

A Matter of Taste: Monstrosity, Consumption and Hannibal Lecter

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Taste. The wine, the truffles. Taste in all things was a constant between Dr Lecter's lives in America and Europe. Between his life as a successful medical practitioner and fugitive monster. (*Hannibal* 225)

The monster, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996: 7-12), among others, has proposed, is one who marks the outside, comes from an elsewhere. The monster is 'not one of us'. He represents the limits of civilization and civility.

Yet twentieth century's most fascinating fictional monster, with his own cult following due to the TV series, is the very embodiment of civility and 'high' culture: Hannibal Lecter. Lecter, who makes his debut in Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon*, finally gets to be the centrepiece of a series of horror-thrillers: *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising*. He is no alien or outsider though but rather, until he is caught, a Johns Hopkins Medical school graduate and respected clinical psychiatrist. LHM Ling notes: 'Hannibal the Cannibal cannot remain an "alien" monster. He is, instead, a familiar, identifiable character: one of us. Put differently, the evil other now resides *explicitly* within' (2004: 380, emphasis in original). Yet, Hannibal is *unlike* one of us for several reasons: he is a cannibal with a serious set of affectations, a man of supreme tastes in food, clothing, cars and drinks. He is extremely well-read in a wide variety of areas, from astronomy to gastronomy. He has an enviable knowledge of art and music. And he is, of course, a brilliant psychiatrist. Hannibal Lecter is, literally, a monster like no Other. The 'high' and the 'low' combine within the novels, in Lecter's particular tastes, as Peter Messent puts it (2000: 26. Also Williams 1999: 139-141). Precisely because of his merger of tastes and habits he disturbs us.

Jeffrey Cohen writes of monsters in general:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (1996: 6)

More interestingly, 'in the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble' (Cohen 7). Anybody who seeks to quantify and classify Lecter, Harris shows, is bound to fail. When he is being analysed, Lecter analyses them. Indeed, in *Hannibal* we are told of a psychiatrist, Dr Doemling, who,

when he interviews Lecter in the asylum is forced to leave the place in tears because, instead of being analysed, Lecter enters the psychiatrist's own mind and stirs him up (*Hannibal* 277). Dr Fredrick Chilton, the warden of the asylum where Lecter is incarcerated, declares: 'We've tried to study him, of course, but he's much too sophisticated for the standard tests' (*Silence* 10). Lecter himself declares to Starling:

Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. *I* happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up on good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everyone in moral dignity pants - nothing is ever anyone's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling? (*Silence*20, emphasis in original)

Later we are told he is 'not measurable by any means known to man' (*Silence* 190).

So: Lecter as monster, Lecter as a psychiatric anomaly, Lecter as an immeasurable object. However, there is one more dimension to Lecter's monstrosity: taste. Taste enables us to 'read' Lecter, this essay proposes, within a larger symbolic economy of consumption. Consumption in the Lecter texts is of various kinds: of as art, commodities, food, ideas and the human mind's dreams, nightmares and aspirations.

The Lecter character is a monstrous consumer, above all else. He represents the class of people with exclusive tastes and who embody the consumption patterns of the late twentieth-century world. Exclusivity in taste, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Denise Gigante (2006) and others have argued, was a marker of social status and distinction. 'Taste' serves as a metaphor for aesthetic discernment, says Denise Gigante, and is an established trope (16). It is Lecter's refined tastes that set him above the rest of humanity. Now, a taste for special foods, clothing, styles or recreational modes creates the subcultural social groups of the very rich. The Lecter texts merge the monstrous with the pursuit of taste because in the pursuit of special flavours he also seeks what is rare, taboo and illegitimate. Refined tastes such as Lecter's are by definition a fascination for rare, not-easily obtainable objects.

It should be noted that there are villains with specialized tastes in the Lecter books: Francis Dolarhyde with a taste for William Blake's painting, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* and seeking the dragon's power (*Red Dragon*) and Jame Gumb who wishes to become a woman by wearing clothes made of their skins (*Silence*).¹ My focus however is on Lecter.

Lecter's sense of taste is very highly particularized, and divided between material and cultural tastes. When out in the world, he consumes gourmet food (alongside human flesh, but only of the 'rude' he says) and expensive wines, wears fine

clothes and drives a high-end Jaguar. He also reads hard-core academic journals in higher mathematics, astronomy and psychiatry. He can recite Dante in Italian and Latin. He collects church-collapse paintings, and loves Bach. He can only cook in specific utensils, which he measures before buying (*Hannibal* 288-9).

Lecter represents a crisis in classification in an age of consumerism wherein taste, and its cognate action, consumption, as a determinant of identity locates Lecter as a specialist. He is a man with different and exclusive tastes, a connoisseur and a collector, who refuses to be limited to what he is allowed to buy or consume. His monstrosity for the world might be his 'taste' for human flesh, but this is, I argue, a subset of the rarefied and unusual objects he prefers. The horror of Lecter is not that he consumes human flesh, in other words, but that for him human flesh is as consumable as a cultural icon (such as Dante) or vintage wine. Lecter is *taste* personified and in an age of exclusivity and the drive for customized personal equipment, clothing, styles, Lecter embodies exclusivity as no other twentieth century character does (except perhaps for Patrick Bateman in Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*).

The monstrous, in other words, is specialized taste and the urge to acquire objects that satisfy those tastes, no matter how socially proscribed or illegal these may be. Lecter's voyage into epicurean taste is organized around several aspects of life.

Lecter's evolved taste is of course due to his lineage: a Count for a father and a Visconti for a mother. He grew up in a castle in Lithuania, surrounded by tapestries and art work. When he acquires the most taboo of tastes – human flesh – he becomes, to the general public, a monster. However, even this does not quite make him a 'regular' villain. As Stephen Fuller notes, Lecter's distinction from the other villains in the novels (Dolarhyde, JameGumb) is founded on his class-driven taste: 'Only class attributes, then – such as Lecter's impressive erudition, his cultivated aestheticism, and some appealing personal qualities – distinguish villain from antihero' (2005: 824).

It is taste, Lecter explains, that sets people apart. Lecter's debut in *Red Dragon* is a scene with Will Graham and his first comment to the FBI agent is: 'That is the same atrocious aftershave you wore in court' (*Dragon* 63). When Clarice Starling meets him for the first time, he inventories her costume: 'You use Eryan skin cream, and sometimes you wear L' Air du Temps, but not today ... Your bag is lovely' (*Silence* 16-17). We are told, outside of Lecter's comment: 'it [the bag] was the best item she owned' (17). But he comments adversely about her shoes (17). Lecter then goes on:

"You'd like to quantify me, Officer Starling. You're so ambitious, aren't you? Do you know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. You're a well-scrubbed, hustling rube with a little taste. Your eyes are like cheap birthstones – all surface shine when you stalk some little answer. And you're bright behind them, aren't you? Desperate not to be like your mother. Good nutrition has given you some length of bone, but you're not

more than one generation out of the mines, Officer Starling. Is it the West Virginia Starlings or the Okie Starlings, Officer? It was a toss-up between college and the opportunities in the Women's Army Corps, wasn't it? Let me tell you something specific about yourself, Student Starling. Back in your room, you have a string of gold add-a-beads and you feel an ugly little thump when you look at how tacky they are now, isn't that so? All those tedious thank-yous, permitting all that sincere fumbling, getting all sticky once for every bead. Tedious. Tedious. Bo-o-o-o-r-i-ing. Being smart spoils a lot of things, doesn't it? And, taste isn't kind. When you think about this conversation, you'll remember the dumb animal hurt in his face when you got rid of him.

"If the add-a-beads got tacky, what else will as you go along? You wonder don't you, at night?" Dr. Lecter asked in the kindest of tones. (21)

Lecter then advises her on fashion:

"Let me make a suggestion. Get some loose, drilled tiger's eyes and string them alternately with the gold beads. You might want to do two-and-three or one-and-two, however looks best to you. The tiger's eyes will pick up the color of your own eyes and the highlights in your hair." (22)

Lecter sets out in the above passage not only to deconstruct Starling's character and upbringing by reading it against the 'evidence' of her taste, but also to *educate* her on it. Tracing her pedigree and her dreams, Lecter offers her suggestions about taste, where she could use cheap material to design a fashionable piece of jewellery. That is, he wishes to make her a different kind of *consumer*. Later Lecter ensures that when Clarice joins him, he invests in her transformation, bestowing upon her, clothing, perfumes and accessories of exquisite taste. In the closet of her bedroom in his house 'were a variety of clothes, dresses, pant suits, a shimmery long gown with a beaded top. There were cashmere pants and pullovers' (*Hannibal*441). Later she 'found a long dinner gown in cream silk', 'a pair of earrings with pendant cabochon emeralds' (464). We understand how Lecter has transformed Starling through another character's eyes. A few years later Barney, once the attendant of the asylum where Lecter had been incarcerated, sees them in Buenos Aires. Lecter and Starling arrive in a Mercedes Maybach (479). Starling is described thus:

Her hair was a shapely platinum helmet and she wore a soft sheath of coral frosted with an overlayer of tulle. Emeralds flashed at her throat. (479)

This transformation is often ignored upon by most Lecter scholars, except for Ling who notes: 'Clarice is transformed by the end of *Hannibal* into a bejeweled cosmopolitan who attends opera around the world with that cannibal of exquisite taste' (392). In a sense this transformative act in *Hannibal* is the logical progression in their relationship, where Lecter lectures on taste (and her lack of it) to Starling,

and accomplishes his project of improving her by introducing her to sophisticated consumer products and food. Through a fashion pedagogy and reconstructive action Lecter actually transforms her into his protégé in *taste*. In other words, their relationship might be based on love or his desire to replace his dead sister Mischa with Starling, but it is also about the taste-teacher who trains his student.

Lecter's frequent comments on appearance leave us uncertain as to whether he is evaluating physiognomies and bodies for their looks/style or as potential meals. He writes to Will Graham at the end of *Red Dragon*, after Dolarhyde has embedded a large knife into Graham's face, 'I ... hope you won't be very ugly' (350). When he meets Laura Pazzi he 'bent over Signora Pazzi's hand, his lips perhaps closer to the skin than is customary in Florence' (*Hannibal* 179). Whether he is appreciative of her beauty or appraising her potential as a meal is left uncertain. The line between different forms of consumption – of beauty and of flesh – is precisely what monstrous taste such as Lecter's blurs.

On the flight into America Lecter has packed his own lunch because he cannot suffer airline food:

Dr Lecter takes from beneath the seat in front of him, his own lunch in an elegant yellow box trimmed with brown from Fauchon, the Paris caterer. It is tied with two ribbons of silk gauze in complementary colors. Dr Lecter has provisioned himself with wonderfully aromatic truffled pâté de foie gras, and Anatolian figs still weeping from their severed stems. He has a half-bottle of a St Estephe he favors. The silk bow yields with a whisper. (*Hannibal* 249)

Lecter ponders over the exact moment when he should open the wine bottle (*Hannibal* 321). In Florence he purchases 'the first white truffles of the season' (150).

His car, a 'black Jaguar Saloon an elegant thirty-year-old Mark II [is] the best one that Pazzi had ever seen' (162). Lecter purchases scents and perfumes that even the specialist storekeepers appreciate: 'the fragrances and essences were chosen and combined with a sensibility startling and gratifying to these scent merchants' (187).

In each of these episodes what strikes us is Lecter's enthusiasm for and interest in high-end creaturely comforts and style. That he has access to enormous amounts of money – apparently he obtained money from his wealthier clientele and stashed it away, along with multiple identity papers – is indicative of a carefully plotted project.

But Epicureanism of the gastronomic kind is only one part of Lecter's hyperconsumptive persona. He is also a cultural fetishist seeking to fulfil his taste for old sheet music, manuscripts, musical instruments, arms and books.

Note Dr Lecter's entry into the story (and our cultural lexicon) in *Red Dragon*:

Dr Hannibal Lecter lay on his cot asleep. His head propped on a pillow against the wall. Alexandre Dumas's *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine* was open on his chest. (63)

Lecter gifts Pazzi's wife 'an antique score on parchment, hand-copied', dating back as he informs them, to 1688 (*Hannibal*179). He loves the Capponi Library for its numerous manuscripts and parchments (184). Lecter purchases from Sotheby's rare musical instruments: 'a late eighteenth-century Flemish harpsichord [and] an early electronic instrument, a theremin, built in the 1930s by Professor Theremin himself (287). He plays music from a score composed by Henry VIII (290).

Then there is the erudition, in multiple knowledge domains and languages. When he recites Dante, he does so in 'clear Tuscan' so that 'even the most contentious Florentines could not resist the verse of Dante ringing off [the] frescoed walls' (123). At his major lecture to the Renaissance scholars of the Capponi, Lecter delivers a speech on Dante, the trope of hanging and avarice that has the scholars applauding him 'enthusiastically' (197). His one regret when he is forced to leave Florence is for his imminent cultural deprivation: 'There were things in the Palazzo Capponi that he would have liked to find and read. He would have liked to play the clavier and perhaps compose' (210). Even when he kills, he needs his favourite music: Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (*Silence* 225).

Lecter's consumption involves the appropriation of cultural icons, from Dante to Bach, from branded food and cosmetic products to classical manuscripts.

There are twofar more troubling dimensions to Lecter's modes of specialized consumption.

Lecter seeks to not only consume humans in the literal sense, he wishes also that his acts of consumption become some form of artistic objects for public consumption. Lecter 'composes' his murders and killings in particular ways. In *Red Dragon* Will Graham discovers that Lecter is the killer he was seeking when he discovers a medical science textbook in Lecter's clinic - *Wound Man* - with its detailed illustration of battle injuries, where the 'sixth victim's position and his injuries were a close match to Wound Man's (*Dragon* 57). In *Hannibal*, Lecter disembowels and hangs Pazzi, leaving him dangling outside the very window where his, Pazzi's, ancestor had hung in exactly the same fashion: a death *fashioned* after the death of Judas Iscariot and as represented in a series of paintings and in Dante's *Inferno* (198-99). In an extreme case of converting his murder into a consumable product, from his first known killing he extracts the thymus and sweetbreads and these were part of the dinner menu he prepared for the Baltimore Philharmonic (*Silence* 26).

The visual-aesthetic arrangement of murdered bodies as theatre, spectacle and tableau is not new. Killers copying from paintings and art works, Sonia Allué proposes, is a part of the contemporary aesthetics of serial killing (2002). In *Red Dragon* Francis Dolarhyde positions the bodies of his victims in particular postures and films them, thus converting them into artistic 'products'. But there is more to it in the case of Hannibal Lecter. Lecter transforms his personal killings into quasi-artistic objects for them to be consumed by the public *as* spectacle. He transforms dead meat into an *artefact* and in a sense animates it.²

Lecter also has a taste for people's dreams and nightmares. Senator Martin who seeks Lecter's help in rescuing her daughter, kidnapped by Buffalo Bill, is appreciated for her suit by Lecter. And then, Lecter follows it up with: 'Did you breast-feed her?' and she says 'yes'. Lecter then responds: 'thirsty work, isn't it?' Senator Martin, shocked, is stricken with nostalgia and a terrible sadness about her daughter and then Lecter, we are told, 'took a single sip of her pain and found it exquisite' (*Silence* 191). Clarice Starling is warned that she should not let Lecter inside her head.

Lecter consumes pain, disappointment and anxiety. He also fuels the rage of killers like Dolarhyde (*Red Dragon*) by pretending to sympathize with them. Lecter's interactions with Starling demand her sharing her nightmares (of the screaming lambs from her foster home). His *quid pro quo* for offering clues to catching Buffalo Bill is: Starling sharing her childhood, her dreams and her aspirations. Lecter's modes of consumption are a form of primitive barter when it involves the law enforcement authorities like Starling or exploitative in the case of Senator Martin. The monstrosity here has to do with a brilliant mind's questing for psychic damage and feeding off those. For Lecter, Starling notes, boredom and the ordinary are two major fears, while other people's pains and nightmares are sources of 'amusement': 'I amuse him', she admits. Even in the novel that serves as the backstory of Lecter, *Hannibal Rising*, Inspector Popil questioning the boy Hannibal has the interrogation jumbled up because the boy starts prying into Popil's mind (122).

This too is a specialized, niche form of consumption in the Lecter texts, and this is what renders him monstrous: for he is *inside* their heads preying on them. 'If Lecter talks to you at all, he'll just be trying to find out about you... You don't want any of your personal facts in his head', Jack Crawford warns Starling before she sets out to meet Lecter because, as Crawford puts it, Lecter possesses the 'kind of curiosity that makes a snake look in a bird's nest' (*Silence* 6).

Denise Gigante points out that 'the senses of touch, taste, and smell demand an actual self engaged in the world of material presence' (16). Lecter in the asylum, behind glass walls and wire meshes, cannot touch. Yet he is extraordinarily conscious of the world due to his refined sense of smell. Lecter as a man of taste emphasizes materiality. He is aware of the textures of clothes, of utensils and of meat. He smells and thereby tastes them before he ingests any of them. I now use 'taste' as a verb as well to examine the case of Lecter.

Hans-Georg Gadamer has argued that 'the sensuous differentiation of taste . . . is in fact not merely an instinct, but strikes the balance between sensory instinct and intellectual freedom' (cited in Gigante 17). Lecter's monstrosity lies in his sensory instincts and intellect turned toward the simultaneity of taboo tastes and gourmet foods, his ability to read the mind of a serial killer and prey on any human dreams for his own amusement. Despite his protracted incarceration Lecter is free because, not only does he have his spacious memory palace of the mind to roam in, he has the minds of living people like Francis Dolarhyde, Will Graham, Dr Doemling, Frederick Chilton, Clarice Starling, Jame Gumb to read.

He was free in his head.

His inner world has intense colors and smells, and not much sound ... Dr Lecter was musing on how he would give JameGumb to Starling. (*Silence* 164)

He tastes them *through* their smells and appearance first. In other words, his taste in and ability to 'read' the smells coming off from people drive his *intellectual* curiosity about them, helps him categorize people: Lecter utilizes whatever his *tasting* of the people revealed to him, and starts preying on them. For instance, once he has gauged Starling from her smells he proceeds to examine her childhood, her nightmares and her concerns with what he calls 'advancement'. Having mentally identified her as a lonely orphan obsessed with the 'plight' of the helpless (as he describes her toward the end of *The Silence of the Lambs*) from his 'tasting' of her, Lecter then sets up his famous *quid pro quo*: clues to Buffalo Bill in exchange for her mind. His toying with her for amusement hinges on what his preliminary tasting of her revealed.

Taste then is at once material and mental in the case of Lecter, both instinct and intellect. Taste sets Lecter's formidable mind in motion but roots it in bodies and persons. Monstrosity lies, in Lecter's case, in his gourmet tastes – of which one is a specialized craving for both human flesh and human minds.

Endnotes

¹Harris actually describes the wrong Blake. In the novel he uses The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun but the description is of Blake's The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun where the Dragon's tail is wrapped around the woman.

²That JameGumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* also 'consumes' women by wearing clothes made of their skins has brought feminist attention to bear on this aspect of the texts. See, for instance, Tharp (1991), Dubois (2001), Garrett (2004)

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