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Eating and Speech(lessness) in Two Texts with No Words – Virgilio Piñera's *La Carne* and Jorge Luis Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos*

This paper presents two very short texts – Virgilio Piñera's *La Carne* (1944) and Jorge Luis Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos* (1970) – and the way in which they interweave eating and speechlessness. Both texts already in their titles allude to ingestion: While Piñera's *La Carne* means at the same time dead meat and live flesh, Borges' title alludes to the biblical gospel, where the miraculous life and death of Jesus Christ and the way he overcomes the frontier between the two are told. They both fit into the category of "texts with no words" because they end quite abruptly: falling silent. I will argue that by paralleling incorporation and reading, special attention is drawn to questions of absence and presence, of appearance and essence, as well as to the processes of transformation and interaction of both via metaphoricity.

1. Eating and Speech(lessness)

What can an observation of eating reveal about the communication of speechlessness? What connections exist between eating and speaking (or not)?

Speechlessness, outside or at least at the margins of language, can only be referred to by means of some kind of language. As absence of speech, speechlessness always points to its 'other', which is speech: as pause, speechlessness is a necessary moment in speech but at the same time it marks its limits. Therefore, speech(lessness)¹ always points to this frontier or contact between inside and outside language.

In a similar way, eating as an act of incorporation thematizes a frontier for the subject. To eat is a life-sustaining basic need. In order to maintain its own vitality, an organism has to incorporate and assimilate nourishing substances by opening its corporal barrier. What is outside the body has to be taken inside. The organism must open itself, e.g., the mouth, and make the bodily frontier permeable in order to introduce and appropriate an object outside itself, in other words: the world. A necessary further step in ingestion is the destruction of the incorporated so as to be able to assimilate and appropriate nourishing substances and excrete what remains as indigestible. Thus, what is incorporated must necessarily be destroyed and silenced. Besides this physiological procedure, eating – at least for humans – is at the same time a cultural practice. Setting and trespassing boundaries as well as frontiers enables identification, integration, and differentiation of individuals or groups.²

1 To make this frontier and the always existing referential connection to speech more visible and present, brackets are set in my notation of speech(lessness).

2 On the differentiating potential of food and food habits see Pierre Bourdieu (1979: 189–223).

Through these practices, food has become and is a system of meaning, like language and speech (cf. Barthes 1961: 980).

Both eating and speaking involve the mouth. While food is *incorporated*, speech is *expressed*. Doing both at the same time may cause communicational problems and can result in incomprehension of what is articulated with a full mouth. When the mouth is occupied with chewing, eating impedes speaking. This brings us to a first meaning of speech(lessness): a (corporeal) incapacity to speak and articulate words. This dumbness can occur either due to physical obstacles, or to an involuntary reaction to emotionally overwhelming situations, such as joy or shock, the means to express which are lacking.

Beyond that, problems of digestion could be caused when what is eaten cannot be manducated properly – a first step of destruction of what shall further be transformed and appropriated in the digestive tract. Apart from effects of spitting food around onto your table neighbor's plate, eating and speaking at the same time can also bare the danger of choking and even death. That is the reason why one should not talk while eating and gives cause to the rule or taboo: "Don't talk while you eat." Such a ban on speaking reveals a second meaning of speech(lessness): a voluntary, or involuntary and forced omission of speech. This omission can be traced back to social agreement such as talking conventions, or political repressions like censorship. In both these cases, it signalizes a sort of obedience. As a voluntarily chosen (re)action, speech(lessness) can express approval but also resignation or protest.

In contrast, a convivial meal lacking any table talk at all can be regarded as a situation that reveals tensions or problems among those sitting together at one table. Even if there is no topic at all for table talk, at least what is dished up and eaten (its taste, smell, presentation, exclusiveness, quality, origin, etc.) can offer a subject for innocuous small talk. In situations where talking politics or raising conflictive topics is inappropriate or taboo, food as a subject of empty talk, where much is said but nothing is expressed, allows for polite conversation and avoids remaining speechless.

Food and eating usually become a topic of speech when they are exceptionally good, bad, or exotic – whatever the case, an extraordinary event being worth a good story. Two short stories that interweave eating and speechlessness are Virgilio Piñera's *La Carne*, published in 1944 and Jorge Luis Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos* (*The Gospel according to Mark*), published in 1970. Both texts already in

their titles allude to eating: While Piñera's "Carne" means at the same time dead meat, proper for consumption, as well as live flesh,³ Borges' title alludes to the biblical gospel, where the miraculous life and death of Jesus Christ and the way he overcomes the frontier separating the two are told. In the latter, the last supper achieves certain relevance. In addition, both texts deal with a topic about which, ever since Herodot, much has been said, and which leaves some of us still today agape and speechless: anthropophagy. While in Piñera's story autophagy is made explicit, in Borges', cannibalism is only alluded to. Piñera's and Borges' short-stories both fit into the category of "texts with no words" because they broach the issue of speechlessness by means of *histoire* and *discours*. Beyond that, they both end quite abruptly as their narrations in the end fall silent.

I will argue that by paralleling eating and reading, special attention is drawn to questions of absence and presence, of appearance and essence, and to the processes of transformation and interaction between what is taken inside and what remains outside, what is said and what is not, and by this, to metaphor. For this purpose, in a first step, I will point to the connections between eating and literature, and in a second step focus on the relation between cannibalism, metaphor, and speech(lessness) in order to display, in a third step, how the two texts interweave eating and speech(lessness) in a cannibalistic poetic.

2. Eating and Literature

Above, some relations between eating and talking have been elucidated. Regarding literature, it should be kept in mind that literary texts are – at least nowadays – usually not spoken, oral texts, but written. In this case, arguments regarding the mouth aren't of value. In a more written literature oriented perspective, conceiving literature as fixed on a medium standing the test of time, eating and writing are both strategies for preventing death or to achieve enduring vitality.⁴ While ingestion prevents the death of the eater for the cost of the destruction (death) and assimilation of the eaten, written texts overcome death and therefore the ultimate speech(lessness) of the author. The text as fixed on a medium dissociates the moment of pro-

3 An ambiguity which the English language, in contrast to Spanish, has two separate words for.

4 For further considerations on the connection between eating, death, and literature, see Hardt (1987: 28–31).

duction and that of reception. Potentially, all future readers can receive, "incorporate", and "assimilate" the dead author's thoughts and therefore reactualize or revive them.

As the English metaphor "food for thought" indicates, there are similarities in the processing of food and of thoughts (usually) transported by language. The ingestion of food and the reception of thoughts or literature structurally share processes of input (incorporation or reception), transformation (digestion, appropriation or reflection⁵), and output (excretion and vitality or writing).⁶ This processing chain can be infinitely continued as the output of the one can serve as input for connecting communications or further ingestions for others. The step usually silenced in this process is that of assimilation or transformation. As it takes place inside (the digestive tract or mind), it cannot be observed directly but only reconstructed or retraced indirectly through its output.⁷

The analogy between eating and thinking is one the German idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel refers to in his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), discussing the "Reflection on Subjective Mind".⁸ More recently, Jacques Derrida summarizes Hegel's argumentation as "spirit eats everything that is external and foreign, and thereby transforms it into something internal, something that is its own" (Derrida in Birnbaum / Olsson: 2009). Therefore, Derrida concludes that in Hegel's philosophy "the very notion of comprehending is a kind of incorporation" (ibid.). This congruency of comprehension and incorporation is, according to Derrida, not only characteristic of Hegelian thinking but, "as a cultural a priori" (ibid.), of western philosophy in general. Derrida ascribes this analogy explicitly to

5 This is the step when the processing proper, i.e., assimilation as destruction but also "restruction", takes place.

6 On the relation between eating and literature see Hein (2015: 26–30); Ott (2011: 91–99) and Clark (2004).

7 A fact Niklas Luhmann's System Theory refers to as "paradox of observation". The moment of assimilation or – in System Theory – "observation" cannot be observed directly but only by a second level observer reconstructing what was autopoietically produced by the system itself. See Luhmann (1997: 92).

8 "The activities of spirit are nothing but different manners of leading the external back to an inwardness, which is spirit itself, and only by means of this idealization or assimilation of the external, it becomes and is spirit." My translation of § 381 Zusatz: "Die Tätigkeiten des Geistes sind nichts als verschiedene Weisen der Zurückführung des Äußerlichen zur Innerlichkeit, welche der Geist selbst ist, und nur durch diese Zurückführung, durch diese Idealisierung oder Assimilation des Äußerlichen wird und ist er Geist" (Hegel 1974: 21). For further considerations on Hegel and eating see Denker (2015: 303).

Christianism and the biblical assimilation of the body of Christ in the Holy Communion.⁹ For Derrida, the Holy Sacrament as ingestion constitutes a parallel to reading God's words. In both the communion as well as the reading of the Bible, "a divine transubstantiation" (ibid.)¹⁰ and assimilation in the sense of absorption of something new into something already existing takes place. Consequently, Derrida calls all figures of incorporation in speculative thinking and hermeneutics "cannibalistic tropes" (ibid.).

From this perspective, "food for thought" can express "that which nourishes the mind" but from another it also expresses that "which [is] in dispute, and which cannot be digested" (Serra Pagès: 2011). For the romantic idealist Hegel, everything could be interiorized and incorporated by the spirit, whereas for Derrida after Martin Heidegger, this isn't the case anymore¹¹ and some indigestible rest remains. Or the purpose of this article, I would like to suggest that speech(lessness) is this rest and a moment of resistance to or interruption of this endless processing chain described above. It can interfere either in moments of input, when nothing is said which could be received; or it can intervene in the moment of transformation, so that there is no output at all or, at most, one that has not been digested properly, which means what gets in is equal to what is put out.

3. Cannibalism, Metaphor, and other Tropes

Another rather interesting connection between eating and speech(lessness) comes to the fore when cannibalism¹² is brought up. As a cultural practice, anthropophagy is tabooed in our societies as being a symbol of total victory and power over an enemy and simultaneously a sign of complete otherness. Reports of man-eating leave readers, still today, horrified and speechless. Its horror results not only from

9 "[...] this relationship between understanding and eating is in no way specific to a given current in the thought of the West, but can more accurately be regarded as a cultural a priori" (ibid.).

10 This transubstantiation is twofold, as "it is not simply God's body that is incorporated via a mystical eating – it is also his words" (ibid.).

11 "[...] not everything for him [Heidegger] can be assimilated. What Heidegger calls the 'ontological difference' between 'being' (Sein) and 'beings' (Seienden) [...] indicates such a limit. The ontological difference is the boundary between what can be assimilated and what is already presupposed in all assimilation, but which itself is inaccessible" (Derrida in Birnbaum / Olsson: 2009).

12 Though Peter Hulme (1992) states that the denomination "cannibalism" should exclusively be reserved for man-eating in the context of European colonialism, he acknowledges that the expression – etymologically related to the tribe of the Caribs and *canis* (latin for dog) – has replaced the ancient concept and term *anthropophagy*. For both denominate a scheme of projection for otherness, and following Hein (2016: 53), who argues that cannibalism today is the more productive denomination in the discourse, both expressions are used as synonyms in this text.

the annihilation of another human (i.e. murder) but also from the incorporation of the similar by which the human is degraded to an object of incorporation, to bare meat.¹³ In addition, the similarity of eater and eaten triggers a fear of being this "other", of active subject becoming silent and passive object (cf. Korsmeyer 1999: 193f.). Although the incorporated is destroyed and effaced, in the consumption it interacts with the eater, for it assures and transfers vitality to the later.

As William Arens (1979: 21) points out, reports on cannibalistic cultures rely on only weak evidence and are as *Man-Eating Myth* rather a discursive phenomenon of collective images, prejudices, and cultural constructs to thematize the dichotomy between the inside and the outside of a group (cf. Arens 1979: 167–169, 145). The textual production of the cannibal by the Spanish, for example, functioned as a strategy of legitimation to conquer the "New World" as "other", but simultaneously as a hiding cloak for Spain's own unexpressed imperialistic desire for colonial incorporation and assimilation (cf. Arens 1979: 49). The cannibal as subject and construct of alterity always points indirectly to the construction of a nostalgic "fable of identity" (Kilgour 1990: 10)¹⁴ and unity. In his essay *XXX. Sur les Cannibales* (1595), Michel de Montaigne has already made transparent that reports of cannibals reveal much more about those telling this story than about the ones it is told about. As usually neither the one who eats nor the one who is eaten actually speaks to us – for they and their intimate business are only reported by a testimony – authenticity, authorship and its reliability become delicate questions. Consequently, the speechlessness of the cannibal, as Jens Andermann puts it, transforms all reflection on man-eating to a critique of verbal production in general (cf. Andermann 1999: 20f.). Hence, at the end of the 20th century, scientific interest in the phenomenon shifted from the cannibal as "historical fact" to cannibalism as a figure and phenomenon of discourse. In more detail, Maggie Kilgour (1990) has shown how cannibalistic incorporation and speech(lessness) are linked: via metaphor.¹⁵

Metaphor is a trope of 'translation', which is frequently described in such terms as trespass across boundary lines, a usurpation of the proper by the alien term, an impositor or guest who displaces its host [...]. It is a basically dualistic trope that depends upon a difference between its inside and outside, its literal and figurative meaning;

13 Michel de Certeau (2006: 70) goes as far as to state that the fear of the cannibal is caused by "a disturbance that places the entire symbolic order in question".

14 Especially in the time of conquests, reports on cannibalism were helpful to establish and assure in-group identity (in the empire's center) by a frightening common other (in its periphery).

15 Merriam-Webster (s.a.-a): "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them".

'antimetaphorical' positions dream of abolishing this duality in order to return to a proper literal meaning. (Kilgour 1990: 12)

In Kilgour's argumentation, the cannibal and metaphor can be regarded as figures of transgression, as what is 'outside' and different transgresses the frontiers of the body and is taken 'inside' in order to be assimilated. Both figures indirectly address this differentiation and frontier between inside and outside, identity and alterity, which in the act of incorporation itself is dissolved, for, when the external becomes internal, the "opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce" (Kilgour 1990: 4). According to Kilgour, both the metaphor as well as the cannibal point to the "relation between thought and language as one of essence and appearance, in which appearances are read as misleading cloaks that hide an inside truth" (ibid.: 12).

While the cannibal incorporates and hosts the vitality of its similar other, i.e., his victim, and thereby nourishes his own vitality, metaphor's vehicle (signifier) 'incorporates' and hosts two (more or less similar) tenors (signified). Kilgour argues that older theories of metaphor conceptualize this process as one of one-way substitution, where a literal meaning (signified₁) is replaced by a figurative meaning (signified₂), whereas younger approaches point out the ambiguity of metaphors and the interaction between the two signified, the literal meaning of the vehicle and the figurative of the tenor, both denoted by one signifier.¹⁶ As in a palimpsest, both meanings shine through and can be perceived simultaneously, bringing the usually unperceived processes of transformation and shift of signification performatively to the fore. From this perspective, metaphor is not only a trope of one-way substitution, it is a figure of incorporation in the sense of reciprocal interaction. Consequently, cannibalism and the cannibal – in reverse – can be regarded as trope for metaphor.

Kilgour's concept of metaphor tends towards Paul de Man's concept of allegory as a permanent shifting of sense in a text, as aporia and ambiguity between literal and figurative meaning, between two (or more) readings of one expression. Because the (hermeneutic) intention to fix "the one" signification in this context always fails, De Man concludes that the figurative dimension of language "implies the persistent threat of misreading" (cf. De Man 1983²: 285). In a more recent conception of allegory, Susanne Knaller defines as allegoric a procedure that makes a story become

¹⁶ One of the first to rethink the concept of metaphor and to introduce a differentiation between a substitution and an interaction approach is Max Black (1954).

a semiotic sign by opening another story without making the first one irrelevant (cf. Knaller 2002: 36). As Kilgour does with metaphor and the cannibal, Knaller attributes to the mode of allegory a performative character which allows the disclosure of the textuality and rhetoricity of concepts and discourses, as it performatively exhibits the constitutive play between difference and identity in processes of signification (cf. *ibid.*: 41). While metaphor and the cannibal are punctual figures, allegory and the discourse of cannibalism can be regarded as temporally extended, narrative modes.

These figures and modes make their quality as *shifting signifiers* perceivable, as they display their constant trespassing and thereby demarcation of the line between identification and alienation.¹⁷ As figures and modes of ambiguity and interaction, of inside and outside, presence and absence, subject and object, signifier and signified(s), they are means to make this usually unexpressed and speechless process of interaction and shift between what is said and what not, explicit.

Derrida defined "tropes of cannibalism" as denomination for "figures of incorporation in hermeneutics and speculative philosophy" (Birnbaum / Olsson 2009), criticizing the idea of complete assimilation and appropriation which abnegates the persisting *différance* between subject and object, inside and outside. While he argues against a mode of concealment, "cannibalistic tropes" such as metaphors, the cannibal, and other allegories operating with ingestion can also be understood as "figures of enablement", for, as Claudia Hein (cf. 2015: 66) states, they make it possible to perceive and reflect on frontiers between culture and nature, identity and alterity, inside and outside. They question the limits of their own (verbal) production, as the following considerations on two texts with no words dealing with anthropophagy will show.

4. Texts with no Words – Virgilo Piñera's *La Carne* and Jorge Luis Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos*

In Piñera's very short story, an impersonal narrator depicts, in a rather neutral report, the effects of a meat shortage in an undefined (urban) community. From the very first sentences on, our attention is drawn to what is said and what is silenced: "It

17 For further considerations on cannibalism as shifting signifier see Fulda (2001: 16f.).

occurred with great simplicity, without any affectation. For reasons *not worth mentioning here*, the people went without meat." (Piñera 2006: 43, my emphasis)¹⁸ A vegetarian diet doesn't seem to be a satisfying coping strategy for the citizens, as one of them finds a quite unusual reaction to this situation:

Only Mr. Ansaldo didn't follow the general protocol. With great tranquility he began to sharpen an enormous kitchen knife, and lowering his pants, sliced from his left buttock an impressive filete. After cleaning it, he seasoned it with vinegar and salt, and tossed it on the grill – as it is said – to cook in the skillet used for making omelets on Sunday. He sat at the table and began to savor his lovely filete. (Piñera 2006: 43)¹⁹

The explicit and detailed description of a banal, everyday meal-preparing scenario contrasts the unexpressed pain of the character's self-amputation. The narrator's euphemistic and highly ironic comments, disguising the horrible practice as "gourmet-cuisine", draw special attention to the allegoricity and ambiguity of the narration itself. Though the narrator comments "[e]verything was explained" (Piñera 2006: 43),²⁰ Ansaldo's motivation is never made clear and remains unexplained because he stays speechless on this topic: Does he amputate and eat himself because of an enormous appetite for meat or as a drastic act of protest against the "general protocol"? The narration leaves it open.

Shortly after a neighbor discovers this meat-assuring practice, Ansaldo gives a speechless "practical demonstration to the masses" (Piñera 2006: 43).²¹ Inspired by this, his fellow citizens start to imitate his example: Women cut off their breasts, which results in being quite practical and liberating because at least there is no more need to wear bras and spend money on clothes, as the narrator explains. But actually, this practice of self-cutting leads to an incapacity to take part in everyday communication and even affects authorities:

And some, not all, no longer spoke because they had already consumed their tongues, which, it must be said, are morsels fit for monarchs. The most delicious scenes took place on the street: two ladies, who had not seen each other in a very long time, could not kiss; they had used their lips in confectioning some very tasty fritters. And the Warden of the prison could not sign the death sentence of an inmate because he had eaten his fingertips, which, according to the connoisseurs of fine gourmet cooking (as

18 "Sucedió con gran sencillez, sin afectación. Por motivos que no son del caso exponer, la población sufría de falta de carne" (Piñera 1999: 38).

19 "Sólo que el señor Ansaldo no siguió la orden general. Con gran tranquilidad se puso a afilar un enorme cuchillo de cocina, y, acto seguido, bajándose los pantalones hasta las rodillas, cortó de su nalga izquierda un hermoso filete. Tras haberlo limpiado, lo adobó con sal y vinagre, lo pasó – como se dice – por la parrilla, para finalmente freírlo en la gran sartén de las tortillas del domingo. Sentóse a la mesa y comenzó a saborear su hermoso filete" (Piñera 1999: 38).

20 "Todo quedaba explicado" (Piñera 1999: 38).

21 "[...] 'una demostración práctica a las masas'" (Piñera 1999: 38).

was the good Warden), has spawned that now overused phrase: 'it will have you sucking your fingers'. (Piñera 2006: 45)²²

Especialy this last sentence, foregrounding the ambiguous meaning of a catachrestic colloquialism and thereby displaying its usually hidden, literal consequences, reveals that what is said in this short story demands questioning for its literality. Eating here leads to speechlessness in the sense of an incapacity to speak and articulate words. But as the problematic consequences of "biting one's tongue" are never spoken or complained about, and due to its voluntary nature, a second type of speechlessness comes to mind, that of omitting speech in a kind of self-censorship. But, whether this speech(lessness) is an expression of approval, resignation, or protest remains unanswered.

As a last consequence of this self-cutting and self-censoring practice, people start to disappear, which in the text is euphemistically referred to as "hiding" or "going into seclusion" (Piñera 2006: 47, 49).²³ Piñera displays how self-censorship leads to invisibility and finally to the ultimate speechlessness: death. Finally, the narrator's conclusion comments on the events in a chain of rhetorical questions:

The deeply serious problem of a disrupted civil order created by the lack of meat – was not this issue wiped clean? That the population progressively went into seclusion had nothing to do with the central aspect of the thing; it was only the dénouement that did not in any way change the firm will of those people to procure themselves of that precious nourishment. Was by chance this dénouement the price to pay for each one's meat? But it would be foolish to ask any more inopportune questions; those prudent people were very well fed. (Piñera 2006: 49)²⁴

Just as the characters (on the plot-level) start to cut off parts of themselves, remaining speechless, the narration also simply breaks off. And though it ends here, one could conclude in the same sarcastic (or mauling) attitude: A fed people won't raise its voice against authorities, starting a revolution.

22 "Y algunas, no todas, no hablaban ya, pues habían engullido su lengua, que dicho sea de paso, es un manjar de monarcas. En la calle tenían lugar las más deliciosas escenas: así, dos señoras que hacía muchísimo tiempo no se veían no pudieron besarse; habían usado sus labios en la confección de unas frituras de gran éxito. Y el alcaide del penal no pudo firmar la sentencia de muerte de un condenado porque se había comido las yemas de los dedos, que, según los buenos gourmets (y el alcaide lo era) ha dado origen a esa frase tan llevada y traída de 'chuparse la yema de los dedos'" (Piñera 1999: 39).

23 "Evidentemente se ocultaba... Pero no sólo se ocultaba él, sino que otros muchos comenzaban a adoptar idéntico comportamiento [...] ocultándose progresivamente [...]" (Piñera 1999: 40).

24 "El grave problema del orden público creado por la falta de carne, ¿no había quedado definitivamente zanjado? Que la población fuera ocultándose progresivamente nada tenía que ver con el aspecto central de la cosa, y sólo era un colofón que no alteraba en modo alguno la firme voluntad de aquella gente de procurarse el precioso alimento. ¿Era, por ventura, dicho colofón el precio que exigía la carne de cada uno? Pero sería miserable hacer más preguntas inoportunas, y aquel prudente pueblo estaba muy bien alimentado" (Piñera 1999: 40).

The general idea of the text is based on taking the usually figuratively used term "self-consuming",²⁵ literally as "consumption of oneself". Instead of being "fed up" with their situation, characters are satisfied and well fed. Nevertheless, this satisfaction is ambivalent: On the *histoire* level, Piñera displays how, due to improper digestion or imitation of authorities, unreflected reception of what is presented as a solution for the meat-shortage causes at first sight calm self-sufficiency. But as a consequence, this self-mutilation leads to self-censorship and finally ends in self-annihilation.

Though the narrator's neutral and emotionless reporting style on the *discours*-level suggests objectivity and unambiguousness of the absurd occurrences it narrates, it is highly ironic and ambivalent. There are several stylistic mechanisms or cannibalistic tropes which, in a culinary code, tension the denoted and connoted, that are related to speech(lessness): First, in the beginning, the reasons for the food-shortage are eclipsed. Also, the pain of self-amputation is not articulated explicitly but ironically disguised as a 'joyful gourmandise'. Doing so, its horror is – although seemingly absent – foregrounded. Dead metaphors or catachreses and their ambivalence are made explicit throughout the text, and the rhetorical questions at the end, appearing to ask for a response but actually already giving it themselves, express exactly the opposite of their literal statement: disappearance is indeed the core or 'central aspect'.

When words are used to express the opposite of their literal meaning, we speak of irony. As an indirect speech-act and a type of figurative speech, irony aims at ambiguity, hiding an intended, figurative sense behind a literal one. To recognize and decipher irony, usually a nonverbal context (gestures, mimics, intonation, or situative knowledge) is necessary. According to his diary, Piñera wrote this absurd and highly ironic short story *La Carne* in 1941 in reaction to the Cuban authorities sending Cuban cows to the United States in a period of nutritional crisis on the Caribbean Island (cf. Anderson 2006: 125). Though irony is not necessarily a strategy of sarcasm – a sharp and often satirical utterance or comment designed to cut or give pain (cf. Merriam-Webster s.a.-b) – regarding the (historical) context, *La Carne* is not only an ironic and counterfactual story but also a cutting critique. Keeping in mind that 'sarcasm' derives from *sarx*, the latin word for 'raw meat',

25 In Spanish "recomerse" (literally 'to eat oneself again') means 'being obsessed with something', to bear a secret – usually a feeling. The Spanish language possesses more such autophagic references such as "concomerse" or "consumirse en deseos de algo".

Piñera's title gets even an additional connotation that announces the text from its very beginning as a biting comment.

As throughout the story special emphasis is put on what is said and thereby on what is not, this speech(lessness) on the level of narration itself has to be questioned: does it suggest resignation or protest? Surely not satisfaction or agreement. If undigested incorporation and unreflected imitation of (at first sight) easy solutions lead to voiceless self-sufficiency, thereby silencing the "central aspect of the thing", which is speech(lessness) as self-censorship and disappearance, this auto-destructive and autophagic food chain – it seems – can only be broken by a severe diet, not giving 'easily digestible' input anymore, but rather an input that provokes reflection: speech(lessness). *La Carne* can be read simply as an absurd story of autophagia, but at the same time as an ironic and sarcastic comment that articulates a tacit dissent, an indirectly articulated protest against nobody protesting.

Eating and speech(lessness) also play a crucial role in Borges' short story *El Evangelio según Marcos* (1970).²⁶ Its protagonist is the 33-year-old Espinosa, who's name alludes to "espinas", the Spanish word for 'thorns', but also to Baruch Spinoza,²⁷ the founder of Historical Criticism of the Bible.

In the last days of March 1928 – so the precise indication – Espinosa is invited by his cousin to visit him on his farm in the Argentine Pampas. In contrast to his Dutch namesake, Borges' protagonist does "not like arguing, and prefer[s] having his listener rather than himself in the right" (Borges 1971).²⁸ "[B]ecause it was easier to say yes than to dream up reasons for saying no" (ibid.),²⁹ Espinosa takes up the invitation. During an absence of his cousin, torrential rainfalls lead to inundations and Espinosa finds himself "isolated" – as the narrator comments on the catachrestic nature of the term – "etymologically, the word was perfect" (ibid.).³⁰ He's alone with the Gutres, the farm's widowed foreman and his two children. Despite their Scottish roots, they have forgotten their English and are presented as primitives: "barely speaking", "illiterate", "having trouble with English and Spanish" and

26 The English translation of *El Evangelio según Marcos* was realized by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the Borges (1971). If not explicitly stated, the English translations of Borges' texts are my own.

27 While Susanne Zepp sees an allusion to spines, she excludes in her comment on Borges' text the homophony to Spinoza (cf. Zepp 2000: 373). Borges not only dedicated two poems to the Dutch philosopher but also refers to him in several works, see Abadi (2001).

28 "No le gustaba discutir; prefería que el interlocutor tuviera razón y no él" (Borges 1974a: 123).

29 "[...] porque no buscó razones válidas para decir que no" (Borges 1974a: 124).

30 "[...] estaba aislado – la palabra, etimológicamente, era justa" (Borges 1974a: 127f.).

"lacking faith".³¹ On the contrary, they are quite versed in practical farming but actually unable to explain it, which makes 'table talk' difficult.³² This becomes evident especially when they start to eat all together due to the inundations. As dialogue is handicapped, Espinosa decides to read to them after dinner (cf. Borges 1974a: 127). A first reading of a gaucho novel bores the Gutres: the story of "another cattle drover, failed to whet [the Gutres'] interest" (Borges 1971)³³ as it is too similar and familiar. But Espinosa soon finds another text: a Bible in English.

Leafing through the volume, his fingers opened it at the beginning of the Gospel according to Saint Mark. As an exercise in translation, and maybe to find out whether the Gutres understood any of it, Espinosa decided to begin reading them that text after their evening meal. It surprised him that they listened attentively, absorbed. [...] Remembering his lessons in elocution from his schooldays [...], Espinosa got to his feet when he came to the parables. (ibid.)³⁴

In contrast to the boring gaucho novel, the Gutres can't wait for the vivid reading of the bible, "bolting their barbecued meat and their sardines so as not to delay the Gospel" (ibid.).³⁵ "Like Children who love repetition" (ibid.)³⁶ and therefore imitation, they even rebel when Espinosa wants to read – or more precisely translate – another passage of the bible.

In addition to Espinosa's performative incarnation of the gospel, increasingly throughout the text similarities between Espinosa and Jesus Christ are stressed in a kind of metaleptical superposition between Borges' and the Bible's protagonists. These are: the same age (33 years), a grown beard, a gift for preaching, and an "almost unlimited kindness" (ibid.).³⁷ Furthermore, the events described by Borges temporarily occur in the last days of March, which means: near Easter.³⁸ After healing an injured lamb with pills – for the Gutres a miracle, as they would have used a spiderweb instead – their admiration for Espinosa grows more and more. Like the disciples, they follow Espinosa everywhere and are even "secretly stealing the

31 "Casi no hablaban", "eran analfabetos", "habían olvidado el inglés; el castellano [...] les daba trabajo. Carecían de fe" (Borges 1974a: 125, 127, 128).

32 "El diálogo resultaba difícil; los Gutres, que sabían tantas cosas en materia de campo, no sabían explicarlas" (Borges 1974a: cf. 126).

33 "[...] no le podían importar las andanzas de otro [tropero]" (Borges 1974a: 127).

34 "Hojeó el volumen y sus dedos lo abrieron en el comienzo del Evangelio según Marcos. Para ejercitarse en la traducción y acaso para ver si entendían algo, decidió leerles ese texto después de la comida. Le sorprendió que lo escucharan con atención y luego con callado interés. [...] Recordó las clases de elocución en Ramos Mejía y se ponía de pie para predicar las parábolas" (Borges 1974a: 128).

35 "Los Gutres despachaban la carne asada y las sardinas para no demorar el Evangelio" (Borges 1974a: 129).

36 "[...] como niños, a quienes la repetición les agrada" (Borges 1974a: 129).

37 "[...] una casi ilimitada bondad" (Borges 1974a: 123).

38 As Susanne Zepp (2003) has excellently shown.

crumbs he had dropped on the table" (ibid.).³⁹ This changes dramatically one Thursday: After reassuring themselves that those who nailed Christ to the cross were forgiven, and after begging Espinosa for his blessing, apparently out of nothing, the Gutres start to mock and spit on him, and drag him toward the rare building. There, "Espinosa [finally] understood what awaited him": "the cross" (ibid.).⁴⁰ The narration cuts off here, but until now has set enough traces for the reader (at least for me) to continue and transgress this textual frontier, imagining a scene of crucifixion, and – considering the suggested primitivity⁴¹ of the Gutres and the words account in Mark (14, 22).⁴² "Take it; this is my body" – even cannibalism.

Borges' text deals with incorporation as the great mystery of Christianity⁴³ by paralleling eating and reading on the *histoire*-level. It displays the consequences of a hastened, 'undigested', untransformed, and quite literal reception. Its main topic is the problematic appropriation, assimilation, and interpretation of the diverse polysemy – apparently not realized by the Gutres – of the most read and most interpreted book in the world.

Though only eating and not cannibalism is made explicit in the story's plot and the reminiscence on the last supper is only referred to implicitly, in the cited title of the biblical gospel, cannibalistic tropes and incorporating techniques can be found throughout the text: Intertextual allusions to the Bible via congruencies in the title, the description of the protagonists, and the parallels of the plot are striking. Also, the translation of the gospel by the protagonist from English to Spanish⁴⁴ and from written to spoken evoke not only the biblical text but also its rich tradition of exegeses and criticism.⁴⁵ This is even emphasized due to the similarity of the name

39 "[...] le retiraban las migas que él había dejado sobre la mesa" (Borges 1974a: 129). Besides this the Gutres are "spoiling him. None of them liked coffee, but for him there was always a small cup into which they heaped sugar" (Borges 1971).

40 "Espinosa entendió lo que le esperaba [...] la Cruz" (Borges 1974a: 131f.).

41 As Walter Pape adverts, in traditional images of the cannibal, a non-allegorical communication is attributed to the savage (cf. Pape 2001: 308). A characteristic Montaigne also emphasizes (cf. Montaigne 2009: 303).

42 Mark continues: "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying "Take it; this is my body" (MK: 14, 22).

43 "Eating is, after all, the great mystery of Christianity, the transubstantiation occurs in the act of incorporation itself: bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Christ. But it is not simply God's body that is incorporated via a mystical eating – it is also his words" (Derrida in Birnbaum / Olsson: 2009).

44 For the analogy of cannibalism and translation see Gentzler (2001: 196f.).

45 Mark's Gospel historically is considered to be the oldest version of the four gospels appearing in the Bible.

"Espinosa" to that of Baruch Spinoza, who was one of the first philosophers to critique openly the literal sense and the historicity of the (hebrew) Bible (cf. Spinoza 1989: 179) – a fact which is ironically contrasted by the Gutre's monosemic and literal interpretation as well as by their imitative reenactment of the Holy Week and the apparent substitution of Espinosa for Jesus Christ (cf. Zepp 2000: 373–375).

Explicit comments on catachresis and the metaphoricality of some terms, for example the discussion of the appropriateness of the "stock metaphor comparing the pampa to the sea",⁴⁶ highlight the polysemy of the text and language in general. The reference to the textual genre of parable or the usually silenced, etymological sense of words, on the *discours*-level of the story, emphasize the materiality of language and the performativity of ambiguity. The narrator makes clear that Borges has evidently transformed and "digested" his material well. His cannibalistic poetics point to ambiguity, transformation, and interaction of expressed and 'hidden' meanings and challenge the apparent surface of his plot.

Even though Borges' text suggests that the Gutres indeed understood any of the gospel, incorporating and imitating it in a literal or anti-metaphorical attitude (as Kilgour would say), the silence at its end leaves the story open.⁴⁷ The narrator's silence and the open end thereby stand in contrast to the explicitness of the crucifixion account in Mark. Though the text presents the Gutre's monosemic version of the Salvation History throughout, its final silence leaves space for polysemy.

In his prologue to *El Informe de Brodie* (1970), Borges states that he took efforts in his stories to make it possible for imagination to operate with more liberty.⁴⁸ In *El Evangelio según Marcos* he achieves this by simultaneously evoking two opposite poles of reading. According to his dictum of "[a] book that doesn't include its counter-book has to be considered incomplete",⁴⁹ Borges' *El Evangelio según Marcos* gives on the plot-level explicitly one (for illuminated readers quite restricted) reading of the biblical text but at the same time indirectly refers to the high diversity of other possible ways to read, interpret, incorporate, and assimilate a text. Perhaps,

46 "[...] la metáfora que equipara la pampa con el mar" (Borges 1974a: 125).

47 Gabriela Massuh has shown how in other texts by Borges silence opens space for the plurality of meanings overcoming the realm of fiction (cf. Massuh 1979: 181–184). She argues that the aesthetic of silence in Borges' work is a means of dissolution, transcending frontiers of language, as naming always limits meaning (cf. *ibid.*: 192).

48 "La imaginación puede obrar así con más libertad" (cf. Borges 1974b: 13).

49 "Un libro que no encierra su contralibro es considerado incompleto" (Borges 1998: 31).

this explains why Borges in his prologue to *El Informe de Brodie* calls *El Evangelio según Marcos* the "best of the collection".⁵⁰

5. Piñera's and Borges' Cannibalistic Poetics

Like Piñera, Borges depicts the possible consequences of a too imitating, too literal reading. Whereas consequences in Piñera's text are rather existential for the intertextual recipients, in Borges', it is the person translating, telling, or preaching, and thereby reading and producing it at the same time, who is finally silenced and with him narration. Both texts parallel the speechless incorporation process of food and texts, and display to which end 'undigested', untransformed consumption can lead: to blind imitation and monosemic interpretation, to annihilation, to silence as death of narration. Both texts operate with metaphors, tropes, euphemisms, and ambiguity. They live from and point to the tension between what is said and what is not. Their speechless endings appeal to us readers not to just imitate the textual authorities they perform and not to read them in a self-satisfying and substituting manner, 'consuming them', but instead, to constantly interact with them, to make them our 'food for thought', digesting it properly, revitalizing their silences and polysemies and thereby to transcend textual frontiers and those of speech(lessness).

As I have tried to argue, both texts refer to incorporation and cannibalism as an outstanding event not only on a plot level but also on a structural and material *discours*-level, by performing their quality as shifting signifier, trespassing and dissolving the frontier between what is said and what is not in a manner I would refer to as cannibalistic poetics. I would like to suggest this term for literary strategies which not only foreground incorporation on a *histoire*-level, but also contrast plot- and discourse-level, appearance and essence, literal and figurative sense, using rhetorical devices of ambiguity such as (cannibalistic) tropes and schemes that operate by analogy (not contiguity), such as metaphor, allegory, litotes, euphemism or hyperboles, catachresis, personification, irony, sarcasm; and which at the same time use schemes of speech(lessness) such as eclipse, aposiopesis, rhetorical questions, concessio (foregrounding the counter-argument), periphrasis (indirect or reported speech), homophony; or narrational techniques such as intertextuality, translation,

50 "[...] la mejor de la serie" (Borges 1974b: 11).

metalepsis, structures of *mise en abîme*, irony, sarcasm, unreliable and/or phantastic⁵¹ narration.

This list is surely not exhaustive and needs to be augmented, but it gives an idea of mechanisms that interweave eating and speech(lessness) on different textual levels, by performing the dissolution of the frontier between inside and outside.

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51 In the strict sense of Todorov (1970) and Durst (2001), or Alazraki (2001).

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