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Abstract

Merlinda Bobis was born in the Philippines but went to Australia in 1991. *Banana Heart Summer*, the novel she published in 2005, is a truly original piece, very different from her previous works. What at first seems to be a collection of exotic recipes (most of its chapters have titles such as 'Shredded heart in coconut milk', 'Tomato lemon carp with hibiscus', and 'Clear clam soup', to give but three examples), turns out to be a touching, funny and elegiac story. Namely, the fictive autobiographical account of the summer in which Nenita, a poor twelve-year-old Filipina girl, decides to quit school and employ herself as a maid and cook in order to desperately try to appease her family's hunger and, what is even more important, to win her violent mother's love.

DOLORES HERRERO

Merlinda Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer*: Recipes to Work through Trauma and Appease the Human Heart's Everlasting Hunger¹

Some books are to be tasted, others to
be swallowed, some few to be
chewed and digested.
(Francis Bacon, 'Of Studies')

Merlinda Bobis was born in the Philippines but went to Australia in 1991. *Banana Heart Summer*, the novel she published in 2005, is a truly original piece, very different from her previous works. What at first seems to be a collection of exotic recipes (most of its chapters have titles such as 'Shredded heart in coconut milk', 'Tomato lemon carp with hibiscus', and 'Clear clam soup', to give but three examples), turns out to be a touching, funny and elegiac story. Namely, the fictive autobiographical account of the summer in which Nenita, a poor twelve-year-old Filipina girl, decides to quit school and employ herself as a maid and cook in order to desperately try to appease her family's hunger and, what is even more important, to win her violent mother's love.

'Rice cooked too soon' (68): that is the joke that some people use to refer to her mother's early unwanted pregnancy. Nenita's mother's subsequent marriage to her lower-class father 'collapsed the social order beyond restoration' (71) and scandalised her rich family ('*Buena familia*' [65]), who accused her of being 'a gallivanting whore' (116), and 'did not wish to know about their kin who ran away with a mason during her first year at high school' (71). Nenita cannot help interiorising what people say about her, that she is responsible for her mother's frustration and unhappiness and, what is even worse, that her mother has never loved her.

Mother never got over it. She fell pregnant and fell out of her family's favour. I suspect she never wanted the pregnancy, but my earnest young father knew that a baby would make sure she couldn't leave him, and she never forgave him or me. Her shame, her sorrow. (117)

Nenita takes after her father, but does not have her mother's graces. This explains why she always feels inferior and guilty in debt to her 'pristine' mother (107), and the reason why she longs to become her mother's 'best girl' at all costs

(108): 'I was my mother's shame and sorrow. I had stolen so much of her dignity, she often said. I needed to compensate for my crime' (107). This is her own private and unconfessable sin, the trauma she will always have to live with. So intense and incomprehensible has been her suffering that she feels she must write about that summer in order to write herself into a worthwhile existence. Despite Nenita's frequent claims that she is strong enough to cope with everything, to the point that 'nothing could ever hurt [her] enough to exhaust [her]' (41), it will take her twenty-eight years to have the courage to narrate her story. At forty and from Oregon, a city in a country so far away from her own, Nenita is finally able to explicitly narrate to us, her readers, what she experienced and underwent during that crucial summer: 'I will take you through a tour of our street and I will tell you its stories. Ay, my street of wishful sweets and spices' (3-4).

Her survival has become a form of autobiography, and she directly addresses the reader, who becomes deeply involved in her account and can therefore identify with her heroic plight. An approach such as this constitutes the main difference between men's and women's autobiographies, according to critics like Shoshana Felman: autobiographies written by men tend to have a celebratory tone that is often absent in autobiographies written by women.

The proclivity of men toward embellishing their autobiographies results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered. This is contrary to the self-image projected in women's autobiographies. What their life stories reveal is a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image. (qtd in Jelinek 15)

Felman goes on to argue that a significant difference between men's and women's writing is that pain is very often present in female autobiographies, which consequently become the narration and unearthing of a trauma that has for long been repressed: 'Unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women's autobiography is what their memory cannot contain — or hold together as a whole, although their writing inadvertently writes it' (15). This painful experience of writing and re-membering the humiliations of the past, especially those of being an unwanted daughter, is one of the fundamental aims of Nenita's bittersweet autobiographical account, in which food becomes its main structural link. After all, autobiographical writing is, among other things, about experiencing-articulating, which could be easily extrapolated to ingesting-expelling. As *Banana Heart Summer* seems to hint, in the case of many women like Nenita, pain from trauma is physicalised in its articulation, in the writing. Hence the use of so many food and eating/ingesting metaphors in the novel, and the ambivalent symbolism that they can often have. To give but one example, in the chapter 'Lengua para diablo', the act of cannibalism, and of being eaten results in Nenita being the fortunate 'inside girl', the girl in the rich man's stomach who would thus be able

to tell 'the true nature of sated affluence', because '[i]n his stomach, [she] would be inducted to secrets' (18), the secrets of abundance and plenty. On the other hand, this image inevitable brings to mind that of Nenita as an unwanted foetus in her mother's womb, but in this case the implications are of a very different nature, because in her mother's womb she would be inducted to *the* secret: the truth that she was unwanted.

Eating is a fundamental human activity, since it is both necessary for survival and inextricably linked with social function. Eating practices are essential to self-identity, and are instrumental in defining family, class, even ethnic identity,² and in understanding human society and its relationship with the world. As Mikhail Bakhtin stated when discussing Rabelais's irreverent novel, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, because appetite is located in the viscera, '[t]he bowels study the world in order to conquer and subjugate it' (301). Themes related to food are therefore common among all types of writing since, as Evelyn J. Hinz maintains, 'eating and drinking in themselves constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience' (v). The relationship between food and literature, as Hinz goes on to argue (v–vi), can have multifarious implications: attitudes towards eating can affect the critical reception of a literary work and its interpretation; a focus on food may have an effect on the shape or narrative technique of a work; attitudes towards food may function as indices to mode or genre; the presence of food in a text inevitably situates that work in a specific cultural context; the question of metaphoricity becomes especially crucial in texts dealing with eating habits; food may function as a mediator between Nature and Culture, author and reader, world and text. Moreover, it is a fact that many female writers have used food and its related concerns as an emblem of feminine identity and domesticity. *Banana Heart Summer* is an exceptional illustration of all the aforementioned aspects.

However, while plot in literature most often focuses on the vicissitudes of human relationships, on love, betrayal, conquest, loss, rather than food, that is, while meals often merely provide the framework for events, in the case of Bobis's novel food becomes the main event upon which everything hinges and coheres, the almighty metaphor that grants Nenita the centrality and healing powers that she longs to have. Unlike well-known feminist texts in which the kitchen symbolises the marginalisation and oppression of women, in *Banana Heart Summer* the kitchen becomes, not only a woman's domain, that is, the ultimate realm for female survival, celebration, creativity and solidarity, but also a vehicle for knowing secret recipes, the inside stories. The kitchen could thus be related to 'the inside', like the gut, since it is home to our most basic human preoccupations.³ Furthermore, Nenita's autobiographical account using stories, recipes and reminiscences, also helps to portray the migrant/transcultural writer as an exile from both Filipino and Western cultures. Her attempts to enunciate a self that is both enduring and dynamic are mainly revealed in her passionate

concerns with food. As Merlinda Bobis argues, forty-year-old Nenita stands for the migrant writer who desperately tries to rarefy domestic food images from the first home, in order to make sense of her new condition, and to make sure that she does not forget old loyalties (2006 11). Eating is much more than a human activity necessary for survival, eating becomes, to quote Bobis's own words, 'a ritual of remembering ... a symbolic homecoming' (11). If, according to Herbert Read, a metaphor is 'the swift illumination of an equivalence' (25), then it can be argued that Filipino recipes and food, the banana heart being the ultimate embodiment of them all, migrate to America as precious metaphors. Food, mainly as embodied by the banana heart, does not only bring reminiscences of home. Food is the representation of dignified survival. Food is home and mother, Nenita's first home, Nenita's first heart. It is the banana heart, together with all the other food metaphors, that will allow the migrant writer to re-invent, not only her representation of food and eating, but also and more important, her representation of herself. As Bobis put it:

'Foodspeak' is doublespeak for the writer and the migrant. Both the literary and the domestic discourse are layered, ambivalent and often shifting between exposure and subterfuge — a state evoked by the image of the banana heart, the 'petticoated flirt' that reveals and hides itself in many velveteen folds. (2006 11)

Food metaphors allow Nenita, a Filipina domestic helper in America, to tell her own story, and thus define and dignify herself in the host culture, an experience shared by many other Filipina migrants.⁴ Almost every chapter in the novel is a Filipino dish that becomes a metaphor for life and survival. To give but some examples, because the whole list would be never-ending: the *palitaw* (a rice cake) is remembered as 'floating faith'; the *acharra* (pickled green papayas) teaches the art of preserving dignity and self-respect; the *halo-halo* (an iced mixture of sweets) is a mix-mix of life's comforting moments; the *turon* (deep-dried sugar banana and jackfruit) sounds and smells like happiness; the tomato lemon carp with hibiscus, the clear clam soup, and the stillborn banana fritters stand for dignity in the face of poverty and helplessness; the bitter melon graced with eggs represents the capacity to live a meaningful life in spite of marginality and isolation; the *biniribid* (a rice snack) encapsulates endurance and resilience; the *pinuso* (heart-shaped rice and coconut cake) stands for achievement and completion; the *igado* (liver dish) is a magic remedy to purge spleen; the food game of *piko-piko* points to the comforting power of fantasy; the *dinuguan* (blood stew) to the futility of greed and corruption; and the *peccadillo* (a fish dish) to the power of unconfessable sexual desire.

Why so many recipes? What does this excessive display of dishes stand for? As I see it, it is not a question of 'pandering to the West's love for "exotic morsels"' (Bobis 2006 16), nor is it a mere attempt to imitate and denounce the western practice that many critics have labelled as 'commodification of the exotic'.⁵ Food metaphors play a rather more complex and ambivalent role in the novel. To quote

Bobis's words again, 'food evokes more than good things ... food also evokes the lack of it. It is bound with hunger' (2006 15). Since in the novel food is home and mother food at once symbolises the absolute presence and absence of both. As a migrant, Nenita misses her far-away home. As an unwanted child, she desperately tries to make up for her mother's lack of love for her and fill in this immense hole. In other words, Nenita will strive to work through this heart-breaking childhood trauma by becoming the most meticulous and altruistic cook, namely, 'the master of the ritual of appeasement, of making better, and ultimately of balance' (266). Consequently, cooking becomes the main defence mechanism that Nenita uses to overcome the anxiety that her sense of guilt and lack of self-esteem provoke.

As many psychoanalytical theorists have explained, following Freud's delineation of the nature of ego mechanisms of defence,⁶ defence mechanisms are psychological strategies used by the self to protect itself from anxiety, social sanctions or situations with which one cannot easily cope. Feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame often accompany the feeling of anxiety. The signalling function of anxiety is, therefore, a crucial one, biologically adapted to warn the organism of danger or a threat to its mental balance. Anxiety is felt as an increase in bodily or mental tension, and the signal that the organism receives leads it to take defensive action towards the perceived danger. Defence mechanisms work by distorting the unconscious impulses into acceptable forms, or by unconscious blockage of these impulses. The list of particular defence mechanisms is huge, and there is no theoretical consensus as regards their number. Different theorists have produced different categorisations and conceptualisations of defence mechanisms.⁷ For the purpose of this analysis, however, I will employ George Eman Vaillant's theories (1977 and 1992), since they have been some of the most thoroughly elaborated and influential. Vaillant classified defence mechanisms according to four different levels of psychological development: level I — psychotic defences (psychotic denial, delusional projection); level II — immature defences (fantasy, projection, passive aggression, acting out); level III — neurotic defences (intellectualization, reaction formation, dissociation, displacement, repression); and level IV — mature defences (anticipation, altruism, sublimation, suppression, humour, identification, introjection).

It is my contention that forty-year-old Nenita has managed to become an emotionally healthy and mature adult by making use of mature (level IV) defence mechanisms. They had their origins in childhood, and were adapted through the years so that she managed to integrate conflicting emotions and thoughts (the heart and the spleen, love and anger), and as a result optimise success in life and relationships. Vaillant describes the mature defence mechanism of anticipation as the 'realistic anticipation of or planning for future inner discomfort', which includes, above all, 'goal-directed but overtly careful affective planning or worrying, anticipatory mourning and anxiety, and the conscious utilisation of "insight"' (1992 248). Following this argument, it can be said that Nenita is able

to anticipate the hunger and greater discomfort that the birth of her mother's seventh child is bound to bring about,⁸ and decides of her own free will to leave school and work as a maid and cook in the house of the Valenzuelas, one of the most well-off families in the neighbourhood. She chooses to become an earnest cook in order to feed, nourish and protect the others (her siblings, her poor friends Chi-Chi and Bebet, her mistress Violeta). To put it in Vaillant's terms, it is her altruism that brings her pleasure and personal satisfaction.⁹ 'Suddenly I felt big and grown-up, like the richest patron of all the empty stomachs in the world. Come all ye that hunger into my opulent abode' (165).

Moreover, she decides to channel her aggressive instincts towards difficult people and situations by focusing on their good side, that is, she makes use of the defence mechanism of sublimation, which will allow her to acknowledge but discard hurtful emotions by transforming them into positive ones. Following Vaillant's interpretation of similar cases, it could be argued that Nenita's feelings will be 'acknowledged, modified, and directed toward a relatively significant person or goal so that modest instinctual satisfaction results' (1992 248). Nenita is working for the Valenzuelas, who are very kind to her, but she cannot help missing her family because, in spite of all their negative aspects, Nenita says, she feels they are one and feel like one: 'In my family, we never hugged. We loved each other in our own way ... we did things together. We called out to God as one. We lay our bodies as one... Maybe we even dreamt as one' (74). And incomprehensible as it might be, she especially misses her mother. The reason for this can only be Nenita's decision to forget her mother's violence in order to sublimate her subsequent appeasing attitude, 'the change of heart that followed as [her mother] sat [her] down' after having beaten her: 'We hit you, because we love you' (106), she often said. Furthermore, Nenita clings to the very few happy memories that she has like when she and her brother Junior ate melon seeds with their mother, and magnifies these memories so as to keep herself happy: 'when it was just Junior and me, and Mother still laughed, she'd buy a packet and we'd sit around learning these tricks of eating, of companionship, of delight. Ay, she did it so well' (58). Nenita prefers sublimating her mother's good side: 'how she wanted all of us to eat and eat well, nagging each measly meal to multiply in her desperate hands' (119–20). It is this sublimation alone that will finally enable her to forgive her mother and write this conciliatory closing remark: 'How do I say that I have kissed those hands again and again in my dreams, and now I understand? And it is all right' (266).

Manolito Ching, Nenita's first love, also deserves some mention. Youth and hormones, together with an inevitable sense of social inferiority, lead her and her friend Chi-Chi to idealise what for a rather more detached eye would have merely been a rich spoilt boy. 'To us, the Chinese-Spanish *mestizo* still looked impeccably groomed, despite his sweaty bare chest. (122–23); 'None of us could move before the perfect teeth at the other side' (124). Nenita is free to regard

Manolito either as neighbour, friend or infatuation, and chooses to see him as the perfect combination of all three, simply because she needs to believe that he is the Prince Charming that will awaken her self-esteem. ‘Manolito Ching: interceding neighbour, friend, crush. The nature of a thing (or person) is realised in the intent of its user’ (128). To put it differently, the ultimate reason for this idealisation and sublimation is Nenita’s hunger for love, the ‘love at first sight between a mother and her firstborn ... imperative for the child’s survival’ (136) which she never enjoyed. The association that Nenita establishes between Manolito, her first love, and the figure of the mother is by no means accidental. She longs for a sentimental relationship that can make up for this primary lack and hunger ‘[f]oolishly I wondered about the boy who could kiss it better, my back, my eyes, kiss them all into forgetting’ (244).

Nenita also manages to cope with reality by momentarily suppressing some uncomfortable thoughts and fears so as to be able to fully accept them eventually. According to Vaillant, the defence mechanism of suppression entails ‘[t]he capacity to hold all components of a conflict in mind and then postpone action, affective response, or ideational worrying’ (1992: 247); that is, the sagacity to protect oneself by minimising and postponing acknowledged discomfort. Nenita knows she is poor (her family has a ‘lengthened oesophagus’ [6] due to their constant hunger) and lacks physical and social graces, and deep down in her heart is afraid of being rejected and humiliated by her rich neighbours and relations, most of whom look down on her and reject her company. Aunt Rosario’s condescending attitude, Manolito’s loud and cruel laughter when he sees her ragged knickers as she falls off the tree and, above all, Mrs Ching’s accusation of theft, are clear evidence of this.

I should have known better. You don’t mix with those above you, you keep to your kind. Culinary tricks, especially the more adventurous ones, never apply to human relationships. My salt with [their] sugar? Impossible. (41)

However, her ingrained sense of dignity helps her to minimise this inferiority complex so as to eventually cope with it. When Manolito, who some days before had sent her away from his kitchen without even asking for her name, asks Nenita to stay and play ball, she retorts: ‘I’m busy’ (126), thus making it clear that, no matter how attractive she may find him, she is not a toy he can take and discard at will.

Boy Hapon, the solitary neighbour about whom nobody in Remedios Street knows anything, has similar fears, although in his case anxiety is invested with a fairly pathological nature. He gave up being a member of the community a long time ago. ‘Boy Hapon was and was not part of our street. He had never left his garden during the twelve years that I’d known or heard of him. I think he was afraid of us, and we of him’ (80). Nenita is right: it is fear, fear of the unknown and unfamiliar — that is, of the other — that prevents them all from getting to know each other. One day, Nenita falls off a mango branch while trying to steal some green mangos for her mother, and ends up falling straight into Boy

Hapon's hands. Contrary to what Nenita might have expected, he is very kind to her, and begs her to ask him for whatever fruit she may need. Nenita now knows his secret: he is not a young boy, nor is he a monstrous figure. It is only a lonely and 'wrinkled man', with a 'lined, longish face with high cheekbones ... eyes that sloped upwards and ... very big ears' (109). Later on he will explain to her why he looks so different: he is a half-breed because his mother worked for the Japanese during the war. Actually, what the novel is suggesting, although in a very subtle way, is that his mother was 'a comfort woman'; that is, a Filipino woman who, like many others, was forced to prostitute herself and 'service' Japanese soldiers during the war.¹⁰ That explains why he looks Japanese and why the other neighbours do not like him (248–49). He never knew his mother. All he has from her is a faded picture that the nuns gave him as a child, and which he venerates on an altar he has arranged in a corner of the main room of his house.¹¹ He cooks, and reads Mills and Boon romances for his mother. This is his one and only activity, all he does in life. His nostalgia, loneliness and hunger for motherly love has led him to lock himself away from the neighbourhood and refuse all contact with the real, outside world. The similarities between Nenita and Boy Hapon are obvious. Both are half-breeds, albeit for different reasons: Boy Hapon's are racial (his mother was Filipina and his father Japanese), while Nenita's are social (her mother married a lower-class man). Both are mother-obsessed: they wish they had had a proper mother and they experience the same kind of fundamental void. Significantly, Nenita is the only person in the whole street with whom Boy Hapon eventually manages to communicate. However, whereas Boy Hapon has chosen to live in complete isolation, and worship the picture of a woman he never knew, Nenita has preferred to assume her condition, help and serve the others, and love her mother as the frustrated and unbalanced person that she is. Boy Hapon has decided to avoid interpersonal intimacy and use eccentricity to repel the others. Following Vaillant's theories again, it could be concluded that he relies on fantasy, an immature defence mechanism, so as 'to indulge in autistic retreat for the purpose of conflict resolution and gratification' (1992 244). On the contrary, Nenita has managed to face up to reality and look her fears and limitations in the face. Hers is the healthiest of attitudes.

Another defence mechanism that Nenita often uses in her narrative account is humour. As Vaillant claims when analysing similar cases (1992 247), it could be said that humour allows Nenita to express those ideas and feelings that are too unpleasant or terrible to talk about, and at the same time give pleasure to the others with her wit by referring to the serious or distressing in a humorous way, rather than disarming it. The thoughts remain just as distressing, but they are smoothed by the witticism. When Nana Dora asks Nenita how she sustained all those terrible bruises on her arms and legs, she simply answers: 'I fell from the sky' (96), refusing to tell Nana Dora how violently her mother had slapped, kicked and beaten her.¹² Being aware of the futility of praying to a God who

never listens, Nenita humorously concludes: 'Is it possible that the God the Father sometimes hears too late, because of too many crossed lines? ... [W]ho was taking [our earthly intentions] up to Him? What saint should we assign for this task that we couldn't even begin to grasp?' (62–63). When Nenita has to face up to her mother's resentment towards her, she chooses to find an exonerating explanation for this in the tale of the melon that grew pale. A melon farmer replies to a customer who complains that the melon he has just bought and dropped to the ground is not red inside: 'Believe me, Sir, I only grow the sweetest-reddest melons, but if it was you who had fallen, wouldn't you grow as pale?' (117). Her mother fell pregnant and fell out of her family's favour and, consequently, Nenita argues, '[s]he never got over the bruising. She remained pale even in the hottest summers' (116).

Nenita will also make use of the defence mechanism of identification by trying to model herself upon two different female figures, whose character and behaviour she respects and admires, although for different reasons. One of them will be her mistress, VV, Miss Violeta Valenzuela. She is not perfect: she commits one sin (she has a love affair with Mr Alano, a married man), and eventually pays the price (she gets pregnant and her lover lets her down). VV is generous, understanding, and cares about the suffering of the less privileged. Nenita adores her mistress because she understands her plight and tells Nenita's parents that she is going to work for her family.

I fell hopelessly in love with my new mistress then. Not with her beauty ... but with something I couldn't yet comprehend... I did not see an eighteen-year-old... I saw someone older, more composed, knowing, and the voice I heard was rich and rounded, like life that had come full circle. (100)

Moreover, VV keeps on telling Nenita that, contrary to what she thinks, the world is not her fault (234), and gives her the love and affection that she so badly needs: '[a]nd she loved me, she loved me. Even in her distraught moments, she always had a kind word for m... "You're not my maid, but my little friend"' (233). Similarly, Ralph, the American man who falls in love with VV and agrees to marry her and give her child a father, calls Nenita 'Miss' and says that she has a beautiful smile. Unlike Nenita's mother, who more often than not spat her name out at home, he calls her 'Neni-da', 'a name that would never sound angry' (182). Nenita all of a sudden realises that she is also attractive and, what is more important, that she deserves to be loved. Significantly enough, it is VV and Ralph who take Nenita with them to Oregon, far away from the suffocating street.

The other female character with whom Nenita unconsciously identifies is Nana Dora, the wise woman who appeases everybody's hunger in the street, and who keeps on feeding the fatherless twins long after all the other neighbours had forgotten about their sad destiny. Nana Dora and Nenita share the same passion for cooking, both of them are generous, are aware of the difficulty of '[finding] the balance between [their] love and anger' (263), and speak the same language:

'[w]e understood each other, we understood dignity' (96). Nana Dora cares about Nenita but respects her silence, and teaches her some very important lessons. There is nothing wrong in pleading, providing one never loses one's dignity: Nana Dora was abandoned by her husband, the Calcium Man, '[b]ecause her womb was as barren as soup without water and he so badly wanted to have sons' (206). She did as many things as she knew to make him come back but, in the third year, she definitely decided to make do without him. He did come home then, but it was too late, because 'her door was closed by then to his claims of love and regret' (207). Deep down in her heart, Nenita feels this is something she should also do in order to heal the wounds that her mother has inflicted on her: 'I did plead, then I purged (in my dreams at least), but with little success at home. So how to know when to stop? I never had the conviction of Nana Dora' (208). Last but not least, Nana Dora, who might be seen as Nenita's surrogate grandmother figure, tells Nenita that she worries too much (236), and gives her the most precious gift: the story of the banana heart, 'the charm that [she] kept in her pocket ever since' (237), and which she will introject to the point of taking this tale as her one and only key to survival and happiness:¹³

Close to midnight, when the heart bows from its stem, wait for its first dew. It will drop like a gem. Catch it with your tongue. When you eat the heart of the matter, you'll never grow hungry again. (237)

It is only when you face up to reality and realise what is really important in life, and cling to it at all costs, that you reach the heart of the matter, and thus plenitude, whatever your circumstances may be. It is only when you are able to reach the perfect balance between the heart and the spleen, between love and anger, that you can become mature, happy, free, that you can become a heart, that you, like Nenita, can become a red stone with black ridges because you have 'fire with the promise of burning' (73).

The association the reader is invited to establish between Nenita and the volcano is by no means accidental. Neither is the fact that the volcano and the church 'faced each other in a perpetual stand-off, as if blocked for a duel' (26). People living in Remedios Street lived between both of them, between the 'smoking peak and the soaring cross', the 'two gods' that ruled their whole existence (26).

The cross can be said to symbolise the most suffocating and oppressive side of the establishment as represented by the official Catholic church. The novel abounds in allusions to the punitive and castratory side of the Catholic faith. To give some examples: the priest refuses to say a mass for Tiyo Anding's soul because he committed suicide (174); God is described as 'our long suffering father' (159), a dull man who disapproves of human contact and dancing, since this might arouse 'the body's wayward desires' (192), who knows nothing about feasts and cakes, since he only eats 'rice gruel with fish sauce everyday' (159), and who probably wonders how on earth Nenita, 'the wrong angel in the wrong party ... could inflict a mother so' (68).

On the other hand, the volcano encapsulates the strength and potential of all of their non-conforming dreams and wishes: ‘the volcano’s smoke is all [their] breaths collected, [their] wish to get to heaven’ (45).¹⁴ When Remedios Street becomes the abode of confrontation, resentment and insulting gossip (such as Tiya Miling’s on Tiya Viring’s relationship with Juanito Gwupito, the triangle VV-Basilio Profundo-the American, Boy Hapon’s suspicious isolation, and Manolito Ching’s sudden departure), and it is impossible ‘to see through so much spleen in the air’ (166), the volcano erupts, destroying everything around it, and bringing about the ‘purging’ they need (167), like the Pentecostal fire that the church is unable to start. After this purging fire comes the rain, first dark, as if the sky were flushing itself, and then clean and life-giving. It seems that everything is, again, as it used to be. ‘[T]he guardians of the sky were back in their appointed places. The cross gleamed as if brand-new and the volcano stood calm and still’ (261), but Remedios Street would never be the same. How could it be? Those who long to love and eat, those who have ‘understood balance, the almost equal size of those organs shaped like a fist’ (142), eventually become a heart, and leave the community for good: Tiya Viring and Juanito Gwupito, VV and Ralph, Tiyo Anding, even Manolito Ching (he could not stand his pretentious parents!), and Nenita, of course, the most eager and generous heart of them all. The past is never past, it is always alive, and leaves perennial marks on the present and future. Some people are strong enough to face up to their past so as to learn its lessons, improve their present, and pave the way for a better future. Some others simply refuse to do it, or lack the resources to even try. After all, life is what we want to make of it, or so Nenita tries to teach her readers.

Judging from all the things so far said, it is clear that *Banana Heart Summer* is a most powerful and innovative work. Among other things, the telling and retelling of her childhood story allows forty-year-old Nenita to make sense of her life, to overcome her trauma, and to exorcise her evil memories and reconcile herself with her mother: ‘Told again, a tale in fact gains conviction, the belief that it is worth telling and that the telling is worth our while’ (114). The act of writing, *Banana Heart Summer* seems to claim, makes up a shelter, and unearths what would otherwise remain hidden, crossed out, and dismembered. Writing helps to transcend imperfect reality and make up for, even sublimate, unbearable pain and frustration. This conviction clearly encapsulates Merlinda Bobis’s concept of writing and literature as expressed on the home page of her website:

Writing visits like grace. Its greatest gift is the comfort if not the joy of transformation. In an inspired moment, we almost believe that anguish can be made bearable and injustice can be overturned, because they can be named. And if we’re lucky, joy can even be multiplied a hundredfold, so we may have reserves in the cupboard for the lean times. (online)

Writing works towards reparation, while also disclosing fissures and ruptures in what might otherwise seem an unconvincing consoling narrative. Life, like

human relationships and feelings, is by no means simple. Maybe that is the reason why Bobis suggests we need magic, the magic of literature, so that we can better understand the real and cope with our everyday anxieties, 'for what use is magic if it's not grounded in reality, if it has no flesh and blood palate that you can manipulate into hope?' (168).

As an accomplished cook, Nenita strives to make food taste better. As a nuanced poet, she feels the compulsive need to turn what would otherwise be a sordid story into one of the most beautiful tales ever written. She feels the need to forgive, to make better, and to improve the world around her. Just as water is not enough to satisfy our appetite, a superficial and monolithic account of a life story cannot possibly bring to the surface the overwhelming complexity of an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour, that combine to create a fragile and yet resilient human being. When Nenita tries to explain the human hunger for complexity and improvement, this is all she can conclude:

But perhaps we are born compromised to hunger, in all its variations, and just water or just rice or fish will never assuage it... So we seek for more and we cook, we spice and sweeten up, we make better, but who can blame us? (257)

Who could blame Nenita, and indeed Bobis, for concocting such fabulous meals and stories, for inserting so many ingredients and elements in her productions? It is clear that the novel's tripartite division (*The heart of the matter/ The spleen of the matter/Becoming a Heart*), together with the different symbols that it uses, food being the most important, contribute to giving it a most original and coherent structure, while also clarifying things and drawing the reader's attention towards some of the novel's most outstanding messages: namely, the inexorable need to lead an emotionally balanced life, and the urgent need for love, forgiveness and dialogue between different individuals, whatever their kinship, race, class, or gender. Bobis has once again contributed to enriching Australia's cultural panorama. By accommodating other traditions and symbolic structures, such as those provided by Bobis, mainstream Australian literature is, no doubt, becoming rather more multicultural and complex, and hence appealing, than it used to be in the past.

NOTES

- ¹ The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the MEC/FEDER, Proyecto HUM2007-61035/ FILO.
- ² In their seminal essays on the role of food, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Claude Fischler demonstrated that the domain of food includes appetite, desire, and pleasure, but also serves as a reference point for society's structure and cosmovision. See Fischler 1988 and Lévi-Strauss 1964.
- ³ From this perspective, *Banana Heart Summer* could be related to other well-known works, such as Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* and Karen Blixen's *Babette's Feast*, which respectively inspired the internationally acclaimed films

bearing the same titles. As regards the way in which food becomes a vehicle of social healing in Bobis's novel, two novels that could also be said to belong in this strand of food literature are Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Michael Cunningham's *Home at the End of the World*.

- ⁴ As Merlinda Bobis states, 'Filipina domestic helpers work probably in all seven continents now. There are approximately eight million Filipino overseas workers around the world. They left their country and their families in order to survive, because the government could not take care of its own people. In 2005 their remittance to the Philippines amounted to 10.7 million US dollars. Not for nothing does the Philippine government label these Filipino contract workers as 'new heroes' (2006 16).
- ⁵ In a capitalist consumer society, the 'ethnic/other' is systematically appropriated in order to meet the needs and wishes of mainstream white culture. To put it in gastronomic terms, the 'ethnic' is very often used as a kind of seasoning that adds flavour and improves the dull dish that is dominant white culture. For more information on this concept, see hooks 1992, Figueira 1994, and Root 1996.
- ⁶ As is well known, over a period of forty years, Freud identified most of the defence mechanisms that we speak of today and identified five of their important properties: 1) defences are a major means of managing instinct and affect; 2) they are unconscious; 3) they are discrete (from one another); 4) although often the hallmarks of major psychiatric syndromes, defences are dynamic and reversible; and 5) they can be adaptive as well as pathological. By 1915, Freud had, if only in passing, identified almost all the mechanisms of defence that Anna Freud was to catalogue twenty years later in her seminal work, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, which she gave her father as his 80th birthday present.
- ⁷ Large reviews of theories of defence mechanisms are available from Paulhus, Fridhandler and Hayes (1977), and Cramer (1991), to mention but two of the most well-known. The *Journal of Personality* (1998) also published an exhaustive monographic issue on defence mechanisms.
- ⁸ The symbolism of number seven should not be overlooked. As is well known, in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, seven is the infinite number par excellence. Not in vain did Jesus Christ tell his disciples to forgive 'seventy times seven' (Matthew 4, 21–23), meaning always. It must also be noted that seven is the number of the Creation, that is, of completion and perfection. The irony in the novel is therefore obvious: unlike God, who out of infinite love created the world in six days and took a rest on the seventh, when he blessed all creatures and was satisfied that everything had been done, and was good (Genesis 2, 2–3), Nenita's mother's hatred and resentment, which have been on the increase with each pregnancy, reach their climax with her seventh child, who is consequently born dead because she does not belong there (*BHS* 252). Love generates and creates life, whereas hatred can only bring about death and unhappiness.
- ⁹ According to Vaillant (1992 247), altruism is the 'vicarious but constructive and instinctually gratifying service to others'. It can include constructive reaction formation, empathy, philanthropy, and well-repaid service to others. Altruism is to be distinguished from projection in that it responds to needs of others that are real and not projected, and from reaction formation in that the person does for others as s/he pleases, and is partly gratified by so doing.
- ¹⁰ For more information on the subject, see Hicks (1997), Yoshimi (2001) and Tanaka (2002).

- ¹¹ Interestingly enough, Nenita and her siblings will produce a similar altar, using a shoebox, their mother's wedding dress, their father's best handkerchief and candles to show their affection for their dead newborn sister, whom they decide to call Aqualita, perhaps in a desperate attempt to restore her back to eternal life as a blessed offering to the redemptive rain.
- ¹² However, it must be noted that, despite Nenita's efforts to play down this unfair hiding, this will inexorably come back to her mind when she later sees her mother beating her brother Junior in a similar way. All of a sudden, her narration becomes one childish and never-ending sentence.
- He had found his pork and was eating again, slumped on his chest but one hand still firmly around the knuckle, and he couldn't get up and the kicks wouldn't stop like his eating and I thought my lungs would burst because I was suddenly falling from the sky and the air was rushing past me, I couldn't catch it just as no one could catch me, no one, so my back would break and no one could make it better again so I found myself striding up to her and pushing, just pushing her to the wall and she was looking at me really looking now and I could see the shock in her eyes but I couldn't stop screaming I couldn't stop — (243).
- That terrible event was not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only later on, in its belated possession and haunting of Nenita. It is the very unassimilated nature of trauma, the way it was not fully known in the first place, that returns to haunt the survivor afterwards.
- ¹³ *Introjection* is a defence mechanism that is defined by Vaillant as 'the internalisation of characteristics of the object [=a loved object] with the goal of establishing closeness to and constant presence of the object' (1992 240).
- ¹⁴ When discussing the symbolism of the volcano, one should not ignore the subversive potential that it has in some of Bobis's previous works, the *Cantata of the Warrior Woman* being the most outstanding, since these interpretations undoubtedly add further layers of meaning to the novel under discussion. For more information on this, see Herrero 2007.

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