



The Land of Green Ginger by Antony Rowland

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Reviewed by [Angelica Michelis](#) September 2010

'Amongst the highly placed
It is considered low to talk about food.
The fact is: they have
Already eaten.'
(Bertolt Brecht, A German War Primer)

Antony Rowland does not consider it low to talk about food. The Land of Green Ginger gathers poems that delight in the taste, texture and smell of food, and that celebrate the sublime in the ordinary:

‘Singing herb singe roast vapours Fray: Saturday
pie-floater in Rawson market; waxy peas island
gelatine coated pink flush before comic stall.
Passionate friendship wanted with a Bentos,
good sense of meat to gravy ratio. ...’

Thus begins Rowland’s eulogy to the humble pie, a poem that is sticky and dense with consonants, alliterations and hidden rhymes. It refers unashamedly to the delights of a dish that does not even attempt to hide its lowly provenance; on the contrary, it looks down with pity at the (southern) ‘Blair babes weaned on focaccia and lamb’s lettuce’. However, this is not just a stereotypical celebration of northern English identity and difference packaged in the language of food and the culinary. The poem, like so many others in *The Land of Green Ginger*, explores the various borderlines that transverse the geographical and cultural landscape of contemporary Britain and its history by re-writing them in a language that accentuates what we usually marginalise in every-day communication: ambiguity, plurality of meaning and an enjoyment of wordiness. None of the poems in this volume is easily accessible and digestible: like a good pie, they lie slightly heavy on your stomach and repeat on you. In this respect poems like ‘Pie’, ‘English’, ‘Scallops’ and ‘The Cake’ are not just poetic texts about food, they are attempts to explore the extent to which food can be read and poetry can be eaten. In *Le corps à corps culinaire* Noëlle Châtelet argues that the idea ‘that everything we absorb (air-sustenance-water-sperm) entirely traverses us to come out later transformed (gas-excrement-urine-baby) never ceases to amaze us and the astonishment increases when we consider the fact that matter not only metamorphoses in another reconstituted matter, but also in energy, intelligence or stupidity, in short in a series of social and affective gestures which we perform forgetting (or pretending to forget) that the spaghetti and the rosé eaten the night before serve a function.’ In a similar way the poems in *The Land of Green Ginger* seem to ask: where do words come from, where does food go to, what becomes of them and what impact do they have on who we are and how we situate ourselves in the world?

This interest in the complex relationship between language and food often results in rather surprising settings and combinations of themes: ‘Cake’, for example, is a war poem that

conveys the experience of a soldier in the trenches of World War I via the lexical spectrum of cake. The poem travels through the etymological battlefield of the various meanings of cake and, by doing so un-silences the voices from the margin and the narratives they have to tell about the precariousness of life at a time when the presence of death had become normality:

'A cake for a life: the gift
of a cake in the trenches.
Under the moon-slice, hours
until dawn, the package from Leeds,
that gnawed your dreams of warmer feet,
forgiving shoes among the rats.

Jack curses all serges as cakes,
Their bespoke battles all to cock:

...

Charles knew their cak'd 'av it's dough';
Jack bagged his cake with his ammo.'

In the following stanzas the poem talks about the trench that 'was caked with dawn', uses the expression 'cake-hole' and finally turns the cake into a 'tansy-cake'. The Tansy Cake, or Tansy Pudding, used to be eaten at Easter and was a Christian adaptation of the bitter herbs which were part of the Jewish paschal feast where it functioned as a reminder of the bitter oppression the Jewish community suffered in the past. Whereas our normal understanding associates cake with a frivolous luxury, Rowland's poem travels genealogically through its many different meanings and shows that the sweet comes with the bitter as life comes with death. Food, like language, has always a surplus, these poems seem to suggest, and there is always one more story they can tell us about ourselves, our past and our private and public memories.

Although not every poem in *The Land of Green Ginger* is as immersed in the language of the culinary and gastronomical as 'Cake' or 'Pie', there is a very distinct sense that it is the 'edible' in language that is at the centre of this collection of poems. What many of the poems seem to suggest is, as Elspeth Probyn put it in *Carnal Appetites*, that '... eating is of interest because of the ways in which it can be a mundane exposition of the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, from ourselves, and from our social environment: it throws into relief the heartfelt, the painful, playful or pleasurable articulations of identity.' By approaching poetic language via food and exploring eating as a poetic practice, the poems in this volume push poetry to its material limit:

'Last Easter broke like a podge of cream
(binks of emetic eggs, of Yorkie chickens)
and Akil, seven, spelt as he found, a hanger in his hair,
spitting 'Where's the buffalo?' for buffet,
and the roast flowed with the steam of potatoes
and something was dissing with the lilac tree
after the winter after the chrash.'

In these lines from the poem 'Rain-pie' the sound of the words melt in the reader's mouth (and this mixing of metaphors is deliberate!), and one feels never even tempted to search for its meaning in a straightforward manner. It is the taste and texture of words such as 'podge' and 'binks' that lingers on, their oddity standing out against the idea that language is self-present and meaningful in itself. The very eccentricity of language, its ability to render words that an everyday *Thesaurus* does not recognise, lies at the heart of many of the poems gathered in this volume. It is particular the northern, Yorkshire vernacular that is explored in *The Land of Green Ginger*, but poems such as 'Cech Speaks', 'Golem' and 'Terezín' also marvel at the way other languages can feel a mouthful next to your mother tongue. To tease the peculiar out of the mundane, to probe the taste of lost words and to sniff out the strange in the familiar is what these poems set out to do. However, this is never done on a purely representational level, these poems are not 'about' eating, cooking or remembering personal and public history. 'Cromwell's Toothbrush', for example, is a lesson in Englishness where the contemporary appears clothed in a history that is as tangible as the books in a second-hand bookshop and as surprising as the taste of traditional beer in an old pub:

We are neonates in this place with wrong questions on our lips:
Is Cromwell's toothbrush before Worcester historical or not?
The hunch of backs is a Rump Parliament in the snug
as we clap our eye-beams on gammon in The Lion,
mock-commonwealth candles and goode beer,
which is good and converts me to a one-pint screamer.'

In The Land of Green Ginger one never stops being amazed about what can be done with simple ingredients by somebody who knows how to combine them in a novel manner. Words roll from your tongue ('We earwig those who come in with the milk bottles,/kettled, trolled, mullered, muppets who were clangered/with mutts, mucky ducks and swamp donkeys. 'Cromwell's Toothbrush') and stick to your memory like the taste of just recalled childhood food. The theme of memory and the modes in which we remember is intrinsic to most of the poems in this volume, but it is neither glorified nor simplified, and it never merges into nostalgia. The act of remembering and its culinary, linguistic, visual and sensuous triggers are closely investigated, prodded and chewed over, and every poem conveys a sense of surprise and wonderment. These are poems to be enjoyed in their rawness and peculiarity; this is poetry with an aftertaste.

Note from editor: The Manchester Salon will be hosting a discussion of poetry and the relevance debate entitled '[Poetry: its relevance and beyond](#)' on Wednesday 19 January 2011 at 6:30pm for 6:45pm start.