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## 'A language we all speak': Food in Marion Halligan's writing

### **Abstract**

Martha thinks there's nothing like a good Brie, tasting of grass or clay or whatever, and as much wine as you want in your own garden in spring with interesting conversation, to make you feel smug about the pleasures of existence. She thinks smug but she means happy; smug may placate through irony, happy could tempt fate. (Halligan 1989, 28)

DOROTHY JONES

## ‘A Language We All Speak’: Food in Marion Halligan’s Writing

Martha thinks there’s nothing like a good Brie, tasting of grass or clay or whatever, and as much wine as you want in your own garden in spring with interesting conversation, to make you feel smug about the pleasures of existence. She thinks smug but she means happy; smug may placate through irony, happy could tempt fate. (Halligan 1989, 28)

Food can be grown in gardens, which may also offer a pleasant setting to eat in, and Marion Halligan frequently writes about both together. It is usually the domestic, suburban garden — a relatively confined space given over to flowers and trees — that appears in her fiction, sometimes symbolising life in the household it surrounds. Halligan also draws on a wealth of Western literary and pictorial tradition, loaded with biblical associations, portraying the *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden, as an idyllic place all too easily corrupted. Food is another important theme in Halligan’s writing, ‘a language we all speak’ because everyone consumes it, and she has devoted two personal memoirs to the subject, *Eat My Words* (1990) and *The Taste of Memory* (2004). Although she describes the latter as ‘another set of stories of my life in food, and travel, and especially gardens, these nourishing spaces that we like to surround ourselves with’ (2004 10), it is also an elegiac tribute to her husband, Graham, and celebrates their thirty-five year marriage. There are close connections between this memoir and Halligan’s two preceding novels, *The Fog Garden* (2001) and *The Point* (2003). Halligan began writing *The Point* when her husband fell ill, ‘but another book [*The Fog Garden*] sprang out of the intense emotions prompted by his death’ (Wyndham 13). Bereavement is a central issue in these novels as well as in *The Taste of Memory* and all three books explore the relationship between food and gardens. While gardens are “nourishing spaces”, they can also be sites of loss, subject to extremes of weather and depredation by birds, insects and animals. In this they can echo human and personal experiences of loss, yet, although growth is subject to decay, they also offer the prospect of renewal through new growth.

The Old Testament locates human origins in a garden, which simultaneously represents paradise and its loss through eating the Forbidden Fruit. In Christian tradition, enclosed gardens are also double-sided images invoking both chastity and sexual wantonness. Because Eve’s seductiveness was held responsible for

humankind's exile from Eden, paradise gardens could be the abode of secular love where a man and woman take their secret pleasure, or where worshippers of Venus indulge as a group in refined debauchery (Hughes 51). Yet the walled garden can also symbolise the Virgin Mary, that second Eve who helped repair the transgression of the first (Stewart 38). So, in the paradise gardens of medieval and renaissance art and literature, food can signify Holy Communion or, in a secular context, the indulgence of profane appetites. Gardens producing food of their own accord have long symbolised a perfect existence, as in the Golden Age of Classical mythology, or the biblical Garden of Eden, so losing such perfection means that hunger constantly threatens and cultivating food now requires hard work. Halligan's ideal garden of the mind is primarily food-producing - full of fruit trees and vegetables.

In deep fertile beds edged with box grow the vegetables of the season, salads, tomatoes, aubergines, peppers the brassicas, peas, broad beans to pick while still babies. How they flourish, for my mind is a good gardener. (2004 169)

She assures us, however, that even if her imagined garden resembles Eden,

... it is essentially a post-lapsarian garden, a garden made full in the knowledge of good and evil, that values abundance because it has known famine, whose walls acknowledge the fragility of its microclimate, whose tilth has learned that food depends on work. (2004 169)

While Halligan's gardens are often, like the medieval *hortus conclusus*, defined by an encompassing fence or wall, appearing on first sight to be safe places where hardship and evil are banished, she keeps reminding us that safety can never be relied on. Evil can spring up within the garden's confines and walls that provide shelter from outside peril can just as easily imprison those inside.

Garden images pervade *The Point* and *The Fog Garden*, with the theme of paradise lost central to both: the former focuses upon society, with its exercise and abuse of power, whereas the latter concentrates upon personal loss and disruption within the immediate family. The Point is both an imagined promontory projecting into Lake Burley Griffin and an equally imaginary restaurant located there, strategically positioned in relation to some of the nation's main sites of power, privilege and culture.

If you stand outside the restaurant and look to the right, you will see the National Library. To the left is the High Court and the National Gallery. Grandiose buildings all. Directly above the Point, on a small hill, is the Parliament House. It is lit like a performance on a stage. (2)

In this novel, set in Canberra, the garden city — 'a place where fences are illegal' (2003 124) — restaurant and garden are conflated. The Point is elegantly beautiful, highly exclusive and very expensive with 'amazing floral arrangements' in various corners of the room. Flora, the chef and restaurateur, is regularly addressed by one patron as 'ma fleur, ma belle fleurissante ... florissima' (2003

38) and in earlier days when she worked in publishing, she helped bring out a book on gardens. She also commissions a willow sculpture — ‘living, leafing wands of willow’ (2003 99) — to be planted and established outside the building. Although outsiders may consider it a paradise, the restaurant is thoroughly secular. Lit up at night, it is a microcosm of Parliament House on the hill behind, with a clientele comprising society’s leaders — politicians, wealthy business and professional people, and the wheeler-dealers so essential to their activities. ‘The restaurant is a mirror. It is a glass darkly. It is an octagon. From outside it looks like a lantern. Which lights itself, but how far beyond its own space does it illuminate?’ (2003 1). Jerome, a former Franciscan monk who now heads a select but very successful computer consultancy and who narrates part of the novel, sees *The Point* as an image of the World he left the monastery to embrace: a place that hangs over a narrow promontory of land like a lantern against the dark sky and the dark lake, and promises. How it promises’ (2003 47).

The restaurant also signifies exclusion. ‘Outside are the dispossessed. The dispossessed see themselves, and the others, the insiders. The others see only themselves’ (2003 2). This insider/outsider theme is explored principally through two pairs of characters. Jerome and Flora, who become lovers in the course of the book, are contrasted with two homeless people, the middle-aged ex-lawyer Clovis and a young girl, Gwyneth, who form a precarious alliance, haunting the area round the restaurant because of the still-edible food they find among its garbage and because the warm air vents outside the library and art gallery offer comfort on cold Canberra nights. Both are cut off from their families; Gwyneth because of a violent stepfather and uncaring mother; Clovis through the social scandal he caused by embezzling his trust fund — ‘you understand, don’t you Dad, it’s better if they don’t see you, if we all don’t really’ (2003 62). Living on the small stipend assigned by his family, Clovis chooses homelessness, but Gwyneth, who is dependent on methadone, has no choice.

Eventually the two couples eat together in the restaurant, a circumstance that comes about through Flora’s invitation to thank Clovis for rescuing Jerome from a near drowning in the lake by a group of teenage thugs who earlier tried to batter down the newly planted willow sculpture. The meal is a socially awkward, mildly comic episode. While the novel emphasises the artistry and exquisiteness of Flora’s cuisine, from a reader’s perspective her meals are not very inviting, though incompatibility between food and language is partly responsible for this. As Flora acknowledges, ‘My food is a work of art. But I am failing to put it into words’ (2003 104). Halligan deliberately sets out, however, to make her food seem obsessive and unappealing:

The food she cooks is amazing, rare, erudite, serious. Not much fun. Her picnic is almost bizarrely austere; parmesan cheese, bread, olive oil and pears. All perfect of course. With superb wine, on and in and with handsome plates, glasses, napkins.

(2003 97)

Throughout the novel, food, particularly that served in the restaurant, is associated with desire. Flora promises, 'I shall make a meal that will be their heart's desire' (2003 195). There is, however, a fine line between desire and greed. When he looks at The Point, Clovis sees 'The promise. The rituals. The exquisiteness of desire', but then reflects, 'Or else just something that people with quite a lot of money can afford to do' (2003 129). Emily Dickinson explores the paradox of the outsider who loses all appetite when going inside to dine:

I had been hungry, all the Years —  
My Noon had Come — to dine —  
I trembling drew the Table near —  
And touched the Curious Wine —

The unaccustomed plenty hurts and nauseates her.

Nor was I hungry — so I found  
That Hunger — was a way  
Of Persons outside Windows —  
The Entering — takes away — (238)

This is similar to Gwyneth's experience. Despite enjoying the food, she feels intimidated and thoroughly ill at ease, eventually vomiting up her meal. When Clovis asks how it feels to be on the inside looking out, she responds: 'Well, it's not my inside, is it. This is just a visit. Pretend. It's not me' (2003 197). Next day she tells Clovis that the restaurant leftovers rescued from the garbage taste better than the food eaten inside. He insists she is mistaken, but acknowledges a meal's enjoyment depends on the context in which it is eaten: 'Food isn't just its taste, he says. It's who you eat it with, and where. It's in the Bible. Better a dinner of herbs where love is ...' (2003 206).

By the novel's end, the two outsiders' fortunes have been restored to some extent, whereas Flora's and Jerome's are shattered. In the end Jerome recognises they were both afflicted by hubris, 'I suppose we overweened. Is there such a verb? Flora and I, and our desires to do and to know. But at what point does ambition become hubris?' (2003 334). Flora seeks to go beyond nature in a search for the absolute:

That's where her culinary art, her endeavour, took her. It's a matter of simplifying to the point of perfection. And simplifying by doing, over and over again, until that point is reached. (2003 183)

Late at night in the restaurant, Flora plans a dinner for the Slow Food Society, deciding one dish will contain roasted Bogong moths which Aboriginal people in the area feasted on for centuries. The flat river stone she chooses as a base for cooking the ground-up moths explodes when heated on the gas burner, and the subsequent fire consumes both Flora and her restaurant, while almost killing Gwyneth as she sleeps huddled against the wall outside. The past can never be revisited, and Flora's attempt to reach back to an almost impossible origin — a

kind of prelapsarian innocence — ends in destruction. Jerome's ambition is to achieve, through his computer skills, 'a complete program for all knowledge' (2003 183), but in the end his business is ruined by treachery. A programmer in his employ has loaded massive amounts of child pornography into the system, triggering a police investigation.

My innocence was finally established, maybe not entirely believed but at least agreed to. But my business was gone. A service such as mine which depends on trust cannot survive months in court. (2003 330)

Flora's death, even more than social disgrace and the loss of his business, means Jerome is now painfully conscious of living in a fallen world:

The desire to know: the last great Faustian temptation. Age old, age old. The oldest. Eve in the garden succumbed to it. The fruit the serpent offered her was the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. An apple, we call it. It did not occur to me at the time that the means of my temptation was called an Apple too, the very name, for god's sake, the device which offers us knowledge. Maybe the temptation is the belief that it can be done. (2003 258)

Now he must acknowledge his own expulsion from the garden (*TP*, 259).

Humanity's lost innocence is emphasised through constant reference to abused, corrupt and corrupted children. A regular patron of the restaurant, whose firm organises questionable Asian tours for Australian paedophiles, directs the sabotage of Jerome's business as payback for his refusal to accept him as a client. A sinister group of youths — all from privileged backgrounds — keeps reappearing throughout the narrative, guilty of both murder and attempted murder, as well as gang rape. 'They're very okay. They're fucking *nice* kids. All the right gear, you know, the Nikes, the Calvin Kleins, all the stuff with proper names you have to have. They go to college' (2003 146). Even when the boys are taken into custody, one of their fathers, a lawyer, succeeds in having the charges dismissed. When Clovis asks who is to blame here, Gwyneth replies: 'Maybe it is the way they are. Maybe they have cruel hearts' (2003 147). Dead children also abound in *The Point*. Flora's driven, obsessive personality and her inability to trust in lasting relationships result from having lost a baby boy to cot death. Jerome's ex-wife aborted their child and Gwyneth, raped by her stepfather, has also been forced to terminate a pregnancy. Oscar, son to Laurel, the restaurant manager, dies of a heroin overdose on his twenty-first birthday. When Jerome tries to persuade Flora they should have a child, she responds: 'Children die when they are small and beautiful and you love them. Or they grow up and turn into monsters ... Or they get killed in car accidents. Or they take drugs and die of heroin overdoses. Or run away from home and live on the streets' (2003 243).

According to Judaeo-Christian tradition, Adam and Eve's sin both banished innocence and introduced death into the world — that brutal reality all human beings must come to terms with. The restaurant in *The Point*, although a monument to art, because of its cuisine and beautiful architecture, is ultimately a sterile

place, though sterility and destruction are offset to some extent by Gwyneth's and Clovis's clumsy attempts to create a willow sculpture of their own and by Clovis's decision at the end of the novel that he will study to become a professional willow sculptor. As Halligan points out in *The Taste of Memory*, gardens in a fallen world may still be havens of a kind, but they have ceased to be truly safe. In both this book and *The Fog Garden* they are equated not with the social sphere of privilege and power like the restaurant in *The Point*, but with lives of individual families. The model here becomes Halligan's own suburban Canberra garden:

The lawn is small, most of the garden is planted with shrubs and perennials and odd flowers. I can sit on this seat and imagine nooks and corners and wandering paths. It isn't a formal garden, no box hedges — I read they were originally meant for spreading washing on to dry. No mazes or labyrinths either, to remind of the circuitous courses of sinful man. This is the garden as paradise, suburban incarnation. (2004 157)

Throughout her memoir, the garden, begun when she and Graham first moved into their house, serves as an image of their marriage. 'We did some spectacular things, a less optimistic person than me might say, made some spectacular mistakes ...' (2004 161). Evil lurks even here, however.

A paradise-garden, a Garden of Eden ... in fact, mostly our gardens are fallen gardens, there is a serpent in them. Mine was illness, the cancer that destroyed the image of perfect safety. I did think that Graham and I would go on for much longer, nurturing our garden, making meals, opening bottles of wine, cossetting the house. We knew that you are never safe, really, finally, but thought it would be all right for a while.

(2004 164)

Bereavement, widowhood and shattered family life are central to *The Fog Garden* whose principal character, Clare, is, like her author, a novelist. Halligan comments on the resemblance:

Clare isn't me. She's like me. Some of her experiences, adventures, terrors, have been mine. Some haven't. We have the same profession. Both of us have had to come to terms with being widowed, and sometimes we have made similar choices. Not always.

(2001 9)

Although in the novel, she plays with the resemblance between herself and Clare, even attributing to Clare's authorship fiction she has herself created, Halligan publicly disavows too close a connection, especially since Clare's immediate response to bereavement is a strong surge of erotic yearning, resulting in an intense, though short-lived adulterous liaison.<sup>1</sup> Much of *The Fog Garden* explores how profound grief interconnects with powerful sexual desire, and throughout their affair both Clare and her lover reflect on their respective marriages. The initial image for grief in the novel — presented ambiguously so it seems to apply both to Clare and to Halligan herself — is of a great cathedral:

My cathedral is a truly Gothic edifice, in that it is going to be a long time in the building. I am still constructing it. Not all the parts match, but they never do, that is part of a cathedral's richness. (2001 8)

Gradually, however, gardens also come to be associated first with bereavement, then with memory and joy.

After their affair has ended, Clare and her lover lunch together on the deck of a Canberra restaurant set in a garden containing a fog sculpture and watch ‘its white vapour eddy and billow and rise in rags of mist among the reeds and through the casuarinas’. Although beautiful, the mist is also an image of transience and grief as its droplets settle on Clare’s hair, ‘not spangling it because her head isn’t in the sunlight, it seems to be laying a grayish veil over it’ (2001 79). There is a further association between gardens and grief when Clare and her friend Polly puzzle over the line ‘Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar’ to discover later that it comes from an Edwardian ballad by Lawrence Hope. The Shalimar is a Mughal garden in Kashmir with ‘Lots of fountains that fling drops of water in the air, so you walk around in a rainbow mist’ (2001 161) and the lyric expresses intense longing for a lost love. As the two women discuss the poem, pondering its narrative possibilities, one points out that the word paradise comes from the Greek *paradeisos* meaning ‘garden’:

Really? So that’s what you and I are doing, grubbing about in our back yards; we’re making paradises. I did know that Muslims imagine paradise, as in the afterlife, as a garden. And that’s what these Mughal gardens are about, creating it on earth. A sort of preview of the next life’s attractions. (2001 163)

In a situation that links this novel to *The Point*, Clare knows she may have to face another bereavement — the possible death of a child whose ‘textbook heart should have failed at birth’ (2001 123). Her now adult daughter undergoes yet one more in a series of long and dangerous operations which, against all expectations, she survives. The doctor comments, ‘Well, you nearly went away and left us, but at the last minute you changed your mind and came back’ (2001 123). This recovery is set against, and to some extent softens, the harsh reality of her husband Geoffrey’s death, though Clare knows the threat of mortality will continue to hover over her family.

As the novel progresses, gardens and communally eaten food, frequently in combination, become positive images to offset the bitter pain of grief and loss. Even during her husband’s illness, Clare plans and tends her garden, deciding to put in a quince tree, ‘so she can make quince paste, Cotignac, carnelian-coloured’ (2001 176), and buys a number of roses to plant, including one called Love Potion.

Love Potion flowered and she picked single blooms and put them in a tiny glass vase beside Geoffrey’s bed. Now she puts them beside a picture of him. Of both of them, eating what looks disturbingly like ice-cream sundaes in a nightclub in Katoomba. (2001 179)

As an assertion about the future, she consults with Geoffrey during his illness about what they should plant.

She told herself she was getting the garden in order for Geoffrey to enjoy, and so she was, but she was also bending it to her will. Geoffrey's life and health were also the subject of her fierce willing, but she knew she would lose this battle. With the garden she might win. (2001 215)

Just as the garden is embedded in memories of Clare's shared life with her husband, so too is food. One immediate consequence of his death is a loss of appetite which leaves her considerably slimmer. Food no longer tempts as it once did because the shared meals of marriage are no longer part of her life: 'Meals were rituals, sometimes simple, sometimes complicated, but always having a meaning. They were of being married, and now she isn't any more' (2001 195).

Nevertheless, food still remains important and the garden becomes the site of Geoffrey's wake where great quantities of wine are consumed — 'they had to send a nursing mother out for more, and then later still for pizzas to feed people, late in the evening. The nursing mother being the one sober enough to drive' (2001 223). Eating together becomes an act of communion where family and friends celebrate Geoffrey's life in his house and garden and the nursing mother serves as an image of hope and renewal. Although such images console, they can only partially assuage a grief which must be continually endured.

Characters in *The Point* and *The Fog Garden* yearn for safety, a longing most readers share. Illusions of safety frequently cluster around food, a source of comfort both in fiction and in real life, and, in *The Taste of Memory*, Halligan indicates how even some of the books written about it can create magical spaces, not unlike a paradise garden, where error and misfortune are temporarily excluded:

Of course the nice thing about food books is they don't need fear, or threat, the worst that may happen is a soufflé falling, and if you read my words carefully I will save you from this fate. So maybe we like this kind of reading simply because it is never not safe, never offers even a distant frisson of terror. The risotto is always suitably runny and creamy and soft, all at once, the soup is never too salty, the beef is always tender, the Death by Chocolate will never fatten us or clog our arteries, we only flirt with the notion that it will kill us. (2004 260)

Although Halligan revels in the power of language to create and recreate the material world, of which food and gardens form part, she continually reminds her readers that we live in a fallen world where every garden, no matter how fair and flourishing, contains its serpent. No one is immune to temptation and she understands how most people relish a taste of the forbidden fruit. Safety, whether represented by that refined enclave of power and money, the elegant, expensive restaurant in *The Point*, or a loving, domestic space, as in *The Fog Garden*, is constantly undermined through human folly and evil, and ultimately by the inevitable presence of death. Nevertheless, she would argue, it is possible to receive consolation from material pleasures whilst recognising their transience and their limitations. People can still rejoice in the pleasures of food, particularly its power to unite them with those they love. Most of her writing about food, whether in fiction or memoir, endorses the biblical passage Clovis quotes from in



Marion Halligan's kitchen

*The Point*: 'Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith' (Proverbs 15.17).

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Wyndham, 'Cravings of a Hungry Heart', p. 13 and Marion Halligan, 'Sex and the Singular Woman', pp. 8–9.

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## *Apple Shortcake*

*This was my mother's recipe and I have called it Apple Shortcake because apples are relatively easy to come by in so many parts of the world. Other kinds of fruit can, however, be used as filling. My preference is for gooseberries. These grew abundantly in our south island New Zealand garden, along with red, black and white currants, all of which need a fairly cold climate. One of my summer childhood memories is cleaning currants and topping and tailing gooseberries for the annual jam making. Gooseberries are lovely for eating when ripe, but for cooking they must be picked while still green. They are a fruit I really miss now that I live in the warmth of coastal New South Wales.*

### *INGREDIENTS*

*4 ozs butter*

*4 ozs sugar*

*1 egg*

*6 – 8 ozs self raising flour*

*1 large cooking apple*

### *METHOD*

- 1. Cream butter and sugar.*
- 2. Add beaten egg and mix well.*
- 3. Add flour. (I usually start by adding 6 ozs and then add more as needed to form a soft paste.) The pastry is very soft and can be placed in the fridge for an hour to make it easier to handle.*
- 4. Roll out half the pastry on a piece of baking paper placed on an oven tray and add a layer of sliced apple.*
- 5. Roll out remaining pastry into a piece big enough to cover the fruit layer, pinching together the edges of top and bottom layers of pastry to enclose the filling.*
- 6. Bake in a moderate oven (180°C) for 40 mins or until pastry is browned. I don't usually sugar the fruit filling because I find the pastry itself sweetens the dish sufficiently.*