

# The Food of Love:

## Plato's Banquet and Bersianik's Picnic<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Silences*<sup>2</sup> Tillie Olsen quotes this statement: "Power is not recognized as the power it is at all, if the subject matter is considered woman's." (p. 230) This may indeed be true when we are dealing specifically with writing or painting by women but in most contexts power that is not recognized is not power. It might be more accurate to say that wherever the subject matter is considered women's, all power that was recognized has long since been appropriated. And it is this appropriation, its nature and effects that interest Louky Bersianik.

Power lies in control, control of the dominant description of the world, and therefore, in our culture, control of language. In her first book *l'Euguélonne* (1976)<sup>3</sup> which was a parody of the Bible, Louky Bersianik examined the sexist structure of French and the languages of repression of women that had been developed within the Christian Church and by Freudian psychology. This time, in *Pique-Nique sur l'Acropole* (1979)<sup>4</sup> she takes on philosophy and the nature of love in a feminist companion to Plato's *Symposium*. As in her previous work she has borrowed the form of an authoritative text in order to call into question its content and authority by means of reversal, irony and black humour. Here her aim is to show how patriarchal tradition and practice in the Western world have repressed female sexuality, oppressed and destroyed women in the name of love; in short that patriarchy is gynocidal.

**Jennifer Waelti-Walters**  
**University of Victoria**

In order to do this she offers a series of dialogues parallel to those in the *Symposium* but, instead of having a series of rhetorical flourishes, set forms and developed metaphors leading to the ideal, we are given a sequence of direct reports on physical experiences leading to the real. Bersianik's women choose to talk not about love but about sexuality, discussing first its nature and then its effects just as do Plato's speakers in their eulogy of love. The parallels develop: narcissism in the *Symposium* becomes masturbation in *Pique-Nique*, homosexuality becomes lesbianism, and to complete the description of female sexual possibilities (and to provide an ironic comment on the omission of women from *The Banquet*) there



LUNCHEON ON THE GRASS  
(after Edward Manet, 1863)  
Susanne MacKay

is a section on love for and with men. The nature of desire has been examined in both texts. Each now offers a version of the myth of being cut into pieces followed by a discussion of the relationship between beauty and desire which leads to the culminating speech of each debate. Socrates presents an intellectualization of love, which is a sublimation of sexuality and a negation of the body, while Ancy, Bersianik's protagonist, speaks of physical tenderness which is a fulfilment of sexuality and a panegyric of the body. The distinction is between the abstract and the physical, distinction formed by the sense that each group accepts as dominant and through the mediation of which each apprehends the world. For the men this sense is sight; for the women it is touch. In each case, however, the progression goes from the self by means of an object of desire to fulfilment, and in each text the central image is that of the human being cut into two parts and forever after seeking its complementary self in a desire for wholeness and a desire to regain lost happiness. This image is used by Aristophanes to explain the differences in sexual preference: homosexuality or heterosexuality; for Adizétu it is the difference between sexual response of any kind and total deprivation because, like all the other speakers in *Pique-Nique*, she deals with her topic on a real and physical level. For many women being cut in half is no metaphor, no "blessure symbolique," but rather the excruciating pain of excision. And the subsequent "search for wholeness" offers fear, suffering and premature death in the guise of love, sexual pleasure and fulfilment.

This continued gynocide is the most obvious manifestation of the desire to eliminate women that runs through our culture and has one of its strongest roots in the Greek classics. Bersianik reminds us of the various stories throughout her text, beginning with murder:

AGAMEMNON, IPHIGENIE qui est tuée par son père *non par hasard* au hasard des pages: Père, père! mais il est sourd; comme CLYTEMNESTRE qui est tuée par son fils *non par accident*; Ma mère cette étrangère . Et comme XANTHIPPE qui a épousé *le philosophe de la vérité*, la

pauvre clouche: Qu'on l'emmène à la maison! " (p.16)

and continuing with rape:

On racontait, entre autres cocasseries, les déboires conjugaux du père des dieux, supercoq et grand oiseau de proie, à la suite de ses efforts rocambolesques pour séduire les nymphes; et les incessantes métamorphoses auxquelles celles-ci devaient avoir recours pour lui échapper.

Ainsi, dit Xanthippe, avait-on appris qu'Astéria avait dû se changer en caille (et de caille en caillou), Calisto en ourse, Io en génisse et Némésis en oie, pour se soustraire aux entreprises divines. A quoi Zeus avait répliqué en prenant la forme d'un aigle pour chasser la caille et d'un jars pour soumettre la petite oie blanche. . .

Il fut également rapporté que son digne fils Apollon, lancé à la poursuite de Castalia, puis de Daphné, vit la première disparaître dans un puits et la seconde se transformer en laurier. On en fit discrètement des gorges chaudes sur le mont Parnasse et dans tout le pays, depuis le Péloponèse jusqu'en Thessalie, d'autant plus qu'Apollon passait pour être très brillant puisqu'il était le dieu de la lumière. . .

Ce que tu dis là est confirmé par le dictionnaire, dit Ancy. J'ai lu dans le *petit Robert* deux que, <<malgré sa beauté et sa gloire, Apollon est malheureux en amour. Les nymphes et les mortelles fuyant ses ardeurs trouvent la mort ou sont violées par lui.>>

Tout à fait exact, dit Xanthippe, ce qui montre bien que la viol des femmes résistant aux assauts sexuels n'est pas une invention moderne.

Ni une invention très brillante, dit Aphélie (pp. 67-8). (my italics)

and then with torture leading to suicide:

Les soeurs d'Erechtée . . . l'une fut enfermées vivante par son mari qui fit croire à l'autre que sa soeur était morte afin de la forcer à lui céder. Après quoi il lui coupa la langue pour l'empêcher de parler.

Les filles d'Erechtée n'ont guère été plus favorisées. Elles s'aimaient entre elles d'un si grand amour qu'elles avaient juré de ne pas se survivre. Et quand l'une d'elles fut immolée par son père pour prix d'une victoire, ses six soeurs se suicidèrent pour l'accompagner dans la mort. (pp. 89-90)

All of which lead back to clitoridectomy and the "killing" of female sexuality in a girl by her father's decree in order to protect her from rape by another man. Bersianik's tales are supported by one recounted by Phaedrus:

And again, nothing but Love will make a man offer his life for another's—and not only man but woman, of which last we Greeks can ask no better witness than Alcestis, for she alone was ready to lay down her life for her husband—for all he had a father and a mother, whose love fell so far short of hers in charity that they seemed to be alien to their own son, and bound to him by nothing but a name. But hers was accounted so great a sacrifice, not only by mankind but by the gods, that in recognition of her magnanimity it was granted—and among the many doers of many noble deeds there is only the merest handful to whom such grace has been given—that her soul should rise again from the Stygian depths. (179c)

This is the last of a series of examples of heroism for love and it is to be noted that man dies for man or woman dies for man; in neither text do we find man dying for woman.

All of the stories with which Bersianik intersperses the

dialogues, whether they be drawn from the classics, quoted from psychologists, or created as modern allegory, and indeed the dialogues themselves, are stories of deprivation and exclusion from which women are gradually drawing strength and discovering their potential. As in Plato, the dialogue form is there to show that this has to be a collective endeavour for growth, and it is to Plato that the philosophy of exclusion from loving sexual relations can be traced.

First Pausanias devalues love for women:

Well, then, gentlemen, the earthly Aphrodite's Love is a very earthly Love indeed, and does his work entirely at random. *It is he that governs the passions of the vulgar. For, first, they are as much attracted by women as by boys; next, whoever they may love, their desires are of the body rather than of the soul; and, finally, they make a point of courting the shallowest people they can find, looking forward to the mere act of fruition and careless whether it be a worthy or unworthy consummation. And hence they take their pleasures where they find them, good and bad alike. For this is the Love of the younger Aphrodite, whose nature partakes of both male and female.*(181b) (my italics)

and then denies that Aphrodite herself has any female attribute:

*But the heavenly Love springs from a goddess whose attributes have nothing of the female, but are altogether male, and who is also the elder of the two, and innocent of any hint of lewdness. And so those who are inspired by this other Love turn rather to the male, preferring the more vigorous and intellectual bent.*(181c) (my italics)

Aristophanes continues the vilification of women by his choice of examples:

And so, gentlemen, we are all like pieces of the

coins that children break in half for keepsakes—making two out of one, like the flatfish—and each of us is forever seeking the half that will tally with himself. The man who is a slice of the hermaphrodite sex, as it was called, will naturally be attracted by women—the adulterer, for instance—and women who run after men are of similar descent—as for instance, the unfaithful wife. But the woman who is a slice of the original female is attracted by women rather than by men—in fact she is a Lesbian—*while men who are slices of the male are followers of the male*, and show their masculinity throughout their boyhood by the way they make friends with men, and the delight they take in lying beside them and being taken in their arms. *And these are the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs is the most virile constitution.* (191c) (my italics)

Love of man for man is the emotion which has status. Meanwhile Eryximachus has equated love with the life force so this is quietly appropriated for the male half of the population.

The whole takeover is then reinforced by Socrates in his use of Diotima, who is used to shore up the entire male-oriented structure: the Caryatid described by Bersianik. She is the only woman in the *Symposium* and she is the only speaker who is not there in person and whose words are reported by someone else. By using a woman, a known wise-woman at that, Socrates implies that all women are in agreement with the argument made, and by reporting her words himself he undermines her status while he is using it. Diotima is one of the original token women.

It is Diotima then who deprives women of their last base of power: motherhood. Aristophanes recognizes the need for women for the race to continue:

So now, as I say, he (Zeus) moves their members round to the front and made them propagate among themselves, the male begetting upon the

female—the idea being that if, in all these clippings and claspings, a man should chance upon a woman, conception would take place and the race would be continued. (191c)

but Diotima takes away this power by her very language. “Conception, we know, takes place when man and woman come together” she says but then obliterates the woman totally and attributes both procreation and birth to the man.

In propagation, then, Beauty is the goddess of both fate and travail, and so when procreancy draws near the beautiful it grows genial and blithe, and birth follows swiftly on conception. But when it meets with ugliness it is overcome with heaviness and gloom, and turning away it shrinks into itself and is not brought to bed, but still labors under its painful burden. And so, when the procreant is big with child, he is strangely stirred by the beautiful, because he knows that beauty's tenant will bring his travail to an end. (206d)

Even given that Plato thought, as Aristotle did, that the woman was merely the vessel for male seed and, being unable to generate her own essence, she was necessarily subject to men and physiologically inferior; nonetheless giving birth was still a totally female function without which men could not reproduce themselves either. The procreation of children is juxtaposed constantly to that of ideas (always to the detriment of the former) until the shift is made:

it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be *quicken*ed with the true, (212a)

and lo and behold he is pregnant: pregnant with ideas as we say to this day.

And when he has brought forth and nurtured this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of god. (212a)

Thus the life force in its abstract and physical forms has been removed from women's realm and women have been deprived of love/desire/sexuality, power and motherhood and relegated to second rate citizenship all at once.

Plato's dialogue is an illustration of the power of language and Bersianik's shows its results. Therefore in the two books together we find a repeat of the structure of each of them: a study of the nature of the theme first, followed by a study of its effects and a rejection of them all. For Bersianik's book is also an illustration of the power of language. Not only is she challenging the authority of Plato's text by showing its misogyny but she is also making a claim for women's right to exist in body and language and to describe themselves:

Écrire est une expression corporelle. (p.16)

Celle qu'on enferme: *on fait croire qu'elle est morte*. Celle qui en sait trop long: *on lui coupe la langue*. Le langage se rétrécit. Les corps se raréfient. . . (p.17)

Hence she reclaims birth images and mother and simultaneously food and nurturing:

La femme du philosophe fait l'éloge de ceux de nos sens qui nous collent à la peau. Deux sur cinq, une bonne moyenne. Les deux-cinquièmes de nos sens aboutissent au corps, abolissent l'espace entre le corps et le corps ou entre le corps et l'objet du désir. Pas de no man's land pour eux. Pas de douanes ni frontières. Pas de poste ni de détachement d'observation. Aucune distance ne saurait être admise. *Ce sont les sens propres*. Les sens du corps à corps. Incestueux ils nous font refluer au Corps mémorable. *Goûter* les seins, la vie en gouttes, le blanc qui coule dans la bouche et qui fait corps liquide avec moi corps solide mais *toucher* d'abord. Toucher l'intérieur de l'utérus avec mon corps se multipliant de seconde en instant à l'autre, pousser le mur liquide avec chaque

minime partie de mon corps minuscule allant grandissant, avec ma bouche majuscule à peine ourlée, avec mes mains aux doigts faisant, avec mon pouce, avec mon talon d'Achille, avec ma grosse tête, avec mon sexe flottant dans sa coque d'éponge.

Toutes les femmes qui ont été fabriquées dans un utérus connaissent d'abord l'utérus, dit Xanthippe, ce lieu—dit géographique de l'environnement total, lieu où elles sont touchées de partout, ce qu'elles n'oublieront jamais—surtout quand leur corps sera soumis à la carence du Toucher et à la surabondance du Voir. (pp. 46-7)

It is at this point that the full irony of Bersianik's title becomes clear: women have always prepared food for men, fed them with their very selves as the menu for the famous banquet described here by Xanthippe tells us. Many of the women who were deprived of their womanhood because of man's appetite are represented in the dishes offered:

## MENU DU BANQUET DE PLATON

### ENTRÉES

CAILLES EN TIMBALE  
À LA SAUCE ASTÉRIA  
VOL-AU-VENT D'HIRONDELLES  
À LA SAUCE PHILOMÉLE  
ROSSIGNOLS SUR CANAPÉS PROCNÉ  
SEPT COLOMBES SAUTÉES AU BEURRE  
PLÉIADES (une pour chaque orateur)

### PIÈCES DE RÉSISTANCE

UNE OIE RÔTIE À LA NÉMÉSIS  
UNE JUMENT AU JUS DÉMÉTER  
UNE OURSE À LA BROCHE CALLISTO  
UNE GÉNISSE BRAISÉE À LA SAUCE IO

TOUS CES METS SONT ASSAISONNÉS  
DE LAURIER DAPHNÉ  
DANS LES COUPES DE TERRE CUITE, ON  
SERT LE VIN MÊLÉ AU SANG DE  
L'HOLOCAUSTE, AINSI QUE L'EAU DES  
FONTAINES CASTALIA ET ARÉTHUSE

For themselves women can only afford a picnic but they eat it with relish in the very sanctuary of patriarchy because in eating their own meal together at last they cease to be eaten one by one.

The Caryatids beside them, on the other hand, are images of the desexualized, silent, co-opted women who have lost contact with themselves and with others. This is how Bersianik describes their situation:

Vous avez vu ça, dit Avertine? Défense de toucher quoi? Les Caryatides? Il n'y a pas de danger que personne ne veuille jamais toucher ces créatures de marbre. C'est un panneau-réclame peut-être. Ça signifie peut-être *touchez-moi*.

Oh regardez ce qui est écrit de l'autre côté: DEFENSE DE SE TOUCHER. Ça c'est un message aux Caryatides puisque le public ne peut le voir.

Est-ce que les Caryatides ont jamais manifesté des tendances à l'auto-satisfaction pour parler comme les pontes de mon nid à poux? Elles sont le support bienveillant des édifices érigés pour la plus grande gloire des Autres. Elles sont le support bienveillant de la loi qui leur est étrangère.

De dégoût Avertine brise la pancarte et la piétine.

Elle a raison dit Xanthippe. Remarquez avec quel art les *andres* ont inventé ont créé des femmes pour les soutenir. Ecoutez la voix de Diotime dans la bouche de Socrate se faire l'apôtre de la phallogratie et du mépris de son propre sexe. Ecoutez la voix d'Athéna à Delphes se faire

l'avocate des mâles pour écraser les mères. C'est elle la déesse guerrière et non pas un dieu, qui est le symbole de la civilisation grecque, berceau des civilisations misogynes, de la nôtre en ce siècle encore, ici et partout. Ces temples sur cette acropole lui sont consacrés. Cette ville qui nous entoure est sa ville. Mais elle proclame qu'elle n'a pas de mère à qui elle doive la vie puisqu'elle est sortie de la tête de Zeus comme Eve de la côte d'Adam. La grossesse d'Adam. La maternité mâle. Le Phallus pour l'Utérus. Spoliation, spoliation. Escroquerie. Supercherie. Tel est le pouvoir patriarcal institué dans le but de dépouiller les femmes de leur pouvoir afin d'en revêtir les *andres*. Tel est-il ce pouvoir et tel doit-il être renversé.

Avertine se lève et s'avance vers le portique en criant: CARYATIDES REVEILLEZ-VOUS!  
(pp.223-4)

One of them comes to life in the final moments of the text in a chapter appropriately called "Fugue en la majeur" (Fugue in she major) as a symbol of victory of the new order. This chapter counterbalances the "Prélude en la mineur" with which the book opens:

Le chant des Statues Vives

Toutes touchantes et de n'être pas touchées. Toutes impliquées. Toutes chantantes et tout et tout un jour ou l'autre où tout chante. L'une et les unes. Toutes sachant toucher. Et les autres. Moi aussi. L'autre Ancyl. (p.15)

Music, banished from the banquet, here surrounds and permeates the picnic as a symbol of the emotion, sensuousness and female desire excluded from the original discussion by the elimination of all "dionysian" manifestations:

Le désir de la femme ne parlerait pas la même langue que celui de l'homme et il aurait été

recouvert par la logique qui domine l'occident depuis les Grecs. (p.199)

writes Luce Irigaray (quoted by Bersianik). Indeed the "apollonian" view of the world, abstract, logical, distant and visual which sublimates feeling into intellectual structure, thereby denying physical love and becoming of necessity misogynous, dominates our culture, forming and strengthening a patriarchal structure which depends upon still, silent women for its survival. Plato is one of the creators and mainstays of this thought-process. In making clear the biases, omissions and linguistic sleight of hand in the *Symposium*, by reversing them in her own work Bersianik has undermined yet another of the tex-

tual bastions of male supremacy and taken another step towards providing an equivalent description of the world by and for women. For them, if not for Socrates and his friends, music would seem to be one of the foods of love.

#### NOTES

1. This paper was given to the Canadian Comparative Literature Association at the Université de Québec à Montréal May 1980.
2. Tillie Olsen: *Silences*, Delta Press (New York) 1978.
3. Louky Bersianik: *L'Eugélonne*, Les Editions La Presse (Montréal) 1976.
4. Louky Bersianik: *Le Pique-Nique sur L'Acropole*, VLB Editeur (Montréal) 1979.