

Gandhian Fasting and Cultural Indigestion in Jeffrey Eugenides' "Air Mail"

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Abstract

"Air Mail" is one of the ten stories included in Jeffrey Eugenides' latest collection of stories, *Fresh Complaint*. Drawing on one of the characters in his third novel, *The Marriage Plot*, as well as on his own experiences in India working as a volunteer alongside Mother Theresa, "Air Mail" tells the story of young (and idealistic) Mitchell Grammaticus, who leaves the West in order to explore India, Bangkok, and a tropical island in the Gulf of Siam, where he finally succumbs to dysentery (as well as to thoughts regarding the futility of existence). Ripe in irony and biting sarcasm, coupled with a surprising tenderness and empathy, which are the landmarks of Eugenides' writing, the story is a tongue-in-cheek debate on the East-West cultural conflict, as well as on the numerous (false) conceptions Westerners harbor regarding foreign cultures, paradigms and ideologies.

Keywords: food, fasting, foreign, East, West, ideologies, asceticism, the spirit, sarcasm.

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Theresa, “Air Mail” tells the story of young (and idealistic) Mitchell Grammaticus, who leaves the West in order to explore India, Bangkok, and a tropical island in the Gulf of Siam, where he finally succumbs to dysentery (as well as to thoughts regarding the futility of existence). Ripe in irony and biting sarcasm, coupled with a surprising tenderness and empathy, which are the landmarks of Eugenides’ writing, the story is a tongue-in-cheek debate on the East-West cultural conflict, as well as on the numerous (false) conceptions Westerners harbor regarding foreign cultures, paradigms and ideologies. Food, and the troubles it may cause, take up an important part of the story, and are used as a symbolic reflection of the East-West disjunction: the West is described in terms of over-abundance of food, and consequently garbage, while the East is related to fasting and feeding the spirit – it is however in the East that Mitchell becomes ill with dysentery – an obvious allusion to the fact that for the naive, unprepared Western mind, the complexity of Eastern philosophies might turn out rather hard to stomach.

Eugenides’ readers may well be acquainted with the figure of Mitchell Grammaticus from *The Marriage Plot*, where Mitchell appears as a don Quijote-an postmodern dreamer, who, after being disappointed in love, flees to India in order to work alongside Mother Theresa – an episode closely modeled on Eugenides’ own experience (Leyshon). In *The Marriage Plot*, Mitchell is viewed half sentimentally, half ironically, appearing as a little boy trapped in a man’s body. He appears in the exact same manner in “Air Mail”: a half pathetic, half relatable Westerner, fascinated by Oriental philosophy and Gandhian fasting, but ultimately incapable of properly understanding the world around him, or even keeping his diarrhea under control. This is, in fact, how all the male characters in *Fresh Complaint* are sketched out by Eugenides: well-meaning, maybe even kind, but ultimately ridiculous, helpless and, we must say it, useless. This is what a *Guardian* review states regarding *Fresh Complaint*’s male characters:

It's fair to say that, in *Fresh Complaint*, men are well intentioned enough, but also pathetic and faintly absurd. (...) There are probably a few too many occasions when ostensibly comfortable, middle-class lives are thrown into crisis by bad choices (...) moments when you want to tell these people to grow up. But maybe that's Eugenides's point. They can't. (East)

This is precisely the case of Mitchell, who leaves behind a comfortable, safe, but ultimately boring existence in Detroit in order to pursue the mirage of Eastern enlightenment which leads him first to India, then to Bangkok, and finally to the Gulf of Siam, where he succumbs to his illness after a prolonged period of trying to ignore and deny it.

When the story opens Mitchell is lying on a bamboo mat in his beach hut, plagued with severe diarrhea and dehydration. Around him, his fellow Western travelers and their 'camping habits' offer an image of the typical occidental waste and over-consumption – images of food dominate this symbolically loaded landscape, the Westerners being described with food-related imagery:

Through the bamboo Mitchell watched the German woman, his fellow invalid, making another trip to the outhouse. (...) Through the slats her skin looked a sickly, chicken-soup color. (...) Mitchell (...) was lying on a straw mat, with a plaid L.L. Bean bathing suit for a pillow. Unfortunately, his stomach was erupting. All night his insides had been quiet, but that morning Larry had persuaded him to eat an egg, and now the amoebas had something to feed on. (...) The German woman's footprints were still visible, along with pieces of litter, shredded packages of Nescafe or balled up paper napkins that blew from the cook tent. He could smell fish grilling. It didn't make him hungry. (*Fresh Complaint* 37-41)

Following a sudden bout of stomach pain and diarrhea in Bangkok, Mitchell, we are told, has been fasting for almost a week, in an effort to emulate his role model, Gandhi, whom he regards as a saint and a fanatic. Surviving on nothing but black tea, Mitchell

believes that he will starve out the amoebas he holds responsible for his illness. Symbolically, Mitchell is trying to 'purge' himself of his Western nature, and to embrace an Oriental life of simplicity and spiritual growth. During a phone call with his parents, Mitchell remarks: "'Dad, this is the best part of the trip so far. Europe was great and everything, but it's still the West.' 'And what's wrong with the West?' 'Nothing. Only it's more exciting to get away from your own culture'" (45). Unfortunately, as Eugenides seems to ironically remark, the spirit cannot survive without the body, which, in its perplexing triviality and undeniable reality, asks to be fed. Mitchell's problem is that he too, like Gandhi, is a fanatic: he denies Western consumerism and the culture of over-consumption, as well as the inflated (or should we say bloated?), sense of Western civilization (about which Gandhi famously stated that it would be a good idea), but simultaneously embraces the extremism of water-fasting, rejecting food altogether.

It looks like for men like Mitchell there are only two options: overeat, or do not eat at all. Needless to say, both are looked upon ironically and disapprovingly by the narrator who still manages to present Mitchell as what he is: a lonely child, searching for himself in the world, and silently writing desperate letters to his parents – or judging by their content, rather to himself. Food imagery is also employed in order to describe Mitchell's physical ordeal: "The combustion began high in his intestines. Then it worked its way along, like an egg swallowed by a snake, expanding, stretching the tissue, until, with a series of shudders, it dropped, and he exploded into water" (42). By denying his body food, Mitchell hopes to break the destructive cycle of dependency and attachment to his physical self, as he indirectly reveals in one of his letters to his parents:

Eastern religions teach that all matter is illusory. That includes everything, our house, every one of Dad's suits, even Mom's plant hangers – all maya, according to the Buddha. That category also includes, of course, the body. One of the reasons I decided to take this grand tour was that our frame of reference back in Detroit seemed a little cramped. And there are a few

things I've come to believe in. And to test. One of which is that we can control our bodies with our minds. (43)

Needless to say, Mitchell is very far from being able to control his raging diarrhea with his mind, which is clouded by the absence of food and by dehydration. What is also ironic is that while he is referring to the Buddha and trying to emulate Gandhi, Mitchell keeps a pocket New Testament under his pillow and stores the unfinished letters to his parents inside it. Cultural indigestion is at its finest: unable to truly make up his mind between his Western heritage and his Eastern aspirations, Mitchell "explodes into water," which is by its very nature colorless, tasteless and odorless – just like the personality-less protagonist. A similar, quite hilarious episode occurs when Mitchell is trying to meditate in the lotus position, but his "inflexible Western knee" (43) as well as reminiscences of his former girlfriend's pubic hair disrupt his inner peace. He is also contemplating food instead of meditating: "He was thinking about food. He was hoping they had something in this town besides idli sambar" (43). A wannabe Buddha caught up in a wannabe fascination with the East – this would be, in short, Mitchell Grammaticus' predicament.

Feeding oneself equals vanity for Mitchell, an inflated sense of self, symbolically mirrored by the cremation scene he witnesses in India, and the deceased woman's exploding intestines: "Dear Mom and Dad, I watched a woman being cremated this afternoon. (...) While I was watching, her intestines filled up with hot gas, like a great big balloon. They got bigger and bigger until they finally popped. Then all this fluid came out. I tried to find something similar on a postcard for you but no such luck" (44-45). All that humans seem to amount to are fluids: Mitchell and the cremated woman both explode into water – drowning any illusion of substantiality we might have. We are weightless, unimportant creatures, in this, Eugenides seems to say, the Buddha is right – but still, our weightlessness, our "unbearable lightness of being," as Milan Kundera so aptly put it, needs to be sustained by food and

drink. What could be more puzzling? An immaterial soul sustained by an overly material body.

One of Mitchell's fellow adventurers, a Frenchman, seems to have fallen a victim to the same illness, but is miraculously (according to Mitchell, of course) restored to health:

Besides his German neighbor, two other travelers on the island had been suffering from stomach complaints. One, a Frenchman, laid low by a salad, had taken to his hut, from which he'd groaned and called for help like a dying emperor. But just yesterday Mitchell had seen him restored to health, rising out of the shallow bay with a parrotfish impaled on the end of his spear gun. (47)

The postcolonial undertone is quite obvious in the image of the Frenchman described as a dying emperor who returns to life, immediately claiming another life, the one of the parrotfish, that he triumphantly displays on the tip of his weapon. Such, we might say, 'thoroughly Western' individuals can never truly become the victims of cultural indigestion: they are always their unapologetic, destructive, colonial selves – they do not 'mix meals,' and the local culture not only cannot subdue them, but inevitably ends up subdued by them (the impaled fish). By contrast, Mitchell is the kind of individual who does not know who he is and where he belongs: he mixes cultures, ideas and ideologies chaotically – and the result can only be what we termed cultural indigestion. Mitchell is torn between cultural opposites, and thus lingers longer on the island than he should, as compared to the Swedish woman, who is carried away to the hospital in a ferry along "the empty soda bottles": Western waste is swept away along with Western culture, leaving no trace behind.

As the days drag on, Mitchell starts losing his connection to reality more and more acutely, and Eugenides chooses to picture this through Mitchell's severing his ties with food completely: "The rhythms of the island reached him: the sleep-thickened voices of people breakfasting on banana pancakes and coffee; later, shouts on the beach, and in the evening, the grill smoking, and the Chinese

cook scraping her wok with a long metal spatula” (51). Mitchell only perceives time through the smells of the different foods which are being cooked and which tell him if it is morning or evening, but he refuses to take part in these profoundly social human activities that are cooking and eating. His fasting is not only restricted to food, but also extends to people: “His skin began to taste of salt. (...) While he squatted, he sucked the salt from his bare shoulders. It was his only food. Sometimes he had an urge to go into the cook tent and order an entire grilled fish or a stack of pancakes. But stabs of hunger were rare, and in their wake he felt only a deeper, more complete peace” (52). That the peace is illusory is aptly proven by Mitchell’s recollection of a leper mother and son in Bangalore, to whom he gives 50 paise. Remembering the boy’s joy upon receiving the money, he believes that it was brought about by the prospect of buying mango juice: “And then I had another revelation. I had a hunch that the kid was a nut for mango lassi. (...) When my coin hit the cup and the boy said ‘Atcha,’ I just knew that he was thinking about a nice cold mango lassi” (53). Mitchell relates to the boy, to his ordeal, to his physical suffering, which he unconsciously compares to his own: in fact, it is not the boy who craves the comfort of food and drink, but Mitchell, who has been trying to deny his nature for too long.

Later the same evening Mitchell emerges from his hut, convinced that he has been healed, and, very hungry, he heads directly for the cook tent. In a typical Mitchell fashion, he jumps yet again from one extreme to the other, and after a week of Gandhian fasting, succumbs to gluttony, encouraged by his fellow travelers:

Everyone on the island had heard about Mitchell’s Gandhian fast by this point. His arrival in the cook tent brought applause and cheers. Also gasps from some of the women, who couldn’t bear to see how skinny he was. (...) The tent was full of picnic tables, the counters stacked with pineapples and watermelons, beans, onions, potatoes, and lettuce. Long blue fish lay on chopping blocks. Coffee thermoses lined one wall, full of hot water or tea (...). The Chinese cook (...) sent out a sea bass, a plate of fried

rice, and an onion omelet. Most everyone else advocated pure gluttony, too. "Look at him. He's a skeleton. Go on, eat. Eat!" (55-56)

Along with food intake, Mitchell realizes that what he has also missed is social interaction. By giving up food, he had given up on people, too: "It was nice to be around people again. Mitchell hadn't become quite as ascetic as he'd thought. He missed socializing. (...) 'I'd die for cheekbones like yours,' one girl said. Then she made him eat some fried bananas" (56). After the feast comes the painful realization – Mitchell is by no means cured: "At some point the ringing had started up again; he was concentrating on that, too, so that at first he didn't notice the twinge in his intestines. (...) He felt a valve open inside him, and a trickle of hot liquid, like acid, began burning its way toward the outside" (58). The ending of the story is ambiguous and shows Mitchell going into the water to release himself and seemingly floating away into unconsciousness and possible death, with the liquid inside of his bowels still floating out into the open sea, making Mitchell merge with nature and the universe – or this is how he perceives it:

Something was coming out of him, far away. He felt his insides emptying out. The sensation of water leaving him was no longer painful or explosive; it had become a steady flow of his essence into nature. In the next second, Mitchell felt as though he were dropping through the water, and then he had no sense of himself at all. (...) For a moment, he thought he should send word to his parents, to tell them not to worry. He'd found the paradise beyond the island. He was trying to gather himself to dictate this last message, but soon he realized that there was nothing left of him to do it – nothing at all – no person left to hold a pen or to send word to the people he loved, who would never understand. (60)

This ending can be interpreted in two manners: either Mitchell dying as a result of his untreated illness, or Mitchell attaining the Buddha state of mind, as a result of his prolonged

fasting and meditation. However, considering how miserably he has failed at the latter throughout the story, the first hypothesis, the one of Mitchell's death, seems more plausible. Dissolved to his essence, which just like in the case of the cremated woman, seems to be the unidentified liquid in his intestines, Mitchell merges into nature and 'disappears,' a speck of human nothingness in a vast (physical and spiritual) sea of nothingness.

The significance of the title thus becomes apparent only in the story's end: it refers not only to Mitchell's old-fashioned way of communicating with his parents, but also to the lack of substance, to the 'airy' nature of all human endeavour, of our very existence. We will all ultimately dissolve into nothingness, to be incorporated into the endless universal void. And it is here, in this very realization, that Mitchell ceases to be ridiculous and becomes a tragic character. Like most of Eugenides' protagonists, he too exists on the borderline between tragicomedy and profound epiphany. In picturing such characters, Eugenides manages to expose humanity in all its painful triviality and its sporadic grandeur, with irony, but simultaneously with a painful smile of empathy and understanding.

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