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Cruel Optimism and Obsessive Appetites in Leïla Slimani's Novels

L'optimisme cruel et les appétits obsessionels dans les romans de Leïla Slimani

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Abstract: This article explores obsessive appetites in Leïla Slimani's *Chanson Douce* [Sweet Song], translated into English in the UK with the title *Lullaby* and in the US as *The Perfect Nanny*, and *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* [In the Ogre's Garden], translated as *Adèle*. I draw on Lauren Berlant's ideas on the connections between obsessive eating and obsessive sexuality in *Cruel Optimism*, highlighting how in Slimani's work, eating disorders and sexual compulsions constitute repeated enactments of failed attachments and are triggered by a form of systemic trauma (which Berlant calls 'crisis ordinariness') rooted in sociocultural alienation. The desperate quest for intimacy, in *Chanson douce*, and for anti-intimacy, in *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, leads to self-destruction, figured in self-starvation, in damaging sexual relations, and ultimately in murder. The reader, I argue, gets caught up in the destructive repetitions and in the desire to move beyond them to some sort of satisfying ending, which in these texts entails the brutal silencing of female desires and agency (written into the narratives from the very beginning). Reading here is thus shown to be bound up in the violence of cruel optimism and its obsessive appetites.
Keywords: trauma; addiction; appetites; crisis ordinariness; violence.

Résumé: Cet article étudie les appétits obsessionnels dans deux romans de Leïla Slimani, Chanson douce et Dans le Jardin de l'ogre. Je m'inspire des idées de Lauren Berlant sur les relations entre l'alimentation obsessionnelle et la sexualité obsessionnelle dans Cruel Optimism, soulignant comment dans l'œuvre de Slimani, les troubles du comportement alimentaire et les compulsions sexuelles constituent des reconstitutions des attachements ratés et sont déclenchés par une forme du traumatisme systémique ('crisis ordinariness' (la crise de banalité) selon Berlant) qui trouve ses racines dans une aliénation socio-culturelle. La quête désespérée de l'intimité (dans Chanson douce) et de l'anti-intimité (dans Dans le jardin de l'ogre) mène à l'autodestruction, figurée par le refus de manger, par les relations sexuelles nuisibles et finalement par le meurtre. Les lecteurs/trices sont entraîné/es dans les répétitions destructrices et dans le désir de les dépasser pour arriver à une fin satisfaisante, qui dans ces textes fait brutalement passer sous silence les désirs et l'autonomie féminins. La lecture ici est impliquée dans la violence de l'optimisme cruel et dans ses appétits obsessionnels.
Mots clés: le trauma; l'addiction; les appétits; la crise de banalité; la violence.

According to Lauren Berlant, cruel optimism ("when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing", 2011: 1) "opens out to obsessive appetites" (2011: 25). This article explores obsessive appetites in two novels by the half-French, half-Moroccan writer Leïla Slimani, *Chanson Douce* [Sweet Song], translated into English in the UK with the title *Lullaby* and in the US as *The Perfect Nanny*, and *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* [In the Ogre's Garden], translated as *Adèle*. In this article I analyse "the kinds of embodied problems that may be solved or managed through participation in –or refraining from participation in– thinking, eating or sex under [...] conditions of attrition" (that is, in circumstances where the subject is traumatised or exhausted by a difficult life) (Duschinsky, Reisz & Messina, 2019: 124-5), through Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. The connection between eating food and having sex drawn by Berlant underpins my discussion of Slimani's first novel, *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, which portrays a lonely wife and mother addicted to anonymous sexual encounters; the obsessive appetite in this text is first and foremost related to an overwhelming addiction to sex. Also apparent in this novel, however, is an eating disorder, which seems inextricably bound up in the sexual compulsion. Before analysing this novel, I look first at Slimani's second novel, the best-selling *Chanson douce*, which offers a portrayal, and a critique, of what we label as disordered eating under "conditions of attrition", which include living in poverty and isolation in a 21st century Paris shadowed by terror threats. I argue that both novels narrate obsessive appetites anchored in residual everyday trauma and perpetuated by cruel optimism and that the reader too ends up caught up in these structures of violence and destruction.

I will begin briefly by explaining Berlant's account of obsessive appetites in the chapter of *Cruel Optimism* devoted to Mary Gaitskill's 1991 novel, *Two Girls: Fat and Thin*. Berlant describes how the two eponymous girls seek relief from the after-effects of various traumatic experiences in childhood through ritualised over-consumption of food and sexual relationships that combine "self-abuse and pleasure" (2011: 133), the former constituting a condition of possibility for the latter, as is shown clearly in Slimani's first novel, in Adèle's compulsive sexual addiction and equally compelling food rejection. Berlant writes:

> We witness them growing up paralyzed by fear and at the same time launching into madnesses of thinking, reading, eating, masturbating, attaching, and fucking. A traumatic frenzy of interiority and impersonality constitutes a scene of being and embodiment that they both control and control not a whit. If she wants a good life, what's a girl, or two girls, to do? (2011: 128).

The paralysis of terror is shown to be induced at least by childhood (sexual) trauma, which in part triggers their compulsive bodily responses; the list of "madnesses" links reading and thinking to eating, to sex (both alone and with others) and to forming attachments (to friends, lovers, or other interpersonal connections, but also to fantasies of a "good life"). For Berlant, eating, thinking and having sex are survival mechanisms for the girls as they struggle to "organise life to lessen the impact" (Gaitskill, 1991: 112) of their difficulties in coping with life. Berlant proposes that "eating is a technique for pulling the world in and pushing it away" (in other words, for engaging with one's surroundings and simultaneously rejecting them), "neither an act of conscious agency nor a manifestation of unconscious symptoms" (2011: 138); in other words, it cannot be defined entirely either as an intentional coping mechanism or an involuntary psychic response but implies a mixture of the two[1]. The two girls in Gaitskill's novel are both obsessed with eating, one (Dorothy) bingeing on junk food, the other, Justine, eating very little, but masturbating "alone under the covers" whilst imagining "fat, ugly people walking around eating and staring" at her (Gaitskill: 93, cited in Berlant: 136). Justine's self-repulsion is engendered through her covert (literally under cover) masturbation but is figured through the image of "fat" others, staring at her body publicly and eating (food she denies herself) in a shopping mall. Food and sex may be two distinct strategies identified by Berlant, but they are also bound up together here, as Justine –imagining herself judged for her sexual activity– projects her shame onto people whom she imagines over-eat, in contrast to her own refusal of food. This is also, as I will show, true of Adèle in Slimani's first novel, who refuses food and binges on sexual encounters. The disordered sexual activity and eating are expressions of disordered relations with other subjects and other bodies, enactments of pain, of shame and of self-denial; they point to the subject's struggle to constitute and maintain itself in and through a backdrop of systemic trauma (which Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness" (2011: 11). The latter defines a trauma that is not a singular breach in an otherwise relatively smooth existence, but a perpetual state of crisis for subjects struggling just to keep going; the characters in Slimani's novels

[1] Lucas Crawford claims that "Berlant's equation presumes a sequence: trauma makes one eat more; eating more is what 'causes' fatness; fatness is therefore a manifestation of that trauma" (Crawford, 2017: 452), but this is not entirely correct: Berlant does not attribute "eating more" exclusively to "trauma" or relate disordered eating exclusively to "fatness". Crawford is right, though, that Berlant does persistently associate trauma and fat, in what he perceives to be "cruel figuring".

exemplify this through their disordered practices of sex and of eating. In this article, I explore how obsessive appetites respond to this crisis ordinariness in my discussion of eating and cruel optimism in *Chanson douce*, before moving on to the portrayal of sex addiction and food refusal in *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*.

1. *Disordered Eating in* Chanson Douce

Chanson douce, published in 2016, won the Prix Goncourt that same year, as well as topping the French best seller lists; it has been translated into multiple languages and adapted into a play and a film. My discussion focuses on its representation of disordered eating, beginning with Louise, the seemingly ideal nanny who (we learn at the very beginning of the novel) has murdered her young charges before attempting to kill herself. Food plays a key role in this novel, firstly in establishing the social stratification of power (the nanny prepares food not only for the children, but also for her employers' dinner parties) and secondly in highlighting the deterioration of Louise's mental health through the descriptions of her disordered eating. The latter highlights one example of Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism", in which subjects remain trapped by their own fierce attachment to the possibilities that alienate and restrict them (2011: 1). Yet this novel does not only illustrate one tragic outcome of cruel optimism, but also –through its repeated emphasis on bodies and food– depicts a society mired in trauma, in what Berlant terms in "systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness'", "not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (2011: 10). Trauma, in this novel as in Berlant's theory, is not a singular individual psychic injury, but a persistent constant state of crisis, one which Berlant associates with contemporary neoliberal Western socio-political structures, compounded for subjects like Louise who are not politically and economically equipped to navigate them.

Scenes of eating recur throughout *Chanson douce*, reflecting complex power structures inflected by racial and class hierarchies. It is through food that the reader is first introduced to Myriam, the children's mother, at the beginning of the novel as she returns home early from work to find her son dead and her daughter dying. We are told that she leaves work planning to take the children to the fairground and that she stops at a bakery to pick up a baguette, a dessert for her children and the nanny's favourite orange cake. Myriam is presented as a mother who hurries home to be with her children, who buys

them treats, and who also treats "la nounou" (Slimani, 2016: 15) ["the nanny" (Slimani, 2018: 3)]; the cake purchase reflects Myriam's ambivalent attitude towards Louise, both appreciated and yet also clearly designated as paid help rather than a named subject. This ambivalence, at the very heart of the novel, is played out most strikingly at mealtimes. After eating with her employers on holiday, Louise fantasizes about being asked to accompany them to a restaurant in Paris, helping Mila, feeding Adam –in other words, her fantasy keeps her in the position of subordinate employee– but no invitation is forthcoming and the restaurant remains a privileged and fantasized space of family intimacy, from which she is definitively excluded. In Paris, she prepares the food for Myriam and Paul's frequent dinner parties, making traditionally French dishes (*blanquettes de veau*, *pot-au-feu*); the guests "couvrent" ["shower"] Myriam "de compliments" ["with compliments"] , to which she seemingly modestly replies that "C'est ma nounou qui a tout fait" (Slimani, 2016: 36) ["My nanny did it all" (Slimani, 2018: 24)], the demurral reinforcing her privileged position in relation to *my* nanny, unnamed and seemingly owned. The novel does to some extent toy with expectations and stereotypes about race and social status: Louise is French, described repeatedly as very pale, with a "blancheur de statue" (Slimani, 2016: 136), ["marble whiteness" (173)], seen as exotic and fascinating by the other nannies she meets in the park precisely because she is a "nounou blanche" (199) ["white nanny" (179)]. Myriam is a lawyer of Maghrebi origin whose skin colour and hair mark her out as socially inferior (when she visits an agency to enquire about hiring a nanny, the manager takes her for a nanny looking for work, an assumption based on her "cheveux drus et frisés" (25) ["bushy, curly hair" (13)]. However, the novel also reinforces racial divisions (Myriam rejects the prospect of a Moroccan nanny for fear of eliciting "une complicité tacite, une familiarité", "la solidarité d'immigrés" ["a tacit complicity and familiarness", "immigrant solidarity" (16)] erasing her own African heritage and her own otherness; her friend complains about too many Arab children in her white son's school; as Khalid Lyamlahy notes, an Ivorian nanny Louise meets in the park is labelled as "la présidente autoproclamée" (200) ["self-proclaimed president" (180)] in a "cliché of African nondemocracy" (Lyamlahy, 2018). Again, the troubling racial hierarchies are clearest in a context of food: the first time Louise has ever been cooked for is by Wafa, another nanny, from Morocco, who urges Louise to put her feet up while she prepares her a meal including spiced chicken and Moroccan cake, and then sits at her feet. Descriptions of food, as I will show, serve to illustrate

social and racialised relations between subjects as well as highlighting Louise's desperation and cruel optimism.

Louise is portrayed as a very disordered eater. She is repeatedly alluded to as "menue" (51) ["slim" (39)], "si frêle, si menue" (32) ["so fragile, so slender" (19)], fitting into child's armbands when she learns to swim with "les bras [...] aussi fins que les alumettes" (47) ["match-thin arms" (35)], doll-like. She knows her place, keeps guard against excess flesh. By contrast the daughter she neglects is referred to as fat, taking up too much space: "grosses cuisses" and "profil lourd" (90) ["fat thighs" and "heavy figure" (77)] "trop ronde, trop grande" (180) ["too fat, too tall" (162)]. Louise's almost total lack of attachment to her daughter is highlighted when Stéphanie is excluded from the school Louise's employer pulled strings to get her into, and Louise violently beats her. The child's craving for maternal love is underscored when she drinks the breast milk pumped by Louise's employer for her baby to drink while she works, literally imbibing someone else's love and sustenance in the absence of her own. Stephanie is constantly out of place: too heavy, too awkward, in the way, until she runs away from home, literally disappearing out of Louise's life, whilst the latter, seemingly unconcerned, continues to obsess over becoming part of another family. Louise, in comparison to her daughter, is unobtrusive and can squeeze herself into the tiniest of spaces (as seen in her games of hide and seek in the apartment with Mila). Her slenderness is doubtless due to disordered eating. In the park, she repeatedly "refuse les patisseries grasses que lui propose Wafa" (114) ["refuses the fatty pastries that Wafa offers her" (98)] and tells Mila not to eat them either (highlighting her internalisation of social expectations of female appetites and bodies). Wafa, another contrast to Louise, is described as sitting on the park bench with her legs apart, taking up space, with "des rondeurs sensuelles [...] des cuisses épaisses" (114) [a "slightly round belly, thick thighs" (98)], chewing her honey cakes with her mouth open and sucking her fingers. The descriptions of Wafa as excessive eater merge into the account of how she came to France through prostitution work in Casablanca; her figure associated with excessive appetite, both for food and sex, Wafa troublingly "embodies the reflected image of Slimani's ambiguous and demeaning representations of the immigrant" (Lyamlahy, 2018). Louise, in contrast to Wafa, refuses fatty pastries, dresses primly and cleanly, eats minimally, to occupy as little space as possible partly out of the implicit recognition that she belongs to a social class intended to serve others without being seen and partly out of the cruelly optimistic conviction that the less space she takes up, the more chance she has of becoming part of Myriam's family unit.

Louise feeds Myriam and her family obsessively, whilst depriving herself, to fulfil her dream of belonging to their family, seemingly unaware that clinging to this hope simultaneously prevents her from deepening relationships with others like Wafa and the other nannies and therefore, to borrow Berlant's definition of cruel optimism, constitutes an "obstacle" to her "flourishing".

The intensity of Louise's cruel optimism is related to several factors: her poverty and loneliness (she is ridden with debt and lives alone in a mould-stained apartment owned by an unpleasant landlord), and her childhood trauma, which again is described through food. As a child Louise was forced to eat other people's leftovers and otherwise was habitually forced to eat the same soup, reheated daily until it was finished, complete with "graisse figée" (139) ["cold fat" (121)] and taste of "os rongé" (139) ["gnawed bones" (139)]. It is this experience that is re-enacted in the key scene with the chicken carcass which Myriam has thrown into the bin because it smelled off, but which Louise rescues from the bin, cleans meticulously, and feeds to the children. Mila later explains to Myriam, laughing as she recounts it, that at Louise's behest, she and Adam tore all the meat off the carcass and ate it with their fingers, washing it down with Fanta. To Myriam, however, who returns late from work and sees the chicken, its "articulations distendues" (163) ["joints distended" (145), on a plate, the meat entirely removed, this is a scene of abjection: she sees "une charogne, un immonde cadavre" (164) ["putrescent carcass, a vile corpse" (145)] and a "totème maléfique" (164) ["baleful totem" (146)]. Megan Warin describes eating disorders as constituting "abject relations"[2]; this is exemplified here through the description of the abject chicken that Louise force feeds Mila and Adam (Warin, 2010). Myriam recognizes the violence underpinning Louise's insistence that the children eat chicken that has gone off. She dons plastic gloves to dispose of the skeleton, the plate on which it was standing and the tea towel beside it, taking the bin bag to the outside bins immediately. Myriam's revulsion is clear, prompting her to remove any shred of evidence from her home and to contemplate letting Louise go. The "totem" –whose flesh, according to ritual, must not be consumed– marks a transgression, a violence against civilised order, and shows Louise as not only a disordered eater, but a disordered feeder, force feeding repulsive meat to her charges. This is also a scene of displacement, as Louise ritually cleans the rotting carcass as though purging trauma before displacing her own trauma onto the children by forcing them to eat it and then wash it down with Fanta,

[2] See also Ferreday (2012) for an analysis of eating disorders and abjection.

a processed drink emblematising the consumerist context in which Louise, who can barely afford to live, is struggling. This scene, contrasting starkly with the socially normative dinner parties, pre-empts the final scene, the murders in the bath and violence against clean flesh[3].

If we look again at the chicken scene, though, we can recognize its ambivalence. Firstly, the reference to "totem" (and thereby to taboo and transgression) casts Myriam as superstitious, imposing rules about eating that might have no rational basis but be rooted in her own prejudices. This is compounded as Paul laughs the episode off and Myriam begins to rethink her assumptions, questioning her conviction that eating chicken that has gone off, from the bin, constitutes disordered eating as opposed to eating frugally out of necessity. Her self-interrogation is also based on previous altercations with Louise over serving up food past its best-before date and on recognition of her own mockery of Louise for saving every uneaten morsel to serve later and collecting money-saving coupons to save shopping money. What initially seemed like disordered and deviant eating is, then, perhaps more accurately behaviour conditioned by poverty; moreover, the amusement Myriam and Paul take from watching Louise's frugality shows them up as lacking in empathy and cruel, as well as wasteful, excessive, frivolous. Louise is very clearly not the only disordered eater in this novel: the other characters, from the pastry-munching Wafa to the bourgeois dinner party guests who reject the idea of an immigrant nanny, are all shown to be within a disordered consumerist society that discards food, and certain people, at will. Indeed, attitudes to food and to bodies, across the spectrum of characters that populate *Chanson douce*, mark "abject relations", to return to Warin's term, that extend beyond Louise herself. Louise does not eat the chicken herself but compels Myriam's children to eat it; part of what is disordered here is not just the frugality, but the force-feeding (and its ritualisation). Perhaps, then, the most disturbing aspect of the whole episode is Myriam using Louise's poverty as a justification to allow her to disregard her potentially poisoning her children, so that she can keep her as nanny. What we can see here is the extent to which disordered eating is itself a social construction, inextricable from the sociocultural structures within which it is defined. Louise's disordered eating is to some extent a product of Myriam's own casual disregard for other people's poverty and need. The nanny turns the children into disordered eaters, in the chicken scene and

[3] This scene "stands as an omen of death, foreshadowing Louise's killings whilst at the same time representing a symptom of the nanny's psychosis" (Rushton, 2021: 45).

again at the end of the novel when she insists on taking Mila out to eat to give her parents time alone together (to conceive Louise's desired baby), choosing a dirty, greasy restaurant that repels Mila, who rejects the food; Mila, too, uses food to "push away" what does not match up to her fantasies. Louise, unable to afford her own meal despite the relatively cheap prices, sits silently nursing a glass of wine while Mila asks to go home. Both had high hopes of their outing, hopes dashed by the gap between the fantasy and the reality.

The descriptions of disordered eating in this text are very clear examples of cruel optimism. Louise, obsessed with the idea of being part of Myriam's family (her ideal of a "good life"), fails to look after Myriam's children whilst plotting desperately for Myriam to have another baby to anchor her attachment, just as she has already neglected her own child to attach herself to other families. It is this obsessive desire for Myriam to have another baby ("elle le désire avec une violence de fanatique, un aveuglement de possédée" (203) ["her desire for that baby is fanatical, violent, blindly possessive" (183)] "elle le veut comme elle a rarement voulu" (203) ["she wants it in a way she has rarely wanted anything" (183)] that drives her to see her existing children as "un obstacle" (203) ["an obstacle" (183)] that she removes firstly by taking them out to the restaurant then, when that fails (when both Myriam and Mila refuse their meals and Myriam also rejects sex: witnessing the double refusal of food and of sex clearly compounds Louise's disappointment), by killing them. Yet Myriam is also prone to cruel optimism, albeit less pathologically, by making herself believe that Louise is fit to look after her children in the face of increasing evidence of her failing mental health. The disintegration of Louise's mental health is shown through food: before Louise comes up with the plan of Myriam's baby, she has been cooking "inedible meals", but as soon as she makes her plan, she begins to cook delicious meals again whilst she examines Myriam's body attentively for signs of pregnancy, washing her pants by hand, inspecting her underwear for signs of blood. Where Gaitskill's "two girls" reproduce their trauma through food and sex, Louise displaces hers onto Myriam's body, desperate for her to eat, to have sex, policing her bodily boundaries (even inspecting the bathroom floor for specks of menstrual blood which she sees as marking "la mort d'un enfant" (189) ["the death of a child" (169)]). Cooking is a material example of cruel optimism here, as Louise cooks for others as a form of attachment, as a marker of her proximity to them and of their need for her, yet it also highlights the gap between employee and employer, the one cooking for the other, as well as the financial dependence of one upon the other and Louise's own attempt to navigate trau-

ma by making someone else eat and have sex, through someone else's intimacy. Louise's desperation to be intimately part of Myriam's family is moreover firstly what causes Myriam to distance herself from Louise (no longer sharing glasses of wine in the evenings) and secondly what triggers Louise to kill the children in the ultimate familial separation.

My reading of *Chanson douce* has shown disordered eating to be bound up in cruel optimism, a cruel optimism it enacts and illustrates. Whilst the nanny is the most obvious disordered eater, food materialises cruel optimism more generally in this text, a cruel optimism that ends in a tragedy written into the narrative from the very start. Louise projects her "crisis ordinariness" onto others as a means of establishing intimacy, yet in so doing, alienates them and herself, meaning that she can no longer invent self-deluding strategies to "push" away and "pull" in the world, as Berlant puts it. *Chanson douce* offers one interpretation of "cruel optimism"; *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, to which I now turn, offers a different take, exploring obsessive appetite combined with equally compulsive self-denial through the main character Adèle, addicted to sex and to hunger.

2. Addiction and self-destruction in *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*

Dans le Jardin de l'ogre, which nods back to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in its portrayal of an unsatisfied provincial doctor's wife, is more obviously about a sexual disorder than an eating disorder, but the two are inextricably linked in this novel. Adèle semi-neglects her young son to pursue adrenaline-fuelled sexual encounters; when her husband Richard finds out, he moves the family to the Normandy countryside and semi-imprisons Adèle as a non-driver in the rural house. If *Dans le jardin* is a novel about sexual addiction –its protagonist propelled by compulsion more than desire– it is also a narrative of disordered eating[4]. The narrative is interspersed with scenes of eating, or rather,

[4] Sexual addiction –also defined as hypersexual disorder– is a complex label that does not figure in DSM-5. It is variously understood as "a compulsion, impulsive disorder, or an addiction", which share common features ("repetitious behaviors, difficulty resisting the behavior despite knowledge of potential adverse consequences, and behaviors that may be triggered by internal or external cues") but "the goal of impulsive behavior is to experience pleasure, whereas the motivation underlying compulsive behavior is to prevent or reduce anxiety and feelings of subjective discomfort", "NOT for pleasure or gratification" and "The concept of addiction refers to a behavior pattern" without assuming motivation (Giugliano, 2013: 78). Given the above definitions, Adèle's sexual addiction is clearly compulsive rather than impulsive.

in Adèle's case, of not eating, and with descriptions of repulsive (fat) bodies. Adèle is frequently described as drinking too much, too often, but appears to leave most of the food on her plate at the dinner parties and restaurants where she consumes glass upon glass of wine or champagne. At her in-laws' house, at Christmas, what she perceives to be the rest of the family's "obsession [...] du 'bien boire' et du 'bien manger'" ["obsession [...] with 'eating well' and 'drinking well'" (61)] baffles Adèle, a "mauvaise cuisinière" (175) ["bad cook" (159)], who appears equally obsessed with not eating:

> Elle a toujours aimé avoir faim. Se sentir fléchir, chavirer, entendre son ventre se creuser et puis vaincre, ne plus avoir envie, être au-dessus de ça. Elle a cultivé la maigreur comme un art de vivre (77).
>
> [She always liked being hungry. Feeling herself bend but not break, hearing her stomach groan emptily and then conquering her need, proving herself above all that. Thinness has become a way of life (61).]

Adèle is addicted to hunger and self-deprivation, not only to convince herself of her own will power but also as a means to stay light, to take up less space, in comparison with other people who she sees as over-indulgent and overweight. The first striking example here is her sister-in-law Clémence, who over-indulges in *apéritifs* ("se goinfrant de tartines de foie gras et de biscuits à la cannelle" ["wolfing down slices of toast loaded with foie gras and cinnamon biscuits"] before she "sombre dans une interminable sieste, souvent trop soûle pour reconnaître les ingrédients de l'entrée" (75) ["sink[ing] into an endless nap, often too drunk to recognise the ingredients of the main course" (60)][5]. Adèle's repugnance is starkly clear, reinforced when she later observes "les grosses cuisses de Clémence qui s'étalent sur le siège. Ses mains aux ongles rongés" (79) ["Clémence's fat thighs spread across the seat, her bitten-down nails" (64)]. Clémence is portrayed as greedy and disgusting, lacking any self-control, the very antithesis of the self-depriving Adèle. In many ways, however, the pair are very similar, both prone to excessive drinking, both unable to resist their desires (one for food, the other for sex). The second counterpoint is a character mentioned only once, when Adèle returns to her mother's home for her father's funeral and sees the neighbour "si obèse qu'Adèle avait du mal à trouver son sexe sous les plis de son ventre. Son sexe, transparent sous la graisse, brûlant du frottement de ses cuisses énormes"

[5] The English translation here refers to "main course" (presumably following the American use of the word "entrée·, but the French would more likely imply "starter" in English.

(213) ["so obese that Adèle had trouble locating his penis amid the folds of his belly. The penis was layered with sweat under all that fat, rubbed sore by those enormous thighs" (194)]. Adèle would visit him after school to find him sitting, trousers around his ankles, looking at the stunning view of the English Channel, presumably her role being to service his sexual requests, although the text gives no more details either of their sexual activities or of Adèle's emotional responses. Given that she was visiting after school, we can assume her to be under the age of consent; even if she were old enough to consent, the age and power imbalance still points to her being sexually violated and exploited. Part of her revulsion towards fat may stem from the traumatic association of being forced into sexual acts; she displaces the sexual trauma onto the memory of the man's weight. What this shows us is that Adèle's ideas about weight and hunger are very much bound up in her premature sexual experiences and indeed in trauma. This is reinforced in her memories of being taken to Paris as a child by her mother and being locked alone in the hotel room for days on end, "affamée" ["desperately hungry"] but with nothing to eat bar "deux bonbons sales" (71) ["two boiled sweets" (55)] and terrified because her mother had warned her that hotel rooms are dangerous for "une petite fille" (70) ["a little girl" (55)]. When she hears someone knocking on the hotel room door, she is petrified and hides under the bed, as though protecting herself from intrusion and –given the reference to girls– potential rape. The sexual threat is bolstered the next day when her mother and her mother's lover take her to Pigalle, a visit that is "noir, effrayant" (73) ["dark and frightening" (57)] yet also exciting, memorable both for the sex shops and the "regards lubriques" (73) ["lascivious looks" (57)] her mother and companion give each other as they travel. There is a lot to unpick here. Adèle associates sexual desire with fear and hunger, with being neglected; she connects sex with violence and danger, and as she grows up seeks desperately to recreate "ce sentiment magique de toucher du doigt le vil et l'obscène" (73) ["the magical feeling of actually touching the vile and the obscene" (58)]. Her memories of hunger and shameful desire in Paris and of the abusive neighbour are very likely triggers for her sexual compulsion and for her disordered eating, hunger, shame, and sexual desire conflated in her mind.

Adèle's addiction to anonymous sexual encounters is shown to be bound up in her rejection of food. The morning after a night spent having unsatisfying sex with a young stranger, she scrubs herself clean in the shower, then "il faut qu'elle avale quelque chose pour éponger sa peine et sa nausée" ["needs something in her stomach to soak up the dolour and the nausea"] so buys "un

pain au chocolat sec et froid, dans la pire boulangerie du quartier" (30) ["a dry, cold pain au chocolat at the worst bakery in the neighbourhood" (17)], a pastry so dry she can barely chew it and ends up tossing it into the bin. Adèle punishes herself by choosing the least desirable breakfast and being unable to eat it, marking self-deprivation as a clear bodily response to the sex she belatedly seems to regret. Food, for Adèle, is a punishment, the means by which she asserts control over her bodily desires and indeed her body. On holiday, Adèle, Richard and their young son Lucien eat lunch in a restaurant, Richard ordering for the other two without checking what they might like, talking about his plans to move to the country, and Lucien playing with the food and spitting out mint flavoured water. Later that same day, the adults dine together in a restaurant without their son and Richard continues his monologue about the move, suggesting another baby, seeming not to notice his wife's lack of enthusiasm. At this point, Adèle "a envie de vomir" ["wants to vomit"], "a l'impression que son ventre est gonflé, prêt à deborder" (45) ["has the impression that her stomach has swollen, that it's about to overflow" (32)], even though she still has enough food left on her plate to offer it to Richard. Here her eating reminds us of a description of Justine's eating habit in *Two Girls*: "her stomach felt too tight even for chewed-up mouthfuls of salad, and she ate uncomfortably" (Gaitskill, 1991: 225). If both Justine and Adèle feel uncomfortably full very quickly, this highlights a policing of the boundaries of themselves as embodied subjects, "pushing" the world away, using eating as a means of asserting their own borders.

This is underscored when Adèle goes to a peep show, where "un Maghrébin" ("an Arab") gives her "un regard dégoûté" (146), "a disgusted look" (130), judging and shaming her in the word "Hchouma" (meaning shame) that is the only word he speaks to her before staring openly at her body, spitting and turning away. After leaving the show, Adèle wanders through a supermarket, her "panier vide" ("empty basket") symbolising her empty body, feeling utterly repelled by food ("l'idée même de manger la dégoûte") (147) ["even the idea of eating disgusts her" (131)]. Hunger, for Adèle, triggers memories of desire and of trauma; her refusal of food, and her concomitant insatiable need for sex, are forms of post-traumatic response, which generate a very bodily enactment of "cruel optimism". Justine's self-repulsion in Gaitskill's novel, figured through the image of "fat" others, staring at her body, mirrors the disgust Adèle internalizes and projects back onto the idea of eating after being shamed by the man in the peep show: in both cases, shame about sex is deflected onto food and onto (fears of being) fat and onto others, perceived

as being fat. Adèle, like Justine, is unable to control her sexual urges whilst refusing food to reassure herself that she can keep her appetites at bay, that she is not disgusting, and ultimately that she can police her attachments to others.

Like Louise in *Chanson douce*, Adèle is caught in cruel optimism, albeit very differently. Richard tells her: "Tu sais, tu es toute aussi ordinaire que nous, Adèle. Le jour où tu l'accepteras, tu seras beaucoup plus heureuse" (69) ["You know, you're just as ordinary as we are, Adèle. The day you finally accept that, you'll be a lot happier" (54)], associating happiness with acceptance of being ordinary. Ironically, it is precisely this "crisis ordinariness", in Berlant's words, that prompts Adèle's compulsion for sex. This echoes Berlant's allusion to characters "using the episodic relief of particular exchanges in order not, for a minute, to be that ordinary failed person with that history" (Berlant, 2011: 133). One coping strategy for "crisis ordinariness" is precisely to deny or defer that ordinariness through compulsive sexual encounters that read like episodes of self-harm. Berlant argues that pleasurable self-harm "is not merely dissociative, anti-intimate" but also engenders "optimistic habits of embodiment and attachment", so that "self-protection and risk are indistinguishable" (2011: 132). Adèle fantasizes about being a "poupée dans le jardin de l'ogre" (14) ["doll in an ogre's garden" (2)], anonymous and disposable, but she also imagines that her sexual affairs constitute "ce qui selon elle la définit vraiment [...] son être vrai" (137) ["the very thing that she thinks defines her, her true self" (121)]. Berlant observes that "These repetitions can be read as establishing a regime of self-continuity that amounts to the constellation called 'who I am'" (2011: 133), and this is clearly how Adèle asserts a sense of self, how she pushes and pulls, but it is also evidence of her self-annihilation and her cruel optimism, as she seeks to create an identity rooted in self-destruction.

Adèle's cruel optimism constitutes a coping mechanism that both sustains her (through exhausting her: she makes herself run repeatedly through the streets of Paris) and also wears her out (she is often exhausted, needing naps). Berlant gives an example of the experimental lab animal "compelled to create a form of living through repetitions that do not gratify it. But they do gratify it too, in the sense that this is a scene it recognizes" (2011: 151). Like the lab animal, Adèle is both gratified and damaged by her own compulsions, both the self-violating sexual encounters and the refusal of food. At the end of the novel, back in Paris after her father's funeral, Adèle shares a joint with a student and dances with "le sentiment de se soustraire du monde", "offerte à un avenir qu'elle imaginait superbe, plus haut, plus grand, plus exultant" (221-222)

["cut off from the world", "on the cusp of a future that she imagined glorious, higher, greater, more exhilarating" (202)], even as the world from which she purports to feel cut off reasserts itself as she is pawed at, groped and mocked by passing men (222); her fantasy of escape is structured by violence in the ultimate example of cruel optimism as self-affirmation rooted in self-destruction. The ending rewrites the end of *Two Girls*, wherein the subjects sink into exhaustion together: this novel ends with Richard, imagining that Adèle "s'abondonnera" and "se reposera" [will "surrender" and "rest"] with him yet equally insisting "nous n'avons pas fini" (228) ["we're not finished" (209)]; the reciprocity of Gaitskill's ending is thus entirely transformed. Adèle is trapped in violent exhaustion, cut off from the world ("plus personne ne la verra" (228) ["no one will see her any more" (209)], the embodiment of cruel optimism as seen from the perspective of Richard, who is equally cruelly optimistic, seeking to make Adèle content through alienating her from the world and wearing her down.

In conclusion, then, these two novels offer different portraits of cruel optimism through disordered eating and sexual attachments; both are shown to constitute repeated enactments of failed attachments. Cruel optimism here is rooted both in specific childhood trauma and in "crisis ordinariness" which is another way of defining the struggle to pull in and push away the world, and other people, as seen throughout these two novels. Perhaps what is most striking in both texts is the connection between disordered eating and dysfunctional attachments, the two feeding into each other. Obsessive appetites highlight cruel optimism and its impact on embodied subjects trapped in crisis ordinariness; they show disordered societies, as well as disordered eaters. We must, of course, be wary of diagnosing characters in literary texts, or of using them as case studies for eating or sexual disorders. My aim here is instead to explore how Slimani's novels narrate cruel optimism through narratives of disordered eating and intimacy that track female desire. These are texts about female desire: not only Adèle's sexual compulsions and Louise's need for intimacy, but Myriam's desperation to work, repeatedly alluded to as a physical desire. It is interesting, then, that these desires seem to lead inexorably to destruction or self-annihilation: Myriam loses her children; Louise loses the family unit she seeks to be part of, and Adèle ends in a sort of limbo, wearing herself out. Berlant suggests that "intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (Berlant, 1998: 281); in these novels, the inevitable outcome is destruction, the violent enactment of a termi-

nation of female desires. Reading becomes increasingly uncomfortable: the awkward bodily descriptions; the chicken in *Chanson douce*; the negligence of the children in both texts. Reading these texts, we too become caught up in obsessive appetites, and the anticipation of moving beyond this discomfort to a satisfying ending (which would imply silencing female desires, for sex, for food, for work, to preserve a certain assumption of social order) is rooted in destruction. Reading is itself here bound up in the violence of cruel optimism and its obsessive appetites and desires, wherein desiring female subjects propel themselves desperately towards self-destruction and wear themselves out.

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