HOLY FEASTING: FOOD IN THE WRITINGS OF MARION HALLIGAN

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This is a paper about food. About food and spirituality. Food and contemporary Australian spirituality.

The idea for the paper came when I was reading a relatively early collection of short stories, entitled *The Living Hothouse*, by the Australian author Marion Halligan.[1] I was already aware of the sensual delights that Halligan finds in buying and preparing food, eating food and writing about food, but what came through to me on this occasion were glowing images of food, fruit particularly, vivid as pieces in a stained glass window. This led me, naturally, to think about food in the context of religion. And so I turned to Halligan's 1996 title, *Cockles of the Heart* where religion, food and story are explicitly brought together.[2] What I found there set me thinking that Halligan may be consciously using food as a language with which to talk about spiritual aspirations and insights, much as a musician uses music to address the soul, or an architect uses design to render visible spiritual longing. I'm not talking about food as a metaphor for the Eucharist but rather food as a requirement for our daily life and also as an expressive language complete within itself, with its own integrity, somewhat like music, painting or any other form of creative art. Food in Halligan's writing, I'm suggesting, has both a secular and a sacred purpose and it should not be ignored in any attempt to describe an Australian spirituality.

What I want to do here is to indicate some of the ways in which Halligan uses food to express both an individual and a communal spirituality. I'll start with a couple of examples of the way in which she incorporates food into her fictions in order to familiarise you with her writing style and then I'll move on to the two threads I'm following in this paper: Halligan's use of food to describe the moral ambiguities and temporality of life; and her appreciation of food as evidence of a bountiful creation and an essentially convivial creator. To conclude, I'll comment on the sensuality of Halligan's language when she writes about food and I'll be suggesting that, although this is one of the reasons why she tends not to be read as a religious writer, it is, paradoxically, one of the most significant contributions she is making to the way in which matters of the spirit are imaged in contemporary Australia. Marion Halligan's writing on food could

go a long way towards revivifying not only eucharistic imagery but also the way in which we recognise the holiness of everyday life.

So - food as a story-telling device. I'm not going into biographical and bibliographical details about Marion Halligan because you'll find some of this information set out in the conference program. The point to remember is that Halligan is both a skilled fictionaliser and an essayist and that I'm referring to works in both genres today. You'll note that, in her fictions, Halligan uses different types of food to give us insights into her characters, and that meals are also used to advance the plot, by bringing characters into conflict with each other, by allowing them to explain to each other (and the reader) what is happening, and by enabling them to resolve their differences and come to new understandings of their situations. This deployment of food is obvious even in Halligan's first novel, *Self Possession* ,[3] as you'll see in the following examples where different types of food are associated with different characters and differing psychological states. Notice, when I come to them, how adaptable the language of food is, how it can be used to deflate people's pretensions and how it can also be used to recreate moments of love and nurture.

When Halligan wants to send up the bohemian life-style of the early 1970s, she creates the couple Zachary and Helen Willis, the last of the Laurentian lovers. He teaches art at a university in Canberra and fancies himself as a painter, while she makes massive earthernware pots at their 10 acre farmlet. In this house, which is open to student protegés and admirers, there is always a mess of pottage cooking away in an iron pot over an open fire. This pottage consists of whatever is available - fried pork chops, plums, rosemary, onions and port, for example - and is an obvious indication of the artistic Willises' pretensions.[4] Thus Helen, when pronouncing the word pottage, always gives it

> a biblical air. Old Testament of course, but sacramental enough, with a touch of the earth goddess thrown in. Whereas Zachary liked to think of Homeric simplicity: a slab of goat and a handful of grapes, a feast fit for the greatest of men.[5]

At the other end of the spectrum in *Self Possession* is the pretentious Mrs Felicity Finton-Sharpe, who lives in a fashionable inner suburb of Canberra and who sends out dinner invitations on heavy engraved cards. This is a woman who buys a black dinner set to better show off her all-white banquet. Her food on this occasion is entirely cream-based, rich, pureed, sauced, and culminating in a heart made of cream and sweetened cheese accompanied

by sweetish yellow wine. It is food for effect, not for enjoyment; a meal which does not respect the integrity of the ingredients or the digestion of the diners but which is as affected as the hostess, whose dining room is 'lit by several large many-branched floor candlesticks which looked as though they'd been looted from a Spanish church, with fat yellow ecclesiastical candles to match'.[6] Even in this first novel, Halligan mixes religious allusions and language with descriptions of food.

Spiritual barrenness is indicated by references to the food served in university halls of residence. These places are the refuge of the socially inept, the friendless and the hopeless - who else but a sick, pregnant and deserted student would endure a meal of 'roast grey anonymous meat and potatoes more at home in a Victorian waxworks museum, followed by the inevitable Two Fruits and ice-cream', and coffee that tasted like stewed tea or tea that tasted like rancid coffee?[7] This is while she is contemplating the suicide of a fellow student and planning how to raise sufficient funds to travel to Sydney for an abortion.[8]

The most congenial meals in *Self Possession* are those which take place in a family situation: omelettes with small mushrooms cooked in butter with garlic and coriander and parsley, a salad and camembert taken at the kitchen table with friends,[9] or a welcome home-coming, a ritual high tea which, although lacking in sophistication, is overflowing with parental love and nostalgia:

> Ham, and cucumber sandwiches, and a bowl of finely chopped lettuce decorated with tomato wedges, and the condensed milk, mustard and vinegar dressing that her mother would think was still her favourite, and a sponge with real cream and home-made apricot jam, and walnut slice and one of the Christmas cakes cut early. And cups and cups of tea from the imitation Georgian teapot that was only used on special occasions.[10]

The Australian equivalent of killing the fatted calf to welcome home a prodigal daughter.

As I read such descriptions I feel myself slowing my reading speed, rolling the words around, and savouring them. I am drawn into the shared rituals of preparation, contemplation and consumption which Halligan has prepared to help her characters through the complications of life.

And this brings me to the core of the paper, the suggestion that Marion Halligan utilises food as a spiritual language, that is, as a way of facing up to the ambiguities of life and of commemorating the bountifulness and nurturing aspects of God.

I had hoped to separate out these two strands, human and divine, but it became obvious that this was neither practical nor in keeping with the way Halligan deals with spiritual matters: in her books - and in life, if you think about it - the human and the spiritual are interwoven, for we can only experience the spiritual through our physical selves, we can only describe it in relation to our daily lives and we can only use our own personal languages to explain our world to ourselves.[11]

As I mentioned at the start of this paper, it is the non-fiction collection of essays, *Cockles of the Heart*, which brought home to me most explicitly the connections between food and spiritual matters in Halligan's writing, and her celebratory intentions. The book is an account of Halligan's journey with her husband along the old pilgrim routes of Europe, their intended endpoint Santiago de Compostela in Spain. They run out of time before they get to their destination but then, given the nature of their pilgrimage, this hardly matters. For Halligan is not journeying in order to pay homage to St James but rather to share in - and honour - the consciousness of those people who have travelled the route for centuries past.[12] The pilgrimage, to Halligan's way of thinking, is 'a tracing and retracing of a journey':[13] as we read the book we find that this retracing is not restricted to specific routes of travel but also includes revisiting the habits and customs of everyday life down the generations. This sharing in the life of common humanity is made explicit in relation to food, as when, for instance, Halligan remembers picking cherries in Goulburn with a friend:

> ... picking cherries, industrious, provident, happy (wallowing in race memory, you might say), we live for a moment in the lives of women who have enjoyed such work in company and conversation. Work must often have been like this. A kind of idyll.[14]

Halligan makes it clear that the pilgrimage on which she is engaged is one of devotion rather than penance [15] and, as Chaucer's pilgrims found, devotion easily becomes festive. The stages on this modern pilgrimage are marked not only by churches but also by restaurants, markets and fine local wines - both the spiritual and the physical fruits of the common life, past and present, are savoured. And if we look askance at this blending of sacred and secular pleasure we might take heed of the quotation from Ecclesiastes with which Halligan prefaces *Cockles of the Heart*, that is, 'every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God'.[16]

Recast in inclusive language, this quotation describes Halligan's own attitude to food as it comes through in much of her writing, and it leads me to ask how she demonstrates this understanding of food as a gift of God. Are there certain qualities of which food partakes that might also be seen as a reflection of aspects of the divine?

Halligan's earlier book of non-fiction essays, *Eat My Words* is a fruitful source of answers to such a question.[17] In it, food is associated with love, fidelity and beauty; with joy, health and truthfulness; with mortality and immortality; with creativity, balance and imagination; and with integrity, hope and transformation. Obviously there's not time to illustrate all these qualities, many of which are to be intuited rather than read, anyway. There are some direct statements, such as the observations that 'All good food has its beauty...'[18] and '... food is love. A person offering it to another is offering nurture, comfort, pleasure.'[19] But generally we are invited to muse over connections between food and the spiritual. Thus we can experience intimations of mortality - and possibly immortality - as we partake of rhubarb fool, with the sharp taste of the rhubarb piercing the soft cream.[20] Or we may ponder the possibilities of transformation when we slice an ugly grey piece of boiled rump steak and find that the meat inside is rare and meltingly tender.[21] Or we can enjoy the sheer beauty of food as manifest in a tall straight jar of home-bottled cumquats 'suspended dimly golden in their spicy liquor', an enjoyment tinged with housewifely virtue if we have prepared the preserves ourselves.[22]

One of the most interesting things about this writing is the way in which elevated qualities which might be the province of theologians are intimately linked with everyday life and, similarly, the ritual niceties observed by the priest are also observed by the cook who honours the integrity of her or his materials.

And as the existence of good predicates the existence of evil, so Halligan also associates food with corruption. Pictorial representations of Hell as a place where evil-doers are consumed either in burning fires or by creatures of nightmare have titillated us for centuries and Halligan plays on this sort of imagery when she describes a banquet staged by Phillip Searle which, in turn, was inspired by a Fellini film.

> Searle's feast was aristocratic, extravagant, rich: venison, goose, quail, pigeon, sucking pig. Vegetables had no visible role in it, it was meat that was insisted on, meat at its most meatiness, proclaiming its origins, the death that had brought it here: the sucking pig stared and the snapper bared its teeth as though about to take revenge for the cruelty of their ends; the Mount of Pigeons was a funeral pyre. The Goose Liverwurst was a blackened coil draped with a slimy pink entrail which proved to be

> foie gras and truffles. . . Our point of view was constantly shifted between the delicious and the disgusting...[23]

A banquet such as this draws attention to the fact that human life is sustained by death. We might think of the cultivation and preparation of food solely as a nurturing affair but it also involves sacrifice and violence. Think, for example, of the terms associated with food preparation. Halligan lists a few of them in *Eat My Words*: 'pound, beat, strip, whip, boil, sear, grind, tear, crack, mince, mash, crush, stuff, chop'. What does it say about human beings that we routinely, and without even thinking of it, invoke images of torture, of 'skinning and peeling and bleeding and hanging and binding, not to mention skewering and spitting, topping and tailing' when handling the materials which are essential for our continuing physical existence?[24] It would seem that, despite our civilised protestations, we actually take pleasure in killing.

Food may provide an officially sanctioned outlet for human violence but, if we stop and think about what we are doing, it also challenges our notions of moral integrity and civilised behaviour. How can we take pleasure in something that has been subject to 'a series of bloody battles and underhand tricks' in order to be rendered fit for human consumption?[25]

Such ambiguities concerning food are recognised, of course, in Christian mythology and imagery - the eating of an apple symbolises humanity's acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil, while the eucharistic meal symbolises humanity's redemption through sacrifice of the one who was without sin. The ingestion of food marks the depths and heights of salvational history.

Not only moral, but also temporal concerns are associated with food. Not only can food signify both beauty *and* decadence, pleasure *and* indulgence, but it can also signify purity *and* corruption. Food is a salutary reminder of the passing of time and the inevitability of decay;[26] irradiation and food-photography attempt to stave off the natural processes and are indicative of our fear of time and its ravages. A more positive response to the ephemerality of life, as symbolised by both the destruction that is wrought upon the much laboured-over banquet and the breaking-down of food, is to appreciate the depth of love that has gone in to creating something that is so perfect, even when it is known that it will last such a short time; as Halligan says of the banquet in the film *Babette's Feast*,, 'a more permanent monument would not have been so purely loving'.[27]

It is these sorts of ambiguities which are associated with food that make it such a flexible language with which to express spiritual and moral concerns. They also highlight how important it is to strive for balance, whether it is between the artistic and the pretentious, between cultivation and decadence, or innocence and temptation. The balance required of the banquet-chef is also required of us in our approach to life.

I have already touched on Marion Halligan's use of food as a way of commemorating the bountifulness of God's creation and it is to this that I wish to return to now, albeit briefly, in order to indicate the sort of spirituality that this writing implies. There's no time for further examples of this celebratory writing, but you'll find ample evidence of it in *Eat My Words* and *Cockles of the Heart*.

If I were to choose one word to describe the overall mood in these writings, it would have to be conviviality. Food is rarely taken as a solitary pleasure but rather it is seen as a form of communion, not only with one's table companions but with the whole of humanity, present and past: thus the importance of pilgrimage in *Cockles of the Heart*, the idea that one is travelling in the consciousness of those who have gone before. The similarity between spiritual and physical refreshment is obvious: if one participates in an act of worship by opening oneself out to the love that is offered, one experiences an occasion of grace, whether it is through healing or fellowship.[28]

The spirituality that comes through in this writing is one that is grounded in the senses - it does not abjure the body and the needs of the body in favour of the mind and its abstractions. Halligan's world is one that has been blessed by God, and in experiencing the fruits of the world we may also experience intimations of the divine. The fellowship of God is not confined to the Christian church but is also with us in the ceremonies of the secular table, the restorative moments which bring grace, leisure and calmness.[29] There is a place, too, for mortality, for it adds a certain piquancy - and consolation - to the enjoyment of what we have been given: if so much has been lavished on us for so short a time, what pleasures await us in eternity?

But even if this predicates a loving God, one who provides occasions of warmth, comfort and security, and is unlikely to cast us into the terrors of a medieval hell, it does not relieve us of the need to behave in a similarly loving fashion towards other people. Halligan, while she delights in satirising pretentious and self-absorbed behaviour, is slow to condemn her

characters outright: she understands that they cannot be perfect and commends kindness and understanding in relationships, not judgement.

Ideally, Marion Halligan's use of food as a medium through which to express the life of the spirit would be transparent to all who read her. But I'm not sure if this is the case. My impression is that many people read her writing, particularly on food, for the way in which she captures textures, tastes and odours, without asking *why* she is writing so sensually - her work is admired as an aesthetic object, but her purpose isn't questioned.

We might ask why Halligan isn't widely thought of as a writer of religious intent. It may well be due to the medium she is using - food in late twentieth century Australia is treated more as a matter of life-style than as a gift of God. Food is an opportunity for displaying one's wealth or culinary skills but it has been forgotten that it is not solely the work of human hands. Although Halligan is not advocating gluttony but is instead celebrating the co-creative process, human skill allied with fruits and foods, I suspect that her readers aren't always aware of this distinction and tend to place her writing firmly in the secular world, not the sacred.

In this paper I'm suggesting that the sensuality of Halligan's writing could well be of benefit to the Australian spiritual or religious imagination. I may well be showing my Protestant heritage, but I have the feeling that Australian Christianity encourages a penitential rather than a devotional frame of mind - we are more likely to feel at home with the concept of holy fasting than with the concept of holy feasting. When a medieval woman mystic, for instance, writes of union with Christ in the language of the Song of Songs, with its imagery of feasting and physical love, I want to dismiss her words as hallucinations born of starvation or sexual repression. I'm not comfortable with the notion that there could be an intimate connection between religion and sensuality. God may revel in abundance but I - we? - look askance at people who celebrate that abundance, preferring instead to talk of penance and purification while forgetting its purpose.

Think about it - think how difficult we find it, expressing table fellowship in Australian Christianity. Am I being unfair when I say that our iconography doesn't go far beyond barbecued sausages and cold beer? Not that there's anything wrong with a barbecue - one is scheduled on Sunday as part of this conference - but is it not symptomatic of the depleted state of the Christian imagination in this country that we cannot celebrate God's abundance with creative human abundance? Holy feasting is a potent way of expressing the personal spiritual life as well as sharing in the communal celebration of the sacred. I commend Marion Halligan's use of food as a

metaphor for grace, inspiration and generosity with a reminder that the distinction we tend to draw between the sensual and the sacred in relation to food is not of divine origin.

REFERENCES

[1] Marion Halligan, *The Living Hothouse* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988).
[2] Marion Halligan, *Cockles of the Heart* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books, 1996).
[3] Marion Halligan, *Self Possession* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992; first published 1987).
[4] The satirical edge is reinforced by the description of another enormous pottage, 'rather fatty lamb chops stewed in vermouth with carrots and olives and long white radishes and onions, with handfuls of herbs from the garden', cooked in an iron pot slung over a fire, 'So wonderfully ethnic. So fabulously primitive.' *Self Possession* , op. cit., p. 64.
[5] Ibid., p. 21.
[6] Ibid., p. 197.
[7] Ibid., p. 216. College lunches in *Self Possession* are equally unattractive: mysterious (maybe artificial) meat, acidic pulverised coleslaw and sugary tinned beetroot leaking over everything (pp. 241-2).
[8] How different this is from the earlier country picnic of seduction organised by her boyfriend, who had 'been to a classy delicatessen and bought a selection of its most elegant food: paté, and tiny sharp cornichons, and Kalamata olives and a camembert and small Italian breads, with wine and two fragile stemmed goblets and damask napkins, all in a picnic basket Edwardian in its ingenuity' (ibid., p. 88).
[9] Ibid., p. 147.
[10] Ibid., p. 278.
[11] The personal nature of language and allusion (which is of course strongly influenced by the society in which people live) explains in part at least why the spiritual writings of medieval women, for example, are so different from those of women today. An obvious area for comparison is food in a religious/spiritual context. The medieval relationship to food is complex, as Carol Walker Bynum points out in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), but in popular late-twentieth century understanding, women mystics are thought to have regarded food as an occasion of penance and to have valued fasting or the adulteration of food in order to lessen its pleasurable appeal. This might be contrasted with holy feasting, the celebration of food as a gift of God, as practised by Halligan as narrator in *Cockles of the Heart* .
[12] As Halligan says of Christian works of art, 'Belief in the religion that fostered them is not essential; faith in the common humanity of those who made them and of us who want to look at what they made is what counts.' *Cockles*, op. cit., p. 68.
[13] Ibid,, p. 15.
[14] Ibid., pp. 89-90.
[15] Ibid., p. 82.
[16] Quoted by Halligan as a preface to *Cockles*, op. cit..
[17] Marion Halligan, *Eat My Words* (North Ryde: Collins/Angus and Robertson, 1990).
[18] Ibid., p. 86.
[19] Ibid., p. 50.
[20] Ibid., p. 40.
[21] Ibid., pp. 34-5.
[22] Ibid., p. 60.
[23] Ibid., pp. 192-3.
[24] Ibid., p. 118.
[25] Ibid., pp. 118-9.
[26] As described, for example, in *Wishbone*: 'The debris of lunch lay in the sun, quite altered. The butter was greasy and rancid. The Brie had oozed to the edge of its dish so that it was flat as a plate, and the bread was dry and scratchy. Two sardines lay stiff as fossils. The honey cakes crawled with ants. She got a garbage bag and scraped the whole lot in. For a

moment she thought of putting the plates and glasses in too but why punish them for the corruptions of flesh. She loaded them on to a tray and carried them inside to the dishwasher.' Marion Halligan, *Wishbone* (Port Melbourne: Reed Books, 1994), pp. 70-1.

[27] *Eat my Words*, op. cit., p. 194.

[28] See *Cockles*, op. cit., p. 200.

[29] Ibid., p. 29.