore, but rather global, in order to meet and, when possible, merge different cultures and forms of expression.

In my opinion, this is the main aspect that differentiates her from the German “Migrant literature”, especially if we consider the peculiar characteristics and themes of her writing. Tawada herself defines her literature as “exophonic”. She heard the term “exophony” for the first time in 2002, during a symposium in Senegal organized by the Goethe Institut in Dakar, to which she had been invited as a writer who used German for her literary production (Tawada 2012a, 3). She perceived the term “exophony” as something with a more omni-comprehensive meaning in comparison to terms like “creole literature” (クレオール文学) or “migrant literature” (移民文学). In her opinion, exophony (エクソフォニー) can be defined as a “general state of being outside the mother tongue” (母語の外に出た状態一般を指す).¹ Suga underlines how the exophonic dimension of Tawada consists in her use of the foreign language, in this case German, for daily interactions and creative purposes: indeed, exophony is the basis of her poetics (Suga 2007, 26–7).

A particular characteristic of her writing is a constant re-adaptation of traditional literary genres, also obtained through an intense reflection on the nature of language itself and on the migration intended as a general, global phenomenon; this encompasses not only the relocation of people for economic purposes, but also the movement around the globe for intellectual and artistic research and performance. The textual and rhetorical strategies used by Tawada in her writings are mainly two: the first and more frequent strategy is the use of irony to deconstruct stereotypes and to criticize our superficial vision of other cultures and forms of expression. The second one is what the author herself has defined as a “mixed-writing”. This is a merge of cultural traditions, both Japanese and European, but also the simultaneous use of two languages, Japanese and German, often with an experimental purpose.

Since relocating to Germany in 1982, in her whole literary production Tawada has constantly reflected on issues such as the construction of identity of the

¹ Tawada 2012a, 3 (all translations from Japanese to English are my own for the purpose of this article).

migrant subject, as well as on the forms of cultural contamination in the global world. Therefore, recurrent and symbolically inescapable themes in Tawada's work are metamorphosis and transformations, intended both in a physical and textual sense: the main characters of her novels are often undergoing radical changes in their body appearance, transforming themselves into animals, changing sex or becoming hybrid mythological and legendary creatures. This topic has been the object of several studies and it is very easy to connect the theme of the metamorphosis to the changes that the migrant subject undergoes during the process of relocation and adaptation into a new environment and a new culture. Additionally, the metamorphosis is, for Tawada, often linked to the foreign language acquisition process: by increasingly mastering the foreign idiom, the individual evolves and changes from the person that he/she was before confronting with a different culture.

On the other hand, a theme that in my opinion is worth exploring further is Tawada's representation and use of food—simple food and most of the times traditional Japanese ingredients like fish or plain rice, but also fruit, vegetables and bread. Food is used by the author as a narrative metaphor that varies according to the different situations and the message that she wants to convey to the reader. According to Hui, in Tawada the mouth of the protagonist is a sort of transformative space in which foreign languages and, more in general, foreignness start to be digested and assimilated (Hui 2020, 200). In this sense Hui re-reads the concept of exophony in Tawada as a sensibility for consuming new words of a foreign language that is similar to eating food, a process that happens in a voracious and naive way. For both Tingting Hui (2020, 201) and Chantal Wright (2008, 27), exophony is a matter of literary style more than literary content.

According to what has been expressed so far, this contribution will analyze the representation of food in some of the most famous novels and stories by Tawada, with the aim to understand the functions of the act of eating in the text, as well as how food is used as a narrative device to catalyze the narration, to develop the events and to symbolize meanings. To do so, I will draw examples from a selection of narrative and lyrical works, chosen among the vast literary corpus of the author on the basis of their wide circulation and relatively big impact on critics and readers globally. Most of these works have had several translations in different languages that have made them accessible to a wider transnational audience.

One of her earlier and most famous writings is called *The bath* (the German title is *Das Bad*, and the Japanese one is *urokomochi* (うろこもち), which I would translate with *With scales*). Although very short, this novel has a very complicated plot, dense in symbolic meanings, which is open to many interpretations. It was originally written in Japanese at the end of the Eighties, but, as stated by Tawada in the 覚え書き *oboegaki* (memorandum) of the Japanese/German edition, since she was not famous in Japan at the time, it was published first in its German translation made by Japanese literature scholar Peter Pörtner (Tawada 2010, 189). The text raised the interest of critics and publishing houses and various additional translations were realized from the German one. Tawada ad-

mitted that it was very interesting to see how many versions of an unpublished book were coming out, so she deliberately decided not to release the original Japanese one until 2010, when an edition with parallel Japanese and German text was published (Tawada 2010, 188–9). The novel is one of the most cited works in the large production of Tawada and it gained critical attention not only in Germany and Japan but also worldwide, thanks to the English translation published in 2002. It is the story of a Japanese woman who lives in Germany, whose occupation changes many times throughout the novel (is she a model? an interpreter? maybe a typist?). One day, while she's working on a translation service, she loses her tongue after eating a fish at a business lunch.

In *The bath* we encounter different metamorphoses related and activated or accelerated (or both) by a common factor: eating. The first one is narrated at the very beginning of the book. It has the form of a traditional Japanese story, told by the I-narrator herself while realizing that she is starting to transform into some kind of fish-woman:

Once upon a time there was an impoverished village in a valley where no rice would grow. A pregnant woman was so hungry that when she found a fish one day she wolfed it down raw without sharing it with the other villagers. The woman gave birth to a lovely baby boy. Afterwards, her body grew scales, and she turned into an enormous fish. She could no longer survive on land, and went to live all by herself beneath the river.²

The act of selfishly eating all by herself and not sharing the food with the other villagers causes a punishment that transforms her into a fish. Eating is related to something magic, but eating in Tawada can also be connected to something nightmarish and unnatural, as narrated in the second story related to the act of ingesting food, a few pages after:

Once, a long time ago, there was a village in which lived a gluttonous woman. She worked hard and had a good disposition, and so she was well-liked in the village, but she ate so many helpings of rice that her husband thought it strange. Moreover, she forbade others to watch her eat, and would take her meals alone at night in the barn. One night the man crept up to the barn to watch, and he saw that each of the woman's hairs had turned into a snake and was eating rice. Astonished, the man got out his rifle and shot the woman dead.³

These two stories, as aforementioned, anticipate some kind of metamorphosis that the narrator of the main story is undergoing. The first story is narrated when, one day, she wakes up and finds her body all covered in little scales; the second one is inserted when she sees her hair full of spores of poisonous mushrooms and carcasses of winged insects. These two stories about food-caused metamorphosis seem to anticipate what is going to be the real change in the

² Tawada 2002a, 4.

³ Tawada 2002a, 8.

main character's body: she will transform into a hybrid between a human and a fish, a woman covered in scales.

Chapter 3 is the turning point of the narration. The protagonist works as an interpreter; one day, she receives a call from a Japanese firm that has arranged a lunch for its German clients, and asks her to do a consecutive translation on that occasion. Here, we are said that:

When my work takes me to an exclusive restaurant, I always order sole. Sole, unlike flounder, never tastes bland, and it's also not fatty like salmon. I don't know anything more delicious in Western cuisine. But it's not just because of the taste I insist on sole. It's the word itself. [...] When I eat sole, I'm never at a loss for words with which to translate.

On this day, however, one large fish was ordered for the whole party, so I wasn't able to order sole.⁴

Unfortunately, in the English translation, the real wordplay made by the author could not be rendered. But, if we go back to the original Japanese text and its German translation, the meaning of this passage is more than clear: "sole" in Japanese is 舌びらめ *shitabirame*, and in German is *Seezunge*. Both words have something in common in their respective language: they contain the word "tongue". In German is *Zunge* and in Japanese is 舌 *shita*. The first thing that we are told is that, if the narrator doesn't eat a sole, she would not be able to find the words for her translation. This is one of the most studied and cited examples of linguistic puns by Tawada and, as Rainer Guldin underlines (2020, 67), the preference of the narrator for this specific type of fish is a deliberate metaphor used by the author to signify that, by eating the sole, the protagonist is actually gaining an help and a boost with her work as an interpreter. What gives her the ability to translate is the act of eating a fish that contains the word "tongue" in its name, as if the narrator needs to properly eat a tongue: the protagonist of the narration confesses here that it's through this specific type of food, with these specific properties, that she acquires or at least improves her ability to speak another language, because food helps her translating when words don't come to her mind. We can observe that eating and interpreting are two very similar things: both actions involve "chewing" some foreign entities, words or edibles, in one's own mouth. This act of chewing results then in two different outputs: on one hand it introduces nutrients for the body and on the other it produces foreign words directed to the external.

But during the luncheon, another type of fish is served. The character loses the ability to speak properly and she is not able to eat her usual sole in order to have an additional support to her translating activity. Soon afterwards, she loses consciousness and she dreams of a fish eating her tongue. When she wakes up, rescued by a mysterious woman, her tongue has disappeared. The loss of her physical tongue coincides, of course, with the loss of her ability to speak. This is

⁴ Tawada 2002a, 14.

anticipated by another food image: at the restaurant, during the luncheon, the big fish that is taken to the table it is described as follows:

At this point, the master chef and his assistant carried in a large fish [...]. The white, swollen belly of the fish looked like a fat woman's thigh, and perhaps because of this, the arrival of the fish at the table was greeted with suppressed laughter. The fish's back was blue-green and thickly covered with translucent scales. One chef skillfully slid a knife from tail to head, stripping away the scales. There was a burst of applause. The eyes had already been removed. The open mouth had no tongue in it. The chef rapidly cut up the body and divided it among eleven plates. Finally, only the eyeless fish-head and backbone remained.⁵

In this sense, the main course of the lunch anticipates the destiny of the protagonist, who will remain mute for the rest of the novel, with the tongue ripped away and stolen by a sole in a dream. Without her tongue, of course she loses the ability to talk and, all in all, her identity as a mediator between two different cultures.

Christine Ivanovic and Miho Matsunaga underline how in Tawada's novels the act of eating is very often responsible for a change, a metamorphosis. Eating and drinking, or in a broader sense introducing something into one's body, brings something strange, magic, demonic, prohibited in the body itself (Ivanovic and Matsunaga 2011, 118). Corporeal transformations involve not only the appearance, but also the innermost essence. This metamorphosis is represented mainly as a corporeal change, but I believe it can be interpreted as a refined textual strategy that the author uses to mirror the transformations undergone by the migrant subjects when they relocate in a place different from their homeland. With the migration, they also metaphorically relocate in a new language, a virtual space that they have to occupy, that they have to "ingest and digest" we might say, in order to acquire the ability to speak the idiom. When moving to a new country, the migrants bring with them their own subjectivity and their cultural experience, a heritage that is enriched and transformed by the contact with a new culture, by the everyday life in a distant place and its values, customs and lifestyles. An invisible but important transformation that Tawada chooses to represent through the topos of bodily metamorphosis, in this case triggered by food.

There are many more examples of food related to metamorphosis in Tawada's works. Many of the themes and motifs that are present in *The bath* will recur also in another publication: *Yōgisha no yakōressha* (Night train with suspects 容疑者の夜行列車, 2002b), a collection of thirteen short episodes all related to the theme of the travel by train. An originally stylistical feature of the text is the second person narrator (あなた *anata* in the original Japanese) instead of the more traditional third person narrator or first person narrator. Also, the sex of the protagonist of the episodes remains deliberately unclear

⁵ Tawada 2002a, 16.

until the end of the book (Königsberg 2011, 103). With these techniques, Tawada achieves a higher degree of depersonalization of the protagonist of her stories, and enacts a narrative perspective that points in the direction of the reader who, therefore, is assigned with a higher potential of identification with the sequence of events.

As Ivanovic and Matsunaga point out (2011, 118), the seventh chapter of *Yōgisha no yakōressha*, titled *Habarofusuku e* (To Khabarovsk ハバロフスクへ), contains an example of representation of food whose ingestion is later linked to a metamorphosis of the main character. The protagonist of the story wakes up during a night-journey on a train through Siberia, with the urge to use the restroom but, unexpectedly, somehow she falls off the train and finds herself in a desolate and frozen place in the middle of the steppe. There is nothing in sight so she starts following the railroad and finally finds a small group of houses. The narrator enters one of those houses to look for a shelter where she finds a mysterious man who, to warm her up, offers her some sort of sweet and sour apple mousse:

「石炭ストーブが燃え、その上に鍋がかけてある。中から湯気が立ち、りんごを煮ているような甘酸っぱいにおいが立ちこめていた。それは何ですか、と尋ねると、男は答える代わりに、木の腕に鍋の中のものを盛ってテーブルの上に置いた。黄色いどろどろとした物が入っていた。舌が焼けるほど熱く、木の匙ですくって、飲み下すと身体の中を熱い柱が伸びていくようだった。」

A coal stove was burning, and steam was coming from the pot boiling at its top. The smell was sweet and sour, as if apples were being simmered. When you asked what it was, instead of answering, the man poured the contents of the pot inside a wooden bowl and placed it on the table. There was a yellowish sludge inside. It was so hot that it burned your tongue, and when you took a wooden spoon and swallowed it down, it was as if a hot pillar was growing into your body.⁶

After the ingestion of this local delicacy, the narrator is invited by her host to take a bath into a big tub of apparently hot water. While undressing, the protagonist notices that she has transformed into an androgynous being:

男は満足そうにうなずいたが、その場を去ろうとしない。あなたは、仕方なく、服を脱ぎながら、いつの間にか両性具有になっている自分の身体をそれほど驚きもせずに眺めていた。

The man nodded, satisfied, but refused to leave. While reluctantly taking off your clothes, you looked at your body, that had somehow become hermaphrodite, without much surprise.⁷

⁶ Tawada 2002b, 89–90. There is a complete English translation of the story, realized by Jessiqa Greenblatt and published in the collection *Digital Geishas and Talking Frogs: The Best 21st Century Short Stories from Japan*, edited by Helen Mitsions, Cheng & Tsui Company, Inc., 2011. However, the translation of the Japanese passages quoted in this contribution are by the author.

⁷ Tawada 2002b, 92.

The metamorphosis that is triggered by the ingestion of food is here different from the previous metamorphosis. It is true that, in the works of Tawada, the identity of the foreign person who travels or relocates abroad has always been presented as a fluid concept. In the case of *The bath* the protagonist changes her appearance and gradually transforms into a fish-woman, while in *Yōgisha no yakōressha*, and in particular in this example from chapter 7, the character becomes androgynous. Specifically, this case is not a transformation of the protagonist into the opposite sex, but a stage in between in which the protagonist has both male and female physical attributes. The development of the male part, especially the growth of the male sexual organ and its consequent turgidity, is triggered by the ingestion of the aforementioned apple mousse:

さっき食べた甘酸っぱいりんごムースが腸の中で酸酵し始め、下半身がなんだか落ち着かなくなってきた。

The sweet and sour apple mousse you had eaten earlier began to ferment in your bowels, and your lower body started to feel somehow unsettled.⁸

We should also note that the growing of a new and “foreign” sexual organ, just near the one the narrator was born with, might also be seen as an anticipation of the final revelation of the sex of the protagonist. At this point of the narration, the male host pushes the protagonist underwater and this androgynous being starts to drown. In this moment she feels that the boundary represented by the body seems to dissolve as she is not able to understand whether the water comes from outside or inside herself:

それはあなたを包んでいるのか、それとも、あなたの中から流れ出てきたものなのか、外と中とが溶け合って、どうでもよくなってくる。

Whether it surrounded you or flew out of you, the outside and the inside melted together and it didn’t matter anymore [...].⁹

Instead of drowning and dying, she wakes up back in the train and she realizes, as we readers do at the same time, that it was all just a dream.

In this work Tawada is clearly problematizing and denying the idea of a fixed, predetermined identity. Both the use of the second person *anata* and the metamorphosis of the protagonist into an androgynous being reflects the attention of Tawada for the dissolution of clear boundaries, in this specific case the dichotomies character/reader and male/female. Instead, she loves in-between spaces, ravines (or to use the Japanese word 狭間 *hazama*) between languages, cultures and identities: in those places her literature takes form and develops. For Tawada, these are the best places to reside because they are spaces from which

⁸ Tawada 2002b, 93.

⁹ Tawada 2002b, 94.

one can observe two different realities from a privileged external, nevertheless still close position. The fact that the very narration of the events in chapter 7 of *Yōgisha no yakōressha* is happening in a dreamlike space seems to reinforce this interpretation, as dreams can be seen as space suspended between reality and imagination. Also in this case, this transformation is caused by the ingestion of food, a sort of not specified dish made with apples. The same thing can be assumed for the metamorphosis of the protagonist of *The bath*, anticipated and thematized by metaphors related to food, whose body remains in an intermediate state between a human being and a fish, without ever completing her transformation into an aquatic animal.

In the examples above we have noticed how Tawada uses food as a sort of starter for metamorphosis and how these changes are not radical transformations, rather states in-between that might symbolize what Tawada considers a privileged position from which observing reality, and maybe writing about it.

Food assumes a different role in some of the production written after the events of March 2011, where, in works that deal in a more straightforward way with the disaster, it starts to be associated with something dangerous or poisonous.

Tawada reflects on the possible dangers of the contamination of food in a poem called *Hamuretto no umi* (The sea of Hamlet ハムレットの海).¹⁰ The poem is written in Japanese but it contains many English words: code-mixing and the interplay of multiple idioms in a single poem is not new in the poetic production of Tawada.¹¹ Nevertheless this piece of literature is peculiar because it is one of the few that does not involve the relationship between German and Japanese but it presents language puns between Japanese and English. The English words and lines of the poem are taken from the Shakespearean soliloquy, the famous “To be or not to be” speech pronounced by Prince Hamlet in the third act of the homonymous play. Generally considered as one of the masterpieces of world literature, it is a reflection on the polarity between life and death and uncertainty and doubt. Its impact in time has been huge and even today it continues to have a great echo in media and cultures around the world.

Tawada’s poem draws inspiration from Shakespeare in order to express people’s anxiety and doubts after the Fukushima accident, in particular concerning the contamination of land and food. After the disaster, many people believed that products coming from the area of Fukushima might have been contaminated. One of the central points expressed in the poem is whether is it safe to eat; this doubt is conveyed in the very first lines of the composition, in which Tawada plays with the homophony between the Japanese *kue* (to eat 喰え) and the first syllable of the English word “question”, the central word and concept of the Shakespearean soliloquy:

¹⁰ Sometimes it is also called *Hamlet no sea* or *Hamlet no see*. I was not able to trace the exact writing date of the poem, but I suppose it was written shortly after the triple disaster, around 2011.

¹¹ See for instance Mazza 2016.

喰え、喰え、クエスチョン、
 食べられるのか、
 フクシマのトマト、フクシマのキャベツ、フクシマの大根、
 です、と書いてある やおやのマジックペンで
 喰え、喰えず、クエスチョン、
 that is the question: Whether 安全か危険か
 危険だけど健康 いいえ 安全だけと病気にはなる¹²

The act of eating becomes an act of doubt, and the question here is whether it is safe to eat the products from Fukushima. The poem seems to offer no definitive answer but just continuous contradictions, an uncertainty that reflects the great state of anxiety and of doubt that permeated Japanese people immediately after the catastrophe.

Another important manifestation of this new idea of food in the work of Tawada can be found in the story *Fushi no shima* (*The island of eternal life* 不死の島, 2011), included in *March was made of yarn* (2012b), a collection of pieces on the 3.11 disaster written by famous Japanese writers and translated in English.

Here there is only a brief mention to food, which is represented again as something potentially damaging and poisonous. The story opens with the first-person narrator that is coming back to Berlin from a trip to New York. At the airport, passing through the passport control, when handing her Japanese document she is immediately looked at as if both herself and the passport were contaminated or dangerous. She then has to reassure the immigration officer that, despite being of Japanese nationality, she is coming from New York and she is, indeed, resident in Germany. In addition, the narrator is travelling with a suitcase full of Japanese food bought in the United States, a suitcase that has been lost in the trip:

The suitcase I'd checked in New York did not arrive in Berlin. I went to the Lost and Found, and while I was writing down the color and the shape of the suitcase, together with my address in Berlin, and other necessary information, something awful occurred to me. In downtown Manhattan I loaded up with Japanese food that wasn't available in Berlin, such as soba noodles made from mountain potato, fermented soybeans, seaweed in vinegar, and spicy fish roe, all of which I'd packed in my suitcase. If it was opened, those packages, covered with words in Japanese,

¹² The full text is available here: <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/hamlet-no-see-13807> (last access: September 23rd, 2021).

I would translate the part quoted in the text as follows:

Eat, eat, question

can you eat it?

Tomatoes from Fukushima, cabbages from Fukushima, radishes from Fukushima

is written with the magic pen of the greengrocer

eat, can't eat, question

that is the question: whether safe or dangerous

dangerous but healthy—no—safe but you get sick

would surely be confiscated as dangerous material and sent to a Radioactive Waste Management Facility. The fermented soybeans might even be mistaken for peanuts that had undergone some rapid mutation due to radiation.¹³

In this passage we see how traditional food is considered dangerous, mainly because it is supposed to have a connection with the nuclear accident that happened in Japan that same year. Especially *nattō* (納豆), fermented soybeans, a peculiar Japanese food that most foreigners find disgusting because of its stinging scent and unconventional taste, might be misunderstood and mistaken for some sort of corrupted form of life because of its singular slimy consistency. And it does not matter if it was bought in the United States and not in Japan: as far as the food is recognizably Japanese it is immediately associated with danger in those days after the catastrophe. Here, Tawada is clearly ironizing and problematizing stereotypes against Japanese people, using food as a metaphor for the fear of the foreign. The same fear is symbolized in the opening scene, where the immigration officer is afraid to touch the Japanese passport because it might be contaminated. As noted by Seungyeong Kim, passports are the symbol of predetermined identities (Kim 2020, 260) that bind the protagonist to a dimension of foreignness: even if she is able to demonstrate that she has a permanent resident permit stamp, the officer is still nervous (Tawada 2012b, 3).

Later in the story we are informed that the protagonist went to New York in order to buy a plane ticket to go back to Japan from an illegal travel company operating from the back of a small vegetable shop in Manhattan. But once she got there, the agency had disappeared, and the same destiny would occur to her suitcase containing all the Japanese food she bought in New York. Apparently, any relation with Japan, expressed in terms of food, strangely disappears without a specific reason, as to underline the isolation in which the country finds itself after the nuclear catastrophe.

Tawada's renown masterpiece of the post-Fukushima period is *Kentōshi* (published in Japanese in 2014 and translated in English in 2018 with both the titles *The last children of Tokyo* and *The emissary*, 献灯使). This novel, the first long piece of writing that deals with 3.11 events, is a re-elaborated version of some themes of Tawada's previous works. It was written shortly after the accident and after a visit that Tawada made to Fukushima (Kim 2020, 254). The English translation by Margaret Mitsutani was awarded the National Book Award for Translated Literature in 2018 and, since then, the novel has been translated in several foreign languages.

The novel tells the story of a Japan that is devastated by a terrible and unnamed accident. This catastrophe moves and isolates the archipelago further into the Pacific Ocean, more distant from the coastline of continental Asia. The accident and its physical consequences result in an isolationist policy of the national government that bans all international travels, and cuts off every communication and connection

¹³ Tawada2012b, 4.

with the rest of the world, creating a situation similar to the one experienced by Japan during the Tokugawa period. But *Kentōshi* is, most of all, a story of inversion and distortion of the normal course of events, a betrayal of the expectations of the reader. Occurring sometime after the terrible accident, the normal logic here is completely distorted: old men start to live a very long and apparently healthy life, while young children, especially those born after the unnamed accident, become weaker and, as time passes, more and more dependent on the elders' care. This subverts the usual course of events where children initially depend on the care of the adults who, in turn, become old and rely on the assistance of the young that have now grown up.

Kentōshi tells the story of Yoshirō and Mumei, respectively grandfather and grandson. Yoshirō takes care of all the needs of his grandchild Mumei who, instead of growing healthy and strong, as the reader would expect, is everyday weaker. His health gets worse as he progressively loses his teeth and his bones are unable to absorb calcium from food. This is not a characteristic of the young protagonist alone, but is a common feature of all the Japanese children that are born after the unnamed accident. The book is pretty much the story of the everyday life of these two characters in the shadow of the aftermath and, as noted by Dan Fujiwara, can be divided into two main parts. The first part occupies the majority of the narration and it is the very accurate description of a Tuesday morning in the life of Mumei and Yoshirō. In the second part, which corresponds to the end of the book, Mumei is chosen as an emissary to India for a mission to an experimental laboratory where scientists are trying to find a cure for the condition affecting these children. The narrative is a sort of long description of the present conditions in which the protagonists live, interrupted by frequent flashbacks of Yoshirō's previous life in the form of recollection, not organized in chronological order (Fujiwara 2020, 156).

Even if the story does not deal with food as its primary topic, there are several passages in which food and the act of eating are described as problematic for the protagonists. These passages are generally associated by an upturning of the function and the purpose of the act of eating itself. The difference from the previous generation is expressed not only in terms of assimilation of food, which remains the main divergence, but also in terms of treatment of the food itself:

Yoshirō's generation were brought up believing that there was a proper way to eat fruit: *this* was the way you peeled an orange; you use *this* sort of spoon to scoop out grapefruit sections. They believed that by standardizing the eating process into a ritual, they could soothe their cells into ignoring the sourness of the fruit, which actually warned of danger. Mumei's generation could never be deceived by such a silly trick, originally meant to fool children. No matter how they ate fruit, alarms went off throughout their bodies. When Mumei ate kiwi fruit he had trouble breathing; lemon juice paralyzed his tongue. And it wasn't just fruit. Spinach gave him heartburn, while shiitake mushrooms made him dizzy. Mumei never forgot for an instant that food was dangerous.¹⁴

¹⁴ Tawada 2018, 45.

If people born before the mysterious accident were educated to eat while performing certain movements, a custom anthropologically interpreted by Tawada as a ritual to help exorcise the dangers of food, this is not possible for the new generations because their relationship with edibles has been radically twisted. Normally, one would expect to absorb the beneficial properties of the single food, like vitamin C in citrus fruit for example. In Tawada's narration, for the younger generations it becomes, instead, a source of danger and of potential poisoning; in the story every food is associated with a specific damage to a determined organ or apparatus, and its nourishing properties are substituted with the side effects that most surely will occur if a child born after the accident ingests that specific edible.

In another very important moment in the story that presents an overturning of the concept of food as beneficial, Tawada problematizes what can be identified as the most important and symbolic archetype of nourishing food in human history: breast milk. Mumei's mother dies of birth and Yoshirō is left alone taking care of the newborn grandson. Of course, he cannot breastfeed the baby, and the toddler needs to be fed with bottled milk. He then discovers that not only Mumei, but every child is given artificial milk, as it appears that the milk produced by women is not safe anymore. It still is highly nutritious, but it also contains poisonous elements that make it undrinkable:

Though Yoshirō had assumed that only babies without mothers were given formula, he now saw that all the mothers were bottle-feeding their babies. No breast milk was guaranteed to be safe, one of the nurses explained. Breast milk contained, along with its life-giving nutrients, a high concentration of poison. There was no cow's milk in the formula either.¹⁵

This is actually the only declared contaminated food that appears in the novel, as the other groceries appear to be relatively safe for adults and old people, they are just dangerous for the new generations whose bodies are not able to process them anymore.

The transformation occurs again in the bodies of the people after the disaster and it reflects again in the relationship between the body and the food:

Every bit of food he put in his mouth was a challenge to be met. If sour orange juice bit into his stomach wall, he'd lose all his nourishment and burden his digestive system as well. Taking a breather after yesterday's grated carrot, his stomach would then be desperately battling today's bean fiber, not producing enough digestive juices to win, which caused Mumei's tummy to swell up with gas.¹⁶

Food represents danger in *Kentōshi*, but only for those generations born around and after the accident: apparently, elder people have not lost the ability to eat and correctly digest groceries. It could be argued that, if ingesting food

¹⁵ Tawada 2018, 73.

¹⁶ Tawada 2018, 94.

is akin to ingesting the foreign—introducing some external element into the body and transforming it into something useful for one’s own self—then the fact that newborns in Japan cannot process food can be due to the absence of contact of the country with the outside world. As Hui maintained, we can parallel the process of ingestion and digestion of food with that of internalizing a new language: “Foreignness is to be digested, consumed and incorporated” (Hui 2020, 200). On the basis of this, I read the fact that the children born in a country with no contact with the foreign have lost their ability to digest and incorporate food as a metaphor for their inability to deal with foreignness at large. Their impossibility of ingestion can therefore be interpreted as a symbol of the political and cultural closeness of the country that has stopped connections with the outside world. The theme of food as metaphor for foreignness was already introduced by Tawada in *Fushi no shima*, where groceries, especially the Japanese delicacies that the protagonist was carrying in her suitcase, could be seen as a potential danger just because of their exotic, almost dangerous aspect. Finally, in *Hamlet no umi* one of the themes was the urgency of eating and the uncertainty related to the contamination of food in the immediate aftermath of the 3.11 catastrophe.

Food and the act of eating recur often in Tawada’s works, and they perform a diverse number of thematic and literary functions. As it is common in her oeuvre, it is impossible to provide an omni-comprehensive and unambiguous definition, a fixed paradigm of interpretation. Indeed, Tawada constantly plays with her literature, evolves and changes it continuously.

With the help of the examples shown above, it is therefore possible to notice how metamorphosis, one of Tawada’s main elements, can be triggered by some external factors such as the ingestion of food. In *The bath*, the loss of her physical tongue symbolizes the loss of her capacity of being a medium between two different worlds and cultures. The protagonist of the story is in an intermediate state, halfway in between her old country and a new one: a new identity starts to emerge from the transformation, an identity that the migrant subject is going to acquire as a result of a process of syncretism between his/her own culture and the foreign one. Transformations of the body, changing the outer appearance of the self, are directly linked to the transformations of the innermost essence of the human being: the migrant positions himself between different languages, spaces and cultures, in the spectrum defined from domestic to foreign. This gradually results in a progressive but radical change. In *Yōgisha no yakōressha*, food once again triggers a transformation into an androgynous creature, another entity positioned in an intermediate place, between male and female, another theme dear to Tawada.

Food also acquires other functions in the author’s work and it’s closely related to the representation of the aftermath of the nuclear disaster of March 2011, especially as a metaphor of foreignness. In *Hamlet no umi* the question whether to eat or not is closely linked with the possibility of continuing one’s own existence instead of surrendering to the hamletian sea of troubles. In *The island of eternal life*, food is used to symbolize, together with the passport, the prejudice

and the stereotype against foreign people, especially Japanese nationals in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster. Finally, in the renowned *The emissary*, I would read the impossibility for the new generations of ingesting food as the impossibility to deal with foreignness and to enter in contact with a foreign culture or at least foreign elements, due to the dystopian condition in which the country has been relegated. This might also be read as a warning sign that Tawada is trying to convey, as an invitation to always be open to the foreigners and the other.

As we have seen, food has a wide range of functions in the work of Tawada Yōko and is a literary and narrative symbol that can be traced in a variety of writings that belong to different periods, with a diversified number of functions. I believe that further investigations of this topic would shed light on some fascinating and unexplored aspects of the production of the author.

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